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The South Caucasus nations face tricky balancing acts at a time of tension between Moscow and the West.

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South Caucasus history is ultra-complex and endlessly fascinating. We sort the Seljuks from the Soviets, and Saakashvili from Shevardnadze.

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It's one of the world's most difficult ethnic jigsaws, but its people have a surprising amount in common.

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A spectacular and wonderfully varied canvas for hikers, horse riders, skiers, rafters and everyone else.

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From quaint, ancient churches and towers to dazzling futuristic statements of the 21st century.

Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan Today

The three South Caucasus nations have travelled radically different roads since they became nations during the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The new era of tension between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the West now presents each of them with a different balancing act to perform, falling as they do within the territories of the old tsarist and Soviet empires, which Russia considers its rightful 'sphere of influence'.

Best on Film

The Colour of Pomegranates (1969) Sergei Paradjanov's dreamlike classic about troubadour Sayat Nova.

Tangerines (2013) Zaza Urushadze's Oscar-nominated film set in the Abkhazian war.

Repentance (1984) Ground-breaking Soviet-era film about a dictatorial politician (director Tengiz Abuladze).

Ali and Nino (2016) Movie version of Kurban Said's wonderful novel (director Asif Kapadia).

Best in Print

Ali and Nino (Kurban Said; 1937) Magical cross-cultural love story set in early-20th-century Azerbaijan

Bread and Ashes (Tony Anderson; 2003) Adventures and laughs walking the Caucasus.

The Crossing Place (Philip Marsden; 1993) Journeys among the Armenians, in Armenia and elsewhere.

Georgia: In the Mountains of Poetry (Peter Nasmyth; 1998) Exploring Georgia's landscapes and literature.

Journey to Karabakh (Aka Morchiladze; 1992) Two young Georgians suddenly find themselves in midst of the Karabakh War.

Entwined with Russia

The South Caucasus economies are still deeply entwined with Russia as a trade partner and as a source of remittances from migrant workers – which in Armenia's case amount to 20% of its entire GDP. Disappointing economic growth since 2013 has been made worse by Russia's own problems from the oil price slump and Western sanctions following its Ukraine interventions.

Armenia

Serzh Sargsyan of the Republican Party was reelected president in 2013, in an election boycotted by several opposition groups citing expectation of electoral fraud. Anger about economic stagnation and corruption erupted in the huge 'Electric Yerevan' street protests in summer 2015 over a planned electricity price hike.

A big part of Armenia's problem is that its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are closed because of the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, leaving Armenia economically isolated and dependent on aid and investment from Russia. Russia is also Armenia's military protector, with a large base at Gyumri. Under Russian pressure, in 2013 Armenia decided against signing an EU association agreement and instead joined the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union.

Georgia

The Georgian Dream coalition launched by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili softened the fiercely pro-Western, anti-Russian stance of Mikheil Saakashvili (Georgia's president from 2004 to 2013), but maintained a westward course. In 2014 it signed an association agreement and free trade deal with the EU. It seemed little coincidence that Russia subsequently signed new alliances with the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, tying them ever closer to it, including in matters of defence.