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The purpose of the journal is to promote scientific exchange and cooperation between Russian and foreign political scientists.

The journal is intended for the publication of the results of fundamental and applied scientific research. Thematic focus of the journal is reflected in the following permanent headings: “Domestic history, ethnology and ethnography”, “History of international relations and world politics”, “History and philosophy of politics”, “Political institutions, processes and technologies”, “Political culture, ethnohistory and ideologies”, “Political problems of international relations and globalization.”

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The target audience of the journal is Russian and foreign specialists-political scientists, as well as graduate students and masters in the fields of political science, state and municipal management and international relations.

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CONTENTS

HISTORY OF RUSSIA: NATIONAL AND REGIONAL DIMENSION

Vivchar V. M. Traditional Historiography of Ruthenian Greek Catholicism in the Politically “Booming” Russia of the Early Twentieth Century	5
---	---

Goncharova T. A., Grosheva G. V. Personal Texts of Tomsk Region Villagers of the Last Quarter of the XX – early XXI Century in the Discourse of Ethnic History: General Characteristics and Systematization.....	10
--	----

ISSUES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POST-SOVIET REINTEGRATION

Suleymanov A. R., Nikiforov A. Yu., Khadimillin R. R., Suleymanova A. R. Critical Thinking as a Principle of Preventing Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space	20
---	----

Goncharova L. N. Geopolitical Transformation of the Eurasian Region in the Context of Globalization	26
---	----

Dadashova K. K. Political and Diplomatic Processes in the South Caucasus: Prospects for Developing Relations with Russia	32
--	----

HISTORY AND MODERN PROBLEMS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Maistat M. A. Palestinian National Autonomy: Sovereign State or “Geo-Ephemer”?	38
--	----

Aljarwan Mohd Hier Jarwan Iran’s Nuclear Program as an Important Factor in International Politics. Phase one (from 1970 to 2007).....	44
--	----

Idriss Ahmat Regional Integration and its Impact on the Security and Stability of Weak States: on the Example of Chad, Cameroon and Gabon.....	50
--	----

OUR AUTHORS.....	56
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AUTHORS’ GUIDELINES.....	57
--------------------------	----

POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC PROCESSES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPING RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The author considers the main directions of foreign policy of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia in the South Caucasus. Special attention is paid to the strategic partnership between Russia and the three republics. Among the main issues on the agenda between the two countries are the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, energy cooperation and participation in joint projects. The article also discusses attempts to create new formats of cooperation in the South Caucasus.

Key words: *South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, foreign policy, geopolitics, security.*

Due to its geostrategic position and resource potential of the Caspian sea, the South Caucasus occupies a special place in the world and regional politics. For Western powers, the South Caucasus is important as a reference base with profitable military transport communications on the borders of strategic rivals: Russia and Iran. Moreover, it permits realization of the energy projects bypassing these countries.

Russian interests are of a different nature. For Russia, the South Caucasus is a border region, so Moscow is vitally interested in ensuring a stable situation in this region. The three republics are also interested in this, but the ongoing contradictions and conflicts prevent them from joining efforts to counter destructive external forces and normalize the situation [4. P. 4].

The US interests in the region are connected with the solution of strategic tasks through promoting the activities of American oil companies, in particular by including NATO in the efforts aimed at maintaining stability on the routes of oil and gas pipelines and deterring Russia. The 2008 Caucasus crisis can be considered as a starting point for developing plans to counter Moscow, when trust between Moscow and the West was seriously shaken. The cornerstone of the EU's policy is lesser energy dependence on Russia and the more active involvement of the region's countries in Europe's affairs [8. P. 9-11].

Regarding the diplomacy of the South Caucasus states, the orientation of their foreign policy differ, but, when determining the course in international affairs, they (although in different ways) maintain a balance in relations with Russia and the West.

The Georgian leadership is acting with the aim of joining the European Union and NATO. The country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are supported by the West, but the legal formalization of the integration process is delayed.

Since the launch of the Eastern partnership program, there has been unsatisfactory progress in the process of democratization of the region's countries, including Georgia. In the European Union, there is an opinion that the rhetoric of Euro-Atlantic integration and the desire to adopt liberal democratic values, which is actively declared by the new democracies, are used as a tool in the traditional balancing between major players. In other words, the goal is to strengthen its position in relations with Moscow [1. P. 119-120].

At the same time, Georgia became the first republic in the South Caucasus to agree on an Individual partnership plan with NATO. Tens of millions of dollars of aid were spent on reorganizing the army; a NATO training center was even opened to train Georgian military personnel who demonstrated their combat capability during the operation in Afghanistan. At the July 2018 NATO summit, Georgia reiterated its desire to become a member of the Alliance, which provoked a negative reaction from Moscow. The Georgian government is confident of future membership, counting on US financial assistance, which was not interrupted by the Trump administration, and the broad support of its own population.

Georgia has developed a fairly stable political system that allowed it to pass through the period of power change that began with the parliamentary elections of 2012 and ended with the presidential elections of 2013 in a democratic way, in accordance with the constitutional norms. Changes in the Constitution that provided for the transition of the Republic from presidential to parliamentary rule played their positive role. A negative component of Georgia's democratic future is the lack of a full-fledged multiparty system, although there are many different parties and political blocs in the country. The prospects for Georgia's integration into the Western military-political and economic space are not obvious [7. P. 77-78].

10 years have passed since the end of the August war, but political tensions in Russian-Georgian relations remain at the same level, despite the restoration of trade and economic relations and transport links. Russian troops are still present in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the Western support of Georgia has not contributed to either the withdrawal of these troops or the annulment of Moscow's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On the contrary, they have become de facto Russian regions, to which hundreds of millions of dollars are allocated. Although a new clash is not expected, the situation remains unstable, and the estrangement between Georgia and Russia will not be overcome in the near future.

Russia's influence in Armenia is higher than in any other country in the South Caucasus. The Russian Federation is one of the most important trade partners of Armenia, and the achievements of cooperation in the economic and humanitarian spheres are significant. Russia plays a key role in ensuring the Republic's energy security. Armenia receives Russian natural gas at preferential rates, and Gazprom Armenia, a 100% subsidiary of Gazprom, has a monopoly on the supply and distribution of this gas on the domestic market.

Taking into account the semi-blockade state of Armenia, the development of the energy sector is an important component of the state's security. Russian capital is present in almost all spheres of the Republic's economy. A number of hydroelectric power stations and thermal power plants, as well as part of the telecommunications, banking and insurance markets are owned by major Russian companies. In addition, Russia provides military and technical support to Yerevan. Russian military bases are located here, and large-scale exercises are being held. Cooperation is carried out both on a bilateral basis and within the framework of the CSTO. Thus, the relations between Armenia and Russia are characterized as a strategic partnership [5. P. 94-95].

Armenia is a full member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) aimed at strengthening the positions of the participating countries in the international arena. Along with the economic nature of the project, there are additional opportunities for its promotion based on a gradual convergence of civil society structures. We are talking about the process of formation of the Eurasian trend of public diplomacy in the interests of creating a common information and intellectual environment of the EEU countries. In the Eurasian Economic Union Armenia acts as a partner of the Russian structures for the development of public information. A significant event in the development of bilateral cooperation based on public diplomacy was, in particular, the holding of the seminar "Public diplomacy – for the truth about Russia" in Yerevan in March 2014 [2. P. 44-48].

Regarding the relatively recent socio-political events in Armenia, Moscow's reaction to the non-violent "Velvet revolution" was restrained and cautious. After a short pause in Russian political circles, the resignation of Armenian Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, who had been in office for almost a week, was called exclusively an internal matter of the Armenian state. The new government confirmed the continuation of its foreign policy, particularly in its relations with Moscow. Before taking the post of Prime Minister, the leader of the protest rallies Nikol Pashinyan met with the Russian Ambassador in Yerevan and assured him that the movement is not directed against Russia.

Indeed, there are no reversals in the country's diplomacy. Ensuring military security remains one of the key issues for Armenia in cooperation with Moscow in view of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey. At the same time, the Eurasian vector does not hinder the development of relations with the EU, as evidenced, in particular, by the signing

of the comprehensive and expanded partnership agreement. Given the difficulties Georgia has faced since the beginning of democratic reforms, Yerevan will expand cooperation with the West, taking into account the position of the Russian leadership.

Russia and Azerbaijan have strong traditions of cooperation in various fields. This is largely due to a shared vision of interdependence and the absence of major disagreements. The dynamics given to Russian-Azerbaijani cooperation in 2001, as part of the first official visit of the President of the Russian Federation to Baku after the collapse of the bipolar system, is getting a new acceleration to this day. The high intensity of contacts at the highest level also has a positive impact on inter-agency and inter-parliamentary cooperation. Working relations are maintained between the heads of law enforcement agencies. An important component of bilateral relations is mutual trade, education and science [3. P. 37-41].

A stable political dialogue, close economic partnership, and promising directions in the humanitarian sphere are in the interests of both countries. Putting contradictions on the back burner, Baku and Moscow focus on constructive and joint resolution of problematic issues, which is also facilitated by a high level of trust. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's diplomacy is quite pragmatic and the country's national interests are of primary importance. Azerbaijan develops energy cooperation with European countries, implements projects that contribute to the diversification of Europe's energy supply, and to some extent seeks to integrate with it.

In particular, the launch of the TRANS-Anatolian TANAP gas pipeline bypassing Russia in the summer of 2018 became one of the most discussed events in the world's media and was evaluated differently in the expert community. In general, the Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation is a reaction of Baku and Ankara to the failures of the European pipeline policy. Expanding gas export routes is one of the key directions of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Therefore, TANAP can be considered as a local pipeline project that is of interest primarily to Azerbaijan and Turkey striving to diversify its sources of hydrocarbons and strengthen its role in gas supply to Europe [9. P. 47-48].

Another negative factor was that Azerbaijan supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, supporting a UN resolution that called the referendum in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol null and void. Azerbaijan is also a member country of the GUAM organization, which was considered by some experts as an anti-Russian regional structure. At the same time, Baku is interested in GUAM as an economic cooperation organization that allows solving trade issues and implementing regional transport projects, and as a political platform for resolving existing conflicts.

Despite some contradictions, the Russian-Azerbaijani partnership is at a high level and will continue to develop. Strengthening security in the Caucasus, increasing trade turnover, increasing counter-investment, and expanding humani-

tarian cooperation will remain among the priorities. At the same time, Azerbaijan's foreign policy will remain multi-vector, which means maintaining intensive friendly relations with other countries of the Muslim world and with Europe.

Consequently, Russia remains one of the strongest players in the South Caucasus, making a significant contribution to maintaining stability in the region. Despite the diplomatic gap, the Georgian vector towards Euro-Atlantic integration, the issue of ensuring territorial integrity and other barriers to the normalization of bilateral relations, trade and economic ties between Georgia and Russia are at a stage of dynamic development. The change of political leadership in Armenia did not affect the traditional policy of maintaining balance. The high level of cooperation between Yerevan and Moscow in the energy and security sectors will be combined with the development of cooperation with Western countries. The focus of Azerbaijani diplomacy will also be on maintaining close relations with Moscow and simultaneously implementing projects with other partners.

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