

Georgia – Bait in the South Caucasus?

Changes in realities and perceptions

The South Caucasus is irreversibly on the agenda of European politics. This is a reality which the pessimists could have been easily suspicious about not in the very remote past. The reality seems to have changed also in terms of holistic perception of the region. Only a couple of years ago one would desperately brush off the idea that no matter how ardently we try and spare no effort to register progressive achievements, each of our countries would still be destined to “wait for” the others and the benefit to climb the European stairs would be granted through a group visa only. However, today the reality is different even in this regard. It seems that Europe has released the chains of interconnectedness of the South Caucasian countries and has started to regard the region as a group of three countries, rather than a whole unit. The processes within the European Neighborhood Policy, as well as the statements by European Union officials of varying ranks are good evidences to support such an argument.

“Only a few years ago we would not miss an appropriate forum to emphasize that “We encourage regional cooperation”. Today we understand that in reality this means to say “We wash our hands off your problems””, notes an expert in one of the most prominent international organizations. Individual approach to each country has already become a practice within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan and development and implementation of NATO IPAP, as well as on a number of other dimensions.

Realities change and the wishes of the yesterday become realities of today with these new realities offering still new challenges.

Armenia – Azerbaijan/Georgia

Bring together on a discussion table the liberal minds among Armenians and Azerbaijanis and ask them about current realities and possibilities of the conflict resolution. Obviously, the first thing you will hear will be about the imperative of democratization, freedom of speech, free and fair elections, significance of human rights and European integration, about the lack of all these, the need for all these and the exhaustion and lack of prospects that pseudo-imitations create. Young Armenians and Azerbaijanis (or at least a significant part of them) see the solutions to many issues in their countries in European integration. Moreover, they simply want to live in a European country. The number of these young people grows irreversibly, they become more active and this is already a fact.

Similarly, bring together on a discussion table different officials of Georgian authorities and ask them about current realities. The first thing you will hear, indeed, will be about the imperative of democratization, importance of European integration, about their enthusiasm regarding this and their pro-activeness, their ardor not to wait but act, and their readiness and will to achieve progressive accomplishments. In Georgia policy makers at all levels see the solutions to problems in their country exclusively on the way to Europe. Moreover, they want to live in a European country. This is also a fact.

What do we have then?

Though the need for cooperation among the three South Caucasian countries and the possible gains from this cooperation are being constantly emphasized by various international institutions, obviously, those international institutions which have political agendas have similar attitudes regarding only two of these countries, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia. In many international perspectives and reports changing the names of Azerbaijan and Armenia will not change the message of these documents and one cannot even clearly figure out which of the two countries is being referred to. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a clear and stable policy, which often are evaluated as stable, secure, realistic, pragmatic and eventually... stagnating. Actually, we are the ones to determine attitudes regarding our region, and in this triangle two do not believe in serious changes, they act only with one incentive: not to be left out of current processes, whereas the third believes and engages in emphatically pro-active initiatives. It may sound paradoxical, but certain experts in Armenia and Azerbaijan blame Georgia for not being realistic and implementing risky policies. Is faith in the possibility of change a hopeless romanticism indeed and stagnation – realistic development? Perhaps we do believe in this formula, however, Europe and the others prefer to see in the role of a locomotive the one who really believes and approaches change with a zeal.

From the above-mentioned it can be implied that Georgia with its exemplary and commendable activeness has not only taken up the role of the first on the way to Europeanization in the whole region, but seemingly is becoming the bait for major Euro-Atlantic and European players, with which the latter are to ‘fish’ the other two countries of the region. In the result, their work style in the region has also changed: they “work” with pleasure with the current policy makers in Georgia and the future ones in Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion on “The role of international organizations in the process of enhancing cooperation among the countries of the South Caucasus” which took place on March 23, 2007 at ICHD. The round table was attended by independent analysts, government officials and representatives of international organizations.