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INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENERGY PROJECTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION: A VIEW FROM GEORGIA

GRUZIŃSKI PUNKT WIDZENIA NA PROJEKTY INFRASTRUKTURALNE I ENERGETYCZNE NA KAUKAZIE POŁUDNIOWYM JAKO NARZĘDZIE INTEGRACJI REGIONALNEJ

Abstract

Due to its energy resources and strategic trade routes, the South Caucasus region remains an area of interest for many major powers and a focal point of geopolitical tensions. The aim of this study is to explain the geopolitical situation in the region, identify issues affecting regional security, present the positions of external actors, and outline possible prospects for regional integration in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: regional integration; logistics; infrastructure; key players; South Caucasus; Georgia.

Theoretical background

The post-Soviet crisis and the socio-economic setbacks observed in nearly all spheres of life have not led Georgia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Republic of Armenia to recognize the vital need for the integration of the South Caucasus, which should support the region's political and economic development. Through regional integration, it is possible to create a political and economic platform with a moderate degree of integration, serving to discuss and resolve regional problems and outline the region's development prospects. The possibility of initiating a process of regional integration among the countries of the South Caucasus depends primarily on their foreign policies, and in particular on their actual willingness to form alliances. To clarify a state's foreign policy, this article discusses the theory of balance and

bandwagoning in international relations, formulated by Stephen Waltz, which redefined the understanding of alliance behavior by shifting the focus from the balance of power, within which weaker states may decide to form alliances.

A country's foreign policy reflects its overall objectives, which determine the direction of its actions and shape its relations with other states. The formation of foreign policy is influenced by the internal political relations of a sovereign state, national interests, and security issues (Cheishvili, 2024). In his work titled "Soft Power," Joseph Nye argues that all countries pursue their national interests in foreign policy, but a choice must be made regarding how broadly or narrowly a country's national interests are defined, as well as how they are pursued (Nye, 2004, p. 60). In this context, Stephen Waltz's theory of balance and threat is noteworthy; according to this theory, the political scientist argues that alliances are most often perceived as a response to threats, but there is a sharp divergence regarding how this response should be implemented. When entering an alliance, states can either seek balance (aligning themselves against the primary source of threat) or join the winning side (aligning themselves with the state that poses the primary threat). When the dominant tendency is to side with the winner, security becomes a rarity because aggression is rewarded (Waltz, 1985). The transformation of the balance of power in the region would lead to instability and risks of conflicts. Intervention in the process of regional development itself weakens the three states of the South Caucasus and makes them more vulnerable to regional challenges. Since the South Caucasus is divided into three relatively small countries, the most appropriate course of action for them should be to establish mutual cooperation. So, for Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan it is essential to establish and maintain positive relations with neighboring countries at all levels. This strategy is especially important for the small nations that construct the modern South Caucasus. Due to the different political paths of the three states, this strategy seems to be extremely difficult and they are unable to improve their position at the international stage (Gelashvili, 2002).

The case of South Caucasus

Despite their geographical proximity, the countries of the South Caucasus are divided by significant cultural, economic, and political differences. Azerbaijan is a wealthy country with close cultural ties to Turkey, possessing vast hydrocarbon reserves and in need of secure

export routes for its resources. Georgia serves as a transit country for raw materials from the Caspian Sea basin to the West and would like to reclaim the territories it lost to Russia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Armenia, in turn, is a traditional Russian satellite that, following the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as a result of the war with Azerbaijan, is increasingly engaging with the West and diversifying its partnerships. Recent developments (including: the 2020 conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the 2022 war in Ukraine, the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West) have created new opportunities for Georgia, growing interests of major players in the Black Sea region, growing interests of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China in the logistical potential of the South Caucasus.

New geostrategic opportunities are emerging for Georgia as a result of modern infrastructure projects. The Anaklia port and the Middle Corridor route are crucial efforts to establish commercial relations for People`s Republic of China in the South Caucasus (Palu, Hilmola, 2023). Regarding the international role of Georgia, it is worth noting the article of James Carafano, an expert from the growing U.S conservative organization, who essentially discusses Georgia and the South Caucasus region. It basically examines Georgia and the South Caucasus region given that Georgia is a crucial geographic hub for the transportation of energy resources from the Central Asian countries. He also indicates Central Asia within its abundance of natural resources. Carafano characterizes the U.S. strategic interests and future outcomes in the South Caucasus as important topic in the context of the South Caucasus and the Central Asia (Carafano, 2022).

According to Carafano the United States has recognized the Middle Corridor, which connects Europe to the Central Asia (Turkestan) through the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia. The most convenient route connecting the hydrocarbon-rich countries on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea coast and Europe runs through Azerbaijan and Georgia. There is no connection between Azerbaijan and Turkey, as these two culturally similar countries do not share a border. This is why the Ceyhan oil pipeline[1] and Shah Deniz gas pipeline run through Georgian territory. For the export of oil and gas, Azerbaijan needed the 250 km oil pipeline from Georgia. The oil pipeline could not pass through Nakhichevan due to the previous state conflict with the Republic of Armenia. The above-mentioned fact further strengthens the

[1] Ceyhan is home to a major oil terminal on the Gulf of Iskenderun in the Mediterranean Sea.

presumption of how important the regional stability and development of the South Caucasus is. The area of the Armenian region of Syunik (Zangezur) is of key importance, as it separates Azerbaijani territory from the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, which borders Turkey, by a 40–50 km-wide strip. In order for Azerbaijan to establish a direct connection with Turkey, it is necessary to establish the 43-kilometer-long Zangezur Corridor crossing Armenian territory along the Araks River valley, which also forms the border with Iran. From an infrastructural point of view, it is worth noting that the terrain and geographical location of the Zangezur corridor is quite difficult and complex. What unites the countries of the South Caucasus, despite all their differences, and effectively compels them to cooperate, is the infrastructure used to transport oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea fields to Mediterranean ports and on to Europe, as well as goods from China.

Trans-Caspian International Transport Route

The concept of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR, the so-called Middle Corridor) being developed by China in Central Asia and the South Caucasus aims to diversify transport routes from China to the EU, bypassing Russia and avoiding the dangerous route through the Red Sea. Its key link is to be the planned deep-water port of Anaklia—the second-largest Georgian port on the Black Sea, capable of handling the largest post-Panamax vessels (draft over 13 m). China's involvement in this investment poses challenges to EU and NATO influence in the Black Sea basin (Yermekbayev, et al., 2024; Pastucha, Wojtasiewicz, 2024). In October 2025, negotiations were underway between the railway operators of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Kazakhstan and Georgia on establishing a long-term tariffs for the entire TITR.

The parties agreed on a plan aimed at improving the efficiency and connectivity of transportation on the route, which ought to become the main corridor between the People's Republic of China, Central Asia and Europe. In addition, the plan consists of aspects, such as establishing a single long-term tariff along the entire route; increasing throughput; coordinating the development of port, railway and logistics infrastructure; preventing delays and adapting to digital procedures[2]. It is noteworthy that the development of the strategically important route

[2] https://caucasus-chronicle.com/2025/10/03/8841/amp/

of the Middle Corridor in the transport system of Europe and Asia strengthens the role of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

In this context, political scientist Ramaz Sakvarelidze evaluates the transport potential of Georgia by emphasizing that "the most important transit lines pass through Georgia and even more will pass through it in the future", so “if they have the slightest sense of reality in Europe, they should definitely grant Georgia status” [3]. It is clear that South Caucasus, and especially Georgia has to contribute to the development of Europe in addition to become a beneficial nation. Georgia serves as a crucial link between the countries of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the European Union. Based on data from the Republic of Kazakhstan's railways the amount of goods transported over the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) grew fourteen times between January and July of 2024 compared to same period of the previous year. The delivery time from Republic of Kazakhstan to Republic of Azerbaijan has been reduced to nine days, the delivery time from Baku to Poti/Batumi has been reduced to twelve days, and the cargo transportation time from Poti/Batumi to Constanta has been reduced to twenty-two days. The volume of cargo transported through the Middle Corridor has increased fourteen times (Rentschler, et al., 2025). Regarding the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, Georgian analyst Petre Mamradze evaluates the geostrategic role of South Caucasus, and especially Georgia in accordance with the regional importance and suggests that political and economic contacts with the People's Republic of China is important for Georgia.[4] The Anaklia port and the Middle Corridor route are crucial efforts to establish commercial relations for People`s Republic of China in the South Caucasus.

In addition to the Middle Corridor, the Lapis Lazuli Route is also of significant importance, from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province via Turkmenistan to the South Caucasus, Europe, and North Africa. The region's nations are becoming increasingly interested in these routes, such as the Black Sea cable and the Lapis Lazuli route[5].

[3] https://kvira.ge/843544
[4] https://www.resonancedaily.com/index.php?id_rub=2&id_artc=238500 (Nov.3, 2025).
[5] https://commersant.ge/news/world/lapis-lazulis-derefani(05.02.2026).

South Caucasus Pipeline

The South Caucasus Pipeline, also known as Shah Deniz pipeline (or Baku – Tbilisi – Erzurum pipeline) is a natural gas pipeline from the Shah Deniz gas field in the Azerbaijan sector of the Caspian Sea to Turkey,. has been built in 2006. It runs parallel to the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline. On August 5, 2015 the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved a $250 million "A Loan" and a $220.0 million "B Loan" to Lukoil Overseas Shah Deniz Limited, to finance the acquisition of its 10% stake in the Shah-Deniz Phase II Gas Field Expansion Project. With the involvement of Western companies, it was decided to build a new pipeline for gas export from the second phase of the Shah-Deniz field development, which shall be implemented through the "Southern Gas Corridor" (Lukoil Overseas Shah Deniz Stage II Gas Field Expansion Project (Azerbaijan) p. 8; ADB Extended Annual Review Report, October 2022[6]). Shah Deniz is one of the world's largest gas fields, located beneath the Caspian Sea, east of Baku. Shah-Deniz Stage II is main component of the Southern Gas Corridor, enabling gas exports from the Caspian Sea to Europe via South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion. Gas from this pipeline is then transported via the TANAP pipeline through Turkey and Greece to Brindisi, Italy. To figure out importance of Georgia even though TANAP avoids it geographically it should be mentioned that gas from Shah-Deniz reaches Turkey only through Georgia via the South Caucasus Pipeline, and TANAP starts exactly wherever South Caucasus Pipeline ends - at the border among Georgia and Turkey.

North-South Transport Corridor

Transport infrastructure in the South Caucasus countries runs primarily along a latitudinal axis, connecting the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea. This is because the continent's most important economic centers—Europe and China—are located to the east and west of the region. Therefore, traffic in a meridian direction will likely never reach the intensity seen on the Trans-Caspian Route. However, there are powers for which meridian-direction communication is very important. These powers are Russia and Iran; both are interested in increasing their influence in the South Caucasus.

Regarding the International North–South Transport Corridor it is in the interest of the Russian Federation to look for an alternative route.

[6] https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-documents/48330/48330-001-xarr-en.pdf

Furthermore regional strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the South Caucasus since 2024 has been characterized by a shift towards the north actively prioritizing the Republic of Armenia as the main strategic partner, while simultaneously pursuing pragmatic increasingly economically oriented cooperation with Georgia. In 2024 the Ambassador of Iran to the Republic of Armenia, Mehdi Sobhani, emphasized the strengthening of bilateral relations with Republic of Armenia and Georgia, while simultaneously ignoring and criticizing Republic of Azerbaijan`s strategic initiatives in the South Caucasus. This factor is important given the idea that the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) creates prospects for restoring territorial integrity of Georgia, for which the opening of the Abkhazian railway is the subject of active geopolitical debate.

The influence of Russian Federation in the South Caucasus has diminished following the events in Karabakh in 2020. Even stability between the two countries remains uncertain, the peace declaration signed in Washington on August 8, 2025 is considered a historic milestone after years of tension and conflict between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan (Khutsiberidze, 2025). The previously existed Minsk Agreement was repealed by the August 8, 2025 Washington Declaration, mediated by Trump administration.

The Armenian side is negotiating the launch of a trade route along this route. According to the Armenian side, the international transit infrastructure connecting the Persian Gulf with the Black Sea makes cargo transportation through the Republic of Armenia either safer also more secure. The long-term agreement between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the management of the Chabahar port is set up for ten years signed by Armenia, Iran and India.

Discussion

The prominent representative of political realism Jeffrey Sachs emphasizes the division of states into geographical definitions in the new geopolitical space. He higlights that in some cases the interests of the West (the United States and Europe) is various, for which he distinguishes between the traditions of continental Europe and the Anglo-American countries. In this regard, it is important to note Arnold J. Toynbee`s conviction, that the modern dominance of the West over the past three hundred years is a relatively new and abnormal phase in world history, rather than a permanent or natural state (Toynbee, 1953). The West is interested in the South Caucasus region not only for its oil

and gas reserves and their transportation to world markets, but also the interests of the United States in this region are much broader. The South Caucasus plays an important military-strategic role due to its proximity to the unstable Middle East, which is characterized by conflicts and wars. The South Caucasus is also of interest from the perspective of spheres of influence in international relations. Since the Cold War, this region has served as a potential buffer zone for the West against geopolitical rivals such as the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the People's Republic of China[7]. Jeffrey Sachs maintains a difference between various characteristics nations have regularly intervened in the political, economic, and security issues of neighboring countries. He claims that the scope of influence involves two distinct issues: 1) the legal claim of large countries to avoid hostile encirclement, which he calls the security sphere; 2) the illegitimate claim of large countries to engage in the domestic political affairs of small countries, which he calls the sphere of influence. This second scenario applies when we consider Russia's policy toward the South Caucasus (which Moscow still refers to as the Transcaucasus).

Regarding the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus, political scientist Valeri Modebadze emphasizes the crucial role of the region in ensuring energy security for Europe. Particularly, in terms of energy resources, the geographical location of the South Caucasus facilitates access of Europe to the Caspian Sea, Middle East and Central Asia. The region represents an important land route for the transportation of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to European markets, which has made the South Caucasus a significant player in the energy sector (Modebadze, 2024). The United States attempts to reduce the influence of the Russian Federation from the market of Turkey, which is reflected in the signing of a memorandum of cooperation in nuclear energy between Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Energy Minister Alfarslan Bayraktar on September 25, 2025. At the meeting, it was also decided that Turkey will purchase 70 billion cubic meters of liquefied gas from the United States. Turkey is a reliable partner and the United States considers it as a regional leader, which shall be responsible for: the Central Asian region, Syria and the South Caucasus. The above-mentioned factors reveal the function of this meeting, which gains a historical significance[8]. It is worth noting that the

[7] https://publicist.ge/info/1851/
[8] https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-trump-meets

South Caucasus is a sphere of special interests of the Russian Federation from the post-Soviet space. Current events demonstrate the active involvement of Great Britain and Turkey in the South Caucasus region. In parallel with the implementation of modern projects, the South Caucasus states should pay special attention to the issue of identifying threats in order to respond to them appropriately.

The current global backdrop creates a danger of inspiring certain types of conflicts in the South Caucasus. Diplomatic intelligence stands out in this regard as major nations have recently attempted to increase their own interests and influence in the South Caucasus. The purpose of the diplomatic relations is to pursue the intelligence interests of its own country, which harms the national and regional interests of the South Caucasus countries. It is important that conflicts on ethnic or religious grounds shall not be inspired among states of this region. Otherwise, there may be a danger of regional disintegration or loss of sovereignty. In this regard political scientist Tamar Kiknadze demonstrates in her book that since the restoration of independence, post-soviet countries have experienced signs of intelligence activities in state governance practices and a lack of experienced political elites (Kiknadze, Kukhalashvil, Ortanezashvili, 2024). The South Caucasus is regarded as a single territory from a political and economic standpoint, and any action in the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia, or Georgia directly affects the other countries. In her work professor Tamar Kiknadze attributes the establishment of political-economic, military, and scientific-technical ties in international relations to the active work of intelligence services, in which the author also discusses ensuring the security of the established ties. In terms of security and defense topics it is noteworthy that in February 2026 official representatives of the United States of America met with the head of the Georgian security service as part of a standard working visit focused on security cooperation, which was related to either regional security and also relations between Georgia and the United States of America. This visit took place while on the official tour of Vice President J.D. Vance to the South Caucasus.

For regional purposes, the 2025 Joint Meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors of the Central Asian and Caucasus Regions is noteworthy. The meeting emphasized that the development of Georgia's sectoral policy determines the agenda of reforms and investments, thereby Georgia is focused on strengthening and enhancing the connectivity function. Georgia is a member of the European Union's new

computerized transit system NCTS[9], bilateral trade agreements are in force with the European Union, with People`s Republic of China and totally among fourty seven countries and a customs union, meanwhile a double taxation avoidance agreement is in force with fourty eight countries. Georgia ranks third in the regulatory framework, 14th in public services, 2nd in operational efficiency according to the B-Ready survey (which will replace the Ease of Doing Business Index), and 1st in budget transparency. It is crucial to present specific indicators in order to evaluate observable results. The Georgian economy has grown by 9% annually over the last five years, resulting in a doubling of GDP per capita.

Along with the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia is actively working on the concept of a single window at border checkpoints, the construction of underwater electricity and digital cables, investments in the Anaklia port. In this regard, cooperation between international institutions and Georgia is important. In particular during the meeting on April 25, 2025 the Georgian delegation highlighted the country's recent achievements in economic development. The Georgian delegation provided the Deputy Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund with information on ensuring fiscal sustainability and maintaining price stability in order to overcome global and regional economic challenges.[10] The confirmation of IMF support for Georgia stems from a combination of Georgia's economic performance, ongoing constructive engagement with IMF missions, and the Fund's broader mission to promote stability, growth, and sound economic management in its member countries.

Conclusion

Despite the modern changes and approaches to the state the regional challenge of the South Caucasus remains unchanged form, which is related to the strengthening of control and influence over the South Caucasus region by global actors. According to contemporary dynamics, the growth of the South Caucasus's internal and regional

[9] It is a mechanism established under the Common Transit Convention (CTC), facilitating the movement of goods under a transit declaration submitted within the system. CTC member states: 27 EU states, European Free Trade Association (EFTA) member States (Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, Switzerland); Serbia, North Macedonia, United Kingdom, Turkey, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Georgia. See: https://www.rs.ge/NCTSInfo-en?cat=1&tab=1

[10] https://nbg.gov.ge/en/media/news/natia-turnava

economy corresponds to both regional development and the preservation of positive ties between the border states. It is important to remember that small nations cannot sustain their international standing in the context of contemporary geopolitical shifts when their interactions with one another are either unfriendly or indifferent. Regional integration of the South Caucasus implies to harmonize relations between the countries of the region at the political-economic and cultural levels.

Infrastructure, geographical location, and a stable economic environment determine the development of South Caucasus states. Against the backdrop of global economic challenges the geopolitical role of Georgia has been highlighted, for which it is worth noting what sort of projects do the regional powers intend to implement in the South Caucasus. For these purposes it is worth noting that common interests of South Caucasus is based on an equal historical and cultural level creating a solid foundation on which constructive dialogue and interstate cooperation are carried out, through which prospects for comprehensive regional development are outlined. Currently South Caucasus is a special and essential point for the European Union. The stability of Georgia, Republic of Azerbaijan and Republic of Armenia is essential in the energy supply chain. In this regard, Georgia remains one of the main parts of the corridor through which passes the energy and trade security of the EU. In terms of regional interests it becomes clear that the South Caucasus region plays an important role whereever the growing potential for trade and economic projects is evident. The transformation of sovereign positioning in financial and economic projects is in the interests of Georgia. The geographical location of Georgia ensures active participation in modern global projects. Based on the above, Georgia is a direct and/or indirect recipient of a number of modern investment projects. Georgia has an interest in pursuing an active neighborhood policy, regional development, within preserving and enhancing its position as an important South Caucasus nation.

The competition for energy dominance in the South Caucasus has intensified, evident in the potential for Russia's replacement in Armenia's nuclear sector. Any Western involvement in the South Caucasus area is significant, such as: relationship between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, transit initiatives or collaboration in the energy sector. Nevertheless, Georgia is the geopolitical center of the South Caucasus region. The primary land and transit route from the Central Asian area to the West runs through

Georgia. The geographical position of the Republic of Armenia restricts its political influence, whereas Georgia serves as a crucial way connecting the region to the West. Even through the West aims for long-term investment and financial relations in the South Caucasus, the primary focus must be on Georgia.

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Streszczenie

Ze względu na zasoby energetyczne i strategiczne szlaki handlowe region Kaukazu Południowego pozostaje obszarem budzącym zainteresowanie wielu mocarstw oraz punktem skupienia napięć geopolitycznych. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest wyjaśnienie sytuacji geopolitycznej w regionie, wskazanie kwestii mających wpływ na bezpieczeństwo regionalne, przedstawienie stanowisk podmiotów zewnętrznych oraz nakreślenie możliwych perspektyw integracji regionalnej na Kaukazie Południowym.

Słowa kluczowe: integracja regionalna, logistyka, infrastruktura, Kaukaz Południowy, Gruzja.