

Introduction

The year 2015 was very difficult for many reasons. The Ukrainian crisis, which revealed the confrontation between the US and EU and Russia, continues. In the meantime, Europe suffers from a serious crisis, caused by mass migration from the conflict zones, above all, from Syria and Iraq. As a consequence, a revision of some fundamental principles of the European Union has begun. In addition, the right-wing parties are gaining momentum in the political dynamic of several European states. The United States is entering its pre-election period. Whatever the result of the presidential election, a more isolationist foreign policy should be expected.

The US and the EU, as the two main external actors, are withdrawing themselves from several regions, including the South Caucasus, and are concentrating more on their own internal problems. Not surprisingly, the South Caucasus is becoming once again one of the areas of confrontation of strategic interests of Russia and Turkey. Against the background of the Ukrainian dimension in the conflict between Russia and the European Union, an accelerated Turkey – EU rapprochement is occurring: the serious refugees crisis allowed Turkey to launch open bargaining with the EU aimed at the obtaining economic and political preferences.

Until recently, the Russian-Turkish bilateral relationships served as examples of a pragmatic approach that involved a "win-win" situation for both parties. However, in the course of the Syrian crisis, a shift toward an open confrontation took place, one which negatively influenced the stability and security of the South Caucasus – a region trapped between these two regional powers. Moreover, both Russia and Turkey are attempting to implement their integration projects that exclude each other. Therefore, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia should cultivate greater flexibility and caution to avoid the engagement in a Russian-Turkish conflict.

The South Caucasus, with its illusive stability, reacts very nervously to all changes in its immediate neighborhood. A fragmentation of the region in the political, economic, and military spheres continues, tensions in the areas of unresolved conflicts are not reducing their explosive potential (developments in the area of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict are especially complicated), and the image of the enemy is cultivated. In parallel, along with the aggravating

economic crises in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the potential of internal social conflict and unrest grows, albeit at a different pace.

The internal logic of processes throughout the entire South Caucasus region, and beyond, has influenced the choice of themes for this volume – the sixth – in our "Regional Security Issues" series. The chapters in this book are written by eleven internationally recognized researchers and regional security analysts. Each presents exclusively his or her personal opinion.

All authors point out the reduced interest of the United States and the European Union toward the South Caucasus. The article by Tomasz Knothe introduces the expectations and challenges of the European Union relationships with the three regional states. Owing to the fact that any Russian-Turkish confrontation implies direct ramifications for South Caucasus affairs and significantly decreases the region's level of stability and security, Gayane Novikova analyses the nuances of its impact on each state and the region, in general. This volume presents also two opposing points of view on Russia's role in the South Caucasus: Stephen Blank and Sergey Markedonov analyze it through the prism of events in Ukraine as well as through connection to a wide spectrum of Russia's bilateral relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. A cautious optimism can be found in the chapter written by Kemal Kirişçi and Andrew Moffatt; they discuss the idea of Turkey's "soft regionalism." Lifting sanctions from another regional power, Iran, will obviously lead in the mid-term perspective to serious shifts in the security system of the wider region. These issues are discussed by Farhad Atai in his chapter.

In addition, a clear trend exists in the South Caucasus toward an aggravation of the internal political situation in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The dynamic of internal political processes in Armenia, where a civil society is in a process of formation, is covered in the chapter by Aghasi Tadevosyan. Oktay Tanrisever examines the difficulties in Azerbaijan's domestic policy and their impact on this country's foreign policy. Georgia is on the threshold of parliamentary elections, and Giorgi Gogosadze analyses trends in internal developments of this state.

In the concluding chapter, Sergey Sargsyan presents his view on the shifts in the balance of forces in the Greater Middle East and the South Caucasus through the prism of the Islamic State's activity.

The wide spectrum of positions on urgent problems of regional security presented in this book, although not always and not necessarily shared by the editors, will be of special interest to a large audience.

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