

## **Geopolitical Challenges in the Formation of Nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus; A Comparative Study**

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Received: 09/12/2021

Accepted: 04/07/2022

**DOR:20.1001.1.17354331.1402.19.70.8.1**

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### **Abstract**

Central Asian and Caucasian countries are among the countries that have faced numerous ups and downs in the process of nation-building, and they are currently facing various challenges, particularly in the geopolitical arena. Since nation-building is a process greatly influenced by a country's historical roots and events, Central Asian and Caucasian countries have unique coordinates despite sharing a part of history. This article examines the nation-building process in Central Asian and Caucasian countries through a comparative approach. It focuses on the practical geopolitical challenges of nation-building in these two regions. The study findings indicate that Due to differences in the social context, historical processes, and geopolitical features, Central Asia and the Caucasus countries have gone through two different patterns of nation formation. In particular, Central Asian countries face significant geopolitical challenges during this process.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Caucasus, Nation, Nation-Building, Geopolitical Challenges.

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## **1. Introduction**

Central Asia and the Caucasus are two pivotal regions that serve as a bridge between Europe, East Asia, and North and South Asia. Central Asia was considered a peripheral and impoverished region on this side of the world since the 16th century and was referred to as a landlocked region. During the Soviet era, the republics of this region largely disconnected from the outside world, and their economy heavily relied on the Soviet Union (Central Asia Human Development Report,2005:1). However, after the independence of these countries, more actors emerged to penetrate the newly independent countries. Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, and the West, in addition to the involved governments, also include multinational and foreign companies. Today, the competition among different regional parties mainly focuses on employment, oil pipelines, new markets, and political and religious influence. In fact, the recent tug-of-war for Eurasian resources encompasses a set of security, geographic, and economic variables (Jones, 2000:14-13). In the years following their independence, the United States and other Western countries increasingly paid attention to Central Asia and the Caucasus as two important strategic regions. Central Asia is rich in vast oil, natural gas, gold, and uranium resources. Additionally, this region is a major conduit for drug trafficking to Europe, small arms for regional conflicts, strategic missiles, and nuclear technologies. They have also realized that the region can be a field for cultural and ideological competition (Anderson and Beck,2000:75).

In recent years, the level of cooperation between China and Europe has significantly increased. In the midst of this, Central Asia has provided opportunities to enhance cooperation between China and the EU in areas such as security, transit, and development assistance. Due to its geographical location, this region is a land bridge and traditional transportation route that connects Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (Von Hauff,2019). Central Asia has always been important to China, as the ancient Silk Road's central section, which dates back to the Han Dynasty (207 BC to 220 AD), was located in this region, making it a bridge for China's land trade with Europe and the Middle East for centuries. More importantly, Central Asia has recently joined China's "One Belt, One Road" or "Belt and Road Initiative" to revive and expand the ancient Silk Road (Chen and Fazilov,2018:2). This region is also rich in significant and in-demand raw materials, particularly hydrocarbon and hydropower resources,

as well as iron and non-iron metals (Von Hauff,2019). In fact, the main reason for international attention to Central Asia and the Caucasus is the natural resources of oil and gas in the Caspian Sea and the need to create pipelines and other infrastructures for its transfer to global markets. It is estimated that the Caspian Sea has the second-largest natural oil and gas reserves after the Middle East. Additionally, the low rainfall and dry climate of Central Asia have turned it into one of the most environmentally challenging regions in the world (Li and et al,2019:665).

Despite this, Central Asia is a region that poses significant local and transnational insecurity potential. It has faced governmental and societal instability in past decades, interregional disputes and sometimes ethnically motivated conflicts over border, land, and water issues, notable transnational criminal activity, especially in arms and drug trafficking, and the presence of fundamentalist movements have created numerous geopolitical challenges in this region (Gleason and Kangas,2017; Von Hauff,2019).

On the other hand, the Caucasus region is one of the most complex and politically risky yet culturally rich areas in the world. Over the past quarter-century, the Caucasus has been a laboratory for post-Soviet transformations and a testing ground for current theories of modernization, democratization, and social change (Agadjanian and et al,2015:1). Throughout its history; the Caucasus has been a land of diversity, where civilizations and religions have intersected with each other. It has served as both a bridge and a barrier to contact between the north and south and between the west and east (Cornell,2001:2).

The Southern Caucasus is a region that has gained strategic importance in the competition between world powers since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, the main competitors for the most influence in the region were the United States and the Russian Federation (as the legal successor to the Soviet Union), with China later joining them. Over time, more players have joined the game due to the region's importance, including international organizations (primarily NATO and the European Union) and regional powers, such as Turkey and Iran (Kaçka and Piechowiak,2021:347; To learn more about the European Union's role in the Caucasus region, refer to Tulmets and et al,(2018) and Buzogány (2019)). To examine the relationships between the Caucasus countries and Iran, refer to Mkrtychyan (2015). The South Caucasus republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia have been important neighbors for Turkey. Historically, the Caucasus region

has been of great geopolitical value to the Ottoman Empire (Balci,2015: 255).

Therefore, the significant geopolitical position of the Caucasus, located between historical empires such as the Tartar, Safavid, and Ottoman, and among regional powers of the 20th century, has resulted in conflicting outcomes for the region. According to Alexander Rondeli, the people of the Caucasus have suffered more than benefited from this geopolitical position (Cornell,2001:2). In fact, the interests of various countries, such as the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran, in the region have provided opportunities for assistance, as well as posed dangers of intervention for countries in this area (Hille,2010:211).

As a result, the crucial geopolitical position of Central Asia and the Caucasus has significantly impacted various political, economic, and cultural processes in these regions. This position, along with other geopolitical factors, has challenged the formation of nations, which is this region's most critical political unit. Hau recognizes that the nation is both the dominant unit of political, economic, social, and ideological analyses and the primary agent of these analyses (2005:40). Therefore, this article aims to compare some of the geopolitical challenges that affect the process of nation formation in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

## **2. Research Method**

The research was conducted using the comparative research method, which involves comparing two or more geographic or social systems (Chang and et al,2001:415). Esser and Hanitzsch, in their overview of comparative research, define it as the simultaneous examination of at least two macro-level units, such as systems, cultures, markets, or their sub-elements, while considering at least one subject (Esser and Hanitzsch,2012:7; Hasebrink,2016).

In general, several conditions must be taken into consideration in comparative studies. First, the purpose of the comparison must be clearly defined. Second, the macro-level comparison units must be clearly defined, regardless of how the boundaries are set. In contextual settings, specific factors that are hypothesized to affect the subjects of analysis should be identified. Third, the examined items should be compared along at least one common dimension and functionally equivalent. Fourth, the topics being analyzed should be compared with each other based on a common

theoretical framework, and instead of separate analyses, equivalent conceptualizations, and methods should be used (Esser and Vliegenthart, 2017).

The present study is a descriptive comparison that describes particular phenomena and their occurrence in different cases (Esser and Vliegenthart, 2017). To achieve this aim, the process and geopolitical challenges of nation formation in Central Asia and the Caucasus have been examined from a historical perspective, using significant scientific sources in this field.

### **3. Historical Background of Nation-State Formation in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

The study of the historical process of Central Asia and the Caucasus highlights the differences in the formation of nations in these regions. The Central Asian republics are a relatively recent phenomenon in terms of nationality (Isaacs and Polese,2015:371). Historically, Central Asia has a civilization dating back to the second millennium BC, which saw the development of urban societies and strong centralization, according to the remaining works and books of historians. These areas were under Iranian rule for centuries (Sheikh Attar,1994:11-12). The written history of Central Asia dates back to 651 AD when Arab invaders conquered the city of Marv, located in present-day Turkmenistan, and rebuilt it, making it one of the most important centers for Islamic art and culture. In 705 AD, the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand were captured and destroyed, and their people converted to Islam. The combination of ethnic-Islamic tradition and the region's cultural heritage led to the expansion of art and knowledge in the region. At the same time, Islamic rulers supported business and private enterprises, providing a united force that encouraged the continuous expansion of the Silk Road (Central Asia Human Development Report, 2005:35). During the Tsarist reign over Russia, most of these regions were conquered. They became part of the Russian Empire (Sheikh Attar,1994: 11-12).

The fact is that before the establishment of the Soviet Union, the people of Central Asia did not exist as a nation (Everett-Heath,2003:1). They were mainly nomadic ethnic groups who lived under the leadership of a tribe. Russia created five Central Asian republics with separate borders by determining their borders between 1924 and 1936. Afterward, the concept of nationality based on land began to take shape (Akçali,2003:414).

Undoubtedly, one of the essential factors in the formation of the nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus is the role of foreign structures and external factors. The Soviet government played a significant role in the formation and current nature of the nations of Central Asia. The borders of the new countries were based on internal borders created during different stages of the Soviet period (Massan salvador,2010:3-4). Although Central Asia has a relatively long history of civilization, this history is considered part of Iranian and Islamic civilization, which means that this region lacked an internal political-institutional history that could have served as a precursor to the formation of the nations of this region. In fact, until the beginning of the 20th century, most people in this region were nomads, and their social structure was based on tribal structures rather than an integrated government and social structure. The Soviet Union created the first administrative units in the region, including Turkistan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1918, Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, Bukhara Soviet People's Republic, and Khwarezm Soviet People's Republic in 1920, which continued the tsarist administrative grouping (Segars,2003:92-93; Bergne, 2003:33).

In 1924, Stalin redefined the region by creating new territories and dissolving others. The Republics of Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khwarezm were eliminated, and instead, the Socialist Republics of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were formed. The Autonomous Region of Kyrgyzstan and the Autonomous Republic of Tajikistan were also created, with official borders with the Republic of Uzbekistan. The steppe region became the Autonomous Republic of Kazakhstan. The Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic was renamed three times, first to the Kyrgyz Autonomous Region in 1925, then to the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic in 1926, and finally to the Kyrgyz Socialist Republic in 1926. The Tajik Autonomous Republic was renamed the Tajik Soviet Republic in 1926 and officially separated from the Uzbekistan region. The Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan was established in 1936 (Segars,2003:93; Haghayeghi,2002:316). These republics were formed in lands that lacked a traditional Westphalian state or national consciousness (Massansalvador,2010:4). Defining their borders as Soviet Socialist Republics was a result of the Soviet Union's contradictory nature, which was committed to ethnic particularism on the one hand and efforts to integrate national groups on the other (Isaacs and Polese,2015:371).

The collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 was an unexpected, rapid, socially, and economically painful yet surprisingly peaceful historical event of great importance. In fact, many of the economic, social, political, and cultural issues that the new Soviet republics faced can be traced back to the inappropriate and inefficient economic policies and institutions of the Soviet system, which ultimately brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union (Central Asia Human Development Report, 2005:37). The collapse of the former Soviet Union had significant impacts on the political and economic structures of the region, as noted by the World Bank (2005:2). Thus, the process of nation-building in Central Asia began in earnest with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the sudden independence of the five republics: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Although the revival of cultural heritage had already been encouraged by the central government in the late 1980s, the nation-building process in the republics took on greater importance following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kamrava,2020:8). None of the Central Asian republics had mass separatist movements or specific opposition groups before the actual collapse of the Soviet Union, and local leaders remained loyal to the central Soviet leadership until the very end, never requesting autonomy or independence (Abashin,2012:154).

The transition from the Soviet political and social system and the command economy occurred extensively in Central Asia. It laid the foundations for a new system and basic structures for the region's countries (Rumer,2005:32). This transfer had two key dimensions: the first was "systematic," involving a change from dictatorship to democracy and from a centralized economy to a market-based economy. The second dimension was "spatial," including the economic and political space collapse. One of the most prominent outcomes of this transition was the severe decline in the economic level and the widespread adverse economic effects on most people's lives. The fall and economic stagnation in the former Soviet Union were much deeper than in Eastern and Southern Europe (Central Asia Human Development Report, 2005:37). Therefore, in Central Asia, there were no nationalist traditions in the classical sense, and the concept of the nation, as it is typically defined, had little relation to the reality of Central Asia in 1991 (Massan salvador, 2010:3).

On the opposite side of the Caspian Sea, many people in the Caucasus have been living in the region for over a millennium, making them indigenous to

the area. While some new immigrants arrived more than 800 years ago, particularly in Armenia and Georgia, Armenian Christianity historically led to the formation of ethnic nationalism (Jones,2000:7-8). Armenia, in particular, holds a significant position in this regard. Records show that the first references to Armenians and their country date back to 520 BC, when Darius I, the king of Iran, documented his victories over conquered peoples on the Bisotun Inscription. Prior to that, Armenians were known as distinct people from the Urartian tribal confederation centered around Lake Van. The Greek writer Xenophon wrote about Armenians during the Greek army's retreat from Iran through Armenia in 401-400 BC, noting their social habits and economic life in his account, *Anabasis* (Panossian,2008:1698). Therefore, Armenians have a long history of using the term and identifying with it, despite not aligning with the modern concept of nationhood. This recognition demonstrates the region's people's historical depth. Armenians are considered one of the oldest inhabitants of the Caucasus in terms of ethnic and historical roots. They are one of the ethnic groups that have managed to preserve their unity and identity despite enduring pressures and dispersion worldwide (Ghavam and Zargar,2009:99).

This history is also applicable to Georgia, where Georgians are considered one of the ancient and well-established tribes in the Caucasus region. Locally, they refer to themselves as "Kartveli," their land as "Sakartvelo," and their language as "Kartuli," drawing inspiration from historical myths. They belong to a distinct ethnic branch of the Caucasian people and are distinct from their Indo-European and Turkish neighbors. Some Georgian tribe names can be traced back to Assyrian and Oratory inscriptions from the first millennium BC. Around seven hundred years before Christ, Georgians were able to establish the kingdom of "Iberia" in the regions of "Caltli" and "Kakhti," which lasted for several centuries. Hence, Georgians have a remarkable cultural and historical background (Qawam and Zargar, 2018:153).

Although Azerbaijanis have a tradition of writing dating back to the 16th century, their identity is primarily based on local (khanates, districts, or clans) or transnational (Islamic) identities (Cornell,2001:33). According to Olir, the idea of Azerbaijani national identity first emerged during a brief period of state independence in 1918. However, less than two years later, Azerbaijan was conquered by the Soviet Union, and its borders were changed. Azerbaijan became one of the 15 republics of the Soviet Union



(Ollir,2008:1714-1715). Following independence, Azerbaijan's nation-building process followed a specific pattern in which the emergence of nationalism based on ethnic identity preceded the formation of the state and the nation (Çağla,2019:52).

Therefore, the countries of the Caucasus region have a more specific and well-formed history, as well as a rich experience of the nation-state. However, the governments of these countries are weak and primarily quasi-states with fragile statehood (Rondeli,2000:49). Historically, Armenian and Georgian Christianity had played a significant role in the formation of strong modern nationalism in this region (Jones,2000:7). Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a sense of national awareness and anti-Soviet sentiment had already crystallized in Azerbaijan, and the Karabakh war further intensified it. The conflict fueled anti-Armenian sentiments, and Russia's support for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh ignited a wave of nationalism in Azerbaijan (Akiner,2000:92; Çağla,2019).

#### **4. Findings**

##### **4-1. Geopolitical Challenges in Nation Building in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

The formation of nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus regions has presented significant geopolitical obstacles and challenges. Geopolitical challenges refer to the creation of a situation for a government or country based on fixed and changing geopolitical factors, which influence the country's policies by utilizing geographic variables and factors (Ahmadi Nohdani and et al.,2021:6). The formation of nations in these regions has been directly influenced by geopolitical factors, which typically consume a lot of the country's energy (Asgari,2021:231). Building nations and establishing efficient and new social orders in Central Asia and the Caucasus have been met with many obstacles and challenges. These factors are interdependent and generally include ethnic-local nationalism, low socio-economic cohesion of the population, familyism, lack of democratic traditions, corruption, and a preference for strong leadership, which have significantly influenced the formation process of the modern nation-state (Rondeli,2000:49). In this region, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic and geopolitical opportunities are often counterbalanced by security challenges (Von Hauff,2019).

Therefore, although the leaders of the countries in the region are attempting to develop an administrative discourse regarding nation-state building and

accepting a legal and political framework, the people impose significant restrictions on this official goal. After the independence of the countries in Central Asia and, to some extent, the countries in the Caucasus, they faced various challenges, particularly in the geopolitical field, which had numerous effects on establishing order in multiple fields. The following examines the most significant geopolitical challenges of the formation of nations in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus:

**4-1-1 .Regional Identities Based on Ethnic and Religious Divisions in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

The existence of regional identities based on ethnic and religious divisions is one of the essential issues in examining the structure of the countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Most texts related to this region have dealt with the structure and influence of ethnic and religious minorities on the current trends in these nations. The reason for this is the significant impact of this issue on the social order in these countries, particularly its impact on social conflicts and regional security (Zviagelskaya,2005:94; Rondeli,2000: 49; Moldaliv,2000:258; Jones,2000:2). In fact, the geopolitical weight of ethnic groups reflects all their geographical, cultural, and population characteristics, as well as their ability and role in various fields of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of human societies (Valigholizadeh, 2016:88). After gaining independence, the independent republics, particularly the Central Asian republics, had to grapple with multiple identities at the transnational (Soviet) and internal (ethnic) levels, in addition to the need to rebuild state institutions and establish new sources of legitimacy (Kamrava,2020:9).

Central Asia and the Caucasus countries are home to more than 50 different ethnic and linguistic groups, with a total population of about sixty million people (Jones,2000:3). The ethnic composition of these nations is illustrated in Table (1).

**Table (1): Ethnic Composition among the National Communities of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Percentage)**

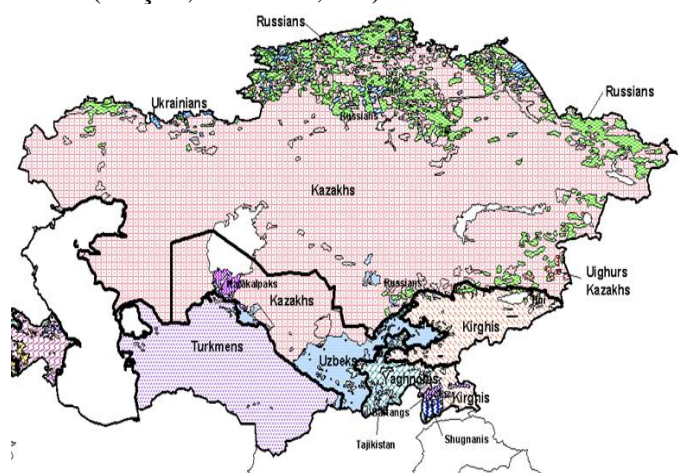
Countries	Ethnic Groups							
Armenia	Armenian	Other Armenia	Azerbaijani					
	93.3	4.1	2.6					
Azerbaijan	Azerbaijani	Other Azerbaijan	Russian	Lezgian	Armenian			
	89	3.8	3	2.2	2			
Georgia	Georgian	Armenian	Russian	Azerbaijani	Other Georgia	Ossetian	Greek	Abkhazian
	70.1	8.1	6.3	5.7	3.1	3	1.9	1.8
Kazakhstan	Kazakh	Russian	Kazakh Other	Ukrainian	Uzbek	German	Uighur	
	53.4	30	6.6	3.7	3.5	2.4	1.4	
Kyrgyzstan	Kirghiz	Russian	Uzbek	Ukrainian	German			
	52.4	18	12.9	2.5	2.4			
Tajikistan	Tajik	Uzbek	Tajik Other	Russian				
	64.9	25	6.6	3.5				
Turkmenistan	Turkmen	Uzbek	Russian	Other Turkmen	Kazak	Tatar		
	77	9.2	6.7	4.3	2	0.8		
Uzbekistan	Uzbek	Other Uzbekistan	Russian	Tajik	Kazak	Kyrgyz	Turkmen	Ukrainian
	75.8	7.2	6	4.8	4.1	0.9	0.6	0.6

(Source: Fractionalization Data (Alesina and et al,2003))

The significance of local, ethnic, or tribal identities poses a crucial constraint on the nation-building processes in Central Asia. These identities play vital economic and political roles in the region's societies both before and after independence. During the Soviet era, such affiliations proved effective despite Moscow's control of the party and government hierarchy. The leaders of the Communist Party in the region appointed individuals from their tribe or region to essential positions to consolidate their power. Following independence, the importance of such ties did not diminish. In fact, it may be the most significant threat to the region's long-term progress in nation-building processes.

An example of this can be observed during the war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997. Tajikistan's regions are characterized by ethnic, topographic, linguistic, cultural, economic, and religious diversity, resulting in

regionalism, which is both the cause and effect of historical, geographical, political, and economic competition. Throughout the modern history of Tajikistan, economic interests and political power have been unevenly distributed. Two serious ethnic clashes occurred before Soviet independence - the conflict between Muscat Turks and Uzbeks in the Faraghana Valley in June 1989 and between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the city of Usk in June 1990 - led to many casualties. These two incidents raised serious concerns about ethnic stability in Central Asia in the post-independence period of the region's countries (Akçali,2003:421,423).



**Figure (1): Map Spatial Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Central Asian Countries**

(Source: Representing Ethnic Groups in Space: A New Dataset,2010)

Ethnic diversity poses a significant challenge to the process of nation-building in Central Asia, specifically in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This is because building a national identity can be divisive rather than unifying in the absence of consensus (Everett-Heath,2003:3-4). Ethnicity and clans are prevalent in Central Asian society. They are, therefore, critical components of nation-building efforts (Kamrava,2020: 19). Despite the establishment of borders, nationality (Uzbek or Tajik) remains unimportant to most people, and various local identities are more critical (Haugen,2003:212). Therefore, regional leaders focus on promoting ethnic unity and harmony in nation-building initiatives. Although there are significant ethnic differences, all countries in the region stress ethnic unity, with the dominant ethnic language accepted as the official language in some countries.

Additionally, each country attempts to create a conventional image of its nation through various elements such as traditional dress, cuisine, architecture, folklore, songs, dances, behavioral rules, moral values, and rituals (Abashin,2012:154). Consequently, ethnic relations in Central Asia remain relatively stable. However, several events could jeopardize this stability and threaten the nation-state-building process. Ethnic harmony is crucial for political stability, but the contribution of non-indigenous groups in the political, administrative, and cultural fields has significantly decreased (Akçali,2003:423,425). Ethnic diversity is therefore regarded as a significant factor contributing to increasing regional tensions.

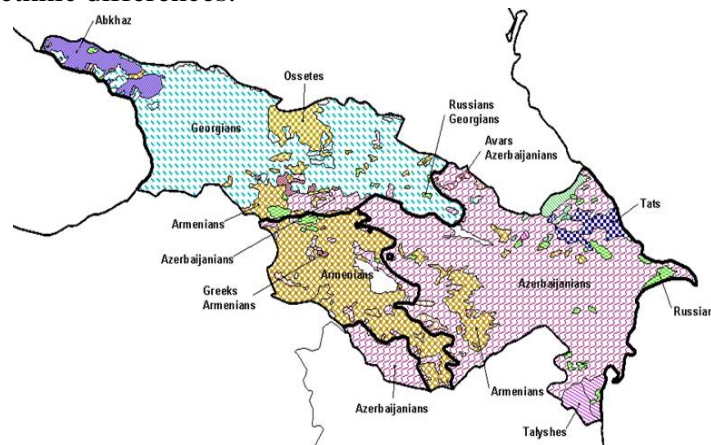
On the other hand, the presence of regional, tribal, and familial pluralism has resulted in many divisions within nationalities, with ethnic sub-identities remaining particularly strong. This has led to a disconnection of regional connections along ethnic lines. Although such issues existed during the Soviet period, their importance as a basis for political mobilization and social support, particularly for elite relations, has significantly increased (Matveeva,1999). Indeed, tribal norms such as unity and loyalty to kin, raising multiple children, respect for elders, and other shared structures of life and work are essential throughout Central Asia. Research conducted in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan has revealed that tribal identity is more salient than ethnicity and religion and is a crucial variable in understanding stability and conflict. In some countries, these identities contribute to stability; in others, they lead to instability (Collins,2003; Kamrava,2020). As a result, the countries of Central Asia face complex ethnic-tribal mosaics, which have complicated official efforts toward nation-building (Kamrava,2020:21).

The ethnic and ethnopolitical situations in Central Asia and the Caucasus are distinct from one another. The Caucasus region can be divided into three nations based on their ethnolinguistic characteristics. These three nations consist of the Azeris (6 million), Georgians (4 million), and Armenians (3.5 million in the Caucasus), along with several small groups, including indigenous people. All three nations are multi-ethnic, but each country has one ethnic group that constitutes the majority of its population. Armenia is an almost mono-ethnic state as over 95% of its population is Armenian, while Russians and Yezidi Kurds constitute less than 2% each.

In contrast, Georgia and Azerbaijan are multi-ethnic countries. In Georgia, 70% of the population speaks Georgian, and Azeris, Armenians, Ossetians,

Greeks, and Abkhazians are the main minority groups. However, the majority of Georgia's population, i.e., Georgians, consists of several subgroups, such as the Mingrelians and the Swans. In Azerbaijan, more than 60% of the population is Azeri, 30% are Dagestanis, and 2.5% are Russians. Kurds also comprise a significant proportion of Azerbaijan's population, with some sources estimating their numbers to be more than 10%. In South Azerbaijan, the Talashis, an Iranian ethnic group, constitute between 200,000 and 400,000 people (Cornell,2001:4-5).

In general, the ethnic characteristics of Caucasus countries can be summarized as follows: Firstly, there have historically been specific relationships between aspects of state policy and ethnicity in the Caucasus, meaning that the government has always had an ethnic-national character. Secondly, an important element of the ethnopolitical situation in the Caucasus is the presence of ethnic and religious borders, particularly among the three main populations of the South Caucasus: Azerbaijanis, Georgians, and Armenians. Religious distinctions have intensified inter-ethnic differences, causing the factor of religion to override intra-ethnic considerations. Thirdly, the social-psychological aspects of territorial relations have an ethnic nature and reveal greater intra-ethnic considerations and inter-ethnic differences.



**Figure (2): Map Spatial Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Caucasus Countries**  
(Source: Representing Ethnic Groups in Space: A New Dataset,2010)

The contradictions and oppositions between ethnic groups in the Caucasus have a primarily territorial and ethnic character. Recent instances of inter-ethnic conflict in the region have had a territorial and ethnic nature, as

documented by Porkhomorsky (1994:2-3). Being Armenian is considered a crucial component of an initial identity with roots that date back to ancient times and a visible presence within the national territory. In Azerbaijan, the origin and affiliation of Azeri Turks, which had a pre-Turkish layer of local self-rule according to a new historical account, became the key element of Azerbaijani identity. The Karabakh dispute between the two nations has demonstrated that ethnic identity holds greater significance in these countries (Agadjanian,2015:25).

The three factors mentioned above suggest that the situation in Central Asia differs from that of the Caucasus. Firstly, traditional political power in Central Asia lacks a predominant ethnic status and is relatively impartial in terms of ethnicity. Secondly, Central Asia exhibits a notable degree of religious homogeneity, particularly among the Sunni Muslim population. Exceptions exist in the Pamirs Mountain regions where Muslim dominance varies. During the time Central Asia was a part of the Russian Empire, other religions gained momentum and prominence during the Soviet era. Consequently, religion plays a significant role in Central Asia in bridging ethnic divides and facilitating the process of ethnic integration.

The third point to be considered is the territorial aspect of ethnic relations in Central Asia, which fundamentally differs from the situation in the Caucasus. Central Asia's historical development was shaped by two distinct forms of regional distribution of ethnic groups: monogamy and migration. Ethnic professional specializations arose from this, resulting in multiple ethnic groups coexisting within one territorial unit, meeting different ecological and economic demands, and hence being non-competitive (Porkhomorsky,1994:33).

Certainly, this does not imply the absence of ethnic tensions in Central Asia. Moreover, during the last phase of Central Asia's history as a part of the Russian and later Soviet empire, fundamental changes occurred in these three factors. Consequently, the potential for ethnic conflict in the region has significantly increased (Porkhomorsky,1994:4). Ethnic conflicts in Central Asia are generally categorized as functional rather than territorial or independence-seeking conflicts. Such conflicts revolve around gaining power, influence, control, and significant positions in various areas such as politics, management, economics, society, and language (Porkhomorsky, 1994:4).

During the Soviet era, ethnic and religious conflict organizers were strongly repressed, and even today, continuous leadership in Central Asia prevents or suppresses potential ethnic conflicts. However, the lack of leadership continuity in the Caucasus has hindered efforts to address ethnic conflicts. After the collapse of the Soviet system, social contradictions shifted from being based on class politics to status-based, namely ethnicity. As Hector (2004) notes, with the decline of class politics, political conflicts between groups are now based on status. This shift toward politics of dignity has increased the prominence of ethnicity, religion, and nationality in politics (Hector,2004:404).

Hence, the diverse ethnic composition in Central Asian and Caucasian nations following their independence became the primary cause of social contradictions in these countries. As previously stated, these contradictions are evident in territorial disputes over ethnicity and functional conflicts based on ethnicity, such as the pursuit of power, in these nations. These have considerably impacted the establishment of social stability and order and ultimately shaped the concept of the nation in a modern context in Central Asian and Caucasian nations.

#### **4-1-2. The Role of Religion in the Creation of National Identities**

In the Soviet era, the Central Asian and Caucasian republics experienced a "compulsory secularization process" (Janelidze,2015:67). At the time of the former Soviet Union, it was thought that communist ideology could gradually eliminate the differences between people and create a new human being. On the other hand, the Soviet government structure was based on national divisions. Since the national units that made up the union were not ethnically homogeneous, the result of this lack of homogeneity was either overt or covert policies of assimilation of minorities by the main nationalities that formed the units (Cornell,2001:33). The collapse of the Soviet regime was accompanied by a resurgence of religiosity in the newly independent countries (Janelidze,2015:67). With the end of the suppression of religious groups and communities by the totalitarian Soviet regime, a new period began in the late 1980s that enabled political and ideological pluralism as well as religious freedom. The new ideological pluralism allowed religious communities to reclaim their positions at the center of religious life in the post-Soviet state. With the dissolution of the Soviet regime, interest in religious values in newly independent societies quickly



increased (Ismayilov,2015:96). However, examining the role of religion and denominations in the Central Asian and Caucasian region demonstrates the impact of this issue on the process of nation-building. Of course, this issue is different in the two models of nation-building, namely the Caucasian model and the Central Asian model.

Many researchers who have studied Islam in Central Asia agree that Islam has had a significant impact on the region's historical, cultural, and traditional conditions and greatly influences people's lives. Islam is an inseparable part of the traditions, customs, and rituals of Central Asia and has become one of the pillars of the collective memory of Central Asian societies. As Kondratieff (1989) shows, the collective memory of a society or social memory is organized and legitimized through rituals, physical acts, and commemorative ceremonies (Zhussipbek and et al,2020:2). In the new discourse of nation-building in Central Asia, Islam has been recognized as an integral part of the cultural heritage. However, it has been rejected as a guiding principle for public and political life (Akçali,2003:418-420). Therefore, Central Asian political elites have used Islam in the process of nation-building, creating popularity and mobilizing forces (Omeličeva 2016; Hanks,2015:65, Zhussipbek and et al.,2020:2). Table (2) shows the religious-denominational composition among the Central Asian and Caucasian nations.

**Table (2): Religious Composition in the Countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Percentage)**

Countries	Religious Groups			
Armenia	Armenian Apostolic (Orthodox)	Armenian Other		
	64.57	35.43		
Azerbaijan	Shii Muslim	Sunni Muslim	Azerbaijan Other	
	65.34	28.07	6.58	
Georgia	Georgian Orthodox	Sunni Muslim	Armenian Apostolic (Orthodox)	Russian Orthodox
	80.88	10.96	5.58	2.59
Kazakhstan	Sunni Muslim	Nonreligious	Russian Orthodox	Protestant
	47.02	42.66	8.18	2.15
Kyrgyzstan	Sunni Muslim	Nonreligious	Russian Orthodox	
	70.00	24.49	5.51	

<b>Tajikistan</b>	Sunni Muslim	Nonreligious	Shii Muslim	Russian Orthodox
	80.03	13.47	5.07	1.43
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Sunni Muslim	Nonreligious	Russian Orthodox	
	86.91	10.63	2.45	
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Sunni Muslim	Nonreligious	Russian Orthodox	
	88.00	11.03	0.97	

(Source: Fractionalization Data (Alesina and et al,2003))

Islam certainly provides tempting opportunities, but it also creates new dangers. On the one hand, its legalization allows new governments to create a clearer break from the Soviet past. It provides nationalist ideologues with new tools to revive a "genuine" national history. On the other hand, strengthening religious sentiments and activities of extremist Islamists pose a serious threat to the internal stability of these countries and the survival of Central Asian regimes (Abashin,2012:159-160). Central Asian leaders soon saw Islam as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, especially in the early years of independence, they considered Islam a powerful force for nation-building, a prominent cultural source that could be easily exploited. But they soon realized they could easily lose control of political motivations and the religious potential for mobilization and dissent. This duality - recognizing the centrality of Islam in nation-building and its potential for political opposition-reveals the state's complex and sometimes contradictory attitude towards religion (Kamrava,2020:14).

However, there are significant differences in religious practices and perceptions not only between different countries but also between different regions within a country. Overall, it can be said that people who have traditionally been nomadic - such as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen - have had less defined religious culture throughout their history. Conversely, people who have been sedentary, such as Uzbeks and Tajiks, have generally been more religious. Islamic centers such as schools and mosques have been established in these regions. This difference also exists within countries. For example, in Kazakhstan, people in the northern region are less religious than those in the southern region, despite the fact that countries with more religious traditions, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have moved towards more radical versions of Islam since their independence. Anti-Islamic groups may pose a direct threat to the process of nation-building, as these

groups see "nation" as an unrelated identity with political and legal loyalty. What is truly important is loyalty to the international Islamic community and its leaders (Akçali,2003:418-420; Everett-Heath,2003:4).

Central Asian countries have resorted to a combination of collusion and suppression to neutralize potential threats from Islamist activists. All five republics follow a modified version of Soviet policy toward Islam. They all view Islam with suspicion and as a potential threat, hence promoting official Islam and suppressing all dissenters (Gunn,2003; Kamrava,2020:17). Throughout Central Asian countries, the threat of Islamic radicalism has been used to launch social engineering projects aimed at strengthening national identities and legitimizing "controllable" versions of Islam, in order to gain social legitimacy (Zhussipbek and et al,2020:7).

Religion has played a major role in creating social divisions and shaping distinct national identities in the Caucasus. In fact, religious diversity in the region is quite prevalent, with followers of all four major religions found in the area. Sunni and Shia Jaafari Islam are present among the majority of Azerbaijanis (75 to 85 percent) and a small group of ethnic Dagestanis in Azerbaijan. Christianity also exists in various forms in the Caucasus, with the main pillars of Christianity in the region being the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Church. Although the majority of Ossetians are Orthodox Christians, their main religious ceremonies are similar to those of the Russians who reside in the area. Jews are present among the indigenous people of Georgia. They are a minority in Azerbaijan and Dagestan. Finally, Buddhism, which is considered a native religion according to the Russian Federation's constitution, is present among the residents of the southwestern Caspian Sea and southern Dagestan, i.e., the Kamliks (Cornell,2001:6-5). In this region, the role of the Armenian Church and the Georgian Church is prominent in maintaining and strengthening a national identity based on religion. The "national church" concept indicates the connection between these countries' religious and political institutions (Mkrtchyan,2015:51).

All three countries-with different backgrounds-have religious organizations that represent the majority of their religious traditions, cooperate with national political institutions, and maneuver with national identity discourses. However, a focus on national identity should not obscure the fact that these religious organizations are political actors whose field of activity also has an important transnational dimension (Jödicke,2015:13). Dominant religious groups shape the characteristics of nationalism and the

interrelation between religion and politics in South Caucasus countries. The increasing importance of religion and the stable fame of religious leaders have reinforced the national-cultural meaning of religion in Georgia and Armenia (Zviadadze,2021:210). The influence of religion on politics in this region affects both the ruling political parties and the opposition. Depending on the available resources (especially in countries with majority religions), religious organizations may interfere in politics as an opposing party or state religion and quickly switch between these roles. The political power of religion in Azerbaijan, which was very limited after independence, evolved under a political regime that sought to suppress political opponents (Jödicke, 2015:17). To better understand the religious transformation in Azerbaijan, one should consider the ambiguity of religion in society and politics. Azerbaijan is often considered a secular country in scientific literature and public discourse. Azerbaijani identity is often considered to be in transition, in which Shiism, Sunnism, Turkism, and secularism are competing with each other (Zviadadze,2021:213).

#### **4-1-3. The Role of Foreign Agencies, Especially Russia, in Nation-State Formation**

In all Russian political and security documents, the priority of the "near abroad" (former geographical area of the Soviet Union) in Russia's foreign, military, and security policies has been emphasized (Kolaei and Abedi, 2016:23). Russia is the only country capable of exerting punitive power in the region. This punitive power is potential only, but it also has symbolic weight: Moscow can challenge the state authority obtained in 1991 and its military capacity can defeat any Central Asian army at least in a classical confrontation (Laruelle,2017).

Various opinions have been presented in examining the reasons for Russia's focus on Central Asia. Among these, the economic aspects of dominance are highlighted by both Soviet and Western researchers. More than new markets, what Russian capital gained from controlling Central Asia in the mid-nineteenth century was an excess of cotton for the textile industry. Cotton became scarce as a result of the American Civil War. The crisis in America led Russian merchants to pressure the Ministry of Finance to search for raw materials in Central Asia, especially in Bukhara. Another viewpoint is focused on the "Great Game" perspective, which initially sees Russia's concentration on Central Asia as a result of competition between major powers, namely Russia and Britain. Others point to a grand plan for

occupying Central Asia and emphasize the role of Russia's big ambitions (Haugen,2003:49-50; Chen and Fazilov,2018).

For any of the reasons mentioned above, studies indicate that the emergence of modern Central Asia can be traced back to the October Revolution of 1917, in which the Bolsheviks came to power and established a Marxist state in Russia, after which a new structure was imposed on Central Asia. In an effort to consolidate their control, Soviet leaders felt the need to create a new organizational structure in the region and thus established political and administrative units in the area (Segars,2003:92).

Nevertheless, one of the questions that have attracted the attention of many researchers is why Soviet leaders established these republics and what their national policy was. In the scientific literature on Soviet national policies, two interpretive frameworks can be identified: the first emphasizes nationalism as a policy of power and a strategy for securing Moscow and Central Russia's domination over borders. The second framework links the promotion of nationalism with the concept of modernization. From this perspective, the Soviet emphasis on national identity is a strategy for transforming the overall structure rather than just creating and maintaining political power (Haugen,2003:13).

Some researchers have attributed the promotion of national identities in Central Asia during the Soviet era to its international dimension and have placed it at the center of their attention. These arrangements were used as a means of international propaganda to demonstrate the Soviet regime's respect for the national rights of ethnic minorities in global politics (Haugen, 2003:15-14). According to the Soviet version, the establishment of national boundaries in Central Asia resulted from the demand of the Central Asian population to realize the aspirations of the golden age of national statehood. According to Soviet leaders, the main goal of defining national boundaries was to create politically homogeneous national identities (Haugen,2003: 109,180).

After the independence of these countries from the Soviet Union, although different countries are trying to influence the region, Russia is still the region's largest and most important player. Along with strategic considerations, Russia has two major reasons for its presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. One is to protect Russians in the region, and the other is to maintain access to important resources. Of course, the relationship between the region's countries and Russia has mutual interests

(Jones,2000:14). However, Russia's policy in Central Asia is changing as a result of developments in the region and its surroundings, as well as changes in its relations with other major powers. The collapse of Moscow's relations with the West has led to a major geopolitical shift towards Asia and closer relations with China (Dubnov,2018:10). Russia's priorities are changing. Its relationship with China is more important than its relationship with Central Asia. Moscow has entered a long period of estrangement from the West, and as long as Putin is in power, it is unlikely even to restore minimal trust in the United States. As a result, Russia is turning towards the East. Central Asia does not play a significant role in this axis. In fact, this region increasingly plays a peripheral role in Russia's geopolitical considerations, while China is at the center of the stage (Dubnov,2018:2).

In Central Asian countries, the fear of foreign domination, particularly by Russians, explains to some extent the attitudes towards Russian minorities as the fifth column aimed at reconstructing the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is particularly vulnerable in this regard, and anxiety increased due to the Uzbek and Russian interventions in the Tajikistan civil war in 1992 (Matveeva,1999:24-26). However, the formation of nations in the Caucasus predates the Soviet era. Nevertheless, the importance of the South Caucasus for Russia as part of the Soviet sphere of influence is recognized by all Russian and non-Russian experts. The South Caucasus can be likened to the strategic heart of Russia. Russia's strategy towards the South Caucasus should be analyzed and evaluated as part of the overall strategy of the country towards the Soviet sphere (Kolaei,2010:79). Russia sees the South Caucasus republics, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, as its strategic depth, and considers any influence resulting from foreign intervention in the region as a threat to its national security (Alamasi and Azati,2010 cited in Ebrahimi and Mohammadi,2011). From an international perspective, Russia's goals and interests in the South Caucasus region are part of the strategic competition of this country with Western powers, especially the United States and NATO (Kolaei and et al,2015:98).

Due to structural limitations, three countries in the region also adopt a pro-Russian policy. Armenia relies on Moscow militarily because of territorial hostility with Azerbaijan, but current policies in Tbilisi have shown that Georgia is seriously willing and enthusiastic about joining NATO. Azerbaijan's nationalist policies make it a reliable partner for Turkey, Israel, and the United States. Therefore, Baku's pro-Western policy is more intense,

but Russia has not overlooked its presence in the energy sector in the country. Russia's military support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has complicated relations between Russia and Armenia. Historical tensions in Russia's relations with Georgia and increasing efforts by the United States to narrow Russia's deep geopolitical influence in the South Caucasus have exacerbated Moscow's problems in Georgia. (Kolaei and Hadipoor,2020:662).

Russia has used its superior military power and security agents in the South Caucasus region to directly and indirectly force some regional governments to change their policies towards incorporating Russia's interests into their policies (Kolaei and et al.,2015:118). Along with hard power, Russia seeks to use soft power in the region, and the use of the Russian language is one of its tools. Russification through the promotion of the Russian language and its associated cultural norms among non-Russian populations was a key element in the Soviet Union's project of national consolidation. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's political, economic, and socio-cultural influence and connections in the former Soviet republics weakened. However, the Russian language is still widely used in many of them, even if its extent varies (Agadjanian and Nedoluzhko,2021; Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski,2019; Pavlenko,2013). Among the three South Caucasus countries, it is in Armenia that Russia seeks to increase its cultural influence through educational pathways. The Rossotrudnichestvo branch in Yerevan is working to maintain its relationships with local graduates of Russian higher education institutions. The Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University aims to bridge educational gaps between Armenia and Russia (Kornilov and Makarychev,2015:246). Therefore, due to the complexity of the South Caucasus region, Russia is trying to use multiple tools to maintain its influence.

#### **4-1-4. Border Disputes among Independent Nation-States**

One of the most significant challenges facing Central Asian and Caucasian countries in the process of forming independent nation-states is the issue of determining borders. The borders of new countries were created based on internal borders established at various stages during the Soviet period (Massansalvador,2010:4). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan accepted the old borders of the Soviet Union as their national borders. Despite general agreement on past administrative borders, negotiations over

the actual location of borders became a source of contention among countries. Each country was inclined to draw borders according to its national interests. This issue has led to fundamental disagreements and obstacles to wider regional cooperation in economics, security, and strong relationships (International Crisis Group).

During Stalin's rule, the borders between the republics were drawn (by Moscow), and this legacy still affects Central Asian republics and their relationships today. The fertile Fergana Valley, with its high population density, is located at the center of these countries. The creation of borders and recent names by Moscow under Stalin's rule aimed to separate ethnic groups to prevent movement towards independence and unity and prevent the creation of a united republic by a single ethnic group (Central Asian Human Development Report,2005:35).

Uzbekistan has the most border issues among Central Asian countries. After independence, there were concerns about border conflicts, but no real conflicts of this kind occurred. However, there is potential for local-level conflicts between borders. A study of 66 local-level conflicts in 5 Central Asian countries shows a high prevalence of border conflicts in communities near borders. Of the 25 cases of such conflicts, six were related to disputes over shared water resources, two to land, ten to commercial and civilian issues on both sides of the borders, and seven to conflicts with migrants from outside the borders. In each case, the issue began after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it is evident that new borders have divided communities and hindered trade, with water and land resources being divided in ways that are not perceived as fair (Central Asia Human Development Report,2005:39).



**Table (3): Armed Conflict in the Countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus from 1991 to 2021**

Location	Year	Side A	Secondary party A	Side B	Secondary party B	Incompatibility	Territory name	Intensity level	Type of Conflict	
Azerbaijan	1991	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	1992	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	War	Internationalized intrastate	
	1993	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	War	Internationalized intrastate	
	1993	Government of Azerbaijan		Military faction (forces of Suret Husseinov)		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
	1994	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh		Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	War	Intrastate	
	1995	Government of Azerbaijan		OPON Forces		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
	1997	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	1998	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2003	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2008	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2012	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2014	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2015	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2016	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2017	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2020	Government of Azerbaijan	Government of Turkey	Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	War	Internationalized intrastate	
	2021	Government of Azerbaijan		Republic of Artsakh	Government of Armenia	Territory	Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
Georgia	1991	Government of Georgia		National Guard and Mkhedrion		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
	1992	Government of Georgia		Zviadists		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
	1992	Government of Georgia		Republic of Abkhazia		Territory	Abkhazia	Minor	Intrastate	
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	1992	Government of Georgia		Republic of South Ossetia		Territory	South Ossetia	Minor	Intrastate	
	1993	Government of Georgia		Zviadists		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
	1993	Government of Georgia		Republic of Abkhazia		Territory	Abkhazia	War	Intrastate	
	2004	Government of Georgia		Republic of South Ossetia		Territory	South Ossetia	Minor	Intrastate	
	2008	Government of Georgia		Republic of South Ossetia	Government of Russia (Soviet Union)	Territory	South Ossetia	Minor	Intrastate	
	2021	Government of Kyrgyzstan		Government of Tajikistan		Territory	Common Border	Minor	Interstate	
	Tajikistan	1992	Government of Tajikistan	Government of Uzbekistan	PTI, UTO	Government of Uzbekistan	Government		War	Internationalized intrastate
		1993	Government of Tajikistan	Government of Russia, Government of Uzbekistan	UTO		Government		War	Internationalized intrastate
		1994	Government of Tajikistan	Government of Russia, Government of Uzbekistan	UTO		Government		Minor	Internationalized intrastate
		1995	Government of Tajikistan	Government of Russia	UTO		Government		Minor	Internationalized intrastate
1996		Government of Tajikistan	Government of Russia	UTO		Government		War	Internationalized intrastate	
1997		Government of Tajikistan		Forces of Khudoberdiyev		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
1998		Government of Tajikistan		Forces of Khudoberdiyev, UTO		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
2000		Government of Tajikistan		Forces of Millio Abdullo		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
2010		Government of Tajikistan		Forces of Millio Abdullo, IMU		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
2011		Government of Tajikistan		IMU		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
Uzbekistan	1999	Government of Uzbekistan		IMU		Government		Minor	Intrastate	
	2000	Government of Uzbekistan	Government of Kyrgyzstan	IMU		Government		Minor	Internationalized intrastate	
	2004	Government of Uzbekistan		JIG		Government		Minor	Intrastate	

(Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 21.1)

In the Caucasus region, border challenges, especially in relations between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh region, have led to several serious military clashes and conflicts between these countries. The Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2021 and Azerbaijan's

renewed control over the region was the latest serious conflict between the two countries, which demonstrated that the Central Asian and Caucasus countries are facing potential conflicts, with the intervention of foreign countries, particularly Turkey and Russia. This region is often depicted as a source of real and potential conflicts and security risks and threats. This assessment largely reflects the real situation in this region. There is great potential for instability in the complex relationships between governments. These tensions arise from several unresolved issues such as border disputes, water procurement, some governments' dependence on other governments for energy resources, and so on (Zviagelskaya,2005:86; Kaçka and Piechowiak,2021).

#### **4-2 .Political Leaders and Elites and the Effort to Overcome Geopolitical Challenges**

Most studies on nation-building in Central Asia mainly focus on how political elites, through practical policies or discourse, perceive the nation and national identity. Less attention is paid to examining this issue from the people's perspective (Isaacs and Polese,2015:371). Initially, researchers used the concept of "state nationalism" to examine the efforts of elites to promote a national majority through policies and actions such as state symbolism and the promotion of historical figures and specific myths (Isaacs and Polese,2015:374). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, political leaders have undoubtedly played a dominant role in the political systems of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Akiner,2000:93).

At the dawn of independence, political and bureaucratic elites in Central Asia and the Caucasus had to transform themselves into national elites protecting new independent governments' interests. All leaders, except for Asghar Aghaev in Kyrgyzstan, were initially the secretary of the Communist Party in their republics. They became the presidents of the newly independent countries after independence, and former communist parties transformed into republican parties (Akçali,2003:410). Therefore, after independence, the former Soviet-era leaders became the new elites in their countries, who openly pursue declared goals and policies in the direction of state-nation building. However, it remains unclear whether this top-down approach will be successful in the long run (Akçali,2003:409).

The collapse of the Soviet Union was not an event that the Central Asian countries were seeking, but rather it was imposed upon them. At the time of

the collapse, the political elites in these countries lacked the necessary political legitimacy because their countries had gained independence without any significant struggle. Therefore, the leaders of these countries, who were mostly former Communist Party leaders, faced the fundamental challenge of state-building, as these countries and their elites had no prior experience with nation-state building (Matveeva,1999:24). As previously mentioned, these countries essentially did not exist outside of Soviet rule. Nomadic tribes in the region primarily populated them. The divisions created by Stalin led to the creation of regional identities that are now known as the Central Asian and Caucasian countries. After their formation, these republics were under the centralized control of the Soviet government and thus had no experience with nation-state building. During the Soviet era, the concept of nation was insignificant according to Marxist ideology. According to Marx and Engels, capital takes precedence over the nation, and the proletariat is a stronger force than nationalism. "Workers have no country." According to them, national differences and animosities between people disappear more and more every day (Lars Oden,1996:343).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, five Central Asian countries entered a phase of nation-building that had begun by the political elites of the former Soviet Union. These republics were not ready for independence and became independent without national demand or struggle. Although the Soviet regime first initiated the process of nation-building in Central Asia in the 1920s, it acquired new dimensions in the post-Soviet era that had some similarities to its previous versions. After independence, Central Asian countries began both nation-building and state-building. This was unprecedented in Central Asia. Since there was no territorial sovereignty in nomadic steppe societies, the Soviet government first imposed a system of territorial governance on these countries. Prior to 1991, there were no governments in the region in the true sense of the word. In the post-Soviet era, nation-building and state-building go hand in hand, and there is an effort to build an independent state that derives its legitimacy and support from the nation (Akçali,2003:417,409).

After 1991, the leaders of Central Asian and Caucasian republics sought recognition of their sovereignty as nation-states. They created specific national policies and structures to facilitate the nation-state-building process. In other words, these republics adopted a policy of "de-Sovietization" and replaced Soviet-era symbols, institutions, and rituals with

national symbols. For the new political elites, distancing themselves from the previous regime and aligning with nationalist codes was essential. This was essentially accomplished through two simultaneous mechanisms: an official discourse that developed based on the existence of newly developed national identities and a legal-political framework that shaped the foundations of such discourse. Both of these mechanisms reinforced each other and facilitated the process of transition (Akçali,2003:414).

Central Asian and Caucasian leaders offered different policy responses to their challenges. These responses, which were embodied in nation-building projects and led to new foundations, were identified by the following elements:

1. Maintaining social stability and avoiding overt conflict
2. Using economic tools for political ends
3. A new ideology based on state nationalism
4. International cooperation, regional security, and prevention of annexationist tendencies (Matveeva,1999:27-30).

On the other hand, in order to overcome some of the challenges faced by newly established nations, the leaders of these new governments have essentially focused on three main areas: 1) history, 2) new alphabets and language policies, and 3) national pride and glory. In fact, given the historical background and nationalist policies during the Soviet era, the conditions for forming a national identity in these nations lacked the power of identity formation elements in people's perceptions. In other words, these conditions did not have much of a place as constructive elements in people's identity perceptions. Therefore, due to the importance of these identity elements after independence, political leaders in Central Asia and the Caucasus emphasized these three elements to create historical and cultural distinctions with other nations and create a sense of national identity in their nation-building process. Hence, for these nations, internal structural elements were used as tools. Within this framework, Central Asian leaders made great efforts to create a space for national pride and glory. The most obvious example of this can be seen in their national flags, which contain their national symbols.

Another example is national days that need to be celebrated. In this regard, Turkmenistan is an extreme example, with more than 50 national holidays. Central Asian leaders honored the alliances of heroes and their national historical experiences (Akçali,2003:416).

History refers to rediscovery, which means the creation of a national past. During the Soviet era, strict control and censorship were imposed on history. Censorship only allowed Marxist interpretations of the region's past. The name Turkestan was stigmatized, and in some cases, national and historical figures were introduced as enemies of the people (Akçali,2003: 415). Soviet historiography in Central Asia was almost exclusively related to two subjects: Islamic history and dynastic history. Although writings about the people of Central Asia were very limited from different perspectives, a strong oral tradition among nomads had preserved a form of collective awareness. Among the settled people, knowledge of history was limited. Concurrent with the emergence of national history writing in the Western style during the late Ottoman period, some educated individuals in Central Asia and the Caucasus began to write history to create a historical awareness similar to that of more advanced nations. These reformers understood the importance of history in creating and preserving collective awareness. However, national histories became more important during the Soviet era (Segars,2003). After independence, these countries also focused on creating a real and even artificial history to draw a historical background for themselves and their people. According to Laou (2003), Central Asia had a rich history before the Russian invasion but lacked ethnic and national distinctions among its different groups (2003: 106). This has made the history of these countries, in some cases, common and sharing similar historical experiences. Nevertheless, efforts to create a distinct historical identity have led these countries to attempt to formulate and present their unique history.

Of course, this issue has been quite different in the Caucasus region, especially among Armenians. Armenians have a deep sense of history and began writing their history in the 15th century AD. The most important Armenian writer is Moses Khorenatsi, who wrote the history of the Armenians in the second half of the 5th century. Despite some discussions about the history and some errors in some historical events, Khorenatsi was a tool that gave Armenians a sense of belonging to a history of more than two thousand years. He was the first person to write a complete history of the Armenians systematically, with a sense of historical continuity and antiquity with world civilization and Gospel narratives. Interestingly, he consciously did this a thousand years before the era of nationalism. Khorenatsi's work has been read, used, and abused by nationalist historians

from the 18th to the 20th centuries and has become an integral part of Armenian culture (Panossian,2008:1702).

One of the fundamental issues is the adaptation of the new alphabet and new language policies. Language plays the role of one of the main symbols of a nation, its "soul," and its primary value. Language preservation is one of the main duties of Central Asian policymakers, who have the responsibility of forming their national governments (Abashin,2012:158). During the period of Russian domination over Central Asia, the evolution of Central Asian languages entered a new phase with the influx of Russian immigrants during the 19th century. One of the important consequences of the expansion of Russians in Central Asia was introducing the language as a criterion for creating a common awareness. For example, for the Uzbeks during the Russian era, language was not so important, only considered a means of communication, and even bilingualism was prevalent. However, gradually, language turned into an identity criterion. In the first decade of Soviet rule, language policies focused on the issue of dialect and alphabet. In the second decade, they dealt with other issues, such as simplifying, compiling, and printing encyclopedias and grammar books. Another important language issue in the Soviet era was the introduction of Russian as an official language of communication in Central Asia (Segars,2003:94). After the independence of the republics, they reduced the influence of the Russian language and replaced the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin or Arabic alphabet. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan changed to the Latin alphabet, while the Russian language still influences Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan due to a significant Russian minority. Due to internal wars and the period after that, Tajikistan has not yet pursued these policies (Akçali,2003:415).

In the Caucasus, Armenia had its unique Armenian alphabet and language. Armenian is a separate branch of the Indo-European languages, with its literature dating back to the 15th century AD. Around 405 AD, a distinct alphabet was invented specifically for the Armenian language by the cleric and scholar Mesrop Mashtots under the patronage of King Vramshapuh (which was promoted as a divine revelation). Soon, the Gospel and other texts were translated into this alphabet, and many important works were written during this period, known as the golden age of Armenian literature. However, the Classical Armenian language was not used as a daily language at the beginning of the modern era and was limited to the church and some intellectuals. Ordinary people mostly spoke local dialects or Turkish during

the Ottoman Empire. Creating a commonly spoken language became an important goal for intellectuals. At the end of the 19th century, a modern Armenian language appeared and was taught in schools and used in publications. Although this language has two western and eastern branches, which are understandable by both sides (Panossian,2008:1703-1702). In this context, Armenian and Azerbaijani historians, writers, and linguists tried to discover, compare, and give credibility to their national pasts because the recovery of a suitable and authentic national history was the starting point for the subsequent process of mobilizing the lower-class natives. The language was used as a legitimate symbolic code that encompasses the unique internal experience of the people (a collective cultural unit) and transfers their collective memories from one generation to the next linguists and historians (Geukjian,2016:20).

### **5. Conclusion**

As demonstrated, a set of geopolitical, indigenous, cultural, regional, and international factors impact the formation of nations in the Central Asian and South Caucasus regions. Indigenous and cultural elements include the legacy of communism, religious and ethnic differences, the instability of the transitional period, the growth of corruption, and increasing economic inequality due to the uneven distribution of wealth, which often overlaps with competition for natural resources. International factors include competition for economic and political influence in the region by Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the West (Jones,2000:2). In fact, it is this geopolitics that shapes policymakers' perceptions of their country's national interests in relation to the surrounding environment, and, naturally, these perceptions guide the foreign policy of the actors, one of which can be having strategic interactions with other actors (Abdi and et al,2016:32). The existence of such challenges in these countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union required political leaders to play a prominent role in establishing a national social structure based on a comprehensive national identity.

Therefore, when the Central Asian and Caucasian countries became independent, several issues regarding their foreign governance needed to be resolved. First, after gaining independence, these countries faced different preferences. As a result of these indecisions, they pursued various development models, ranging from the secular Turkish political model versus the Iranian religious model on one side to the gradual economic reform model in China versus the shock therapy approach in Russia on the

other. Additionally, the economic model of East Asia even included the Kuwaiti model for Turkmenistan, which included a strong anti-democratic tradition that replaced political empowerment with financial and material wealth for the people.

The second external issue for these countries is the marking of border lines, uncontrolled border routes, and border claims by neighboring countries. Border issues between themselves and China and Afghanistan, including control of Afghan borders, were also included. Border issues between these countries have not been fully resolved, as the borders between Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan-Tajikistan, Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan, and Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan are still disputed.

The third problem of these countries is related to regional and non-regional actors. China and Russia appear to be the most important regional actors. Despite the close borders of the regional states, they have not yet become fully independent from Russia in terms of political, economic, military, and cultural aspects. The United States competes with Russia and China and has a significant presence, particularly in the Caucasus countries. After September 11th, the interests of the United States and its real presence in the region have increased considerably, and a new pattern of military and economic relations has begun to expand. These issues have created challenges in establishing stability and order in various areas of these countries (Akçali,2003:412).

In addition to these external geopolitical challenges, attention to internal challenges, particularly the presence of ethnic and religious diversity, has accompanied the formation of nations in these two regions with challenges. Therefore, considering the issues raised, the processes of nation formation in Central Asian and Caucasus countries indicate two somewhat different paths.

In Central Asia, the formation of nations is characterized by a lack of historical continuity and the significant role of external factors, particularly Russia, in shaping these societies, along with a relatively unfavorable internal structure. Before the formation of independent governments in these countries, there was mostly no concept of a nation, and governments in these countries still face the challenge of nation-building. Following Bartholomew, we call this phenomenon "emerging nation-states." In this region, geopolitical challenges have played a significant role in forming and consolidating nations, and many of the developments in these countries have



resulted from these challenges. Geopolitical challenges still play an important role in national processes in these countries.

In the Caucasus countries, the formation of nations can be traced back to the historical continuity of the nation within a national state structure, along with a relatively favorable internal structure and a less significant influence from Russia. This region had a concept of nation in the form of religious-ethnic identity before independence from the former Soviet Union. The nations in this region faced fewer challenges in nation-building after independence. Although important geopolitical challenges such as border disputes exist in this region, these challenges have contributed to creating a relatively strong national identity due to historical issues and regional rivalries with neighboring countries, which has facilitated the nation-building process.

#### **6. Acknowledgment**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and constructive feedback, which greatly contributed to the improvement of this paper. Additionally, I would like to thank the editorial team of *Geopolitics Quarterly* for their professional guidance and support throughout the publication process.

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