The fifteen successor states that were born from the wreck of the Soviet Union are now twenty years old. If these countries were people, they would now be emerging from adolescence into full adulthood (although still one year away from the legal drinking age in the United States).

For the three South Caucasian countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the milestone of two decades is a moment to reflect that, unlike their unhappy experiment with statehood in the years 1918-21, this time independence is irreversible. Yet, it is still much easier to say what these states are not, than what they are.

First, they are not “newly independent,” as they were frequently described in the 1990s. Twenty years is an age to look forward and not back.

Nor is the term “post-Soviet” as useful as it was. The Soviet Union has shaped their politics and culture, but the South Caucasus is now busy re-discovering its geography at the intersection of Russia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Iran and Turkey are nearer than Moscow.

It is also misleading to still describe these countries as being “in transition.” The hope that the post-Communist countries were on an inevitable trajectory toward democracy and a free market economy was stopped in its tracks by local realities. This is not Poland. Even Georgia, the most progressive of the three, still lags a long way behind most Central and Eastern European countries in the strength of its democratic institutions and the openness of its economy.

Equally, the term “conflict regions” is not the best description. Of course, the three bitter and still unresolved conflicts fought here in the 1990s over the disputed territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorny Karabakh—and reprised in South Ossetia in 2008—cast a long shadow. But it would be a mistake to say that conflict defines how people in the region see themselves. State-building has continued despite them and opinion polls suggest most people are more preoccupied with economic issues than the conflicts.

Finally, the twenty-year mark is surely the moment to say that three adult countries should be defined by their own domestic performances and not by the behavior of their Great Power neighbors. Yes, Russia can be a difficult neighbor, but in real terms it does not threaten Georgia more now than it did in the early 1990s. Modern Turkey is an entirely different country from the Ottoman Empire, while Iran is preoccupied with its internal problems and poses no immediate threat to the stability of the region.

These three countries are now functioning states—something that was definitely not a given in the conflict-scarred, lawless, dark days of the early 1990s. The governments provide services, institutions work, workers are paid for the job they do. Yet most
foreign visitors are only seeing a distorted picture if they do not venture beyond the three capital cities. Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan are all now eminently visitable cities, with smart shops and hotels and good public services. Baku in particular is bursting with new infrastructure and construction from its energy boom. But on the edge of the cities, a different picture begins to unfold of poverty, crushing unemployment, and hundreds of villages half-emptied by emigration.

If you look at the GDP per capita of the three countries, Armenia and Georgia are still stuck in a desperately low-income bracket (around $5,000 per capita, making them around three times poorer than Turkey), while Azerbaijan’s stronger performance masks big oil and gas revenues that are concentrated among a relatively small urban segment of the population. No wonder that, of an official population of around 16 million people across all three countries, at least a fifth has left in temporary or permanent emigration in search of work.

So, although the biggest threat these three countries face is that renewed conflict will drag them back two decades, there is a longer-term challenge of slipping into global irrelevance. Even if new conflicts can be averted (and, more ambitiously, the long-standing disputes can be resolved peacefully) the challenge is to build states where the poorest members of the population want to live.

Here, prosperity and political accountability go hand in hand. All three countries basically have one-party systems and weak oppositions. That has created a disconnect between the ruling class and the mass of the population—what might be called a latter-day feudal relationship.

Perhaps the most depressing fact of twenty years of independence in the South Caucasus is that there has not been a single instance where power has been transferred peacefully between government and opposition through an election. Five presidents—Levon Ter-Petrosian in Armenia, Ayaz Mutalibov and Abulfaz Elchibey in Azerbaijan, and Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia—have been either deposed or pushed out, leaving office before their terms were up. Nowhere has an incumbent lost an election and congratulated his rival on defeating him. In fact the only time this has happened was before independence in 1990, when in both Armenia and Georgia the Soviet Communist Party peacefully surrendered power to the nationalist opposition.

Creating an environment where this kind of transfer of power is possible—and peaceful—should be at the top of the agenda for all those who wish the South Caucasus success over the next two decades.