

# Does the EU Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?

**Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)**

Study Group Information





Study Group Information

Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)

## **Does the EU Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?**

**27<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the PöP Consortium Study Group  
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

**14/2024**

Vienna, September 2024

**Imprint:**

Copyright, Production, Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence  
Rossauer Lände 1  
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:

National Defence Academy  
Command  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:

PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes  
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

Copyright

© Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence  
All rights reserved

September 2024  
ISBN 978-3-903359-97-0

Printing:

ReproZ W 24-5163  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Wien

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	5
Abstract.....	7
Introduction	
<i>Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu</i> .....	9
PART I: What Should Be the EU Goals in the South Caucasus Region?.....	15
Risks of Orbit Thinking in the South Caucasus: On the European Union's Engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict	
<i>Daria Isachenko</i> .....	17
The European Union in the South Caucasus: Peace Broker or Silent Observer?	
<i>Fuad Shabbazov</i> .....	25
EU's Role in South Caucasus Viewed from Russia	
<i>Yeghia Tashjian</i> .....	35
PART II: EU's Evolving Policies and Tools: Perceptions and Expectations from the Eastern Neighbourhood .....	59
The Dynamic Role of the European Union in the South Caucasus and the Broader Eastern Neighbourhood	
<i>Elena Marçac</i> .....	61
The European Union and the South Caucasus: A Force for Peace?	
<i>Stephanie Fenkart</i> .....	67
PART III: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration (Regional Actors) .....	83
Azerbaijan's Balancing Act under Pressure: Quest for Alternative Regionalism	
<i>Vasif Huseynov</i> .....	85

Challenges to Reconciling European and Regional Integration (Regional Actors) <i>Stephan H. Astourian</i> .....	101
A New Strategy that Deters and Promotes: Framing the EU's Actions in the South Caucasus <i>Shalva Džebisashvili</i> .....	123
PART IV: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration (External Actors) .....	137
Türkiye and the EU in the South Caucasus: Complementary Partnership and Competition <i>Niliifer Narli</i> .....	139
External Actors and Geopolitical Pivoting in the South Caucasus <i>Marat Terterov</i> .....	167
Conclusions <i>Frederic Labarre</i> .....	187
PART V: Policy Recommendations .....	193
Policy Recommendations <i>Regional Stability in South Caucasus Study Group</i> .....	195
List of Abbreviations .....	203
List of Authors and Editors .....	205

## Acknowledgments

This booklet, reflecting the proceedings of the 27<sup>th</sup> workshop of the Regional Stability in South Caucasus Study Group held in Chisinau, Moldova from April 11 to 14, 2024, would not have been possible without the financial and technical support of the Austrian National Defence Academy (by means of Mr. Benedikt Hensellek), the Austrian Ministry of Defence (thanks to the commitment of Mr. Andreas Wannemacher), as well as the dedication of Ms. Sara Milena Schachinger. The Co-chairs are thankful for those essential inputs for the outcome of the Study Group. We would also thank Lieutenant Colonel Olaf Garlich, Deputy Executive Director of the PfP Consortium Secretariat in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, along with Bernd Speckhardt, without whose logistical and financial support this workshop would have been impossible.

## **Abstract**

This Study Group Information booklet represents the proceedings of the 27<sup>th</sup> workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) entitled “Does the EU need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?” held in Chisinau, Moldova, from 11 to 14 April 2024. The papers collected herein deal with the evolving geopolitical structures which may affect the orientation of South Caucasus states individually or as a group. The papers deal also with the European Union’s general policy orientation regarding the South Caucasus, and, in some cases, on policy decisions which have had a lasting impact on regional security. In some cases, the papers explore the history of relations between Europe and the South Caucasus, and the growing role of Türkiye and Iran in the strategic equation. It concludes with actionable recommendations extracted from the interactive discussions moderated by the co-chairs.

## Introduction

*Christoph Bilban, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu*

The geopolitical upheavals that we have witnessed over the last decade culminating into the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the expansion of the war in Ukraine demanded that the RSSC SG renew its efforts at raising awareness of geopolitical risks in the South Caucasus and beyond. Those wars have propelled the European Union's (EU) Eastern Neighbourhood ever closer to the centre of the current geopolitical scene. At the November 2023 workshop, held in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, panellists underlined the shifting geopolitical orientation of the South Caucasus largely to the detriment of the West. The ensuing Policy Recommendations then noted that misperceptions of the EU's role and objectives in the South Caucasus, confusion regarding its internal and external operational procedures, as well as its abilities and capabilities have not been helpful in advancing security. However, most participants agreed that the EU should stay engaged, and some have even argued its role and capabilities deployed in the region should be expanded. It is in this challenging international and regional context that the co-chairs have convened the RSSC SG workshop **“Does the European Union Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?”** on April 11–14, 2024, in Chisinau, Moldova.

Since February 24, 2022, the EU's level of engagement with the South Caucasus region has significantly increased, while Western confrontation with Russia expanded and intensified ever since, and tensions with Iran over deliveries of drones and missiles to Russia, the war in Gaza, and more broadly over Tehran's aspirations for growing regional influence in the Middle East have reached new highs. The problem is that the rules-based order (i.e. post-Cold War “*status quo*”) in Europe has been killed. This has been most obvious in Ukraine where the West is struggling to maintain her alive as an independent, sovereign state. In the South Caucasus, Western regional influence is minimal, and the “*status quo*” is now based upon the Russo-Turkish condominium currently supported by Iran, rather than the post-Cold War order, while the West is struggling to get back into the regional geopolitical game.



The EU has been often criticized over its lack of a strategy for the South Caucasus. An explicit, tailor-made, and overarching strategy for the region has never been developed. Supporters of such an EU strategy have argued for better prioritizing and pursuing more consistent external action in the region. A South Caucasus strategy should clearly outline the EU's objectives, as well as the ways and means to pursue them. It should have a clear focus on the security as well as on the (geo)political, economic, and normative dimensions. Critics of EU's regional strategies usually pointed to internal difficulties in building strategic consensus, and to past failures of EU's regional strategies, while offering the "Black Sea Synergy" initiative as the most conspicuous example. In fact, the EU has rather addressed relations with the regional states within broader policy frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and, since 2009, the Eastern Partnership. Judging from the EU's recent engagement in the South Caucasus, experts identified four sets of possible strategic objectives and interests:

1. to transfer European norms and values of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, including for persons belonging to minorities;
2. the promotion of stability and security in the region, by contributing to the resolution of the protracted conflicts and enhancing the resilience of South Caucasus states against hybrid threats and regional spoilers;
3. develop mutually-advantageous economic benefits and secure energy and trade interests by contributing to the development of transport and energy infrastructure;
4. to contain the Russian Federation by promoting the resilience of Georgia and reducing the Russian grip over Armenia.<sup>1</sup>

In December 2023, Georgia was granted EU candidate status, on the understanding that it would take the relevant steps as set out in the Commission recommendations. On that occasion, the European Council called on Georgia to demonstrate a clear commitment to EU values, continue progress on its reform agenda and meet the conditions for accession meaningfully and

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Deen, W. Zweers, C. Linder. "The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a Geopolitical Labyrinth in Turmoil", Clingendael Report, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus.pdf>.

irreversibly. While Georgia's progress on reforms is crucial, there has also been a geopolitical element in this EU decision. The Russian invasion of Ukraine highlighted what many experts had been saying for years – that the EU cannot just sit and watch major security evolutions in its neighbourhoods. It must also act in a geopolitically relevant way.

In many ways, the 28 April 2024 statement made by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Georgian oligarch who dominated Georgian politics (as the founder and chairman of the Georgian Dream ruling party) over the last twelve years, suspected by many as being secretly sympathetic to Russia, and who is claiming a return to Georgian politics in the October 2024 elections, may suggest that Georgia's westward orientation is under jeopardy. Given the recent history of Russia-Georgia relations, one can hardly expect that any responsible, largely popular Georgian party would do anything likely to be perceived as pro-Russia. That would amount to "political suicide". In fact, the Georgian government has aimed at building a pragmatic relationship with Moscow stemming from past experience showing that geopolitical alignment could hardly help solve its territorial disputes with Russian *protégés*. Nevertheless, the growing gap between the Georgian government and the West might be spearheading a possible re-alignment of Georgia away from the West, and closer to the Turkey-Azerbaijan axis as well as to China, and most likely shift also, to a certain extent, relations with Russia. In that vein, the possibility that Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two breakaway regions of Georgia, were used by Moscow as bargaining chips in exchange for Tbilisi dropping its aspirations to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU membership could come up as a core theme of the electoral campaign of the October 2024 legislative elections.

Armenia, *a contrario*, has stated that its orientation is henceforth westerly; and that ties with the Russian sphere of influence are about to be definitely cut, with Mr. Pashinyan's declaration that Armenia would quit the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The EU's relations with Armenia are built on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017. While Armenia's reform agenda remained essential for the future development of bilateral relations, the EU's active engagement in mediating the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process has until recently monopolized much of the common agenda. In

the wake of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, this peace process has been complicated by the evolving regional balance of power, and by the diverging strategic choices of Yerevan and Baku in the wake of the ongoing Russia-West geopolitical confrontation. Apparently, the Armenian government has put its bet on playing the West against Russia and on pulling Iran closer to the South Caucasian balance of power. However, closer Russo-Turkish relations have undercut Armenian tactics by pulling together Russian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani interests to finish the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Baku's decisive victory and Nagorno-Karabakh's capitulation and dissolution. This geopolitical shift may have put Baku in a position of force whereby it could impose its will on Yerevan, including the conditions for peace. This new regional reality paired by apparent tensions between Moscow and Yerevan have put the onus on further strengthening EU-Armenia ties.

The EU and Azerbaijan have had a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement since 1999. Negotiations for an enhanced agreement were launched in February 2017, but they have so far been inconclusive. In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan agreed to double European gas imports from Azerbaijan by 2027, thereby helping the former to reduce its dependence on Russian energy imports. However, concerns over safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the respect of the rule of law in Azerbaijan, as well as what is perceived in Baku as European bias in favour of Yerevan have recently chilled EU-Azerbaijan relations. Probably, the lowest point of this relationship was reached in October 2023 when Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev refused to meet Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan in the margins of an EU summit in Granada, citing “pro-Armenian statements by French officials ... and statements on the supply of weapons and ammunition (to Yerevan), on military cooperation.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, whereas European observers have been deployed in Armenia since February 2023 to contribute to regional security, Azerbaijan has not agreed to the deployment of EU monitors on its side of the border.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20231004-azerbaijan-s-president-refuses-to-attend-eu-talks-with-armenia-pm>.

Within that broader regional and international context, the workshop aimed:

- to explore the European Union’s evolving role and strategic posture in the South Caucasus region (and in the Eastern Neighbourhood);
- to understand the gap between expectations on how to best integrate the EU with the evolving regional context, both at the level of regional states and regional powers, and actual possibilities;
- to figure out how – if at all – European external action could be better strategized in the South Caucasus region.

The programme and workshop outline provided several comprehensive, but non-exhaustive, questions aiming to focus the presentations of panellists and the subsequent interactive discussions, such as:

- What would be the pros and cons of a strategic approach of the EU to the South Caucasus (and in the Eastern Neighbourhood)?
- How could the European Union contribute effectively and in a balanced way to the resolution of “protracted conflicts” and to decreasing geopolitical tensions in the South Caucasus?
- What should be the EU’s priorities in each of the regional countries and in the South Caucasus region more broadly?
- Have the changes in the strategic outlook of the South Caucasus impacted the position of the EU and its policy towards the region? If so, is this change aligned with the expectations of the regional states and does it alter their perceptions vis-à-vis the EU role in the region?
- Are the existing frameworks and instruments for integration and co-operation deployed in the South Caucasus still valid and sufficient under the current geopolitical changes?
- How could their development and implementation be enhanced? Moldova’s potential accession to the EU, and how it could influence the EU’s role in the South Caucasus was also discussed here.

- How would the states from the region see an EU policy to reconcile/harmonize European and regional integration processes in the South Caucasus?
- How would the regional powers – Russia, Turkey, Iran – look at EU’s further involvement in the South Caucasus region?

The following contributions make up the bulk of the presentations made and opinions provided during the workshop, and highlight the ensuing Policy Recommendations. The co-chairs are grateful for the input of so many experts who remain committed in working together to provide readers with original analysis, solutions, and ways ahead.

## **PART I: What Should Be the EU Goals in the South Caucasus Region?**

## **Risks of Orbit Thinking in the South Caucasus: On the European Union's Engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict**

*Daria Isachenko*

Following the Second Karabakh war and especially since Azerbaijan's retaking of the rest of Karabakh on 19–20 September 2023, there have been at least three key developments that deserve particular attention. First, an unprecedented bilateral framework of negotiations has emerged between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 7 December 2023, both sides released a joint statement announcing exchange of prisoners, Yerevan's support of Baku to host the COP29 summit within the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change and Baku's support of Yerevan's candidacy for Eastern European Group COP Bureau membership. Remarkable was also Armenia's and Azerbaijan's message to those seeking to mediate or facilitate the peace talks: underlining their preference for a bilateral process, both parties in their joint statement called "on the international community to support their efforts that will contribute to building mutual trust between two countries and will positively impact the entire South Caucasus region."<sup>1</sup> Of particular significance regarding the bilateral track has also been a protocol signed on 19 April 2024 on the borders demarcation and delineation based on the 1991 Alma-Ata declaration.<sup>2</sup>

Second key development that needs to be highlighted is Russia's acknowledgement and acceptance of new geopolitical realities, as can be observed from Moscow's retreat from the mediation efforts in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, withdrawal of peacekeeping troops ahead of schedule, closure of the joint Türkiye-Russia monitoring centre, as well as from

---

<sup>1</sup> Krnjević Mišković, Damjan (2023): Armenia and Azerbaijan are Finally Talking Directly. Is Peace Next? In: *The National Interest*, 15.12.2023. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/armenia-and-azerbaijan-are-finally-talking-directly-peace-next-207984>.

<sup>2</sup> Caucasus Watch. (2024): Border progress: Azerbaijan and Armenia Reach Agreement on Demarcation Process. 19.04.2024. <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/border-progress-azerbaijan-and-armenia-reach-agreement-on-demarcation-process.html>.

Kremlin's apparent shift in focus from having a military footprint to prioritising economic interests in its relations with Baku. Moscow's acceptance of new geopolitical realities has been a gradual process. Back in November 2020, the role of Russia's president Vladimir Putin has been central to broker a cease fire agreement between Yerevan and Baku. In October 2022, during the Valdai International Discussion Club's meeting, commenting on Russia's stance concerning options for the conflict settlement and the peace treaty, Putin stated, "If the Armenian people and leaders believe that Nagorno-Karabakh has certain peculiarities that should be considered in a future peace treaty, this is also possible."<sup>3</sup> Following what Baku called "local antiterrorist measures" on 19–20 September 2023, Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov summarised Moscow's position as follows: "...The main issue of Karabakh's belonging as such has now been resolved – it has been resolved and settled by Armenia's decision to recognize Karabakh's belonging."<sup>4</sup>

Russia's diminishing presence in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been conditioned by a third key development, namely the growing involvement of the West, in particular of the European Union (EU). The EU's engagement started with providing a platform for peace talks. One of the significant achievements of the EU mediation efforts, as highlighted in the press statement of the Russian Foreign Ministry, has been "Yerevan's recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the territory of Azerbaijan at the summits in October 2022 and May 2023, held under the EU aegis", the fact that "changed the fundamental conditions" of Moscow-brokered cease fire declaration of November 2020.<sup>5</sup>

The EU's facilitation of peace talks has been overshadowed by other forms of engagement. It includes the deployment of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) since February 2023 that replaced a short-term EU

---

<sup>3</sup> President of Russia (2022): The President took part in the final plenary session of the 19<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. Moscow. 27.10.2022. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/69695>.

<sup>4</sup> Armenia News – NEWS.am (2023): Peskov: The issue of whom Karabakh belongs is resolved. 21.09.2023. <https://news.am/eng/news/782403.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2023): Foreign Ministry statement on the situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. 20.09.2023. [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1905169/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1905169/?lang=en).



Monitoring Capacity (EUMCAP).<sup>6</sup> Some of the EU member states like Cyprus, Greece and France have been developing cooperation in defence sphere with Armenia.<sup>7</sup> Particularly controversial was the trilateral meeting on 5 April 2024 in Brussels attended by European Commission's President von Ursula der Leyen, US State Secretary Anthony Blinken and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

As the record of the EU's engagement shows, it has proved problematic to maintain the role of mediator while at the same time trying to provide a geopolitical orbit for Armenia. Given the EU's ambition for a greater involvement in the South Caucasus, Brussels will also have to deal with regional dynamics that do not necessarily fit with its transformative agenda. The current situation is such that none of the actors seeking a footprint in the region can offer a comprehensive plan that would appeal to all three countries of the South Caucasus as a region, or for Armenia, Azerbaijan or Georgia separately. As the paper seeks to illustrate, in the context of geopolitical heterogeneity,<sup>8</sup> the old orbit thinking of the Russia-West confrontation without the necessary capacity or even intent to actually provide a comprehensive orbit is one of the key challenges for all actors involved, including the EU.

### **South Caucasus Viewed along the Conflict Lines**

One of the key effects of Russia's war in Ukraine on the South Caucasus has been the accentuation of two conflict lines predominant in the Western ap-

---

<sup>6</sup> Krikorian, Onnik James (2024): European Mission in Armenia Completes Its First Year Amid Regional Tensions. In: *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, 11.03.2024 (37). <https://jamestown.org/program/european-mission-in-armenia-completes-its-first-year-amid-regional-tensions/>.

<sup>7</sup> Iddon, Paul (2023): Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia Are Increasing Military Cooperation and Upgrading Their Armed Forces. In: *Forbes*, 09.07.2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2023/07/09/greece-cyprus-and-armenia-are-increasing-military-cooperation-and-upgrading-their-armed-forces/>; Grigoryan, Anna (2024): Armenia, France establish long-term cooperation, including defence field: Ambassador's interview. In: *ARMENPRESS*, 06.03.2024. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1131797/>.

<sup>8</sup> Huseynov, Vasif (2020): Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-Regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity. In: *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* 1 (1), 127–138.

proach. These are the Russia-West confrontation and the democracy-authoritarianism divide.<sup>9</sup> The logic behind is strictly a binary one: “you are either with us, or against us,” whereby being “with us” appears to equal from the EU perspective to be or at least aspire to be “like us.”

In the context of the South Caucasus, this binary assessment in terms of “either/or” has taken several forms. First, it meant projection of EU’s own perspective rather than dealing with the countries of the regions as they are. In other words, in order for the EU to engage with the South Caucasus in the first place, the guiding assumption has been that the South Caucasus countries need to become like the EU itself. It is worth mentioning that as the EU has elaborated frameworks for its engagement in the South Caucasus like the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, one of the interests behind was to contribute to security environment by the means of promoting good governance and democracy reforms that have been viewed as a necessary precondition for stability.<sup>10</sup> This transformative agenda of the EU, however, faced an expectations gap in the South Caucasus, as “the EU has exported ‘its own vision’ of the problems affecting the neighbourhood’ and its own solutions, based on its own experience” rather than addressing security concerns of the region.<sup>11</sup>

Second, one of the central aspects of the “either/or” perspective on the South Caucasus, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, has been how to assess the countries’ relations with Russia. In this context as well, a similar projection of the EU’s own stance on Russia has been applied towards the region. Thus, Brussels has been “alarmed that Azerbaijan has become too close to Russia.”<sup>12</sup> Ankara’s traditional concern not to antagonise Russia in the region

---

<sup>9</sup> Poghosyan, Benjamin (2024): Armenia must avoid becoming entangled in the ‘Russia vs West, democracy vs authoritarianism’ dilemma. In: *CIVILNET*, 05.01.2024. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/761292/armenia-must-avoid-becoming-entangled-in-the-russia-vs-west-democracy-vs-authoritarianism-dilemma/>.

<sup>10</sup> Wolczuk, Katarzyna; Delcour, Laure (2018): Well-Meaning but Ineffective? Perceptions of the EU’s Role as a Security Actor in the South Caucasus. In: *European Foreign Affairs Review* 23 (Special Issue), 41–60, p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> CIVILNET (2023): V Brjussele vstrevozheny – Azerbajdzhan slishkom blizok k Rossii: Thomas de Waal. 10.11.2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5FCODYan7A>.

is seen by the EU automatically as being pro-Russian.<sup>13</sup> It also remains unclear how Armenia's worsening relations with Russia and its pivot to the West will play out since "in the current zero-sum geopolitical climate it [Armenia] cannot obtain new security guarantees from Western actors without abandoning its current security guarantees from Russia."<sup>14</sup>

Third, in the binary approach of "either with us or against us", the two conflict lines of Russia-West confrontation and the democracy-authoritarianism divide, sometimes become conflated. From this perspective the emerging geopolitical configuration in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is regarded by some analysts along the lines of how the EU can support Armenia against "the authoritarian axis" consisting of Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran and Türkiye.<sup>15</sup> As will be illustrated in the following section such a view does not necessarily reflect the complexity of regional dynamics and ties that bind countries of the South Caucasus with their neighbours.

### **South Caucasus Viewed across the Conflict Lines**

South Caucasus is known not only as a region of protracted conflicts but also by the fact that many of the bilateral relationships cannot be easily categorised in binaries of being either "good" or "bad." Thus, some analysts describe them as "ambiguous", like Russia-Azerbaijan, Türkiye-Iran, Russia-Türkiye, Türkiye-US, Israel-Armenia, Türkiye-Israel, EU-Türkiye, Armenia-Russia.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth comparing and contrasting this seemingly geopolitically driven view of bilateral ambiguity from the outside along the conflict lines with the

---

<sup>13</sup> Turkish diplomat in conversation with the author, December 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Deen, Bob; Zweers, Wouter; Linder, Camille (2023): The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil. Clingendael – Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael Report). <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus/>, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Hauff, Luba von (2023): Endlich „Frieden“ im Südkaukasus? Aserbaidzhan, Armenien und die geopolitischen Aussichten der neuen post-Karabacher Ordnung. Metis Institut für Strategie & Vorausschau, Universität der Bundeswehr München (Metis Studie Nr. 38). [https://metis.unibw.de/assets/pdf/metis-studie38-2023\\_12-s%C3%BCdkaukasus.pdf](https://metis.unibw.de/assets/pdf/metis-studie38-2023_12-s%C3%BCdkaukasus.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Deen, Bob; Zweers, Wouter; Linder, Camille (2023): The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil, op. cit., pp. 71–72.

way these relationships operate across the conflict lines from within the region. We find that in the South Caucasus there is a number of cooperation mechanisms based on a trilateral format: Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Iran, Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Georgia, Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan, Türkiye-Iran-Russia, Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan.<sup>17</sup> What is important here is not only the regional link between the South Caucasus and Central Asia, but also the necessity to contain geopolitical ambiguity by focusing on concrete projects, predominantly in the area of infrastructure.

The trilateral logic of interaction in the South Caucasus has also played a role in the emergence of the regional platform 3+3. It was first announced during a joint press conference by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and supported by his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan in December 2020. The idea was to bring together trilateral cooperation mechanisms (explicit mention found Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia; Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran, Turkey-Russia-Iran formats) under one roof by including Armenia in order to address such regional tasks as “infrastructure, political, diplomatic and many other issues.”<sup>18</sup> The current format is de facto 3+2 as Georgia refused to participate.

---

<sup>17</sup> Turkey seeks thaw in Iran-Azeri ties (2011). In: *AZERNEWS*, 14.04.2011. <https://www.azernews.az/nation/31673.html>; Shiryev, Zaur; Tkeshelashvili, Eka; Çelikpala, Mitat (2016): Institutionalizing Trilateral Strategic Partnership: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey. Konrad Adenaur Stiftung/Center for International and European Studies (CIES) at Kadir Has University. [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=cd257d1b-df92-5184-9ad4-2a5dd95c0886&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=cd257d1b-df92-5184-9ad4-2a5dd95c0886&groupId=252038); President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev (2017): Trilateral Summit of heads of state of Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia was held in Tehran. 01.11.2017. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/25664>; Daily Sabah (2022): Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan summit to strengthen Turkic world. 15.12.2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-azerbaijan-turkmenistan-summit-to-strengthen-turkic-world>; Mammadov, Seymur (2024): Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan join forces to power Europe. In: *IntelNews*, 09.05.2024. <https://www.intellinews.com/azerbaijan-kazakhstan-and-uzbekistan-join-forces-to-power-europe-324450/>.

<sup>18</sup> President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev (2020): Joint press statements of Presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkish. 10.12.2020. <https://president.az/en/articles/view/50868>.

So far, there were two meetings of the 3+3 platform: in December 2021 in Moscow at the level of deputy foreign ministers and in October 2023 in Teheran at the level of foreign ministers. Whereas from the outside, the purpose of this platform is understood “to keep ‘outside actors’ such as the EU and the US out,”<sup>19</sup> from within the region, it is seen as a sign of “a new regional security order – one that is not dominated by any other extra-regional actor and characterized by local states’ stronger agency.”<sup>20</sup>

It is yet unclear how the 3+3 platform is likely to evolve. The various trilateral formats however do form a solid basis for the regional interaction in the South Caucasus. And this dynamic cannot be ignored by the EU, as diminishing Russia’s role in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan does not necessarily mean that there is “a geopolitical vacuum” to be filled in the increasingly regional multipolarity in the South Caucasus.

## Conclusion

For meaningful engagement in the South Caucasus, the EU needs to learn to deal with the countries in its neighbourhood as they are rather than as the EU would like them to be according to its own image. Brussels would also need to recognise that, as Laurence Broers put it, “some local actors want less of the West, some actors want more, and some want some of what the West has to offer, but not the whole package.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition, the EU should regard the South Caucasus beyond the Russia-West confrontation prism. The new geopolitical reality consists not only in Azerbaijan’s restoration of its territorial integrity but also in the emerged multipolarity with the decline of Russian domination in the regional security order, however not in Moscow’s retreat from the South Caucasus *per se*.

---

<sup>19</sup> Deen, Bob; Zweers, Wouter; Linder, Camille (2023): The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil, op. cit., pp. 71–72.

<sup>20</sup> Huseynov, Vasif (2024): Revitalizing the 3+3 Platform: A Formula for a New Regional Security Order? In: *Baku Dialogues* 7, 2024 (2), 72–82. <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/revitalizing-the-33-platform-30-01-2024>.

<sup>21</sup> CIVILNET (2024): Laurence Broers: Western engagement in the region still ‘diffuse, tactical, ad hoc, and reactive’. 20.03.2024. <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/768685/laurence-broers-western-engagement-in-the-region-still-diffuse-tactical-ad-hoc-and-reactive/>.

At present, we can thus observe in the South Caucasus the coexistence of the old Russia-West confrontation paradigm, with its characteristic orbit thinking, with the newly emerging regional figuration, with a number of actors seeking to secure their interests in the region apart from Russia, Turkey and Iran. These include United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, India, and China.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Russia-centred approach to the South Caucasus by the West in general and the EU in particular overlooks regional linkages that are not free of tensions between the South Caucasus and other regional theatres such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Tashjian, Yeghia (2023): Beyond Yerevan and Baku: How Iran and India Perceive the Developments in the South Caucasus. In: Frederic Labarre und George Niculescu (eds.): *After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security*. Vienna: Republic of Austria Federal Ministry of Defence (24<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group on Regional Stability in the South Caucasus), 91–102; Azizi, Hamidreza; Isachenko, Daria (2023): Turkey-Iran Rivalry in the Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP Comment 2023/C 49). <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/turkey-iran-rivalry-in-the-changing-geopolitics-of-the-south-caucasus>; German, Tracey (2022): Russia and the South Caucasus: The China Challenge. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 74 (9), 1596–1615; Rahimov, Rahim (2024): On Azerbaijan visit, UAE’s MBZ quietly expands influence into South Caucasus. In: *Al-Monitor*, 15.01.2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/azerbaijan-visit-uaes-mbz-quietly-expands-influence-south-caucasus>; Mirzali, Farid; Tahmazov, Murad (2024): Neither Close, Nor Too Far: Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy Towards South Caucasus. Topchubashov Centre. [https://www.top-center.org/js/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Reports/South%20Caucasus%20in%20the%20focus%20of%20Middle%20Eastern%20powers\(1\).pdf](https://www.top-center.org/js/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Reports/South%20Caucasus%20in%20the%20focus%20of%20Middle%20Eastern%20powers(1).pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Stronski, Paul (2021): The Shifting Geography of the South Caucasus. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/23/shifting-geography-of-south-caucasus-pub-84814>; Deen, Bob; Zweers, Wouter; Linder, Camille (2023): The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil, op. cit.

# The European Union in the South Caucasus: Peace Broker or Silent Observer?

*Fuad Shabbazov*

## Introduction

2020 was a critical year for the European Union (EU) as the full-scale war occurred in its close vicinity – the South Caucasus under the close watch of Russia and Turkey, which significantly shaped the region’s geopolitical landscape and shifted the long-term balance of power.<sup>1</sup> The war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Karabakh region, within the internationally recognized boundaries of the former, resulted in Baku’s control of large swathes of territories of Karabakh. The next major move of Azerbaijan on September 19, 2023, resulted in its full control over the region and mass exodus of the ethnic Armenian community taking refuge in neighbouring Armenia.<sup>2</sup>

Although two major armed escalations have dramatically changed the traditional regional order in the Caucasus, the EU appears to have remained a bystander without effective means of intervention. Indeed, the EU’s position has boosted disappointment in Azerbaijani and Armenian societies.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the absence of the EU may be explained by several reasons. The main reason is Russia’s long-term influence in the South Caucasus, which set particular limitations for the EU’s expansion. Another reason is the complexity of the region itself and the diverse foreign policy orientation of all three regional states.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, regional power dynamics enabled the EU to maintain a limited presence through energy, economic, and social fields and avoid open expansion in the region. The EU’s indirect participation in

---

<sup>1</sup> Linder, C; Deen, B; Zweers, B (2023). The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil. Clingendael Institute. URL: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., (2023).

<sup>3</sup> Poghosyan, B (2023). The EU can bring peace to the South Caucasus. ISPI. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-eu-can-bring-peace-to-the-south-caucasus-126773>.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford Analytica (2024). The EU will encounter obstacles in the South Caucasus. URL: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/OXAN-DB285060/full/html>.

regional political processes and conflict resolution served its conviction that such a policy significantly decreases the chances of the emergence of new regional conflicts, thus creating prerequisites for long-lasting stability.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the EU has long been involved in the political process in the South Caucasus to varying degrees of intensity. While Georgia remained the most pro-European regional country until recently, Armenia and Azerbaijan pursued slightly different approaches. Nevertheless, the geopolitical landscape changed significantly with the two major events in the post-Soviet region: the renewed full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Karabakh in September 2020 and Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>6</sup>

The military victory of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh War triggered political instability within Armenia, while the ruling government faced harsh challenges. Nevertheless, the continuous instability and military defeat in 2020 and 2023 emboldened Armenia to shift foreign policy orientation toward the West explicitly. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan prioritized multivector diplomacy to deepen ties with different actors beyond the region and decrease dependence on the EU and Russia. Such a decision came in light of the rising diplomatic confrontation between Azerbaijan and the EU in the post-war period.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the devastating invasion of Ukraine in 2022 opened new horizons for the EU to counter Russian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia by pursuing more assertive expansion. Hence, the new realities boosted the EU's importance in the South Caucasus region, making it more eager to establish a permanent footprint in the region. Undoubtedly, the EU's new expansion towards the Caucasus aims to bring the region closer to Europe, thus making it the EU's geopolitical neighbourhood instead of the Russian geopolitical backyard.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mikhelidze, N (2009). Eastern Partnership and Conflicts in the South Caucasus: Old Wine in New Skins? URL: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eastern-partnership-and-conflicts-south-caucasus>.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford Analytica (2024).

<sup>7</sup> Ananyan, R (2024). Armenia's decisive turn towards the West. URL: [intellinews.com/comment-armenia-s-decisive-turn-towards-the-west-321676/](https://intellinews.com/comment-armenia-s-decisive-turn-towards-the-west-321676/).



This paper will analyze the changing paradigms of the EU's policy toward the South Caucasus region after 2020 and its evolving role as a non-regional geopolitical actor. It will attempt to answer the question of how the Second Karabakh War and the Russo-Ukraine War stepped up the EU's role as a peace mediator in a complex region like the South Caucasus.

## **The EU and Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Process**

As this paper argues, the Russo-Ukraine war that erupted in 2022 triggered global security cataclysms in Europe, such as food and energy crises and supply chain disruption. On the other hand, the unprecedented full-scale war in Europe since World War II empowered the EU to re-adjust its traditional restraint policy towards its eastern neighbourhood, namely the South Caucasus. Indeed, the energy crisis that Europe faced shortly after military intervention unfolded boosted the importance of the South Caucasus for the EU due to energy resources and viable transit links bypassing Russian territories.<sup>8</sup> Although the two wars in the post-Soviet region forced the EU to re-assess its geopolitical role in the world arena, it did not dismiss the claims of some scholars that the EU's nature as a power in world politics is controversial and debated in theoretical and practical discourses.<sup>9</sup>

Modern scholarship defines the EU's role as a geopolitical actor as “less effective” beyond its traditional borders.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is evident that the EU has long sought a strong presence beyond the continent by using “Europeanisation” tools. These tools were designed as a foreign policy mechanism to demonstrate a specific approach to Eastern European countries plagued with long-term conflicts. However, in fact, such an approach provided the EU only with a modest role in regional affairs.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the

---

<sup>8</sup> Hedenskog, J (2023). The EU in the South Caucasus: Making the Most of Current Opportunities. Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies. URL: <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus-making-the-most-of-current-opportunities/>.

<sup>9</sup> Schimmelfennig, F (2010). Europeanization beyond the member states. ETH Zürich, paper for Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften, Center for Comparative and International Studies.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Lavenex, S (2004). EU External Governance in ‘Wider Europe’. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11 (4), pp. 680–700.

EU's role during and after the second Karabakh war in 2020 remained minor and inconsequential until 2022.

The absence of the EU from the peace negotiating table between Azerbaijan and Armenia enabled Russia to fill the gap demonstratively emphasizing leverage despite the allegations of Moscow's declining influence in the South Caucasus. However, Russia's primary attention on Ukraine since February 2022 and its little disregard for the South Caucasus region became a golden opportunity for the EU to intervene in the Azerbaijan-Armenia peace process as a more reliable peace broker.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the newest proactive European approach has gained more vigour after several deadly incidents at the Armenian-Azerbaijan border in 2021 and 2022 that raised fears of a new all-out conflict in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The EU's intervention in the peace process was helpful in establishing the Brussels format between Baku and Yerevan, making the EU's engagement more sustained, robust, and assertive than before 2020.

Notwithstanding the EU's efforts to maintain a higher profile in the Karabakh peace process since 2022, it was not sufficient to prevent the renewed brief clashes in the region in September 2023 that completely changed the situation on the ground in favour of Azerbaijan.<sup>14</sup> As such, the responsibility of the EU to demonstrate a strong commitment to peace in a complex region in its vicinity has increased significantly after September 2023. However, harsh diplomatic statements of some EU countries, namely France and the Netherlands, toward Azerbaijan following its September military operation overshadowed the EU's peace efforts and peace broker image for a while. Indeed, the last military operation of Azerbaijan in Karabakh resulted in a mass exodus of the ethnic Armenian community,

---

<sup>12</sup> Special Eurasia (2022). Moscow's involvement in Ukraine allows the European Union to accredit itself as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Geopolitical Report; Volume 25 Issue 3. URL: [specialeurasia.com/2022/11/07/european-union-caucasus/](https://specialeurasia.com/2022/11/07/european-union-caucasus/).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., (2022).

<sup>14</sup> Srbinovski, A (2023). "Armenia: Russia's backdoor to circumvent sanctions," *New Eastern Europe*. (26 May 2023). URL: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/05/26/armenia-russias-backdoor-to-circumvent-sanctions/>.

prompting some European countries to urge the EU “to reset ties with Azerbaijan as it crossed the red line.”<sup>15</sup>

While France’s continuous criticism of Azerbaijan led to the downgrade of diplomatic relations with Baku, it also somehow triggered scepticism of Azerbaijani authorities. For example, due to the strained relations with France and some EU states, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev refused to attend the face-to-face meeting with the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Granada on October 6, 2023, with the mediation of France, Germany, and the EU. As a result, the expected meeting of Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders in Brussels at the end of October was also cancelled.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the consequences of the EU’s criticism of Azerbaijan and vice versa were cataclysmic. EU officials became more critical of Azerbaijan, while Baku launched a campaign against the EU, accusing the organization of failing to exert more pressure on Armenia to fulfill Brussels’s format requirements and sign the final peace treaty.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock said it most clearly: “Baku broke its repeated assurances to refrain from using force, causing tremendous suffering to a population already in dire straits.”<sup>18</sup>

While the debates regarding the EU’s image as a potential peace broker on the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides became more frequent, Russia repeatedly renewed efforts to intervene in the process due to its strengthening upper hand in Ukraine. Indeed, the EU’s attempts to become a reliable interlocutor between Baku and Yerevan reflected its ambitions to directly contribute to resolving one of the most complex peace processes ever. Prior to the EU’s intervention, this task was the primary responsibility of

---

<sup>15</sup> de Waal, T (2023). The EU and Azerbaijan: Time to Talk Tough. Carnegie Politika. URL: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/90631>.

<sup>16</sup> Turan Agency (2023). Aliyev-Pashinyan meeting may take place in Brussels. URL: <https://turan.az/en/politics/aliyev-pashinyan-meeting-may-take-place-in-brussels-770464>.

<sup>17</sup> Mediamax.am (2023). German expert comments on Aliyev’s criticism of the EU. URL: <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/49951/>.

<sup>18</sup> Federal Foreign Office of Germany (2023). Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. URL: [auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2618034](https://auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2618034).

the OSCE's Minsk Group for nearly three decades, albeit unsuccessfully.<sup>19</sup> After the ceasefire agreement in November, the Minsk group effectively suspended its activities, allowing Russia to briefly monopolize the peace process.

Unlike the EU's peacebuilding agenda, Russia has long sought to preserve its "guarantor" and "protector" status in the geopolitically tense region. Nonetheless, in light of the diplomatic confrontation with the West, Azerbaijan gradually shifted from its long-term "balanced foreign policy" to a pragmatic "multivector diplomacy," establishing various partnerships in the West and East, thus increasing its geopolitical profile as a small regional power in the post-war period.<sup>20</sup>

In the post-war period, Armenia took a critical stance toward Russia. Yerevan expressed a willingness to proceed with the peace process within the EU format, thus seeking additional security guarantees against Azerbaijan. In this context, Armenia's deepened strategic ties with France are of particular importance as Yerevan viewed the latter as a counterbalance to the Azerbaijan-Turkey tandem.<sup>21</sup> However, considering the fact that France does not possess strong influence or soft power over Azerbaijan, the Yerevan-Paris duo had little impact on putting pressure on Azerbaijan. Although France adopted a different policy agenda toward Azerbaijan in the last two years by making harsh statements, the collective EU was in no rush to follow suit due to the energy partnership with Baku and overshadow the results of the Brussels format. The diplomatic confrontation between Paris and Baku bypassing Brussels reached a peak point in early 2024 when, on April 2, Azerbaijan

---

<sup>19</sup> Gorecki, W (2024). The EU's ambivalent neighbours. Brussels on the South Caucasus. URL: [https://osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-03-15/eus-ambivalent-neighbours-brussels-south-caucasus#\\_ftn9](https://osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-03-15/eus-ambivalent-neighbours-brussels-south-caucasus#_ftn9).

<sup>20</sup> Eldem, T (2022). Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as the Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity. SWP Comment/C64. URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>.

<sup>21</sup> Caucasus Watch (2023). EU Mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Prospects and Challenges. URL: <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/eu-mediation-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-prospects-and-challenges.html>.

issued an official statement accusing the French Foreign Minister of intervention in domestic affairs and making baseless accusations against Baku.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the EU's efforts to be the only viable platform for the Azerbaijan – Armenia peace process in an attempt to isolate Russia throughout 2023, there were no significant achievements due to Azerbaijan's reluctance to comply with the Western-imposed agenda and Armenia's endless efforts to seek additional security guarantees under Western protection.<sup>23</sup> As the Brussels negotiations format did not yield significant results, official Baku began promoting the idea of "bilateral negotiation form without foreign mediators," thus keeping Russia, Iran, and the EU at a distance.<sup>24</sup>

Despite France and Armenia's efforts to exert pressure on Azerbaijan to accept Western mediation, official Baku maintained a firm stance, which first resulted in a December 7, 2023, joint Azerbaijan-Armenia statement on prisoners' release and an April 20, 2024, agreement entailing the return of four Azerbaijani villages in the Tavush region that fell under Armenian control in the early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Paradoxically, the last two significant accomplishments in the Azerbaijan-Armenia peace process were made possible without foreign mediation.

Despite the EU's more vigorous approach toward the South Caucasus region after the September 2023 events, it did not manage to formulate a clear strategy on time, though it expressed willingness to support the joint peace efforts. Therefore, it is highly likely that Baku and Yerevan will preserve a certain level of partnership with the EU, as it might be a useful partner in terms of post-war reconstruction and humanitarian assistance.

---

<sup>22</sup> Turan Agency (2024). Baku responds to Paris. URL: <https://turaz.az/en/politics/baku-responds-to-paris-but-not-to-tehran>.

<sup>23</sup> The Guardian (2024). Armenia turns towards the West in search of allies amid Azerbaijan tensions. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/30/armenia-turns-towards-west-in-search-of-allies-amid-azerbaijan-tensions>.

<sup>24</sup> Huseynov, V (2024). Baku wants an agreement with Armenia without mediators. URL: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/opinion-baku-wants-an-agreement-with-armenia-without-mediators-1352>.

<sup>25</sup> News Hub (2024). Baku and Yerevan have tentatively agreed on one section of the border. URL: <https://newshub.ge/en/news/world/baku-and-yerevan-have-tentatively-agreed-on-one-section-of-the-border>.

## Conclusion

In the post-war period, the EU's involvement in the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia has been more than welcomed by both parties. From the EU's point of view, the decision was an act of restoring its image in the post-2020 war and re-emerging as an influential non-regional actor. Indeed, after the invasion of Ukraine, the EU has revised and reconsidered its foreign policy and security priorities in light of new challenges. However, the complex situation in the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia did not leave enough space for the EU to compensate for its failures during the 2020 war.

Moreover, developing a detailed, long-term strategy for the South Caucasus appears to be a difficult task for the EU given the fact that this region is not situated in the immediate vicinity and all three republics pursue different foreign policy orientations in a fragmented region. Therefore, the EU's permanent presence in the South Caucasus requires proactive action, such as more economic and social projects, including policy engagement. For example, the EU could be a front-runner and main sponsor of the post-war reconstruction in Azerbaijan while making explicit moves to deepen ties to Armenia with vocal pro-Western aspirations. Such an approach would be relevant for Brussels to address the post-conflict situation in the South Caucasus and raise expectations on both sides that the EU is more than a remote partner.

## References

- Ananyan, R (2024). Armenia's decisive turn towards the West. URL: [intellinews.com/comment-armenia-s-decisive-turn-towards-the-west-321676/](https://intellinews.com/comment-armenia-s-decisive-turn-towards-the-west-321676/).
- Caucasus Watch (2023). EU Mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Prospects and Challenges. URL: <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/eu-mediation-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-prospects-and-challenges.html>.
- Eldem, T (2022). Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as the Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity. SWP Comment/C64. URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>.
- Federal Foreign Office (2023). Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. URL: [auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2618034](https://auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2618034).
- Gorecki, W (2024). The EU's ambivalent neighbours. Brussels on the South Caucasus. URL: [osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-03-15/eus-ambivalent-neighbours-brussels-south-caucasus#\\_ftn9](https://osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-03-15/eus-ambivalent-neighbours-brussels-south-caucasus#_ftn9).
- Hedenskog, J (2023). The EU in the South Caucasus: Making the Most of Current Opportunities. Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies. URL: <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus-making-the-most-of-current-opportunities/>.
- Huseynov, V (2024). Baku wants an agreement with Armenia without mediators. URL: <https://aircenter.az/en/single/opinion-baku-wants-an-agreement-with-armenia-without-mediators-1352>.
- Lavenex, S (2004). EU External Governance in 'Wider Europe'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11 (4), pp. 680–700.
- Linder, C; Deen, B; Zweers, B (2023). The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil. Clingendael Institute. URL: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2023/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus/>.
- Mediamax.am (2023). German expert comments on Aliyev's criticism of the EU. URL: <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/49951/>.
- Mikhelidze, N (2009). Eastern Partnership and Conflicts in the South Caucasus: Old Wine in New Skins? URL: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eastern-partnership-and-conflicts-south-caucasus>.

- News Hub (2024). Baku and Yerevan have tentatively agreed on one section of the border. URL: <https://newshub.ge/en/news/world/baku-and-yerevan-have-tentatively-agreed-on-one-section-of-the-border>.
- Oxford Analytica (2024). The EU will encounter obstacles in the South Caucasus. URL: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/OXAN-DB285060/full/html>.
- Poghosyan, B (2023). The EU can bring peace to the South Caucasus. ISPI. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-eu-can-bring-peace-to-the-south-caucasus-126773>.
- Schimmelfennig, F (2010). Europeanization beyond the member states. ETH Zurich, paper for Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften, Center for Comparative and International Studies.
- Special Eurasia (2022). Moscow's involvement in Ukraine allows the European Union to accredit itself as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Geopolitical Report; Volume 25 Issue 3. URL: [specialeurasia.com/2022/11/07/european-union-caucasus/](https://specialeurasia.com/2022/11/07/european-union-caucasus/).
- Srbinovski, A (2023). "Armenia: Russia's backdoor to circumvent sanctions," New Eastern Europe. URL: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/05/26/armenia-russias-backdoor-to-circumvent-sanctions/>.
- The Guardian (2024). Armenia turns towards the West in search of allies amid Azerbaijan tensions. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/30/armenia-turns-towards-west-in-search-of-allies-amid-azerbaijan-tensions>.
- Turan Agency (2023). Aliyev-Pashinyan meeting may take place in Brussels. URL: <https://turaz.az/en/politics/aliyev-pashinyan-meeting-may-take-place-in-brussels-770464>.
- Turan Agency (2024). Baku responds to Paris. URL: <https://turaz.az/en/politics/baku-responds-to-paris-but-not-to-tehran>.
- Waal, T (2023). The EU and Azerbaijan: Time to Talk Tough. Carnegie Politika. URL: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/90631>.



# EU's Role in South Caucasus Viewed from Russia

*Yeghia Tashjian*

## Introduction

During his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Russia's President Vladimir Putin expressed significant points complaining about the United States' unilateral dominance in the global system and its almost "un-contained hyper use of force in international relations."<sup>1</sup> The Russian President quoted a 1990 speech by Manfred Worner, Secretary General of NATO (1988–1994), to support his position that back then, NATO officials had promised not to expand further to the East. Putin stated, "(Worner) said at the time that: the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee."<sup>2</sup> "Where are these guarantees?" asked Putin.<sup>3</sup>

Russia did not have the same attitude towards the enlargement of the European Union. Although Moscow strongly opposed NATO's enlargement, it initially viewed the EU positively. Back then, Russian economists suggested that with the EU enlargement, Russian minor short-term economic losses would be adjusted with long-term benefits from trade and standardization of custom procedures.<sup>4</sup> However, Moscow started reviewing its policy towards the EU when the latter adopted the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, which established a framework of cooperation with Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The objective of this initiative was to promote economic, political, and cultural interactions between EU members and these states, like the relations the EU promoted in the post-

---

<sup>1</sup> "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy." *kremlin.ru*, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>, last accessed 3/4/2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Leonid A. Karabeshkin and Dinar R. Spechler "EU and NATO Enlargement: Russia's Expectations, Responses and Options for the Future," *European Security*, Volume 16, 2007-Issue 3–4, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09662830701776056>, last accessed 3/4/2024.

Soviet countries that later joined the Union. This policy threatened Russia's position in the post-Soviet space. Moscow was concerned that several countries in its traditional zone sphere of influence may be encouraged to distance themselves from Russia and join the EU. The "colour revolutions" that spread in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan consolidated the idea that the West was behind the regime changes in the post-Soviet region. Hence, Russia observed this process "predominantly in geopolitical terms," and as a future threat to its national security and territorial integrity.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between the EU and Russia remained relatively calm until 2014, when the Ukrainian crisis erupted and Russia annexed Crimea, leading to the establishment of de-facto pro-Russian authorities in Donbas. Even if the 2008 Georgian-Russian war survived the winds of change, the annexation of Crimea, and later, the 2022 war in Ukraine, closed the door for any possible reconciliation between Moscow and Brussels.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) accused the US and its allies of waging a new form of hybrid war against Russia.<sup>7</sup> The FPC mentions that most European states pursue an aggressive policy toward Russia aiming to induce security threats, undermine political stability, and create obstacles to Russia's cooperation with allies and partners. To neutralize this threat the FPC suggests Russia should adhere to regionalism and give additional weight to regional organizations and cooperation with rising Eurasian powers.

This paper, divided into three sections, reflects how Russian experts and officials view the EU as becoming an important geopolitical political player in the South Caucasus. The first part presents Russia's global view of the international system; the second part analyzes the conflict of interest between Russia and the "Collective West" in Eurasia; finally, the last part addresses Russia's perception of the EU's expanding role in the South Caucasus, an area known as Russia's traditional sphere of influence. We will see that the Ukraine crisis was a turning point in Russia's attitude towards the EU. Since the war, Russia started viewing the EU as the political extension of NATO

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Timofeev, "Russia-West: Rising Stakes," *Valdai Discussion Club*, June 30, 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-west-rising-stakes/>, last accessed 3/4/2024.

<sup>7</sup> "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/), last accessed 3/4/2024.

in the region. To go deeper into Russia's perception and understand Russia's foreign policy motives, this paper engages in a literature review of key Russian publications addressing the above-mentioned sections. They include articles, opinion pieces, academic papers, and policy briefs published by key Russian policy institutions and think tanks, reflecting the ideas of Russian experts and sometimes policymakers.<sup>8</sup>

## **Russia's Worldview of a Multipolar Global System**

While reading through the literature of Russian policy and analytic papers addressing the current developments in Ukraine and the transition in the global order, we can discern repetitions or reminders of historical examples, often linked to crucial historical events that shaped European security and world order. The Congress of Vienna (1815),<sup>9</sup> the Yalta Conference (1945),<sup>10</sup> and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) are repeatedly mentioned in multiple articles. The first two dates are crucial as they followed wars that redrew the map of Europe, legitimizing Russia as an important European player. Meanwhile, the Cuban Missile Crisis showed that Russia could be a global player and that other powers such as the US should come to terms and negotiate with Russia. Many Russian experts have mentioned that the conflict resolution of Ukraine needs similar arrangements that would ultimately redraw the map of Europe and create new zones of influence.<sup>11</sup>

The logic in remembering these dates, like the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna, which founded the Concert of Europe (1815–1914), is that they can be viewed as an important institutional contribution by the Russian Empire

---

<sup>8</sup> The main source of these publications are the Valdai Discussion Club, *Russia in Global Affairs* journal, and Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

<sup>9</sup> Denis A. Borisov and Tatiana A. Chernoverskaya, "The Idea of "Perpetual Peace" in the Foreign Policy Practice of European Monarchs A Story of How a Czech, a Frenchman, and a Russian Tried to Create a Fair World Order", *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 3 (83), July–September 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/perpetual-peace/>, last accessed 23/4/2024.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei A. Sushentov, "Strategy of Sentimentality in EU Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/breakdown-of-eu-russia-ties/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan A. Safranchuk, "A Reverse Cuban Missile Crisis: Fading Red Lines," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/reverse-cuban-missile-crisis/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

to the creation of a new international system where power was distributed among major European powers, creating spheres of influence. A system in which every European power respected the sphere of influence of other powers, refraining from intervening in their domestic affairs and addressing conflicts through dialogue and compromise. Today, according to Russian political logic, the international system is reverting to a multipolar format resembling the situation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.<sup>12</sup> Many Russian experts call the era of the “Concert of Europe” (1815–1914), the “longest peaceful period,” which was based on the balance of power and most importantly on the inclusion and integration of Napoleonic France, the defeated power. They argue that the West did not renew the model of the Congress of Vienna after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, pointing out that the Cold War ended in an arrangement very close to the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the old Cold War did not end, and over the years, it has transformed into or was replaced by a “New Cold War.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Fyodor Lukyanov, the newly emerged Russia first sought to integrate into the Western-led security order. However, later on, a huge disappointment emerged on the Russian side as it became clear by the end of the 1990s that the West would not integrate them into its regional architecture. This disappointment was rooted in the fact that in the early 1990s, Russia tried its best to join the Western club and was rejected, leaving a mark on the Russian political consciousness.<sup>15</sup> Lukyanov argues that if the West had acted differently and had included Russia in its institutions, instead of expanding the “Cold War era institutions” (that is NATO), today the world would have avoided the current situation; i.e. the war in Ukraine. The author adds “Instead of pushing Russia out of the system, the system itself must

---

<sup>12</sup> Denis A. Borisov, and Tatiana A. Chenoverskaya, “The Idea of ‘Perpetual Peace’ in the Foreign Policy Practice of European Monarchs,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Rein Mullerson, “What Went Wrong: From the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Rise of New Fences,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/what-went-wrong/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

<sup>14</sup> Timofei Bordachev, “25 Years of the New Cold War,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, March 27, 2024, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/25-years-of-the-new-cold-war/>, last accessed 28/3/2024.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor A. Lukyanov, “Old Thinking for Our Country and the World,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/old-thinking/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

cease to exist so that a new one could begin to form on entirely new conditions, different from those of the previous three decades.”<sup>16</sup> This is why Russia considers the post-Cold War international order “blatantly despotic.”<sup>17</sup>

This “New Cold War” as Russian experts call it, between the US on one side, and China and Russia on the other side, will likely intensify as the strategic partnership between China and Russia solidifies. This was clearly reflected on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as without Beijing’s political and financial backing, Moscow would have faced heightened challenges in resisting the Western-imposed sanctions.<sup>18</sup> For the Russian side, the “New Cold War” will remain the basic feature of great power relations in the future.

However, Russian experts recognize Russia’s vulnerable position in this “New Cold War.” Alexey Kupriyanov states that Russia is economically and technologically inferior and risks losing the war in Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> The only guarantee for Russia to survive the war is to develop a strategy and objectives based on cooperation with other regional and continental independent rising powers. For a country in a weak position, the main task is to “strengthen itself, which can only be done through a strategic offensive.”<sup>20</sup> For this reason, Russia must form a “neutral alliance of understanding”<sup>21</sup> with China, improve relations with rising powers, strengthen its national economy and political image, and adopt an independent foreign policy in other regions and areas of international cooperation.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Timofei V. Bordachev, “Diplomacy after Procedure: Why Foreign Policy Will Require Figures of a Special Kind,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/diplomacy-after-procedure/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>18</sup> Zhao Huasheng, “The Pendulum of History: Thirsty Years after the Soviet Union,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-pendulum-of-history/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

<sup>19</sup> Alexey V. Kupriyanov, “Cold War as a Special Type of Conflict: A Strategic Sketch,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/strategic-sketch/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

In parallel idea, Sergei Karaganov argues that NATO's continuing expansion and attempts to draw Ukraine into its bloc have created an unacceptable security situation for Moscow.<sup>23</sup> To contain the West and prevent its further expansion into Russia's sphere of influence, Moscow must not strive for the role of a global superpower, which has led to the destruction of the Soviet Union. Instead, it should create partnerships with rising powers across the globe by creating regional and extra-regional organizations. It is worth mentioning that Russia's view of global and regional affairs is deeply rooted in Russian realism, that is the preservation of the balance of power and Russia's regionalism.<sup>24</sup>

Within this context, Lodislav Zemanek argues that neoliberal globalization is being replaced by regionalization and the "Global Majority's" sovereign internationalism, where "Western hegemonism is in stark contrast to Eurasian initiatives and their paradigm based upon peaceful coexistence and sovereign internationalism."<sup>25</sup> According to the author, Eurasia is becoming a center of the global competition area. Therefore, the projects and initiatives carried out in the region, such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, are creating conditions for effective enforcement of the interests of the Global Majority. Zemanek argues that these "processes of pluralization and democratization of international relations" were facilitated by the war in Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> He also states that Moscow has proved resilient enough in finding new opportunities, and the conflict has

---

<sup>23</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov, "From Constructive Destruction to Gathering: An Art Essay on the Future of Russian Politics," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/from-destruction-to-gathering/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov and Pavel A. Tsygankov, "Might Makes No Right: Realism and International Relations Theory," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/might-makes-no-right/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

<sup>25</sup> Lodislav Zemanek, "The Rise of Liberal Authoritarianism and Global Transition to Polycentrism," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/global-transition-to-polycentrism/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

contributed to the establishment of the Global Majority's rule within the polycentric international order. Hence, the old hegemonic system is in decline, and the new one is already on the table.

Moreover, Prokhor Tebin argues that with the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Western-backed colour revolutions sweeping across the post-Soviet space clearly meant that the West did not intend to respect Russia's zone of influence and national interests. The Russians felt that, just like the Ottomans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were regarded as the sick man of Europe. A proof of this argument, according to Russian officials, is the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, which proved that the US ignored Russia's opinion in international affairs. Trying to contain the Western influence in Eurasia, Tebin suggests three policies that should be undertaken by Moscow:

1. Ensuring stability in the current sphere of influence, which includes the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)/EAEU, as well as Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Syria.
2. Increasing cooperation with China to contain NATO.
3. Developing relations with countries that seek to develop independent foreign policies such as India, Turkey, Iran, and others in Asia, Africa, and South America.<sup>27</sup>

Hence, we can argue that Russia's attempt to create regional organizations reveals their cruciality as a tool to contain Western penetration into Eurasia. This idea was clearly reflected in one of the reports published by the Valdai Discussion Club in 2022. One of the reports claims that the need for international restructuring is extremely pressing, as states are facing multiple challenges, including existential ones.<sup>28</sup> Adding that the economic war of the West against Russia has valued regional interaction that is immune to external interference relying on regional interaction and creating special communities can resolve the issues and challenges of countries with limited

---

<sup>27</sup> Prokhor Yu. Tebin, "When Will This Zap End? Speculating on the Struggle for a New World Order," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/when-will-this-zap-end/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>28</sup> Oleg Barabanov, Timofei Bordachev, Yaroslav Lissovolik, Fyodor Lukyanov, Andrey Sushentsov, Ivan Timofeev, "A World Without Superpowers," *Valdai Discussion Club*, October 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/a-world-without-superpowers/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

resources.<sup>29</sup> By being part of a regional association, these countries will have “a good chance to find their own niche, take advantage of the collective potential, and contribute to it.”<sup>30</sup>

## **Regionalism and Containing the West in Eurasia**

According to Dmitry V. Trenin, the “Great Game” between Russia and the West is no more a game, but a total war.<sup>31</sup> The expert mentions that the fact that the West strives to exclude Russia from global affairs and intends to destroy Russia’s economy is the greatest threat. Trenin mentions that the main objective of the US-led West is not only to resolve the “Russian question” but also to create a favourable environment for victory against China. He also warns that it is highly likely that the theatre of the “hybrid war” will move from Ukraine further to the east. For this, he suggests building a new system of international relations together with non-Western countries and forming a new world order for which Russia must strengthen its security and consolidate its position in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In particular, Russia must reinforce its economic relations with the “World Majority”<sup>32</sup> countries, mainly rising powers such as China, India, Turkey, and Iran, and should put greater effort to focus on building international institutions such as the EAEU, CSTO, SCO, BRICS, etc. However, Trenin realizes that the main challenge is forcing NATO countries to recognize Russia’s sphere of influence and “new borders.”

These ideas are also clearly reflected and elaborated in the new Foreign Policy Concept of Russia (FPC), which was approved on March 31, 2023. Alexander Konkov analyzed the new FPC, highlighting the section “National Interest of the Russian Federation in the Foreign Policy Sphere, Strategic Goals

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Dmitry V. Trenin, “How Russia Must Reinvent Itself to Defeat the West’s ‘Hybrid War,’” *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 24, 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-must-reinvent-itself/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

<sup>32</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov, “An Age of Wars? Article One,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, January 1, 2024, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/an-age-of-wars-article-one/>, last accessed 9/4/2024.



and Main Task of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.”<sup>33</sup> According to Konkov, three strategic goals guide Russia’s foreign policy:<sup>34</sup>

1. Ensuring the security of the Russian Federation, its sovereignty in all spheres, and its territorial integrity;
2. Creating external conditions that enhance Russia’s development;
3. Strengthening the position of the Russian Federation as one of the responsible, influential, and independent centres in the modern world.

The second point is particularly important when analyzing Russia’s role in its traditional spheres of influence, mainly the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In these areas, the expansion of Russian-led institutions and the shaping of local economies by making them dependent on Russia, are key to the development of the Russian economy.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, from the Russian perspective, the country is preparing for a long clash with the West in Eurasia and will insist on continuing this clash until conditional peace is achieved. As Sergei Karaganov mentioned, peace with the West can only be achieved by “breaking the West’s will to expand and continue the confrontation.”<sup>36</sup>

To restore peace, though conditionally, Boris Mezhuiev suggests that the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia must begin serious negotiations on the demilitarization of the Baltic-Black Sea space. This could take place through the end of hostilities in Ukraine and the fixation of the border between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic zones of influence. The split of Ukraine in this

---

<sup>33</sup> Alexander E. Konkov, “Rules for a Game without Rules,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/rules-for-a-game-without-rules/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Unlike in the previous FPC where it was mentioned that Russia aims to reform the OSCE, the Concept has now ignored the role of the OSCE. It mentioned 18 names of countries that Russia should prioritize: Belorussia (first), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (second and third respectively), China and India (fourth and fifth respectively), Iran (eighth), Turkey (tenth), the US in the eighteenth place.

<sup>36</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov, “We are Shaking off the Western Yoke...,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 19, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/shaking-off-the-western-yoke/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.

context is inevitable, Mezheuv suggests.<sup>37</sup> When talking about “peace” Russian experts mean a conditional peace based on Russian victory where the West would subordinate to Russia’s will. One of the reasons behind this logic is Russia’s opinion that the political reconciliation between Moscow and Brussels in the early 1990s helped legitimize NATO’s expansion to Russia’s sphere of influence.<sup>38</sup> It is for this reason that Russia now views the EU as a “militarizing actor.”<sup>39</sup>

To prevent the EU’s role from turning into a political-military influence, Prokhor Tebin suggests that Russia should counter NATO’s expansion in Moldova and South Caucasus. Tebin argues that the West aims to isolate Russia in the Black Sea region and create insecurity in the Caucasus and Central Asia. According to him, this policy is pushed by the US, NATO, and EU.<sup>40</sup>

### **Russia’s Perception of the EU’s Role in the South Caucasus**

Russia views the NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and the color revolutions, which all aim to foster liberal democracy and Western values, presumably producing pro-Western leaders in Russia’s “near abroad”, as an existential threat.<sup>41</sup> For Moscow, the EU’s expansion beyond the Black Sea region would create additional tension with Russia and promote Western interests in Yerevan and Baku by distancing them from the neighbourhood.<sup>42</sup> For this

---

<sup>37</sup> Boris V. Mezheuv, “Civilizational Indifference: Can Russia Keep Up Cultural Distancing in Relations with Europe?” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 4(80), October–December 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/civilizational-indifference/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>38</sup> Prokhor Yu. Tebin, “Thunder in the West Portending Tempest in the East,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 22, No. 1 (85), January–March 2024, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/thunder-in-the-west/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

<sup>39</sup> Tatiana A. Rimanova, “Breakdown of EU-Russia Transnational Ties: Causes and Consequences,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/breakdown-of-eu-russia-ties/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>40</sup> Tebin, “Thunder in the West Portending Tempest in the East,” 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Larisa V. Deriglazova, “Time is Out of Joint: EU and Russia in Quest of Themselves in Time,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 4 (84), October–December 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/time-is-out-of-joint/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Vignes, “France and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Role of French Diplomacy,” *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*, September 19, 2023, <https://russian>

reason, Russian leaders unsurprisingly consider the EU “Eastern Partnership” (EP) hostile to their country’s interests. Russian Foreign minister (FM) Sergei Lavrov complained that the EU is trying to create a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. In fact, Russia sees EU expansion as a stalking horse for NATO enlargement.<sup>43</sup>

Russia’s position illustrates Moscow’s “zero-sum game” political logic.<sup>44</sup> According to Ekaterina Chimiris, Russia has a highly negative perception of the EU’s policies related to the EP, viewing it as “Europe’s geopolitical project.”<sup>45</sup> Chimiris calls the countries associated with the EP “buffer zones” who have engaged in a zero-sum game strategy: if they side with the loser, they lose too. The expert argues that today’s EU-Russia relations concerning the EP are stuck in this zero-sum game mode. This logic was deeply highlighted in the events that followed the war in Ukraine in February 2022. A war that Russia argues it is waging for geopolitical and civilization purposes against the collective West.

In 2020 following Armenia’s defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the fall of Stepanakert in September 2023, Yerevan started distancing itself from Moscow and “pivoting to the West”. This foreign policy shift raised alarms in Moscow. Interestingly, although Russia appreciated Georgia’s “balanced position” in the region, by refusing to sanction Russia while Tbilisi pursued integration with the Euro-Atlantic, it took a different approach towards its traditional ally Armenia.<sup>46</sup>

---

council.ru/en/blogs/t-vignes/france-and-the-nagornokarabakh-conflict-the-role-of-french-diplomacy/, last accessed 12/3/2024.

<sup>43</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities,” *Yale University Press*, 2018, pp. 172–174.

<sup>44</sup> Ekaterina Chimiris, “Eastern Partnership Countries: Buffer Zone or Platform for Dialogue?,” *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*, November 11, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/eastern-partnership-countries-buffer-zone-or-platform-for-dialogue/>, last accessed 12/3/2024.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Andrey Petrov, “Georgia in a New World: Between Russia and the West,” *Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)*, March 9, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/georgia-in-a-new-world-between-russia-and-the-west/>, last accessed 12/3/2024.

Thus, in October 2022, Russia unsurprisingly criticized the EU's decision to send a civilian mission to Armenia's border with Azerbaijan following the Azerbaijani military incursion on Armenian territory. The Russian FM Sergei Lavrov stated, "We see this as yet another attempt by the EU to interfere by any means in the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, to oust our country's mediation efforts."<sup>47</sup> Russia also mentioned that the EU has transformed into an "appendage of the US and NATO, and is carrying out a confrontational policy only bringing geopolitical competition into the region and exacerbating existing conflicts."<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that the nature of the monitoring mission is civilian, Moscow perceives the EU's monitoring mission as a first step for a possible Western military deployment in its traditional sphere of influence. Within this context, Russia's FM announced, "We should not be deceived by the declared civilian nature of the mission as it is formulated in the framework of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy with all the attendant consequences."<sup>49</sup> In March 2023, during a press conference with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Russia's FM said that the EU's mission to Armenia raises many important questions about its functions and mandate.<sup>50</sup>

Russia also believes that the monitoring mission has an agenda and reflects the EU's policy to hijack Armenia from Russia's arms. Commenting on the role of the EU observers, Russia's FM spokeswoman Maria Zakharova mentioned that the monitors are spying and collecting intelligence data on Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran.<sup>51</sup> Russia insists that the EU is in the region to replace it and set military footing. Lavrov accused the West of pressuring Armenia

---

<sup>47</sup> Lillian Avedian, "Russia criticizes EU agreement to send observer mission to Armenia-Azerbaijan border," *Armenian Weekly*, October 12, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/12/russia-criticizes-eu-agreement-to-send-observer-mission-to-armenia-azerbaijan-border/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>48</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Russia strongly criticizes new EU mission in Armenia," *Eurasianet*, June 27, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-strongly-criticizes-new-eu-mission-in-armenia>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ismail Aghayeb, "Lavrov accuses EU of 'abusing' Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict," *OC Media*, March 1, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/lavrov-accuses-eu-of-abusing-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>51</sup> "Zakharova: EU observers in Armenia 'spy' on Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan," *Mediamax*, March 20, 2024, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/region/54268/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

to end Russia's military presence in the country adding, "We have information that they are signalling to the Armenians: Come to us, kick the Russians out of your territory, remove the (Russian) base and border guards too, the Americans will help to ensure your security".<sup>52</sup> In an interview with TASS, Russia's FM also mentioned that the EU is not trying to bring peace and stability to the South Caucasus, but aims only "to squeeze out Moscow," and repeat the same mistakes the West did in other regions such as Balkan, Middle East, and Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> Yerevan's rapprochement with EU and NATO member states and their defence cooperation is raising concerns in Moscow, which perceives the trend as "unfriendly steps" taken by Armenia.<sup>54</sup>

Russia's insistence that the EU has a military agenda in the South Caucasus is a clear reflection of its declining role in the region. Years ago, Russian officials did not make such announcements, at least not publicly, when assessing the EU's role in the region. Now, Russia views the EU as a major competitor aiming not only to shape the economy but also the security and geopolitics of the region and open the gate for NATO. Within this context, on March 28, 2024, in an interview with *Izvestia*, Lavrov accused the EU mission in Armenia of turning into a "NATO mission."<sup>55</sup> Russia views the EU's role in the region from a "solely geopolitical background."<sup>56</sup> Russia also believes that Brussels and Washington are convincing Yerevan to leave the CSTO.<sup>57</sup> Multiple times, Russian officials warned Armenia "not to suffer the

---

<sup>52</sup> Astghik Bedevian, "Russia's Lavrov Blasts West's 'Provocative' Policy On Armenia," *Azadutyun*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32415683.html>, last accessed 9/4/2024.

<sup>53</sup> "EU and USA do not want to bring peace to Armenia, only to squeeze out Moscow, Lavrov says," *First Channel News*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.1lurer.am/en/2023/12/28/EU-and-USA-do-not-want-to-bring-peace-to-Armenia-only-to-squeeze-out-Moscow-Lavrov-says/1053881>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>54</sup> "Armenia Turning Way From Russia, Says Lavrov," *Azadutyun*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32750871.html>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>55</sup> "Lavrov: EU mission in Armenia is turning into a NATO mission," *News.am*, March 28, 2024, <https://news.am/eng/news/814964.html>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>56</sup> "Zakharova: Moscow Considers EU Mission to Armenia as Attempt to Squeeze it From the Region," *Massis Post*, February 21, 2023, <https://massispost.com/2023/02/zakharova-moscow-considers-eu-mission-to-armenia-as-attempt-to-squeeze-it-from-the-region/>, 1/4/2024.

<sup>57</sup> "US and EU push Armenia to withdraw from the CSTO," Zakharova say, *Mediamax*, September 27, 2023, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/52669/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

same fate as Ukraine.”<sup>58</sup> Russian officials accused the EU of being an “extra-regional factor” that has a “hidden agenda.”<sup>59</sup> Hence, Moscow views the unarmed EU monitoring mission as an attempt to undermine Russia’s position in the South Caucasus, which in the future could turn into a permanent NATO base.

To contain the EU’s role in the South Caucasus, Russia is cooperating with other regional actors, mainly Turkey to preserve the current status quo. This strategic concept called “offshore balancing”, is supported by many realist thinkers in international relations. This concept presents that a great power uses key regional actors to prevent the emergence of powerful hostile actors.<sup>60</sup> It can be used to better understand Russia’s rapprochement with Turkey politically and Iran economically in the South Caucasus to shape the region’s geopolitical and geo-economic architecture and prevent Western interference.

Within this context, Russian experts value the importance of regional organizations such as the EAEU, arguing that its main task is to ensure economic stability and development in Russia’s neighbourhood.<sup>61</sup> Leonid Sutyryin argues that Russia’s military success in Ukraine could have a direct impact on the future of the EAEU, as it would significantly increase its geopolitical prestige and create a powerful incentive for new countries to join the economic bloc.<sup>62</sup> For this to be fulfilled Russia must cooperate with regional

---

<sup>58</sup> Marianna Mkrtchyan, “Zakharova wishes ‘Yerevan not to suffer the fate of Kyiv’ due to EU-Armenia rapprochement,” *Arminfo*, March 6, 2024, [https://arminfo.info/full\\_news.php?id=82339&lang=3](https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=82339&lang=3), last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>59</sup> Elena Teslova, “Russia sees EU presence in Armenia as attempt to oust it from region,” *Anadolu Agency*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-sees-eu-presence-in-armenia-as-attempt-to-oust-it-from-region/2922789>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

<sup>60</sup> Safranchuk, “A Reverse Cuban Missile Crisis: Fading Red Lines,” 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Leonid E. Slutsky, Elena A. Khudorenko, “The EAEU amid Global Uncertainty: Integration Dilemma Revisited,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/eaue-amid-global-uncertainty/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>62</sup> Vyacheslav V. Sutyryin, “Special Military Operation in Ukraine: Consequences for the EAEU and Eurasian Integration,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, May 24, 2022, <https://valdai.club.com/a/highlights/special-operation-in-ukraine-consequences/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

powers. While in Central Asia, Russia engages with China to stem the growing American and European influence and prevent the spread of colour revolutions in the South Caucasus,<sup>63</sup> as seen after November 2020, Russia also cooperates to some extent with Turkey and Iran to contain rising Western influence. Hence, regionalism has been a tool for Moscow to engage with regional actors and deter European or American influence.

Here, despite Turkey being a NATO member, the decision-makers of the Kremlin have positively assessed its independent foreign policy. Dmitri Trenin acknowledges that since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia was forced to accept Turkey's growing role in the region. Its position in Armenia has suffered due to the "prevalence of Western-leading individuals in the current government, and Yerevan's defeat in the war, despite being Moscow's military ally."<sup>64</sup> He raises the concern that Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh could encourage Georgia to seek military solutions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the future, pushing Moscow to build up its forward positions in these two regions. To preserve the regional status quo, Pavel Shlikov argues that in Turkey's new strategy, Russia has become an important source of Turkish strategic autonomy, while the war in Ukraine has opened new opportunities for both countries. Shlikov mentions that Turkey now aims to limit the involvement of extra-regional powers and is not interested in reversing the regional status quo. There is also a clear regional dimension of interaction between Russia and Turkey where both countries have accommodated each other's interests and successfully compartmentalized their conflicts. Of course, the Middle Eastern transformation towards greater polycentricity reactivated this cooperation. The new format of regional cooperation resulted in specific interaction between Ankara and Moscow in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, Turkey's mediation activities correlated to a certain extent with Russia's interests.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Alexander V. Lukin, "Sino-U.S. Rivalry in the Asia-Pacific: Declarations and Actual Policies," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 1 (81), January–March 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/sino-us-rivalry-in-asia-pacific/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

<sup>64</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia and Europe; the Current Impasse and the Way Out," *Carnegie Moscow*, February 18, 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/83905>, last accessed 4/4/2024.

<sup>65</sup> Pavel V. Shlykov, "The State of Strategic Hedging: Turkey's Foreign Policy and Relations with Russia," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September,

However, without certain economic incentives to the region, Russia cannot hold its position. The war in Ukraine created additional considerable economic challenges for Moscow. Russia is now facing massive transport restrictions, as its access to many seaports and airspace was restricted due to the sanctions, on top of which additional trade restrictions applied.<sup>66</sup> It is in this context that we have to understand Russia's attempt to control key regional trade routes, like Syunik in southern Armenia, and to strengthen its economic and political ties with key regional transit countries, especially Azerbaijan and Iran.

## Reflection and Conclusion

The events leading to Azerbaijan's seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh were a vivid illustration of Moscow's managed declining role in the region. Russia is no longer the sole player but one of the several major powers vying for influence. Meanwhile, the announcement of EU candidate status for Georgia on November 8, 2023, will have broader implications for the EU and Russia in the South Caucasus. The EU seems set to increase its involvement in the region, an area of increasing geopolitical and geo-economic importance, especially in the field of energy security, as Europe is striving to diversify its energy supplies and facilitate alternative cargo trade routes between the East and the West.

At the political, security, and economic levels, the EU is striving for complete decoupling from Russia in order to isolate it and contain its influence in the South Caucasus.<sup>67</sup> EU's expansion will also destabilize Russia's regional economic projects as local actors may be attracted to Western-backed projects aiming to bypass Russia. For this to be fulfilled, South Caucasian states must integrate into the Western economic and security architecture and push Russia out of the region. Moreover, Russia perceives the

---

2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-state-of-strategic-hedging/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

<sup>66</sup> Ivan N. Timofeev, "Sanctions on Russia: A New Chapter," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/sanctions-new-chapter/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

<sup>67</sup> Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers and Camille Linder, "The EU in the South Caucasus," *Clingendael magazine*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-south-caucasus>, last accessed 3/4/2024.



EU's growing role in the region as a spearhead for NATO's expansion further to the east. This is one of the main reasons why Russia views the EU's monitoring mission in Armenia as a threat to its regional designs in the South Caucasus. To evade the occurrence of a scenario similar to the one that happened after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) when many former Soviet client states joined the EU and later NATO, Russia will seek the cooperation of regional and local actors that aim to minimize Western influence in their backyard to avoid the "Balticization" of the South Caucasus. This goal can be achieved only through regionalism, thus integrating local actors into regional partnerships either by providing economic incentives or using force.

## References

### Academic References

- Barabanov, O., Bordachev, T., Lissovolik, Y., Lukyanov, F., Sushentsov, A., and Timofeey, I. “A World Without Superpowers,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, October 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/a-world-without-superpowers/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Bordachev, Timofei. “25 Years of the New Cold War,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, March 27, 2024, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/25-years-of-the-new-cold-war/>, last accessed 28/3/2024.
- Bordachev, Timofei V. “Diplomacy after Procedure: Why Foreign Policy Will Require Figures of a Special Kind,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/diplomacy-after-procedure/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Borisov, Denis A. and Chenoverskaya, Tatiana A. “The Idea of ‘Perpetual Peace’ in the Foreign Policy Practice of European Monarchs,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/perpetual-peace/>, last accessed 8/4/2024.
- Chimiris, Ekaterina. “Eastern Partnership Countries: Buffer Zone or Platform for Dialogue?,” Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), November 11, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/eastern-partnership-countries-buffer-zone-or-platform-for-dialogue/>, last accessed 12/3/2024.
- Deen, B., Zweers, W., and Linder, C. “The EU in the South Caucasus,” *Clingendael magazine*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-south-caucasus>, last accessed 3/4/2024.
- Deriglazova, Larisa V. “Time is Out of Joint: EU and Russia in Quest of Themselves in Time,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 4 (84), October–December 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/time-is-out-of-joint/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.
- Huasheng, Zhao. “The Pendulum of History: Thirsty Years after the Soviet Union,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-pendulum-of->

- history/, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Karabeshkin, Leonid A. and Spechler, Dinar R. "EU and NATO Enlargement: Russia's Expectations, Responses and Options for the Future," *European Security*, Volume 16, 2007-Issue 3–4, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09662830701776056>, last accessed 3/4/2024.
- Karaganov, Sergei A. "From Constructive Destruction to Gathering: An Art Essay on the Future of Russian Politics," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/from-destruction-to-gathering/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Karakanov, Sergei A. "We are Shaking off the Western Yoke...," *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 19, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/shaking-off-the-western-yoke/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Konkov, Alexander E. "Rules for a Game without Rules," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/rules-for-a-game-without-rules/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.
- Kupriyanov, Alexey V. "Cold War as a Special Type of Conflict: A Strategic Sketch," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/strategic-sketch/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Lukin, Alexander V. "Sino-U.S. Rivalry in the Asia-Pacific: Declarations and Actual Policies," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 1 (81), January–March 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/sino-us-rivalry-in-asia-pacific/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.
- Lukyanov, Fyodor A. "Old Thinking for Our Country and the World," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/old-thinking/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Mearsheimer, John J. "The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities," *Yale University Press*, 2018, pp. 172–174.
- Mezhuev, Boris V. "Civilizational Indifference: Can Russia Keep Up Cultural Distancing in Relations with Europe?," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 4 (80), October–December 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/civilizational-indifference/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Mullerson, Rein. "What Went Wrong: From the Fall of the Berlin Wall

- to the Rise of New Fences,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/what-went-wrong/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Petrov, Andrey. “Peace in Southern Caucasus: What Awaits Russia in Azerbaijan,” Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), February 8, 2024, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/peace-in-southern-caucasus-what-awaits-russia-in-azerbaijan/>, last accessed 12/3/2024.
- Petrov, Andrey. “Georgia in a New World: Between Russia and the West,” Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), March 9, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/georgia-in-a-new-world-between-russia-and-the-west/>, last accessed 12/3/2024.
- Rimanova, Tatiana A. “Breakdown of EU-Russia Transnational Ties: Causes and Consequences,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/breakdown-of-eu-russia-ties/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Safranchuk, Ivan A. “A Reverse Cuban Missile Crisis: Fading Red Lines,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/reverse-cuban-missile-crisis/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Shlykov, Pavel V. “The State of Strategic Hedging: Turkey’s Foreign Policy and Relations with Russia,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-state-of-strategic-hedging/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.
- Slutsky, Leonid E. and Khudorenko, Elena A. “The EAEU amid Global Uncertainty: Integration Dilemma Revisited,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/eaeu-amid-global-uncertainty/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Sushentov, Andrei A. “Strategy of Sentimentality in EU Foreign Policy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/breakdown-of-eu-russia-ties/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Sutyurin, Vyacheslav V. “Special Military Operation in Ukraine: Consequences for the EAEU and Eurasian Integration,” *Valdai Discussion Club*, May 24, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/special-operation-in-ukraine-consequences/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.

- Tebin, Prokhor Yu. "Thunder in the West Portending Tempest in the East," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 22, No. 1 (85), January–March 2024, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/thunder-in-the-west/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.
- Tebin, Prokhor Yu. "When Will This Zap End? Speculating on the Struggle for a New World Order," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/when-will-this-zap-end/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Timofeev, Ivan. "Russian-West: Rising Stakes," *Valdai Discussion Club*, June 30, 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-west-rising-stakes/>, last accessed 3/4/2024.
- Timofeev, Ivan N. "Sanctions on Russia: A New Chapter," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 2 (78), April–June 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/sanctions-new-chapter/>, last accessed 9/3/2024.
- Trenin, Dmitri. "Russia and Europe; the Current Impasse and the Way Out," Carnegie Moscow, February 18, 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/83905>.
- Trenin, Dmitry V. "How Russia Must Reinvent Itself to Defeat the West's 'Hybrid War'," *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 24, 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-must-reinvent-itself/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Tsygankov, Andrei P. and Tsygankov Pavel A. "Might Makes No Right: Realism and International Relations Theory," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 20, No. 1 (77), January–March 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/might-makes-no-right/>, last accessed 8/3/2024.
- Vignes, Thomas. "France and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: The Role of French Diplomacy," Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), September 19, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/t-vignes/france-and-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-the-role-of-french-diplomacy/>, last accessed 12/3/2024.
- Zemanek, Lodislav. "The Rise of Liberal Authoritarianism and Global Transition to Polycentrism," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume 21, No. 3 (83), July–September, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/global-transition-to-polycentrism/>, last accessed 11/3/2024.

## Official Sources

“Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.” *kremlin.ru*, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>, last accessed 3/4/2024.

“The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/), last accessed 3/4/2024.

## Newspapers/Media Sources

Aghayeb, Ismail. “Lavrov accuses EU of ‘abusing’ Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict,” *OC Media*, March 1, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/lavrov-accuses-eu-of-abusing-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

Avedian, Lillian. “Russia criticizes EU agreement to send observer mission to Armenia-Azerbaijan border,” *Armenian Weekly*, October 12, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/12/russia-criticizes-eu-agreement-to-send-observer-mission-to-armenia-azerbaijan-border/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

Kucera, Joshua. “Russia strongly criticizes new EU mission in Armenia,” *Eurasianet*, June 27, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-strongly-criticizes-new-eu-mission-in-armenia>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

Mkrtchyan, Marianna. “Zakharova wishes ‘Yerevan not to suffer the fate of Kyiv’ due to EU-Armenia rapprochement,” *Arminfo*, March 6, 2024, [https://arminfo.info/full\\_news.php?id=82339&lang=3](https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=82339&lang=3), last accessed 1/4/2024.

Teslova, Elena. “Russia sees EU presence in Armenia as attempt to oust it from region,” *Anadolu Agency*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-sees-eu-presence-in-armenia-as-attempt-to-oust-it-from-region/2922789>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

“Armenia Turning Way From Russia, Says Lavrov,” *Azatutyun*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32750871.html>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

“EU and USA do not want to bring peace to Armenia, only to squeeze out Moscow, Lavrov says,” *First Channel News*, December 28, 2023,

<https://www.1lurer.am/en/2023/12/28/EU-and-USA-do-not-want-to-bring-peace-to-Armenia-only-to-squeeze-out-Moscow-Lavrov-says/1053881>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

“Lavrov: EU mission in Armenia is turning into a NATO mission,” *News.am*, March 28, 2024, <https://news.am/eng/news/814964.html>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

“US and EU push Armenia to withdraw from the CSTO,” *Mediamax*, September 27, 2023, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/52669/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

“Zakharova: EU observers in Armenia ‘spy’ on Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan,” *Mediamax*, March 20, 2024, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/region/54268/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

“Zakharova: Moscow Considers EU Mission to Armenia as Attempt to Squeeze it From the Region,” *Massis Post*, February 21, 2023, <https://massispost.com/2023/02/zakharova-moscow-considers-eu-mission-to-armenia-as-attempt-to-squeeze-it-from-the-region/>, last accessed 1/4/2024.

## **PART II: EU's Evolving Policies and Tools: Perceptions and Expectations from the Eastern Neighbourhood**



# **The Dynamic Role of the European Union in the South Caucasus and the Broader Eastern Neighbourhood**

*Elena Marşac*

The South Caucasus region has undergone significant changes, notably due to the Russian war in Ukraine and the Armenia-Azerbaijan settlement, and other developments that have reshaped the strategic outlook of the region, raising questions about the EU's position and policy response.

My discourse will be focused on the analysis of the potential Impact of Ukraine's and Moldova's Accessions, to understand if a strengthened EU Presence and Influence is needed in the region of South Caucasus.

The EU's expanded membership would likely lead to greater political and economic integration with Eastern European countries, potentially reshaping regional dynamics. Thus, the accession of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU would significantly enhance the EU's presence and influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood, including the South Caucasus.

## **Alignment with EU Values and Norms**

Ukraine and Moldova's accession to the EU would signify their commitment to European values, democracy, and rule of law, aligning them more closely with EU standards. This alignment could serve as a model for other Eastern Neighbourhood countries, including those in the South Caucasus, encouraging democratic reforms and adherence to EU norms.

The potential accession of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU could reshape the EU's influence in the South Caucasus. As EU aspirants, these countries would likely align their foreign and security policies with the EU's, fostering cooperation in promoting stability, democracy, and economic growth in the region.

## Republic of Moldova Case

The European integration context is pivotal in analyzing Moldova's national security environment. Even prior to the military invasion of Ukraine, efforts were underway to enhance the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, leading to increased investments in Moldova's security and defence sector. Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EU has notably intensified its collaboration with Moldova, contributing to bolstering the country's resilience. This includes deploying a civilian mission in Chisinau to enhance local crisis management capabilities and collaborating on security and defence issues through external financial instruments. Moldova's designation as an EU candidate country and the commencement of accession negotiations in December 2023 hold significant promise for its future. The European Council's recognition of Moldova's European perspective and granting it candidate status in June 2022 signals a commitment to upholding democratic values, the rule of law, and human rights. This status could lead to enhanced institutional strength, democratic processes, and political stability, along with increased financing and investment opportunities in key economic sectors, ultimately driving development and improving living standards.

The status of candidate country for EU accession signifies a significant opportunity for Moldova's social, economic, and security development. It aligns with the government's internal and external policy goals, promising fair justice, resilient institutions, sustainable development, economic independence, and support for key reforms. Moldova has accelerated its reform processes to meet the nine conditions set by the European Council for opening accession negotiations, focusing on justice sector reforms, administrative capacity building, and economic resilience. Improving the business environment, attracting investment, ensuring energy independence, and enhancing migration and border management are also priorities. The EU's recommendation and approval of opening accession negotiations in December 2023 highlight Moldova's strategic importance, calling for a pragmatic and realistic approach, particularly in security and defence. This milestone positions Moldova on a clear path towards EU membership, fostering social cohesion, economic growth, and national security.

The Republic of Moldova has shown increased involvement in addressing hybrid and cyber threats through the European Instrument for Peace. However, its readiness to counter emerging threats, including disinformation, is critical, given Russia's regional influence. Challenges persist in aligning with EU sanctions, potentially affecting integration efforts. Political will and public support are vital for progress. Despite a pro-European stance, domestic and external factors, including Russia's influence, complicate the accession process. Uncertainty surrounds the impact of Moldova's EU accession on the South Caucasus, with predictions challenging. EU's external governance tools have had limited impact on conflict resolution. Recent events in Ukraine highlight the EU's role in safeguarding regional and global security.

*Assessment of Existing Frameworks and Instruments for  
Integration and Cooperation*

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative delineates its normative role in the South Caucasus. Despite regional aspirations for cooperation, the EU's commitment to security issues remains unclear. While advocating peaceful conflict resolution, direct engagement is limited. Recognizing hybrid threats, the EU aims to enhance security capacities in the region through diplomatic efforts and resilience-building. Integration frameworks face challenges amid geopolitical shifts, hampering the EaP's impact. Addressing these, the EU needs a holistic approach, engaging regional actors, supporting civil society, and leveraging economic incentives for reform and development. This comprehensive strategy can foster effective integration and cooperation in the South Caucasus.

The accession of Ukraine and Moldova could shift the balance of power in the Eastern Neighbourhood, *potentially altering geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus*.

This could lead to changes in regional alliances, influence spheres, and diplomatic relations, requiring careful navigation by all parties involved.

The EU faces challenges in the region due to alternative geopolitical alignments, notably Russia's assertiveness and China's economic presence. Regional states vary in their perceptions, viewing the EU as an opportunity

for stability or a distant actor. The EU balances incentives with promoting its values, yet internal divisions limit its influence.

### *Opportunities for Enhanced Cooperation*

Nevertheless, EU accession for Ukraine and Moldova could pave the way for deeper cooperation and integration initiatives between these countries and the South Caucasus region. EU accession for Ukraine and Moldova could indeed serve as a catalyst for deeper cooperation and integration initiatives between these countries and the South Caucasus region. Opportunities may arise for joint projects, trade agreements, and collaboration on security and stability issues, fostering greater regional cooperation, the development of cross-border trade corridors, transportation networks, and energy infrastructure, benefiting both the candidate countries and the South Caucasus region.

EU accession for Ukraine and Moldova could facilitate *the negotiation of trade agreements* with South Caucasus countries, promoting economic integration and enhancing market access. Closer economic ties could stimulate trade and investment flows between the candidate countries and the South Caucasus, creating new opportunities for businesses and fostering economic growth in the region.

Leveraging their EU accession, *Ukraine and Moldova can actively promote regional cooperation in the South Caucasus*. This includes facilitating multilateral discussions, supporting confidence-building measures, and fostering diplomatic engagement. Such collaboration can build trust, reduce tensions, and promote stability in the region, aligning with broader EU goals in the Eastern Neighborhood. Additionally, areas like energy security, trade, infrastructure, and cultural exchange offer substantial opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships among Ukraine, Moldova, and South Caucasus nations.

*Transport and connectivity projects* can further economic development by facilitating efficient movement of goods and people. Environmental collaboration can address shared ecological challenges, promoting conservation and sustainable resource management. Cultural exchange initiatives can foster understanding and boost tourism, benefiting local economies.

*Security cooperation* is crucial, involving sharing best practices and intelligence to address common threats. Academic partnerships and research collaborations can enhance knowledge sharing and innovation. Healthcare collaboration, especially in pandemic preparedness, is vital for regional resilience.

Enhanced cooperation between Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus region could extend to security and stability issues. Joint efforts may focus on addressing common security challenges, such as transnational crime, border security, and regional conflicts, through coordinated initiatives and information sharing. Collaboration on security matters could contribute to enhancing stability and resilience in the wider Eastern Neighbourhood, benefiting all participating countries.

Investing in cross-border infrastructure and conflict resolution mechanisms is crucial for regional stability. Existing frameworks like the Eastern Partnership and European Neighbourhood Policy have fostered dialogue and economic ties, but challenges remain due to conflicts and external influences. Enhancements should prioritize diplomacy, security cooperation, economic diversification, and civil society engagement for lasting peace and prosperity.

*Strengthening security, reducing economic dependencies, promoting democracy, and fostering mutual understanding are vital for these frameworks to effectively address the region's complexities and promote stability. By prioritizing these measures, existing frameworks can evolve to better address the multifaceted challenges in the South Caucasus, paving the way for more effective integration and cooperation.*

In conclusion, the potential accession of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU presents both opportunities and challenges for the Eastern Neighbourhood, including the South Caucasus. Cooperation and alignment with EU values are promising but require careful management of integration challenges. Stakeholders must collaborate for successful EU enlargement, emphasizing trust, shared interests, and sustained efforts. Ukraine's and Moldova's accession could reshape the EU's engagement in the South Caucasus, fostering stability and prosperity. However, addressing internal reforms, geopolitical complexities, and inclusive development is crucial. The EU's evolving policy must address root causes, promote dialogue, and strengthen institutions for lasting impact in the region.

## References

<https://ecfr.eu/publication/energising-eastern-europe-how-the-eu-can-enhance-energy-sovereignty-through-cooperation-with-ukraine-and-moldova/#strategic-cooperation-formats-between-the-eu-and-its-eastern-neighbours>.

<https://emerging-europe.com/voices/why-2024-will-be-a-breakthrough-year-for-the-south-caucasus/>.

<https://www.cmi.no/publications/8911-changing-geopolitics-of-the-south-caucasus-after-the-second-karabakh-war>.

Three Eastern Partnership neighbours: Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.  
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/171/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-ukraine-moldova-and-belarus>.

Three Eastern Partnership neighbours in the South Caucasus:  
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus>.

Three Eastern Partnership neighbours: Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.  
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/171/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-ukraine-moldova-and-belarus>.

Report\_PISA\_DCAF\_SE\_2024\_eng.pdf.

# The European Union and the South Caucasus: A Force for Peace?

*Stephanie Fenkart*

## Introduction

Since Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 the South Caucasus has gained more attention for the European Union. Although the three countries Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia already have been part of the Eastern Partnership since 2009, which was established in the framework of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy in order to create a ring of friendly states surrounding the EU, the ongoing war opened up some room of manoeuvre for the European Union. Although the South Caucasus, compared to other neighbouring regions like the Western Balkans or North Africa has been quite sidelined in the EU neighbouring policies until the war against Ukraine, the EU's interests can be identified along five objectives:

- 1) contain and push back Russia's influence;
- 2) secure energy and trade interests;
- 3) promote stability and security;
- 4) export European values, rule of law, democracy, and human rights;<sup>1</sup> and
- 5) enlarging the EU – although this last point, at the time of writing this article, only applies to Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

However, the region is still dominated by other major geopolitical competitors, – namely Russia, Türkiye and Iran – rivalries as well as alignments,

---

<sup>1</sup> The first four objectives have been identified in the Clingendael Report by Deen, Zweers and Linder in 2023: The EU in the South Caucasus. See Deen, Zweers, Linder (2023): The EU in the South Caucasus, Clingendael report, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Recent discussions about a possible European path of Armenia gained momentum recently. However, until now there is no official communication from the Armenian side to pursue EU accession, while Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev clearly rejects a future EU path for Azerbaijan.

which in return shrink possibilities of the EU to influence the political, socio-economic and geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus decisively. It has often been argued that the EU is lacking an overall long-term strategy towards the region but applies a rather reactive short-term and reactive approach.<sup>3</sup> While Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in her speech to the EU parliament in December 2019 envisaged a Geopolitical Commission for the next term, the EU hardly manages to catch up with the velocity of the change of geopolitical realities.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 lasted for 44 days and ended in a decisive victory of Azerbaijan regaining the seven Azerbaijani districts controlled by Armenia since the 1<sup>st</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh war in the 90ies. Three years later Azerbaijan launched the so-called anti-terror operation in September 2023 which established full control of Azerbaijan over the whole territory of Nagorno Karabakh, after negotiations over a peace deal failed. After the defeat of the Armenian armed forces of NK an estimated 100–120,000 Armenians left Nagorno Karabakh. The mass exodus has been described by many international lawyers as an act of forced displacement or ethnically cleansing.<sup>4</sup> In a press release on 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2023 the UN mission however declared:

The mission was struck by the sudden manner in which the local population left their homes and the suffering the experience must have caused. The mission did not come across any reports – neither from the local population interviewed nor from the interlocutors – of incidences of violence against civilians following the latest ceasefire.<sup>5</sup>

Although Azerbaijan claims that the mass exodus was not forced and Armenians will be allowed to come back and their rights and security will be guaranteed, it can be clearly characterized as a human tragedy considering

<sup>3</sup> See Deen, Zweers, Linder (2023): The EU in the South Caucasus, Clingendael report, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Klonowiecka-Milart, Paylan (2023/11/6) Forced Displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh: A Response, retrieved May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024 from <http://opiniojuris.org/2023/11/06/forced-displacement-of-armenians-from-nagorno-karabakh-a-response/>.

<sup>5</sup> Press release (2023/10/2) UN team completes mission to Karabakh, retrieved 31<sup>st</sup> May 2024 <https://azerbaijan.un.org/en/248051-un-team-completes-mission-karabakh>?\_gl=1\*nhhkix\*\_ga\*MTA4MzA4ODAzNC4zNjk1MTI4MDkz\*\_ga\_TK9BQL5X7Z\*\_MTcxNzE0NjMxMC4zM4wLjE3MTcxNDYzMTA0MC4wLjA.\*\_ga\_S5EKZKSB78\*MTcxNzE0NjMxMC4zM4wLjE3MTcxNzE0NjMvOC40MjI4wLjA.



that only 50–1,000 Armenians stayed in their ancient homeland and fears of retaliation and possible future oppression overwhelmed.

This last military operation showed clearly what many in the European Union do not want to see: In a more and more multipolar world with rising regional powers, geopolitical competition and alliances, the use of force increasingly replaces diplomacy and the quest for political solutions.

While the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno Karabakh war was mentioned in some European newspapers and also discussed on several High-Level meetings, the OSCE Minsk group and other international actors two main factors turned out not to be considered enough. 1) The understanding that frozen conflicts will not be frozen forever – specifically if there are not credible security guarantees from a more powerful ally or if power dynamics shift and create an asymmetry. This was the case for Azerbaijan which, as a petrol state managed to build up modern armed forces and which profited from Turkey's support and drone deliveries, as well as from Israeli arms purchases. Russia, Armenia's official protecting power, on the other hand, was and still is caught in its destructive war against Ukraine while, at the same time, it is increasingly unhappy with the pro-democratic government shift in Armenia, which happened in 2018 after the velvet revolution. 2) The second main factor is the neglect of historical trauma and the feeling of mediators being biased towards one of the sides. While there is no doubt that Armenians and Azerbaijanis suffered immensely from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Nagorno Karabakh wars, especially Azerbaijanis claim that the “West” turned a blind eye towards the violent expulsion of 680,000 Azerbaijanis from Nagorno Karabakh in the 90ies, which has been internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan.<sup>6</sup> Taking into account the genocide of Armenians from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Ottoman Empire, which led to the death of 1–1.5 million Armenians and the recent mass exodus of the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh – it cannot be overstated that both societies still suffer from immense trauma and feel hostile towards each other.

---

<sup>6</sup> See UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/unhcr-publication-cis-conference-displacement-cis-conflicts-caucasus>.

This article focuses on the possibilities the EU has to pursue its interests in the South Caucasus region. It does not delve into the complex history between neighbours and enduring rivalries, although an understanding of the past is considered to be crucial to have positive impact. Since Georgia was granted with candidate status in December 2023, the first part of the article focuses on enlargement as a (geo-)political tool to foster stability and peace and to export European values and human rights. The second part focuses on the EU lack of a comprehensive strategy for the region and the third part on possibilities of the EU to foster peace.

### **The EU: A Geopolitical Actor?**

Russia's war against Ukraine shook Europe to its core and ended the main assumptions it came to believe in since the end of World War II (WWII). First, that the time of conventional wars between sovereign states on European territory is over and second, that economic cooperation and trade automatically lead to stability and peace. While many now are blaming Germany and Willy Brandt's Eastern policy as a pre-requisite of the war Russia is now waging, the successes of this "Ostpolitik" become more and more overlooked. While it is undoubted, that the time of fruitful cooperation with Russia in the short and medium term is over, one should not forget that other eastern countries like Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania, or the Baltics have profited from these policies and are now stable, democratic EU and NATO members. With the so-called European Security Architecture now shattered, if even still existing, the EU and its member states understood that they need to build up their defense capabilities and invest in military armament in order to deter a hostile Russia. With Sweden and Finland joining NATO, NATO, after being called brain-dead (Macron) and obsolete (Trump) just a couple of years ago, became the only game in town when it comes to European Security. As much needed as these investments in security and defense are for the security of the European Union and its member states, it should not detract us from the fact that the EU still is not a military power. The reason why 10 countries in Europe want to join the EU is mainly due to its soft power: economic opportunities, rule of law, freedom of movement, services and goods and the perspective of having a better and save life as well as opportunities for one's children. While the non-NATO candidate countries face also strong security challenges, they are in parallel – except for Serbia and Moldova – seeking NATO membership too.

The EU wants to position itself as a geopolitical actor, as claimed by commissioner president Ursula von der Leyen in 2019, in a world where the so-called international liberal order is in decline, it needs to focus its strength on what it can deliver. Thus, it needs to address the most important issue: *how* can the EU become a pro-active force for stability and peace in Europe and its neighbourhood? One way to address this is through a credible enlargement process. If the EU wants to pursue its interests, enlargement must become a reality not a mere lip service. Russia understood to exploit this very successfully in the past with little political and financial cost on its part. To stand to its promises is what makes the EU credible and what gives it leverage to stimulate possible reforms within Georgia – a necessity for the enlargement-process to move forward and a duty to the pro-European citizens of Georgia.

### *Adapting a Credible and Realistic Approach*

As already mentioned, the EU's role in the South Caucasus is still limited due to the variety of traditional and new actors in the region, their interests, alignments, and rivalries. However, this does not mean that the EU cannot have any positive impact if it is seen as fruitful and honest by the parties involved. While it is generally a welcomed move to grant candidate status to Georgia in December 2023, the process is still long and technically exhausting with chapters being opened and closed by unanimity and spoiled by member states' domestic interests. To look at failures in the ongoing enlargement-process in the Western Balkans can be useful to adapt the enlargement strategy and to counter disappointment and backsliding by being able to promote reforms, which will become more difficult if politicians understand that enlargement is not realistic.

At the time of writing this article Bulgaria is blocking the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia<sup>7</sup> due to an issue unrelated with the enlargement process. With more than 80% of the Georgian population being in favour of EU-accession, it is crucial a) to manage the expectations which are raised by granting an EU path and b) to stick to its promises in order to gain political credibility in the enlargement process. Georgia is the only

---

<sup>7</sup> Which is a candidate country since 2005.

one of the three South Caucasian countries which does have candidate status for EU membership. Until Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 enlargement was not seriously envisaged beyond the six Western Balkan countries, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (which does not have candidate status, although it formally applied for it in December 2022). The European Security Strategy adopted in 2003 states:

It is not in our interest that enlargement should create new dividing lines in Europe. We need to extend the benefits of economic and political cooperation to our neighbours in the East while tackling political problems there. We should now take a stronger and more active interest in the problems of the Southern Caucasus, which will in due course also be a neighbouring region.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, in 2003, the EU did not yet consider the South Caucasus as a neighbouring region. Already a year later in 2004 the EU adopted its Eastern Neighbourhood policy, marking a shift in the approach towards the region by declaring it a neighbouring region. With the establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 and the granting of candidate status to Georgia in December 2023 the EU stepped up its geopolitical ambitions following the will of the Georgian population, which is largely supporting EU membership as a poll released on December 11<sup>th</sup> 2023 by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) Georgia shows:

The new survey, which was conducted before the European Commission's November 8<sup>th</sup> decision, reaffirms the unwavering dedication of the Georgian people to European integration, with an impressive 79 percent expressing support for EU membership. Over the last year, public opinion trends show a significant increase in favour of political and economic cooperation with the EU.<sup>9</sup>

It seems that the EU understood that it needs to step up its game in its enlargement and foreign policy to become a global actor in a more polarized world, at least theoretically. After more than a decade of *enlargement-fatigue* the war against Ukraine put the spotlight back on enlargement, transforming it mainly into a geopolitical tool. However, the EU must not fall into the trap

---

<sup>8</sup> European Security Strategy (2003) A Secure Europe in a better world, retrieved May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024 from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> NDI POLL (2023/12/11): Georgian citizens remain committed to EU membership; Nation united in its dreams and shared challenges, retrieved on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024 from <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgian-citizens-remain-committed-eu-membership-nation-united-its-dreams-and>.

of considering enlargement only as geopolitically motivated at the expense of its values. It is essential to acknowledge the transformational power of the enlargement process if the EU seeks to promote stability and security and to export European values, rule of law, democracy, and human rights. Values which are not based on moral legitimacy only, but which are the basis foundation of the European Union as Art II of the Treaty of the European Union states:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.<sup>10</sup>

Failing to link the normative transformational power of enlargement with geopolitical ambitions, could lead to the stabilization of authoritarian tendencies in candidate countries. Tendencies which can be witnessed in several candidate countries in the Western Balkans, from Serbia, to Albania, Montenegro or North Macedonia.

### *Enlargement Matters: Learning from Past Mistakes*

The EU has 27 member states, nine candidate countries plus Kosovo which applied, but decision is still outstanding. North Macedonia achieved candidate status in 2005 but it took 15 years until accession negotiations started – the longest gap in the EU’s history. Although the EU commission already recommended the start of negotiations in 2009 progress was blocked by Greece over the name issue. Greece insisted on changing the name of Macedonia which was done in 2019 – therefore officially now called North Macedonia. In 2022 the first intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia took place but now Bulgaria is using its veto blocking progress over interpretation of language and cultural ties with Bulgaria. On May 8<sup>th</sup> 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections took place. “North Macedonia set

---

<sup>10</sup> Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, retrieved on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2014 from [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu\\_2012/art\\_2/oj](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2012/art_2/oj).

for rocky ties with EU as nationalists win presidential, parliamentary election” titled the news platform euractiv.com after the elections.<sup>11</sup> Although the stance of the EU, respectively some of its member states, towards North Macedonia is not the only reason why the nationalist-right wing party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VRMO-DNPR) claimed a landslide victory, its contribution should not be underestimated. The Balkan Barometer published in 2023 shows that support towards EU membership dropped to only 50% (only in Serbia it is lower), largely because the enlargement process lost credibility and is not seen as merit-based.<sup>12</sup> Similar developments can be observed in the other candidate countries of the Western Balkans (only Albania is an exception with still 92% in favour of EU enlargement).

If the EU wants to use the enlargement tool for its benefit, it needs to adapt a credible and merit-based approach. In order to make enlargement more than a promise the EU needs to start *imagining* an extended European Union, which until now, it is failing to do. In order to be able to enlarge, it needs to address necessary institutional reforms, especially getting rid of unanimity when it comes to Common Foreign and Security Policy and enlargement. Without doing so, it will fail to deliver on its promises and create distrust and dissatisfaction among a population which is pro-European. However, it is up to the respective candidate countries to live up to their promises if they want to continue a European path. Therefore, the ball is in the court of Georgia’s government for now.

In its conclusion at the EU council meeting in December 14/15 in 2023 the council states:

The European Council also decides to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia, on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/north-macedonia-set-for-rocky-ties-with-eu-as-nationalists-win-presidential-parliamentary-election/>, retrieved on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key\\_findings/2/](https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/), retrieved on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024.

<sup>13</sup> European Council Conclusions December 15<sup>th</sup> 2023, EUCO 20/23, CO EUR 16, CONCL 6, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/68967/europeancouncilconclusions-14-15-12-2023-en.pdf>.

Given the polarised political climate in Georgia, a new wave of protests against the “foreign agent law” and increasing signs of state capture show the limits of possibilities of the EU to influence and motivate further reforms.<sup>14</sup> A continuing support of the government which is not keen on necessary reforms or even going into the opposite direction could also lead to formations, which has been called in the context of the Western Balkans “stabilocracy”.<sup>15</sup> Creating incentives for reforms, therefore, can only be effective if there already is a reform-minded government in place. A condition which does not seem to be the case for Georgia at this time. On the other hand, empty promises of an enlargement-process which is not merit-based and transparent reduces any chance to have a positive impact on democracy and rule of law for the EU in Georgia. Without ongoing political and economic support from the West, Georgia may not be able to resist the malign influence of other actors, particularly Russia. As Amanda Paul and Iana Maisuradze write in a commentary of the European Policy Centre on Georgia’s way ahead: Time for the EU to show some tough love.<sup>16</sup>

### **The EU: A Strategy for the South Caucasus?**

It has been argued that the EU does not have a tailor-made strategy for the South Caucasus. While Georgia is an EU candidate country, Armenia is a member in the Eurasian Economic Union and although it has frozen its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) it still depends on Russia in terms of its security, energy, infrastructure and trade. Azerbaijan recently has put on a more skeptical stance towards the EU, which it sees as being not impartial when it comes to the decades-old en-

---

<sup>14</sup> Although vetoed by the president Georgia’s MPs have voted to overturn a presidential veto on a contentious “transparency on foreign influence” bill.

<sup>15</sup> A Canadian academic, Srđan Pavlović, first used the term in a London School of Economics’ Blog on Montenegro in late 2016 to describe a regime in which undemocratic practices persist and “the West has [...] turned a blind eye to this while simultaneously preaching the virtues of democracy and the rule of law.” See <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/12/23/montenegros-stabilitocracy-how-the-wests-support-of-dukhanovic-is-damaging-the-prospects-of-democratic-change/>.

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Paul/Iana Maisuradze, (2021/04/31) EPC, Georgia’s Road Ahead: Time for the EU to show some tough love, retrieved on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2024 from <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Georgias-road-ahead-Time-for-the-EU-to-show-some-tough-love~3e7c18>.

during rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At an international conference on December 6<sup>th</sup> in Baku titled “Karabakh: Back Home After 30 Years. Accomplishments and Challenges” president of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said:

I think that though Azerbaijan does not have the target to become EU member in its foreign policy concept for very pragmatic reason, just because we will never be allowed in. And the reason is also very clear, and we understand it. [He then added:] We live in real world, not in virtual. So, if you will not be allowed in, why should you knock the door? You will only irritate the homeowner, and only humiliate yourself, if they do not want you.<sup>17</sup>

Since 2020, Baku has pursued a ‘3D policy’ towards NK, characterized by de-internationalization (achieved in practical terms by establishing the checkpoint in the Lachin corridor), deinstitutionalization (achieved through dismantling the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic), and deterritorialization (reintegrating the whole territory of Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan).<sup>18</sup> Armenia, on the contrary, shifted its foreign policy towards a more pro-western and pro-EU stance, especially after the calculations that Russian troops would prevent the takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, failed. “There are significant fears that Azerbaijan could escalate again,” said Benyamin Poghosyan, a researcher at the Applied Policy Research Institute of Armenia, arguing the move is as much about security as ideology. “The government is looking to India, to France, and is now thinking maybe the final salvation of Armenia is the EU perspective.”<sup>19</sup>

A decade after the previous Armenian government completed talks on the EU’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, but then decided to strengthen its ties with Russia by joining the Eurasian Economic Union, Armenia now reconsiders its foreign policy choice. “Armenia is considering applying for European Union membership”, foreign minister Ararat

---

<sup>17</sup> Transcript of the International Conference (2023/12/6), retrieved on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2024 from <https://president.az/en/articles/view/62400>.

<sup>18</sup> Hushcha (2023/12/15) Conference Paper: The EU’s Role in the South Caucasus – a force for Peace? Retrieved on June 1<sup>st</sup> from [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a2c691b3db2b3c6990193a/t/6585865551ba4d2dfa2ebb5e/1703249493742/South+Caucasus+conference+paper\\_FINAL.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a2c691b3db2b3c6990193a/t/6585865551ba4d2dfa2ebb5e/1703249493742/South+Caucasus+conference+paper_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See Gavin (2024/3/14) in Politico: Armenia’s EU dream faces a big obstacle: The Russian army, retrieved on June 1<sup>st</sup> from <https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-eu-dream-membership-russia-army-obstacle/>.



Mirzoyan said in an interview with Türkiye's TRT channel. (...) "Many new opportunities are largely being discussed in Armenia nowadays and it will not be a secret if I say that includes membership in the European Union."

Therefore, the three South Caucasus countries have a different relationship with the European Union. Georgia as an official candidate, Armenia at least thinking about future possibilities of joining the EU and trying to strengthen its ties with the EU over frustration with its traditional ally Russia. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, tries to balance its foreign policy with all relevant actors but has no ambition to join the EU. Additionally, there is still no peace-treaty signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The power asymmetry between Armenia and Azerbaijan poses further obstacles to the negotiation of a peace treaty and its future implementation. Armenia (and Georgia) does not have any security guarantees, which they can rely on, whereas Azerbaijan does have a security cooperation with Turkey and its military strength surpasses Armenia's possibilities by far. While both countries do have an interest in a peace deal, there is no clarity about several crucial issues, demarcation and delimitation; questions around enclaves/exclaves (although there has been some progress recently); humanitarian issues, such as the exchange of detainees and prisoners of war as well as investigations into missing persons (both from the First and Second Karabakh Wars); the issue of land mines and ultimately, how to deal with the trauma from the past.<sup>20</sup>

All these circumstances limit the room of maneuver for the European Union and complicate any ambitions of the EU to come up with a comprehensive and coordinated strategy for the South Caucasus. Specific interests of individual member states and their bilateral relations further complicate the already complex environment and sometimes even fuel mistrust.

---

<sup>20</sup> See Hushcha (2023/12/15) Conference Paper: The EU's Role in the South Caucasus – a force for Peace? Retrieved on June 1<sup>st</sup> from [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a2c691b3db2b3c6990193a/t/6585865551ba4d2dfa2ebb5e/1703249493742/South+Caucasus+conference+paper\\_FINAL.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a2c691b3db2b3c6990193a/t/6585865551ba4d2dfa2ebb5e/1703249493742/South+Caucasus+conference+paper_FINAL.pdf).

## **The EU: A Force for Peace?**

We must acknowledge that there are several very fundamental unknowns of where the EU stands in the world and how a future foreign policy of the EU will look like, while this article is written. It is before the elections of a new parliament of the EU which will take place on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2024 and which will impact who the next president of the commission will be. It is before the US presidential elections which will take place in November 2024 and whether Donald Trump wins, which would force the EU to re-assess its foreign and security policy fundamentally. Plus, much will depend on how Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues and how or if it ends. The EU has invested a lot of political capital into the support of Ukraine so any perceived defeat of Ukraine (whatever that ultimately would mean in terms of territory and sovereignty, not to mention the humanitarian cost and trauma already inflicted on the millions of Ukrainians) would very much harm political credibility of the EU in its Eastern neighbourhood. It would also be detrimental to its interest to contain and push back Russia in the region of the South Caucasus.

Understanding the limited possibilities of the EU to influence political, socio-economic and geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus, it should focus on what it is able to deliver. Having said that, along the main interests the EU does have in the South Caucasus it could be helpful to reconcile the sometimes-diverging interests by prioritizing them cautiously according to the leverage of the EU towards the three countries. Transparency and credibility are key, if the EU wants to be an actor on a global stage, which has become increasingly fragmented.

The main interests the EU has in the region already have been defined as:

- 1) containing and pushing back Russia's influence;
- 2) secure energy and trade interests;
- 3) promote stability and security;
- 4) export European values, rule of law, democracy, and human rights; and
- 5) enlarging the EU.

To follow these interests simultaneously, will prove to be difficult. If peace is to be understood as a process of increasing justice by decreasing violence including the respect for basic human rights, the EU does have some tools to offer. However, it is not going to be the decisive game-changer in the South Caucasus. In light of the different actors and their interests it should apply a flexible approach, based on understanding the different challenges and prospects. To pursue the interests of the EU in the South Caucasus some recommendations, the list is not exclusive, are the following:

#### *On Georgia*

- Georgia as the only country in the region with a clear path towards EU-integration is where the EU has the most political leverage. However, it needs to communicate and monitor clearly the progress on the nine steps, the commission asked the Georgian government to fulfil to go forward with the enlargement process.<sup>21</sup>
- The EU needs to understand that enlargement must become a reality if it wants to use enlargement as a geopolitical and value-based tool to foster its stance in the world and to serve peace and stability in its neighbourhood.
- The EU should offer itself as mediator and/or facilitator in addressing issues for the breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This could include support to travel towards the EU and to Georgia, including for educational or personal purposes. The EU Special Representative to the South Caucasus, together with the High Representative could offer support in developing a short, middle and long-term vision on the future of the relationship of these territories with Georgia.
- On the economic side, the EU should keep investing in transport and energy connections in the framework of discussions about the Middle Corridor – a trade route envisaged from China to Central

---

<sup>21</sup> See 2023 Communication of EU enlargement policy, Delegation of the EU to Georgia, retrieved on June 2<sup>nd</sup> from [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy-extract-about-georgia_en).

Asia, the South Caucasus, Turkey and Europe – surpassing Russia. It should, however, be careful not to forget about Armenia in this economic endeavour, which is still cut out due to the relationship with Azerbaijan.

- The EU should support civil society organizations and show some “tough love” if Georgia cracks down civilian protests with violent means.

#### *On Armenia and Azerbaijan*

- The EU should invest and offer itself as an unbiased facilitator in the negotiations over a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, if a window of opportunity opens. In order to be able to give support it should acknowledge the trauma of Armenians and Azerbaijanis resulting from the enduring rivalry and wars. This includes a better understanding of the long-term conflict, its origins and its results. No victim stands above the other.
- The EU needs to have a coordinated strategy, if it wants to ensure a peace-treaty which is perceived as just by both sides. This includes not to accept the “winner’s peace” but also not to put domestic interests of individual member states above the EU’s common interests. Ultimately, it should apply a do no harm approach.
- The EU could offer to push for something similar like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to support steps towards necessary reconciliation. It is imperative, that reconciliation is a long process, without a beginning or an ultimate end. The French and German reconciliation efforts could also offer some perspectives on how to deal with the past.
- The EU should continue to support programs which bring together Armenians and Azerbaijanis in different formats, especially on the community level.
- While the EU has very limited leverage when it comes to values and human rights within Azerbaijan proper, it should not refrain to call

out human rights abuses. While cooperation in the energy and trade sector is important for the EU in light of its decoupling from Russia, it should also be used to get concessions for basic human rights, to which the EU subscribed itself.

- The EU needs to invest and to communicate clearly, especially to Azerbaijan, what the goal and mandate of the EU-Monitoring Mission on the Armenian side of the border to Azerbaijan is doing on the ground.<sup>22</sup>
- The COP 29 which will take place in Azerbaijan in November 2024 could be used to push for more multilateralism in the green transition. It also could reduce tensions with Azerbaijan and EU and Azerbaijan and Armenia, which as the hosting country might be more conceivable to give up on some of its maximalist demands towards Armenia in light of international spotlight.
- The EU should deliver humanitarian aid to Karabakh-Armenians while simultaneously support Azerbaijan in its demining process.
- The EU should continue to support the reform-oriented government in Armenia in its quest to strengthen the rule of law, democracy and to fight corruption.

---

<sup>22</sup> For a better understanding of the EUMA the podcast with the Head of the mission, Mr. Markus Ritter, recorded on 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2024 is recommended: retrieved on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2024 from <https://podcasts.groong.org/322-markus-ritter-eu-observer-mission-in-armenia-euma/>.

# **PART III: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration (Regional Actors)**

# **Azerbaijan's Balancing Act under Pressure: Quest for Alternative Regionalism**

*Vasif Huseynov<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of the South Caucasus, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were offered by Russia and the West (i.e. the European Union and the United States) two alternative integration platforms: On the one hand, the Russia-led regional integration projects, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), on the other hand, the Euro-Atlantic integration, namely the European Union and NATO. Over the years, the three countries made their choices in this context: While Georgia opted for the Euro-Atlantic integration, Armenia aligned with Russia within the CSTO and EAEU. Azerbaijan, upholding a balancing approach in foreign policy, decided to proceed with neutrality by keeping equidistance and pursuing friendly and mutually beneficial relations with both Russia and the West.

The Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 put an end to the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories by the former and opened up opportunities for the regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. This was a new momentum for the region which lacked any intraregional interaction or cooperation amongst all three countries in the post-Soviet period. This situation brought about two more integration projects which could include all the three countries of the region: trilateral cooperation platform of the three South Caucasian republics and the 3+3 regional cooperation platform which included Russia, Iran, and Türkiye along with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Unlike the above-mentioned two integration platforms of Russia and the West, Azerbaijan expressed interest in the two newcomer platforms. While

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Vasif Huseynov is the head of the Western Studies department at the Centre for Analysis of International Relations (AIR Centre) and adjunct lecturer at Khazar University and ADA University in Baku, Azerbaijan. Email: Vasif.Huseynov@aircenter.az.

the prime ministers of the three South Caucasian republics for the first time came together and hold discussions about regional cooperation during an international forum in Tbilisi in October 2023, there has not been yet any tangible move in the direction of integration in this trilateral format.

However, there have been some steps taken to materialize regional cooperation within the 3+3 format. The meeting of the foreign ministers of the participating countries in the 3+3 format (without Georgia's participation) in October 2023 in Tehran voiced optimism concerning the future of this grouping (Mid.ru, October 24, 2023). According to some observers, including this author, this promised a potential to signify transition to a new security order in the South Caucasus where Azerbaijan is seeking to balance Russia and Iran with the participation of Türkiye and gain more autonomy in regional geopolitics (Huseynov, 2023). From the Azerbaijani perspective, this endeavor is articulated as an effort to assert influence by maintaining Russia at a distance, precluding Iran's encroachment, and fostering a measured involvement of the West in the South Caucasus's geopolitical space.

Nevertheless, the developments since the October 2023 meeting of the 3+3 group have introduced challenges to the realization of this envisioned security paradigm. Armenia's gradual shift towards closer ties with the West amidst strained relations with Russia, coupled with Georgia's consistent refusal to join any regional geopolitical project that includes Russia, underscores the propensity away from the integration amongst the countries of the region. This situation, which is perceived by Azerbaijani side as the emergence of geopolitical fault lines, further complicates regional dynamics (Trend.az, April 5, 2024). Amidst these uncertainties, the feasibility of materializing the 3+3 framework is being decreased, although it remains as an option on the table.

In light of these developments, Azerbaijan confronts an increasingly precarious position, as it navigates the challenges posed to its traditional foreign policy balancing act by the intensifying geopolitical confrontation in the region which forces the regional countries to make a clear choice between competing power centers. Driven by a desire to eschew an unequivocal alignment with either major power bloc, Baku endeavors to chart a nuanced course which is hoped to secure the viability of Azerbaijan's non-alignment. In this milieu, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) emerges as a practical



alternative for Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev's unequivocal endorsement of the OTS during his inauguration speech on February 14, 2024, underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to integration within the Turkic world, reaffirming Baku's refusal to participate in the Western- or Russia-led integration initiatives (President.az, February 14, 2024). In this context, the OTS represents a pragmatic avenue for Azerbaijan to fortify regional cooperation and defense collaboration, underlining its commitment to fostering regional stability amidst geopolitical flux.

This paper is aimed to analyze the rationale behind Azerbaijan's balanced approach in foreign policy and its persistent refusal to join the Western or Russian blocs. The paper discusses the viability of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) as an alternative regionalism for Azerbaijan. It argues that the emergence of the OTS as a regional power center is in the interests of the West as well, given the fact that this Turkic union emerges as a counterbalancing actor in the South Caucasus and Central Asia vis-à-vis surrounding great power and promotes the resilience of the member states.

### **Azerbaijan's Balanced Approach in Foreign Policy**

Azerbaijan is pursuing a policy of non-alignment in international relations, although unlike, for example, Moldova, its constitution does not prohibit joining military alliances. Since 2011, Azerbaijan has been a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an international movement uniting 120 member and 17 observer countries. Based on the understanding of non-participation in military blocs, the NAM was formally established by 25 states, including India, Egypt, and the former Yugoslavia, at the Belgrade Conference in September 1961. Azerbaijan chaired the NAM from 2019 to 2024 and actively promoted the goals and principles of the movement in international relations. Based on these principles, the government of Azerbaijan used to characterize its policy of non-alignment as an imperative conditioned by its geographical location. According to Hikmet Hajiyev, Azerbaijani presidential aide on foreign policy, the geopolitical realities of the region urge Baku to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy course and develop close relations with various regional and global players (Atlantic Council, June 11, 2019).

In upholding these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to avoid allying with one geopolitical pole at the expense of the country's relations with other actors. A quick overview of Azerbaijan's foreign policies in recent years supports this inference. For example, in June 2021, Azerbaijan signed the Shusha Declaration on allied relations with its major ally Türkiye. The countries vowed to militarily support each other if either side is attacked by another state or group of states (President.az, June 15, 2021). In February 2022, Azerbaijan signed another declaration with Russia in Moscow (Mfa.gov.az, February 22, 2022) – a move that was interpreted by some Azerbaijani experts largely as a move for reassurance that Russia will not “pursue similar policies toward Azerbaijan [as Russia has carried out against Georgia and Ukraine] in exchange for Azerbaijan recognizing Russia as a dominant power in the broader former Soviet region” (Huseynov, 2022). However, this declaration does not bear the same legal status for Baku as the one signed with Ankara, which has been ratified by the parliaments of both states.

Such a positioning is critical for a number of reasons, but primarily because of the lack of any capable balancing power that would dare to openly and militarily confront Russia in the case of a challenging security situation that might involve Azerbaijan. This cautious approach is related, among other factors, to the fact that Azerbaijan-Russia relations have had problematic phases, both historically and over recent years. Russia's traditional support to Armenia in the former Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Moscow's military supplies to Yerevan prior to and during the Second Karabakh War, and the deployment of Russian troops as peacekeepers in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan after this war constitute the rationale for Baku's vigilance in its Russia policies.

Azerbaijan continued to uphold this approach in the wake of the withdrawal of the peacekeeping contingent from the Karabakh region in April 2024. This development was indeed unexpected and unprecedented as it was the first time that Russian armed units left the territory of a post-Soviet state voluntarily and prematurely. Many analysts in the region contemplated the reasons behind this move and raise questions about how the two countries (Russia and Azerbaijan) agreed on this (Jam-news.net, April 18, 2024). For some observers, Moscow would not have withdrawn from the region in such a peaceful manner, if there was not a win-win deal for the Kremlin. Therefore, many analysts pointed to the possibility of Azerbaijan's membership to

the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) which is critically important for Moscow's geopolitical ambitions. However, President Aliyev, on 23 April, made it clear that Baku has no such plans at the moment, though did not rule out this possibility in the future, if the membership promises any economic benefits to Azerbaijan (President.az, April 23, 2024). However, this and other comments about the European Union were probably the polite rejection of any alignment with global geopolitical powers, whether it is West or East.

Azerbaijan has earlier singled out any plans or intentions to join the European Union or the NATO (IASS, December 6, 2023). This has been a clear departure from Azerbaijan's plans to pursue "integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures" which was clearly outlined as a "main direction of national security policy" under the National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan, adopted in 2007 and not updated since then (Ethz.ch, undated). President Ilham Aliyev has clearly articulated it in 2004:

Our current strategic choice is integration in Europe, European family and institutions. We are strongly committed to this policy. We will do our utmost so that Azerbaijan meets all standards and criteria peculiar to Europe. Our policy is such and we have been pursuing it for a long time. Current events in Azerbaijan are the results of this continued policy.

For Azerbaijan, the lessons drawn from Russia-Georgia war in 2008 and the developments between Russia and Ukraine since 2013 were considerable. The tragic experience of Ukraine that came on the heels of the country's abandonment of neutrality and the launch of efforts to accede to the EU and NATO demonstrated the failure of the West to protect the regional countries against the threats that the Euro-Atlantic choice bring about. Baku read this as the reaffirmation of the importance of the balanced approach in Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

That said, Baku has not abandoned the relations with the West. Quite contrary, Azerbaijan has become a major player in the European energy security as well as in the Europe-Asia connectivity along the Middle Corridor. Today Azerbaijan is negotiating with its European partners about the possibility of increasing natural gas exports to the EU and thus help the efforts of member states to mitigate the risk of dependence on single sources and supply routes

(Caspiannews.com, June 4, 2022). The two sides have forged a strategic partnership in the field of energy that is pivotal for both sides economic prosperity and energy security. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, called Azerbaijan a “reliable partner” of the EU, when she signed the deal on the strategic partnership with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, on July 18, 2022 (Ec.europa.eu, July 18, 2022).

This partnership, as highlighted by the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) Advisory Council and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Green Energy Advisory Council which took place in Baku, Azerbaijan on March 1–2, 2024, is founded on tangible achievements and shared goals, particularly in the realm of energy cooperation.

Faced with increased Russian violence and a continued unjustified war on our doorstep, it is increasingly clear that, for Europe, there will be no return to business as usual in its energy relations with Russia. That space is now filled by other trusted and reliable energy partners. And we found exactly that in Azerbaijan,

said Kadri Simson, the EU Energy Commissioner, during her speech at the inaugural session of the Advisory Council, which was attended by the representatives of 23 countries in Baku (Ec.europa.eu, March 1, 2024).

Azerbaijan has been also a close partner of the NATO in its operations in Kosova and Afghanistan. This was commended by Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of the NATO, in his visit to Baku on March 17–18.

We appreciate very much your contribution to our KFOR mission in Kosovo, but also, of course, your presidency and your contributions to our mission in Afghanistan over many years were extremely important. You are absolutely right, one of the last troops to leave Afghanistan were actually Azerbaijani troops. Because you were responsible for the protection of the airport, which was a key task in the evacuation of the NATO presence in Afghanistan,

said Stoltenberg in his press conference with the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (President.az, March 17, 2024).

This is a clear manifestation of Azerbaijan’s balanced approach in foreign policy and Baku’s keen interest to maintain friendly relations with all power centers within the interests of the country. Located in the highly precarious geography neighboring Russia in the North and Iran in the South, Azerbaijan is compelled to cautiously consider geopolitical realities and balance of power in the region. The regional situation is, however, growing more tense

and confrontational which creates immense pressure on Azerbaijan's cautious balancing and non-alignment.

For instance, on November 15, 2023, during a hearing before the United States Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs regarding the future of Karabakh, James O'Brien, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, made a statement that stirred significant concern in Azerbaijan. While addressing the Armenia-Azerbaijan disputes and developments in the South Caucasus, he asserted:

A future that is built around the access of Russia and Iran as the main participants in the security of the region, the South Caucasus, is unstable and undesirable including both for the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia. They have the opportunity to make a different decision now (YouTube Channel of House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans, November 15, 2023).

This statement came in the wake of a series of developments indicating a shift towards a new security order in the South Caucasus, including the October 2023 ministerial meeting in the 3+3 framework.

This was followed with another foreign policy move of the West towards the South Caucasus which stirred concerns in Baku. On April 5, 2024, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and Antony Blinken, Secretary of State of the United States, in a trilateral format in Brussels (US Department of State, April 5, 2024). According to the sides, the meeting was aimed to increase Armenia's resilience in economic sphere. This meeting was largely interpreted in the region as a significant milestone in Armenia's foreign policy, underscoring its efforts to depart from Russia's and a shift towards seeking security support from Western nations – although the publicly known results of the meeting seemed to be insignificant.

Given the highly sensitive geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus and the context of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, this meeting was closely followed in Baku (Huseynov, 2024). Above all, Baku expressed concerns that the meeting, that excluded Azerbaijan, would create geopolitical divisions in the South Caucasus threatening regional peace and security. This was presented as the extension of the geopolitical rivalries between Russia and the West into the South Caucasus which poses huge security risks to all

the neighborhood. On the other hand, the Armenian premier's shift towards the West at the cost of his country's relations with Russia creates expectations in the Western capitals for a similar move from the Azerbaijani government or support to the actions of the Armenian leader. On the contrary, Azerbaijan seeks to maintain its traditional balanced approach in foreign policy and develop friendly relations with all major powers. In this context, the deepening and intensifying integration within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) emerges as an alternative regionalism for Azerbaijan which is also instrumental for Baku to maintain its balanced positioning between Russia and the West.

### **The Emergence of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) as an Alternative Regionalism**

On February 14, 2024, during his inauguration speech at parliament, the re-elected President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, outlined the country's foreign policy priorities within the framework of regional integration projects (President.az, February 14, 2024). He designated the Organization of the Turkic States (OTS) as the primary focus for his new term, dismissing alternative organizations without explicitly naming them (Azertag.az, February 14, 2024). "This is the main international organization for us because it is our family. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world," he stated about the OTS, which includes Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with Turkmenistan, Hungary, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (only recognized by Türkiye) as observer states.

This stance serves as a message directed towards both Euro-Atlantic military and political structures and Russia-led integration projects, indicating that Baku has no intention of aligning with either. The OTS grants Baku significant potential to counterbalance other regional powers, assuming a more important role in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Similarly, the institution holds considerable importance for other member states amid escalating geopolitical tensions. Consequently, member states are moving toward deeper integration in various spheres, albeit cautiously, mindful of potential repercussions from Russia and China.

Over the past year, the OTS made significant strides towards institutionalization in areas such as the Civil Protection Mechanism, the Turkic Judicial

Training Network, the Union of Notaries of the Turkic World, the Turkic Investment Fund, and the Organization of Trade Unions of Turkic States (Turkicstates.org, November 3, 2023). One central area for integration within the OTS is the development of allied relations among the member states and deeper military ties. The final communiqué from the latest summit of the OTS in Astana, Kazakhstan, on November 3, 2023, called for “closer cooperation in the field of defense industry and military collaboration” (Turkicstates.org, November 3, 2023). Member states implement joint projects in the economy, culture, connectivity, energy, and other areas. They pursue cooperation in military and security spheres, however, in a primarily bilateral format.

One of the most recent significant developments in this direction occurred on February 28 when Kazakhstan’s Parliament ratified the Treaty on Allied Relations with Uzbekistan, signed in Tashkent on December 22, 2022 (Trend.az, February 28, 2024). The Treaty, already ratified in Uzbekistan last year, upgrades bilateral relations between the two countries to a new level of collaboration (Apa.az, December 1, 2023). It also prohibits them from joining any blocs or unions and engaging in any measures directed against the other party. The treaty resembles the Shusha Declaration between Azerbaijan and Türkiye but, unlike this declaration, it falls short of committing the signing parties to support each other in the case of an attack by a state or group of states.

Azerbaijan is a staunch supporter of defense cooperation within the OTS.

Wars and bloody conflicts break out. In this case, first of all, the main guarantor of security becomes the defense potential. I believe that cooperation between the member states in areas such as security, defense, and the defense industry should be further increased,

Aliyev said at the summit in Astana in November 2023 (Anadolu Agency, November 3, 2023).

The member states have taken significant steps in this direction, albeit mainly bilaterally, which may be followed by more multilateral initiatives. As one analyst noted about this trend within the OTS:

Once non-security collective and multilateral cooperation has begun to seem ‘normal’ for the current generation of national leaders and publics in the region, the evolutionary path to greater military and security cooperation will become normalized as well (Outzen, 2023).

In May 2022, Kazakhstan and Türkiye, as part of the newly established “enhanced strategic partnership,” agreed on a deal for the production of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in Kazakhstan, making it the first country outside Türkiye to produce Turkish drones (Astana Times, February 21). In October last year, it was announced that the production of the UAVs in Kazakhstan will start in 2024 (Caliber.az, October 15, 2023). “We set a goal not just to open production, but to transfer experience and technology so that in the future Kazakhstan can independently produce unmanned aerial vehicles,” Turkish Aerospace representative Erol Oguz said about the production in the Central Asian republic (Caliber.az, October 15, 2023).

Turkish defense industry companies ASELSAN and ROKETSAN operate in Azerbaijan and plan to expand their activities. Reportedly, Azerbaijan is already producing one of the spare parts for the newly inaugurated Turkish fighter jet KAAN (Apa.az, March 1, 2024). Similar to other OTS members, Azerbaijan has various Turkish drones in its fleet. Baku recently introduced the Turkish UAV Akinci drones into service. Türkiye’s combat drones were critical for the OTS members Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan in their conflicts with Armenia and Tajikistan, respectively. In late 2023, Uzbekistan became the last Turkic state in Central Asia to acquire Turkish drones.

The expansion of defense cooperation within the OTS signifies a pivotal shift in regional dynamics, with member states increasingly prioritizing mutual security and strategic alignment. Aliyev’s reaffirmation of Azerbaijan’s commitment to the OTS underscores the organization’s central role in shaping the foreign policy agenda of its member states. Furthermore, the integration of Turkish defense industry companies in member states’ defense infrastructure underscores the tangible benefits of cooperation within the OTS framework. From joint production ventures to the deployment of cutting-edge Turkish UAVs in regional conflicts, the OTS is emerging as a formidable force in the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. However, challenges remain in navigating the delicate balance between deepening military cooperation and managing relations with external actors such as Russia and China. As member states continue to pursue deeper integration, they must remain vigilant against potential backlash from regional powers. Nevertheless, the trajectory is clear: the OTS is poised to play an increasingly influential role in shaping the security architecture of the Turkic world.



## Conclusion

In forging its path amidst the swirling waves of regional geopolitics, Azerbaijan decided to embrace the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) as a cornerstone of its foreign policy strategy. This choice reflects not only a distancing attempt from Western- or Russia-led integration initiatives but also a re-affirmation of Azerbaijan's preference to cooperate with all power centers in the pursuit of the country's national interests. The decision to eschew the Russia-led blocs and Euro-Atlantic integration in favor of the OTS stems from a deeply ingrained understanding of Azerbaijan's geopolitical realities and historical experiences. The scars of past conflicts and the specter of regional instability loom large in Azerbaijan's strategic calculus, driving the nation to seek alternatives that offer both security and autonomy.

In this context, the OTS emerges as an alternative regionalism which allows Baku to deepen trade and cooperation in various fields with neighboring countries without becoming part of the wider geopolitical rivalries. Moreover, the OTS offers Azerbaijan a pragmatic avenue to bolster its security and defense capabilities, free from the constraints and entanglements of Western- or Russia-led alliances. The burgeoning defense cooperation within the OTS, exemplified by joint production ventures and military collaboration, underscores the organization's potential to serve as a bulwark against external threats and destabilizing forces.

In the final analysis, the integration within the Turkic World and, importantly, with a leading role of a NATO member – Türkiye – is an opportunity that is aligned with the interests of the United States and the European Union in Eurasia. This is reflected in the fact that the OTS bolsters the independence and resilience of the member states and empowers them vis-à-vis the expansionist policies of other power centers. The rise of the OTS as a formidable player in regional geopolitics would, therefore, make a critical adjustment to the balance of power in the larger Eurasia. The peace and prosperity in this region – which is the geographic center of Eurasia and therefore at the spotlight of great power struggles – would be benefited from the rise of the OTS as a self-standing geopolitical agent.

## References

- Anadolu Agency, “Azerbaijani president urges Turkic states to strengthen defense cooperation”, November 3, 2023, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/azerbaijani-president-urges-turkic-states-to-strengthen-defense-cooperation/3042257> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Apa.az, “Azerbaijan produces one of spare parts of Turkish fighter jet KAAN”, March 1, 2024, Available at: <https://en.apa.az/military/azerbaijan-produces-one-of-spare-parts-of-turkish-fighter-jet-kaan-429479> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Apa.az, “Ўзбекистан ратифицировал Договор о союзнических отношениях с Казахстаном”, “Uzbekistan ratifies the agreement on allied relations with Kazakhstan”, December 1, 2023, Available at: <https://ru.apa.az/strani-sng/uzbekistan-ratificiroval-dogovor-o-soyuzniceskix-otnoseniyax-s-kazakhstanom-543287> (Accessed: May 1, 2024).
- Astanatimes.com, “Pan-Turkism: Turkic Vector in Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy”, February 21, 2024, Available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2024/02/pan-turkism-turkic-vector-in-kazakhstans-foreign-policy/#:~:text=The%20deal%20makes%20Kazakhstan%20the,ties%20between%20the%20two%20nations> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Atlantic Council, “A Conversation with Hikmet Hajiyev, Atlantic Council”, June 11, 2019, Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFC2hOVh-yQ&ab\\_channel=AtlanticCouncil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFC2hOVh-yQ&ab_channel=AtlanticCouncil) (Accessed: April 14, 2024).
- Azertag.az, “Azerbaijani President: Organization of Turkic States is the main international organization for us, because it is our family”, February 14, 2024, Available at: [https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbaijani\\_president\\_organization\\_of\\_turkic\\_states\\_is\\_the\\_main\\_international\\_organization\\_for\\_us\\_because\\_it\\_is\\_our\\_family-2922781](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbaijani_president_organization_of_turkic_states_is_the_main_international_organization_for_us_because_it_is_our_family-2922781) (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Caliber.az, “Kazakhstan plans to start production of Turkish Anka drones”, October 15, 2023, Available at: <https://caliber.az/en/post/196784/> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Caspiannews.com, “Azerbaijan, EU Working to Expand Natural Gas Supplies to Europe”, June 4, 2022, Available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-eu-working-to-expand-natural-gas-supplies-to-europe-2022-6-2-30/> (Accessed: April 10, 2024).

- Ec.europa.eu, “EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, including energy cooperation”, July 18, 2022, Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_4550](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4550) (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Ec.europa.eu, “Speech by Commissioner Simson at the inaugural session of the Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council (SGC) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Green Energy Advisory Council”, March 1, 2024, Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_24\\_1284](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_24_1284) (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Ethz.ch, “National security concept of the republic of Azerbaijan, Approved by Instruction No. 2198 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, Available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154917/Azerbaijan2007.pdf> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan and Russia Sign Declaration on Allied Cooperation”, The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 19, No. 25, February 25, 2022, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-and-russia-sign-declaration-on-allied-cooperation/> (Accessed: April 14, 2024).
- Huseynov, V., “Geopolitics of the South Caucasus in Flux: Towards a New Security Order”, Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, Vol. 4, No. 2, Winter 2023.
- Huseynov, V., “Opinion: Pashinyan-Blinken-von der Leyen Meeting Stirs Tensions in the South Caucasus”, Commonsplace.eu, April 4, 2024, Available at: <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-pashinyan-blinken-von-der-leyen-meeting-stirs-tensions-south-caucasus> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Jam-news.net, “Historic event for Azerbaijan”: Analysts on the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh, April 18, 2024, Available at: <https://jam-news.net/russian-peacekeepers-leave-karabakh/> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Mfa.gov.az, “No:056/22, Azərbaycan Respublikası Xarici İşlər Nazirliyinin Mətbuat xidməti idarəsinin məlumatı” [No:056/22 Information of the Press Service of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan], February 22, 2022, Available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/az/news/no05622> (Accessed: April 3, 2024).
- Mid.ru, “Joint Communiqué of the Second Meeting of the 3+3 Regional Platform”, October 24, 2023, Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1911348/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1911348/) (Accessed: April 29, 2024).

- Outzen, R., “Security and Military Cooperation Among the Turkic States in the 2020s”, *The Central Asian Analyst*, December 8, 2023, Available at: [https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/231208\\_FT\\_Outzen.pdf](https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/231208_FT_Outzen.pdf) (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- President.az, “Azerbaijan, Turkey signed Shusha Declaration on allied relations”, June 15, 2021, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/52115> (Accessed: April 3, 2024).
- President.az, “Foreign Policy Priorities”, April 29, 2004, Available at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20071005112919/http://www.president.az/browse.php?sec\\_id=34](https://web.archive.org/web/20071005112919/http://www.president.az/browse.php?sec_id=34) (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- President.az, “Ilham Aliyev and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made press statements”, March 17, 2024, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/65365> (Accessed: April 29, 2024).
- President.az, “Ilham Aliyev attended the International Forum ‘COP29 and Green Vision for Azerbaijan’”, April 23, 2024, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/65580> (Accessed: May 2, 2024).
- President.az, “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the inauguration ceremony”, February 14, 2022, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/64527> (Accessed: April 29, 2024).
- TASS, “Azerbaijan has no intention of joining European Union, president says”, December 6, 2023, Available at: <https://tass.com/world/1716735> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- Trend.az, “Kazakh Parliament assents to deal on allied relations with Uzbekistan”, February 28, 2024, Available at: <https://en.trend.az/casia/kazakhstan/3867856.html> (Accessed: May 1, 2024).
- Trend.az, “New source of danger emerges in South Caucasus – President Ilham Aliyev”, Trend.az, April 5, 2024, Available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3882220.html> (Accessed: April 29, 2024).
- Turkicstates.org, “Declaration of the Tenth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States, Astana, Kazakhstan”, November 3, 2023, Available at: <https://www.turkicstates.org/assets/pdf/haberler/astana-declaration-3113-215.pdf> (Accessed: May 3, 2024).
- US Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken With European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign

Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Before Their Meeting”, April 5, 2024, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-european-commission-president-ursula-von-der-leyen-armenian-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-and-high-representative-of-the-european-union-for-foreign-affairs-and-secu/> (Accessed: May 1, 2024).

YouTube Channel of House Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans, “The Future of Nagorno-Karabakh”, November 15, 2023, Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuEhHnwTlAg&ab\\_channel=HouseForeignAffairsCommitteeRepublicans](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuEhHnwTlAg&ab_channel=HouseForeignAffairsCommitteeRepublicans) (Accessed: May 1, 2024).

# Challenges to Reconciling European and Regional Integration (Regional Actors)

*Stephan H. Astourian*

## Introduction

This essay will take for granted that “integration” is the European Union’s medium- or long-term goal for the South Caucasus and will address the “conditions of possibility,” a Kantian term, for reconciling European with regional integration in that region. In the course of its analysis, it will reach several “limited” conclusions – some perhaps trivial or commonsensical, and others somewhat useful – which should provide some food for thought.

“Integration” is often understood vaguely in economic terms, such as increase in the volume of trade, greater interconnectivity, etc. I would like to suggest, however, that a broader approach to the concept should be adopted that includes its political and cultural dimensions. Integration is associated with the concept of “interdependence,” and it is a complex process. Prominent political scientist Joseph Nye outlines seven processes and mechanisms that determine the conditions of possibility of integration:

- a) functionalist linkage of tasks;
- b) rising transactions;
- c) deliberate linkages and coalition formation;
- d) elite socialization;
- e) regional group formation;
- f) ideological and ideational appeal; and
- g) involvement of external actors in the process. These process mechanisms can encourage and create what Nye terms “integrative potential.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger A. Coate, Jeffrey A. Griffin, Steven Elliott-Gower, “Interdependence in International Organization and Global Governance,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, (November 2017) at <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-110#acrefore-9780190846626-e-110-div1-0006>, (accessed on 4/5/2024).

Nye also posits four “conditioning factors”:

- a) symmetry or economic equality of units;
- b) elite value complementarity;
- c) existence of pluralism; and
- d) capacity of member states to adapt and respond to demands within their political units.

The process of integration itself is shaped by other factors, such as politicization or “changes in perceived utility of alternatives to integration.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of the South Caucasus, the challenges are many.

## Unknowns

If we focus on the South Caucasus and add to the above conditions some known unknowns and unknown unknowns, then things get even more complex. Which political party will win the October 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia and what impact could that have on the status of candidate country that the European Council granted that country on December 12, 2023?<sup>3</sup> Could Russia “reactivate” in various ways the breakaway, occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it recognizes as sovereign independent republics, along with only four other states?<sup>4</sup> And what about what could be called significant “irritants,” such as the recent reintroduction of the “Foreign Agents” bills that were withdrawn on March 9, 2023, after massive protests?<sup>5</sup> As if all this were not enough, the even more recent speech of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2023/12/12/>.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Paul Goble, “Moscow Will Only Consider Absorbing South Ossetia amid a Georgian Rapprochement with NATO,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21, 44 (March 21, 2024), at <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-will-only-consider-absorbing-south-ossetia-amid-a-georgian-rapprochement-with-nato/>, (accessed on 4/5/2024). Also, Beka Chedia, “Russia Bait Georgia with Return of Occupied Territories in Run-Up to Parliamentary Elections,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21, 42 (March 19, 2024), at <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-baits-georgia-with-return-of-occupied-territories-in-run-up-to-parliamentary-elections/>, (accessed on 4/5/2024).

<sup>5</sup> Felix Light, “Georgia’s ruling party to reintroduce aborted bill on ‘foreign agents’,” April 3, 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/georgias-ruling-party-says-its-reintroducing-draft-law-foreign-agents-2024-04-03/>, (accessed on 4/8/2024). See also Human Rights Watch, Georgia: “‘Foreign Agents’ Bill Tramples on Rights,” March 7,

Mr. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Georgian billionaire who founded and is the honorary chairman of that country's ruling party ("Georgian Dream"), should be a bit worrisome and unsettling from an EU point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Other highly relevant uncertainties about the future abound. How will the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian war, assuming the war itself does not drag on for years, affect Russia's influence in the South Caucasus? Will a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan be signed, or will clashes of various intensity continue? Could an Israel-Iran war erupt and what would its consequences be for the South Caucasus? Will Russian attempts at destabilizing Armenia and instigating regime change to bring back a more subservient leadership succeed? And if they do not, does the current leadership in Armenia have a clear, genuine plan to move westwards, or is it simply flying by the seat of its pants, so to speak, faced as it is with Russian and Azerbaijani coercion and threats? The above-mentioned issues, whether some of them do take place (Israel-Iran war) or not, and their possible outcomes deserve to be kept in mind. In the case of some of them, as the U.S. State Department Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace stated:

Moscow has exploited ongoing conflicts in all three countries to dominate its self-defined sphere of vital interests. While these conflicts persist, Moscow will maintain significant leverage over Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi.<sup>7</sup>

These, and many other similar questions lead us to our first limited conclusion: the process of integration will be a long and arduous process, shaped to a significant extent by somewhat unpredictable political developments and significant attempts at sabotaging it.

---

2023, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-tramples-rights>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

<sup>6</sup> For the full text of that speech, see "Bidzina Ivanishvili Backs Anti-Western Policies, Threatens Repressions," April 29, 2024, at <https://civil.ge/archives/602348>, (accessed on 4/30/2024).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Glantz, "Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia's Balancing Act Over Russia's War in Ukraine: Russia's Role in Ongoing Conflicts in South Caucasus Countries Is a Critical Factor in Their Response," March 15, 2022, at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgias-balancing-act-over-russias-war-ukraine>, (accessed on 4/5/2024).



## Regime Types and EU Norms

To appreciate the feasibility of significant regional integration, let us look at a few characteristics of the South Caucasian countries in question. Of these, only two (Armenia and Georgia) have developed a democratic culture, in addition to having a very positive perception of the European Union and the USA.<sup>8</sup> Their political systems, however imperfect they might be, are based on democratic norms and overall fair elections. As Nika Chitadze put it, “both societies are mainly oriented toward European cultural and democratic traditions, and sooner or later their paths will cross.”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Azerbaijan is, to use sociologist Max Weber’s term, a sultanistic regime, more precisely a family-run, dynastic, authoritarian, and kleptocratic regime.<sup>10</sup> Unlike some sultanistic regimes that did not need to rely on a clear ideological

---

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Insights in Survey Research (A Project of the International Republican Institute), *Georgian Survey of Public Opinion, September-October 2023*, at <https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/> posted on November 15, 2023, (accessed on 4/5/2024). To the question “Which of these countries do you consider the most important political partners for Georgia,” 51% replied the European Union and 32% the USA, respectively in first and second place. Multiple responses were permitted. Russia came seventh, with 9%. See, p. 34. In the case of Armenia, see, Centre for Insights in Survey Research (A Project of the International Republican Institute), *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia*, at [https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IRI\\_Armenia-Public-Survey\\_FINAL\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IRI_Armenia-Public-Survey_FINAL_ENG.pdf). Posted on March 11, 2024, (accessed on 4/5/2024). To the question “How would you evaluate the current state of the relationship between Armenia and ...?”, 96% of the respondents replied good or somewhat good in the case of France; 88% in the case of the USA; and 87% in the case of the European Union. Russia came in ninth place, with only 4% answering “very good” and 27% “somewhat good.” See p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Nika Chittadze, “How the Russia-Ukraine War Changed the Prospects of Georgia and the South Caucasus Region,” in *Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance*, 25<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”, eds. Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Vienna: Republic of Austria/Federal Ministry of Defence, November 2023), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting reflection on the emergence of sultanism in Azerbaijan, see Farid Guliyev, “Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Transition to Sultanistic Semiauthoritarianism? An Attempt at Conceptualization” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 13, 3 (2005): pp. 393–435. About twenty years after the publication of this article, Azerbaijan has now evolved into a fully authoritarian regime. For a broader perspective of the evolution of Azerbaijan’s political system up to the present, see Najmin Kamilsoy, “Cut the Branches, Strengthen the Roots: Evolution of the Political Structure in Azerbaijan,” *ISPI 90* [Italian Institute for International Political Studies], February 6, 2024, at

framework, President Aliyev has promoted an ultra-nationalistic, irredentist or expansionist ideology, with official claims to “Western Azerbaijan,” or more than half of current Armenia, and “Southern Azerbaijan,” about the northwestern third of Iran. On a still unofficial level allowing plausible deniability, there are also Azerbaijani claims to some parts of Georgia, particularly Borchalu and its region (Marneuli in Georgian, located in Kvemo Kartli).

The recent resolution 2527 of the Parliamentary Assembly of Europe, whereby the latter resolved not to ratify the credentials of Azerbaijan’s delegation, offers a glimpse into all the problems plaguing Azerbaijan, at least from a European perspective, its commitments to the Council of Europe that have not been honoured, and its somewhat problematic activities. These are articles 2 and 3 of the resolution.

2. The Assembly deplores that more than twenty years after joining the Council of Europe Azerbaijan has not fulfilled major commitments stemming therefrom. Very serious concerns remain as to its ability to conduct free and fair elections, the separation of powers, the weakness of its legislature vis-à-vis the executive, the independence of the judiciary and respect for human rights, as illustrated by numerous judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and opinions of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission).

3. In this context, the Assembly recalls its Resolution 2184 (2017) “The functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan”, Resolution 2185 (2017) “Azerbaijan’s Chairmanship of the Council of Europe: what follow-up on respect for human rights?”, Resolution 2279 (2019) “Laundromats: responding to new challenges in the international fight against organised crime, corruption and money laundering”, Resolution 2322 (2020) “Reported cases of political prisoners in Azerbaijan”, Resolution 2362 (2021) “Restrictions on NGO (Non-governmental Organization) activities in Council of Europe member States”, Resolution 2418 (2022) “Alleged violations of the rights of LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex) people in the Southern Caucasus”, Resolution 2494 (2023) “Implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights”, Resolution 2509 (2023) “Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights” and Resolution 2513 (2023) “Pegasus and similar spyware and secret State surveillance”. It also notes with

---

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/cut-the-branches-strengthen-the-roots-evolution-of-the-political-structure-in-azerbaijan-162641>, (accessed on May 1, 2024). The author makes the following interesting point: “Until Turkmenistan’s 2022 election, Azerbaijan was the first and only country in the Eurasian area that saw a dynastic transition of power. Yet, the wholly closing space for civic and political alternatives over the years, and recently boosted public visibility of Heydar Aliyev junior next to the government officials, signal that another one might be underway.”.

concern that, according to the Council of Europe's Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists, at least 18 journalists and media actors are currently in detention in Azerbaijan.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Azerbaijan outranks Belarus, Iran, and Russia in the Freedom House annual Freedom in the World report.<sup>12</sup> Azerbaijan also appears in the latest report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which recommends the following to the US government:

Designate Azerbaijan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)...

The U.S. Congress should:

Raise concerns, through public hearings and other actions, about Azerbaijan's religious freedom and broader human rights abuses, including treatment of the MUM (Muslim Unity Movement or *Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkatı*), directly with the Azerbaijani Embassy and other government officials and advocate for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience.<sup>13</sup>

In view of all this, in particular what has been called the ethnic cleansing of more than 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and the ensuing rather muted EU reaction, some have raised questions about the EU's values and standards:

The reality is that the EU's tolerance, rather than being challenged, has been extended. The political decision that Azerbaijan's geopolitical importance stands above the regime's actions is clear. Today there is no doubt that there are different standards for different countries in the EU's neighbourhood.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically enough, an Azerbaijani analyst working at a Baku think tank, the Topchubashov Centre, reaches approximately the same conclusion but from

---

<sup>11</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), “Resolution 2527 (2024): Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan,” at <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33333/html>, (accessed on 4/5/2024).

<sup>12</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World Report,” at <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>, (accessed on 4/5/2024).

<sup>13</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “2024 Annual Report,” May 1, 2024, at <https://www.uscirtf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirtf-releases-2024-annual-report-new-recommendations-us-policy>, p. 16, (accessed on 5/1/2024).

<sup>14</sup> Rasmus Canbäck, “The hypocrisy of “caviar diplomacy”: How Azerbaijan still manages to avoid European sanctions,” *The Insider: Reports, Analytics, Investigations*, April 7, 2024, at <https://theins.ru/en/opinion/rasmus-canback/270590>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

the viewpoint of pragmatism, while discussing the recent, above-mentioned PACE resolution. The question he addresses is whether EU-Azerbaijan tensions will lead to a significant fracture or “will bounce back to normal.” And he concludes:

Firstly, a meaningful geopolitical turn in the EU foreign policy towards the Eastern Partnership region against the background of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine necessitates comprehensive cooperation with regional partners including Azerbaijan, putting aside normative differences. Secondly, Azerbaijan’s pivotal position in the region’s energy and connectivity geopolitics makes it a natural partner for the EU, establishing a common interest in regional stability even if the two sides currently differ on how to achieve it in the short term.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the case might be, there are clear indications that a significant Azerbaijani attack against the territory of Armenia is likely to lead to EU sanctions.

Based on our analysis of the Azerbaijani political regime, our second limited conclusion is this: it is difficult to see how such a regime could be “integrated” politically and culturally, even very slowly, into the EU. Long-term, significant regime transformation and cultural evolution are required.

## **Economic “Integration” and Norms**

From an economic perspective, however, Azerbaijan is already integrated to a non-negligible extent with the EU. In 2022, EU importations from Azerbaijan amounted to slightly more than 31 billion euros, and its exportations to that country amounted to 2.047 billion euros. Beyond the vast imbalance between importations and exportations, it should be stressed that mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials amounted to more than 30.8 billion euros of the EU importations.<sup>16</sup> In a nutshell, the “integration” of Azerbaijan so far refers essentially to hydrocarbons. Indeed, the economic attractiveness of Azerbaijan to the EU, particularly its gas, is clear, as evidenced by the Memorandum of Understanding European Commission President Ursula

---

<sup>15</sup> Mahammad Mammadov, “Geopolitical undertones of Azerbaijan’s withdrawal from PACE,” *Azmedia*, January 30, 2024, at <https://aze.media/geopolitical-undertones-of-azerbajians-withdrawal-from-pace/>, (accessed 4/5/2024).

<sup>16</sup> European Union, Directorate-General for Trade, “European Union, Trade in goods with Azerbaijan,” at [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb\\_results/factsheets/country/details\\_azerbaijan\\_en.pdf](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_azerbaijan_en.pdf), (accessed on 4/5/2024).

von der Leyen signed in Baku with President Ilham Aliyev in July 2022.<sup>17</sup> There are doubts, however, whether Azerbaijan will be able to double its gas exports to the EU by 2027 as it appears it is already in a way swapping or “laundering” Russian gas to increase its deliveries to Europe. Thus, in November 2022, Azerbaijan struck a deal with Russian gas producer Gazprom whereby the latter would supply Azerbaijan with one billion cubic meters of gas by March 2023. This has raised eyebrows from various perspectives, including human rights.<sup>18</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit summed up the reality aptly:

Azerbaijan’s immediate solution to buy gas from Russia is unlikely to be a viable option over the medium to long term. For now, the EU’s need to source alternative supplies of gas has precluded any complaints about the fact that Azerbaijan’s reported deal with Russia – the exact terms of which remain unclear – violates the intent of the EU’s agreement with Azerbaijan, which was to cut the bloc off from Russian gas. As the EU builds an alternative gas supply infrastructure, it will press harder to ensure that this infrastructure is not dependent on subsidiary agreements with Russia.<sup>19</sup>

The recent \$1.5 billion loan of the Russian energy company Lukoil to State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR), the state-owned Azerbaijani oil company, also indicates a quite close linkage between the production and exportation of both Azerbaijani gas and oil on the one hand, and Russian companies on the other hand. Thanks to this loan, SOCAR repaid, ahead of schedule, a \$1.3 billion syndicated loan to several banks, including JP Morgan

---

<sup>17</sup> “EU signs deal to double gas imports from Azerbaijan by 2027,” *Euractiv*, July 22, 2022, at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/eu-signs-deal-to-double-gas-imports-from-azerbaijan-by-2027/>, (accessed on 4/6/2024).

<sup>18</sup> See, among others, David O’Byrne, “Azerbaijan’s Russian gas deal raises uncomfortable questions for Europe,” *Eurasianet*, November 22, 2022, at <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijans-russian-gas-deal-raises-uncomfortable-questions-for-europe>, (accessed 4/6/2024); Gligor Radečić, “The EU-Azerbaijan Gas Deal Is a Repeat Mistake,” *Politico*, August 17, 2022, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-eu-azerbaijan-gas-deal-is-a-repeat-mistake/>, (accessed 4/21/2024); Jennifer Rankin, “Human Rights Groups Criticise EU’s Azerbaijan Gas Deal,” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/19/human-rights-groups-criticise-eus-azerbaijan-gas-deal>, (accessed on 4/21/2024); and *Eurasianet* (David O’Byrne), “Azerbaijani Gas is Bridging the Supply Gap in Europe,” Oil Price, December 19, 2023, at <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Natural-Gas/Azerbaijani-Gas-is-Bridging-the-Supply-Gap-in-Europe.html>, (accessed on 4/21/2024).

<sup>19</sup> EIU [Economist Intelligence Unit], “Azerbaijan’s Gas Exports to the EU Face challenges,” July 10, 2023, at <https://www.eiu.com/n/azerbaijans-gas-exports-to-the-eu-face-challenges/>, (accessed 4/21/2024).

and Citibank. As Reuters put it, “the sources said the early redemption had the effect of allowing Moscow to resume sales of crude to Socar’s Star refinery in Turkey, a major longstanding buyer, at a time when other refiners worldwide were shunning Russian oil.”<sup>20</sup> Regarding Lukoil and Azerbaijani gas, this must also be noted:

The Russian firm Lukoil is on course to make \$7 billion in profits over the coming decade from a gas field in Azerbaijan that supplies the European Union, according to Rystad Energy data analysed by Global Witness.

The Shah Deniz field is one of the world’s largest gas-condensate projects, and currently the only one in Azerbaijan that exports gas to the EU. The field is operated by the British company British Petroleum (BP), with Lukoil owning a 19.99% share of it.<sup>21</sup>

Leaving aside these arrangements, which some might find a bit problematic, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank have also committed 1.5 billion euros “to enhance the capacities of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as the Middle Corridor.” The latter will link Central Asia to Europe via Azerbaijan. Besides, European Commission Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis stated that more money will “come through the Commission’s open architecture for investment guarantees.”<sup>22</sup> If all this means the emergence of a kind of “dual-track integration,” the political, social, and cultural, not to mention the human rights, dimensions being separated from the economic, then our third limited conclusion will come in the form of a question: is such a “dual-track integration” sustainable in the medium to long run? While a modicum of pragmatism is not a bad thing in international relations, can the EU’s norms and the

---

<sup>20</sup> Dmitry Zhdannikov, “Exclusive: Azeri oil firm which took Russian funds redeems US bank loans early, sources say,” Reuters, March 13, 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/azeri-oil-firm-which-took-russian-funds-redeems-us-bank-loans-early-sources-say-2024-03-13/>, (accessed on 4/21/2024). Also, Eurasianet (David O’Byrne), “SOCAR And Lukoil Seal Unique Oil Deal Despite Western Sanctions,” *Oil Price*, October 16, 2023, at <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/SOCAR-And-Lukoil-Seal-Unique-Oil-Deal-Despite-Western-Sanctions.html>, (accessed on 4/22, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Global Witness, “The EU’s gas love-in with Azerbaijan is a gift for the Russian oil giant Lukoil,” April 30, 2024, at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/the-eus-gas-love-in-with-azerbaijan-is-a-gift-for-the-russian-oil-giant-lukoil/>, (accessed May 1, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Assem Assanyaz, “EU-CA Investors Forum Announces €10 Bln Commitment for Development of Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor,” *The Astana Times*, January 29, 2024, at <https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/eu-ca-transport-forum-kicks-off-in-brussels-eib-global-allocates-over-1-6-blb/>, (accessed on 4/6/2024).

spirit and/or letter of its agreements be overlooked without costs? The above discussion leads us to our fourth limited conclusion: any comprehensive integration that includes economic, political, cultural, and other such facets will have to start with Georgia and Armenia.

## Regional Actors

But what about the three regional powers: Iran, Russia, and Türkiye? All three were imperial powers. While Iran is an electoral semi-theocratic, authoritarian regime, Russia is an electoral, kleptocratic, authoritarian regime, and Türkiye is an illiberal democracy, or an electoral authoritarian regime. With the addition of Azerbaijan, they constitute the authoritarian axis in the region. The relationships between all three could be qualified as a form of pragmatic, case-by-case competitive cooperation that is part of each one's larger strategic calculus. All of them oppose the presence of the West in the region and are in favour of the so-called 3+3 format – Iran, Russia, Türkiye + Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – to address South Caucasian issues, including peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia having rejected participation in this arrangement, the 3+3 format is de facto a 3+2 format. Iran, however, tolerates and does not seem to really oppose EU presence in Armenia, particularly the EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia, and even foreign defensive military support to that country.<sup>23</sup> Azerbaijan joins Russia and Türkiye in their opposition to EU influence and activities in the South Caucasus. Thus, these three countries that appear to have reached a kind of consensus regarding the 44-day war that started in September 2020 continue their collaboration. This is evidenced by their loud condemnations of the tripartite summit that took place in Brussels on April 5, 2024, bringing together President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. In contradistinction, the Iranian reaction to that summit came closer to silence. A very recent interview given by former Iranian ambassador to Baku Afsar Süleymani to journalist Eynulla Fətullayev, on the quasi-official Azerbaijani news website Haqqin.az., has revealed that the US and Iran have

---

<sup>23</sup> European External Action Service Press Team, “Q&A EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia,” October 25, 2022, at [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia_en), (accessed on April 8, 2024).

been consulting each other via third parties and collaborating regarding the South Caucasus.<sup>24</sup>

The Russian agenda in the region is overall quite clear. Though partly weakened by its Ukraine invasion, Russia does not intend to leave the South Caucasus. Today, its main ally in the region is Azerbaijan with whom, among other things, it signed the “Declaration on Allied Interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia” on February 22, 2022, two days before the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war.<sup>25</sup> Dr. Vasif Huseynov, a senior fellow at the Centre of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Centre, Baku), sums up the military and diplomatic dimension of this declaration thus:

The Moscow declaration brings about novelties to Russian-Azerbaijani relations in the military sphere. Until now, the military cooperation between the two sides was largely limited to Azerbaijan’s purchase of Russian weapons, besides some other minor issues; but the latest declaration elevates this cooperation to a much higher level. This includes joint operations involving their armed forces, joint combat training, the establishment of service centres for the maintenance, repair and modernization of Azerbaijan’s weapons and military equipment, as well as the organization of joint production of various types of military products. The sides may also provide military assistance to each other on the basis of the United Nations Charter and other international agreements. [...]

According to the Moscow declaration, Azerbaijan and Russia express readiness to hold the same or similar positions on issues of international relations as well as to maintain cooperative relations to ensure stability and security in the Caucasus and Caspian regions.<sup>26</sup>

As a member of NATO with deep ties with Europe, Türkiye is obviously of critical importance. There are clear difficulties, however, for both the EU and the West in general. In the late 1970s, a kind of consensus emerged about the dominant ideology of the country, especially among nationalists,

---

<sup>24</sup> Әйнулла Фатуллаев, “Iran İsraildən və Azərbaycanıdan nə istəyir?” [What Does Iran Want from Israel and Azerbaijan?], May 1, 2024, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93GoteFJ9O4>, (accessed on 5/3/2024). Also on <https://haqqin.az/>, (accessed on 5/3/2024). The interview is in Azerbaijani.

<sup>25</sup> Trend, “Text of Declaration on Allied Interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia Published,” February 22, 2022, at <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3559099.html>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

<sup>26</sup> Vasif Huseynov, “Azerbaijan and Russia Sign Declaration on Allied Cooperation,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 19, 25, February 25, 2022, at <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-and-russia-sign-declaration-on-allied-cooperation/>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).



which was summed up as the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.” Over the past decade, this dominant ideological framework has evolved into what could be called the “Turkist-Islamist Synthesis.” The latter has little to do with Europe. Beyond its quite deep economic ties with Russia and its very significant competitive cooperation and pragmatic collaboration with Moscow in conflicts stretching from the Middle to the South Caucasus, Türkiye has not imposed any Western sanctions on Russia. Though anchored to the West, it pursues in parallel Neo-Ottoman policies and Pan-Turkic aspirations regarding the Central Asian republics.<sup>27</sup> Concerning Armenia, the negotiations for the normalization of Türkiye’s relations with that country, strongly encouraged by the US, seem to go nowhere and its border with Armenia is still closed. Türkiye’s backing of Azerbaijan’s maximalist demands seems also to be unflinching. Even though both the US and the EU appear to count on Türkiye to help bring peace and stability to the South Caucasus, an approach that makes full sense, my fifth limited conclusion is that high hopes in this regard might be a bit misplaced.<sup>28</sup> The reasons are multiple: economic interdependence with Azerbaijan, strong presence of nationalists and ultra-nationalists in President Erdoğan’s coalition, the large Azerbaijani diaspora, fraternal ethnic feelings, the absence of major gains at this point at least from rapprochement with Armenia, etc.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> For an interesting reflection on the Anatolian foreign policy of President Erdoğan, see Soner Çağaptay, “How Turkey Moved East, Erdoğan and the Rise of an Anatolian Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 19, 2024, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-turkey-moved-east>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

<sup>28</sup> See this section of the recent “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism”: “On the South Caucasus, Secretary Blinken and Minister Fidan committed to work together to promote a balanced and lasting peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and concurred that this would promote regional stability, cooperation, and welfare.” U.S. Depart of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism,” March 9, 2024, at <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-turkiye-strategic-mechanism-2/>, (accessed on 4/8/2024). For the EU, see the statement by Toivo Klaar, European Union Special Representative to the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia, at the Antalya Diplomatic Forum, which took place on March 1–3, 2024: Antalya Diplomacy Forum Panel, “Peace, Development and Connectivity in the South Caucasus,” March 1, 2024, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygThBfXpTXs&t=2269s>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

<sup>29</sup> On the large Azerbaijani diaspora in Türkiye, the interesting article of Jala Garibova, “The Azerbaijani Diaspora in Turkey: Integration, Reintegration, and the Production of Identity,” *Nationalities Papers* 50, 4 (2022): 770–793.

Overall, Türkiye is a very assertive regional power that excels in pragmatic, if not opportunistic, “hedge politics.” As such, it leads, or at least participates in a growing trend among Middle Eastern states characterized by “the rise of more independent-minded regional actors.” These states, including Iran, position “themselves as gatekeepers to the interventions of external powers, which they are trying to leverage to their advantage.”<sup>30</sup> A well-known analyst of Turkish affairs cogently sums up Türkiye’s hedging politics in the Middle East and its broader geopolitical approach thus:

Therefore, in an increasingly multipolar region, Turkey cannot afford to be a power with no partners other than Qatar. Nor does it want to be a satellite of the West. And Turkey’s transformation into a national security state under Erdogan arguably leaves it without a model of Islamist democracy to try to export to Gulf monarchies. Ankara’s main aim in the Middle East is now to engage in a geopolitical balancing act that strengthens Turkey’s economy and protects its security interests as much as possible.<sup>31</sup>

Pretty much the same analysis would apply to the South Caucasus. In this regard, my sixth limited conclusion was best formulated by Dr. Mustafa Aydın, Professor of International Relations at Kadir Has University and President of the International Relations Council of Türkiye. This is the English transcript of what he stated in an interview he gave in Turkish to *Civilnet*, a Yerevan news site.

It is certainly beneficial for Turkey that Russia’s influence decreases a little, with its own influence increasing in exchange, which is also expressed in the context of the current Russia-Ukraine war. However, on the other hand, I do not think that the complete loss of Russia’s influence is beneficial to Turkey, although it may seem very paradoxical, because if Russia loses its influence, then the European Union and the United States will take that place...

When the United States becomes active in the Caucasus, it threatens not only Russia’s position, but also Turkey’s, and so it is more beneficial for the Turkish side if

---

<sup>30</sup> Julian Barnes-Dacey and Hugh Lovatt, “PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM: EUROPE’S PLACE IN A MULTIPOLAR MIDDLE EAST,” *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, April 2022, p. 12, at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/principled-pragmatism-europes-place-in-a-multipolar-middle-east/>, (accessed on 5/1/2024).

<sup>31</sup> Asli Aydintaşbaş, “Hedge politics: Turkey’s search for balance in the Middle East,” *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, July 2022, p. 2, at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/hedge-politics-turkeys-search-for-balance-in-the-middle-east/>, (accessed on 5/1/2024).

the United States does not intervene and supports Ankara's efforts in the Caucasus in the fight against Moscow.<sup>32</sup>

I would also venture to suggest, beyond the current developments discussed in this essay, that President Aliyev also needs Moscow in the long term. His dynastic regime, regardless of how close it is to Türkiye, needs hedging as an insurance policy for its survival, and Russia is likely to play that role. For sure, President Aliyev must be aware of the Bolshevik-Kemalist arrangement that put an end to the first Azerbaijani Republic in April 1920 and of the attempted coup d'état against his father in 1995 by some important elements of the Turkish "deep State."<sup>33</sup> Thus, my seventh limited conclusion, which is more a prediction than a provable statement, is that the Azerbaijan-Russia collaboration is likely to continue in the future, perhaps with some ups and downs, unless Russia is totally defeated in Ukraine.

### **The Russia-Azerbaijan Axis**

Türkiye, however, is unlikely to have any appetite for the prolongation or intensification of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict at a time when it is trying to mend fences with the US. Only two states seem to have an interest in maintaining instability: Azerbaijan and Russia. Though hard to prove beyond any doubt, they appear to be working in tandem. Over the past two to four years, new Azerbaijani "themes" have emerged, such as the idea of "Western Azerbaijan" and the claims thereupon, real or imagined Azerbaijani "enclaves" and territories on strategically located Armenian border territories to be returned unilaterally by Armenia, and especially the "Zangezur Corridor." The latter, linking mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan exclave, is that narrow isthmus that is supposed to also link Azerbaijan with Türkiye. Baku demands free passage across Syunik, the southernmost part of Armenia, with no customs and checkpoints, essentially an extra-territorial passage.

---

<sup>32</sup> Civilnet, "Թուրքիային պետք է Ռուսաստանի թուլացումը, բայց ոչ լիակատար հեռացումը Կովկասից" ["Turkey Needs Russia's Weakening, but not its Total Departure from the Caucasus"], Interview conducted by Georgi Mirzabekyan, March 25, 2024, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpYM4EucZRY>, (accessed 4/1/2024).

<sup>33</sup> For a very concise summary of the coup attempt, see Wikipedia, 1995 Azerbaijani coup attempt, at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995\\_Azerbaijani\\_coup\\_attempt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995_Azerbaijani_coup_attempt), (accessed 4/22/2024).

These demands are a modified or distorted version of the transport connection between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan mentioned in the November 9, 2020, ceasefire agreement brokered by Russian President Putin.

9. All economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall guarantee the security of transport connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic in order to arrange unobstructed movement of persons, vehicles and cargo in both directions. The Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service shall be responsible for overseeing the transport connections.

Subject to agreement between the Parties, the construction of new transport communications to link the Nakhchivan [sic] Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan will be ensured.<sup>34</sup>

While both Russia and Azerbaijan have reneged upon the implementation of all the other articles of the November 9 document, they both insist on the opening of this “corridor,” with Russia stating however that it should be Armenian territory, naturally under the control of its Federal Security Service (FSB), the KGB’s direct descendant. The maximalist demands of Azerbaijan, accompanied with threats, seem to pave the way for the “compromise” solution: handing over that passage to Russia. The presence of Russian troops on the territory of Azerbaijan, whether as “peacekeepers” in Nagorno-Karabakh or as personnel in the Russo-Turkish monitoring centre in the Agdam district of Azerbaijan and the control of the southernmost part of Armenia (Syunik or Zangezur) appear to have been the two prizes for Russia’s collaboration with Türkiye and Azerbaijan in the launching of the war, and perhaps in its course.<sup>35</sup> As there are barely a couple of dozen residents left in Nagorno Karabakh as a result of the ethnic cleansing that took place in September 2023, the Russian “peacekeepers” were left keeping peace with themselves. Then, they were assigned to demining operations.<sup>36</sup> One got the impression that Russia wanted them to remain there at least until the mandate

---

<sup>34</sup> Wikipedia, “2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement,” at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020\\_Nagorno-Karabakh\\_ceasefire\\_agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Nagorno-Karabakh_ceasefire_agreement), (accessed on 4/8/2024).

<sup>35</sup> For the monitoring center, see Paul Goble, “Joint Russian-Turkish Karabakh Monitoring Center Opens Amidst Fresh Controversy,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 18, 20, February 4, 2021, at <https://jamestown.org/program/joint-russian-turkish-karabakh-monitoring-center-opens-amidst-fresh-controversy/>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

<sup>36</sup> Azvision.az [Azerbaijani Vision], “Russian peacekeepers to join demining operations in Azerbaijan’s Khojaly,” April 4, 2024, at <https://en.azvision.az/news/178179/-russian->

for their mission would run out in November 2025, but they quite unexpectedly started leaving on April 16, 2024.<sup>37</sup> As for the Agdam monitoring centre, it started closing on April 26, 2024.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Prime Minister Pashinyan's rejection, so far at least, of any extraterritorial corridor or transport passage outside Armenia's control leaves Russia a bit empty-handed at this point, unless some kind of *quid pro quo* was reached during President Aliyev's meeting with President Putin in Moscow on April 22, 2024. There is also some uncertainty about the extent to which Azerbaijan would like to see that transportation route under Russian control.<sup>39</sup> What makes this corridor issue so important is that Russian control of it would also give it control over East-West communications at a key connection of what has been called the "Middle Corridor," supposed to link Central Asia with Europe. The eighth limited conclusion is that it would be a strategic mistake to allow either the (somewhat unlikely) Azerbaijani or the Russian version of the "Zangezur Corridor" to be implemented. Regarding the former, it would imply that the West agrees to, or condones, Azerbaijani aggression on the sovereign territory of Armenia. This might result in a significant credibility deficit in the Caucasus and elsewhere. At any rate, the highest Iranian officials have made it clear repeatedly that they would not accept the "creation" of such a corridor. These statements were warnings, and though some doubt their seriousness, my inclination would be to take them seriously. Indeed, such an extra-territorial corridor under non-Armenian control would cut Iran from Armenia, and thus from a possible access to the Black Sea; establish direct land communication between Azerbaijan and Türkiye via Nakhichevan, an old pan-Turkic goal; and leave out Iran as a transit country between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, among other things.

---

peacekeepers-to-join-demining-operations-in-azerbaijans-khojaly-.html, (accessed on 4/9/2024).

<sup>37</sup> Vasif Huseynov, "Russia's Peacekeeping Contingent Leaves Karabakh," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21, 61, April 22, 2024, at <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-peacekeeping-contingent-leaves-karabakh/>, (accessed on 4/29/2024).

<sup>38</sup> Nailia Bagirova, "Ceasefire monitoring centre in Nagorno-Karabakh shuts as Russian peacekeepers withdraw," *Reuters*, April 27, 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/ceasefire-monitoring-centre-nagorno-karabakh-shuts-russian-peacekeepers-withdraw-2024-04-26/>, (accessed on 4/28/2024).

<sup>39</sup> Joshua Kucera, "One Winner Of The Ukraine War Is Azerbaijan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 23, 2024, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-winner-caucasus-ukraine-war-russia-relations/32917647.html>, (accessed on 4/29/2024).

## **The “Crossroads of Peace” and Armenia**

The fact that both the EU and the US supported in Brussels President Pashinyan’s connectivity project, which he dubbed the “Crossroads of Peace,” is a welcome development.<sup>40</sup> This project includes two transportation routes linking mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan. However, Pashinyan emphasized that the “Crossroads of Peace” should be based on four “principles,” at least the first two of which are very much likely to face Azerbaijani and Russian opposition for the reasons discussed above. These are:

Principle #1 All infrastructures, including roads, railways, airways, pipelines, cables, and electricity lines, operate under the sovereignty and jurisdiction of the countries through which they pass.

Principle #2 Each country, through its state institutions, in its territory ensures border, customs control and security of all the infrastructures, including the passage through its territory of vehicles, cargo, and people. In fact, in the near future, a special unit will be created within Armenia’s law-enforcement system, which will have the function of ensuring the security of international communications passing through Armenia, as well as the cargo, vehicles, and people using them, of course jointly with our Patrol Police.<sup>41</sup>

My ninth limited conclusion is that this project, which is quite rational and beneficial to all parties, faces insurmountable challenges, at least at this point, unless Türkiye somehow changes its position in the future and supports it.

## **Azerbaijan and Instability**

More generally, the occupation of about 200 square kilometres – the estimates vary – of Armenian territory by Azerbaijani troops, their intermittent

---

<sup>40</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, “Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia’s resilience,” April 5, 2024, at [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05_en), (accessed on 4/8, 2024).

<sup>41</sup> For both the map of the “Crossroads of Peace” and the “principles” on which it should be based, see The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Statements and Messages of the Prime Minister of AM, “Prime Minister Pashinyan presents the “Crossroads of Peace” project and its principles at the Tbilisi International Forum,” October 26, 2023, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/10/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>, (accessed 4/8/2024).

shootings at Armenian border villages, President Aliyev's multiple claims raising questions about his recognition of Armenian territorial integrity in some high-level meetings and his refusal to withdraw his troops from Armenian territory do not suggest that he is in a hurry to conclude a peace treaty. The motivations or causes for such behaviour are unclear: an attempt at maximizing Azerbaijani gains or at enhancing his image and legitimacy in Azerbaijan as a great leader; gaining time to see what the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war might be or that of the elections of the European Parliament in June 2024 or the US presidential election on November 5, 2024; or a sheer sense of invincibility and power? At any rate, Azerbaijan got everything it had wanted because of its victory in the 44-day war, and even much more. There are now, as mentioned above, almost no Armenians left in Nagorno-Karabakh. The tenth limited, and perhaps trivial, conclusion is this: Azerbaijan is now generating instability that prevents integration in the South Caucasus, let alone democratization, most likely with Russia's consent or approval, or maybe even the latter's incitement. It might perhaps be a good idea to hold a tripartite high-level meeting, like the one in Brussels, with President Aliyev. The eleventh limited conclusion is that the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as the "Middle Corridor," is too important a project to be left to the vagaries mentioned earlier.<sup>42</sup> In my mind at least, it is also the project that would benefit all the South Caucasian states, including their immediate neighbours. Interconnectivity and its benefits might be a major incentive to bring peace. They might also provide, in the right diplomatic hands, useful disincentives for those who generate instability and conflict.

## **The Alma-Ata Declaration and the Peace Treaty**

Most people will agree that any form of open or latent warfare in the South Caucasus will not be conducive to integration and will certainly serve Russia's interests. In this regard, a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan is crucial. So is a clear delimitation of their boundaries based on a

---

<sup>42</sup> EIAS [The European Institute for Asian Studies] Policy Briefs, "Forging Sustainable Transport Connectivity: Enhancing EU-Central Asia Transportation Through the Trans-Caspian Corridor," March 1, 2024, at <https://eias.org/policy-briefs/forging-sustainable-transport-connectivity-enhancing-eu-central-asia-transportation-through-the-trans-caspian-corridor/>, (accessed on 4/8/2024).

significant document, an agreed upon map, etc., to be followed by precise demarcation. First, one must note that the decoupling of the future peace treaty – assuming it will be concluded – from an overall agreement about boundary demarcation may pave the way to protracted crises. The EU and the US have welcomed the recent mini-agreement between Erevan and Baku regarding four “villages” in the region of Tavush – in fact, mostly empty lands – which were part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in late-Soviet times, among other things because it contains a reference to the Alma-Ata Declaration or Protocols, which eleven post-Soviet republics signed on December 21, 1991. The latter laid the foundation to the Commonwealth of Independent States and included a statement that these republics would be “recognizing and respecting each other’s territorial integrity and the inviolability of the existing borders.”<sup>43</sup> Leaving aside the fact that this agreement, albeit somewhat useful, was imposed on Armenia under threat of war and does not correspond to the OSCE’s recommended process for border delimitation and demarcation, a look at it reveals that it includes something that could be called a “poison pill” in the second part of the relevant article:<sup>44</sup>

The Parties have agreed that the process of delimitation will be based on the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991. The Parties have also arranged to stipulate this fundamental principle in the draft Regulation (in the future, in case the Agreement on establishment of peace and interstate relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan provides otherwise, the relevant clause of the Regulation will be brought into compliance with the principles as prescribed by this Agreement).<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> For the text in English, see Federal Research Division. Country Studies. Area Handbook Series. Belarus. Appendix C., “The Alma-Ata Declaration,” at [https://web.archive.org/web/20010122033300/http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/belarus/by\\_appnc.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20010122033300/http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/belarus/by_appnc.html), (accessed on 4/22/2024).

<sup>44</sup> For the OSCE guidebook, see Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “DELIMITATION AND DEMARCATION OF STATE BOUNDARIES: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS,” 2017, at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/2/363466.pdf>, (accessed on 5/1/2024).

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, “Press release on the outcome of the 8<sup>th</sup> meeting of the State Commissions on the delimitation of the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan,” April 19, 2024, at [https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2024/04/19/8th\\_meeting/12606](https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2024/04/19/8th_meeting/12606), (accessed on 4/22/2024).



In a nutshell, the text of the future peace treaty will take precedence on this very limited agreement and on the text of the future “Regulation on the Joint Activity of the Commission on Delimitation and Border Security of the State Border between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan and the State Commission on the Delimitation of the State Border” between the two countries.<sup>46</sup> It thus happens, as stated by Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan in a recent interview on Al-Jazeera, that “our neighbours are still reluctant to make a concrete and strong reference to Almati [sic] [sic] declaration in the draft of [sic] peace treaty.”<sup>47</sup> This reluctance appears to be one of the main issues hindering the signature of the peace treaty, even though President Aliyev has agreed more than once that the Alma-Ata Declaration should be the foundation of interstate boundaries and territorial integrity.<sup>48</sup> The twelfth limited conclusion is that whatever his motivations might be, President Aliyev’s acceptance of Alma-Ata would contradict the second article of the “Constitutional Act on State Independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan,” adopted on October 18, 1991, “Article 2. The Republic of Azerbaijan is the successor of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which existed from May 28, 1918, to April 28, 1920.”<sup>49</sup>

That first Republic of Azerbaijan had no recognized boundaries, but it had a clear view of its “proper borders,” which it presented at the Paris

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, “Foreign Minister of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan’s interview to ‘Al-Jazeera,’” April 30, 2024, at <https://www.mfa.am/en/videos/>, (accessed on 5/2/2024).

<sup>48</sup> See European Council, “Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022,” October 7, 2022 press release, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/07/statement-following-quadrilateral-meeting-between-president-aliyev-prime-minister-pashinyan-president-macron-and-president-michel-6-october-2022/>, (accessed on 4/22/2024); and U.S. Embassy, Baku, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Azerbaijani President Aliyev,” April 28, 2024, at <https://az.usembassy.gov/blinken-aliyev-call-ap/>, (accessed on 5/2/2024).

<sup>49</sup> For the text in Azerbaijani, see Vikipediya, “Azərbaycan Respublikasının Dövlət Müstəqilliyi haqqında Konstitusiyası Aktı,” at [https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Az%C9%99rbaycan\\_Respublikas%C4%B1n%C4%B1n\\_D%C3%B6vl%C9%99t\\_M%C3%BCst%C9%99qilliyi\\_haqq%C4%B1nda\\_Konstitusiyası\\_Akt%C4%B1](https://az.wikipedia.org/wiki/Az%C9%99rbaycan_Respublikas%C4%B1n%C4%B1n_D%C3%B6vl%C9%99t_M%C3%BCst%C9%99qilliyi_haqq%C4%B1nda_Konstitusiyası_Akt%C4%B1), (accessed on 4/22/2024).

Peace conference in 1919. A look at some of those demands, summed up by a Baku State University Azerbaijani historian, will reveal that President Aliyev's current claims regarding "Western Azerbaijan" and Zangezur (Syunik) are rooted in them.

...it was vital to establish the proper borders of Azerbaijan for the conference leaders. The territory of Azerbaijan was drawn up according to the former system of executive division:

1. Baku Province, including Baku city, as well as Baku, Javad, Goychay, Shamax, Quba and Lankaran districts.
2. Yelizavetpol (Ganja) Province, including Yelizavetpol (Ganja), Javanshir, Nukha (Sheki), Arash, Shusha, Jabrayil, Zengezur and Qazakh districts.
3. Irevan Province, including Nakhchivan, Sharur-Dereleyez, Surmeli districts, as well as a part of New Beyazid, Echmiadzin, Irevan and Alexandropol districts.
4. Part of Borchali, Tbilisi and Sighnaq districts in Tbilisi Province.
5. Zaqatala district.
6. Part of the territories surrounding Kurina and Samur in Daghestan region, as well as part of Kaytag-Tabasaran district including Derbend City and its surroundings.
7. In the above-mentioned Irevan and Tbilisi Provinces, as well as in Zaqatala district, there are very small territories whose origins have been the source of claims from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Northern Caucasus Republics.<sup>50</sup>

The thirteenth limited conclusion is that a peace treaty that does not include a reference to the Alma-Ata Declaration and a real commitment to respect the latter is likely to result in protracted instability.

## Conclusion

Too many regional powers are against both the European presence in South Caucasian affairs and the spread of European integration, which implies democratic and legal-rational forms of government. They despise, but also

---

<sup>50</sup> Vasif Gafarov, "The Azerbaijani Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference," *Visions of Azerbaijan*, July–August 2012, at <http://www.visions.az/en/news/404/6a7cabf7/>, (accessed on 5/1/2024).

fear them. My fourteenth limited conclusion is that without the full involvement of the US and solid coordination with it, the EU is unlikely to address successfully the difficult challenges waiting on the long road to integration. In the immediate future, one can expect renewed, perhaps more intense, attempts at destabilization in Armenia. Russia's loss of its influence there, where it still has military presence and vast economic levers of control, would significantly or perhaps terminally damage its role in the South Caucasus as a whole. Obviously, the struggle for Georgia's orientation will also intensify. My final limited conclusion is also simple: a European integration process that focuses only on one of these two Republics – Armenia and Georgia – is likely to fail for multiple reasons, which cannot be developed here.

Reconciling European and regional integration is well worth facing the difficult road ahead, "but all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare," as the last line of Spinoza's *Ethics* states.

# **A New Strategy that Deters and Promotes: Framing the EU's Actions in the South Caucasus**

*Shalva Džebisashvili*

## **Executive Summary**

The problem for the EU as an independent geopolitical player has long been discussed in academic and policy related literature. The enlargement process itself inherently deepened the quest for a more visible European footprint globally, and especially in its immediate neighbourhood. At the same time the South Caucasus, a region long regarded as a buffer-zone between Russia, Europe and other “big players” has been increasingly articulating its interest for a more European footprint. By opening negotiations on membership with Ukraine and granting Georgia candidate status, as well as hailing Armenia’s interest in a European perspective, Brussels, in fact, has made a clear geopolitical claim and questioned the existing format of cooperation such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Hence, this article examines the dilemmas facing the forming of a more clear-cut and articulated EU-strategy in the South Caucasus region, and suggests several policy changes that would bring far more clarity to the strategic objectives of the EU and better security in achieving these objectives, i.e. securing its footprint in the region.

## **Introduction**

As Germany’s chancellor Olaf Scholz declared on Oct. 16, 2022, the voice of Europe must be heard from Lisbon to Tbilisi, and the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, welcomed Georgia in December 2023 as a future member of the European family, making a clear geopolitical statement and indicating the EU’s new approach, that of regarding the South Caucasus region, as being within its geographic and political realm.<sup>1</sup> The new reality was made possible not only by the granting of EU-candidate status to Georgia, but it was essentially preconditioned by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Doborjginidze, Elene. October 15, 2022. German Chancellor Delivers Speech at PES. Georgia Public Broadcaster. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/german-chancellor-deliversspeech-at-pes/>.

quick military victory of Azerbaijan over the Armenian forces in the separatist region of Karabakh, which restored the territorial integrity for which Baku had been working hard for the last 30 years, effectively eliminating one of the major sources of instability and discord in the region. The vision of Russia as the military protector of the Armenian nation was shattered, forcing Yerevan first to come to terms with Baku and Ankara, and second, to start looking for better security alternatives, notably the EU. Consequently, Armenia froze its membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), initiated peace talks with Azerbaijan and expressed openly its desire to enter more close cooperation with the EU.

Given the huge geopolitical impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the entire post-soviet area (not to speak of globally), the positioning of the EU towards its future plans in the South Caucasus requires more clarity and even more elaboration. It is urgently necessary, since the Putin regime has never abandoned its imperial vision of the entire South Caucasus becoming part of a new Russian empire, and the controlled internal discourse in the Russian media frequently calls for “abolishing borders with Armenia, i.e. obviously with Georgia”, as the natural corridor connecting Russia with Armenia.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the existing mechanisms of close cooperation between the EU and South Caucasus countries, such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), in the general context of neighbourhood policy have become increasingly questionable, due to an ever-growing gap between the political reality and security on the ground and the objectives of EaP, which were formulated long before the dramatic geopolitical events of 2022. A new European Strategy that is more assertive and no longer relies solely on the display of soft power is increasingly rational and justified. In a very “bold” statement former U.S. president Donald Trump in July 2018 labelled the EU as one of the greatest foes of America, and, according to many sources, including his former national security advisor John Bolton, actively considered pulling the US out of NATO.<sup>3</sup> It requires no additional intellectual effort to understand the

---

<sup>2</sup> Kazanskyi, Denis. February 27, 2024. В Армении Теперь Тоже Враги! Нужно Ее Уничтожить! Симоньян и Соловьев Нашли Новую Жертву. Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pdc1FbJqAms>.

<sup>3</sup> Alfaro, Mariana. March 4, 2022. Bolton Says Trump Might Have Pulled the U.S. out of NATO If He Had Been Reelected. The Washington Post, sec. Politics. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/04/bolton-says-trump-might-have-pulled-us-outnato-if-he-had-been-reelected/>.

gravity of the consequences of such a decision to the EU, its security posture, and its commitments to forming one of the global power centres. The risk of renewed American isolationism points even more to a serious need for a more independent European military capacity to deal with conventional threats in Europe.

Consequently, this paper attempts to suggest a new EU-strategy towards the South Caucasus region, based on the objective necessity of applying a combined approach with an increasing role for security projection. This would not only provide a much higher level of credibility to the EU's regional commitments, but promote regional stability, allow a tailored approach to each country, and significantly support local efforts to increase democratic as well as state/society resilience in times of crises. The objective of this article is not to dive deeply into local political intricacies and assess local government's actions that either align with or seek to sabotage Europeanization efforts. Rather we will focus on and rationalize several key elements of the suggested new strategy, especially those that will help enhance the EU's regional posture (and the impact on countries' politics) with the positive side-effect of solving the dilemma of EU-NATO military cooperation.

### **Has There Ever Been an EU-Strategy in the South Caucasus?**

The European approach to the region has been largely defined within the greater (geographical) scope of the Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership (EaP) which has been in force since 2009 and is centred around the topics of citizens mobility, transport, energy, and environment.<sup>4</sup> The EU doubled down and initiated the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Georgia in 2016. This, along with the multiple benefits of economic cooperation, and the granting of visa-free travel for Georgian citizens in 2017, were two major pillars of cooperation, i.e. European priorities can easily be identified here.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the EU places special emphasis on democracy, rule of law, human rights, and good governance (transparency and accountability).

---

<sup>4</sup> European Union External Action, March 17, 2022. Eastern Partnership. Communication. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en).

<sup>5</sup> Information Centre on NATO and EU. Association Agreement. Available at: <https://info-center.gov.ge/en/eugeorgia/association-agreement/>. Accessed April 15, 2024.

On the other, projects that support energy and transport connectivity (undersea cable, ferries etc.) as well as support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), sustainable development, and environment protection, constitute the second pillar of European interests in Georgia (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023). In fact, significant efforts are directed to the development of energy infrastructure, its efficiency, introduction of energy standards and, most importantly, the alignment with key EU energy legislation.<sup>6</sup> Azerbaijan managed to establish itself primarily as a strategic energy partner to Europe (via the southern gas corridor and oil supplies), and Armenia received relatively less attention in democratic governance and economic cooperation due to its close political (security) and economic ties to Russia (member of CSTO and the Eurasian Economic and Customs Union).

Although a first attempt to reflect on regional security developments was made in 2008, when the EUMM (European Union Monitoring Mission) was sent to Georgia to observe the occupation line in the aftermath of Russian aggression, the real security force majeure arrived as Azerbaijan liberated the Karabakh region from Armenian forces in 2020, and Russia started its *Ver-nichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation) against Ukraine. A spontaneous reaction in Brussels was to copy its practice in Georgia and send a monitoring mission to Armenia, the EUMA (EU Mission in Armenia), but it came to realize that the Minsk Group no longer provided a good platform for solving territorial problems between Baku and Yerevan.<sup>7</sup> It became more than evident that a new security vision, a new kind of security role-model for the EU, was needed: first – to coordinate EU-member states interests/policies in the region (i.e. to avoid local animosity, similar those formed between Paris and Baku); and second – to formulate and propose more effective and lasting solutions for regional security and stability. The latter obviously implies a far more (pro)active role for the EU in the South Caucasus, to which Anders

---

<sup>6</sup> EU4Georgia. 2024. Energy Efficiency – Doing More with Less. Available at: <https://eu4georgia.eu/energy/>.

<sup>7</sup> European Union External Action. October 25, 2022. Q&A EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia_en).

Fogh Rasmussen was pointing as he pledged in French *Le Monde* an independent and much bolder security role in the region for the EU to mediate lasting peace.<sup>8</sup>

Given the huge geopolitical and security implications of Russian aggression in Ukraine for all the south Caucasus republics (threat of a renewed occupation), and the decision of the European Commission to grant candidacy status to Georgia, the need for a coherent EU security strategy in the region becomes more than evident. The European political concept that geographically includes Georgia, which was confirmed by the decision to grant candidacy status (not, by the way, in recognition for achievements of the Georgian government), is in fact, nothing less than a clear geopolitical claim. Geopolitical claims, however, in turn degrade to the level of wishful thinking if not held together by strong security arrangements. In the past, the EU clearly preferred the carrots of soft power, such as economic, infrastructure and society-related cooperation, to advance its goals, largely defined as the promotion of general stability in its periphery.<sup>9</sup> Coined as the concept of conditionality, the prospect of membership could theoretically motivate local political stakeholders to advance democratic reforms and implement a large variety of cooperation commitments (primarily of normative/legal and technical nature) agreed in EaP and AA-frameworks. Yet without the clear promise of membership, little implementation of the given commitments can be expected.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, even within the EaP or AA conditions the degree of compliance, i.e. successful completion of agreed objectives, could not serve as a basis for solid optimism. Not least, membership of a political alliance that can hardly provide any meaningful military assistance and security

---

<sup>8</sup> Rasmussen, Anders Fogh. April 16, 2024. Armenia Is Pivoting to the West. It's Time for Europe to Step Up. *Le Monde*. sec. Opinion/Diplomacy. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/04/03/armenia-is-pivoting-to-the-west-it-s-time-for-europe-to-step-up\\_6667289\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/04/03/armenia-is-pivoting-to-the-west-it-s-time-for-europe-to-step-up_6667289_23.html).

<sup>9</sup> European Council. (2009). European Security Strategy – A Secure Europe in a Better World. Brussels. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/publications/european-security-strategysecure-europe-better-world/>.

<sup>10</sup> Checkel, Jeffrey T. (2000). Compliance and Conditionality. ARENA Working Papers, no. 18. Available at: [http://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arenapublications/workingpapers/working-papers2000/wp00\\_18.htm](http://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arenapublications/workingpapers/working-papers2000/wp00_18.htm).



guarantees to candidates on the path to membership (to secure the membership process itself) can become an even greater risk, thus reducing the chances of meeting the conditions for cooperation.

Intuitively the EU understood the inherent problem and decided to centre its attention (even after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014) solely on the concept of resilience by copying (although belated) the NATO-approach of instituting general requirements to its member states in key sectors of state activities (baseline requirements).<sup>11</sup> Only in 2020 did the Strategic Foresight Report – 2020 recognize the resilience concept as a new compass for EU policies, and in 2023 the Critical Entities Resilience Directive was issued.<sup>12</sup> As for the need of taking strategic positioning, the EU continues rather to choose vague wording and instead of directly pointing to Russia as its major adversary, prefers to focus on sustainability goals and the so-called global battles of narratives as the major areas, where actions have to be initiated.<sup>13</sup> The European concept of resilience is decoupled from the general understanding of strategy and strategic action, and solely relates to the ability of critical entities to withstand all hazards “whether natural or manmade, accidental or intentional.”<sup>14</sup> This is very problematic, since watering down the critical and clear link between a strategic threat and the need to provide everything to counter it, while remaining resilient to counterattacks (i.e. in state of war) in the wide spectrum of state and societal activities, will inevitably lead to false objectives and failed strategic policies.

In its Strategic Compass, adopted in 2022, the EU clearly identified Georgia and the other countries of the South Caucasus as facing “direct threats to their sovereignty and territorial integrity by extensive use of military

---

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, Press Release. July 25, 2023. Enhancing EU Resilience: A Step Forward to Identify Critical Entities for Key Sectors. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3992](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3992).

<sup>12</sup> The Critical Entities Resilience Directive (CER). n.d. Accessed: March 20, 2024. The European Union and Georgia. September 7, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> European Union External Action, March 17, 2022. Eastern Partnership. Communication. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en).

<sup>14</sup> The Critical Entities Resilience Directive (CER). n.d. Accessed: March 20, 2024. The European Union and Georgia. September 7, 2023.

instruments and hybrid tactics”<sup>15</sup> (by Russia – comment by the author). However, despite declaring its “unwavering support for, and commitment to, their sovereignty and territorial integrity,” the EU is very measured in strategic messaging and promises as it puts it, deployment of the various tools to increase resilience and cooperation in countering hybrid threats, disinformation, and cybersecurity. Consequently, an obvious discrepancy can be identified, in which the strategic objective of enlargement is being reinforced, and therefore candidacy status granted to Georgia, yet no adequate security strategy, within which the European geopolitical claims could be secured, has been formed and put on table. This is a challenge, if not the biggest problem for the EU as an independent geopolitical player.

Inability to support strategic claims with respective security and military measures, as well as resources, will inevitably lead to actions devised on abstract assumptions and strategic failures. A more assertive Europe in the South Caucasus implies no acceptance of geopolitical buffer zones, and this is directly interpreted in the Kremlin as an indication of the EU’s weakness and a de facto invitation to invade. A need for more western deterrence in the region is increasingly evident. No wonder the degree of Georgia’s alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) statements and the Council’s decisions remains pretty low (44% in August 2023) given the complete absence of the mentioned deterrence.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the recent meeting of the Armenia’s prime minister Pashinyan in Brussels with Ursula von der Leyen, Josep Borell and Antony Blinken and the political endorsement of the increased European aspiration of Armenia, could indicate that slowly, but still very much in process, a new EU geopolitical stance is forming in the South Caucasus.

### **A New Approach to the South Caucasus: More Resolve, i.e. More Deterrence**

The worst thing the EU could do is to fall back again into denying reality and lapsing into wishful thinking by not realizing that in the South Caucasus

---

<sup>15</sup> European Union External Action Service. *Strategic Compass*, Brussels: European Council, 2022, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> European Union External Action, March 17, 2022. Eastern Partnership. Communication. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en).

it is not merely in competition with Russia on the various cooperation mechanisms but, quite to the contrary as the Russian Leadership is openly claiming, as it is in direct war (with the West). The Union needs to devise a new strategy by which it might successfully coordinate the different interests (policies) of its member states and formulate more effective and lasting solutions for regional stability and security. It must be acknowledged, finally, that contrary to the situation in the 90s, when Russia posed no serious threat to the EU and the membership processes for the potential EU candidates required no extraordinary efforts for enhancing their security, the situation today is completely different. The problem of conditionality that implies the impossibility of compliance on the side of a candidate country if the membership is not guaranteed, is even more deteriorating.<sup>17</sup>

As already mentioned, membership of a political alliance that can barely provide any meaningful military assistance or security guarantees to candidates on the path to membership (to secure the membership process itself) can create an even greater security risk, reducing in that way the chances of meeting cooperation commitments. Hence, a strategy that is featured by hesitance, uncertainty and half-hearted measures is no longer sustainable, and creates the danger of institutional entropy, motivating Russia to plan and execute more bold attacks on the EU, both externally and internally. Since Russian strategic logic and thinking focuses on securing its core interests in the “near abroad” by coercive and military means first, and then by adjusting political mechanisms to the reality created on the ground, the EU *modus operandi* of devising political mechanisms first, with almost no reference to potential (credible) security mechanisms, effectively creates *de facto* buffer zones adjacent to Russia, i.e. a window of opportunity for the Kremlin to act decisively and turn the regional situation radically in its favour. This situation must be avoided as it is like that created by the NATO Bucharest Summit declaration in April 2008, which showed disunity and NATO’s hesitance on the granting of MAP (Membership Action Plan) to Ukraine and Georgia, and was quickly exploited by Russia against Georgia (by launching a war). Geopolitics and *Realpolitik* are back again, and this should be recognized.

---

<sup>17</sup> Checkel, op.cit.

In fact, the EU Strategic Compass document openly favours more clarity in strategic objectives and quick, decisive actions when facing crises, as well as a robust and flexible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)-mandates.<sup>18</sup> The EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), a 5000-strong deployable taskforce, planned to become operational by 2025, has therefore to be viewed as the key mechanism for security provision and deterrence in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Since the historical evidence of successful deterrence models undoubtedly speaks for the need of credible military capabilities and potential of "present-in place", as well as effective communication of the resolve to use them, if necessary, the RDC deployment in Georgia must be backed by the option of the NATO Response Force (NRF) reinforcement. This is by no means a secret to experts, who highlight the logical need for bringing the NRF component into discussion, due to the limited capacity of RDC (i.e. EU Battlegroups (EU BGs)) to remain combat ready in a prolonged high intensity conventional war.<sup>20</sup> Initially this can be done by establishing a permanent training and exercise mission (EU-PTEM-G) in the country, which will integrate the RDC element and consider the potential extension of its mission to Armenia (EU-PTEM-A). By doing that the RDC is turning into an effective deterrent and stability factor (supported by NRF) in the European zone of responsibility, and contributing significantly to clarifying the operational concepts, missions, and decision-making (military cooperation) dilemma existing between EU and NATO.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Tough times require bold decisions. The strategic interests of the EU in the South Caucasus are to secure Georgia's membership, to protect it from destructive external factors, to provide more stability in the region, facilitate peace, and ensure inter and intra-regional economic cooperation. Thus, to provide for a positive outcome, the following policy recommendations should be formulated:

---

<sup>18</sup> European Union External Action Service. *Strategic Compass*, Brussels: European Council, 2022, p. 12, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Kerttunen, Mika. March 2010. The EU Battlegroup – Its Background and Concept. *Diskussion & Debatt*, no. 1. pp. 127–50.

- Initiate gradual deployment of RDC/Initial Entry Force (IEF) in Georgia to provide a high level of deterrence and communicate political resolve and capabilities. Repeating the mistakes created by the outdated MAP framework must be rejected as it provides for no additional security guarantees. (As was clearly recognized by Finland and Sweden, who in similar circumstances opted instead for direct membership).
- The sense of security created by guaranteeing the path of membership (via enhancing the level of deterrence) will itself have an immense positive effect for local political life. It will completely shift political and societal energy towards democratic (institutional) consolidation and away from the existing political modus operandi, which balances European requirements with the silent acceptance of Russian demands, i.e. growing democratic backsliding and authoritarianism, out of fear of Russian punishment.
- This could trigger additional efforts to promote democracy, in which the EU can provide immense expertise and support. The EU could push the enhancing internal party democracy as well as reviving party politics on regional and local levels. This can only be achieved through effective political and administrative decentralization of state governance (more autonomy, and more resources for municipalities and regions).

These four priorities, under the slogan of more security for more democracy in Georgia, will radiate strong signals to Armenia and Azerbaijan, thus helping build strategic alternatives. More democratic reforms and a stronger EU security presence in Armenia will be very difficult to achieve if a European “foothold” is not first secured and guaranteed in Georgia. Being, de-facto, the geographic bottleneck of the region, western access to South Caucasus, as well as to Central Asia, can only be provided through Georgia. This is, of course, well understood by Russia. Therefore, whether it is the prospects of solving the border and territorial disputes between Baku and Yerevan, or the options of enhanced regional cooperation between the three South Caucasus-countries, no viable plans or actions can be launched without turning Georgia into the European bridgehead in the region. Once this is established,

the chances of far more intensive cooperation and of integrational projects/policies being implemented in the region will get incomparably higher, (albeit in a rather more functional manner similar to the EU in areas such as transport, energy, finances and market, etc). Not to forget that the prospect of a more integrated and more peaceful South Caucasus is in US interests as well, as strongly highlighted recently by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Brussels when meeting his European and Armenian counterparts.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> US Department of State. April 5, 2024. Secretary Antony J. Blinken with European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Before Their Meeting. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-european-commission-president-ursula-von-derleyen-armenian-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-and-high-representative-of-the-european-union-forforeign-affairs-and-secu/>.

## References

- Alfaro, Mariana. March 4, 2022. Bolton Says Trump Might Have Pulled the U.S. out of NATO If He Had Been Reelected. The Washington Post, sec. Politics. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/04/bolton-says-trump-might-have-pulled-us-outnato-if-he-had-been-reelected/>.
- Checkel, Jeffrey T. (2000). Compliance and Conditionality. ARENA Working Papers, no. 18. Available at: [http://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arenapublications/workingpapers/working-papers-2000/wp00\\_18.htm](http://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arenapublications/workingpapers/working-papers-2000/wp00_18.htm).
- Doborjiginidze, Elene. October 15, 2022. German Chancellor Delivers Speech at PES. Georgia Public Broadcaster. Available at: <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/german-chancellor-deliversspeech-at-pes/>.
- EU4Georgia. 2024. Energy Efficiency – Doing More with Less. Available at: <https://eu4georgia.eu/energy/>.
- European Commission, EU Science Hub. Resilience. Available at: [https://joint-researchcentre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/resilience\\_en](https://joint-researchcentre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/resilience_en). Accessed October 4, 2023.
- European Commission, November 8, 2023. Key Findings of the 2023 Report on Georgia. Brussels. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_23\\_5626](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_23_5626).
- European Commission, Press Release. July 25, 2023. Enhancing EU Resilience: A Step Forward to Identify Critical Entities for Key Sectors. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_3992](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3992).
- European Commission. 2014. EU-Georgia Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Available at: <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/content/eu-georgia-deep-and-comprehensive-free-tradearea>. Accessed March 25, 2024.
- European Commission. December 15, 2023. Opening Remarks by President von Der Leyen at the Joint Press Conference with President Michel and Prime Minister Sánchez Following the Meeting of the European Council of 15 December 2023. Statement. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_23\\_6628](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_6628).

- European Commission. July 6, 2023. Strategic Foresight Report 23 – ‘Sustainability and Wellbeing at the Heart of Europe’s Open Strategic Autonomy’. Brussels. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/document/f8f67d33-194c-4c89-a4a6-795980a1dabd\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/document/f8f67d33-194c-4c89-a4a6-795980a1dabd_en).
- European Council. (2009). European Security Strategy – A Secure Europe in a Better World. Brussels. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/documents-publications/publications/european-security-strategy-secure-europe-better-world/>.
- European Union External Action, March 17, 2022. Eastern Partnership. Communication. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en).
- European Union External Action. October 25, 2022. Q&A EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/qa-eu-monitoring-capacity-armenia_en).
- Information Centre on NATO and EU. Association Agreement. Available at: <https://infocenter.gov.ge/en/eugeorgia/association-agreement/>. Accessed April 15, 2024.
- Kazanskyi, Denis. February 27, 2024. В Армении Теперь Тоже Враги! Нужно Ее Уничтожить! Симоньян и Соловьев Нашли Новую Жертву. Youtube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pdc1FbJqAms>.
- Kelley, Judith. July 1, 2004. International Actors on the Domestic Scene: Membership Conditionality and Socialization by International Institutions. *International Organization* 58, no. 03. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304583017>.
- Kerttunen, Mika. March 2010. The EU Battlegroup – Its Background and Concept. *Diskussion & Debatt*, no. 1. pp. 127–50.
- Rasmussen, Anders Fogh. April 16, 2024. Armenia Is Pivoting to the West. It’s Time for Europe to Step Up. *Le Monde*. sec. Opinion/Diplomacy. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/04/03/armenia-is-pivoting-to-the-west-it-s-time-foreurope-to-step-up\\_6667289\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/04/03/armenia-is-pivoting-to-the-west-it-s-time-foreurope-to-step-up_6667289_23.html).
- Reinhard, Janine. 2010. EU Democracy Promotion through Conditionality in Its Neighbourhood: The Temptation of Membership Perspective or Flexible Integration. *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 4, no. 3. pp. 196213.



- Reuters. February 23, 2024. Armenia Freezes Participation in Russia-Led Security Bloc – Prime Minister. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-freezes-participation-russia-led-security-blocprime-minister-2024-02-23/>.
- Reuters. March 9, 2024. Armenia Is Considering Seeking EU Membership, Foreign Minister Says. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-is-considering-seeking-eu-membership-foreign-minister-says-2024-03-09/>.
- Reuters. April 4, 2024. Kremlin Says Russia and NATO Are Now in ‘Direct Confrontation’. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-nato-relations-level-direct-confrontation-kremlin-says-2024-0404/>.
- Roepke, Wolf-Diether, & Thankey Hasit. February 27, 2019. Resilience: The First Line of Defence. NATO Review. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/02/27/resilience-the-first-line-ofdefence/index.html>.
- The Critical Entities Resilience Directive (CER). n.d. Accessed: March 20, 2024. The European Union and Georgia. September 7, 2023.
- The European Union and Georgia enjoy a very close and positive relationship. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia\\_en?s=221](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia_en?s=221).
- US Department of State. April 5, 2024. Secretary Antony J. Blinken With European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Before Their Meeting. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-european-commission-president-ursula-von-derleyen-armenian-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan-and-high-representative-of-the-european-union-forforeign-affairs-and-secu/>.
- Zandee, Dick, & Adája Stoetman. October 2022. Realising the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: Opportunities and Pitfalls. Policy Brief. Clingendael – Netherlands Institute of International Relations. Available at: [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Policy\\_brief\\_Rapid\\_Deployment\\_Capacity.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Policy_brief_Rapid_Deployment_Capacity.pdf).

## **PART IV: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration (External Actors)**

# **Türkiye and the EU in the South Caucasus: Complementary Partnership and Competition**

*Nilüfer Narlı*

## **Introduction**

Since February 24, 2022, the European Union (EU) has increased its involvement in the South Caucasus, especially by coordinating European integration initiatives with local developments. This has made understanding the EU's role in the region increasingly vital for academics and policymakers both within and outside the area. This paper examines Türkiye's perspective on the EU's strategy for European integration and its compatibility with regional processes in this geopolitically significant area. It addresses two main questions: What are the implications of the EU's new South Caucasus strategy for Türkiye's interests and the regional dynamics? In which policy areas do Türkiye and the European Union complement, cooperate, and compete in the South Caucasus?

This paper begins by reviewing recent EU policies that aim to align European integration efforts, emphasizing the strategic importance of the South Caucasus region. It then explores Türkiye's historical, economic, and geopolitical stakes in the area, as well as its bilateral and regional cooperation initiatives. The analysis continues by examining the ways in which Türkiye and the EU complement, cooperate, and compete in the South Caucasus, highlighting potential areas of partnership or rivalry. To achieve this, the paper examines Türkiye's historical involvement and current engagements in the region, examining the dynamics of competition and cooperation with the EU. Through a detailed study of Türkiye's historical legacies and current policies, this paper offers a comprehensive understanding of the complex geopolitical landscape and the interactions between regional actors in the South Caucasus.

## Background and Context

Previously, throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the European Union (EU) maintained a relatively modest geopolitical presence and exerted limited influence in the South Caucasus. However, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the EU significantly increased its engagement and involvement in this region, marking a substantial shift in its approach and commitment. This heightened engagement has sparked concerns about the reactions of regional powers such as Russia, Iran, and Türkiye to these developments.

Türkiye's involvement in the South Caucasus dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably highlighted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's endorsement of the Treaty of Kars with the Socialist Soviet Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in 1921. This treaty, ratified in Yerevan on 11 September 1922, reflected Türkiye's longstanding interest in the region. It was a continuation of the principles outlined in the earlier Treaty of Moscow, signed on March 16, 1921. Before the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk demonstrated strategic foresight by endorsing this Treaty of Friendship, which laid the groundwork for Türkiye's bilateral and regional cooperation initiatives after the Soviet Union's collapse. The Treaty of Kars, significant for Türkiye's relations in the South Caucasus, set a precedent for subsequent agreements, such as the 1992 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Good Neighbourly Relations with Georgia. This later treaty, signed on 30 June 1992, both reinforced and paid homage to the principles established by the Treaty of Kars. Additionally, Türkiye signed similar agreements with Azerbaijan and Georgia during the 1990s, further solidifying its diplomatic ties in the region (see Figure 1).

EU's policy of integrating the South Caucasus region in the early 2000s has begun with its more general European Neighbourhood Policy and later the multilateral Eastern Partnership framework. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) serve as the cornerstone of the EU involvement in the South Caucasus region. These frameworks underscore the key role of good governance and democracy in fostering security and stability, which are linked to "normative interest" of the EU in the region. The EU interest in the region can be analyzed by conceptualizing the interest into

three distinct groups: sovereignty and security; energy and trade; and governance.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of this paper strategy takes these categories into consideration.

To understand how Türkiye has responded to increased EU engagement in the region, it is critical to examine Türkiye's foreign policy priorities and recent rhetoric. Recently, the "Century of Türkiye" policy has been emphasized on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. According to this policy, the century:

Has begun with the centenary of the "Republic of Türkiye" and the "national foreign policy" aims to strengthen regional peace and security, expand the institutional basis of our foreign relations, promote economic development and prosperity in our region, and influence the transformation of the global system.<sup>2</sup>

The foreign policy of Ankara prioritizes maintaining regional stability, fostering relationships with Gulf countries due to economic interests, and addressing security concerns in neighbouring areas like Syria, while also increasing its influence in the South Caucasus. The "Century of Türkiye" foreign policy acknowledges the importance of the South Caucasus: "Türkiye continues to further strengthen its close ties with countries in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, the Southern Caucasus, South, and Central Asia."<sup>3</sup>

The analytical approach to understanding the intricate relationships between Türkiye, the European Union, and the South Caucasus should consider two crucial factors. First, the three countries – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – aspire to connect with the West, particularly Europe, like Türkiye. However, they are also inherently linked to the Middle East due to shared ethnic and religious affinities.<sup>4</sup> For Azerbaijan, EU support has strategic importance, especially following the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Georgia prioritizes EU and NATO membership<sup>5</sup> while Azerbaijan welcomes EU involvement in conflict resolution. Hedenskog observed that Azerbaijan

---

<sup>1</sup> Cornell, S. E., Starr, S. F., & Tsereteli, M. (2015). *A Western strategy for the South Caucasus*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

<sup>2</sup> MFA (2024). "National Foreign Policy in the Century of Türkiye" Ankara, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Bishku, M. B. (2015). Is the South Caucasus region a part of the Middle East?. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 32(1), pp. 83–102.

<sup>5</sup> Kakachia, K. (2015). Europeanisation and Georgian foreign policy. *The South Caucasus*, pp. 11–18.

“wants a western-backed peace treaty that neutralizes Russia and extracts maximum concessions from Russia on the Karabakh and other issues.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Priego emphasized the region’s connection to the Middle East, noting that the South Caucasus emerged as a “cornerstone in the greater Middle East.”<sup>7</sup> Both Türkiye and the three South Caucasus countries embody Western and Middle Eastern elements. Second, they share collective memories of deeply ingrained traumas caused by wars, ethnic strife, and forced migration. The memory of such traumas could shape domestic and regional political dynamics and relations with the EU, and thus needs to be taken into consideration.

### **Patterns of Türkiye and European Union South Caucasus Policy Interactions: Convergence and Divergence of Interests**

To analyze the areas where Türkiye and the EU have cooperated, competed, and where their interests have converged or diverged, Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the modes of engagement, policy tools, and implementations of both actors in the South Caucasus region across various decades, from the 1980s to 2024.

It is understood that, before the Maastricht Treaty (1991) and even more so before the Lisbon Treaty (2010), there was precious little that the then European Communities could offer in terms of cogent and coherent foreign policy. That role would have partially devolved to the NATO Council as Türkiye was then a critical element in the Alliance’s strategic schemes and policy regarding the Black Sea. The European Communities would have been a mere political passenger of NATO’s strategic concepts. This would have also been true of Türkiye itself, of course.

---

<sup>6</sup> Hedenskog, J. (2022). *The EU in the South Caucasus: Making the Most of Current Opportunities*. Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Priego Moreno, A. (2007). The Emergence of Southern Caucasus as the Cornerstone in the Greater Middle East. *Revista Electrónica De Estudios Internacionales*, 13, pp. 1–22.

**Figure 1: Türkiye (TR) and European Union Policies in the South Caucasus: Convergence and Divergence in Specific Areas of Interests (1980–1990s)**

Time	TR Policy	EU Policy	Convergence or Divergence of Interest between TR and EU
<b>After the Cold War in the 1980s</b>	<p>Türkiye began its involvement in the region after the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s.</p> <p>Cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities are instrumental</p>	No visibility, very limited engagement	No cooperation, no competition
<b>1990s</b>	<p>Establishing bilateral relations with the newly independent states in the South Caucasus (SC)</p> <p>Effort to be a “model” country.</p>	<p>Establishing relations with the newly independent states in the SC</p> <p>Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) 1991</p> <p>New Policy Instruments of the EU after 1992.</p> <p>Assistance was the core EU policy instrument (Delcour &amp; Duhot, 2011)</p>	<p>Complementary Policies</p> <p>Both actors building bilateral and regional co-operations, without any competition.</p>
<b>1990s</b>	<p>Conflict Resolution Effort</p> <p>Cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities with SC countries</p>	<p>Conflict Resolution Effort</p> <p>Diplomatic efforts</p>	<p>Convergence</p> <p>Both actors supported peace initiatives and facilitated negotiations aimed at finding peaceful solutions.</p>

Türkiye began its involvement in the region after the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s under the leadership of then Prime Minister Turgut Özal. In the 1990s, establishing bilateral ties was a priority for Ankara. The power vacuum in the post-Soviet era facilitated Türkiye's increased engagement in the region, along with other players including the Russian Federation, Iran, and the United States.<sup>8</sup> This situation helped Ankara to enlarge its role in the region. Ankara immediately recognized the newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and established diplomatic relations with them. Friendship agreements with Georgia (1992) and cooperation agreements with Azerbaijan were added, enhancing bilateral ties with South Caucasus countries.<sup>9</sup> Other dynamics that was instrumental for Ankara's policy was the primordial sentiments linked to the ethnic groups of the South Caucasus, which resurfaced in Türkiye in the late 1980s as a result of the memory boom. This memory boom revived forgotten ethnic and cultural identities and ties. These cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities were initial stimuli for forming closer ties with the South Caucasus countries.<sup>10</sup>

They have become a dynamic force influencing foreign policy across the South Caucasus and Central Asia in various ways and have also facilitated the economic activities of Turkish businesspeople, from large corporations to small and medium-sized enterprises.<sup>11</sup> Historical legacies and ethnic identities have heavily influenced regional cooperation and integration and have become an advantage for Turkish engagement in the region. Yet, these legacies and identities have also become sources of security concerns in Türkiye's South Caucasus policy. For example, Türkiye's interactions with Armenia and Azerbaijan have been informed by such identity dynamics, where the

---

<sup>8</sup> Hill, F. (2001). *The Caucasus and Central Asia*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution.

<sup>9</sup> Çelikpala, M., & Veliyev, C. (2015). Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey: An Example of a Successful Regional Cooperation. *Kadir Has University CIES Policy Brief*.

<sup>10</sup> Aydın, M. (2004). Foucault's pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus. *Turkish studies*, 5(2), pp. 1–22.

<sup>11</sup> Görgülü, A., & Krikorian, O. (2012). Turkey's South Caucasus Agenda: The Role of State and Non-State Actors. *Eurasia Partnership Foundation (TESEV Foreign Policy Program)*, pp. 49–59.



historical memories and political sensitivities play a significant role, particularly in the aftermath of the second Karabakh War, discussed below.<sup>12</sup>

Ankara presented itself as a “big brother” in the Caucasus and Central Asia<sup>13</sup> in the 1990s, partly due to the cultural affinities between Türkiye and South Caucasus countries. Türkiye’s South Caucasus policy in the 1990s was characterized by its efforts to position itself as a ‘model’ or ‘bridge’ country.<sup>14</sup> Ankara aimed to present itself as an exemplar of secular development.<sup>15</sup> However, this initiative was abandoned in the 2000s for several reasons, including insufficient resources and the reluctance of the newly formed republics to relinquish their sovereignty to an external model. Additionally, the Russian factor<sup>16</sup> and Ankara’s diminishing interest in maintaining a secular model after the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) introduced Islamic elements into its foreign policy further contributed to this shift.

In the 1990s, the European Union also began to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The first step for EU institutional involvement in the region was the signing of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with each republic in 1996, which went into effect in 1999. The EU opened offices in Georgia and Armenia and planned to open a European Commission delegation in Azerbaijan in 2007.<sup>17</sup> Energy security is key in EU-South Caucasus relations.<sup>18</sup> To

---

<sup>12</sup> Neset, S., Aydin, M., Ergun, A., Giragosian, R., Kakachia, K., & Strand, A. (2023). Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry. *CMI Report*.

<sup>13</sup> Aydin, M. (1996). Turkey and Central Asia: Challenges of Change. *Central Asian Survey*, 15(2), pp. 157–177.

<sup>14</sup> Veliyev, C. (2015). Turkey’s role in the South Caucasus: between fragmentation and integration. *The South Caucasus*, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Balci, B. (2014). Strengths and constraints of Turkish policy in the South Caucasus. *Insight Turkey*, 16(2), pp. 43–52.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Alieva, L. (2006). EU and South Caucasus. *CAP Discussions Paper*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Şahbazov, R. (2015). “Yeni Dönemde Avrupa Birliği-Güney Kafkasya İlişkilerinin Lojistik Boyutu” in I. International Caucasus-Central Asia Foreign Trade and Logistics Congress Proceeding Book, B. Hamdemir et al (eds), Kafkas Üniversitesi, Kars, pp. 653–674, available at I. International Caucasus-Central Asia Foreign Trade and Logistics Congress Proceeding Book. Ulaştırma ve Lojistik Kongreleri (ulk.ist) and Karimov, H.

enhance this security, the ‘European Energy Charter’ between the EU and non-member countries was signed as early as 1991.

After 1992, the EU engaged in the South Caucasus region, utilizing several policy instruments to contribute to the establishment of the Caspian energy transportation network: Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transportation Corridor (TRACECA), and the Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) programs, as well as Inter-State Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) programs.<sup>19</sup> Assistance was the core EU policy instrument in the 1990s.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to establishing secure energy networks in the 1990s, both Türkiye and the European Union were involved in conflict resolution and mediation efforts to support peace initiatives. The EU played a role in diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the first Karabakh war, from 1988 to 1994, and the conflicts in Abkhazia (1992–1993) and South Ossetia in Georgia (1988–1992).

In this endeavour, Türkiye differed from the European Union in that Türkiye was and still is a direct or indirect participant in the ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh). Ethnic groups from the South Caucasus are represented in the Turkish population, thus a regional conflict issue has the potential to become a domestic political concern. This difference did not lead to a clash of strategic interests between Türkiye and the EU. Turkey’s strategic interests partially aligned with the goals and interests of the European Union in the 1990s.<sup>21</sup>

---

(2016). *Avrupa Birliği’nin enerji güvenliği ve Güney Kafkasya* (Doctoral dissertation, Sakarya Üniversitesi (Turkey)).

<sup>19</sup> Şahbazov, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Delcour, L., & Duhot, H. (2011). Bringing South Caucasus closer to Europe? Achievements and challenges in ENP implementation. *Achievements and Challenges in ENP Implementation* (April 7, 2011). *College of Europe Natolin Research Paper*, (2011/3).

<sup>21</sup> Novikova, G. (2011). Quid Pro Quo in Turkey’s South Caucasus Policies. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 10(1), pp. 133–150.

In the 2000s, Türkiye introduced new elements to its South Caucasus policy, such as pipeline diplomacy and soft power. These elements can be gleaned at in figure 2, below. One notes the predilection for “zero problems with neighbours” which would seem to align with the general EU predisposition. One can surmise that the EU’s reliance on energy infrastructure and access also helps in enabling Ankara to take the lead on a number of conflict resolution initiatives, which, at the same time, suggest growing confidence and independence on the part of Türkiye.

**Figure 2: Türkiye and European Union Policies in the South Caucasus: Convergence and Divergence in Specific Areas of Interests (2000s)**

Time	TR Policy	EU Policy	Convergence or Divergence of Interest between TR and EU
<b>2000s</b>	<p>Türkiye’s increased engagement with Azerbaijan and Georgia on regional development projects, including railways and pipelines</p> <p>Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC)</p> <p>Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum</p> <p>Pipeline Diplomacy, Soft Power</p>	<p>EU’s New Policy Instruments: Launch of the ENP in 2003 and its development throughout 2004</p> <p>Proactive approach in dealing with frozen conflicts in 2006.</p> <p>The Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009.</p>	Convergence of interests in energy security.
<b>2000s</b>	Conflict resolution efforts “zero problems with neighbours” policy	<p>Conflict resolution efforts</p> <p>Policy of promoting good governance (Cornell, et al, 2015).</p>	Complementary partners

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Turkey initiated the development of a comprehensive and constructive foreign policy strategy towards the South Caucasus, building on previously established bilateral agreements with Georgia

and Azerbaijan in the early 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Initially, the bilateral relations between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye in the late 1990s evolved into a trilateral strategic relationship and facilitated regional development projects.<sup>23</sup> Through strengthening bilateral relations and participating in key projects such as railway and pipeline construction, Türkiye expanded its economic and political influence in the South Caucasus in the 2000s.

The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline began in 2003 and was completed in 2005. Its impact extends beyond mere oil transportation, fostering enhanced political and economic collaboration among the countries through which it passes.<sup>24</sup> This project constituted ‘a strategic milestone’ for Türkiye’s relations with South Caucasus countries.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, also known as the South Caucasus Pipeline, is a major energy project designed to transport natural gas from the Shah Deniz gas field in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea through Georgia and into Türkiye, terminating at Erzurum. It follows a similar route to the BTC oil pipeline for a significant portion of its length. This pipeline is crucial for reducing European dependence on Russian gas by offering an alternative source of energy. It is part of the Southern Gas Corridor, which aims to bring Azerbaijani gas to Europe.

Türkiye’s increased role in constructing pipelines was integral to its pipeline diplomacy and soft power policy, which significantly shaped its approach to the South Caucasus in the 2000s. The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, commencing in 2003 and completed in 2005, exemplifies this pipeline diplomacy. This project not only transcended mere oil transportation but also fostered enhanced political and economic collaboration among the countries it traversed, marking it as ‘a strategic milestone’ for Türkiye’s relations with the South Caucasus countries.<sup>26</sup> The project involved

---

<sup>22</sup> Görgülü & Krikorian, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Çelikpala & Veliyev op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Sovacool, B. K. (2012). Reconfiguring territoriality and energy security: global production networks and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 32, pp. 210–218.

<sup>25</sup> Cornell, et al, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Sovacool, op. cit. and Cornell, S. E., Starr, S. F., & Tsereteli, M. (2015). *A western strategy for the South Caucasus*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

both the EU and Türkiye. During the 2000s, as an EU candidate, Türkiye endeavoured to harmonize its policies with the EU, acquiring new foreign policy skills such as the use of soft power.<sup>27</sup> It also integrated a number of foreign policymaking agents, acting as mediators in conflicts in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans.<sup>28</sup> Türkiye's "Europeanisation process"<sup>29</sup> and its adoption of a Kantian strategic outlook in designing its foreign policy enabled it to wield more soft power in the South Caucasus and beyond since the early 2000s. The soft power policy in this region granted Türkiye considerable influence in the Southern Caucasus.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Türkiye tried to mediate between conflicting parties to foster peace and pursued an active foreign policy, officially termed "zero problems with neighbours."<sup>31</sup> Both pipeline diplomacy and the use of soft power distinctly marked Türkiye's policy in the South Caucasus.<sup>32</sup>

In the early 2000s, the EU also introduced new policies: the broader European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and later, the multilateral Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework. These policies, emphasizing the crucial role of good governance and democracy in promoting security and stability, have become the cornerstone of EU involvement in the South Caucasus. The ENP was initially designed to promote stability along the EU's external borders, with a primary goal of projecting stability beyond these borders. The EU's 2003 European Security Strategy, along with the ENP, prioritizes the prevention and settlement of conflicts in its neighbourhood. An important step in increasing EU engagement in the South Caucasus was the launch of the Eastern Partnership

---

<sup>27</sup> Salter, E. M. (2009). *The Efficacy of EU Soft Power on Influencing its Eastern Border: Has it Brought Security and Stability?* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon) and Karataşlı, M. (2016). *Soft power politics in middle powers: Brazilian and Turkish foreign policy between 2003 and 2015* (Master's thesis, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., also Oğuzlu, T. (2010). Turkey and Europeanization of foreign policy? *Political Science Quarterly*, 125(4), pp. 657–683. See also Oner, S. (2012). Continuity and Changes in Turkish Foreign and Security Policy in the Twen. *Debating Security in Turkey: Challenges and Changes in the Twenty-First Century*, 59, and Karataşlı, M. (2016). *Soft power politics in middle powers: Brazilian and Turkish foreign policy between 2003 and 2015* (Master's thesis, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi).

<sup>29</sup> Triantaphyllou, D., & Fotiou, E. (2010). The EU and Turkey in energy diplomacy. *Insight Turkey*, pp. 55–61.

<sup>30</sup> Balci, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Novikova, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Triantaphyllou & Fotiou, op. cit.

(EaP) policy initiative in 2009, aimed at forging closer ties with six countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.<sup>33</sup> The EU also increased its activity in the South Caucasus through new policies aimed at integration, signalling a heightened engagement in conflict resolution. By incorporating the South Caucasus states into the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU initiated a qualitatively new phase in bilateral relations, demonstrating its willingness to deepen connections beyond the existing frameworks of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA).<sup>34</sup> A 2006 report from the European Commission (2006) stated clearly that the Union should adopt a more proactive stance in addressing frozen conflicts, as outlined in the ENP.<sup>35</sup>

Türkiye's strategy of expanding its soft power significantly influenced its efforts to align with the EU's energy and trade policies within the region in the 2000s. This alignment was particularly evident in Türkiye's investment in the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, which is crucial for the EU's strategy to diversify energy sources. Türkiye's role as an energy hub was further solidified with the inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline in May 2006.<sup>36</sup> The involvement of the EU in both the BTC and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines brought stability that proved beneficial for Türkiye.<sup>37</sup>

The BTC played a significant role in shaping the energy security landscape for the European Union during the 2000s, forming a part of a broader strategy to diversify energy sources. Convergence of interests in energy security and diplomacy prevailed in the EU and Türkiye's South Caucasus policies (Figure 2) in the 2000s. During this period, Türkiye's diplomacy and investments in oil

---

<sup>33</sup> Park, J. (2014). The European Union's Eastern Partnership. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 14, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Paul, A. (2016). The EU and the South Caucasus 25 Years Since Independence. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., and also Delcour, L., & Duhot, H. (2011). Bringing South Caucasus closer to Europe? Achievements and challenges in ENP implementation. *Achievements and Challenges in ENP Implementation (April 7, 2011)*. *College of Europe Natolin Research Paper*, (2011/3).

<sup>36</sup> Austvik, O. G., & Rzaeva, G. (2017). Turkey in the geopolitics of energy. *Energy Policy*, 107, pp. 539–547.

<sup>37</sup> Barysch, K. (2007). *Turkey's role in European energy security* (p. 3). London: Centre for European Reform.

and gas pipelines were aligned with the EU's energy security policies, highlighting a convergence of interests that benefited both parties in diversifying energy resources. The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline is a key component of this diversification strategy for both the EU and Türkiye.

In the 2010s (Figure 3), Türkiye continued enhancing its bilateral ties with the South Caucasus countries and its soft power policy in the region, despite shifting from a Kantian to a Hobbesian state perspective due to evolving strategic priorities following the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The partial reliance on hard power in the Middle East was a reaction to the Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its allies declaring a “federal democratic system” known as Rojava in northern Syria in March 2016.<sup>38</sup>

Another trend in Türkiye's South Caucasus policy was the advancement of its supply of military equipment and training to the Azerbaijani armed forces in the late 2010s (Deen et al., 2023). Türkiye was not a significant supplier of armaments to Azerbaijan until the 2010s, despite being a close ally. Azerbaijan purchased 72 armoured personnel vehicles (APVs) from Türkiye in 2010–2011.<sup>39</sup> However, Türkiye did not contribute significantly to Azerbaijani arms imports in the 2010s.<sup>40</sup>

This began to change in the early 2020s, with increased arms supplies to Azerbaijan. Türkiye has been providing military assistance to Georgia since 1997.<sup>41</sup> Türkiye was Georgia's largest trading partner in 2007 and remains one of the country's leading foreign investors. An increasing convergence can be noted between the attitudes and policies of Türkiye and those of major European powers, most notably those that required increased access to affordable energy.

---

<sup>38</sup> Altunışık, M. B. (2022). *New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

<sup>39</sup> Nazeretyan, H. (2023). “Three Decades of Arms Supplies to Armenia and Azerbaijan”, International Press, Three Decades of Arms Supplies to Armenia and Azerbaijan – Yerepouni Daily News (yerepouni-news.com).

<sup>40</sup> Kochashvili, I. (2022). *Armenia-Azerbaijan War and Implications for Russia* (Doctoral dissertation, Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School).

<sup>41</sup> For arms sales to Georgia see, RT. (2009). “Turkey arms Georgia” in *Russia Today*, April 1, 2009, Turkey arms Georgia – RT Russia & Former Soviet Union.

**Figure 3: Türkiye and European Union Policies in the South Caucasus:  
Convergence and Divergence in Specific Areas of Interests (2010s)**

Time	TR Policy	EU Policy	Convergence or Divergence of Interest between TR and EU
<b>2010s (a)</b>	Enhancing bilateral relations, regional development projects, pipeline diplomacy  Supply of military equipment to South Caucasian countries (Georgia and Azerbaijan)	The EU reviewed ENP in 2011, following the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings.  A strategic shift in the EU’s policy towards the South Caucasus Security concerns fort the Middle East component of the South Caucasus	EU’s and TR’s security concerns converge
<b>2010s (b)</b>	Energy, railway and trade  Baku-Tbilisi-Kars rail-road project launched in 2017. Its idea goes back to the early 1990s  Türkiye’s role as an “energy corridor” (Müftüler-Baç & Başkan, 2011)	Enhancing regional engagement with new policy instruments and forming bilateral ties with SC countries  EU Revised ENP  Deepening the EU-Georgia relations under the Association Agreement (AA), including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), with the EU on 27 June 2014  The EU’s relations with Armenia, (CEPA) in 2017	Converge of interest in the energy and railway projects



In the 2000s, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) highlighted the importance of good governance and democracy in promoting security and stability in the region. However, in the 2010s, the EU's approach to the South Caucasus underwent significant changes (Figure 3) extending beyond merely providing political support and assistance. Punsmann notes a strategic shift in the EU's policy towards the South Caucasus, with an emphasis on strengthening and building resilience within the Union.<sup>42</sup> This marks a transition from focusing solely on stability projection to adopting a more proactive and defensive strategy in addressing challenges and threats. The concept of "building resilience around the Union" was established as a strategic objective, reflecting a broader agenda that recognizes the evolving security challenges emanating from the Union's periphery. This evolution in policy was encapsulated in the Global Strategy of June 2016, which serves as a guiding document for the revised ENP. The updated policy aims to safeguard the EU from emerging threats, indicating a defensive posture towards its neighbouring regions.<sup>43</sup>

In the 2010s, the European Union significantly enhanced its bilateral relationships with the countries of the South Caucasus, implementing several strategic agreements to deepen political, economic, and security ties. One notable development was the strengthening of relations with Georgia through the Association Agreement (AA) which has been in effect since 2016. This agreement has been instrumental in fostering political association and economic integration, establishing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that benefits Georgian businesses by providing them access to the EU market under favourable conditions. Additionally, since March 2017, Georgian citizens have enjoyed visa-free travel to the Schengen area, marking a significant enhancement in EU-Georgia relations.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the EU deepened ties with Armenia through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017 and fully

---

<sup>42</sup> Punsmann, B. G. (2016). Can we envisage a Collaborative EU-Turkey approach supportive of regionalism in the South Caucasus today?

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Hedenskog, op. cit.

implemented by March 2021. This agreement not only promotes closer economic and political ties but also emphasizes the propagation of EU values within Armenia, a crucial aspect of the EU's regional integration strategy.<sup>45</sup>

These developments in the South Caucasus occurred against a backdrop of broader regional security concerns spurred by the Arab Spring beginning in 2011. The uprisings brought to the forefront the rise of Sunni extremism, as seen in movements like the *Ikwan* in Egypt and Syria, and the spread of transnational Salafi and jihadist networks. These groups also influenced the security landscape in the larger Caucasus region, including Jihadist violence<sup>46</sup> in the North Caucasus, prompting a re-evaluation of engagement policies by both the EU and Türkiye.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the Arab Spring introduced new geopolitical tensions from the Middle East into the Caucasus, further complicating the security environment.<sup>48</sup> This complex interplay of regional dynamics underscores the strategic importance of the EU's evolving policy approach in the South Caucasus during this decade.

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, one of the foundational aspects of cooperation between the EU and Türkiye has been their shared commitment to creating a secure and stable regional energy market. Both parties focused on establishing secure energy routes, exemplified by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Operational since June 2006, this pipeline transports oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia and Türkiye, strategically bypassing Russia.

This has been a crucial development for the EU, forming an integral part of its strategy to diversify energy sources and reduce reliance on Russian gas

---

<sup>45</sup> Kolarz, S. (2021). CEPA as a Model of Cooperation: The Example of EU-Armenia Relations. See also Khvorostiankina, A. (2021). The EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement: A New Instrument of Promoting EU's Values and the General Principles of EU Law. *EU External Relations Law: Shared Competences and Shared Values in Agreements Between the EU and Its Eastern Neighbourhood*, pp. 193–226.

<sup>46</sup> Sagramoso, D., & Yarlykapov, A. (2020). Jihadist violence in the North Caucasus: political, social and economic factors. In: *Routledge Handbook of the Caucasus*, pp. 273–287. London: Routledge.

<sup>47</sup> Ratelle, J.-F. (2020). Transnational Salafi and jihadist networks: from an independent insurgency to a leaderless network. In: *Routledge Handbook of the Caucasus*, pp. 288–301. London: Routledge.

<sup>48</sup> Deen, B., Zweers, W., & Linder, C. (2023). *The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil*. Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

and oil supplies. Additionally, during the 2010s, the EU's increased engagement with and deeper bilateral relations with South Caucasus countries (Figure 3) complemented these efforts without sparking rivalry.

In the 2020s, a couple of events created shifts in the South Caucasus policies of the EU and Türkiye. (Figure 4). One of them is the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that significantly altered the geopolitical dynamics<sup>49</sup> in the South Caucasus, reshaping regional power balances and relationships.<sup>50</sup> In response to these changes, Türkiye adopted an integrated and multifaceted approach that included military collaboration, economic objectives, and cultural connections.

This strategic shift has notably increased Türkiye's influence in the region, enhancing its role post-conflict. Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has notably shifted the regional balance of power in its favour, leading to increased competition among regional powers, especially between Türkiye and Iran. This rivalry has intensified as both nations compete for influence in the area.<sup>51</sup>

The deepening partnership between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is viewed by Tehran as a direct challenge to its regional aspirations and a potential threat to its influence in the South Caucasus. This has resulted in a more complex geopolitical landscape, with multiple regional actors pursuing their security and economic interests. One would expect the increased activity on the part of Ankara to be a factor of disquiet among the Euro-Atlantic partners, but this does not appear to be so. In this view, NATO comes to mind. Even if Türkiye is not a member of the EU, it nevertheless wrests significant influence over the sum total of existing members since everyone depends on her for access to energy markets. Her relations with Azerbaijan will therefore tend to not provoke rivalry.

---

<sup>49</sup> Neset, et al, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Meister, S. (2021). Shifting Geopolitical Realities in the South Caucasus. *SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security in Eastern Europe*, (8). And Meister, S. (2023). Geopolitics of Infrastructure and Connectivity in the South Caucasus: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, (132), pp. 21–25.

<sup>51</sup> Golmohammadi, V. and Markedonov, S. M., (2024). How Iran Perceives Turkey's Rise in the South Caucasus. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22(1), pp. 152–175. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-1-152-175.

**Figure 4: Türkiye and European Union Policies in the South Caucasus: Convergence and Divergence in Specific Areas of Interests (2020s and Post 2020 War)**

Time	TR Policy	EU Policy	Convergence or Divergence of Interest between TR and EU
<b>2020s</b>	Türkiye's multi-faceted policy and strategy in the South Caucasus, pivoting to expand its regional influence in the South Caucasus.	The EU's investment in BTC and the establishment of financial institutions to support pipeline projects, like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, are key components of its strategy.	Convergence of interests in securing economic benefits and ensuring energy security.
<b>Post 2020 War</b>	Deepened relationships between Türkiye and Azerbaijan.  Shusha Declaration, signed between Azerbaijan and Türkiye (2021).	EU interest in the stable energy supply through the region prevails.  EU support for progress on good governance, democracy and human rights. (Hedenskog, 2022).	
<b>2021 →</b>	3+3 initiative (three South Caucasus and regional countries)	EU policy of good governance, democracy and human rights	Convergence of interest in fostering dialogue and cooperation in the region.
<b>February 24, 2022 ...&gt; 2024</b> Russian invasion of Ukraine	TR continues increasing its energy, railway and trade activities in the SC	Enhanced EU engagement with the South Caucasus region and high-level diplomatic activities  The EU's cooperation with Armenia within the	

	Military collaboration	Eastern Partnership and the CEPA  Armenian EU membership idea (March 2024) <sup>52</sup>	
<b>2020s</b>	Zangezur Corridor/Road	Zangezur Corridor/Road	Convergence of interests, yet certain issues could overshadow cooperative initiatives.
<b>2020s</b>	Middle Corridor	Middle Corridor	Complementary partners. Mutual interests in trade, energy security, and regional stability

Linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, another pivotal development of the 2020s in the post-44 Day War era was the signing of the Shusha Declaration on June 15<sup>th</sup> by President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. This agreement commits both nations to support each other in the event of threats or attacks on their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security by any third country, aligning with the principles and charter of the United Nations. The signing of the Shusha Declaration marked a significant enhancement in bilateral relations between the two countries, establishing a new level of alliance.<sup>53</sup>

In the 2020s, after the Nagorno-Karabakh war, a notable development in regional cooperation was the “3+3” initiative. This initiative includes the three South Caucasus countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – alongside three regional powers – Russia, Türkiye, and Iran.<sup>54</sup> The 3+3 initiative

---

<sup>52</sup> See *Reuters* (March 9, 2024) for the Armenian EU aspiration.

<sup>53</sup> Mikail E. H., & Hakan, Ç. O. R. A. (2021). East of Eurasia in 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Turkey’s Policy Towards Azerbaijan. *PROCEEDINGS E-BOOK*. See also Shafiyev, F. (2023). Azerbaijan and the Rise of Turkic Unity. *Insight Turkey*, 25(4), pp. 13–24.

<sup>54</sup> Samkharadze, N. (2022). “3+ 3 Minus One: Georgia’s South Caucasian Challenges and Prospects.” *Georgian Institute of Politics Policy Brief*, (37).

aims to foster regional cooperation among these nations and to promote dialogue and uphold principles such as respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity in the post-conflict environment of the South Caucasus. During the second meeting, held in Tehran, there was a strong emphasis on these values, as well as on the inviolability of internationally recognized borders and the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the principles of the United Nations Charter.<sup>55</sup>

Georgia has shown reluctance to join this initiative. The concept of establishing such a format is not new and has been considered since the conclusion of the Karabakh war in November 2020. The leadership roles of Türkiye and Russia in designing this format are significant.<sup>56</sup> Georgia's stance on the 3+3 initiative is notably cautious and largely negative, primarily due to Russia's participation.<sup>57</sup> Russia currently occupies 20% of Georgian territory in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Additionally, Georgia's Western-oriented foreign policy goals and its aspirations to join Euro-Atlantic institutions like the EU and NATO further complicate its participation.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the 3+3 meetings held in Moscow, Russia, on December 10, 2021, and Tehran, Iran, on October 23, 2023, were conducted in a 3+2 format without Georgia's involvement. Despite this, Russia has expressed a desire for Georgia's inclusion in the initiative.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Diplomatic Insight, (2023). "3+3 Format Meeting on South Caucasus kicks off in Tehran", October 24, 2023, 3+3 Format Meeting on South Caucasus kicks off in Tehran – The Diplomatic Insight.

<sup>56</sup> Teslova, Elena. (2021). "Russia suggests 3+3 format with Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia in Caucasus", aa.com.tr. For Ankara's role in the six-nation format, see *Hürriyet Daily*, (January 29, 2021), and Azizova, Aysel, Aida Hovhannisyan and Ketevan Khutsishvili. (2022). "3+3 ≠ 6 in South Caucasus." Goethe Institut. January 2022. <https://www.goethe.de/ins/ro/en/kul/sup/unp/22745686.html>. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi. Among their discussion topics was the proposed six-nation format, which Putin was prepared to establish, according to Erdoğan.

<sup>57</sup> Javakhishvili, E. (2022). The "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 128, pp. 3–6.

<sup>58</sup> Samkharadze, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> One example of outreach from Russia to Georgia occurred in October 2023. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov mentioned that Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan supported the initiative and that Russia planned to collaborate with Armenia on this matter. He expressed hope that despite facing challenges, Georgia would find the project appealing and consider participating.

In the 2020s, the European Union (EU) has strategically enhanced its engagement in the South Caucasus, developing a comprehensive approach that underscores its support and presence in this geopolitically sensitive region. This shift is primarily influenced by two major conflicts which have reshaped the area's dynamics. Firstly, the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has prompted the EU to increase its diplomatic activity, driven by significant concerns over energy security. This conflict highlights the region's critical role in energy transit routes that are essential for the EU's energy diversification strategies. The importance of the South Caucasus was further underscored following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This event marked a pivotal shift, leading to a strategic reassessment of the region's significance, particularly in addressing geopolitical shifts and enhancing energy security. Amid these developments, the EU has catalysed efforts to reassess its policies towards the South Caucasus, aiming to ensure stability and support democratic governance. Economic assistance has been a key component of the EU's reinforced engagement, especially through ongoing financing for critical energy infrastructures, such as developments in the Caspian region and the construction of the BTC Pipeline. These investments are part of a broader EU strategy to secure a stable energy supply from the region, crucial amid the heightened concerns posed by regional conflicts like Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, the EU has committed to promoting good governance, democracy, and human rights in the South Caucasus, a commitment outlined by scholars like Hedenskog. Despite challenges from regional instability, the EU continues to elevate its role as a mediator in conflicts and strengthen its geopolitical stance as a counterbalance to diminishing Russian influence. This is evidenced by high-level diplomatic initiatives, including visits by EU Foreign Ministers to the region, orchestrated by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. These efforts are indicative of the EU's strategic pivot in the 2020s, emphasizing a more assertive and diplomatically active presence in the South Caucasus to address both immediate and long-term regional challenges.

The Middle Corridor,<sup>60</sup> also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), plays a crucial role in the convergence of EU and

---

<sup>60</sup> For the Middle Corridor and its importance for energy security, see Kenderdine, T., & Bucsky, P. (2021). *Middle corridor-policy development and trade potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route* (No. 1268). ADBI Working Paper Series.

Turkish policies in the South Caucasus. This corridor not only facilitates the transport of energy but also offers Türkiye and European countries an alternative to Russian energy resources, thereby enhancing energy security and diversification. As a key player in the Middle Corridor, Türkiye boosts its geopolitical influence by positioning itself as an essential transit country for goods moving between Asia and Europe. This strategic positioning grants Türkiye increased leverage in international negotiations and partnerships, fostering potential collaboration between the EU and Türkiye.

In contrast, the alignment of EU and Turkish policies is less clear concerning the Zangezur Corridor/Road project. While the EU has not articulated a specific policy towards the Zangezur project, it, along with other global powers, supports the development of new transport routes in the South Caucasus, including the Zangezur Corridor/Road. For Türkiye, this corridor is particularly significant as it not only enhances connectivity between Europe and Asia but also serves as a critical gateway to the Caspian basin and Central Asia. This distinction highlights the complexities and varying degrees of policy convergence between the EU and Türkiye in the region.

## **Conclusion**

In the South Caucasus, a region characterized by its strategic importance and complex geopolitical landscape, both the European Union (EU) and Türkiye find significant opportunities for cooperation and competition. The shared aspiration of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan to strengthen their connections with the West aligns with the strategic interests of both the EU and Türkiye, facilitating a more integrated approach to regional engagement. Türkiye's economic interests in the South Caucasus, including energy projects, trade routes, and infrastructure investments, play a critical role in its foreign policy. The EU's involvement in the region could either complement these initiatives or present new opportunities for cooperation, particularly in the energy sector, which is vital for both parties. However, the religious and cultural ties of the South Caucasus to the Middle East add a layer of complexity, influenced by various regional and international dynamics that could potentially complicate relationships.

A pivotal element of Türkiye's strategy has been strengthening its partnership with Azerbaijan, securing a key position that extends Türkiye's influence



through the South Caucasus to the broader Central Asian region. This strategic partnership is crucial not just for energy transit but also for broader geopolitical stability. Concerning the EU and Türkiye's policy interactions in the South Caucasus, any EU involvement that respects and acknowledges these strengthened ties with Azerbaijan could be viewed positively by Türkiye.

The paper concludes that the EU and Türkiye's cooperation in the South Caucasus is pivotal for the stability and development of the region. While there are potential challenges due to cultural and religious affiliations, the economic and strategic interests largely promote a collaborative approach. Strengthening cooperative frameworks and supporting regional integration can maximize mutual benefits and contribute to the broader goal of regional peace and prosperity. The nature of the EU's increased involvement in the region could be perceived by Türkiye either as a complement to its own diplomatic and economic efforts or as competition, particularly when it comes to mediating regional conflicts or leading economic initiatives. Both the EU and Türkiye should support regional integration processes and economic development to enhance cooperation and mitigate competition.

## Bibliography

- Alieva, L. (2006). EU and South Caucasus. *CAP Discussions Paper*, 18.
- Altunışık, M. B. (2022). *New Turn in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Regional and Domestic Insecurities*. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).
- Austvik, O. G., & Rzayeva, G. (2017). Turkey in the geopolitics of energy. *Energy Policy*, 107, 539–547.
- Aydin, M. (1996). Turkey and Central Asia: Challenges of Change. *Central Asian Survey*, 15(2), 157–177.
- Aydin, M. (2004). Foucault's pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus. *Turkish studies*, 5(2), 1–22.
- Azizova, Aysel, Aida Hovhannisyan and Ketevan Khutsishvili. (2022). 3+3 ≠ 6 in South Caucasus. Goethe Institut. January 2022. <https://www.goethe.de/ins/ro/en/kul/sup/unp/22745686.html>.
- Balci, B. (2014). Strengths and constraints of Turkish policy in the South Caucasus. *Insight Turkey*, 16(2), 43–52.
- Barysch, K. (2007). *Turkey's role in European energy security* (p. 3). London: Centre for European Reform.
- Bishku, M. B. (2015). Is the South Caucasus region a part of the Middle East? *Journal of Third World Studies*, 32(1), 83–102.
- Cornell, S. E., Starr, S. F., & Tsereteli, M. (2015). *A western strategy for the South Caucasus*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.
- Çelikpala, M., & Veliyev, C. (2015). Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey: An Example of a Successful Regional Cooperation. *Kadir Has University CIES Policy Brief*.
- Deen, B., Zweers, W., & Linder, C. (2023). *The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a geopolitical labyrinth in turmoil*. Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations.
- Delcour, L., & Duhot, H. (2011). Bringing South Caucasus closer to Europe? Achievements and challenges in ENP implementation. *Achievements and Challenges in ENP Implementation (April 7, 2011)*. College of Europe Natolin Research Paper, (2011/3).
- Diplomatic Insight. (2023). “3+3 Format Meeting on South Caucasus kicks

- off in Tehran”, October 24, 2023, 3+3 Format Meeting on South Caucasus kicks off in Tehran – The Diplomatic Insight.
- Euronews. (2022). What is the Energy Charter Treaty and why is it so controversial? Euronews.
- European Commission. (2006). Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy, Communication to the Council and to the European Parliament, European Commission 2006. Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy (europa.eu).
- Golmohammadi, V. and Markedonov, S. M., (2024). How Iran Perceives Turkey’s Rise in the South Caucasus. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22(1), 152–175. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-1-152-175.
- Görgülü, A., & Krikorian, O. (2012). Turkey’s South Caucasus Agenda: The Role of State and Non-State Actors. *Eurasia Partnership Foundation (TESEV Foreign Policy Program)*, 49–59.
- Hedenskog, J. (2022). *The EU in the South Caucasus: Making the Most of Current Opportunities*. Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies.
- Hill, F. (2001). *The Caucasus and Central Asia*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution.
- Hurriyetdailynews.com. (2021). “Turkey, Iran propose 3+3 format for Caucasus”, January 29, 2021. Available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-hopes-us-returns-to-iran-nuclear-deal-162018>.
- Javakhishvili, E. (2022). The “3+3” Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 128, 3–6.
- Kakachia, K. (2015). Europeanisation and Georgian foreign policy. *The South Caucasus*, 11–18.
- Karataşlı, M. (2016). *Soft power politics in middle powers: Brazilian and Turkish foreign policy between 2003 and 2015* (Master’s thesis, İzmir Ekonomi Üniversitesi).
- Karimov, H. (2016). *Avrupa Birliği’nin enerji güvenliği ve Güney Kafkasya* (Doctoral dissertation, Sakarya Üniversitesi (Turkey)).
- Kenderdine, T., & Bucsky, P. (2021). *Middle corridor-policy development and trade potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route* (No. 1268). ADBI Working Paper Series.
- Kochashvili, I. (2022). *Armenia-Azerbaijan War and Implications for Russia* (Doctoral dissertation, Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School).

- Kolarz, S. (2021). CEPA as a Model of Cooperation: The Example of EU-Armenia Relations.
- Khvorostiankina, A. (2021). The EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement: A New Instrument of Promoting EU's Values and the General Principles of EU Law. *EU External Relations Law: Shared Competences and Shared Values in Agreements Between the EU and Its Eastern Neighbourhood*, 193–226.
- Meister, S. (2021). Shifting Geopolitical Realities in the South Caucasus. *SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security in Eastern Europe*, (8).
- Meister, S. (2023). Geopolitics of Infrastructure and Connectivity in the South Caucasus: The Case of Armenia and Azerbaijan. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, (132), 21–25.
- MFA. (2024). “National Foreign Policy in the Century of Türkiye” Ankara, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye.
- Mikail E. H., & Hakan, Ç.O.R.A. (2021). East of Eurasia in 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Turkey's Policy Towards Azerbaijan. *PROCEEDINGS E-BOOK*.
- Müftüler-Baç, M., & Görgülü, A. (2014). Turkey and the European Union: partners in foreign policy cooperation in the South Caucasus. In: *New Approaches to EU Foreign Policy*, 222–238. Routledge.
- Narli, N. (2019). Turkey's relations with Greece and Western Balkans: Looking from Turkish geopolitical lenses, memory, and security culture. *Greece and Its Western Balkan Neighbours – Common Challenges in a Changing Europe*, 57.
- Narli, N. (2020). Narli, Nilufer. Mapping the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict and Drivers for Resolution Scenarios. In: *Concrete Steps to Break the Deadlocks in the South Caucasus* (pp. 85–109).
- Nazeretyan, H. (2023). “Three Decades of Arms Supplies to Armenia and Azerbaijan”, International Press, Three Decades of Arms Supplies to Armenia and Azerbaijan – Yerepouni Daily News (yerepouni-news.com).
- Neset, S., Aydin, M., Ergun, A., Giragosian, R., Kakachia, K., & Strand, A. (2023). Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry. *CMI Report*.
- Nixey, J. (2010). The South Caucasus: drama on three stages. *America and a changed world: A question of leadership*, 125–142.

- Novikova, G. (2011). Quid Pro Quo in Turkey's South Caucasus Policies. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 10(1), 133–150.
- Oğuzlu, T. (2010). Turkey and Europeanization of foreign policy? *Political Science Quarterly*, 125(4), 657–683.
- Oner, S. (2012). Continuity and Changes in Turkish Foreign and Security Policy in the Twen. *Debating Security in Turkey: Challenges and Changes in the Twenty-First Century*, 59.
- Park, J. (2014). The European Union's Eastern Partnership. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 14, 2014.
- Paul, A. (2016). The EU and the South Caucasus 25 Years Since Independence. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 25.
- Priego Moreno, A. (2007). The Emergence of Southern Caucasus as the Cornerstone in the Greater Middle East. *Revista Electrónica De Estudios Internacionales*, 13, 1–22.
- Punsmann, B. G. (2016). Can we envisage a Collaborative EU-Turkey approach supportive of regionalism in the South Caucasus today?
- Ratelle, J.-F. (2020). Transnational Salafi and jihadist networks: from an independent insurgency to a leaderless network. In: *Routledge Handbook of the Caucasus* (pp. 288–301). London: Routledge.
- Reuters, March 9, 2024. “Armenia is considering seeking EU membership, foreign minister says” Armenia is considering seeking EU membership, foreign minister says. Reuters.
- Russia Today. (2009). “Turkey arms Georgia” in RT, April 1, 2009, Turkey arms Georgia – RT Russia & Former Soviet Union.
- Sagramoso, D., & Yarlykapov, A. (2020). Jihadist violence in the North Caucasus: political, social and economic factors. In: *Routledge Handbook of the Caucasus* (pp. 273–287). London: Routledge.
- Salter, E. M. (2009). *The Efficacy of EU Soft Power on Influencing its Eastern Border: Has it Brought Security and Stability?* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon).
- Samkharadze, N. (2022). “3+ 3 Minus One: Georgia's South Caucasian Challenges and Prospects.” *Georgian Institute of Politics Policy Brief*, (37).
- Shafiyev, F. (2023). Azerbaijan and the Rise of Turkic Unity. *Insight Turkey*, 25(4), 13–24.

- Skalamera, M. (2018). Revisiting the Nabucco debacle: Myths and realities. *Problems of Post-communism*, 65(1), 18–36.
- Sovacool, B. K. (2012). Reconfiguring territoriality and energy security: global production networks and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 32, 210–218.
- Şahbazov, R. (2015). “Yeni Dönemde Avrupa Birliği-Güney Kafkasya İlişkilerinin Lojistik Boyutu” in I. International Caucasus-Central Asia Foreign Trade and Logistics Congress Proceeding Book, Adem KARAKAŞ, Berkan HAMDEMİR, Savaş DEMİRCİ, Ömer ATALAY, Murat AKÇA, Samet TOPAL (eds), Kafkas Üniversitesi, Kars, 653–674, available at I. International Caucasus-Central Asia Foreign Trade and Logistics Congress Proceeding Book. Ulaştırma ve Lojistik Kongreleri (ulk.ist).
- Şenol L, C., & Erbilien, S. Ü. (2022). Analysis of the Impact of the Middle Corridor on Türkiye in Terms of Geopolitics and Economy in the OBOR Initiative. *Cografya Dergisi*, (45), 161–180.
- Teslova, Elena. (2021). “Russia suggests 3+3 format with Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia in Caucasus”, aa.com.tr.
- Triantaphyllou, D., & Fotiou, E. (2010). The EU and Turkey in energy diplomacy. *Insight Turkey*, 55–61.
- Veliyev, C. (2015). Turkey’s role in the South Caucasus: between fragmentation and integration. *The South Caucasus*, 85.
- Yeşiltaş, Murat. (2023). Türkiye’s Foreign Policy in 2024, Sabah Daily, December 22, 2023, Türkiye’s foreign policy in 2024. Column (dailysabah.com).

## External Actors and Geopolitical Pivoting in the South Caucasus<sup>1</sup>

*Marat Terterov*

Small countries often find themselves having to make difficult choices when it comes to navigating optimal pathways for their national development. Their relations with larger powers, as well as competing relations between larger powers with an interest in specific regions where small countries are located, will invariably impact on their development. One of the regions of the world where the impact of larger powers on the development of smaller countries is highly evident is the South Caucasus, a region of the former-Soviet Union predominantly associated with the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. These three relatively small yet important countries in a region of strategic importance have come a long way since they became independent nation states following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

Most international visitors to the thriving, present day urban metropolises of Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi are largely oblivious to the fact that just a few decades ago, these were capital cities of countries going through a dire political, economic and social crisis. Basic goods and services which most people have long taken for granted in the developed world – including basic energy supply, adequate transport infrastructure, appropriate public as well as consumer goods and, perhaps most importantly, civil security – were for the most part in short supply in these countries.

Fast forward the situation some 25 years later and find a completely different situation. All three countries have reached an impressive state of development compared to their baseline scenarios from barely a generation ago. Modernisation of infrastructure, abundance and variety of goods and ser-

---

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this article was originally published on the website of the European Geopolitical Forum ([http://gpf-europe.com/upload/marat\\_terterov\\_paper\\_chisinau\\_12042024.pdf](http://gpf-europe.com/upload/marat_terterov_paper_chisinau_12042024.pdf)) on August 21, 2024. The text has been revised for this publication.

vices as well as the highly evident process of capital formation through domestic and international investment flows are all very visible to persons visiting Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia at the present time.

Yet the countries of the South Caucasus region remain in many ways in a similar predicament to their situation during the 1990s: largely unfinished projects from a national development perspective – politically and socio-economically. Despite substantial economic gains made by all three during the last two decades, and the fact that the results of capital formation are visibly contributing to their modernisation, a major sense of uncertainty surrounds the future of Armenia, Georgia and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Azerbaijan.

This is largely due to two factors. The first is to do with the political and security-level fallout in the region as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Prior to the conflict currently engulfing Ukraine, the South Caucasus was the region which has seen the largest degree of political violence, break-away wars and inter-state conflict out of all of the Soviet Union's successor states – perhaps with the exclusion of the largest of the successor states: Russia. The region has still not been able to cast aside the shadow of its post-Soviet era conflicts, resulting in political volatility, strategic uncertainty and the inability for the region to fully integrate economically with itself.

The second factor is the relationships the states of the region harbour with larger powers, as already alluded to above. When it comes to the states of the South Caucasus having to engage larger powers, two sets of external actors loom large: regional larger powers (predominantly Russia, Turkey and Iran) and international larger powers (predominantly the EU and several of its individual member states, the US and the UK and, to a lesser degree, China, and the Gulf Arab States). The regional larger powers have been present as external actors in the South Caucasus region for centuries. They have both courted as well as imposed their power on the smaller states (and in historical terms, kingdoms) of the region and continue to do so to this day.

The international larger powers have appeared in the region as external actors very recently, mainly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were of course all part of the larger Soviet mother state until the end of 1991 and the South Caucasus was largely closed off to



the outside world up until that time. All larger powers – local and international – have exercised their interest in the region as external actors, whether it has coincided or contradicted to that of the region's smaller countries. As it stands today, the region is characterised by fairly intense geopolitical rivalry, adversarial relations and lack of trust between a number of the external powers in general and Russia and (the so called) West in particular.

Russia has found it difficult to 'pull out' of the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union or accept the fact that the South Caucasus countries are fully fledged sovereign states whose national interest may not always coincide with that of Moscow. The EU, the US and the UK, all backed by the NATO Alliance, on the other hand, have invested substantial political capital in bringing these countries (especially Georgia, and more recently Armenia) closer to the West. This has created, rightly or wrongly, a perception in Moscow that they are being pulled away from Russia's geostrategic orbit. Such developments have clearly not been well received in Moscow and has resulted in a backlash from the Russian state. Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008, and the short yet deadly war that followed between the two countries, is perhaps the most flagrant example of how the West's political courting of the South Caucasus states has led to a violent and decisive backlash from Russia.

The newfound rivalry and power competition between the larger external powers in the South Caucasus region – which has been present for centuries – has increasingly forced the three countries of the region to engage in what can be referred to as 'geopolitical pivoting'.<sup>2</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are finding themselves under increasing pressure to choose between integrating themselves politically and economically with either East or West: to decide whether to anchor themselves either to the EU/US, or to stick with Russia, as the primary means of assuring their security and economic development.

---

<sup>2</sup> There is no particular academic literature on the concept that we refer to here as 'geopolitical pivoting'. In a theoretical context, the term would refer to a responsive course of foreign policy actions taken by small states/local actors as a means of promoting and/or defending their national interest in response to rivalry and influence seeking instigated by larger powers/external actors in a certain region of strategic interest. In the context of this essay the term is largely used to describe the actions of smaller powers/local actors in the former-Soviet Union (and particularly in the South Caucasus) in response to the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West in post-Soviet space.

The game of geopolitical pivoting in which these countries now find themselves not only undermines the region's security and prospects for regional economic integration, but it is also the major contributing factor to the prevailing uncertainty which hangs over the future of the entire South Caucasus. A major change in the behaviour from the leading external actors exercising power and influence in the South Caucasus is necessary if Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are to realise their sovereign nation-statehood and to complete the realisation of national-development project journeys upon which they embarked in the early 1990s.

### **The Lure of Europe**

When the Soviet Union collapsed as a nation state in late December 1991, history ended. Or at least this was the myth that entered into widespread circulation at the time, as made famous none more so than by Francis Fukuyama's seminal essay: *The End of History*.<sup>3</sup> While the collapse of the Soviet Union immediately resulted in the birth of 14 new countries in 1992, as the USSR's successor states, influential essays such as those of Fukuyama and other scholars in Europe and North America cultivated a default thinking that these countries would now join the international club of democracies and market economies. Democracy theorist, Samuel Huntington, spoke of the 'third wave' of democratisation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which included the political transformations taking place in Eastern Europe and the former-Soviet Union at the time of the coming down of the Berlin Wall in 1989.<sup>4</sup>

The Cold War had ended. Democratic elections were taking place in all Soviet successor states, including Russia. Market reforms, including chaotic yet pervasive privatisation programs intended to form the basis of market economies, were also being rolled out in the former-Soviet Union region. In light of newly emerging trade and investment opportunities in ex-Soviet Eurasia, the world was entering into a new era where Cold War tensions took a backseat as we witnessed the onset of globalisation. The lure of the West – the economic, technological and material wealth of capital rich Europe and

---

<sup>3</sup> *The End of History?*, Francis Fukuyama, *The National Interest* No.16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18 (16 pages); Published By: Center for the National Interest.

<sup>4</sup> *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*; Samuel Huntington; University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1993.

North America – rapidly emerged as a default development benchmark for all Soviet successor states to aspire to. A new term even appeared in the Russian language to encapsulate the lure and to rapidly spread the seductive nature of its message across Russia and the Soviet successor states: *Evrostandart*.

The lure of the West was particularly strong in all Soviet successor states during the 1990s and early 2000s, including Russia, and was cultivated further by a steady flow of the West's investment, trade and aid to the region. Further, as ex-Soviet Eurasia globalised and become more integrated into the international economy during the 1990s, the lure of new business opportunities in the 'East' – with its emerging markets, abundance of raw materials and high-quality human capital – attracted many investors (and fortune hunters) to the region. In countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, international oil companies invested big time into the oil and gas sectors based on long term production sharing agreements and other forms of concessional arrangements with these governments.

Major investments were also channelled into oil and gas transportation projects in these countries, including pipelines designed to export Caspian hydrocarbons to international markets in circumvention of Russia, depriving the latter of both income and influence. Western capital often came in parallel to, or was accompanied by, development aid and technical assistance projects funded by governments from Europe and North America. This process was further supported by the establishment of diplomatic representations, chambers of commerce, and even efforts at military cooperation.

By the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the West had firmly established a powerful interest in all of the Soviet successor states, including Russia. At the same time governments in Europe and North America actively promoted democratic values throughout the region, to compliment investment and market reform. Aid money was happily accepted by government and non-government stakeholders in the region – Eurasia was largely cash strapped in the initial years following the Soviet collapse.

## A Russian Reconsolidation in the Former-Soviet Union

The journey to democracy and to the market (economy) for the successor states of the former-Soviet Union was anything but a simple one, however. In Russia, the main successor state of the Soviet Union, the liberal and (relatively) democratic 1990s decade soon gave way to a re-centralised political economy during the 2000s, where the state clawed back control of the crown jewels of the economy and tightened the political environment, which became centred around the (Vladimir) Putin regime. At the same time, the Russian economy grew at a very impressive tempo in the 2000s, fuelled both by foreign investment as well as steadily high incomes received from hydrocarbons exports. As the Russian economy expanded, Russia became the main source of investment and trade for most of the other Soviet successor states.

By the early 2000s, Russian corporate brands competed strongly with leading Western brands across the former-Soviet Union, whilst Moscow and other major Russian cities attracted guest workers by the millions from the poorer Soviet successor states. Moscow was establishing itself as a new capital, no longer of the Soviet Union, but rather of a swathing post-Soviet economic eco-system which became a driver for investment and trade right across the entirety of Eurasia. While the West was visibly establishing its presence across the region, the economic evolution which took place in Russia during the 2000s resulted in Moscow's reconsolidation in the former-Soviet Union. Some Western critics described this process as Vladimir Putin's attempt to recreate the Soviet Union by asserting Russian political dominance across the region, but the phenomenon taking place was largely of an economic/business creation.

At the same time, the 2000s are also often associated with the retreat of democracy in Russia (although it is questionable, how democratic Russia really was during the 'liberal 1990s') and the arrival of the *siloviki* (former-state security officials turned 'power-bureaucrats'), who rallied around the Putin regime and propped up its increasingly authoritarian tendencies. In fact, the better the Russian economy did at the time, the tighter the political control seemed to become in Putin's newly rebranded Russia. In Moscow's newly evolving world view, the lure of the West was largely dwindling down into

an 'economic lure'. Democracy also failed to take root in other sound performing and relatively stable post-Soviet economies, including Azerbaijan, Belarus and Kazakhstan, as well as politically stable yet lesser economic performers such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, as well as Tajikistan.

While all of these countries actively courted Western business and some of them (Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in particular) attracted very substantial volumes of foreign direct investment (FDI), their progress with democratic reform continued to evolve largely on their own terms. All of these countries, as well as Russia, recorded impressive economic growth during the 2000s and were largely guided by an indigenous form of evolving state capitalism. This development model – limited in democracy yet heavily pro-business – created a solid foundation for their current level of relatively impressive economic development, particularly if we take account the dire situation in which all of these countries were mired during the 1990s.

Furthermore, neither Russia nor any of these state capitalist, limited democracy countries of the former-Soviet Union were on a political collision course with the West, despite the retreat of democracy in the region as of the earlier part of the 2000s decade. To the contrary, prior to the Russo-Georgia war of 2008, Russia and the West were going through their own form of political honeymoon, which was underscored by massive expansion of FDI into the Russian economy as well as voluminous trade turnover between Russia and Europe. Multibillion dollar investment projects channelled by multinationals into the Russian economy at the time, particularly in the energy sector, helped to iron out some areas of geopolitical discord, such as the accession of former-Soviet republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – to the EU and the eastbound expansion of NATO.

### **Geopolitical Pivoting Begins with State Failure: Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan**

The seeds of large-scale tension and the overall crisis in Russia's relations with the West currently being witnessed has its roots in the partial state failure experience of the politically weaker and poorer economic performers of the post-Soviet countries, namely Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and (to a lesser extent) Armenia. It is in the near political collapse that these countries experienced – following contentious elections and the ensuing

eruption of ‘coloured revolutions’ in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan – between 2003 and 2005 that the game of geopolitical pivoting began, both in the South Caucasus and in the former-Soviet Union more broadly.

In November 2003, following a parliamentary election which was widely seen as a fraudulent attempt to keep the decaying regime of President Eduard Shevardnadze in power, Georgia succumbed to what became dubbed as the Rose Revolution. While Shevardnadze’s early legitimacy as Georgia’s mainstay president of the 1990s was derived from the relative stability he brought to the country following the Soviet collapse, by the early 2000s his rule oversaw a country on the brink of socio-economic collapse. Discontent in the country was pervasive and the rigged elections of 2003 led to street protests on a scale large enough to eventuate in Shevardnadze’s downfall.

A year later, in late 2004 in Ukraine, another fraudulent election led to the eruption of what became dubbed as the Orange Revolution, where a seemingly pro-Western candidate, Victor Yushchenko, swept to power following widespread street protests rejecting the initial results of the poll. Yushchenko won a re-run of the election, defeating the pro-Russian candidate, Victor Yanukovich, who was also widely seen as ‘the candidate of continuity’ of the murky regime of President Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine’s second elected president of the post-Soviet era. A further coloured revolution then engulfed the small, mountainous Central Asian Republic of Kyrgyzstan in the spring of 2005, where the regime of the country’s first ex-Soviet president, Askar Akayev, was also toppled by sweeping street protests. Kyrgyzstan’s protests and the downfall of Akayev were labelled as the Tulip Revolution.

It was at this point in the historical evolution of post-Soviet politics that the roots of geopolitical pivoting – a concept reflecting foreign policy behaviour of smaller Soviet successor states in response to the rivalry for power and influence between Russia and the West in post-Soviet space – were largely sown. Following the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, both Georgia and Ukraine were widely perceived to have pivoted increasingly to the West, becoming less aligned with Russia politically. The relationships of both countries with Russia became more complex, following

what appeared to be – at least on the surface – a form of regime change which took place in the two countries.

Following their respective revolutions, both Georgia and Ukraine appeared as shining examples of democratic former-Soviet reformers at a time when democracy was in retreat in Russia, and perhaps also losing foothold in other Soviet successor states. Further, since the process of democratisation in the former-Soviet Union was firmly associated with the West, the new regimes in Georgia and Ukraine almost immediately became labelled as pro-Western.

In these circumstances, it proved almost impossible for the EU and the US not to support both Tbilisi and Kiev in their new pivot to the West. Furthermore, the economic and fiscal weakness of both countries helped further open the door for voluminous foreign aid as well as external finance from international donors in order to help prop up the new governments of Presidents Mikhail Saakashvili in Tbilisi and Victor Yushchenko in Kiev respectively. The dependency relationship which both the Saakashvili and Yushchenko governments allowed to develop with the Western-led international donor community left them with little room to manoeuvre apart from continuing with their reform agendas.

In the case of Georgia, the reforms introduced by Saakashvili appeared to improve governance in the country, with many of the political and economic indicators improving according to international ratings agencies. Ukraine, on the other hand, appeared to produce fewer positive results – much of the foreign assistance coming into the country was either mismanaged or squandered, and led to multiple reshuffles within government. Nevertheless, continued aid packages and flows of donor money to Georgia and Ukraine deepened their pro-Western political orientation and set the seeds for much deeper geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West in the former-Soviet space for years to come.

Eventually, this state of affairs would elicit a Russian response, particularly in Georgia. It came following the Bucharest Summit of NATO in April 2008, where the prospects for Georgia's future membership of the alliance appeared to be put on the table. Russia's response was in fact a geopolitical power play – a full-scale military invasion of the country intended to

rattle the Saakashvili government to the core and to block any prospect of Georgia's future NATO membership. Moscow already held the view that both the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine were 'encouraged' – if not directly instigated – by the West, since Euro-Atlantic public diplomacy openly endorsed both movements. Additionally, the accession of the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – to NATO in 2004 was not an easy pill for Moscow to swallow.<sup>5</sup> 'Losing Georgia' (and possibly later on Ukraine) to NATO appeared to be a red line that Moscow was not prepared to compromise.

The Russian military onslaught against Georgia in August 2008 – which Moscow waged in the name of protection of ethnic minorities in the Russian Federation's Caucasian republic of North Ossetia – ended after mediation by the president of France of the time, Nikola Sarkozy. While Russia's war against Georgia did not lead to the immediate collapse of Saakashvili's government, the Georgian president eventually lost power in the country to a new regime which pivoted Tbilisi back towards improved political ties with Moscow.

Nevertheless, Georgian society became highly polarised, with much of the country remaining pro-Western in orientation and resentful of Russia's omnipresent geopolitical-military shadow, which continued to loom large over the small South Caucasian country following the August 2008 war. The West continued to court Georgia with multiple instruments of development aid and external finance from international donors. Yet the new and successive Georgian governments, which were financially backed by the pro-Russian billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili, exercised caution in not repeating the brand of geopolitical pivoting which was rather brazenly adopted by Tbilisi during the Saakashvili years.

---

<sup>5</sup> The accession and assumption of full membership of NATO of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was duly accompanied by that of Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, making the 2004 enlargement the biggest in the history of the alliance. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary had already joined NATO in 1999. All of these countries were either members of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact or constituent republics of the Soviet Union barely a decade earlier.



## External Actors Making Life Unbearable for Soviet Successor Countries

If Russia's ultimate aim in Georgia was to (first) put an end to any discussion of Georgia's membership of NATO and also (second) to see the end of Mikhail Saakashvili, then it can probably be argued that Moscow succeeded. However, neither the war, nor the departure from power of Saakashvili resulted in the end of geopolitical pivoting in the former-Soviet space. To the contrary, rivalry and competition between Russia and the West in the former-Soviet Union – as well as in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America – would only intensify following Moscow's military operation against Georgia in 2008.

We have already commented in detail as to how post-Soviet Russia has evolved from what can be referred to as a 'compliant power' (1992–2008) to a 'revisionist power' (2008–2023) in an earlier essay in this series for the Austrian Defence Academy.<sup>6</sup> Spurred on by differing positions towards Arab regimes during the upheavals of the Arab Spring (particularly in Syria), relations with Iran and China, as well as multiple tensions over the EU-Russia energy (particularly gas) trade, Russia and the West increasingly failed to see eye-to-eye. The West, for its part, often viewed Moscow's non-alignment on multiple geostrategic issues in antagonistic terms: Moscow's non-compliance with the West's position against Syrian leader, Bashir al-Assad, for example, was seen as an action countering the interests of the US and the major powers of the EU.

This led to tense diplomatic relations between Moscow and the West, resulting in Russia seeking to further assert its dominance in those parts of the world where it could do so, with its most natural spheres of influence being in the former-Soviet Union. Thus, any structural movement in the external policies of the former-Soviet states towards European (political, economic or military) integration *de facto* became viewed in Moscow as policy measures contrary to the Russian national interest – or a form of geopolitical pivoting

---

<sup>6</sup> "The Likeliest Scenarios for 'Tomorrow's Russia'" in Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Ed), *Discussing a South Caucasus short of Russian dominance*, Study Group Information, 25<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group 'Regional Stability in the South Caucasus', 17/2023, Vienna, Austrian Defence Academy, November 2023.

towards the West. Moscow increasingly tightened the screws in the former-Soviet Union and sought to maintain its geopolitical leverage where possible, both in the near and far-abroad.

It largely monopolized for itself the peace-process between Armenia and Azerbaijan through the tri-partite OSCE Minsk Group format, whilst maintaining its military footprint in other frozen, separatist conflicts in Soviet successor states such as Moldova and Georgia. It also kept close tabs on Central Asia – the spring 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan initially led to substantial chaos and instability in the small mountainous country rather than a pro-Western orientation. The request placed by the government of Kyrgyzstan to Washington for the removal of US military presence from the Manas airbase in 2014 was portrayed in Moscow as a Russian geopolitical victory in Central Asia.

It should also be mentioned that Russia's business corporations – in energy, raw materials and multiple other areas of the economy – had firmly established themselves in other Soviet successor states during Russia's reconsolidation in the former-Soviet Union (discussed above). Moscow's oligarchs and giant parastatal corporations – most of whom likely benefited from substantial links to the Kremlin – held little interest in losing market share to foreign competition in these newly emerging countries.

Many of the Russian oligarchs and business leaders were themselves *Rossiyan*, or 'greater-Russians' from non-ethnic Russian titular nations of the former-Soviet Union, with substantial ties in the Soviet successor states where their businesses operated. This further assisted in connecting Russia with these countries and ensuring the Russian interest within them. Post-Soviet Eurasia, whilst now comprised of sovereign states as opposed to Soviet Socialist Republics, firmly remained a highly integrated *Russophile*-dominated economic space – where business deals cut through the borders of the newly emerged sovereign states like a sharp knife through butter.

Yet the lure of Europe continued to loom large in the region, particularly in Western Eurasia (Ukraine and the South Caucasus). In countries like Ukraine, it was driven by multiple factors. These included continued state failure and widespread corruption under the regime of President Victor Yanukovich, who made a comeback in the polls to win Ukraine's presidential

elections in 2010, despite being widely seen as Moscow's preferred candidate. They also included Brussels' Eastward expansion through exportation of European integration to EU neighbourhood countries through multiple policy tools and technical assistance instruments under the European Neighbourhood Programs. Much of this policy of exporting European integration instruments to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood was driven politically by some of the bloc's newest member countries, particularly Poland and the three Baltic nations, whose primary objective of promoting such policies was to settle old scores with Russia backlogged from Soviet times.

In November 2013, a new, major crisis erupted in Ukraine following Yanukovich's reluctance to sign a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. Much has already been said about Ukraine's (effectively) second post-Soviet revolution which led to the overthrow of the Yanukovich regime in February 2014 and embroiled Ukraine, Russia and the West into a conflict over Ukraine's sovereignty in the Crimea and the Donbass. The reasons why Yanukovich abstained from signing the DCFTA with Brussels may be obvious enough to some (that he was instructed not to sign the agreement by Moscow), but debatable for others (that Moscow offered Ukraine a much better financial and investment deal in return for not signing, whilst it should also be noted that Armenia and Belarus also abstained from signing the DCFTA).

What is important to mention, however, is that the sheer magnitude of the protest movement which toppled Yanukovich, and its overwhelmingly pro-EU orientation resulted in European and Euro-Atlantic integration becoming perhaps the most sensitive political topic in the post-Soviet space since the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Ukraine's ensuing *Euromaidan* revolution led to even greater political turbulence than was seen during the Orange Revolution a decade earlier. *Euromaidan* precipitated overt civil war in the country in the early spring of 2014 and led to the first Russian military intervention on the territory of a post-Soviet neighbour since its invasion of Georgia in August 2008. As most of the post-Soviet successor states ominously looked on at the turmoil taking place in Ukraine, European integration became a topic almost too sensitive for the countries of the region to even consider discussing openly. Geopolitical pivoting had by now made political life almost unbearable for Soviet successor states.

## **Georgia's Pivot from West to East and Ensuing Polarisation**

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in the former-Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries created an expectation that East-West antagonism, rivalry and the bloc mentality which divided Europe for over four decades would come to an end. It was expected that democracies and market economies would emerge, ushering in a new era of trade, investment and globalisation for the benefit of all. The entire Soviet bloc, including Russia, would succumb to the lure of Europe, it was thought. This has, for the most part, not happened. Whilst a high degree of economic integration and some political goodwill existed between Russia and the West during the years that Moscow played its part in the post-Cold War European system of international relations as the 'compliant power', all of this has since evaporated. Initially Georgia, and later Ukraine, increasingly became the straws that broke the camel's back when it came to relations between Russia and the West following the end of the Cold War.

A good three decades since the Soviet collapse, geopolitical pivoting has become a major, if not dominant foreign-security policy feature in the former-Soviet space, particularly in regions such as the South Caucasus, where multiple external actors compete for power and influence. Whereas in Central Asia, the Soviet successor states have walked a tight rope in advocating a non-aligned foreign policy whilst publicly championing economic cooperation, geopolitical pivoting continues to dominate external relations in the South Caucasus.

Georgia, which pivoted to the West under Saakashvili some two decades ago, has now reoriented itself towards Moscow. Successive Georgian governments supported by pro-Moscow oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili, have continued to keep both the EU and NATO at a distance, whilst gradually restoring and strengthening ties with Moscow. Georgian Prime Ministers have made public statements to the effect that 'Georgia will never again go to war with Russia'.

Indeed, at the time of writing, rumours circulating on some Russian language Telegram (social media) channels suggested that Georgia would join the (Russia-driven) Eurasian Economic Union – which would be a major political coup for Moscow in its current standoff with the West over Ukraine and

in the former-Soviet Union more broadly. Russia would, in exchange, allow for the return of Abkhazia to Georgia, which Tbilisi considers to be part of its sovereign territory. Abkhazia broke away from Georgia following the collapse of the Soviet Union, further to a short, separatist war fought by Sukhumi against Tbilisi, where the former was backed by Moscow. Georgia has been unable to restore its sovereignty over the breakaway region since that time and Moscow's support for Sukhumi has continued to this day. Furthermore, Georgia's largest electricity generation plant – the Inguri Hydroelectric Power Station – is also located in Abkhazia. Its return to Tbilisi's fold would be another carrot and part of the deal between Georgia and Russia.

At the same time, Georgia's steady pivot towards Russia has been accompanied by similar tumultuous street protests to those seen during the Rose Revolution, which led to the overthrow of Edward Shevardnadze. The Georgian Parliament's recent adoption of a new law requiring full transparency of (foreign) funding for NGOs has led to widespread political demonstrations in the country during 2024. The Georgian opposition and civil society groups have dubbed the new legal requirement as 'the Russian law', since it is based on similar statutes to those introduced in Moscow, which require NGOs to reveal their foreign backers. The Georgian government has justified the law by arguing that it protects the country's sovereignty against intrusive meddling by foreign agents and helps protect Georgian culture from the West's 'exportation of its degeneracy agenda such as the LGBT movement'. Brussels responded to the passing of the law by largely putting on hold Georgia's EU integration track. Brussels had earlier granted Georgia the status of an 'EU candidate country' in December 2023, opening the pathway for Tbilisi's eventual EU membership.

Georgian society remains highly polarised over the implementation of the law, however. Much of the country's fast growing, younger population has become highly Westernised during the last generation and sees Europe and the US – rather than Russia – as the benchmark for the future they want to build. Substantial distrust of Russia as an external actor in the South Caucasus still remains amongst large segments of the Georgian population and many Georgians would like to see the EU, the US and NATO bolster their presence on Georgian territory as a deterrent to Moscow. Such polarisation in Georgian society has not prevented Georgia from expanding economically, and the country is now far more developed than it was a generation

ago. But the country remains largely poor, dependant on foreign aid and its future is no less uncertain today than it was during the 1990s.

### **Armenia, Azerbaijan and the New Lines of Division in the South Caucasus**

In contrast to Georgia, Armenia has gone in the other direction. Yerevan was a loyal ally of Moscow for much of the post-Cold War period. It was part of the Eurasian Economic Union, a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and like Ukraine under Yanukovich, resisted Brussels' temptations in signing the DCFTA with the EU in late 2013. Russian military bases were largely welcome on Armenian territory and Yerevan looked at Moscow as a core pillar of its security, which helped to keep the pro-Armenian *status quo* over the largely frozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

This entire configuration started to change substantially following yet another set of sweeping street protests which led to the downfall of the regime of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and the arrival of the populist leader, Nikol Pashinyan, who became Prime Minister of Armenia in 2018. The equation shifted further, more radically, following Armenia's defeat by Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War in the autumn of 2020, and further still after the Armenian loss of Stepanakert (*Kbankendi* in Azerbaijani), the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, in September 2023.

The decisive operation by the highly superior military forces of Azerbaijan in disarming Armenian rejectionists of Azeri rule in Karabakh in the early Autumn of last year led to the final dissolution of the Karabakh-Armenian statelet which was established shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The crisis also caused an exodus of Armenian refugees fleeing the region for the Armenian mother country. The images of the fleeing of some 100,000 Armenians – the second large scale refugee crisis to inflict the former-Soviet Union in less than two years – resulted in stern reprimand of the Baku leadership in Europe and North America. Russian peacekeepers, who were present in the area, appeared to do little to prevent hostilities during the highly uneven conflict between the Azerbaijani military and the remaining Armenian armed groups in Karabakh, who were no longer backed by the Armenian army. Russia, whose credibility as a peace keeping

force separating Armenian and Azeri combatants had already eroded after the Second Karabakh War, had by now suffered a total loss of face in Yerevan.

After the fall of Stepanakert and the exodus of the remaining Armenians of Karabakh, Armenia pivoted to the West in a manner not seen previously since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian military bases have been packing up their operations on Armenian territory and there is now talk of Yerevan leaving the CSTO. In wake of the Russian loss of face in Yerevan, as well as the emerging military vacuum, France has come to Armenia's aid, reportedly arming the country and engaging in talks of defence agreements.

While Brussels has attempted to provide a platform for hosting peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the Second Karabakh War, it has more recently accorded substantive attention to Armenia in its diplomatic engagements. Such posturing culminated in Pashinyan being endorsed in Brussels and Washington almost at the same level as Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelenski following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Indeed, in April 2024, the Armenian Prime Minister was received in Brussels jointly by the President of the European Commission and the Secretary of State of the United States.

Although Pashinyan's visit to Brussels may have been an effort to provide political support for his dwindling popularity within Armenia (the Armenian Prime Minister had been facing regular protests over his efforts on a peace agreement with Azerbaijan), it was not seen in the most positive light in Baku. Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, referred to Pashinyan as being received in a manner unprecedented for any leader of a post-Soviet state and warned that the West is creating new lines of division in the South Caucasus. Other high-level representatives of the Azerbaijani state accused the EU of waging a 'Cold War' against their country.

Such remarks may have been targeted just as much at Paris, as they were at Brussels, since relations between Azerbaijan and France have plummeted to an all-time low after France started to provide weapons to Armenia in the second half of 2023. France and Azerbaijan have engaged in *tit-for-tat* expulsions of each other's diplomats on reciprocal espionage charges, while Paris has accused Baku of aggravating anti-Paris riots in the French Pacific Ocean

territory of New Caledonia. A war of words has been raging between Baku and Brussels in light of the above: there is currently little love lost between the European Parliament and Azerbaijan on the one hand, and the EU's outgoing top diplomat, Josep Borrel, and President Aliyev on the other.

Azerbaijan, it should be said, has been very careful in presenting itself as a neutral actor when it comes to tensions between Russia and the West, be it over Ukraine or other points of discontent. Baku – like the Central Asian states across the Caspian – has done its utmost to abstain from the game of geopolitical pivoting and to avoid the 'it's either us or them' mentality. Although Baku (like the Central Asians) has not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has provided Kiev with humanitarian aid and has also responded to the EU's requests for additional support in the area of natural gas supplies following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

However, following the long convoys of Armenian refugees fleeing Karabakh in the Autumn of 2023, both European and American leaders have increasingly pointed the finger at Aliyev as the aggressor – although not withstanding that his military conducted the operation within restored Azerbaijani sovereign territory against armed groups which Baku considered to be illegally formed. Aliyev, for his part, was not impressed by Borrel's thinly veiled reference to Azerbaijan when he stated that 'Europe is a garden while the rest is but a jungle'.

Despite Azerbaijan's efforts to maintain a non-aligned foreign policy, Baku is now being placed increasingly into the Russian camp by Western experts and political figures, even though it has resisted temptation to pivot geopolitically either East or West. But with Georgia's current rough patch with the EU and consolidation with Russia, Baku's scolding in Paris, Brussels and Washington over its handling of the remaining Karabakh Armenians, and Pashinyan's 'Zelenski-style' welcome received within the Euro-Atlantic camp, Azerbaijan's president may well be right when he warned recently of new dividing lines emerging in the South Caucasus.

### **Small Countries Should Not Have to Make Hard Choices**

Small countries often have to make hard choices when it comes to their national development, particularly those categories of small countries which



find themselves in complex external environments, where the interests of larger powers and external actors collide. The international relations environment which has prevailed in the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union – the inexorable expansion of the West on the one hand and the inability of Russia to ‘let go’ on the other – has substantially complicated the efforts of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to secure and consolidate upon their independent, sovereign statehoods. The prevailing level of tension and confrontation between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community of states which has steadily accumulated to levels unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, has neither allowed for the integration of (some) of these countries with Europe, nor integration with themselves as a region – either politically or economically.

All three South Caucasus countries remain highly integrated with Russia economically and it does not seem likely that this economic interdependence will subside in the foreseeable future. This has both positive and negative implications for their future economic development prospects. All three countries have in their own way developed substantially, although to varying degrees, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, a substantial clouding of geopolitical risk remains omnipresent in the region at the present time. It would be foolhardy to diminish the seriousness of the current situation, the likelihood of the reigniting of conflicts or to disregard the impact that the prevailing wider tensions between Russia and the West can have on the South Caucasus.

The spiralling of the region into another war, such as the level of conflict which took place between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Autumn of 2020, risks unravelling many of the economic gains made in recent years. New conflict in the South Caucasus would also further undermine business confidence in the region. Only a substantial change in the behaviour of the large powers and external actors in the region will allow Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to consolidate on their sovereignty and secure their future as strong, independent nation states in a dynamic, integrated, prosperous and peaceful South Caucasus region. Small countries should not have to make hard choices.

## Conclusions

*Frederic Labarre*

The rapid pace of geopolitical change in the South Caucasus – especially between the time that this workshop took place and the editing of this Study Group Information booklet – prevents us from making definitive claims about the need for a EU strategy. Recent events, such as the statement made by Bidzina Ivanishvili regarding the future path of Georgia away from Western destinies, and, likewise, statements made by Nikol Pashinyan about Armenia’s eventual exit from the CSTO, or Azerbaijan’s alleged support of separatism in the far-away French territory of New Caledonia, only reinforce the need for policy-makers to consider the South Caucasus as the next “battle-ground” between the Euro-Atlantic world, and the so-called “Russian”/“Greater Eurasian” world. Alongside these two competing world views, another is emerging; that of the Turkic world, which could affect geopolitics as far as Central Asia. On these counts alone, the need for the EU to secure its medium and long-term strategic involvement and restore its influence in the South Caucasus region would appear unfulfilled.

Nevertheless, there is broad convergence regarding economic, energy and infrastructural interests between Türkiye and the EU. They also share the need for regional stability in the South Caucasus. Does this mean that the EU has an incremental strategy already at work in the region? Or can Türkiye be left to her own devices and act as an honest broker on behalf (or in support of) the EU? Such an eventuality can be surmised from the analysis provided by Dr. Narli. A common Turkish-EU policy vector would hypothetically create one of two contradictory eventualities. On the first hand, such a commonality of views has not yet been clearly indicated. If such a symbiosis did exist, one would have expected to see much stronger pressure applied on Russia regarding the war in Ukraine, for example. On the other hand, our contributors note the consolidation of Turkic unity in the region, perhaps the likes of which can offer its own counterweight to the Russian world which is trying to emerge.

The potential shift of Georgia's geopolitical orientation, demonstrated by the Georgian Dream's insistence on passing a "foreign agents" law against the will of significant parts of the Georgian society, and the firm demands of Georgia's Western partners shows that there is elite support for looking for ways to live with Russia. The EU's strategic calculations have been complicated further by Armenia's own shift away from that world. In June 2024, Nikol Pashinyan has declared his intention of having Armenia quit the CSTO, which would mean the final expulsion of Russian forces from Armenia. The pressure on Mr. Pashinyan is not only elite-borne, but also originates from a disgruntled society. At a moment when Russian troops have also completed their withdrawal from Karabakh, much ahead of schedule, Russia has manifested interest in establishing a seaport in Ochamchire (Abkhaz territory of Georgia). This development should be puzzling to the EU's strategic interests if such a project should ever come to pass.<sup>1</sup> The EU's ability to compose a comprehensive strategy for the South Caucasus is limited *inter alia* by the fluid nature of combat between Russia and Ukraine, by the supercharged atmosphere within Georgian society, by the activism of the Armenian diaspora, and the quasi-independence, backed by Türkiye, of a self-confident Azerbaijan.

Faced with such dilemmas, the EU is naturally tempted to resort to her own attractiveness as a motivator of reforms in the region. The decision in December 2023 to offer Georgia candidate status aligns with such an outlook, but it threatens to act against the benefit of Georgia. As Shalva Dzebisashvili underscores, it is pointless to make promises the fulfillment of which will be distant in time. This is because the gap between the statement of that promise and its realization is a window of opportunity for spoilers. Far from putting Georgia out of Russia's reach, Georgia's candidate status puts her in Russia's crosshairs – witness Mr. Ivanishvili's statement of April 2024.

---

<sup>1</sup> The strategic implications of the possible establishment of a naval presence on what is ostensibly the Georgian coast have not been discussed in great detail during the workshop. However, it bears reminding that such a move could be aimed at protecting the remaining assets of the Russian Black Sea fleet by lodging them in a geographic area which Ukraine recognizes as being under legal Georgian sovereignty. Therefore, any strike against Russian assets in Ochamchire would run the risk of widening the war to Georgia. Russia may think that posting the Russian fleet in Ochamchire may increase its security relevance in the region at a time when China looks posed to building and manage the Anaklia deep-sea port nearby.

The twin tragedies of August 2008 for Georgia, and of the Spring of 2014 for Ukraine are a testament to the imprudence of believing that a mere unofficial invitation to join a security organization will deter contrarian hegemonies. On the contrary, it will act as a prompt for coercive action which the EU and NATO have no counterweight for – the EU for want of collective armed forces able to reliably respond in concert, and NATO for want of an effective pre-emptive doctrine of action in favour of non-members. It is therefore not surprising to see the Kremlin attempt to exert its influence on Georgia – the EU simply cannot keep it at bay while it tries to motivate Georgian political and administrative reform in preparation for eventual enlargement. Without continued support from the West, Georgia may therefore soon find herself faced with its own February 24<sup>th</sup> scenario. In that respect, EU policy should be clear. A close look at the policy recommendations which originated from this workshop would seem a good place to start.

More and more, a new world is congealing before our eyes into three possible camps. The first is the established democracies, whose polarized polities show disquieting signs of normative exhaustion. The second concerns “stabilocracies” – those countries prone to personal liberty just as long as their regimes are left with a free hand to do what they want, and thus maintain a pliable polity, unlikely to revolt. The third is represented by countries whose destinies fall outside the Euro-Atlantic and Russian worlds, and whose relative powers make them quasi-independent. Iran is an example of that phenomenon. The necessity to maintain a connection with Russia has made her more risk-prone than ever. This has been sufficiently underlined by contributors to this SGI booklet. One therefore wonders whether this type of connectivity (which may act as a support to the Russian inroads in Oshchamchire) should not be offset by an alternative Euro-Atlantic-friendly, or at least South Caucasus exclusive connectivity.

The advantages of regional inter-connectivity continue to face significant challenges. There remains a pervasive and enduring mistrust of Azerbaijan on the part of Armenia. This mistrust puts extra pressure on the development of EU strategy because much of the EU’s clout originates in French power. And nowhere else in Europe is the influence of the Armenia diaspora more evident. Azerbaijan’s support of Neo-Caledonian separatists has been designed as a clear signal to France to focus on more proximate EU interests in the South Caucasus. Even without the French drive, the EU needs to

source its energy imports from reliable sources. Azerbaijan's non-alignment enables it to resell Russian gas to other markets – including the EU. This gives the impression of a policy that is at best discrete and incremental, or at worst, ambivalent towards the South Caucasus and the Greater Black Sea.

One should also draw the nuance between strategy formulation and strategy execution. The former, elaborated by the External Action Service, finds expression in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which is regularly updated. In general, one cannot find fault with such a policy, because it remains very general, and, as such, acceptable to all members. It is the latter which may betray a lack of unity and resolve, and, in consequence, the lack of means to enforce policy. The means and manner of executing policy can be grounds for disagreement or rent-seeking by EU members. The question therefore becomes not whether or not the EU needs a strategy, but under which conditions can any strategy be reliably implemented. The EU may be a force for peace, but her influence will remain rhetorical as long as she denies herself the tools to demonstrate her resolve to conclude that peace, and realize her promises. So far, regional stability seems to be establishing itself in a manner outside the EU's will and control, and there is no guarantee that the resulting structure will satisfy her interests, or benefit South Caucasus inhabitants.

We find ourselves underlining once again the need for a *sui generis* strategic construct, one that gives the South Caucasus a concerted (and not disjointed) voice in its own region. At present, the creation of a South Caucasus strategic persona seems ever farther from reach, and instead, the region seems to be slipping into what Daria Isachenko calls “orbit thinking.” Can intra-regional connectivity work as a counter-weight to extra-regional connectivity? Can such a feeling of inter-connectedness and inter-communication be fostered in spite of the increase of Russo-Iranian-Chinese influence? Now would seem to be the time to redouble our efforts at establishing grounds for mutual understanding to develop such connections. What kinds of connections are we talking about? In view of the rapidly evolving strategic situation, and seeing that sufficient positive changes have taken place (witness the emerging agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan on border demarcation and delimitation), we may reconsider energy and infrastructural connectivity. This would include, naturally, the links within countries as well, such as in Georgia. Links need not be material only; one

must consider the human factor as well. Cultural and demographic connectivity need to be considered in the current climate of informational pollution. Clearly, the onus must be put on people-to-people communication as the basis of an integrated South Caucasus, before any other integration takes place (at least to prevent the sort of integration that would be detrimental to EU interests). Taking the narrow view – the human level – may in time offer a wider perspective as to what the South Caucasus can become. This is what we promise for the future of the region in workshops to come.

## **PART V: Policy Recommendations**

## Policy Recommendations

### *Regional Stability in South Caucasus Study Group*

#### Executive Summary of Recommendations

- **EU:** The EU should strive to align bilateral actions of member states to the overall EU actions, so as not to threaten credibility.
- **Western countries:** Binary logic should be avoided, and the regional countries should not be confronted with an “either-or” choice when it comes to foreign policy decisions.
- **Armenia, Azerbaijan (government and whole of society):** Support implementing cross-border projects to build confidence among populations. Governments should enable projects (diplomatic and legal provisions) while civil society actors should run the projects.

#### Situation Analysis

With Georgia being an official EU candidate since December 2023, Armenia voicing an interest in deeper integration with the EU and Azerbaijan being open for pragmatic relations short of further EU enlargement in the South Caucasus, future policy decisions taken in Brussels inimitably will not only manifest their effects in bilateral relations with the three South Caucasus republics but in the region. Moreover, facing grave doubts concerning U.S. normative leadership and the impact of its possible erosion on South Caucasus security, the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group explored whether the European Union needed to fill this gap in order to contain Russia in the region. The latter risk is especially potent when one considers the political polarization witnessed in the region, especially in Georgia.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, the academic literature establishes that the EU is an indispensable actor in the South Caucasus, however its

---

<sup>1</sup> This topic has been covered in the 26<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop, held in Reichenau, Austria, in November 2023.



security input in the region remains limited to soft initiatives. Such activities, worthy as they are, are deemed insufficient by our experts to forestall Russia's aggressive inroads.

It is true that, Russia has withdrawn its soldiers affected to the peacekeeping mission in Karabakh on an accelerated timetable. Moreover, the joint Russian-Turkish Monitoring Centre has been dissolved too. This withdrawal could be seen in the context of Russia's severe manpower and equipment shortages suffered in Ukraine, yet most probably Moscow was adapting to the shifting geopolitical realities in the South Caucasus since Azerbaijan's restoration of its territorial integrity last fall. After all, Russian influence in Abkhazia has increased resulting in the redeployment of several ground and naval assets on the shores of the Black Sea, thereby strengthening its illegal presence in Georgia. Türkiye, in contrast, remains the most important strategic ally of Azerbaijan, allowing Baku to follow its multivector foreign policy. This begs the question as to whether the EU should not undertake a strategic review to address upcoming challenges in the South Caucasus.

This 27<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop in Chişinău, Moldova, sought to evaluate the EU's role in the South Caucasus integrative processes and its traditional soft power approach to the region. However, the findings present an external image from the region as no EU representatives could join the workshop. The discussions entertained cast a bright light on the risks associated with failed promises of enlargement, and on the dangers lurking for South Caucasus countries wishing stronger integration with Euro-Atlantic structures during the enlargement transition period.

The workshop participants have been welcomed by Stanislav Secieru, the defence and national security advisor to the President of Moldova. In his keynote address, he outlined how the war in neighbouring Ukraine strengthened ties between Moldova and the South Caucasus states, while straining the country's scarce security capabilities and economic infrastructure. He explained why Russian potential military advances towards Odessa and Tiraspol were perceived as existential threats for Moldova, and how they were striving to counter Russian full-scale hybrid warfare and to strengthen relevant institutions, policies, and capabilities.

## EU Goals in the South Caucasus Region

Any discussion of a strategic role must start with questions of identity; what is the EU “strategically”? What aspirations does it have? How does the EU see the South Caucasus in relation to the preceding questions? From an outside perspective it seems that the EU has not fully considered these questions since the setting up of the External Action Service (EEAS) in 2011. As a result, the identity of the EU as a strategic actor remains dubious; is it a mediator or a *sui generis* geopolitical power broker? It cannot be both. Ambivalence about its role has been the result of “orbit” thinking, relinquishing the South Caucasus as a region in Russia’s sphere of influence. The EU, unable to be the exact antithesis of the Russian Federation, has failed to acknowledge that making sense of the region requires thinking trilaterally; the Armenia-Azerbaijan-Georgia triad is met by the Iran-Russia-Türkiye triad, and the EU bilateralism has had only a limited relevance in the region.

It is not surprising therefore that conflict management has been the new vector of engagement for the EU in the region. The Brussels format for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process was supposed to be the most potent input in response to Russia’s attempt at disqualifying alternative powers from the region. However, it has been largely muted over the last months. Certain countries’ policies actually helped Russia in this endeavour. For instance, French and American reluctance in engaging with Azerbaijan plays in Russia’s hands. Yet, should there be greater engagement, an effective conflict management format could be a “middle road” based on EU-South Caucasus energy interdependence. The EU’s energy policy, at the very least could consider this overtone constructively, in the context of perduring Russian sanctions.

Meanwhile, Russia may be actively seeking to establish new Cold War conditions which would give the strategic environment a semblance of recognizable stability. The Eurasian Economic Union is an indicator of this ambition. The EU should consider such complexes as fundamental to the task of establishing its own objectives and identifying impediments to its own ambitions. While it is common knowledge, that Russia perceives the EU as NATO’s extended arm into the South Caucasus, Brussels has to find a way to mitigate not just Moscow’s concerns but also Baku’s perceptions of EU enlargement and of the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) as potentially curtailing its own security.

## **Reconciling European and Regional Integration**

The increasing multipolarity of the strategic environment underscores the shifting geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus and its growing links with the Middle East, which complicates the EU computations about what it should and can do in the South Caucasus; dubious election campaigns, the increasing prospects of multi-pronged wars and the U.S.-China rivalry threaten to distract attention and accentuate the intervention/integration dilemma of the EU. Currently, the most pressing needs of the EU in the South Caucasus region seem to be: containing Russia, preserving its involvement, and enhancing its influence, while simultaneously improving regional trade, as well as energy and connectivity cooperation.

In theory, the integration of adherent countries is mutually beneficial because it achieves a number of normative and geopolitical goals that are natural to the EU's *raison-d'être* and which correspond to the adherent countries' objectives. EU integration without a transition period is too much to hope for, but a shortened transition period would increase regional stability by sustaining the credibility of the collective West. Indeed, the techno-bureaucratic approach to integration is no longer viable under current circumstances. On the NATO side, the Membership Action Plan acts as a general political tool which offers little in the sense of security guarantees and provides an opportunity to Russia to poison the wells. As a result, a security hinge to the process of enlargement must be included – without which the smooth sectoral alignment will remain out of reach. Enlargement of the EU (and NATO) is no longer just a normative project; it should be seen as a geopolitical move designed to also maintain the Euro-Atlantic powers' predominance and contain Russia. Yet this should not mean to value stabilocracy over democracy, as it fuels the Balkanese fatigue: an enlargement process stuck in the limbo between proto-authoritarian governance and performative acts of reform. Hence, a geopolitical EU aiming to shape relations in the South Caucasus has to be able to use its economic leverages to enforce its norms.

## **The EU's Evolving Policies and Tools: Perceptions and Expectations from the Eastern Neighbourhood**

The EU excels at soft power solutions. The Eastern Partnership is one of those solutions which can be voluntarily – and productively – leveraged by individual states in the region. But until the EU develops a coherent policy which goes beyond the Eastern Partnership, it falls upon the countries in the region to propose solutions that spell regional integration – such as the Middle Corridor – to link the South Caucasus together and connect Europe with the Caspian Sea region.

The Eastern Partnership had been designed to foster a choice between the civilisationist “East” and the EU short of full integration. There is a sentiment circulating that this platform has outlived its usefulness or has not fulfilled its promises. To some, the Eastern Partnership is dead, overtaken by geopolitical and historical realities.

Ideally, the Eastern Partnership and like platforms should not only foster reform, but sustain the credibility of the collective West's commitment to an effective rules-based order which was established in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, managing expectations regarding the prospects of EU enlargement and being realistic about promoting EU values in the Eastern Neighbourhood are critical to maintaining the potential for a larger European role in the South Caucasus.

Others thought that regional economic integration is the main goal South Caucasus states should aim to. After all, if European integration is not deemed as a panacea for all the challenges facing those countries, each regional state may choose to follow its own path towards becoming more stable, more developed, and more secure. However, a critical question remains without a concrete response so far: how to move regional states towards peace?

## **South Caucasus Developing on its Terms**

However, our talks have revealed particular complexes at work in the South Caucasus which give grounds to hopeful developments, and others which are cause for worry. In the first instance, the mainstream discussion has shown that regional integration in the South Caucasus is possible. Each

country has different political and economic interests, strategies, and policies, and harmonizing varying models of economic integration in the region is paramount. Many participants shared views hinting that there should not necessarily be a choice for the regional countries between European and Eurasian integration. Instead, they should build their regional integration in ways which would be compatible with both, while allowing each of them to choose freely their levels of engagement and priorities on cooperation and integration with the EU and the EAEU, respectively.

In the second instance, things are less rosy. Contributors have linked the rise of illiberalism in their own countries (and the need to countenance Russia's aggressive interests) to the absence of security during the lengthy transition period from adherent to member country (of the EU or NATO). As we have alluded to above, this provides an opportunity for Russia to pressure and split societies in the midst of painful transformations. An important factor to keep in mind is that without potent security guarantees while transforming, political parties may have to compromise and yield to Moscow's pressure. Therefore, the solidity of reforms in South Caucasus countries depends directly on political parties' ability to be relieved from that pressure. In turn, this relief can only be guaranteed from the significance of Western security support in country.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **EU General Policies towards the South Caucasus and its Countries**

- ***EU:*** The EU should strive to align bilateral actions of member states to the overall EU actions, so as not to threaten credibility. Moreover, Brussels should assess how it sees the South Caucasus region – as an extension of integrated Europe (via the Black Sea paradigm) or as a potential backyard of Russia, Turkey and Iran.
- ***EU and member states:*** Improve strategic communications towards the region to reduce the impression of being biased. Establish educational programmes for civil servants and experts from the region to foster understanding of EU mechanisms and its limitations.

- ***Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia (governments):*** Refrain from mistaking norms-based critique with the wish to side in geopolitical conflicts.
- ***Armenian/Azerbaijan governments:*** Refrain from exploiting perceived EU ambivalence, EU missions (like the EUMA), and member state's actions in their strategic communications on EU's impartiality.

### **EU Enlargement and Integration**

- ***Western countries:*** Binary logic should be avoided, and the regional countries should not be confronted with an “either-or” choice when it comes to foreign policy decisions.
- ***EU:*** Develop country-specific security components to cover for the lengthy EU/NATO enlargement transition period. This would discourage Russia from turning the South Caucasus into a new Ukraine.
- ***EU:*** A military component should accompany the process of integration. This may take the form of a permanent (or at least rotative) EU military mission to support security and defence reforms, military training, and such missions.
- ***NATO:*** Open door policy must include measures that discourage hostile actors from shutting that door, spoiling peace processes, or integration ambitions.

### **Armenian-Azerbaijani Peace Process**

- ***EU:*** The EU should consider representatives from neutral countries respectively distant to the South Caucasus member states for leadership roles in the mediation process.
- ***EU:*** The EU should step up humanitarian assistance and could help to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the South Caucasus starting at community level.

- ***EU:*** The EU could offer to support the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments in defusing potential territorial claims in their respective legislature.
- ***EU and member states:*** Increase humanitarian assistance to the conflict affected populations in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Elaborate flagship projects for confidence building on the border.
- ***EU and member states:*** Deploy a demining mission to Azerbaijan not only to improve relations between the EU and Azerbaijan, but to demonstrate good will after a decade of diplomatic neglect.
- ***Armenia, Azerbaijan (governments):*** The Armenian and Azerbaijan governments should avoid the expectation of reaching a comprehensive agreement on all issues before signing a peace treaty. This “all-or-nothing” approach risks prolonging the negotiation process and exacerbating tensions and instability in the region.
- ***Azerbaijan (government and/or whole of society):*** The Azerbaijan government and/or the whole of society could engage with EUMA on an informal basis as long as an official acceptance of the mission in Armenia is not a possibility (e.g. briefings for Azerbaijani experts and officials by Head of Mission in Tbilisi/neutral grounds).
- ***Armenia, Azerbaijan (government and whole of society):*** Support implementing cross-border projects to build confidence among populations. Governments should enable projects (diplomatic and legal provisions) while civil society actors should run the projects.
- ***PfP Consortium stakeholders, EU:*** Increase PfP-like platforms in numbers and activities; increase the number of PfP-C workshops.

## List of Abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
AK Party	Justice and Development Party
APVs	Armored personnel vehicles
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
COP	Conference of the Parties
CPC	Country of particular concern
CRRC	Caucasus Research Resource Center
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSFP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ECT	Energy Charter Treaty
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EP/EaP	Eastern Partnership
EU	European Union
EU BGs	EU Battlegroups
EUMA	European Union Mission in Armenia
EUMCAP	European Union Monitoring Capacity
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission
FM	Foreign minister
FPC	Foreign Policy Concept
FSB	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation
IEF	Initial Entry Force
INOGATE	Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe
IRFA	International Religious Freedom Act
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KGB	Committee for State Security
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MP	Member(s) of Parliament



MUM	Muslim Unity Movement
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NK	Nagorno Karabakh
NRF	NATO Response Force
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OTS	Organization of Turkic States
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
PCAs	Partnership and Cooperation Agreements
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RDC	Rapid Deployment Capacity
RIAC	Russian International Affairs Council
SC	South Caucasus
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SGC	Southern Gas Corridor
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SOCAR	State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TTTR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
TR	Turkiye
TRACECA	Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transportation Corridor
UAV	Unmanned aerial vehicles
UN	United Nations
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
U.S./US/USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic
VRMO-DNPR	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
WWII	World War II

## **List of Authors and Editors**

Stephan H. ASTOURIAN, American University of Armenia, Yerevan

Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

Shalva DZEBISASHVILI, University of Georgia, Tbilisi

Stephanie FENKART, International Institute for Peace, Vienna

Vasif HUSEYNOV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku

Daria ISACHENKO, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Elena MARZAC, Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives, Chişinău

Nilüfer NARLI, Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul

George Vlad NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Fuad SHAHBAZOV, Independent Regional Security and Defence Expert, Baku

Yeghia TASHJIAN, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs – American University of Beirut

Marat TERTEROV, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

With Georgia being an official EU candidate since December 2023, Armenia voicing its interest in deepening relations with the EU and Azerbaijan being open for pragmatic relations short of further EU enlargement in the South Caucasus, future policy decisions taken in Brussels will not only manifest their effects in bilateral relations with the three South Caucasus republics but in the region as a whole. The contributions in this volume evaluate the EU's role in the South Caucasus integrative processes and its traditional soft power approach, with an additional closer look at other external actors active in the region.

**ISBN: 978-3-903359-97-0**



27<sup>th</sup> Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group  
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”