DEAR COLLEAGUES,

DEAR GUESTS,

IT’S MY PLEASURE TO HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS THIS CONFERENCE.

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION. THE SOUTH CAUCASUS HAS COMMON BORDERS WITH RUSSIA, IRAN AND TURKEY, IS CLOSE TO AFGHANISTAN AND TO THE ARAB WORLD. THE REGION CONSTITUTES A NATURAL BRIDGE CONNECTING CENTRAL ASIA TO EUROPE. THIS FACT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT IF WE ARE TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE HUGE ENERGY RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN THE CAUCASUS – CASPIAN REGION. BOTH GEO STRATEGY AND GEO ECONOMY UNDERLINES THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REGION FOR THE WESTERN POWER CENTERS: PRIMARILY FOR THE EU AND THE UNITED STATES.


MEANWHILE THE LITTLE COOPERATION AND ALSO OFTEN DIVERGENT INTERESTS CAUSED SERIOUS DERRAILS IN OVERALL PROCESS OF THE REGION’S INTEGRATION INTO THE EURO ATLANTIC COMMUNITY. EUROPEANS WERE VERY CAUTIOUS NOT TO STRAIN RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA WHILE THE UNITED STATES WAS EAGER TO FOMENT ITS INFLUENCE IN THE REGION SIMULTANEOUSLY TRYING TO REDUCE RUSSIA’S IMPACT. THIS WAS THE CASE ESPECIALLY IN GEORGIA – NATO RELATIONS. THE US PUT HUGE EFFORTS TO BRING GEORGIA CLOSE TO THE MEMBERSHIP WHILE EUROPEAN CENTERS – FIRST OF ALL FRANCE AND GERMANY – WERE ANXIOUS ON POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF GEORGIA’S NATO BID ON RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA. THE HOT SPOT OF THIS SITUATION WAS REACHED IN AUGUST 2008 WHEN HOSTILITIES BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA CAUGHT BOTH THE US AND THE EU IN A SITUATION WHEN THEY HAVE VERY LITTLE OPTIONS TO INFLUENCE THE COURSE OF EVENTS.
It was obvious that Western powers need more coordinated approach in the region if they want to protect their interests and meanwhile not to be involved in zero sum approach relations with other regional centers, especially Russia. The region’s interests also require more balanced and coordinated actions from the US and the EU as it will create more opportunities for all regional states to balance their relations with different power centers directly or indirectly involved in the regional geopolitics.

Situation has changed since 2009. The Obama administration abandoned unilateral policy of previous administration and declared its intention to work closely with its European allies in different parts of the world. The new US National Security Strategy revealed in May 2010 also emphasized the importance of bilateral and multilateral actions in international sphere. The reset in US-Russia relations symbolized the new approach of the US administration in its policy in the Post Soviet region.

2009 was also marked by the start of the Eastern Partnership policy of the EU which involves all three internationally recognized South Caucasian republics. The four platforms of the Eastern Partnership include Democracy, good governance and stability, Economic integration and convergence with EU policies, Energy security and Contacts between people.

Since 2009 we have faced more coordinated US and EU approach in the region. Europeans are more inclined toward fostering democracy and rule of law simultaneously making emphasize on economic cooperation especially in energy sector. The United States is trying to involve broader agenda with emphasize on security as well as on economy and democracy.

The emphasize of the US authorities on close cooperation with its allies and simultaneous efforts toward rapprochement with Russia as well as more active involvement of the EU in the regional developments creates new opportunities for regional states to foster their relationship with the Euro Atlantic community. Meanwhile we may urge that three internationally recognized entities of the region have different perceptions and different expectations from the western power centers. The main goal of Azerbaijan is to diversify its energy recourses export routes and enter the European market of natural gas simultaneously trying to bargain with the EU states trying to link energy projects with European policy concerning possible ways of the Karabakh Conflict settlement.


Azerbaijan tries to use the possible implementation of new energy projects in the region as a tool to change the geopolitical and military balance in the region and as a possibility to gain strategic advantage. Meanwhile Azerbaijan tries to use energy projects and cooperation in this field with Western institutions as a shield to cover the shortcomings in the implementation of reform policy based on Azerbaijani international obligations.

Georgia continues to see Euro Atlantic community as a main trump card which can be used to balance its strained relations with Russia. Georgia simultaneously uses its special relations with US and advanced cooperation with European countries as a tool to facilitate intensive reforms in different sectors of economy now underway in Georgia. Meanwhile we may urge that tragic events of August 2008 made American and European politicians more cautious regarding their direct involvement in the South Caucasian Geopolitics especially concerning the formal inclusion of regional states into Euro Atlantic institutions and structures. We believe that both the United States and the EU have made some amendments in their policy toward Georgia putting more emphasize on continuation of reforms rather than on rapid inclusion of Georgia into the EU or NATO.

The case is little different for Armenia. Blockaded by Azerbaijan since 1990 and by Turkey since 1993 Armenia have been struggling for securing its basic needs in a not so friendly environment. The unresolved Karabakh conflict and permanent bellicose rhetoric of Azerbaijani leaders make situation more complicated. The geopolitical developments had resulted in more restricted options for Armenia’s foreign policy, making inevitable the choice for the strategic partnership with Russia.

Simultaneously, since its independence Armenia has been trying to cultivate close relations with both the US and the EU. The existence of powerful Armenian Diaspora in Western countries facilitated this process. In any case Armenia is still anchored in Russian zone of influence which is fomented by Armenia’s membership in CIS and the CSTO. Russia also holds strong economic positions in Armenia controlling its energy, transport and communication sectors.

The current Armenian leadership is making steps to develop its strategic partnership with Russia and to elaborate closer relations with the Western power centers. Armenia is actively cooperating with NATO in the framework of different programs and has signed two Individual Partnership Action Plans with the Alliance. Armenia has been actively engaged with European institutions such as the EU and Council of Europe. The negotiations are now underway to sign with the EU association agreement and agreement on Deep and Comprehensive free trade.
In this context active cooperation between the US and EU in the region and also their active involvement in regional developments may support Armenia’s bid to diversify its foreign policy options and elaborate more balanced relations with different power centers. As for the South Caucasus the US and the EU may play more targeted role aimed at fostering stability and security in this volatile region. The US - Russia reset and the EU – Russia active dialogue may facilitate this process thus transforming the South Caucasus from the juncture of divergent interests into the region with mutual understanding and advantage.

Резюме

С геополитической и геоэкономической точек зрения значимость Южного Кавказа для западных центров силы, в первую очередь ЕС и США, представляется довольно высокой. При этом результаты их влияния для региона будут существенно значительнее, если США и ЕС будут проводить взаимосогласованную политику. Однако до прихода к власти администрации Б. Обамы США предпочитали действовать в одиночку, не учитывая интересов своего стратегического партнера.

Азербайджан взаимоотношения с США и ЕС строит на стремлении диверсифицировать пути экспорта своих энергоносителей, а также оказывать влияние на политику этих центров силы в отношении Карабахского конфликта. Грузия преследует цели использования своих партнерских взаимоотношений с ними в противовес политике давления России на Грузию, а также как инструмент стимулирования процесса внутригосударственного политического и экономического реформирования. Армения, являясь стратегическим партнером России, использует активное сотрудничество с США и ЕС в регионе в целях обеспечения многовекторности своей внешней политики.