

I – The Balkans and the South Caucasus: Similarities and Differences

When we discuss the details of a possible stability arrangement for the Caucasus, it might be tempting to take the existing SPSEE format and adjust it to the current needs of the Caucasus region on the other side of the Black Sea. Political commentators often use the same terms to describe the two regions, and general, though superficial, comparisons of their complexity and instability are quite common. However, the experts on these regions, including the authors of the CSP, make much of their distinctness.

1.1 Geopolitical context

1.1.1 Interests of outside powers

The political boundaries do not reflect ethnic, linguistic or cultural boundaries: the NIS formed from the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR often border on countries whose people include ethnicities present in one or another NIS. It may be pointed out, however, that the phenomenon of “opportunistic nationalism” trying to bend borders to suit one ethnicity, common in NIS, is rarely found in their neighbours. Instead of trying to use this instability to extend their own boundaries, the neighbouring countries are mainly seeking to stabilize their boundaries with NIS, concerned about their own destabilization. All states bordering on NIS have thus far called for borders to be maintained with no change other than the “first level dismemberment” of the federations.

Apart from this common point, the attitudes of the countries neighbouring the two regions being studied and the interests of the international community in the Balkans and the Caucasus are not the same. Former Yugoslavia is ringed by countries that share a determination to resolve conflicts and seek a “regional détente.” By contrast to the countries of SEE, the South Caucasus is surrounded by neighbours – Iran, Turkey and Russia – that have historical links with the region and are competing to maintain or expand their influence there. This struggle for regional influence is seen mainly in the growth of cultural, economic and military ties.

Though the South Caucasus is no longer part of the Soviet Union, the North Caucasus is on Russian Federation territory. That country has repeatedly demonstrated its opposition to Western involvements in the South Caucasus, viewed as a part of its “near abroad.” It worries to watch the Caucasian states develop partnerships with NATO and the US penetrate the region through the development of Caspian Sea oil.

Apart from immediate neighbours, the international community is also much more interested in SEE than the Caucasus. This is largely explained by the fact that Balkan crises affect the EU countries more quickly and more massively than those of the Caucasus (e.g., the wholesale influx of refugees). The existence of a large number of processes and initiatives to stabilize the Balkans is a good indication of the international community’s more substantial commitment to this region.

Apart from what the Russians have done, the international community’s involvement in the Caucasus peace process has remained fairly tentative. The internationalization of the region’s problems has, however, sometimes complicated rather than facilitated negotiations between belligerents. Indeed, the