INTRODUCING THE CAUCASUS

Galina M. Yemelianova and Laurence Broers

Introduction

The Caucasus is defined by its magnificent mountains, its location between the Caspian and Black Seas and its belonging, both geographically and culturally, to both the Near/Middle East and Eurasia. The main Caucasus range runs over a thousand kilometres from the Taman Peninsula on the Black Sea to the Apsheron Peninsula on the Caspian. Traditionally taken to delimit a boundary between Europe and Asia, the northern slopes of the Caucasus give an expansively imagined Europe its highest peak, Mount Elbrus (5,642 metres) (Figure 1.1). To the south the Likhi mountain range (highest point: 1,926 metres) divides the southern Caucasus into eastern and western lowland sectors. Extending on from the Likhi range is the Lesser Caucasus, a composite system of mountain ranges reaching beyond the region’s modern political boundaries, with its highest peak at Aragats (4,090 metres). Geologically, topographically and climatically speaking, however, ‘the Caucasus has never been one place but many’ (King 2008: 8): alpine environments intersect with river valleys, fertile floodplains, prairies, arid plains and subtropical coastline.

The name ‘Caucasus’ or ‘Caucasia’ (from Καύκασος, in ancient Greek) was used from at least the sixth century BCE in ancient Greek sources with reference to both the region and the region’s stunning mountains. The term may derive from an old Indo-European word for ‘high’ or ‘lofty’ (*kʰówko- in Proto-Indo-European, related to the Gothic hauts and English high) (see Chapter 3 in this volume). In many early Armenian, Georgian, Syriac and Arabic sources the term ‘Caucasus’ was used alongside other, alternative names. For example, Georgian and Armenian sources more frequently referred to the present-day southern Caucasus as ‘the North’ – ჩ’რდილო (north’, in Georgian) and հիւսիս (north’, in Armenian), while Arab caliphal sources applied the term Qabq to describe the region encompassing present-day southern Dagestan (Bab al-Abwab), northern Azerbaijan and eastern Georgia (Vacca 2017: xv). Another caliphal tradition revived the Sasanian provincial designation Jarbi, related to the Syriac garbya, meaning ‘north’ to refer to the Caliphate’s frontier provinces in Armenia, Caucasian Albania and Azerbaijan. Caliphal geographers depicted these provinces as a single space, also known as Rihab (Vacca 2017: 70). The subsequent association of the adjective Caucasian with phenotypical human features originated in early studies of race, and specifically in febrile imaginaries that saw in some of the peoples of the Caucasus idealised progenitors of a purported ‘white race’.
This diversity of designations reflects the fact that throughout history, the Caucasus has been a frontier — and meeting point — where states, cultures and religions intersected. In antiquity, the Caucasus was located at the peripheral nexus of three vital spaces: Mesopotamia’s ‘Fertile Crescent’, which tapers away into the Caucasian isthmus circumscribed by the Black and Caspian Seas; the expansive Eurasian steppe unfolding to the north; and the maritime pathways and littoral cultures of the Black Sea, and beyond it, the Mediterranean. The Caucasus was first known to classical Greek geographers in the form of local kingdoms with disarmingly familiar names, Colchis, Iberia and Caucasian Albania. These political entities proved fleeting, however, as the Caucasus ‘marks its earliest histories through conquest’ (Grant and Yalçın-Heckmann 2007: 1). This in fact remained the case through to the twentieth century, and indeed the Caucasus remains to this day a site of competitive influence-seeking by outside powers.

From late antiquity to medieval times, the Caucasus was a multi-facing periphery continually contested by great powers: Rome, Parthia, Byzantium, the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and by the early modern era Russia, to name but a few. In every case, however, the Caucasus was at the limit of metropolitan power, interrogating it through strategies of detachment, resistance, accommodation, adaptation and syncretism. Few world regions provide more vivid illustration of David Braund’s observation that ‘it is at their peripheries that societies receive their most unsettling interrogations and most searching tests’ (Braund 1994: 3); in the Caucasus, who is socialising whom is a timeless question. This is in part due to terrain. The Caucasian highlands and some other parts, inhabited by neighbourhood- and kinship-based communities, were largely able to retain a considerable degree of autonomy from both external and local centres of political domination. By comparison, in those parts of the Caucasus which
harboured well-established polities, local dynasties tended to alternate between asserting royal claims to sovereignty at times of weakened external influence, and vassalage or dissolution in the face of strengthening outside hegemons.

Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries the Caucasus was part of a succession of Seljuk, Genghizid and other Oghuz Turkic, Kipchak (Qipchaq) Turkic, Kurdish and Turko-Mongol nomadic Muslim empires, while from the sixteenth till the eighteenth centuries it was contested by Sunni Ottoman Turks and Shi’a Safavid Iranians. Throughout the nineteenth century the great power rivalry over the Caucasus took another turn with the arrival in the region of the Christian Orthodox Russian Empire. During this period, the Caucasus’ geopolitics was affected by the ‘Great Game’ between the British and Russian Empires for domination over Asia. 4 It would be Russia that, after decades of the cruel and protracted Caucasian War (1817–64), absorbed the Caucasus. Under its imperial rule, the Caucasus underwent a series of politico-administrative re-arrangements leading to its division into the modern northern Caucasus and Zakavkaz’e, a Russian term literally meaning ‘on the other side of the Caucasus’, usually translated as Transcaucasia, or the Transcaucasus, corresponding to the southern Caucasus. Unlike Kazan, Astrakhan and some other ethnically non-Russian provinces, which were fully integrated into the imperial governance system, the Caucasus, like Russian Turkestan, was put under a mixed system of governance centred on military control, thus allowing local elites and communities a degree of autonomy in the socio-economic and cultural spheres. From the mid-nineteenth century the Caucasus was partially exposed to a new and radical form of transformation, industrialisation, especially related to the Baku oil boom. At the same time the region’s educated elites were introduced to the Western ideologies of liberalism, nationalism and socialism. Cultural revival movements among the Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijani Turks and others contributed to the spawning of modern nations.

In 1917 the Russian Empire disintegrated. In compressed and exceptionally violent form, the following few years recalled the historical patterns of local efflorescence in the Caucasus followed by metropolitan reabsorption. In 1918 several projects in sovereign nation-state building emerged in the Caucasus by default. Cast adrift by turmoil in Russia and buffeted by both geopolitical and revolutionary winds, an experiment in Transcaucasian federation collapsed within a few weeks to give birth to the sovereign republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Riven by competing territorial claims, myriad local revolts and offers of foreign patronage, their existence would be short-lived. All were reabsorbed by their northern neighbour, transformed into the Soviet Union in 1922. Consequently, the Caucasus, along with other parts of the Soviet Union, was subjected to comprehensive structural, societal and ideological Sovietisation. The implementation of the Stalinist nationalities policy divided the region into Soviet Transcaucasia, consisting of the union republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the northern Caucasus, which was divided into several autonomous republics and regions within the Russian union republic.

As the Soviet Union began to falter from the mid-1980s, the Caucasus was far from unique in seeing mass mobilisation around ethno-nationalism, but it was unusual in the extent to which interethnic disputes became violent. In the South Caucasus, among the outcomes of clashing ethnic nationalisms were the Georgian–Abkhaz, the Georgian–South Ossetian and the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflicts, which have remained unresolved. The north-eastern Caucasus (except Dagestan) 5 witnessed the Ingush–North Ossetian conflict and two devastating Russo-Chechen wars. Research on conflict appears to be the Caucasus’ primary export to the mainstream of social science; articles and books on the region’s conflicts far outnumber those on any other research theme (Cheterian 2008; Coppieters 2001; Cornell 2001, 2002, 2017; de

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Caucasus witnessed the diminished role of Russia and some reassertion of the influence of the historic regional powers, Turkey and Iran, mainly in the economic, educational and cultural spheres. The South Caucasus, made up of the newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, also experienced to varying degrees the influence of non-historic global actors, the USA and the European Union (EU). The three South Caucasus states, alongside the former Soviet Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, were included in the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy, and then Eastern Partnership, geared to the promotion of an associated set of political, societal and cultural values and norms. Oil- and gas-rich Azerbaijan became actively involved with Western-dominated major energy companies through the ‘Contract of the Century’ in the development of new oil fields. The Caucasus yet again assumed its historical position as a strategic periphery contested by Russia, the West, Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Iran. The international politics of the South Caucasus consequently plays out across a complex web of contested and insurgent sovereignties, great power penetration and overreach, and manoeuvres among conflicting regimes of international norms and multiple sources of foreign patronage.

Despite this rich and fascinating history, the Caucasus remains an outlier in the study of regions of the former Soviet Union. The relative smallness of the region, its high concentration of often extremely challenging local languages, the prevalence of both physical and epistemological frontlines due to the region’s conflicts, and enduring ambiguity regarding which area studies rubrics it ‘belongs’ to, have all contributed to a quite small research community. Underlying these tensions is ambivalence over what is included in the term ‘Caucasus’. Expansively understood, the term embraces the areas both to the north and south of the Caucasus mountains. In Western parlance, however, the term is often used as a shorthand for only its southern part. In this volume, we understand the term ‘Caucasus’ broadly, to comprise both northern and southern areas, encompassing the Russian Federation’s seven North Caucasus autonomous republics, and the sovereign states of the South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. To the north, the Caucasus fades into the adjacent Stavropol’ and Krasnodar regions of the Russian Federation, and to the south into neighbouring provinces of Turkey and Iran that have historically been closely connected to peoples and nations of the contemporary Caucasus.

Although there is a rich anthropological and geographical literature treating the Caucasus as a unified cultural space or ‘world area’ (e.g., Charachidzé 1987; Grant and Yalçın-Heckmann 2007; Voell and Khutsishvili 2013; O’Loughlin, Kolossov and Radvanyi 2007), very few modern studies by Western scholars encompass this broad definition of the Caucasus: Gammer (2008), King (2008) and Forsyth (2013) are rare exceptions, although several scholars have covered conflicts in both the North and South Caucasus. Of particular significance for the study of ethnic conflicts in the North Caucasus are the publications of Etnologicheskii Monitoring (Ethnological Monitoring) by the network of regional ethnologists headed by Valery A. Tishkov.6 De Waal (2010) and Oskanian (2013) have contributed notable surveys of the South Caucasus. However, a rich and diverse scholarship on the Caucasus which flourishes in Dagestan and other parts of the region, as well as in Iran and Turkey, remains largely inaccessible to Western readers due to language barriers.

As editors, we are acutely aware of the unevenness in Caucasian studies and the existence of multiple and sometimes conflicting theoretical, cultural and political approaches to the region. In our quest to generate as balanced and multi-faceted a perspective on the region as
possible we have gathered together leading scholars in multiple disciplines – historians, linguists, social anthropologists, geographers and political scientists – from the UK, Europe, the USA, Canada, Turkey, Russia and the Caucasus itself. We nevertheless realise the inevitable limitations of such an ambitious and challenging endeavour, including the volume’s relatively short account of the early history compared to contemporary topics, as well as the lack of coverage of the region’s sophisticated architectural and artistic traditions. The outcome of our joint efforts is the present book consisting of 27 chapters divided into six parts along chronological and thematic principles.

Part I: Place, peoples and culture

The volume’s first part introduces readers to the Caucasus as a concept, and to its peoples and cultures. The Caucasus’ frontier location and natural diversity have accounted for its fascinating ethno-linguistic, cultural and socio-political pluralism, and its particular attractiveness to invaders, raiders, merchants and proselytisers. From earliest times foreigners exoticised the Caucasus as a realm beyond the known and familiar. The tropes of danger and the seductive powers of wealth and knowledge combine in the myth of the Golden Fleece, stolen from King Aietes of Colchis on the Black Sea coast by Jason and the Argonauts. Aietes’ daughter, Medea, would wreak a terrible revenge for Jason’s subsequent infidelity, murdering her two sons by Jason in the Greek playwright Euripides’ bleakest work. Knowledge, theft and vengeance also mark the myth of Prometheus, chained to a Caucasian mountainside to have his liver eaten out daily by an eagle in punishment for bestowing the gift of fire upon humanity. Other traditions, such as that of the Iranian ‘North’, also depicted the Caucasus as a forbidding land populated by demons and spirits.

In his contribution to this volume, Florian Mühlfried argues that the contemporary Western gaze upon the Caucasus continues this tradition of ‘othering’ or exoticising the region, by characterising it as being deficient compared to more modern, more ‘advanced’ nations and spaces in Europe and the ‘Global North’. Mühlfried argues that the Caucasus, like Central Asia, is always depicted as lacking something – knowledge, civil society, democracy, peacebuilding or good governance – that others must provide. This projection of deficiency codes the Caucasus as a kind of ‘Orient’, an essential, unchanging and unknowable space demanding enlightenment – and conquest, whether physical or ideological. He argues that the study of the Caucasus has its roots in a Russian imperialist epistemology, fixated with naming and numbering nations, ethnicities and tribes. This underpins ‘Caucasology’, the study of the Caucasus. To overcome implicit orientalism, Mühlfried suggests alternative paradigms of the Caucasus as a border area, contact area and cultural area. In Mühlfried’s conception, the Caucasus emerges as a distinctive entity marked by a radical heterogeneity, discarding traditional conceptions of bordered space and bounded identities.

In the following chapter, John Colarusso presents his unique findings on the Caucasus’ extreme ethno-linguistic diversity and its rich folklore. Colarusso argues that the Caucasus’ numerous indigenous languages, which belong to North-Western, North-Eastern and Southern (Kartvelian) language families, although revealing some area commonalities, also diverge radically in terms of their linguistics and show a degree of grammatical complexity that surpasses anything on the continent. He substantiates his argument by comparative analysis of the grammatical structures of the Circassian, Besleney, Ubykh and Abkhaz languages of the North-Western family; the Vai Nakh, Avar-Andic, Lak, Dargwa and Samurian languages of the North-Eastern family; and Georgian of the Kartvelian family.
The chapter then proceeds to explore ‘external language families’ – Armenian, Kurdish, Ossetian, Tati, Altaic (Turkic), Russian and Ukrainian ‘that have wandered into the Caucasus’ over the longue durée of its history. Colarusso also discusses various linguae francae which at different historical periods ensured cross-Caucasus communication. As the world leading scholar of Caucasus folklore, Colarusso concludes his chapter with a fascinating account of the region’s shared epic narrative, the Nart sagas.

The Caucasus is a frontier where two of the world’s great religious traditions, Christianity and Islam, meet and overlap. Christianity established an early presence in the Caucasus when, in the first half of the fourth century, three kings – Trdat of Armenia Major, Mirian of Iberia and Urnayr of Albania – abjured ancestral allegiances to regional varieties of Zoroastrianism and were baptised. Stephen H. Rapp Jr. argues that the Christianisation of the Caucasus was a cross-cultural process: shared protagonists, tropes and memes indicate that conversion tales circulating among Armenians, Georgians and Albanians were in long-term dialogue with one another. Yet, as Rapp observes, the pluralism of Christian traditions in late antiquity later came to be parcelled into self-contained ethno-centric narrative registers. This is in part due to the role of new literary cultures founded on newly invented scripts – Armenian, Georgian and, to a lesser extent, Albanian – in the Christianisation of wider societies that followed. Rapp argues that it is also due to the fact that no early Caucasian texts have reached us in the original, but only in the form of redactions dating usually from the thirteenth century onwards, by which time ‘national’ churches were competing for primacy and orthodoxy. As he argues, however, the base culture of the Caucasus in late antiquity remained Persianate, emblematic of Caucasus’ membership of the Iranian world – what the Sasanians called Eranshahr. As Christianity took hold and gained popularity, it did so not by displacing but by adapting to pan-Caucasian social structures, mythic tropes and cultural forms rooted in the Iranian world. Christianity in the Caucasus was refracted through this existing social fabric, rather than dissolving it, accounting for its retention of many local and regional characteristics.

In the seventh century CE the Caucasus began to embrace Islam, and by the eighteenth century Islam had become the religion of the vast majority of Caucasians. Unlike other major parts of the ‘Muslim periphery’ (e.g. Indonesia or Malaysia) – most of which began to embrace Islam from the twelfth century onwards as a result of commercial and missionary activities by Arab, Turkic and Indian Muslims – the Caucasus, as well as Central Asia, received Islam directly from Prophet Muhammad’s Companions or their immediate successors. The region was included in the Arab Caliphates, thus constituting part of the historical Islamic heartland. The process of the Caucasus’ advancing Islamisation is discussed by Svetlana I. Akkieva and Galina M. Yemelianova, who are particularly concerned with the role of Islam and customary norms – ‘adats – in the social order of the various peoples of the northern Caucasus. Their analysis scrutinises rare collections of different ‘adats and establishes their particular application in the spheres of violence, private and collective ownership rights, family and gender relations, as well as the ethics of hospitality. They explain the differing weight of ‘adats and shari’ah among the various highlanders and plains-dwellers; and they pay special attention to the role of the Caucasus War in the Islamisation of Vai Nakhs (Chechens and Ingush) and in the strengthening position of shari’ah in the Caucasus’ highlands. The chapter argues that throughout history both ‘adats and shari’ah have been central in ensuring social cohesion and political stability in the northern Caucasus.
Part II: Political history

The volume’s second part discusses the Caucasus’ political history from the seventh century CE till the late twentieth century. In Chapter 6, Laurence Broers and Galina M. Yemelianova provide a critical overview of the Caucasus’ history during the vast time period spanning the seventh to the late eighteenth century. The chapter addresses the major political and cultural shifts resulting from the interaction between the Caucasus’ multiple social and political structures, institutions and norms and powerful external influences, including the Byzantines, Muslim Arabs, Khazars, Seljuks, Mongols, Ottomans and Safavids. Broers and Yemelianova argue that various parts of the contemporary Caucasus reflect particular syntheses and synergies between a Caucasian civilisational core and Iranian, Arab, Armenian, Greek, Turkic and Slavic ethno-cultural and religious infusions which occurred over what they term the ‘long millennium’ from the Arab conquest to the emergence of modern geopolitics. They also address the epistemological and methodological challenges to a unified historiography of the Caucasus arising from the absence, near absence, fragmentation, or unevenness of credible historical records, especially on Caucasian Albania, the Khazar Khaganate, the Genghizid Empire and other Turkic tribal confederations, as well as the existence of diverse and conflicting ethno-centric historiographical traditions.

In the following chapter by Timothy K. Blauvelt the discussion moves to the Russian period in Caucasus history. Blauvelt analyses the causes and driving forces of Russian expansion into the region from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, considering St. Petersburg’s different approaches towards the Christian Armenians and Georgians on the one hand and the Muslim Caucasians on the other. Blauvelt points out that the imperial Russian elite viewed Christian Georgians and Armenians as allies in the southern periphery. The chapter discusses the century-long Caucasus War and the role of the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood under the leadership of Ghazi Muhammad and Imam Shamil in the popular mobilisation against the Russians. Blauvelt argues that the Islamised anti-Russian ghazawat (holy war) had major implications for the Russian governance of the Caucasus and its human geography leading to major population movements within the region and an outflow of Muslims to the Ottoman Empire.

The next chapter by Arsène Saparov provides a detailed account of events in the Transcaucasus during the Russian Civil War of 1918–21, triggered by the cataclysm of the First World War and the collapse of the Russian Empire. The chapter shows that this relatively short temporal period was fraught with multi-layered, multi-sided political, social and ethno-national collisions which had a critical impact on the region’s subsequent ethno-national and political trajectories. Saparov discusses the emergence of the three short-lived independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and their relations with Bolshevik Russia, White Russians and external powers, including Ottoman Turkey, Great Britain and Germany. He argues that the Bolsheviks’ political delimitation of Transcaucasia established a new ethno-federal territorial order that would never be fully accepted, and which under the later impact of multiple causal influences, laid the foundation for the Armenian–Azerbaijani, Georgian–Abkhaz and Georgian–Ossetian conflicts which erupted in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet times.

In the following chapter Jeremy Smith covers the history of the Caucasus during the whole Soviet era from 1921 till 1991, structuring his argument around the themes of resistance, accommodation, nationalism and leadership which, along with the policies of the Soviet regime, characterised the social, political and cultural development of the Soviet Caucasus. Smith addresses different experiences of Sovietisation in Transcaucasia and the
northern Caucasus. He points out that Transcaucasia, between occasional outbreaks of ethnic or anti-Soviet violence, remained calm and generally prospered, economically and culturally. By contrast, the autonomous republics and regions of the northern Caucasus remained among the poorest regions of the USSR, were victims of extreme repression in the form of wholesale deportations of nationalities in 1944, and were subjected to varying degrees of russification.

Part III: The contemporary Caucasus: politics, economics and societies

Since the collapse of the USSR three prisms have coloured external perspectives upon the Caucasus. The first is the proliferation of ethno-territorial conflicts that fractured the region in the early 1990s. Two Russo-Chechen wars in 1994–96 and 1999–2009 recalled the fierce yet ultimately futile nineteenth-century resistance of its various peoples to Russian expansionism in the Caucasian War. In the South Caucasus, secessionists won wars in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh in 1991–94 in conflicts that remain stubbornly unresolved and perennially capable of drawing in outside powers. These conflicts resulted in the formation of three largely unrecognised republics in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh, neither formally part of their patron states, Russia and Armenia, nor accepted by the outside world. The second lens is the significance of the South Caucasus deriving from the Caspian Sea’s large oil and gas reserves. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, inaugurated in 2006, is the primary Western-oriented route for Caspian oil, competition over which was widely read in the 1990s–2000s as a ‘new Great Game’. The third lens is the contestation of democracy and authoritarianism, and the persisting internal fractures within South Caucasus states between partisans of either disposition. Georgia’s 2003 ‘Rose Revolution’ and Armenia’s 2018 ‘Velvet Revolution’ witnessed the ejection of embedded authoritarians by popular mobilisation. Yet the consolidation of democratic gains remains challenged by multi-layered institutional fractures, the persistence of ethno-territorial conflicts and geopolitical rivalries, and the region’s peripheral location. Some of these perspectives are shared in the region, particularly in its southern part. Elsewhere in the Caucasus, especially in the north, they are also complemented or juxtaposed by other perspectives. One is the importance of effective local and central socio-economic governance for the region’s structural and political stability (e.g. Abdulgatov 2011; Akkieva 2002; Khanbabaev 2010).7 Another is the Caucasus’ civilizational ‘indivisibility’ and its Eurasian socio-economic, political and cultural matrix which arguably accounts for its peoples’ stronger sense of statehood and collectivist, rather than liberal and individualist, mentality, as well as their social conservatism (e.g. Akkieva 2008). The third significant perspective is the centrality of the Caucasus in the perceived agendas of the US and the EU to undermine and fragment Russia. Of particular concern are the US and EU’s direct and soft power involvement in the South Caucasus, as well as their instrumentalisation of the sizeable Cherkess and Chechen diasporas in the West aimed at destabilisation of the ethnopolitical situation in the region (e.g. Gadzhiev 2001; Koval’skii 1999).

Azerbaijan is the region’s largest state, positioned between Russia and Iran on the Caspian Sea. Its trajectory out of the Soviet Union and towards independence was in many ways defined by the secessionist challenge of Armenians living in the autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh. In her contribution, Audrey L. Alstadt discusses how a short-lived experiment in democracy, that looked to the historical precedent of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918–20, was a casualty of the conflict. Since the 1994 ceasefire, Azerbaijan has emerged as the most politically stable of the South Caucasus states, bolstered by the influx of billions of oil and gas dollars since the mid-2000s. Yet while it has achieved a wide-ranging
transformation, Altstadt argues that Azerbaijan’s stability and oil wealth have come at the cost of increasingly authoritarian rule: Azerbaijan is distinctive as the only Soviet successor state to have enacted a dynastic succession. Former communist party official Heydar Aliyev returned to power in 1993, at the height of the Nagorny Karabakh war. Although unable to win military victory, Heydar reasserted control over a fractured and demoralised country. In 2003 he handed power to his son, Ilham. Since then, as Altstadt explains, spaces and platforms for contested politics in Azerbaijan have been increasingly constrained. Altstadt warns, however, that Azerbaijan’s stability is fragile: beyond the threat of renewed war in Nagorny Karabakh, continued repression and failure to diversify the economy may eventually lead, as it has in the Middle East, to popular unrest.

Like Azerbaijan, Georgia also faced secessionist challenges, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which escalated into two armed conflicts in the early 1990s, military defeat for central government, and, as Ghia Nodia explains in his contribution, Georgia’s characterisation as a ‘failed’ or ‘failing’ state. For several years the country was at the mercy of competing warlord factions, and in another parallel with Azerbaijan a high-ranking Soviet official, former foreign minister of the Soviet Union Eduard Shevardnadze, returned to power in a fractured and demoralised country. Nodia argues that Shevardnadze can be credited with managing a transition from a failed state to a weak one. Weak state capacity and deep corruption characterised his rule, but unlike Azerbaijan, the cohesion and patronage for stable long-term authoritarianism were lacking in Georgia. In 2003 the first of the post-Soviet ‘colour revolutions’ – civil uprisings against the falsification of elections – ousted Shevardnadze and installed a young reformist administration under the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili, in what would become known as the ‘Rose Revolution’. While Saakashvili’s period in power remains deeply controversial, Nodia argues that broad consensus exists that the reforms he brought in led to the construction of an effective modern state. Nevertheless, as Georgia pursues integration with European structures, its society is becoming both more pluralistic and polarised, as distinctly Western European social norms and conceptions of tolerance are vehemently contested. While this has at times spilled into violence, Nodia nevertheless sees growing pluralism, even if divisive at times, as a sign that Georgia is distancing itself from the Soviet legacy.

In his contribution, Alexander Iskandaryan analyses nation-building and elite politics in post-Soviet Armenia. He notes that the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh, beginning in 1988, was the main driver of Armenia’s path to independence. This initially drove a democratising movement under the revolutionary leadership of liberal democratic intellectuals and activists. However, military victory instead brought into power a generation of veterans and political entrepreneurs whose trajectories were connected to the conflict. This installed in Armenia what Iskandaryan terms a system of consensual clientelism, a loose patrimonial system that oversaw a merger of political and economic power. An Armenian variant of crony capitalism was the result, with oligarchs operating much in the same way as South Korean chaebols. The resulting political system was unable, however, to generate domestic legitimacy; mass mobilisation has been a recurrent feature of Armenian politics, leading in March 2008 to a violent crackdown involving 10 deaths. To guarantee its hold on power, the Armenian leadership began to tinker with the constitution in order to avoid vulnerability at pivotal elections. Iskandaryan describes how, in effect, this process brought Armenia to full circle. In 2018, 30 years after the Karabakh movement, Armenia experienced another revolutionary overthrow of power, in what has become known as the ‘Velvet Revolution’. Whether Armenia can consolidate this belated transition is uncertain. As Iskandaryan explains, many of the salient
problems of the past 25 years remain in place, from poorly developed infrastructure, to limited market capacity and access to external markets, and dependence on Russia for security. This is a circle that Armenian foreign policy attempts to square with the doctrine of ‘complementarity’: strong security linkages with Russia, and strong linkages in other sectors with Western partners.

The next chapter by Galina M. Yemelianova shifts discussion to Russia’s North Caucasus by focusing on the autonomous republics of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. It considers the main historical factors contributing to the making of the modern north-eastern Caucasus before proceeding to analyse the ethno-political and religious dynamic in these three autonomies. The chapter argues that the Dagestanis’ lengthy and deeper Islamisation, as well as the Vai Nakhs’ (Chechens and Ingush) Islamisation in the context of the nineteenth-century Caucasus War against the Russians, have accounted for the stronger Islamic dimension in the post-Soviet political and societal transformation of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia compared to other parts of the Muslim Caucasus. Yemelianova points to the ambivalence of Moscow’s policy in the region: it has achieved the military re-integration of Chechnya albeit at high human cost, but has failed to solve the region’s dire economic and social problems and to deter its ongoing societal re-Islamisation which in the long run might be detrimental to Russia’s integrity as a multi-ethnic and poly-confessional state.

In the following chapter, Svetlana I. Akkieva and Galina M. Yemelianova discuss the modern north-western Caucasus corresponding to Russia’s autonomous republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygea. They outline the region’s historical, ethno-cultural and religious particularities which affected its ethno-national trajectories. In Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Akkieva and Yemelianova examine the Kabardian–Balkar and Karachai-Cherkess inter-relationships, as well as the relations between each of these titular ethnic groups and the Russians/Cossacks, Meskhetian Turks, Nogais and Abazas. In Adygea, they focus on the relations between the titular Adygeis and the numerically dominant Russians/Cossacks. The chapter pays special attention to Circassian (Adyghe) and Karachai-Balkar Turkic- and clan-based solidarity, the role of the Circassian diaspora, globalised Salafism and other external actors. The chapter argues that since the demise of the Soviet system the region has experienced a considerable titular ‘ethnicisation’ which has affected its societal cohesion.

Part IV: Conflict and political violence

Tragically for the region and its peoples, the Caucasus is perhaps most widely known for its intractable conflicts and political violence, which afflict both its northern and southern parts. This theme is addressed in the fourth part of the volume, which begins with a chapter by Laurence Broers and Galina M. Yemelianova examining the main causes, actors and trajectories of ethno-territorial conflicts in Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the South Caucasus, and in Prigorodnyi region between Ossetians and Ingush in Chechnya in the North Caucasus. Broers and Yemelianova argue that these, as well as other ethnic conflicts on the territory of the former USSR, were triggered by perestroika and glasnost policies under Mikhail Gorbachev. Broers and Yemelianova argue, however, that the peculiar Caucasian propensity to violence must be explained in terms of local and contingent factors such as the historically contested delimitation of territorial borders, mythologised narratives of communal antagonism, majority-dominated cores and peripheral minorities (with many in possession of autonomous institutions), relationships between immediate neighbours as well as with the Russian/Soviet centre, and personalities of national leaders that contributed to radicalisation.
Ethno-political conflicts in the Caucasus resulted in the formation of a number of unrecognised states, or what are widely referred to in post-Soviet studies as ‘de facto states’. These are entities that control territory, provide governance, enjoy local legitimacy and survive for extended periods of time, but which are not recognised as states by other states, or only a very small number of them. The South Caucasus is home to three such entities in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh. Although ravaged to varying extents by wars in the 1990s, these three de facto states have survived for the best part of 30 years. Enjoying the both considerable and stable support of external patrons (Russia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Armenia for Nagorny Karabakh), there is little reason to believe that they will not continue to exist for many more. In his contribution, Laurence Broers discusses the formation, domestic politics, and external relations of these entities, and their relations with their ‘parent state’ – the state from which they seceded. He argues that depictions of de facto states as the geopolitical pawns of great powers neglect the indigenous roots of aspirations to separate territorial status in these areas that go back at least a century. Broers argues that while strategies to avert the recognition of these entities by other states have been broadly successful, these have not developed into effective strategies against secession itself. De facto states, in other words, are here to stay and there is no reason to believe that they will collapse or disappear on their own.

The next chapter by Domitilla Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov returns readers to the North Caucasus to discuss the inter-relation between socio-economic and political conditions and Islamised radicalisation. Sagramoso and Yarlykapov trace how over the past decades the violence in the region underwent a significant evolution from politicised ethno-nationalism into Islamised radicalism in the form of jihadism. They argue that the origins and the intricacies of jihadist violence are only partially related to the spread of extremist Islamist ideologies and separatist aspirations. Other drivers of violent jihad include ‘environmental factors’ external to Islamism such as the perpetuation of discredited and corrupt ruling elites, the persistence of severe economic hardship, youth unemployment and social alienation, and the absence of proper and effective channels of political expression.

Sagramoso and Yarlykapov’s findings chime with those of Jean-François Ratelle, who in the following chapter examines the entanglement of the Caucasus with regional and global militant Islamist conflicts. Ratelle traces these inter-relations by showing how Arab foreign fighters contributed to the ‘jihadisation’ of local Caucasus insurgency. Incoming foreign fighters at the time of the First Chechen War in the mid-1990s brought Salafi doctrines of jihad into the Caucasus. He argues that they would eventually overcome secular nationalism, enacting a transition from the nationalist-secessionist cause of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria to the founding of the fully Islamised and pan-Caucasian Caucasus Emirate in 2007. Yet Ratelle warns against simplistic readings of Islamist insurgency in the Caucasus as a ‘local branch of al-Qaeda’: the ‘Salafisation’ of the North Caucasus insurgency was organic to the region and led by local ideologues. The Caucasus Emirate would in turn be eclipsed by the emergence of the ‘Islamic State’ (ISIS) and other groups in Syria and Iraq. Caucasus jihadists were increasingly attracted to the ‘Islamic State’, its new ideology and its initial spectacular successes on the battlefield. The Caucasus Emirate was superseded in 2014 by the declaration of the Wilayah al-Qawqaz, the Caucasus province of the ‘Islamic State’. Ratelle shows how, far from strengthening local insurgents, these developments augured the decline of the North Caucasus insurgency, as its leadership fragmented and its main recruitment pool emigrated to the Middle East.
Part V: The Caucasus in the wider world

As has been the case since antiquity, since 1991 the South Caucasus has been strategically significant as an area where the interests and security concerns of several major actors – Russia, the EU, the United States, Turkey and Iran – meet and collide. S. Neil MacFarlane is concerned with the role of Russia, as a partially Caucasian state, in the wider region. Moscow’s perspectives on its relations with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are seen, MacFarlane argues, through the lens of what it views as its primary challenge: American unipolarity. NATO, and NATO expansion in particular, is consequently seen as a threat. The decision to offer eventual NATO membership to Georgia (and Ukraine) at the 2008 Bucharest summit was a seminal event contributing to Russia’s invasion of Georgia later that year and recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. MacFarlane argues that Russian assertiveness in the South Caucasus is linked also to its own experience of territorial fracture and insurgency in the North Caucasus, in the perception of the South Caucasus as a theatre for the projection of Western soft power aimed at changing regimes from within through ‘colour revolutions’, and an underlying consciousness that sees the South Caucasus as part of the ‘near abroad’, the area encompassed by the former Soviet Union. The Russian view of the ‘near abroad’ is ‘essentially hegemonic and focused on control – control over economies … space, and the denial of that space to competitors such as NATO and the EU’. As MacFarlane explains, Russia has a rich array of levers to pursue this goal, from the use of force, investment and trade, the remittance incomes of substantial Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian migrant communities working in Russia, and soft power, sometimes covertly deployed. In sum, MacFarlane concludes that Russian behaviour in the South Caucasus tends to be more coercive than cooperative, shaped as much by cultural and subjective perceptions, a post-imperial consciousness, and self-perceptions of vulnerability relative to the wider global order.

As Licínia Simão demonstrates in her contribution, increased Russian assertiveness has implied the contestation of Euro-Atlantic influence in the South Caucasus. As she notes, the South Caucasus attained independence simultaneously with the post–Cold War global hegemony of liberal democracy and the Western powers. The convergence of the South Caucasus with liberal democratic governance and norms was taken as a given in the 1990s. Yet the subsequent European and US attention to the region was inconsistent: Western interests there were often second-order concerns relating to priorities elsewhere, whether these were European energy security through pipelines bypassing Russia and Iran, logistical support to military campaigns in Afghanistan, or managing a delicate relationship with Russia itself. Simão argues, however, that the slow and limited pace of integration is not only due to the uncertainty of the European ‘offer’ to the South Caucasus, but to differentiated demand for European integration within the region. While Georgia actively pursued ties with Europe and especially the US, for different reasons Armenia and Azerbaijan have kept their distance.

In their contribution, Bayram Balci and Thomas Liles argue that Turkey has again emerged as a significant regional power in the Caucasus at the societal and state levels. At the societal level, Turkey was an important destination for Muslims fleeing the Russian conquest in the nineteenth century. Turkey is consequently home to substantial Caucasian diasporas, notably Abkhaz and Chechen, who to varying extents acted to support secessionist causes in their ethnic homelands in the early 1990s. At the state level, Balci and Liles argue that the prospect of spillover, energy interests and a sensitive relationship with Russia have instilled a cautious approach in Turkish policy towards the South Caucasus since 1991. Its politique de voisinage with each of the region’s states reflects quite distinct relations with each
of them. Ethno-cultural proximity and common strategic interests bind Turkey and Azerbaijan into close partnership, while Georgia is an essential nexus physically enabling and benefiting from this partnership. Turkey’s relations with Armenia remain clouded by divergent interpretations of the mass murder of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915, although as Balci and Liles discuss, there is a latent desire to normalise relations with Yerevan. As they show, Turkey has enjoyed considerable soft power in the Caucasus. Balci and Liles warn, however, that its increasing involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts and authoritarian turn at home cast doubt on Turkey’s continued ability to project itself as a development model for other Muslim states in the region.

The next chapter by Kelsey Rice explores the complex relationship between the South Caucasus’ republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and their powerful neighbour, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Rice points out that these relations go back to their lengthy shared history and culture, as firm borders between them only emerged in the relatively recent historical period. She is particularly concerned with Azerbaijan and Armenia, as Iran’s relations with Georgia are less characterised by entangled identities. She deconstructs the roots of modern Iran’s much warmer relations with Christian Armenia than with its fellow majority-Shi’ite nation Azerbaijan as being a function of post-Soviet Azerbaijan’s close relations with Iran’s regional and international antagonists – Turkey, the West and Israel, in particular.

The South Caucasus, as already noted, has appeared on global policy-making horizons as a key corridor for the transit of Caspian oil and gas. What were at the time exaggerated estimates of the extent of Caspian oil reserves drove widespread anticipation of a ‘new Great Game’ with the South Caucasus as a key theatre. With strong Western support the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines provided for key westwards transit links bypassing Russian and Iranian territory. As Stanislav Pritchin shows in his contribution, these moves were emblematic of a wider project to create a regional security system in the Caspian independent of Russia and Iran. In the 1990s and 2000s regional states such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan exploited Russian weakness and Western interests in the region to construct a defensive balancing against Russia and Iran in pursuit of consolidating their sovereignty. Pritchin contends that Russia’s recovery from the mid-2000s and demonstrations of the use of force, long-term decline in Western strategic interest in the Caucasus-Caspian region and convergence among the Caspian littoral states around models of regionalism not founded on liberal-democratic principles led to a different conjuncture, symbolised in the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. The Convention guarantees the largest sectors with the most profitable oil and gas reserves to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but also envisages a closed regional security system dominated by Russia, in which no third parties may maintain armed forces in the Caspian. Pritchin describes the Convention as a ‘complex combination of balancing and bandwagoning, using economic elements to broaden the meaning of “security”’ and an important example of regional compromise in international relations. Overall, he argues, the Convention largely enabled Russia and Iran to preserve the old model of a closed regional system which had been in force since 1921.

Part VI: Societal and cultural dynamics

The sixth and final part of the volume homes in on a number of aspects of societal and cultural change in the Caucasus: demography, gender, youth mobilisation and digital activism. It begins with a chapter on Caucasus’ demography by Edward C. Holland and Jennifer S. Wistrand. The chapter examines regional- and country-scale processes in the four Caucasus states – Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – as well as the so-called de facto states of...
Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It considers the consequences of the economic uncertainty, violent conflict and social upheaval that attended the end of the Soviet state. The foci of the discussion are the demographic situation in these states; out-migration by Russians; urbanisation and urban growth; and short-term labour migration. They argue that across the Caucasus demographic processes largely assume similar forms due to its countries’ shared Soviet legacy and the challenges associated with the transition from communism.

The following chapter by Lala A. Aliyeva addresses the significantly under-researched topic of gender relations in the Caucasus. Her discussion starts with a historical overview of gender roles in the region and then proceeds to examine how these roles have changed in the last three decades. Aliyeva is particularly concerned with gender role distribution within families, gender equality in education, and women’s career trajectories and political participation. She argues that gender relations have continued to be strongly influenced by traditional perceptions according to which men are widely regarded as decision-makers and breadwinners, while women are mothers and carers. At the same time Aliyeva points to considerable variations within the region in gender perceptions and roles, and their correlation with religious belief.

The growth of civil society has been a major development in the post-Soviet South Caucasus’ emergence from the totalitarian experience of the Soviet Union. Civil society, in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), independent media and youth groups, played important roles in both Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’ and Armenia’s ‘Velvet Revolution’. As Huseyn Aliyev shows in his chapter, however, the liberalism and autonomy of civil society is far from a given in the Caucasus. In a study of youth groups across the region, Aliyev shows that the youth organisations with the largest membership, nationwide representation, sustainable funding, effective organisation and longevity are closely associated with political elite structures, are rife with patron-clientelism and are ideologically centred on conservative national-patriotic values. Despite substantial funding and visibility, Aliyev finds that youth organisations in the Russian North Caucasus replicate distinctly Soviet patterns of the heavily politicised mobilisation of youth around regime-friendly goals and ideals. Aliyev argues that overall post-communist elites in the Caucasus continue to imitate characteristically Soviet methods of indoctrinating and socialising youth, suggesting significant limits to the depth of the region’s post-Soviet transition.

Karen Avedissian’s findings in the volume’s final chapter also warn against simplistic understandings of the vectors and modalities of socio-political change, by focusing on the variable effects of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Armenia and Chechnya. Avedissian argues that in the relatively more open and socially networked context of opposition in Armenia, ICTs and social media have served as a liberation technology. In Chechnya, where state control is tight and social networks of opposition non-existent, ICTs and social media are controlled by the authorities as instruments of propaganda and surveillance and serve as a repression technology. The comparison demonstrates the centrality of the socio-structural context for oppositions to transmit ideas, coordinate activities and draw in supporters. The relatively more open civil society in Armenia provided ‘free spaces for information flows’, enabling ICTs to play an increasingly significant role in successive waves of mass mobilisation in Armenia. Chechnya’s Ramzan Kadyrov, by contrast, experimented and innovated with digital technologies in a context where alternative networks of personal contacts have been otherwise eliminated or co-opted.

In conclusion, we very much hope that this volume will offer new perspectives both to those familiar with the Caucasus and newcomers to this beguiling yet understudied region. At once peripheral and pivotal, there is little reason at present to assume that the Caucasus will not continue long-standing historical traditions of geopolitical indeterminacy, interstitial
positioning and the interrogation of metropolitan power. In the North Caucasus, Russia’s ‘inner abroad’, the future turns on the capacity and skill of Russian policy-making in meeting the region’s social and developmental challenges, and in overcoming the legacies of violence in the north-eastern Caucasus. To the south of the Great Caucasus mountain range, what remains to be seen is whether the ‘South Caucasus’ will ever emerge as a geopolitical tradition in its own right, grounded in good neighbourly relations rather than outward gazes towards distant and far from benign patrons. What is certain, however, is that the Caucasus will continue to mesmerise visitors with its glorious mountains, its rich and colourful culture and its proud and hospitable peoples.

Notes

1 On the correlation of the terms ‘Near East’ and ‘Middle East’, see Savory (1976): 1.
2 The etymology of the term ‘Caucasus’ or ‘Caucasia’ remains debatable among scholars of late antiquity and the medieval era, albeit the dominant view is that it means ‘highlands’ (see Chapter 3).
3 In the volume, we use inherently Greco-Roman temporal categories of ‘antiquity’, ‘middle ages’ and ‘modern era’, as well as the Christian Gregorian calendar, which was introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, for the purposes of convention and simplicity. We recognise however the Caucasus’ eastern and non-Christian side related to its belonging from as early as the second millennium BCE to the Iran-centric oikoumene, and from the late eighth century till the early nineteenth centuries CE to the Islamic East, which were characterised by other temporal divisions as well as the lunar (the Hijri), the Julian and other non-Gregorian calendars.
4 On the Great Game, see Hopkirk (1992) and Sergeev (2013).
5 Arguably, Dagestan escaped major ethnic wars due to the fact that it is populated by over thirty ethnic groups, none of which is large enough to dominate (Ware and Kisriev 2010: 63). See also Chapter 13.
6 The Network of Monitoring of Ethnic Conflicts and of Conflicts’ Early Prevention’ was established on the basis of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA RAN) in 1993 by the IEA’s director and renowned Russian ethnologist Valery A. Tishkov (b.1941). The network includes over a hundred ethnologists working on conflicts from over 40 of Russia’s regions, including the North Caucasus.
7 See also Chapters 14 and 17 of the volume.

References


