Non-state actors and South Caucasus security: the role of NGOs, transnational corporations and religious organisations

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Executive summary

Following the collapse of Soviet structures, security dynamics in the South Caucasus became closely related to the process of the consolidation of viable and effective states. This entailed, among other things, managing private, non-official activities, which began to develop as a means of survival outside official structures. Since the 1990s the liberal capitalist projects promoted in the region have brought in Westernised structures of social mobilisation and accumulation of wealth and power, i.e. NGOs and multinational corporations, respectively. This policy brief looks at the elements in the post-communist context that favoured the consolidation of non-state actors as challengers of and contributors to state power, from a national, regional and structural perspective. Looking at NGOs, transnational corporations and religious organisations, it deals with the main security implications of this proliferation of new actors for state consolidation and regional stability, including the role of external players in addressing these issues.

Introduction

The post-Soviet context has seen the emergence of new actors in the South Caucasus, including new national states, but also a host of non-state actors, driven by the opening of the region to international dynamics. The promotion of a Western liberal model was visible in support for civil society development and pressures to liberalise the economy. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and transnational corporations were thus given an important boost in the early years of independence. Religious revivalism, on the other hand, became a widespread phenomenon in the post-Soviet era, acting as a force for social mobilisation, both legitimising and challenging state power.

The security context of the South Caucasus is marked by the persistence of traditional and non-traditional security threats, posing security challenges to the fragile regional political structures. The former include the persistence of armed inter- and intrastate conflicts, opposing Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, and between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which evolved into an interstate conflict with Russia in 2008. The persistence of these protracted conflicts has been a central obstacle to the consolidation of state sovereignty and has impacted negatively on the democratic development of the region. The latter challenge includes transnational illicit activities that thrive in a context of weak sovereignty. These dynamics make the security context of the South Caucasus more complex, blurring the lines between security issues and political, economic and social matters. The context of poor economic performance, protracted conflicts and limited sovereignty also contributes to the strengthening of activities by non-state actors, which in one way or another contribute to the undermine of state sovereignty.

Non-governmental organisations

Considering the lack of non-state structures in the Soviet context, the creation of NGOs has largely followed along the lines of existing Western models. The role of NGOs in the South Caucasus has been rather differentiated. These organisations have contested the lack of democratic participation, catapulting Georgia into a popular revolution in 2003, whereas the Armenian and Azerbijani governments responded with highly repressive policies. The Rose Revolution in Georgia (and later the Orange Revolution in Ukraine) was a turning point in the post-Soviet space,
because it represented a powerful challenge to the established status quo, removing the former bureaucrats of the communist nomenklatura from power.

NGOs have also become important players in regional competition for influence among external actors. Western-backed NGOs have pushed democracy as a central feature of Western states’ foreign policy agendas, whereas Russian-sponsored NGOs have been actively engaged in countering these dynamics and advancing state interests via civil society actors, i.e. through the work of so-called GONGOs (governmental NGOs), such as the Caucasus Institute for Democracy in the South Caucasus (see Popescu, 2006). NGOs are also crucial actors in peacebuilding efforts, even if the current situation of “no peace, no war” hampers their potential positive contribution to conflict resolution. The role of civil society organisations is fundamental in facilitating the engagement of societies in achieving peace and preparing for its implementation (see Simão, 2010).

Transnational energy corporations

Transnational energy corporations have also had a direct bearing on the stability of local regimes, especially in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Energy revenues have become a fundamental source of income, removing pressure from the fragile economies of states and ultimately giving legitimacy and international recognition to local regimes. These companies have also played a role in regional security dynamics, influencing the foreign policies of external actors. Thus, energy companies have become relevant security actors in the South Caucasus through two interrelated mechanisms. Firstly, due to the intensely political nature of energy supplies, these companies rely on their national governments to support their economic interests through foreign policy decisions (U.S. engagement in the Caspian Sea area in the 1990s and Britain’s advancement of BP’s interests in Azerbaijan are examples of these dynamics). Secondly, energy companies interfere directly in domestic and regional politics through investments and technology, creating relations of dependence and affecting regional balances. Domestic and regional stability thus becomes a valuable asset for energy development, even if at the expense of democratic processes. Moreover, corporate social responsibility is further used as a means to assure a positive image for these companies and to address emerging problems and social tensions.

This shared interest in stability by international investors and authoritarian regimes has been an important obstacle to democratic transition in Azerbaijan. The domestic changes in Azerbaijan following the oil and gas boom of the early 2000s are far-reaching. Lussac (2011: 274) refers to the process of a gradual merger between state and business interests and the privatisation of state functions in Azerbaijan as the development of a “company-like state”. SOCAR (the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic) develops its own social and employment policies, replacing the state and relieving pressure on it. Moreover, Azerbaijan has also used energy revenues to invest in a sustained militarisation campaign and in a more assertive foreign policy aimed at further isolating Armenia. A similar process took place in Georgia, where the perception of Western support due to the strategic location of the country as a transit route for energy exports provided an important incentive for President Saakashvili’s territorial unification agenda, eventually leading to the war with Russia in 2008.

Religious organisations

Religious organisations have also increasingly gained space as political actors with a marginal capacity to influence the direction of political regimes in Armenia and Georgia. In Azerbaijan, the issue of political Islam has grown more tense following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. of September 11th 2001 and the radicalisation of the fight in the North Caucasus. The revival of religious organisations in the post-Soviet space has not been limited to the factors of social mobilisation, personal comfort and reinterpretation of the post-Soviet context. It has also meant that the new political elites in the South Caucasus, pressured by democratic dynamics, now have to take voters’ interests into account, which means a closer connection with religious leaders for the purposes of their validation of political candidates. Here the political reaction to the revival of Orthodox (and Apostolic Armenian) churches and Islam was fundamentally distinct. Whereas Islam was perceived as a threat by local regimes in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, the various Christian churches were accepted and supported as legitimising mechanisms for the ruling elites, reinforcing national unity.

Catholicos Karekin II, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, who is also the spiritual leader of Armenians worldwide, has refrained from openly engaging in political issues, but Ilia II, the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church, has been more outspoken. He has openly criticised elements of the Georgian government and is seen as a validating figure for political parties. He has also publicly commented on political issues, as in the case of the withdrawal of the Georgian citizenship of billionaire philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili, winner of the parliamentary elections in 2012 and a potential contender for the Georgian presidency in 2013. Relations between Armenia and Georgia have traditionally been cordial, although marked by some tensions, especially over issues relating to the rights of Armenian minorities in Georgia and their allegiance to the authorities in Tbilisi. The role of Christian churches in these matters has at times spilled over into the realm of politics, including foreign policy issues. For instance, according to a Wikileaks cable released on August 26th 2011, Karekin II wrote a letter to President Obama raising the issue of the status of religious minorities in Georgia (Armtown.com, 2011) and further pursued the issue during a visit to Georgia that same year.

In Azerbaijan, Islamic revival and its politisisation have been facilitated by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Christian Armenia and the proselytising activities of
external actors like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Iran has been active through its mullahs and Iranian-sponsored mosques, especially in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, in the Apsheron Peninsula, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and in the internally displaced person camps spread throughout Azerbaijan. Arab and Middle Eastern religious influence was considered potentially more dangerous, as it was linked to the flow of Islamic fighters from the Middle East to Chechnya through Azerbaijan. The religious activities of Turkish organisations in Azerbaijan tend to be perceived more favourably by the government. However, as the balance between secular and religious forces shifts in Turkey, Azerbaijani authorities have displayed some restlessness regarding the potential export of Islam (see Cornell, 2006). After the September 2001 attacks the link between Islamic groups and terrorism was easier to make, justifying a policy of containing Islam in Azerbaijan. Striking a balance between religious freedom and the control of illicit activities that might endanger the state and the security of citizens remains a key challenge for Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

Overall, the role of non-state actors in the South Caucasus remains limited in the post-Soviet context. The Soviet inheritance of centralised politics has meant limited political space for social mobilisation. On the other hand, the national-ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus have also instilled a sense of patriotism and have dominated the processes of social mobilisation, reducing the scope for pluralist participation. Energy development has changed these dynamics somewhat, but the activities of these organisations remain closely linked to the issue of the conflicts in both domestic and regional politics. Non-state actors add complexity to regional security in a context clearly dominated by state dynamics, reflecting the complex nature of politics in the post-cold war globalised context.

References


