

Why Nations Go to War? Ethnocracy vs Democratic Peace in Divided South Caucasus

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Abstract

Based on the analysis of some theoretical approaches and practical circumstances, this research paper explores the issue of war origins and their solutions in divided regions such as South Caucasus. It has to be noted that regions with considerable ethnic diversities and cultural distinctions as well as with non-democratic regimes have a huge conflict potential. In this context, the South Caucasus has become a boiling conflict zone after the Soviet-Union dissolution. Since then, many times and by different ways the efforts to resolve the conflicts were undertaken but with no positive outcomes yet. Some of these conflicts (for example: South Ossetia or Abkhazia) stay as frozen but another one such as Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was reignited in 2020 after 25 years of relative truce. The complex analysis of relevant issues showcases that a sustainable peace-building in the South Caucasus can become possible mostly by democratic values' promotion based on consociation of interests. In this regard, the article suggests and substantiates a democratic (consociational) peace-building approach when the rights and legitimate claims of smaller nations will be considered and respected by bigger ones. This approach can be seen as an appropriate and soft way for stabilizing the South Caucasus region.

Keywords: War, Ethnocracy, Democratic Peace-Building, Divided Regions, South Caucasus

INTRODUCTION

Origins of Regional Wars

Recent developments in world politics demonstrate a wide range of fluctuating conflicts that obviously threaten to remake the existing world order or balance of forces in some regions. Taking into account the need for stability and appeasement as well as the volatile situation and circumstances in conflicting regions, the answer to the question “Why nations go to war” becomes extremely important. More likely, the problem of regional conflicts arises from divided national, demographic, economic, and political structures and aims continuously persisting in these regions. Ethnocratic intentions and provisions of some nations due to their quantitative majority engender a feeling of dominance on smaller ones. And when smaller nations don't agree to be dominated and claim their rights to be considered and protected, the conflict raises and, moreover, it can grow up to a war. In this regard, bigger nations resist to the legitimate claims of smaller ones for not losing the supremacy over them.

The conflict raised to a war was, is and will be one of the crucial problems in international and inter-state relations. For the whole time of their existence, humans have been killing one another; throughout the modern era, they have been doing the same thing in different and devastating ways. This mostly happens in divided regions where people have diverse ethnicities, cultures, languages, and national interests. The human and material destructions of war in the 20 and at the beginning of 21st centuries are incalculable. Why do nations go to war or stay at peace? Is it possible to build peace in historically divided regions with plural religious, linguistic, ethnic and cultural structure? These questions have to be observed and answered to find out rational ways for preventing wars and building a lasting peace.

First of all, the principal causes and preconditions of war have to be defined. In this respect, R. Aron rightly points out that every war has its own unique set of causes, which are invariably multiple, complex, and

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interrelated. Wars have been fought either exclusively or in some combination to gain or defend territory; security; wealth; national, religious, cultural, racial, and/or ideological identity and values; political dynasties; colonies; independence; allies or other friendly states; empire; hegemony; freedom of the seas; endangered citizens; or national honor. Wars have also been fought to weaken or destroy rivals; retaliate against the aggression of others; preempt an imminent or inevitable attack; avenge insults or past losses; fill power vacuums before someone else does; or maintain alliance credibility (Aron, 1968).

It has to be underlined that strengthening or weakening states or nations can become a reason to provoke a war.

These are general reasons but any war can have its particular reasons that play a crucial role on its processing. In this regard, Q. Wright points out that a war, in reality, results from a total situation involving ultimately almost everything that has happened to the human race up to the time the war begins (Wright, 1942).

Each war, potentially, arises from conflict. Wars occur when one or more sides of a conflict understand or are getting convinced that their vital interests can be threatened and are willing to use military force to protect those interests. Predictably, most wars are fought by neighboring nations of the region. The analysis of war history showcases that more likely leaders take their states to war when they are convinced that they will win. But it appears that wars often result when leaders miscalculate their chances for winning. In some cases, lasting wars develop national hate among both sides when the settlement of the bloody conflict becomes quite difficult and even impossible.

How to determine why any particular war breaks out? In this regard, W. Nester points out that the best way is to sort out all the possible reasons by importance (primary, secondary, and tertiary) and time (long, intermediate, short). That framework can be used to analyze the reasons for any war at any time in history, if there is enough accurate information. Scholars, of course, will debate whether a potential cause was of primary, secondary, or tertiary importance, and just when to divide time into long-term, intermediate-term, and short-term phases before the war begins. The same framework can be flipped to analyze the results of any war, starting with the short-term. Quite often the results of one war are among the reasons for the next war (Nester, 2010, p. 28).

When discussing the reasons and results of war R. Art and K. Waltz rightly point out that war is a means for achieving an end, a weapon which can be used for good or bad purposes. Some of these purposes for which war has been used have been accepted by humanity as worthwhile ends; indeed, war performs functions which are essential in any society. It has been used to settle disputes, to uphold rights, to remedy wrongs. One may say that no more stupid, brutal, wasteful, or unfair method could ever have been imagined for such purposes, but this does not alter the situation” (Art & Waltz, 2009).

There are many theoretical and empirical approaches to define war, its reasons or consequences. All researchers who explored and analyzed the problem of war in the human history actually have suggested some solutions taking into account universal means and the peculiarities of concrete cases. But some ongoing conflicts showcase that these solutions, somehow, are not sufficient to build a sustainable peace in conflicting divided regions because the wars based on ethnocratic intentions not only threaten peace and stability but also challenge democracy. The diversity and distinction of ethnocratic and democratic regimes in the same region sometimes incubate preconditions for lasting war between regional states as it was and is in the case of South Caucasus. That’s why ethnocracy has to be determined as a destabilizing factor for peace and a real threat to democracy.

ETHNOCRATIC TRENDS VERSUS DEMOCRATIC PEACE-BUILDING

The rapid transformations in the world politics during the last decades have generated active debate on political regime types in general, and democratization in particular. There are many types and models of democracy.⁴ But the democratization has to be observed by the consideration of peculiarities proper to any region.

⁴See more in detail in: Bermeo, N. (1997); Diamond, L. (2002); Harris, N. (2001); Held, D. (2006); Huntington, S. (1997); Linz, J. & Stephan, A. (1996); Keating, M. & McGarry, J. (2001).

Some researchers such as S. Smooha define ethnic democracy as a political system that combines a structured ethnic dominance with democratic, political and civil rights for all (Smooha, 2002, p. 475). But other ones such as A. Ghanem, Rouhana and O. Yiftachel argue that ethnic democracy is located somewhere in the democratic section of the democracy-non-democracy continuum (Ghanem, Rouhana & Yiftachel, 1998, p. 253).

O. Yiftachel and A. Ghanem underline that ethnocracy is a regime facilitating the expansion, ethnicization and control of contested territory and state by a dominant ethnic nation. ‘Open ethnocracies’, on which he focuses on, exercise selective openness: they possess a range of partial democratic features, most notably political competition, free media and significant civil rights; although these fail to be universal or comprehensive, and are typically applied to the extent they do not interfere with the ethnicization (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004, p. 649).

In ethnocracies the political parties are defined primarily along ethno-religious lines, key state positions are allocated according to ethnic group membership, and educational and other institutions are officially segmented according to ethnic categories. While the introduction of ethnocratic regimes after violent conflict has sometimes coincided with a decrease in violence, it has also introduced new and institutional obstacles that render transition to liberal democracy difficult (Howard, 2012, p. 155).

Theoretical argument centers on the mechanisms of the regime, which explain both the persistent patterns of ethnic dominance and its chronic instability. A related theoretical contribution is the existence of ethnocratic regimes as a distinct identifiable type, which promotes a central (political-geographical) project of ethnicizing contested territories and power structures (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004, p. 648).

According to a widespread definition, an ethnocracy is “a form of government where representatives of a particular ethnic group hold a number of government posts disproportionately large to the percentage of the total... and use them to advance the position of their particular ethnic group(s) to the detriment of others” (Frantzma, 2010).

For example, M. Tabachnik states that authoritarian (Azerbaijan) and liberal-democratic (Moldova) states have used the resulting territorial concept of national identity to combat ethnic separatism, whereas Georgia remains an ethnocracy with difficulties integrating ethnic minorities (Tabachnik, 2019, p. 226). But it is important to underline that in the result of Azerbaijani actions the ethnic Armenians as an autochthon population of Nagorno-Karabakh were totally displaced which can be considered as an ethnic cleansing. This situation showcases that ethnocratic provisions in autocratic states threaten not only democracy but also the fundamental rights of peoples to live in their homeland.

Ethnocratic states regimes represent themselves as democratic; their main project promotes the ethnicization of contested territory and power apparatus (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004, p. 647).

Moreover, ethnocracy means ‘government or rule by a particular ethnic group’ or *ethnos*, sometimes contrasted with democracy, rule by the *demos* or the people in general. The concept was primarily developed as *national* ethnocracy for regimes in contemporary national states which claim to be ‘democratic’. However, questions remain: about, for instance, ethnicity and its sometimes problematic components; about where and how to draw the boundary between ethnocracy and democracy; and about rival concepts such as milder ‘ethnic democracy’ and harsher ‘apartheid’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 1).

More precisely ethnocracy is a rule by a particular *ethnos* in a multi-ethnic situation where there is at least one other significant ethnic group. Ethnicity and group self-awareness can be specified in terms of religion, imputed ‘racial’ features, language, and/or a shared history and culture more broadly defined, components which vary and sometimes in problematic ways.

Nevertheless, despite such problems, democracy is seen as preferable to ethnocracy and indeed to most if not all the other alternative types of rule, though some of these overlap or mingle with democracy and ethnocracy. It has to be emphasized that ethnocracy was generally applied to traditional empires where a dominant ethnic group conquered and spread its rule over ethnically and culturally diverse populations (Anderson, 2016, p. 2).

It still loosely applies to tribe-based politics, but it has been developed from a general imprecise label into an analytical concept, initially for understanding national state regimes. In this regard, A. Mazrui defines ethnocracy more precisely as ‘a distributive system which allocates or divides political power primarily on the basis of ethnicity and kinship real or presumed’ (Mazrui, 1975, p. 4).

His viewpoint is proper to the particular case of military ethnocracy. But however, ethnocratic provisions were primarily developed for national regimes in contemporary national states which claim to be ‘democratic’. This argument reveals the fake democratic intentions in ethnocratic states.

We can also question how ethnocracy relates to perhaps alternative or rival concepts and categories, such as the more extreme-sounding *apartheid* on one side and the milder *ethnic democracy* on the other. Or are these better subsumed as variants of ethnocracy? To answer these questions, we have to focus on the case of South Caucasus ethnocratic diffusions which being autocratic, seemingly pretend to be considered as democratic.

There are questions too about where and how to ‘draw the line’ between democracy and ethnocracy: when, for instance, does democratic decision-making by simple majority voting spill over into majoritarianism and systematic discrimination against an ethnic minority; or how would we recognize if ethnocracy was actually ended, especially where it is mostly informal or *de facto* rather than *de jure* and explicit in state laws? Set the ‘democratic’ bar too low and anti-democratic discrimination goes unchallenged; set it too high and perhaps most contemporary democratic states would become defined as ethnocracies which rather dilutes the concept or renders it vacuous (Anderson, 2016, p. 3).

In our current era of national states, the dominant form of ethnocracy is *national*, in sovereign states and moreover states which usually claim to be ‘democratic’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 5).

These national regimes are not simply authoritarian: they typically have parliamentary assemblies and periodic elections, for instance, and perhaps a (sometimes ostensibly?) independent judiciary, and a (supposedly?) free media. These can give the appearance of ‘ordinary democracy’ but they hide a ‘deeper structure’ which is profoundly *anti-democratic* in that the democracy applies only or mainly to politics *within the dominant ethnos*, not to the *demos* of all the people in the state territory (Anderson, 2016, p. 5). These regimes are ‘democratic’ in appearance but they are authoritarian by nature.

National ethnocracy basically works by (con)fusing the nation-state ideal of the *people’s* ‘right to self-determination’ in their own territory with *ethnic* ‘self-determination’ in territory which is ethnically shared. As Yiftachel points out, typical features include an essentializing, general and all-encompassing ‘ethnicization’ of society - seeing it as a hierarchy of ethnic groups; and using a variety of political, cultural, social, economic, moral and legal frameworks to determine the distribution of power and resources disproportionately in favour of the dominant *ethnos* (Yiftachel, 2006).

Some analysts prefer the term ‘ethnic democracy’ because it is less critical of a regime (in some cases their own country), and it can be argued that it is appropriate where ethnocracy is comparatively mild, the discrimination not very severe. However, it cannot cover other contexts where democracy may be unimportant or non-existent, such as imperial ethnocracy; and in national ethnocracies it is an oxymoron where there is the anti-democratic reality of systematic majoritarian discrimination against an ethnic minority or minorities (Anderson, 2016, p. 7).

But some national ethnocracies (e.g. the Turkey of the Young Turks; newly-independent Sri Lanka in the 1950s) were initially democratic in inspiration but can then slide into authoritarianism and ‘murderous ethnic cleansing’ (and indeed face accusations of genocide, as of Armenians and Sri Lankan Tamils); though again some ethnocracies are established without significant violence (e.g., in Estonia *vis-à-vis* its sizeable Russian-speaking population after 1990) (Anderson, 2016, p. 9). As for the modern history, we also have many examples of national ethnocracies with their violent actions against ethnic minorities. The recent ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan is a prominent example.

Reducing ethnocracy, reducing instability, increasing democracy – usually depends on the inevitable internal opposition getting external help and support in the form of effective pressures to force reforms. This often

fails to materialize, or in sufficient measure. Methods and degrees of ethnocracy vary widely on spectrums from ‘authoritarian’ to ‘democratic’, and *de jure* to *de facto* (Anderson, 2016, p. 11).

Another type of ethnocracy is categorized by Anderson as ‘*post-conflict*’ or ‘*shared*’ ethnocracy which is a continuation of *national* ethnocracy but it constitutes a distinct category as it now involves two or three distinct and conflicting ethnicities with access to state power though on a shared basis. In the new consociational, power-sharing arrangements they continue to compete but they are also under pressure to co-operate. Therefore, this variant has its own distinctive dynamics, or in some cases a lack of them: there may be mutual blocking of ‘the other’s’ initiatives, or ‘gridlock’ because of institutional guarantees which were originally designed to counter damaging majoritarian democracy and end violent conflict.

Old ethnocratic ways of thinking die hard anyway, but, harder if they are actively encouraged and perpetuated by consociationalism. Not surprisingly, its critics have latched onto this truth, some thinking to ‘demolish’ the very idea of consociationalism. But they in turn need to be reminded of the other truth that there once was an armed conflict which had to be stopped: here the framing of the original settlement obviously requires care and foresight but in reality, there are no easy answers – undefeated fighters have to be given guarantees to persuade them to stop fighting (Anderson, 2016, pp. 22-23).

J. Anderson rightly emphasizes that unstable ethnocracy can have a third outcome – not simply the continuation of lethal conflict, nor the ending of it in genuine democratization and sharing, but something in-between: a consociational ‘shared post-conflict ethnocracy’ where conflict is (mostly) non-lethal but the reality (inverting the aphorism of Clausewitz) is that the politics is the war continuing ‘by other means’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 24).

In this respect, T. Haokip points out that the future of the state (or region) depends on how ethnic aspirations are negotiated, accommodated and managed (Haokip, 2022, p. 175).

For example, the Israeli democratic image has been promoted by academia, the media, political rhetoric and congratulatory self-appraisals. It has had an enormously positive impact on the state’s international status, enabling Israel to maintain a regime which structurally discriminates against non-Jews, but avoids the kind of international pressures and costs suffered by structurally discriminatory regimes such as Turkey or Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus.

Careful analysis of the Israeli polity shows that *ethnos* and not *demos* is the main organizing political principle. Israel therefore is characterized as an “ethnocracy” with several key characteristics:

Despite several democratic features, ethnicity, not territorial citizenship, is the main logic behind resource allocation.

State borders and political boundaries are fuzzy: there is no identifiable “demos,” mainly due to the role of ethnic Diasporas inside the polity and the inferior position of ethnic minorities.

A dominant “charter” ethnic group appropriates the state apparatus and determines most public policies.

Significant (though partial) civil and political rights are extended to minority members, distinguishing ethnocracies from or authoritarian regimes (Yiftachel, 1998).

As for post-Soviet plural states, the national identity of some of them was significantly influenced by the Soviet Union’s nationalities policy, linking ethnicity with nationality and thus marginalizing ethnic minorities (Freni, 2011, p. 1). In the South Caucasus Georgia and Azerbaijan as ethnically plural states have been evolving under these circumstances. And in this context the first one succeeded to develop an ethnically democratic state whereas the latter developed consolidated ethnic authoritarian regime conflicting with its neighbor and ethnic autochthon minorities on its state territory.

As in the case of Georgia, ethnic democracy model serves as a preliminary framework for analyzing majority-minority relations at the state level (Freni, 2011, p. 37).

In Georgia, ethnic democracy is more a product of ethno-nationalism manifesting itself informally, where the state has not explicitly clarified how the majority-minority relationship should proceed. This is in contrast to

other states where ethnic democracy is reflected officially through state legislation. Yet, this new civiness is closely tied to the Georgian language, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and other cultural markers. The Saakashvili administration has been successful in ensuring that Georgia remains a tolerant state, but attempts to decentralize power and integrate minorities into the state apparatus have been hampered by the system of appointment, a strong ruling party and executive branch, as well as influential local figures. Georgia may have succeeded in creating a tolerant state, but not at integrating the minorities into the state (Freni, 2011, p. 37-38).

In the case of Azerbaijan, the situation is quite different. With some features, there the interests of non-dominant ethnic groups are de facto suppressed by the dominant ethnic group. Such a situation creates the right impression of authoritarianism and fake democracy which is explained by an argument of democratic transition or regime transformation. In Azerbaijan, the problem was always more complicated in comparison with Georgia because Georgian society has seen a certain level of democratic growth in recent years. Conversely, in Azerbaijan there has been a steady backward towards the ethnic authoritarianism (Ordukhanyan, 2019, p. 120).

Therefore, in plural societies with autocratic regime, it is harder to develop a democratic future because the lack of equal conditions between different groups and segments of society as sub-cultures weakens the impact and significance of political culture on the political system stability. This circumstance also provokes the potential of inter-ethnic, religious or other conflicts which not only threatens the stability but also undermines public security. In this regard, ethnocracies are intended to threaten national minorities and even destroy the social solidarity among the society. The case of Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus properly demonstrates that ethnocratic authorities are also able to launch military action and displace a whole population by de facto pushing them out from their motherland like it happened in Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenians.

The way and tools to stabilization and peace-building in divided regions strongly depend on the choice of proper models and the strict consideration of ethnic and cultural diversities of conflicting ethnicities.

In this regard, the development of democratic peace is based on the consociation of interests of inter-conflicting segments.

While conflict of the cultural variety is preferable to the armed variety, the mere absence of violence is not a high enough bar for transitional societies. By applying principles of conflict management as opposed to principles of conflict transformation, long-lasting reconciliation is overlooked in favor of post-conflict stagnation (Hollmann, 2018, p. 22). The last war in the South Caucasus properly demonstrates that the post-conflict stagnation, instead of reconciliation, in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh stimulated new military clashes even on the presence of Russian peace-keeping forces. Therefore, it is important to stress out that with no consociation between ethnicities there is no real leverages of peace-building and stabilization. Unfortunately, the dominant ethnos will always be intended to promote only its own interests by neglecting other ethnicities' interests.

In this respect, M. Bogaards points out that most contemporary consociations are born out of civil war (wars, in general) and have their origin in a peace agreement (Bogaards, 2019, p. 36). But it has to be noted that negotiations on peace agreement between conflicting or post-conflicting parties in divided regions such as South Caucasus are most likely faced to unpredictable challenges. In this case the winner tends to impose the peace over the loser by taking into consideration only his own preconditions. To prevent such kind of scenario, a democratic peace is the most accurate way aiming at sustainable reconciliation on the respect of equal rights principle for all ethnicities in the same region.

The peace has to be reached with democratic tools and on democratic values. Consequently, the consociational democracy can be considered as the most relevant model for overcoming the above-mentioned problems if there is a place for consociational discourse between different ethnicities of the same region, aimed at forging and satisfying common (and differentiated) interests rather than individual or group interests. In this case, political culture will turn into a more important factor for democratization, as the case with full-fledged democracies (Ordukhanyan, 2019, p. 127).

Consociations can be at best democracies – that is, polities composed not of a single demos but of multiple demoi. Yet the problem of stability remains and it can be addressed by adopting a weak form of democracy – the ‘demos-within-demos’ constellation – where a thin demos coexists with multiple demoi (Stojanović, 2020, p. 30). This argument has to be criticized because the consociational form of democracy does not suppose a regular coexistence which is proper to ethnocracies. The consociational democracy is based on the equality of different ethnicities fundamental rights, their cultures, languages, religions, and other peculiarities.

If citizens living in a consociational regime develop over time a sufficiently strong sense of common (political and/or national) identity, then the polity becomes a democracy (i.e. demos-cracy) and that no longer requires consociational institutions. These reflections are more proper to the cases of Austria and Switzerland. These countries, being already consolidated democracies, can be considered as role model for other divided ones or regions to show how consociation of interests in transitional period and in post-conflict situation can lead to democratic peace and stabilization.

More than 4 decades ago A. Lijphart (Lijphart, 1977, p. 2) has noted that consociationalism is a ‘passing phase’ in the development of divided regions and societies. He has provided a more detailed empirical analysis of the evolution of consociationalism in divided countries and regions. Therefore, he has concluded that consociationalism is necessary for longer periods when the cleavages are ethnic and linguistic than when they are religious and ideological’ (Lijphart, 2002, p. 112). Proper to this conclusion, the peace in South Caucasus as a divided region with ethnic, linguistic, religious and ideological cleavages can be reached by the consociation of interests of all ethnicities. No doubts that this purpose will require combined efforts and inter-ethnic consensus that can be reached only by the consideration of democratic values and processes. Conversely, N. Stojanović makes an observation that consociationalism ceases to be necessary for countries that have succeeded in developing a strong demos (Stojanović, 2020, p. 32). But in this respect it is not specified is the strong demos formed by multiple ethnicities with the respect of their social, cultural or religious peculiarities or this is the demos of dominant segment which is more proper to ethnocracy? Democratic peace in plural societies or divided regions with ethnocratic regimes is very vulnerable. This kind of peace can be crashed when the region is facing external challenges that have the potential to be used as political leverages to ignite new conflicts or to manage them. The lack of tolerance, nihilism and the will of most powerful segments to dominate others can only lead to the development of ethnocracy and autocratic regimes. In the case of plural societies, majoritarian democracy can serve only as mechanical democracy because it will give primarily quantitative but not qualitative solutions. This will generate direct threats to political stability and balanced development in plural societies (Ordukhanyan, Shirinyan & Sukiasyan, 2022, p. 90). A very similar situation can appear in case of fractured or divided regions when the potential of interethnic conflicts is high and it depends on the intentions of dominant ethnicity to enforce its rule on other ones.

CONCLUSION

The complex analysis of the question “why nations go to war in divided regions” was done based on relevant theoretical approaches and practical circumstances especially ongoing in the South Caucasus region. The observation of the above-mentioned issues in the framework of democratic peace-building in divided regions leads us to define and substantiate some important conclusions:

Regions with considerable ethnic diversities and cultural distinctions as well as with non-democratic regimes have a huge conflict potential that can lead to a war even with the risk of ethnic cleansing like it was in the case of South Caucasus region. Recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020-2023 as an outcome, forced the indigenous Armenian population to leave their homeland because of the risk to be physically targeted by the ethnic majority of Azerbaijan.

National ethnocracies with their violent actions against ethnic minorities destabilize the whole region and create risks of minor ethnicities’ destruction and violation of their fundamental rights. In case of ethnocracies the conflict resolution and democratic peace-building become more and more difficult or even impossible because there is no rational way to achieve a consociation of interests among diverse ethnicities.

The complex analysis of relevant issues showcases that a sustainable peace-building in the South Caucasus can become possible mostly by democratic values' promotion. In this regard, the approach of democratic (consociational) peace-building can play a crucial role when the rights and legitimate claims of smaller nations will be considered and respected by bigger ones. This approach can be seen as more appropriate and soft way for stabilizing the South Caucasus region.

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