

FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALL STATES IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGING NATIONAL IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the dynamics of national identity formation, which constantly evolves and renews over time. The construction of identity is closely linked to culture, history, traditions, symbols, and territorial affiliations. The aim of the study is to determine how the formation and change of national identities influence the foreign policy of small states. The case study focuses on three post-Soviet countries: Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. These countries were part of the Soviet Union for approximately seventy years, and following its dissolution, their foreign policies diverged significantly. However, all three nations are located in the Caucasus region and share similar characteristics, such as territorial size, population, and economic indicators. The article analyzes the role of national identity, as we consider a state's self-identification to be a crucial factor in understanding the foreign policies of these countries.

Key Words: National identity, Foreign policy, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia.

ნაციონალური იდენტობის ცვლილების ფონზე პატარა ქვეყნების საგარეო პოლიტიკა

ნატო გურგენიძე

ფუტანის უნივერსიტეტის საერთაშორისო
ურთიერთობებისა და საზოგადოებრივ
საქმეთა სკოლის დოქტორანტი

ანოტაცია

სტატიაში განიხილება ნაციონალური იდენტობის ფორმირების დინამიკა, რომელიც მუდმივად იცვლება და განახლდება დროის განმავლობაში. იდენტობის კონსტრუირება მჭიდროდ არის დაკავშირებული კულტურასთან, ისტორიასთან, ტრადიციებთან, სიმბოლოებთან და ტერიტორიულ კუთვნილებებთან. კვლევის მიზანია დადგინდეს როგორ მოქმედებს ნაციონალური იდენტობების ჩამოყალიბება/ცვლილება პატარა სახელმწიფოების საგარეო პოლიტიკის განსაზღვრისას. ქეის განხილვისას შეიჩრა სამი პოსტსაბჭოური ქვეყანა: აზერბაიჯანი, სომხეთი და საქართველო. აღნიშნული ქვეყნები დაახლოებით სამოცდაათი წლის განმავლობაში იმყოფებოდნენ საბჭოთა კავშირში, რომლის დაშლის შემდგომ მათი საგარეო პოლიტიკა განსხვავებულად წარიმართა, თუმცა სამივე ქვეყანა მდებარეობს კავკასიის რეგიონში, ტერიტორიული ფართობი, მოსახლეობის რაოდენობა, ეკონომიკური მაჩვენებლები და ა.შ. მახასიათებლები არ არის მნიშვნელოვნად განსხვავებული. სტატიაში გააანალიზებთ ნაციონალური იდენტობის როლს, ვინაიდან მივიჩნევთ, რომ სახელმწიფოს თვით იდენტიფიცირება მნიშვნელოვანი ფაქტორია ანიშნული ქვეყნების საგარეო პოლიტიკის გასაგებად.

საკვანძო სიტყვები : ნაციონალური იდენტობა, საგარეო პოლიტიკა, საქართველო, აზერბაიჯანი, სომხეთი.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

“National identity” is a broad concept that is actively used in social, philosophical, psychological, political, and other scientific research fields. Researchers from various disciplines create new theories based on “National Identity” and explain different phenomena using scientific methods, tailored to their research needs. According to Brubaker R., “National Identity” has various and often contradictory meanings, so its use requires great caution to prevent the research from becoming unclear and confusing. Effectively integrating this concept into a study enhances its scientific value.¹ “Identity,” in its semiotic sense, implies self-awareness. On the one hand, it represents a phenomenon reflecting an individual's condition within a socio-cultural space. Identity is a fundamental psychological process because it serves as an intermediary link between the brain's natural biological capabilities (e.g., memory, adaptation) and an individual's functioning/behavior.² Identity can be considered a fundamental element of healthy mental functioning, involving the ability to respond emotionally to events, understand them, and act accordingly. Identity mainly focuses on showing difference and similarity between two or more observed objects. Jenkins, R. considers similarity/difference as a function of perception and attitude, simply put, “Our” similarity means

1 Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond “identity”. *Theory and society*, 29(1), 1-47.

2 Greenfeld, L. (2006). Modernity and nationalism. *The Sage handbook of nations and nationalism*, 157-168

“Their” difference and vice versa - “Their” similarity is “Our” difference. An individual understands who they are once they recognize who they are not.

After classification and identification with a group, individuals tend to compare their internal group with external groups and evaluate themselves in this process. Specifically: prioritizing within the group, focusing on differences with external groups, paying less attention to differences among group members, emphasizing positive factors within the group, and highlighting negative traits of the external group.³ Social-level changes, such as the expansion of the labor market, gender relations, trends in detraditionalization, changes in the education system, and other transformative events, significantly impact identity. Against the backdrop of modern changes, “identity” requires a new definition. While in earlier epochs, religion was an important determinant of identity, today, its significance has diminished, and the role of identity has shifted to the state/citizens. Additionally, when defining identity, Smith A. noted that the concept is multidimensional, encompassing a combination of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditional systems. These represent a country’s unique heritage and the individual’s identification with this heritage and its cultural elements.⁴

FACTORS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

National identity encompasses constantly evolving and dynamic processes. At different times, the attitudes and self-perceptions of the same people regarding their culture, history, traditions, symbols, and territories can differ and are continuously changing. This article highlights main factors that provide a clearer understanding of national identity:

Psycho and emotional factors: This factor plays a significant role in shaping a nation’s identity. It develops emotional connections among individuals, creating a sense of collective closeness. This factor may remain dormant for years but emerges when the country faces a threat. Politicians, aware of the importance of citizens’ shared emotional state, often utilize this resource, urging people to take active measures in the face of national danger. In some cases, emotional unity can be much stronger and more effective than rational understanding of the issue. Emotional solidarity offers a means of escape from everyday routine and lays a strong foundation for making decisions related to self-sacrifice, becoming a national hero, saving the country, and more.

Cultural and historical factors: These factors also play a crucial role in the formation of national identity. According to Smith, common values, beliefs, customs, language, and lifestyle are essential for constructing identity. The process of identifying with a specific culture fosters solidarity among members of society, encouraging them to recognize each other as fellow citizens. History serves as a source of legitimization for nations and cultures, connecting individuals to the past of their ancestors. It emphasizes the link between the past and the present, instilling in individuals the feeling that they are an inseparable part of a particular collective and the descendants of the heroes who played a significant role in preserving the country.

THE CLASSICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SMALL STATES’ FOREIGN POLICY

According to the neorealist perspective, the foreign policy of small states can be defined in two directions. First, the international system represents the most relevant level of analysis, and the ideas of the country’s leaders are, in most cases, ineffective. Second, small states tend to adopt a so-called “Bandwagoning” policy with threatening larger states and do not attempt to pursue a clearly defined independent foreign policy.⁵ According to the views of numerous political science researchers, the “International System” leaves small states with limited room for decision-making.⁶ From the neorealist perspective, even the theoretical possibility of making mistakes is limited for small countries, as they do not have the ability, like stronger states, to easily find solutions in complex situations. Therefore, they have to consider many factors when making decisions. The second popular approach, widely established in research related to foreign policy, as mentioned earlier, is the “Bandwagoning” policy adopted by small states with large and powerful countries. According to Stephen Walt’s view, the weaker a state is, the more likely it is to choose a “Bandwagoning” policy and not try to balance the aggressive actions of stronger states. Balancing, in this context, means acquiring other strong allies and receiving their help in case of threats; however, Walt believes that relying solely on allied countries is ineffective, as their assistance may be delayed. Therefore, the most guaranteed position is to align with threatening countries in order to reduce potential risks to a minimum level.⁷ How do small countries respond to changes in external factors? Their actions cannot al-

3 Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In *Political psychology* (pp. 276-293). Psychology Press.

4 Smith, A. D. (2009). *Ethno-symbolism and nationalism: A cultural approach*. Routledge.

5 Elman, M. F. (1995). The foreign policies of small states: Challenging neorealism in its own backyard. *British Journal of Political Science*, 25(2), 171-217.

6 Handel, M. I. (2016). *Weak states in the international system*. Routledge.

7 Walt, S. M. (1990). *The origins of alliance*. Cornell University Press.

ways be solely determined by external factors, geopolitical situations, and the distribution of power, as it is essential to also consider the internal processes of the country. These internal processes often require taking into account aspects such as national sentiment, ideas, identity, historical memory, and so on.

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALL STATES

Armenia - As discussed in the first chapter of this article, a key component of self-identification is defining the meaning of "Us" and "Others," which is emphasized in Armenia's foreign policy. Over three decades, the analysis of public statements by various political elites reveals attitudes towards neighboring countries, where Azerbaijan-Turkey is referred to as the "Others," and Russia as the "Protector." However, recent events and Russia's inaction in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict have cast doubt on this perception. The devastating conflict with Azerbaijan has posed significant challenges to Armenia. Notably, events related to Nagorno-Karabakh have played a crucial role in Armenian political thought and public consciousness, distinguishing between friends and enemies. Considering both historical conflicts and new military actions, statements by Armenia's political elite and foreign policy documents identify Turkey and Azerbaijan as anti-Armenian and hostile forces. The independence gained after the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought substantial transformation across the country, sparking discussions on national identity issues with a new definition of traditional "Enemies" and "Friends." Russia's traditional role in Armenian strategic thinking as Armenia's "Savior" is subject to constant fluctuation. The renewal of conflict with Azerbaijan in 2020 and Russia's ambiguous stance had a visibly negative impact on Armenia's political elite and local population. In September 2023, during the renewed conflict with Azerbaijan, Russia's inaction marked its positioning within Armenian society as a „Friend and Savior“. A study conducted by the International Republican Institute, covering the period from 2019 to 2023, showed that 93% of the Armenian population viewed relations with Russia as "good," but by the last year of the study, this percentage had dropped to 31%. The motivation behind the non-supportive groups towards Russia includes a desire to replace Russia with a new effective protector, as well as views and values associated with the West.⁸

Georgia - After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, national identity took deep roots in the consciousness

of Georgian society, emphasizing the separation and distinction from the Russian state, aligning with Western countries, and becoming an inseparable part of Europe. A study that includes around forty in-depth interviews with representatives of the political elite and foreign policy experts highlights several factors, specifically that Georgia is unequivocally a full-fledged European country. For Georgia's modernization and development, it is vital to maintain connections with Western and Euro-Atlantic political and military institutions.⁹ Georgia's portrayal as a European state provides a clear framework for identifying the country's role and position within the international system. The construction of Georgian national identity has not occurred during the rule of any single political force but is an irreversible and continuous process that constantly evolves and goes through developmental stages. Numerous academic studies examine the attitudes and rhetoric of Georgian ruling political teams towards national identity following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During this period, we can distinguish the stages of leadership under Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, the United National Movement, and the Georgian Dream. During Gamsakhurdia's short-term presidency, de-Sovietization and association with a Caucasian identity were key elements of the rhetoric. In Shevardnadze's presidency, signs of rapprochement with Europe began to appear, reflected in various agreements with Euro-Atlantic organizations. However, there were no strong statements regarding Russia, nor was it portrayed as a threatening country or considered distinct from Georgia's identity ("The Other"). Under the United National Movement's rule, national identity associated with European values became more pronounced, directly influencing Georgia's foreign policy. In the statements of the political elite and strategic documents, Russia was depicted as a state Enemy/Other that should be countered by Western forces, implying membership in the European Union and NATO. Since 2012, official statements by the ruling party have refrained from radically defining Russia as Other/Enemy. The government opts for a cautious approach, although Georgia's declared pro-Western course remains unchanged, largely driven by a national identity that aligns itself with the Western world.

Azerbaijan - In the post-Soviet period, Azerbaijan's interactions with Iran, Russia, and Turkey highlighted the necessity of building a national identity that, beyond defining national interests, would also determine the role of other countries in Azerbaijan's reality. Turkey holds a special status in Azerbaijan due to cultural, ethnic, and linguistic similarities. Both the Azerbaijani gov-

8 Thomas de Waal, *Armenia Navigates a Path Away From Russia*, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/armenia-navigates-a-path-away-from-russia?lang=en>

9 Gvalia, G., Siroky, D., Lebanidze, B., & Iashvili, Z. (2013). Thinking outside the bloc: explaining the foreign policies of small states. *Security studies*, 22(1), 98-131.

ernment and opposition view Turkey as their best ally and friend. The fact that Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, along with its unconditional support regarding the Karabakh issue and refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia, has forged a close friendship with Azerbaijan. The slogan "One Nation, Two States," frequently referenced by the presidents and politicians of both countries, naturally positions Turkey as an inseparable part of "Us." During the presidency of Popular Front leader Abulfaz Elchibey, Russia and Armenia were perceived as the main threats to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and independence. In the formation of Azerbaijan's national identity, the role of Iran, which has close historical and religious ties with Azerbaijan, cannot be overlooked. As both countries are Shia Muslim nations, there was potential for rapprochement after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, soon after the restoration of relations, various cultural, religious, and linguistic differences emerged. Iranian Azerbaijanis criticized those in the Azerbaijan SSR for "Russification," "loss of language," and "forgetting religion," while the other side sometimes referred to them as "backward" and "fundamentalists."¹⁰ At the political level, tensions escalated in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Iran supported Armenia, ultimately identifying itself as the "other"—a country that does not support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

CONCLUSION

The concept of national identity requires ongoing study against the backdrop of contemporary social changes. Understanding it involves exploring psychological, social, and cultural aspects, which aids in a better understanding of the processes of identity formation and development for individuals and groups.

The article describes the path that post-Soviet Armenia has taken in terms of national identity formation. Historically, Armenia viewed Russia as a "Savior," while Azerbaijan and Turkey were seen as "Hostile Powers." However, recent Russian inactivity in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has called into question traditional alliances within Armenian society, creating new perspectives for Armenia's national identity and consequently its foreign policy.

The article also examines the formation of national identity in Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its impact on the country's foreign policy. Georgian national identity is based on alignment with the West and distancing from Russia, which is reflected in the perception of Georgia as an inseparable part of Europe. During the periods of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, the National Movement, and the Georgian

Dream, the formation of identity went through different stages. Under Gamsakhurdia, de-Sovietization was the main rhetoric, while Shevardnadze's era began moving closer to Europe. During the National Movement period, a pro-Western course became pronounced, and despite maintaining this course under Georgian Dream governance, a more cautious policy towards Russia has been implemented. Overall, national identity defines Georgia as part of the West on the international stage.

The article discusses how relations with Iran, Russia, and Turkey have influenced the formation of Azerbaijan's national identity in the post-Soviet period. Turkey is seen as part of the "we" due to cultural, ethnic, and linguistic similarities. Russia and Armenia, especially during Abulfaz Elchibey's presidency, were regarded as major threats to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. Relations with Iran, despite close historical and religious ties, soon became strained due to cultural-political differences, which were exacerbated by Iran's support for Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, making Iran proportionally "Other" for Azerbaijan.

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