

JÁNOS HEGEDŰS

The dynamics of the security policy of the territories with unsettled status in the South Caucasus

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic — or for short: Covid19 — has formed the health situation in Europe, which has so far had the most severe consequences, and has brought about previously almost unimaginable changes in everyday life, in the system of action of governments and in the state of the world economy. The consequences of the pandemic for the course of normal life management have not yet been fully mapped and processed, since a possible wave again may override even the most optimistic scenarios prepared for the near future. In the field of security policy, it is not new to find that the state of health, including human, animal and plant health, can have a strong influence on the development and dynamics of the security environment and can even represent radical changes in previously established environmental structures and international relations.

In my dissertation, I would like to briefly present the security policy dynamics of three south Caucasus territories during the coronavirus pandemic. The three *de facto* countries — Abkhazia¹, South Ossetia² and Nagorno-Karabakh³ — share similar historical, political and economic characteristics in several areas. One of the main reasons for my choice of the topic is that in the years 2015-2022, in two terms, I worked for a total of five years in Georgia in the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia⁴ (EUMM Georgia), in the Hungarian contingent staff, so I was able to

¹ Area: 8.660 square kilometers, population: 245.000 head, capital city: Sukhumi

² Area: 3.900 square kilometers, population: 53.000 head, capital city: Tskhinvali

³ Area: 3.170 square kilometers, population: 150.00 heads, capital city: Stepanakert

⁴ More details about the mission

Source: www.eumm.eu

Accessed: 01.08.2022.

János Hegedűs: The dynamics of the security policy of the territories with unsettled status in the South Caucasus

gain direct and personal experience of the course and turn of regional security events. The period designated for processing ranges from February 26, 2020 — the date on which the first Covid19 infection was registered in Georgia — to February 24, 2022 — the date of the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine. In my writing, I do not intend to saturate the topic with statistical data, dates, names and locations, but rather I want to prepare a comprehensive presentation work with an emphasis on the processes.

Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh: the roots of the conflicts and the Soviet heritage

The three areas under investigation have a number of common features, the emphasis of which is represented by the historical heritage and the post-Soviet period, which spans a little more than thirty years. In my writing, for reasons of scope alone, I cannot aim to explore the entire historical dimension, but instead I try to highlight the events that are absolutely necessary.

Throughout history, the Caucasus region has often been the site of great power conflicts of interest, an area designated for the conquest of imperial aspirations, and migration routes have passed through the passes of the high mountains. The Caucasus region⁵ extends from the eastern Black Sea basin to the western shores of the Caspian Sea, is bordered by Russia in the north, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the south. The dominant geographical formation in its name is the Caucasus Mountains, which are chain mountains stretching for about a thousand kilometers — approximately in an east-west direction. The mountain range embodies a natural dividing line between continental Europe and Asia.

⁵ Thomas De Waal (2010): *The Caucasus, An Introduction*. 1. *Among the Mountains* Oxford University Press.6-9

The ethnic relations of the area are extremely complex, and the ethnographic processing of the area reveals the existence of thirty-six⁶ nationalities, a research with more detailed characteristics shows the existence of fifty-three nationalities. It is true that among them there are communities with barely 2000-2500 inhabitants, speaking no independent language, but linguistic dialects and with specific cultural identity traits, but at the same time the ethnographic map of the Caucasus can be considered one of the most colorful in the world. Ethnic and related religious complexity created complex internal relations in the system of bonds of the peoples living in the region. The monolithic form of the common historical heritage of the most recent era was manifested in the existence of the USSR. For almost the entire period of the existence of the USSR until 1991⁷, the Caucasus region was part of the then largest country in the world. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were soviet socialist republics of the Soviet Union, to which the Moscow leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has always looked with suspicious eyes. This distrustful political and military approach was no accident and I will name the main reasons below.

The three Soviet republics did not belong to the Slavic family, but their population consisted of a far-reaching proportion of Caucasian mountain peoples, who were closer in historical, linguistic and cultural relations to the Turkish (Turkic) and Iranian (Persian) cultural contexts than to the Russian-Belarusian-Ukrainian axis, located in the center of the soviet mainstream line at that time. Although Orthodox Christianity is determinant from a religious point of view, a significant number of Muslim populations already lived in the territory of the three republics during Soviet times. In addition, the Caucasus region was a special zone from a geopolitical point of view, since NATO member Turkey bordered the southern rim of the

⁶ Source: www.factsanddetails.com: People of the Caucasus. Accessed: 01.08.2022.

⁷ I deliberately did not write the date that declares the creation of the Soviet Union. Although November 7, 1917 was considered a milestone, it cannot be considered as such even when examined from many aspects. The Soviet invasion of the territories beyond the Caucasus continued even in the 1920s.

region. The internal strife of areas that were geographically, culturally and self-identitally distant from Moscow could not be adequately handled by the Soviet Union either. In the last years of the Soviet Union, the ethnic antagonisms, which were forced into an artificial framework and unresolved, could no longer be concealed from the world or kept beneath the surface.

Of the three named territories, the security policy events of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are closest to each other. The common feature of the two territories is that they emerged from the territory of Georgia, and the years 1992-1993 can be marked as the beginning of the aspirations for independence. In addition to the similarity, a significant difference, however, is that Abkhazia has a Black Sea coastline of about 200 kilometres, while South Ossetia is practically a *de facto* country in the southern foothills of the Caucasus with an area only partially suitable for agricultural cultivation. At the same time, the military-political value of South Ossetia is greatly enhanced by the presence on its territory of the Roki Tunnel, which makes the Caucasus permeable both in winter and summer, which, in a given military situation, can provide a continuous route to Georgia, Armenia and Turkey for the influx of Russian military forces.

A comprehensive presentation of the event dynamics of the period from 26 February 2020 to 24 February 2022

As a prelude to the security policy events of the two years under investigation, it can be said that among them the Armenian - Nagorno-Karabakh - Azeri conflict, which began in September 2020 and lasted until the beginning of November, stands out, which was clearly a series of armed acts with the most serious consequences – fatalities. According to some of the analyses of the conflict, Azerbaijan has knowingly taken advantage of the partially paralyzed state of the world caused by the coronavirus pandemic to turn the issue and fate of Nagorno-Karabakh in a way that suits it. The management of the pandemic and the mitigation of its consequences have

captured the attention of governments everywhere and have also greatly narrowed the space for international organizations.

Fortunately, there was no conflict of interest between the security incidents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with weapons. The *de facto* governments of both areas have been heavily engaged in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic and in the matter of obtaining vaccines. Based on an analysis of the news reports of the processed period, it can also be stated that the health care system and infrastructure of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are highly outdated, with serious care problems and staff shortages. Far-reaching majority of the medical facilities were built back in Soviet times and are technically stuck at the level of the '70s and '80s. In Abkhazia, the situation was aggravated by the fact that the use of electricity for the "mining" of bitcoin crypto currency put an extremely strain on the energy situation in the *de facto* country. There was not always enough electricity to meet the needs of the population, on several occasions the supply had to be paused in order to have enough electrical energy to operate the artificial breathing ventilators in hospitals for Covid19 infected patients.

When viewed from the point of view of the stability of state power, both areas are characterized by an administrative structure with weak financial resources, a strong presence of internal political struggles and corruption. The political culture depicted is still rooted in Soviet times, and personal relations and family and kinship ties play a significant role in general state administrations. Without Russian financial, economic assistance and expertise, as well as knowledge, "know-how" exports, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia would collapse and plunge into fatal chaos.

In the field of international relations in the region, the two years evaluated did not represent extraordinary changes, but notable events. For Russia, the territory is considered to belong to the "near-foreign" region, that is, to the former Soviet territories. Active Russian behavior is observed on the platforms of diplomacy, intelligence and mass communication. The European Union and NATO are also present in the region through Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. EUMM Georgia is the only large-scale EU engagement in the common foreign and security policy area and throughout

the Covid19 pandemic, the mission has always carried out its tasks in the operational area, there was no mission evacuation. NATO-Georgia and US-Georgia relations are also at an in-depth stage, even though Georgia's membership of the EU and NATO is far from being in the foreseeable future. China has increased its economic influence in the region, the most visible sign of which is the construction of the Tbilisi — Batumi highway in Georgia.

Event dynamics of the period 26 February 2020 to 24 February 2022 factually evaluated along factor strengths

General security policy assessment: A truly significant security change with cardinal results or consequences did not occur for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the political direction, a strong Russian orientation was preserved in both areas. There is no aspiration to reunite with Georgia or to open negotiations and to settle the current *status quo*. Russia sees the region as a definite sphere of influence; Turkey wants to increase its influence in the region. Iran's intentions in its relationship with the region are less revealed, but process analyses show Tehran wants to strengthen its presence and advocacy, especially in relation to energy supply routes. Rating: stagnant factor.

Military policy: Russia has increased its military influence in the region both in reality and symbolically. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian armed forces and FSB units remain present. The 1970 men strong Russian peacekeeping contingent deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh increased the boundaries of regional projection of Russian forces. An outstanding security event is the Armenian -Nagorno-Karabakh - Azeri War of September 27-November 10, 2020. Rating: strengthening, increasing factor.

Maritime safety, navy: In the two years studied, the Black Sea basin and water surface valued strongly. On November 08, 2021, the visit of the U.S. Navy's 6th Fleet's flagship, the *USS Mount Whitney*, and the high-fire power capable *USS Porter*, equipped with guided missiles, to the port of Batumi, Georgia, as well as their official reception, caused a strong swing

in the segment of maritime safety. Along with this, Russia insists on the Abkhaz coast, where it can launch and receive, repair and replenish its ships in a given naval conflict. The geopolitical importance of the Black Sea has increased enormously in parallel with Russian aggression against Ukraine, including the strategic importance of sea routes for energy and grain transport. Rating: strengthening, increasing factor.

Energy security: The energy supply situation has worsened in the two years under review than in the previous period. Due to outdated electricity systems, renovation programs that have been postponed for years and the already mentioned bitcoin "mining", the emergence of electricity supply problems was especially noticeable in Abkhazia. The strategically important location for electricity generation in the South Caucasus region is the Enguri Dam in Western Georgia and the associated power plants, which are already in the territory of Abkhazia. The facility was built back in Soviet times, and it can be said without exaggeration that it was considered a zenith product of Soviet engineering in that era. The peculiarity of electricity generation is that water is collected on Georgian territory along the bed line of the Enguri River, but it is flowed through underground pipes to Abkhazia for electricity production. The complexity of the situation is complicated by the fact that the entire design documentation of the technical facility is placed at a Moscow design bureau. Rating: strengthening, increasing factor.

Health safety: Definitely deteriorating health conditions can be assessed. Without a Russian anti-Covid19 vaccine, the fight against the epidemic would not have been ensured. Cumbersomely procured vaccine doses, stuttering vaccination points and high death rates among those infected. The help of the Tbilisi-based Georgian government to counteract the weaknesses of the Abkhaz health care system, the reception of Abkhazian patients in Georgian hospitals, should be recorded as a positive event. Rating: deteriorating, weakening factor.

Summary

The South Caucasus region embodies an extremely complex security environment. The relatively small area is also surrounded by a chain of high mountains and two seas, while the east coast of the region is extremely rich in hydrocarbons. The situation in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh was not solved during the period under review. We can still speak of *de facto* countries whose international recognition are extremely scarce, and based on the developments taking place in the world, strong international support for autonomy cannot be predicted in the near future. The coronavirus pandemic has weakened the internal life, social cohesion and economic opportunities of all three areas, tying Abkhazia and South Ossetia more strongly towards Russia. Nagorno-Karabakh's situation has deteriorated, it will have to survive the upcoming years with the support of a weakened Armenia and a strengthening Azerbaijan.