Talking to Grown-Ups in the Caucasus

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When does a country become a grown-up?

This question faces all the states marking independence twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. My short answer is, “Twenty is grown-up enough”—although that would still be a year off the legal drinking age in the United States.

Another way to put it is to say that these are no longer states “in transition.” The elites have, for better or worse, built something durable that most likely will neither collapse nor blossom into European-style democracy.

This new reality was eloquently evoked by a number of scholars and nongovernmental analysts at a recent conference at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on twenty years of independence for the three countries of the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

The debate was vigorous and clear-sighted—but fairly pessimistic. There was widespread agreement that these three states have been built, something that could not have been assumed when they achieved independence in 1991 amidst violence and economic collapse. They provide services for their citizens and are accepted as respectable members of the world community of nations. Azerbaijan, which barely exercised any internal or external sovereignty in 1991, has, thanks to oil revenues, increased its GDP sixfold since independence and will join the UN Security Council in January.

But these countries still lack rule of law, genuine elections, a competitive economy, and space for dialogue and debate. Indeed, if anything, the three are sliding backwards on these measures.

I sum up this contrast in two words: professionalism and stagnation.

The professionalism was on show at the conference, where two dozen articulate, English-speaking analysts held the floor for two days, demonstrating that local capacity has grown to analyze the problems of the region. It is also visible in the competence of people running Armenia’s civil service, Azerbaijan’s oil and gas companies, and Georgia’s foreign ministry.

The stagnation is reflected in the entrenchment of the ruling elites. Protecting their power base, they do nothing for the many political and economic have-nots in their countries. For example, Armenian economist David Grigorian estimated that tax under-collection, which benefits economic elites, amounted to 6.5 percent of Armenia’s GDP by 2006 levels, or nearly $500 million annually—a huge amount for such a small and poor
Azerbaijani analyst Leila Alieva said her country has a system where “political patronage is the glue” and “corruption is the compensating mechanism for lack of legitimacy.” Georgian human-rights activist Giorgi Gogia said that his country was less free than it looks. “Making a distinction between human rights and state building is a false dichotomy,” he said, warning that reforms made by the Georgian government tackling corruption and criminality had cut so many legal corners that rule of law had been sacrificed.

These countries have a habit of blaming geopolitics for their problems. Veteran American Armenian historian and former government official Gerard Libaridian said he gave the same lecture on conflicts in a series of cities around the region—Istanbul, Yerevan, Baku, Tehran, Tbilisi—and was amused to hear the same reaction in each place: “You know, every one of them thought the neighborhood was bad, but they thought it was bad essentially because of the others!”

Nowadays, the institutional capacity of the new states erodes their ability to blame their neighbors. Georgian journalist Margarita Akhvlediani cleverly reframed the problem, adapting John F. Kennedy’s famous phrase to Caucasian conflicts to say, “Ask not what your opponent can do but what you can do for your opponent.” David Khachaturian, an Armenian lawyer, was more pithy. Surveying Armenia’s deeply flawed judicial system, he said, “No more excuses.”

If transition eschatology is no longer applicable and the three countries are now more grown-up, how should the West approach them?

“Stop pushing for cosmetic reforms,” argued Erkin Gadirli, an Azerbaijani lawyer. He said that when Western aid helped create the position of human-rights ombudsman in the human-rights-free zone that is Azerbaijan, it only discredited the institution and hurt the West’s image.

This suggests that the challenge for Westerners is to draw a line between where they are supporting professionalism and where they are sustaining the status quo. There is a good case for substantial cooperation on the whole range of foreign-policy issues and a technical agenda that includes infrastructure and education. But declarations that governments are pursuing democracy and that incremental reforms are “progress” can actually weaken the democratic forces in society. When the West assists government institutions that are instruments of control, such as television stations or ministries, it risks discrediting itself in the eyes of would-be reformers.

This message applies to post-Soviet countries in varying degrees. In the South Caucasus, for example, Azerbaijan is at the more authoritarian end of the spectrum, closer to Russia and the Central Asian states. Georgia, though not a healthy democracy, is at the more progressive end of the spectrum. Here, Western leverage might be brought to bear for freer elections and a better court system.
Twenty years on, a new landscape has taken shape in the Caucasus. The post-Soviet countries are grown-up, though not necessarily as the West might have wished. It is time for a more grown-up conversation about who they are, rather than who we might wish they had become.

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