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# The Caucasus in The Context of Geopolitics and Interethnic Processes: Historical and Cultural Development and The Problem of Identity (Using the Example of Azerbaijan)

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**Abstract:** This article is devoted to the historical and cultural development of the Caucasus in the context of its geopolitical position and complex interethnic processes. Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Caucasus has been subjected to external invasions for centuries, which has left a deep mark on the historical memory of the peoples of the region and influenced their national identity, cultural values, and social relations. Particular attention is paid to the North Caucasus as part of the Russian Empire, and later the USSR and the Russian Federation. It is emphasized that the policies of the imperial and Soviet centers, including Russification, assimilation, deportations, and suppression of national movements, contributed to the accumulation of interethnic contradictions, which intensified during the collapse of the USSR and resulted in numerous conflicts, including the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The article analyzes the problem of identity in a multiethnic space, the role of culture as the basis of national self-awareness and resistance to assimilation. It notes that stereotypes and xenophobic myths have exacerbated tensions between the peoples of the Caucasus and Russia. The research also pays special attention to Azerbaijan as an example of a historically established multicultural and multiconfessional society. It highlights its civilizational uniqueness, shaped by the influence of the Great Silk Road and Islamic culture. Despite Soviet unification policies, Azerbaijan managed to preserve its ethnocultural diversity and, after gaining independence, chose a strategy of preserving national identity and developing multiculturalism as a state policy.

**Keywords:** Caucasus, Russia, cultural identity, Azerbaijan, ethnic factor

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## 1. Introduction

The culture of the Caucasian peoples existed and developed in close relations with neighboring states and civilizations. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Caucasus, due to its natural and geographical features and geopolitical position, has been regularly subjected to foreign invasions throughout history. These invasions remained in the historical memory of the Caucasian peoples not only as brutal destruction and traces on their culture and social relations, but also as painful memories that affected their national pride. The Caucasus as a whole has a large number of ancient, well-established cultures, formed over centuries, each of which is individually characterized by its own national ideology, ethnocultural, national-spiritual system of values, and a complex sign-symbolic cognitive-cultural system, which is vital for the existence of the entire system of cultural-historical unity of society.

## 2. Materials and Method

The work uses a comprehensive historical-comparative method, including the analysis of archival documents, scientific literature, regulatory and legal acts and statistical data. The main sources were the works of Russian, Azerbaijani and Western researchers in ethnology, the sociology of culture and political science. The methodological basis is also the concept of national identity in a multicultural space.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### **Sociocultural identity of the peoples of the North Caucasus within Russia.**

Beginning in the 16th century (following the capture of Kazan and Astrakhan), the North Caucasus fell within the sphere of influence of the Russian Empire. As a result of the war between 1817 and 1864 with the North Caucasian Imamate, the region was completely occupied and annexed by the Russian Empire. From this period onward, the presence of the Russian Empire, acting from a position of power and force, began to rapidly strengthen and expand in the lives of the peoples of the North Caucasus.

Russian Christian culture, sharply contrasting with and radically opposed to the complex, colorful, and historical national and spiritual values of the Caucasian peoples, formed in the public consciousness of these peoples as the culture of an occupying nation, although it was not without influence. The role of culture as a necessary tool for Russia to establish its presence in the Caucasus and, simultaneously, to understand and recognize the peoples living there cannot be denied [1].

Historically, due to its natural and geographical features and geopolitical position, the Caucasus has been extremely important for Russia from political, military, economic and sociocultural perspective. However, beginning in the late 20th century, on the eve of and after the collapse of the former USSR, both among the peoples of the North Caucasus, now part of Russia, and among the peoples of the so-called independent republics of the South Caucasus, as well as with the rise of national consciousness among peoples repressed and deported during the Soviet period (Karachays, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush and Balkars, Crimean Tatars, and Meskhetian Turks), and with the weakening of political and ideological relations between the peoples governed by Russia, processes of exacerbation of interethnic relations began in the region, giving impetus to the emergence of national conflicts based on mutual land claims accumulated over decades. "Cultural heritage sites in the South Caucasus have become symbolic arenas where competing civilizational identities and historical narratives have been articulated and negotiated" [2].

Among them, particularly tragic conflicts that have had a serious impact on the destinies of millions of people include the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (which ended in a complete victory for the Azerbaijani army: having achieved a historic victory in the 44-day Patriotic War (September 27 - November 10, 2020), Azerbaijan restored the territorial integrity of the country and liberated the occupied lands), the Georgian-Russian, Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian, Chechen-Russian, and Ossetian-Ingush conflicts, which have led to an increased relevance of the value-symbolic aspects of the existence of national cultures, national societies, and the specific characteristics of particular nations and ethnic groups.

From this perspective, the Caucasus is of particular nations interest due to its ethnic composition, linguistic and cultural diversity.

Currently, the North Caucasus is the most multinational historical and cultural region of Russia, on whose territory approximately 50 autonomous peoples with ancient national and cultural values historically live, and at the same time, it is also a region where many ethnocultural communities have settled as a result of recent migration processes.

It is well known that in the former Soviet Union, "internationalism" and "friendship of peoples" were promoted as the country's core ideals and implemented as a real political line in the sense of a "national form of socialist culture." In fact, under this slogan, a policy of assimilation and Russification was implemented, which was one of the integral parts of imperial policy. "Education and culture—especially through systematic Russification—were key instruments of the colonization of the Caucasus. Local languages, such as Georgian and Armenian, were pushed to the periphery, while Russian-language schools

were created on a large scale." [3]. A superculture and a subculture emerged within the country. The primary representative of the superculture was, of course, the Russian people, their language and culture, while the subculture included the languages and cultures of the leading peoples, maintaining the predominance of the Russian language in the republics. "For these reasons, pluralism and national cultures were not fully reflected in the former Soviet republics. It was precisely as a result of this that the peoples of these republics experienced national awakening and self-awareness after the collapse of the Soviet Union" (2; 128-130) [4].

On the eve of the collapse of the USSR, discontent, hatred, resentment, and anger against the system that had accumulated in the consciousness of these peoples over seventy years, as well as political (centralization, occupation of peoples, deportations, repressions, Russification), economic (economic crisis, unemployment, poverty), psychological (national self-respect, nationalism, revival of national and spiritual values, national self-awareness), and territorial claims, forced them to unite, organize and, at the first opportunity, move into the form of a national liberation movement.

However, it should be noted that the Soviet state deliberately fomented interethnic conflicts with the goal of identifying, suppressing, and destroying national liberation movements. This was implemented as a method to satisfy its political interests, ensure its own survival, and protect its existence.

It is no coincidence that, beginning in 1986, on the eve of its collapse as a state, interethnic conflicts spread throughout the former Soviet Union.

Interethnic conflicts between Yakuts and Russians in Yakutia, Kazakhs and Russians in Kazakhstan, and among those returning from deportation demanding autonomy in Crimea, (Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and Russians), in Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks, between Kazakhs and North Caucasians in the city of Novy Uzen in Kazakhstan, between ethnic Georgians and Abkhaz in Sukhumi, in the city of Andijan in Uzbekistan, and in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, and between Ossetians and Ingush returning from deportation to North Ossetia are examples of this.

Finally, on December 26, 1991, a country that had no analogue in the world and no specific nationality (more than 100 peoples and nationalities lived in it), with an abstract geographical location (Eastern Europe and Northern Asia), the shores of which were washed by the waters of twelve seas and three oceans (Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific) and the largest state in the world in terms of territory (22.4 million kv.km), a gigantic empire called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ceased to exist.

Many Kremlin ideologists still call the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the century. However, it should be noted that a closed society governed by a command-and-control system, where deportations, repression, a personality cult, widespread double standards between republics, totalitarianism, and the suppression of free thought dominated domestic policy, and backwardness in all spheres—especially the economy—were the harbingers of the logical end of the country's disintegration, and it did come to pass.

Currently, the Russian Federation, including the North Caucasus, is a multiethnic and multiconfessional country, home to over 190 nationalities practicing Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other religions.

Based on the historical Russian statehood as a political union, the term "Russians" is used. This often leads to the assumption that there is no discrimination between Russians and other peoples and nationalities. However, this is not the case.

As Russian researchers themselves acknowledge, "When examining the problem of identity in a multi-ethnic region from the perspective of civic consciousness—that is, from the perspective of the population's commitment to civic identity as the most universal form of unity in any state—it should be noted that citizenship in Russia has not yet been able to fully fulfill its function. Research shows that Russian identity has not yet become dominant. For example, misunderstandings still exist regarding the relationship between Russian and ethnic identities; that is, in most cases, they are opposed" [5].

Unlike during Soviet times, the North Caucasus, which consists of seven federal subjects (Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, Stavropol, and Chechnya), is currently home to a very small number of ethnic Russians. Although the state places great importance on cultural diversity and dialogue, as well as on the national-cultural way of life in this region, the political, cultural, emotional, and economic events unfolding in the North Caucasus demonstrate that the situation is far from satisfactory. Mutual territorial claims between these peoples (around 2,000 in total, most recently in 2018-2019, when unrest erupted between Ingush and Chechens over the border resolution in favor of the Chechens) have had a significant impact, particularly on the development of cultural processes in the region.

It is well known that every national culture, especially in a multiethnic region like the North Caucasus, has its own distinctive dominants. More precisely, each Caucasian people has a set of cultural dominants that encompass the space, of their national culture. Culture includes customs, traditions, language, memory, history, and so on, to which an individual belongs. There is also a community—"we," "like us," "ours"—to which the individual belongs, and where they recognize their belonging to a particular ethnic community. "We" and "they" reflect the differences between cultures. By "they" is meant representatives of another ethnic group, not belonging to "us." The culture of any people draws on the traditions of the present and the past in its development. The alienation of any individual from their own culture poses a threat to the existence and development of the culture to which they belong. As a result, the problem of the loss of the cultural image of not only this individual but also of the nation to which they belong becomes pressing; that is, a process of assimilation into a larger nation and dissolution within it occurs. It is for this reason that the presence of neighboring peoples in cultural dialogue with one another, mutual respect for each other's national, spiritual, and cultural values, and the existence of cultural dialogue are particularly important factors in this matter. According to some researchers, "A person's ethnic essence does not change throughout their entire life. However, one fact should be noted: it is precisely at critical moments in history, in a constantly changing world, that people seek support in the immutability of their nationality" [6], for ethnic characteristics "help in the survival of the species and are directly revealed in the natural essence of man" [7].

Historically, and even today, stereotypes about Caucasian peoples that developed in the 19th century due to insufficient information (backward, savage, ignorant, thieves, robbers, highland bandits) persist in the public consciousness of modern Russians. In the modern period, these old myths have been supplemented by new xenophobic myths (hostility, terrorism, incompatibility, etc.), presented to Russians as the "Caucasian threat," primarily related to the armed struggle for independence of the Caucasian peoples that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet state. Under these circumstances, the attitudes of Caucasian peoples toward Russia naturally change and manifest themselves in appropriate forms. Viewing Russians as a despotic, cruel, and bloodthirsty colonizer who deported their own people is leading the situation in a direction that does not bode well.

**Azerbaijan in the context of the historical interaction of civilizations and cultures of the Caucasus.**

From this perspective, the example of Azerbaijan, located in the South Caucasus at the crossroads of East and West, where two cultures intersect, and its overall affiliation with Islamic civilization, is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

Being part of the East, as a state populated by representatives of approximately 100 ethnic groups (Presidential Library of Azerbaijan, n.d.), Azerbaijan, which belongs to both Eastern and Islamic cultures, has developed a distinct sociocultural identity and path of development for its society.

The ethnic, cultural, and religious tolerance of our people has always been an inexhaustible source of spiritual revival and a necessary, natural norm of societal development.

For millennia, Muslims, Christians, and Jews—people of diverse religions, cultures, and ways of life—have lived side by side in Azerbaijan, mutually enriching each other's lifestyles and cultures.

The millennia-old experience of our society, rooted in Islamic culture, has played a vital role in moments of spiritual and religious revival, in our people's struggle for self-determination, in strengthening our historical memory, and infostering our cultural, social, and historical unity.

With its ancient history, customs, and traditions, and rich heritage, Azerbaijan has made a significant contribution to the world's cultural heritage. "Azerbaijan historically developed at the intersection of several civilizations and cultural traditions, including Persian, Byzantine, Turkic, and Caucasian influences." [8]. From the 1st millennium CE to the mid-2nd millennium, the Great Silk Road, leading from China to the countries of Central and East Asia (China, Japan, India, Mongolia, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and other countries), as a historical transcontinental trade route, facilitated the establishment of ties between European and Asian states and peoples. The Great Silk Road influenced the formation of this country's unique history, encompassing all stages of its development, including statehood and the evolution of art, culture, and architecture.

At the same time, it determined the multiethnic nature of Azerbaijan's civilizational identity. Since the civilizational identity of an entire people or group of related peoples is based on cultural and historical self-awareness, its primary characteristic is the reflection of a high level of social identity. In the modern period, the civilizational crisis that has occurred in the world as a result of a number of objective factors is significantly influenced by economic and political factors and is intensifying and deepening.

It seems obvious that attempts to create a universal world culture based on globalization, without constructive dialogue and interaction between different cultural models, serve the unification and uniformity of cultures and, ultimately, the disintegration of national cultures.

Since the first years of independence, preserving national culture and mentality has become a state strategy in Azerbaijan. According to this strategy, Azerbaijan has not followed the general patterns of global processes or the specifics of civilizational development. Despite the fact that "the formation of Azerbaijani national identity is closely linked to the socio-political transformations of the late 19th century and the emergence of modern national consciousness" [9], Azerbaijan, in accordance with its geopolitical and geocultural position, has been able to protect and preserve its historical, cultural, and civilizational identity, stability, multiculturalism, multiconfessionality, and national and spiritual values. All of this has become an important factor in addressing the challenges of the modern world and in the modernization of the country.

Although Azerbaijan is a small country, its ethnocultural identity is rich and diverse. The roots of multiculturalism in Azerbaijan go back to ancient times. A few peoples living in the southern, western, and northern regions of the country have settled here for centuries and managed to preserve their identity. Thus, multiculturalism in Azerbaijan initially developed as a long-standing tradition and only after historical trials did it transform into a targeted policy. Later, "Heydar Aliyev enriched the concept of the progress of the national idea of Azerbaijanism... by developing tolerance as an important socio-political element of modernity and strengthening the sense of multiculturalism" [10].

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the ethnic factor has acquired particular significance in the world. Currently, Azerbaijan, as a traditional multicultural state with historical experience in this area, is able to determine the direction of development through the superiority of cultural heritage and the preservation of multiculturalism, rather than through political violence, and is pursuing a policy of multiculturalism based on national moral values.

All peoples living in Azerbaijan, as a result of centuries-long historical development, are united by a common destiny and a shared civilizational identity. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan guarantees all rights of each of these peoples and nationalities (Articles 21, 44, 45, 48) [11].

Azerbaijan's geostrategic location places it at the crossroads of East and West, where two worldviews, two ways of life, two cultures, and diverse cultural and spiritual values meet. People living in this location experience not only the geographical but also the

spiritual manifestation of communication and dialogue between Western and Eastern cultures in their daily lives. An interesting aspect is that this cultural proximity, which has escalated into political conflicts in other parts of the world, has not led to any shortcomings in Azerbaijani culture; on the contrary, it has created a unique multicultural environment in this country. As stated in the document, "Multiculturalism is the state policy of Azerbaijan." "Azerbaijan has always been a country where representatives of different religions and nationalities live in an atmosphere of brotherhood. At every stage of history, the Azerbaijani people have shown the world an example of tolerance" [12], [13], [14], [15].

#### 4. Conclusion

The historical experience of the peoples of the Caucasus clearly demonstrates the complexity and multilayered nature of the processes of sociocultural identity formation in the face of constant external pressure, geopolitical competition, and internal transformations. The North Caucasus, while part of the Russian Federation, continues to be a space of intense struggle to find a balance between civic and ethnic identity, between the need for political integration and the desire to preserve cultural distinctiveness. Unresolved territorial, historical, and value contradictions, as well as persistent stereotypes and xenophobic myths, hinder the development of sustainable intercultural dialogue and full-fledged civic unity.

The collapse of the USSR was a logical outcome of protracted political, economic, and ideological crises, as well as a consequence of the suppression of national self-awareness. The processes of national awakening, accompanied by interethnic conflicts, revealed deep-seated problems accumulated under the imperial and totalitarian systems of governance. These events brought particular relevance to issues of ethnic identity, cultural memory, and the preservation of national and spiritual values.

In this context, Azerbaijan's experience is of particular scholarly interest. Situated at the crossroads of civilizations and cultures, Azerbaijan has managed to preserve its historical, cultural, and civilizational identity while simultaneously developing a model of multiculturalism based on traditions of tolerance and interfaith coexistence. In this, "Azerbaijanism promotes the formation of a civic understanding of national identity that combines Turkic cultural roots with secularism, multiculturalism, and tolerance" [14].

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