

## **A regional house...of cards? Discursive and imaginative processes of region-building within and around Georgia**

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### **Abstract**

*In spite of the alleged failure or dysfunction of post-Soviet regionalism(s), political and cultural elites from different post-Soviet countries often refer to the “regionals”, making them meaningful even in the absence of effective and coherent regional institutions. Whereas Georgia represents in many ways an outlier in the post-Soviet area, its foreign policy narratives and state identity are quite affected by the reference to various ideas of the region, independently of its institutional setting. Accordingly, the paper seeks to explain Georgia’s “making of the self” through patterns of “regional association” and “regional disassociation”.*

*The paper looks at this phenomenon through constructivist lenses, premising on the assumption that regions might come into existence also as discursive configurations not enshrined by formal structures or embedded in institutions.*

*The paper thus attempts to trace Georgia’s regional imaginaries through qualitative techniques of data collection. After having identified Georgia’s regional imaginaries, tentative explanations are provided, on the one hand accounting for the role of path dependencies, i.e. the organizing capacity of “historical regions” and the “shadow of the past”; on the other hand, casting light on the international processes of knowledge production about Georgia, in particular, and the post-Soviet region, in general.*

### **South Caucasus in Georgian foreign policy**

According to Stephen Jones’ analysis, Georgian account of its role in the world has often been characterized by many contradictions and multiple “cultural paradigms” (Jones, 2003, p. 86). Among

them, pan-Caucasianism has survived to the alternation of elites in power since post-Soviet independence. The following historical overview serves the purpose of accounting for the resilience of Georgia' Caucasianness in the past quarter of century.

In spite of his short rule (1990-1992), Zviad Gamsakhurdia marked his leadership with a radical anti-Russian narrative and a rather naïve reliance on the West. His affinity with the Georgian Church represented both a sign of nationalism and independence from the Russian Church, and the interpretation of the Orthodoxy as the frontline of Western civilization. In addition to it, Gamsakhurdia's presidency was definitely characterized by his support of "pan-Caucasianism", that emerged as a disillusioned reaction to Western indifference or passivity vis-à-vis Georgian quest for normalization and return to European family. Accordingly, in 1991, Gamsakhurdia promoted the concept of a common "Caucasian Home" which would have gathered non-Turkic-speaking Chechens, Abkhazians and Cherkess and included a common economic zone, a Caucasian Forum (a sort of regional United Nations) and an alliance against foreign interference. However, such Pan-Caucasian vision was endangered by the impossibility to associate Georgian Orthodoxy with the Muslim North Caucasians. Furthermore, the collusion of the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples with Georgian secessionists introduced an irreconcilable dichotomy between Georgian territorial integrity and Pan-Caucasian ideas.

Eduard Shevardnadze inherited a collapsing state, challenged by secessionist movements, the insurgence of Zviadists (Gamsakhurdia's supporters), and the emergence local rulers in overt competition with the central authorities. In order to preserve and restore Georgian territorial integrity, and bolster Georgian statehood (Rondeli, 2001), Shevardnadze made some concessions to Russia. At the same time, westernizing aspirations were not neglected, bringing Georgia towards the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO, specifically through the Partnership for Peace), Council of Europe, and especially European Union (EU)<sup>1</sup>. Even though Shevardnadze formulated his policies and strategy in overt contrast to Gamsakhurdia's rule, the facet of Caucasian regional cooperation did not disappear. On the contrary, between 1996 and 1997 the second Georgia's president envisioned the establishment of a Caucasian parliament and a permanent Coordinating Council of Caucasian governments (Jones, 2003). On the other hand, Shevardnadze's pan-Caucasianism softened the anti-Russia dimension: the pragmatism vis-à-vis Moscow and the ineluctable

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<sup>1</sup> Georgian Europeanness was narrated by the political elites as an imaginative construction going beyond the institutional frameworks of cooperation with the EU structures. In his 1997 state of the union address Shevardnadze declared that joining Europe 'was for centuries the dream of our ancestors', while two years later, in his speech of accession to the Council of Europe, the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, Zurab Zhvania, suggestively declared 'I am Georgian, therefore I am European' (Rondeli, 2001).

consideration of Russia as the “relevant other” (Jones, 2003) resulted in its inclusion within some tentative pan-Caucasian initiatives<sup>2</sup>, paving the way to the design of a quartet-like format. In February 1996 Shevardnadze elaborated the main principles to govern interstate relations among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia (“Peaceful Caucasus Initiative”); similarly, the Declaration in Support of Inter-Ethnic Harmony, Peace, and Economic and Cultural Cooperation in the Caucasus was adopted in Kislovodsk in June 1996 by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Russia, and explicitly considered the Caucasus “a single, integral organism and a geopolitical reality”.

The 2003 Rose Revolution represented a main divide in Georgia post-independence course, at the level of both domestic politics and international positioning: in fact the westward orientation became the overriding feature of Saakashvili’s posture<sup>3</sup> and led the country to loosen its ties with the Russia-centered regional structures. Whereas Saakashvili made the integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures the polestar of Georgian foreign policy, his narrative contributed - as in the case of the two previous presidents - to the (re-)shaping of an imagined region surrounding and entrenching his country. In September 2010, speaking from the rostrum of the United Nations General Assembly, Saakashvili called upon the idea of a “United Caucasus”. The anti-Russia feature of pan-Caucasianism emerged again: that move has actually been interpreted as a provocation vis-à-vis Russia, especially if framed in combination with Georgia’s visa liberalization for residents of the North Caucasus, the launch of “First Caucasian TV” (Первый Кавказский) (“Georgia’s Caucasus TV Channel Launched Online”, 2010) by the Georgian Public Broadcaster (January 2010), and the formal recognition of the Circassian Genocide (May 2011) (German, 2012).

### **Idea of the State, Idea of the Region**

In spite of several transformations marking different phases of its foreign policy since its independence, this article argues that Georgia’s state identity, the perception of what role it should play, and what status it should enjoy among other states, are quite influenced by the reference to the South Caucasus, which can be considered as a resilient “idea of the region”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> While some of these “Caucasian endeavors” remained inconsistent, contradictory and still “autochthonous” (i.e. in June 1997 Zurab Zhvania proposed an “Interparliamentary Assembly of the Caucasus”), others were promoted or initiated by non-Caucasian actors: early in 1999, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov proposed the convening of a “Forum on the Caucasus”, while in June 1999 a Caucasian Summit was held in Luxembourg under the aegis of the EU.

<sup>3</sup> This shift was also reflected in the establishment of a Minister of Integration in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of “idea of the region” recalls Anssi Paasi’s concept of “identity of a region”, defined as “those features of nature, culture and people that are used in the discourses and classification of science, politics, cultural activism, regional marketing,

By “idea of the region” I intend not only that a set of narratives and discourses are at disposal of relevant domestic and international actors, political elites, and policy-makers to create specific representations about the world and the position of a country in the international system. I also imply that discursive practices of delimiting, mapping, naming, representing, and symbolising spaces and collectivities have a constitutive effect on a country’ state identity.

Even though South Caucasus has been depicted as a “divided” or even a “broken” region (De Waal, 2012; Boonstra and Delcour, 2015), there is an extensive literature considering it as i. a regional security complex; ii. the result of regional concepts and definitions provided by both external actors and political groups and parties in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan; iii. a civilizational area (Coppieters, 1996). Yet, the region is conventionally described as a territorial entity, whose social and political incoherence is reflected in the absence of a shared identity and a common framework of cooperation (German, 2012). Whereas the diverse participation of South Caucasian states to different regional organisations can testify their dissimilar strategic orientations, and even though the realization of Caucasianness has never gone beyond the declaratory level, it would be naïve to dismiss it as “non-existent” *tout-court*. In addition to presidential visions, that idea of the region has been at the core of several projects advanced by experts and influential members of Georgian civil society<sup>5</sup>; moreover, Georgian political and cultural elites frequently present their country through a self-identification with South Caucasus. The issue to debate is not whether South Caucasus is discursively and imaginatively constructed as a region, but how.

The investigation on the idea(s) of the region moulding Georgia’s state identity and foreign policy narratives has been undertaken through three sets of qualitative tools.

Firstly, in-depth elite interviews have been carried out during a fieldwork in Tbilisi (April - June 2013)<sup>6</sup>. Interviewees were addressed with questions about their representation of the role(s) of their country at the regional level; their opinions and perceptions about the scope and the objectives of regional

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governance [...] to distinguish one region from others” (Paasi, 2003, p. 480). The notion is also indebted to concepts such as “foreign policy imaginaries” and “geopolitical imaginations”, through which different actors give meaning and make sense of their country’s role and place in the world (Guzzini, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Giorgi Khutsishvili has supported the idea of unification of the three states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the three conflicting territories (Abkhazia, Tskhinvali and Karabakh) granting the latter a special status. Following Khutsishvili’s vision, the Teqali Peace Center has been created in the province of Kvemo-Kartli, at the intersection of the borders among Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Quite differently from Khutsishvili, Abkhazian historian and politician, Viacheslav Chirikba has suggested that the North Caucasian Republics of the Russian Federation, the federated Republic of Abkhazia-Apsny, South Ossetia and the Adjarian Republic, forming a common state with Georgia, should have been brought together in the framework of the pan-Caucasian union.

<sup>6</sup> I have carried out twenty in-depth, unstructured interviews, addressing a sample composed by officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Security Council; members of the Parliament; advisors, experts, and consultants; and member of the local academic community.

interactions; their vision about regional identity/identities; their attitude towards regional institutionalization(s).

Secondly, a content analysis of strategic documents and texts produced by Georgian institutions in the realm of the foreign policy making has been carried out. Different sets of documents have been screened with the support of the software AntConc in order to assess the frequency of predefined semantic groups considered to be relevant to understand the regional dimension of Georgian international posture and to which extent the country has self-represented in relation to different regional imaginaries.

Thirdly, two rounds of on-line, asynchronous focus groups have been arranged using “Ning”, a service that permits to create customized social networks and closed-community websites. In order to take into consideration a generational dimension<sup>7</sup>, the on-line focus groups involved young people (under-35) interested in international affairs but not necessarily involved in foreign policy-making<sup>8</sup>.

Data analysis has unfolded a discursive method also stemming from Iver Neumann’s interpretation of regions as speech acts (Neumann, 1994, p. 59). His Region-Building Approach seeks for replies to the question “whose region is” through examining how regions are defined, imagined and represented, and by whom. As a matter of fact, according to Neumann “a region is constantly being defined and redefined by its members in a permanent discourse [...] this definition necessarily involves a manipulation of knowledge and power” (Neumann, 1994, p. 53). This interpretation discloses a constructivist line of reasoning wherein regions are what region-makers make of them: Neumann particularly focuses on the strategies undertaken by region-builders to substantiate a certain region, including the creation of a regional history, symbolism, mythology. Therefore, regions are created by region-builders’ discourses on the region, and region-building processes should be traced through relevant political entrepreneurs’ discourses.

Understanding a region as a speech act entails addressing research questions such as when, why and how elites label issues referring to the regional level; when, why and how they succeed and fail in such endeavours (that is when, why and how the reference to the regional level by a certain group of elites is acknowledged and legitimated by the domestic constituencies and/or the international community).

### **South Caucasus: a Puzzling Idea of the Region**

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<sup>7</sup> Several interviewees have referred to a resilient “Soviet mentality” (“mental maps”, “collective memories”, “generations that remember the same past”, same routines in private and public life, same education schemes). By addressing younger people, online focus groups also aimed at testing the resilience of “Soviet mental maps” among new generations.

<sup>8</sup> Six participants in total.

“South Caucasus” has recurred as the *first* regional idea mentioned by the majority of the interviewees. The instinctive reference to South Caucasus might characterize it as a “*natural* space”; however, its association with regional conflicts can lead to categorize South Caucasus as a “*failed* space”. These two attributes consistently flow into an understanding of South Caucasus as a geographical fact (furthermore *Asian*) in opposition to politically-grounded groupings (i.e. the ones stemming from allegedly similar domestic configurations: Moldova-Ukraine-Georgia; similar status in Euro-Atlantic structures: Georgia-Bosnia-Montenegro-Macedonia; high-politics projects of cooperation: Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia).

The intuitive association of Georgia with South Caucasus can be interpreted as a sign of the “naturalness” of the region; however, several interviewees has underlined that Georgia’s association to South Caucasus results from external definitions, making the region artificial. This controversial aspect has been epitomized by an interviewee’s statement: “[if you ask Georgians] ‘Are you South Caucasus?’ [you will be replied] Yes, we are South Caucasus” as a sign of internalized acquiescence to patronizing definitions<sup>9</sup>. In other words, “politicians understood that it is useful to use the notion of South Caucasus”<sup>10</sup>; and also outside the political realm, Georgians often put the South Caucasus label on a wide range of projects and initiatives to attracts grants and facilitate international endorsements<sup>11</sup>.

In other words, Caucasianness has been defined as a “perception based on outside-in socialization”<sup>12</sup> and South Caucasus interestingly narrated as an “international invention”<sup>13</sup>. Coherently with that, some of the respondents have explicitly questioned the acritical association of Georgia with South Caucasus: that contestation has occasionally taken an “emotive” shape (“I do not want Georgia to be compared with Armenia and Azerbaijan”<sup>14</sup>). Certain irritated reactions can also be explained by the fact that “South Caucasus” has been interpreted an attempt to peripheralise the country, since the region is identified as “the neighborhood of the European Union but not European neighborhood”<sup>15</sup>. On the same line, it is also interesting to look at how the interviewees depicted Armenia and Azerbaijan; in addition to diverse characterizations about the respective bilateral relations, both Armenia and Azerbaijan has been described as merely “different” (differently European, differently democratic, differently tied to Russia).

A further feature that has emerged from the interviews is that South Caucasus is an inclusive space: in spite of its common relegation to the disjunctive role of buffer/insulator, the region has multifold linkages

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<sup>9</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, June 2013.

with North Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Moreover, according to the majority of the interviewees South Caucasus is a “*European space*”. The latter aspect is quite telling if one considers that Georgia has been unanimously defined by all interviewees as European. Therefore, Georgia’ South-Caucasianness is in contradiction with its Europeanness. On the contrary, several interviewees have described Europe as a *plural* and *nested* space, even “divided” and characterized by differences: that can be read as an attempt to legitimize the divisive, heterogeneous and fragmented nature of the Southern Caucasian region as well as an element which does not exclude *per se* South Caucasus from Europe.

Finally, South Caucasus is the context where Georgian international actorness can be rehabilitated. As a matter of fact, Georgia has been presented as i. a “facilitator”/ “mediator” between Azerbaijan and Armenia; ii. a source of inspiration for other ex-soviet states (“frontline”, “vanguard”, “testing ground”), leading the process of integration of the South Caucasus in the Euro-Atlantic structures; iii) as a “regional hub” (for the re-exportation of goods, services and reforms). According to several interviewees, Georgia has the potential to trigger a democratizing/westernizing domino effect involving Armenia and Azerbaijan; furthermore, a Georgia-led South Caucasus can initiate a transformative pattern in other sectors of the former Soviet space<sup>16</sup>.

The analysis of the main documents produced by the national institutions in the realm of foreign policy has served the purpose of tracing the development over time of the main ideas that have been collected throughout the interviews: South Caucasus has emerged as the most controversial source of regional identification in terms of how it contributes to the Georgian construction of the self.

The following documents has been selected and analyzed:

- 1997 Basic Principles of the Sustainability of Social Life, the Strengthening of State Sovereignty and Security, and the Restoration of the Territorial Integrity of Georgia<sup>17</sup>;
- 2000 Georgia and the World: A Vision and Strategy for the Future;
- 2005 National Security Concept;
- 2006-2009 Foreign Policy Strategy;
- 2012 National Security Concept;
- 2013 Resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia’s Foreign Policy.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, May 2013.

<sup>17</sup> The 1997 document is neither published nor officially translated - therefore it has been examined with the support of a local interpreter.

These strategic documents, purposefully elaborated to deliver the official posture of Georgia's foreign policy, have been complemented with a collection of speeches delivered by the presidents during the sessions of the United Nations General Assembly, inauguration speeches and addresses to the nation.

Scanning the first set of documents it is possible to notice that South Caucasus is often represented as part of Europe, while regional interactions among Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia are mentioned in relation to policies and strategies established by the EU and other European/Euro-Atlantic structures. That apparently confirms the other-directed feature of Caucasianness; nonetheless, Georgia can display its leading role in the South Caucasus and play an active role in Europe as well.

The regional imaginary of the Caucasus is ever-present throughout the second set of documents as well. The latter deliver an idea of the region characterised by the reference to the Caucasian unity and the "non-discrimination" between North Caucasus and South Caucasus ("We might belong to different States and live on different side of the mountains, but in terms of human and cultural space. There is no North and South Caucasus, there is one Caucasus"<sup>18</sup>); the vision of a region of people rather than institutions; and the representation of an historical region at the same time opened to transformation:

*I came here to speak about this change and to promote a specific vision - a vision for a free, stable and united Caucasus. From Pushkin, Lermontov or Tolstoy's times till now, the Caucasian mountains were a symbol of wilderness and paradoxes, a region where individuals and souls were fundamentally free, but where citizens were politically oppressed. Where people and cultures were deeply tolerant but where governments and authorities created artificial divisions, where shepherds would cross 5000 meters high mountains, but where rulers erected walls nobody could cross. I came here today to tell you that these times are vanishing, that the dream of unity and peace is possible<sup>19</sup>.*

*For centuries, the Caucasian mountains have been a geopolitical mystery, a beguiling paradox-a region where individuals and souls were free, but where citizens were oppressed; where cultures were tolerant, but where governments created artificial divisions; where people never ceased to feel deeply Europeans, but where walls erected by Empires turned Europe into a faraway mirage, where men and women were striving for peace, but where*

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<sup>18</sup> Speech by Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia, at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 23 November 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Remarks by Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia, at the 65th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 23 September 2010.



*wars seemed unavoidable. I came here to tell you that we must put an end to these times, that cooperation must replace rivalry, that negotiation must prevail over the rhetoric of war.*<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the focus groups introduced some elements of dissonance vis-à-vis what emerged from the interviews and the analysis of official documents. In particular, Georgian young experts have showed more cautious opinions about their country's potential as a leader or avant-gardist in the region ("It seems to me that political decision-makers pay less attention to the regional issues and even try to escape this notion of 'Caucasian' in exchange of 'European'<sup>21</sup>). There are nonetheless a few aspects that seamlessly return in the narratives of Georgian specialists and policy-makers independently from their exposure to the Soviet experience that is regardless of the abovementioned generational dimension: interestingly, the regional idea of South Caucasus seems to be one of them. South Caucasus is depicted mostly in emotional than geopolitical terms, primarily as a space of nations/peoples rather than a group of states, "as it is represented in the pictures of Dmitri Ivanovich Yermakov":

*For me the South Caucasus is associated with Karvasla - the old guildhall of merchants in the old district of Tbilisi. [...] It is something manifested in the Knight in the Panther's Skin - 'to us men He has given the world, infinite in variety we possess it' - this very word 'variety', which in Georgian has a much powerful meaning 'utvalavi ferita' (multiplicity of colours). It is a space that shaped ideas of Rustaveli, Vazha-Pshavela. [...] We had trilingual poet Sayat-Nova who was Tbilisi born Armenian, but wrote poems in three languages (Georgian, Armenian, Persian)<sup>22</sup>.*

South Caucasus has been imaginatively described by Georgian young experts as a "multicultural and multilingual space", which has inherited a medieval history of intense communications and commercial exchanges ("as Churchill said once about Balkans could be used about the South Caucasus: these people have more history than they can digest"); yet, the present vision of Caucasianness has been exposed to manipulations, as "modern politicians have misinterpreted the idea of the South Caucasus, made it too much political or if you like geopolitical".

In one exceptional case, a focus group participant has emphasized the "international" origin of "South-Caucasianness" and its wrongly romanticized characteristics. According to this respondent, Georgia finds itself "confined within a narrow South Caucasus regional framework that seems to be still at work among

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<sup>20</sup> Speech by Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia, at the Plenary Session of the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 23 November 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Focus group participant.

<sup>22</sup> Focus group participant.

Georgia's Western partners and allies"; similar statements feature other replies delivered by the same person:

*"South Caucasus" is a typical category used by Western political structures, which is also a case of "Black Sea region."*<sup>23</sup>

*Even if it is a part of a nomenclature and a discourse espoused by Georgia's Western partners, I don't think Georgia should pursue and construct its "national brand" and a foreign policy identity based on a vague concept of "South Caucasus". For me, South Caucasus merely means a sum of independent states located South to Russian Federation. The particular space included in the umbrella of "South Caucasus" undoubtedly needs further cooperation among players and a long period of peace-building processes; however, any attempt to conceptualize regional integration - even if we are talking about a hypothetical set of progressive and mutually beneficial projects of partnership - should avoid past mistakes of portraying South Caucasus or Caucasus in non-rational, mystified terms that always fall short of validity and broader perspective.*<sup>24</sup>

In spite of delivering interesting nuances, the interviews, documents and focus groups similarly reveal a double process of "self-orientalisation" (performed by Georgia's elites when representing their countries) and "internal orientalism" (towards South Caucasus and its other members). These two terms draw on Edward Saïd's engagement (not only theoretical) with and examination of Western forms of knowledge production about the Middle East (Saïd, 1978) - knowledge production that is entrenched in the colonial history of this geopolitical expanse. In more general terms, orientalisation implies the construction of "Eastness" through outside production of orientaling discourses typically based on a-historicised, exoticised, essentialist and culturally reductionist tropes. These discourses tend to reproduce patterns of domination and subalternity, not only among scholars but also policy-makers and societal actors. Further, discursive practices of orientalisation may come not only from the outside: political and cultural elites may indeed orientalise their own country (that is, depict it through westerners' lenses) to achieve certain goals (for example, in order to stay in the spotlight of international donors, or get support for certain reform programs). In the definition of Faye Harrison, "Self-Orientalization complies with existing

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<sup>23</sup> Focus group participant.

<sup>24</sup> Focus group participant.

stereotypes, The Orientalized subject absorbs this dominant sense of self-identity and uses it as a way of marketing to the outside world, remaining within understandable and understood frames of reference”<sup>25</sup>.

South Caucasus is frequently perceived as a “geographic cage”: that is, a condition imposed by Georgia’s objective location but also a region whose contested definition is perpetuated by external actors. At the same time, South Caucasus is also imagined as an emancipatory tool to achieve political results such as Georgia’s integration in global institutions and the compliance with EU’s expectations and schemes. Through self-defining as part of the South Caucasus, Georgia enhance its capacity to attract different types of resources (both material and symbolic): therefore, such idea of the region is accepted and internalized as long as the structuration of the Caucasus as a European periphery makes Georgia the Caucasian “core” in terms of Europeanness.

### **Cognitive “Versus” Functional Dimension**

While not being reflected in full-fledged institutional and/or formalised outputs<sup>26</sup>, regional imaginaries connected to the idea of South Caucasus proved to frame Georgia’ state identity. The previous two sections have not only displayed that Georgian political and cultural elites regularly rely on the idea of South Caucasus as Georgia’s most compelling context; they have also showed that Georgia’ South Caucasianness presents high cognitive and functional dimension, and a rather low affective dimension. That means that the identity of the region is clearly identified and categorized (cognitive dimension), and represents an instrument to achieve political objectives not directly related to Caucasian sub-regionalism *per se* (functional dimension). In addition to it, the South Caucasus does not represent a source of identification for Georgian society, especially if compared to other identity frameworks such as the ones rooted in national, local, and/or class identities.

What is argued here is that both the high cognitive dimension and the high functional dimension originate in path-dependencies (Pierson, 2000), namely the organising capacity of the “shadows of the past”, which manifest themselves along two different lines and through two types of mechanism.

On the one hand, the high cognitive dimension stems from the re-elaboration of pre-Soviet and Soviet experiences of region-building that contributed to identifying the South Caucasus with an “historical region” (Todorova, 1997; Todorova, 2005). On the other hand, the high functional dimension can be explained by Georgia’s permeability to outside-in vectors of region-building which reverberate resilient

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Georgiev, 2012, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> This terminology partially draws on Keating 1998.

“mental maps” represented in elites’ narrative templates. In other words, shared past experiences form a collective framework of memory which has not only shaped the imagination of the past but also mediated the collective imaginaries of the future (Assmann and Shortt, 2011).

As concerns the first line of explanation - the one addressing the cognitive dimension - it is worth recalling the different attempts at regional governance in the South Caucasus that have materialised in the past century.

In the period in-between the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, Georgia was part of the first Transcaucasian Federation. In November 1917 party representatives from the Georgian Social-Democratic Party, the Azeri Musavat Party (Mensheviks), the Armenian Dashnaktsutiun party met in Tiflis to create an Independent Government of Transcaucasus with the purpose of rejecting the power of the Council of People’s Commissars headed by Lenin, and refusing the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The latter, in fact, was signed by the Bolshevik regime without consulting the Caucasian countries, although it envisaged the cession of South Caucasian provinces to the Ottoman Empire. In April 1918 the Sejm, convened in Tbilisi, released an historical “Declaration of Independence and Sovereignty of the Transcaucasus”, announcing the separation from Russia and the formation of a Transcaucasian Federation. The latter lasted only one month, as each nationality went into the project with different perspectives, reasons and intentions. Azerbaijan was oriented towards Turkey; Armenia remained loyal to Russia, while Georgia secretly negotiated with Germany for an alliance that would have guaranteed its survival and then declared its independence in May 1918; consequently, Azerbaijan and Armenia declared their independence as well. In other words, the rise and fall of the first Transcaucasian Federation was affected by great power dynamics and external factors.

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The second Transcaucasian Federation was established in 1922 as one of the constituent parts of the newly-established Soviet Union; the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic existed until 1936, and was then abolished due to the adoption of the new Soviet Constitution (Bagirova, 2007).

Not only the formation of regional associative arrangements before and during the Soviet rule was other-directed; post-Soviet projects of uniting the Caucasus also experienced de-integrative trajectories, that reverberated previous governing rationales. In October 1991 representatives of Georgian social and political movements attended the third congress of the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, held in Sukhumi and reviving the idea of an all-Caucasian confederative unity. On that occasion, a Georgian parliamentary deputy indeed called for the entire Caucasus to merge to form a “single fist”. Nevertheless, the Confederation did not embodied the same project of “Caucasianness” for all

components<sup>27</sup>; on the contrary, it somehow testified the effectiveness of Soviet rule in devising nationalities on territorial and linguistic principles and dividing them along artificially created ethnic lines. Even though the attempts towards Caucasian integration had always had an anti-Russian nature, nationalistic consciousness prevailed in the post-Soviet period, leading the Caucasian nations to pursue unification with their co-ethnics rather than Caucasian unity<sup>28</sup>.

As regards the second line of explanation - the one addressing the functional dimension, several clues traceable throughout the interviews, the official documents and the focus groups suggest that also the organising capacity of the shadow of the past manifests itself in post-Soviet times through political elites drawing on multiple ideas of the region coming from the outside.

Although Georgia's political and cultural elites are gradually claiming room to actively contribute the regional imaginaries moulding Georgian state identity (as opposed to receiving externally-shaped regional imaginaries), it can be shown that they keep on relying on other-directed constructions and legitimate them by their functional dimension. That is particularly true for the narratives about Georgia's South Caucasianness: its resilience, i.e. recurring rehabilitation of that idea of the region in post-Soviet times, cannot be explained solely in terms of common historical experiences, past modalities of interactions and governance of the interdependence existing among the three South Caucasian states (and also the North Caucasian nations). It can be argued, indeed, that the survival of this particular regional imaginary can be interpreted in terms of self-orientalisation: this mechanism confirms the role of path-dependencies, in particular a post-colonial political culture (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 141) affected by decades of autochthonous imaginaries that have been silenced and overlaid by different colonizers.

In the post-Soviet period, Georgian elites' alleged "habitus to other-directedness" have facilitated the unfolding of different "models of Caucasian integration" (Ismailov, 2006, pp. 7-10) and Georgia's participation to them. In addition to the one proposed by Russia (the "3+1 format") on the occasion of the abovementioned Kislovodsk Summit in 1996, since the Nineties other actors flowed into the process of externally-induced region-building<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> According to then-president of the Confederation Musa Shanibov, the Confederation should have integrated the peoples of the Caucasus rather than the official governments of the autonomous republics; furthermore, the unification should have served the purpose of resisting attempts to suppress Caucasus' national-democratic movements. Quite differently, the then-president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria Dzhokhar Dudayev considered the integrative project of uniting the Caucasian people in a confederation as an instrument for achieving independence from Russia. He envisioned the creation of a "Caucasian home" and a Confederation of Caucasian states. Shanibov and Dudayev also diverged on whether including the Transcaucasian states in the Caucasian union.

<sup>28</sup> See Lakoba, 1998; Oguz, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Just to mention few examples, former Turkish President Demirel suggested creating a pan-South Caucasus grouping in the late 1990s; by a similar token, in the wake of the 2008 War, Erdogan envisioned a Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform.

These initiatives, similarly characterised by the way they automatically embedded Georgia in the South Caucasus, have been received, debated and revised by a wide range of actors and processed through the encounter of different chains of policy elaboration. One significant example is the ongoing process of European Neighbourhood Policy Review and the parallel development of review recommendations to reframe the Eastern Partnership, which have been elaborated by a number of think tanks, expert associations, and research institutes.

What apparently proves to be more resilient is the way the knowledge about Georgia and its international environment is produced and organized. In other words, outside-in vectors of region-building shaping Georgia's South Caucasianness might have to do with international processes of knowledge production about the country, in particular, and the post-Soviet region, in general.

By looking at the international processes of knowledge production about Georgia, it is possible to reconsider the complex constellation of actors that have, at different times, continued the peripheralisation and exoticisation of the South Caucasus. In other words, this has had to do not only with Russian Orientalism (embodied for example in the works of XVIII century travelogues), great power dynamics (i.e. the Ottoman strategy aimed at creating a Caucasian state to buffer against Russia), or the Soviet policy of "National-Territorial Delimitation" (Hirsch, 2005, pp. 163-164). The repeated compliance with external actors' practices of delimiting, mapping, naming, representing, and symbolising spaces and collectivities (in other words, with external actors' ideas of the region) may have brought Georgian elites to think about their country in other-directed terms in spite of the new independent course.

Within this analytical framework, Georgia' self-representation and imaginative positioning in the South Caucasus can be interpreted as the result of current orientalising actors and discursive practices.

In February 2015 the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center published the latest expression of Western re-construction of the South Caucasus not only through policy circles but also epistemic communities and scholarly networks (Cornell, Starr, and Tsereteli, 2015). Even though the United States and the EU allegedly lack a regional approach to the South Caucasus, in the past two decades all multilateral institutions as well as international/regional organisations have contributed to the conservation of the label "South Caucasus".

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Furthermore, even though the bilateral cooperation between Brussels and Tbilisi has been formally arranged through "country-tailored" initiatives and programmes, the "Caucasian" component has been quite marked in the European policy elaboration toward Georgia, as the appointment of the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus (2003) and the resolution issued by the European Parliament in 2010 on the need for an EU strategy for the South Caucasus can similarly display. See among others: Delcour, 2011; Simão, 2013; Ögütçü *et al.*, 2015.

Georgia has been internationally framed, narrated and studied far more through the lenses of Caucasian Studies than Kartvelian Studies, which remains an academic niche attached to the humanities. The Fund for Kartvelian Studies supports the activity of the only Centre for Kartvelian Studies in the world, established in 1992 and currently based at Tbilisi State University<sup>30</sup>. International Symposia and Summer Schools on Kartvelian Studies have been regularly organised, and an International Association for the Promotion of Georgian/Kartvelian Studies have been recently launched; moreover, research outputs in that field are circulated through a limited number of journals: “The Kartvelologist - Journal of Georgian Studies”, “Bedi Kartlisa. Revue de Kartvélogie”, which was succeeded by “Revue des études géorgiennes et caucasiennes”, and “Georgica: A Journal of Georgian and Caucasian Studies”. Against this background, the study of Georgia as a fragment of the South Caucasian mosaic, and even more frequently, of controversially defined assemblages of countries, is much more internationally recognized and diffused. This trend can be immediately traced by considering a selection of universities among the highest-ranked ones in the world<sup>31</sup> and the publication landscape<sup>32</sup>, which make the Caucasus as such a specific field of knowledge production.

<i>High-Ranked Universities</i>	<i>Site(s) of Knowledge Production about the Post-Soviet Region</i>	<i>Country-Tailored Knowledge Production</i>
Columbia University	Harriman Institute Russian, Eurasian and East European studies	
Duke University	Duke Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies	
Harvard University	Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies; Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs: Research Theme “Europe (Balkans, Caucasus, Western Europe, Eastern	

<sup>30</sup> See the website [www.kartvfund.org.ge](http://www.kartvfund.org.ge).

<sup>31</sup> According to the latest “World University Ranking” issued by The Times Higher Education and the “Academic Ranking of World Universities” by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. Other interesting realities can be found in European and American contexts, such as the program in Caucasian Studies offered by the University of Jena, the American Research Institute of the South Caucasus, and the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net.

<sup>32</sup> Caucasus Survey; Caucasian Review of International Affairs; Caucasus Analytical Digest; Caucasus International (jointly published by the Baku-based Center for Strategic Studies and the Eurasian Association of Scientists); Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation; The Caucasus and Globalisation; Journal of Central Asian and the Caucasus Studies (whose editorial office is at the Ankara-based International Strategic Research Organisation).

	Europe”); Program on Central Asia and the Caucasus	
London School of Economics and Political Science	Research Theme “Europe beyond the EU”	
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Minor Program in Russian and Eurasian Studies	
New York University	Project ”Eurasian Connections”	
Stanford University	Center for Russian, East European & Eurasian Studies	
University College London	School of Slavonic & East European Studies	
University of California, Berkeley	Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies	
University of California, Los Angeles	Center for European and Russian Studies	Armenian Studies Program
University of Cambridge	Central Asia and Caucasus Research Group	Azeri Studies Programme
University of Chicago	Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies	
University of Michigan	Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia; Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies → Regional Programs: Armenian Studies, Central Asian Studies, Czech & Slovak Studies, Polish Studies, Russian Studies, Southeast European Studies	
University of Oxford	St Antony’s Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre	Wardrop Fund for Georgian Studies (Kartvelian Studies);



		Nizami Ganjavi Programme for the study of languages and cultures of Azerbaijan and the Caucasus
University of Pennsylvania	Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies Group	
University of Wisconsin-Madison	Center for Russia, East Europe, and Central Asia	
Yale University	Russian and East European Studies	

Table 1. Sites of knowledge production about Georgia (author's elaboration)

The discursive practices shaping that idea of the region - how “South Caucasus” has been processed outside Georgia - have become established in both American and European mainstream academia and gradually caught on in Georgia, being included in political and cultural elites’ narratives about their country.

The functional dimension of the South Caucasus seems to have progressively overtaken the cognitive one in explaining the rationale behind Georgian elites’ reference to that regional imaginary. In addition to data gathered through the interviews and focus groups, there are at least two sets of evidence pointing to such a conclusion.

Firstly, Georgia’ South Caucasianness is mostly stated in those elites’ discourses addressing an international audience. From a comparison between inauguration state-of-the-nation speeches on the one hand and the addresses to the United Nations General Assembly on the other hand, one can notice that the reference to South Caucasus is downplayed when elites address domestic constituencies (instead of the international community).

Secondly, South Caucasus does not emerge as a well-contoured idea of the region among Georgian people, as displayed by a number of surveys which have been carried out in order to measure Georgians’ attachment and attitudes towards other countries.

According to the Integration Barometer<sup>33</sup> Georgians do not show a preferential attraction towards the other two South Caucasian countries; by a similar token, data from the Caucasian Barometer delivers positive attitudes of Georgians vis-à-vis doing business with - respectively - Armenians and Azerbaijanis, yet negative attitudes as regards mixed marriages with their neighbors. Even more tellingly, according to the dataset “Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia” (2009, 2011, and 2013), Georgians perceive that strengthening ties with Armenia and Azerbaijan is important for their government; however, the large majority of respondents does not consider cooperation with those countries a priority<sup>34</sup>.

Thirdly, South Caucasus has revealed to be an appealing brand for Georgia, both within and beyond the field of knowledge production, not only to raise the interest of international actors towards the country, but also to attract resources through grants, investments in the non-governmental sector and sponsorships to joint projects. As it results from European Commission’s database “CORDIS” (Community Research and Development Information Service), Georgia has been included in several EU-funded projects revolving around the South Caucasus, most of the times in the framework of consortia including also either Armenia, or Azerbaijan, or both. According to its own website, the Ilia State University established in 2009 an “International School for Caucasus Studies” exactly to respond to the increasing attention drawn by the Caucasus region from politicians, businesspeople, journalists and scholars, while university programs, conferences and academic partnerships flourished in the past years having similarly their headquarters or venues in Tbilisi<sup>35</sup>. In addition to its Centre for Kartvelian Studies, the other major university based in the capital - Tbilisi State University - hosts an Institute of Caucasiology and offers several courses in Caucasian Studies<sup>36</sup>. Similar, yet less pronounced, findings can be retrieved from the analysis of the financial structure of the main funding instruments whose recipient was, among others, Georgia: TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991-2006), ENPI (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, 2007-2013), and ENI (European Neighbourhood Instrument, 2014-2020). As per the ENPI, the largest share of funds has been used for bilateral actions, that is country initiatives; on the other hand, according to the Regional Indicative Programmes 2011-2013, funding of €348.57 million has been allocated to regional initiatives and mechanisms (not

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<sup>33</sup> The Integration Barometer has been elaborated by the Centre for Integration Studies of the Eurasian Development Bank, in collaboration with the International Research Agency «Eurasian Monitor».

<sup>34</sup> Both the Caucasian Barometer and the dataset “Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia” have been elaborated by the network of Caucasus Research Resource Centers.

<sup>35</sup> International Caucasological Research Institute; Caucasus International University; Caucasus University; moreover, several Georgian universities participate to the Caucasus University Association.

<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Tbilisi State University supported the creation of an open access database collecting materials related to Georgia, from translated primary sources to academic articles.

necessarily targeting the three South Caucasian countries though). Likewise, the ENI has been programmed with the objective of enhancing sub-regional, regional and Neighbourhood wide collaboration; ENI funds are distributed through bilateral programmes, multi-country programmes and Cross-Border Cooperation programmes, while the instructions for programming the ENI do not include specific sections about the South Caucasus per se. However, from a simple review of the projects actually realized over the last few years through ENI and ENPI, it appears that many of them entails a South Caucasian dimension (and are supported by a pool of other international donors such as the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Labour Organisation...)<sup>37</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

The present article has started from observing that Georgia's political and cultural elites often define their country through positioning it within one or more ideas of the surrounding regional environment. That occurs even though Georgia finds itself no longer embedded in the post-Soviet regional organisations, and not yet integrated in the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Among the multiple regional imaginaries that shape Georgia's foreign policy narratives and state identity, the continuous reference to South Caucasus looks like a puzzle and has been investigated through a discursive approach.

Both in its integrative and disintegrative versions, the regional imaginaries of the South Caucasus have been constructed in Georgia's pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet history from the outside without a sound and rooted attachment in the local autochthonous political identity. The fil rouge weaving together the storylines of federalisation and fragmentation lies in the fact that the reference to regional imaginaries has often resulted from other-directed processes and moves.

On the one hand, Georgia's South Caucasianness reverberates a shared history (not only during the Soviet Union, but also before it) and past experiences of peripheralisation to which the country has been subjected before its independence. On the other hand, international processes of knowledge production

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<sup>37</sup> A non-exhaustive list includes: Support to Integrated Border Management Systems in the South Caucasus; South Caucasus Anti-Drug Programme; Development/Strengthening of Comprehensive Anti-Trafficking Responses in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; Strengthening Protection Capacity Project in the Southern Caucasus - Developing a Regional Protection Response in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; Fostering Community Forest Policy and Practice in Mountain Regions of the Caucasus; Sustainable Land Management for Mitigating Land Degradation and Reducing Poverty in the South Caucasus Region; Trans-Boundary River Management for the Kura River; Caucasus Cultural Initiatives Network; The South Caucasus Mediation & Dialogue Initiative for Reignited Peace Processes.

about Georgia, in particular, and the post-Soviet space, in general, seem to reproduce orientalist discursive practices in present times. A *habitus* of self-identification according to other-directed categories might have facilitated the permeability of Georgia's elites to a regional imaginary which has been certainly nourished by a shared past and actual interdependence, but that has been nonetheless transfigured from the outside.

The re-construction of South Caucasus through processes of knowledge production has had different spillovers in local foreign policy making and policy-related sectors, through the creation of regional fora, think tanks, NGOs, associations of experts and advisory bodies. The ongoing encounter between the cognitive dimension and the functional dimension of Georgia's South Caucasianness - in other words, between an imaginative substrate and material conditions - contributes to self-propelling this complex idea of the region.

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