

New Security Arrangements for the South Caucasus?

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)

Study Group Information



UNSER HEER



Study Group Information

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)

New Security Arrangements for the South Caucasus?

**26th Workshop of the PFP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

9/2024

Vienna, June 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

June 2024

ISBN 978-3-903359-94-9

Printing:

ReproZ W 24-3397
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Wien

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	5
Abstract.....	7
Introduction	
<i>Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu</i>	9
PART I: Political Polarization and Its Dangers: Retaking the Initiative	13
Political Polarisation and Its Dangers for Established and Aspiring Democracies	
<i>Armen Grigoryan</i>	15
Time for Peace in the South Caucasus: Prospects and Challenges	
<i>Razi Nurullayev</i>	25
Exploring the Dynamics of Political Polarization and Healing Divisions	
<i>Niliifer Narh</i>	37
PART II: Building an Integrated South Caucasus:	
A Merger of Alternative Peace Plans?	65
The Future of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations after the Military Takeover of Nagorno Karabakh by Azerbaijan	
<i>Benyamin Poghosyan</i>	67
Euroregion “South Caucasus”	
<i>Andrzej Klimczyk</i>	81
PART III: External Factors of New Security Arrangements in the South Caucasus.....	87
Geopolitical Dilemma of the South Caucasus: Keeping Russia Down, the West In, Iran Out	
<i>Vasif Huseynov</i>	89

How External Factors are Complicating the “Gordian Knot” of the South Caucasus? <i>Yeghia Tashjian</i>	107
External Factors Related to the New Security Environment in the South Caucasus <i>Nika Chitadze</i>	125
New Security Arrangements in the South Caucasus <i>Henry Wathen</i>	137
Epilogue <i>Frederic Labarre</i>	143
PART V: Policy Recommendations.....	149
Policy Recommendations <i>Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group</i>	151
List of Abbreviations.....	159
List of Authors and Editors	161

Acknowledgments

This booklet, reflecting the proceedings of the 26th workshop of the Regional Stability in South Caucasus Study Group held in Reichenau/Rax, Austria from 16 to 19 November 2023, 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 steadfast input and 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 LTC Olaf Garlich, deputy director of the Operational Staff at the PfP Consortium in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, along with Mr 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 26th workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) entitled “New Security Arrangements for the South Caucasus?” held in Reichenau/Rax, Austria from 16 to 19 November 2023. The papers collected herein deal with three main topics; political polarization, the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty and the external influences on the South Caucasus. These topics are deemed to be important factors in the creation of a sense of community for the South Caucasus, a sense of community which could devolve into a self-made security arrangement that would make the whole region resilient to the depredations of hostile hegemony like Russia or Iran. It concludes with actionable recommendations extracted from the interactive discussions moderated by the co-chairs.

Introduction

Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu

February 2024

For the 26th Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) workshop, the co-chairs sought to further address a host of problems with potential consequences far beyond this region, like, for example, the denouement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and its possible implications for the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the implications of the Russian war in Ukraine on the general and particular security of the South Caucasus, and beyond, to the Greater Black Sea have been also reflected in the discussions. A host of problems with consequences far beyond this region have emerged due to Russia's continuing war. One of those problems has been the safety of maritime trade in the Black Sea. The first implication of the insecurity there pertains to the "grain deal" (a Russian agreement with the UN and Türkiye which had allowed Ukraine to export its grain by sea despite a wartime blockade, a deal seen as essential to keeping global food prices stable) which has been terminated by Russia since July 18, 2023, and allegations of the Russian Navy intercepting cargo ships. This action, which has no backing from the international community, is tantamount to piracy. In addition, Russia continues targeting grain depots on Ukrainian territory, with the occasional stray missile/drone exploding on NATO members' territory.

The risks of territorial expansion and further escalation of war remain palpable. That would be very dangerous as Europe, America and Russia might get bogged down into renewed nuclear confrontation, if not in all-out war. Talk of negotiations, let aside peace, have lately become nearly taboo in spite of human, infrastructure, and material losses mounting up on both sides. The impact of war on the trade of foodstuffs and energy is felt beyond, as well, by feeding inflation, socio-economic unrest, and political polarization far beyond the territories of the belligerents, including in the South Caucasus. As the trade links between the South Caucasus and Europe do not solely rely on shipping, the current insecure status of the Black Sea has socio-economic and political consequences. Georgia, for example, has become an exclusive

“tourist” destination to Russian visitors, which exacerbates the tensions within society regarding the country’s political destiny. With that in mind, are Georgia’s aspirations and efforts to belong to the Euro-Atlantic community still relevant and feasible in the post-war context? Meanwhile, more than three years after the Russian-mediated ceasefire of the 44-Day War, Armenia and Azerbaijan have not yet been successful in attaining peace. A peace agreement has still to be concluded, either due to lack of willingness on either side or due to the fact that unresolved disputes are so deep that do not allow for any compromises through mediation. Unsuccessful diplomatic efforts threaten to shatter the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

Since its relaunch in 2012, one of the aims of this Study Group has been to foster the notion of an *integrated strategic persona* for the South Caucasus, enabling it to emerge as a regional actor in its own right, promoting its interests constructively as a group of countries. So far, the unresolved conflicts have been the main hinder to regional integration. From this perspective, the most important strategic variable which has indeed changed over the last several years has been the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh. This conflict acted as a brake to regional integration, as it had also done the still unresolved conflict between Georgia and its breakaway regions supported by Moscow. While Baku and Yerevan would get closer to peace as they concluded a peace agreement, the conflict in Georgia might still remain open, though not necessarily violent for the foreseeable future.

Given an apparent long-expected change of the regional dynamics in favour of peace this seems an appropriate time to enable the South Caucasus to reshape the diplomatic and political tools to maintain its links with, and relevance to, the West. In that context, panellists have been invited to present their views on several issues, such as: What form of conflict resolution can be expected between Armenia and Azerbaijan? Could there be a regional solution created to move on from conflict to peace? How could such a solution affect the competitive interests and strategic goals of regional powers like Russia, Türkiye, and Iran? Would a merger of existing peace plans be feasible? How could the three South Caucasus states best deal with the Russia-West confrontation over Ukraine and the ensuing regional strategic competition? Would better geopolitical coordination among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia be feasible, and could it work like an incentive or a hinder to rebuilding a new, functional framework for stability and security in the South

Caucasus? Is there a choice to be made between an exclusive or an inclusive regional context? Meaning should the South Caucasus become a region closed to certain external powers, such as the EU and the US, or should it be open to every global and regional power who could make a significant contribution to the security and prosperity of regional countries? How would a possible expansion of the Israel-Hamas conflict impact on the peace processes in the South Caucasus? Would it strengthen or weaken them? Furthermore, if the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict escalated yet again, as some well-known South Caucasus experts feared, how would it impact on the possible endgames of the war in Ukraine?

If Azerbaijan and Armenia were to conclude a definitive peace treaty to put their 35 years old conflict to rest, Russia would not solely determine the security of the whole South Caucasus. Iran would lose its stake as well. Furthermore, although Armenia continues to rely on Russia for security guarantees, the outcomes of the 44-Day War question the level of trust and the longevity of this relation. Neither should the Western regional influence be taken for granted, as new players, like China, Iran, and India are quietly challenging the post-Cold War regional order in the South Caucasus. Insecurity and different security aims heighten political polarization, that is not specific to the South Caucasus region as it expands into the Euro-Atlantic community, as a result of the war in Ukraine that seems to last much longer than initially expected. The RSSC SG should investigate which agents are refractory to a peace deal in both Azerbaijan and in Armenia. What is foremost in the co-chairs' minds is that the acuteness of the problems caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine has relegated the South Caucasus on the backburner, while the urgency for the region to sort out its dilemmas is ever greater.

As we approach yet another round of elections in the US and the EU, as well as in Ukraine and Russia, political polarization has affected the prospects of victory for Ukraine, which depends on the vast American military industrial complex, the European military, financial and economic support, and Ukraine's commitment to resist Russia, and recover the lost territories, including Crimea and the Donbas. The consequences would be dire for the existing security architecture; it would confirm NATO's inability to defend its values and support its Partners when there is a threat to them, and it would not only severely weaken the principles of state sovereignty and territorial

integrity but also the international legal regime that supports them. This would have dire consequences for the independence and territorial integrity of the South Caucasus and the non-NATO Black Sea countries.

There is still hope that the South Caucasus states could overcome the hurdles on their way to peace, stemming from the positioning of the key actors against the ongoing negotiation processes, as well as from the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West, and the Turkish manoeuvring around it. However, the possible escalation of the Israeli-Hamas war in Gaza is likely to impact on geopolitical and strategic calculations and on the overall balance of power in the South Caucasus. It remains to be seen if the effects of war in the Middle East would strengthen or weaken the ongoing peace processes. Rational geopolitical thinking should favour the former, but one could not underestimate the latter.

This Study Group Information booklet details the proceedings of the RSSC SG attempts to investigate potential “middle ways” away from deep divisions. Strengthening South Caucasus and greater Black Sea security must enhance the region’s relevance vis-à-vis Europe. To prepare for the “post-war” world, however, it looks like the region will be left more and more to its own devices. Some contributions herein indicate that this is what certain countries wish, while others are forever looking for a *deus ex machina* to retrieve if not lost victories, at least a semblance of guaranteed security. One may assume that, the task being so great, several workshops may be needed to be devoted to this theme. One thing is certain; the persona of the South Caucasus cannot be divorced from the broader strategic context of the wider Black Sea area. The South Caucasus must make itself attractive not merely by its strategic location, but by its ability to contribute to the solution of major strategic dilemmas of our time. New security arrangements should therefore be a South Caucasus creation more than the product of outside forces.

For this to happen, however, the South Caucasus must address the challenges posed by increased political polarization (among many other challenges), the lack of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and consider the external pressures brought about by regional powers and the wider implications of the ongoing great powers’ competition to the South Caucasus.

PART I: Political Polarization and Its Dangers: Retaking the Initiative

Political Polarisation and Its Dangers for Established and Aspiring Democracies

Armen Grigoryan

The Risks of Political Polarisation in Western Democracies

In recent years, political polarisation has become the frequent subject of both political debate and scholarly studies. Quite understandably, the United States has been in the focus of both, given its unique global prominence. The possible democratic decline in the U.S. may multiply the potential of global democratic backsliding. Thus, polarisation, manifested by events such as the 6 January 2021 insurrection, or the potentially far-reaching impact on future elections may understandably cause strong anxiety in a number of established and aspiring democracies.

Different studies have demonstrated that social media exacerbate political polarisation, even though they may not be the root cause.¹ Authors of one such study argue that

social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have played an influential role in political discourse, intensifying political sectarianism. ... a recent field experiment offers intriguing evidence that Americans who deactivate their Facebook account become less politically polarized.²

Other authors note:

We focus on both observational and experimental evidence of online behavior. Although social media is unlikely to be the main driver of polarization, we posit that it is often a key facilitator. ... One large field study randomly assigned Americans to deactivate their Facebook account (or not) for 4 weeks prior to the 2018 US election. Deactivating Facebook reduced issue (i.e., policy preferences) polarization and marginally reduced affective (i.e., feelings about the other party) polarization.³

¹ See Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu, eds. *Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape*. Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2022.

² Eli J. Finkel, Christopher A. Bail, Mina Cikara, Peter H. Ditto, Shanto Iyengar and others, "Political sectarianism in America," *Science* Vol. 370 Issue 6516, 2020, 534.

³ Jay J. Van Bavel, Steve Rathje, Elizabeth Harris, Claire Robertson and Anni Sternisko, "How social media shapes polarization," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* Vol. 25 Issue 11, 2021, 913.

Also, as noted before,

social media, with a business model based on creating bubbles of “friends” and “followers”, buttressed by big data algorithms, have been multiplying the negative effects by supplying people with selected information which they would probably like, thereby strengthening confirmation bias and polarisation. The ongoing expansion of social media and other digital platforms contributes to increasing levels of political polarisation, and has apparently stimulated the growth of both right- and left-wing populism.⁴

It has also been noted that “the United States is the only advanced Western democracy to have faced such intense polarization for such an extended period”.⁵ Some of the polarisation effects on American politics, such as the divisions across different political and social groups, which may possibly reverberate internationally, deserve special attention:

At the elite level, deep political divides in Washington have crippled efforts at legislative compromise, eroded institutional and behavioral norms, and incentivized politicians to pursue their aims outside of gridlocked institutions, including through the courts. Yet these divides extend far beyond the corridors of power, as polarization at the mass level is pushing Americans across the country to divide themselves into distinct and mutually exclusive political camps. The rise of an “us versus them” mindset and political identity in American sociopolitical life is evident in everything from the rise of highly partisan media to the decline in Americans’ willingness to marry someone from the opposing political party.⁶

Whereas right radicalism has attracted a lot of attention, and far-right extremism has been officially named among the greatest domestic security threats facing the U.S., left radicalism articulated by means such as historical revisionism (reviewing the role of the Founding Fathers, tearing down statues, “cancellation” campaigns, etc.), pressure towards adoption of ideologized school curricula and other manifestations of “culture war”, mob violence presented as legitimate protest if happening for a “progressive” cause (e.g., alleged protection of one of the Left’s favourite minorities), censorship disguised as “speech codes”, “trigger warnings” and other “progressive”

⁴ Armen Grigoryan, “Countering information irresponsibility” in *Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape*, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu, eds. (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2022), 167–168.

⁵ Jennifer McCoy and Benjamin Press, “What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized?”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18 January 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190>.

⁶ Ibid.

Newspeak, other attempts to limit civil liberties, and so forth, became sort of acceptable mainstream, being adopted by most of the “legacy” media, large segment of the academia, and other elites. As noted before,

self-declared “progressives” (essentially, the radical left) have also been attempting to impose control on media content and the general public discourse, advancing a dogmatic approach tantamount to a weaponisation of culture. *Groupthink* including demands to exclude information and opinions which could offend some audiences, “speech codes” and other contemporary practices constitute a threat for the freedom of speech developed over centuries, since the age of Enlightenment.⁷

It may be argued that the two-party system could be supposed to be particularly prone to polarisation, so the situation has deteriorated in a downward spiral, as polarisation led to the spread of more radical views, leading to deeper polarisation, and so on. It remains to be seen how the American establishment will manage the situation. With both parties not yet being fully taken over by the radicals, but essentially taken hostage (in the sense that in case of alienating their illiberal factions they risk losing in a landslide, unless the other party is split as well), it seems that for the moment prevention of further polarisation is an extremely complicated task.

Meanwhile, it has already turned out that a deep divide within the same party could be not such a distant possibility. The Biden administration’s unconditional support of Israel’s military operation in Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the Hamas’ raid on 7 October 2023 has apparently disappointed a significant faction of the left wing of the Democratic Party to such an extent that their abstaining from the November 2024 elections cannot be excluded, and the election outcome may be affected by a split within the party constituency.

Meanwhile, some radical policies may eventually backfire. It would still be premature to claim that the political right has also fully adopted “cancel culture”, but a highly divisive issue such as Israel’s military operation in Gaza Strip was perhaps a good occasion for attempting that, as the U.S. Congress voted on 7 November 2023 to censure Rep. Rashida Tlaib for “promoting

⁷ Armen Grigoryan, “Countering information irresponsibility” in *Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape*, Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu, eds. (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2022), 172–173.

false narratives” about the situation in Gaza Strip.⁸ Ironically, that made some of those normally keen on speech control to remember that the 1st Amendment, guaranteeing the freedom of speech, is of utmost importance. It is rather worrisome that *groupthink* would produce such an understanding result only from a punitive action against one of their own.

In such a context, the future developments regarding the European security architecture and other global issues depending on a consistent U.S. foreign policy may, in turn, have become dependent on the U.S. administration’s capability to deal with dangerous radicalism *within* its Democratic constituency, or, as the former chairman of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, co-founder of the Centre for Liberal Modernity Ralf Fücks aptly put it, with “the illiberal temptations of the post-modernist left”.⁹ And while in the immediate future the dividing line may be the attitude towards Israel, in the longer term, left radicalism, involving an abundance of “culture war” issues, has to be dealt with. It is also already rather obvious that the radical left’s attitude towards Israel is a part of its selective blindness which makes them fight Western colonialism – a story long bygone – raucously while not having anything against conquests and colonial endeavours of non-Western powers – making such “progressives” into “useful idiots” and “fellow travellers” for modern autocrats such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (for the sake of fairness, the author also wants to underscore that, along with self-declared “progressives”, some self-declared conservatives who claim to defend “national interests” or “national sovereignty” also make excellent “fellow travellers”, pandering to the same foreign autocrats).

Some Related Aspects

While extreme polarisation might seem to be a less pressing issue in West European multi-party systems, the rise of both left-wing and right-wing rad-

⁸ H. Res. 845 Censuring Representative Rashida Tlaib for promoting false narratives regarding the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and for calling for the destruction of the state of Israel: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/845?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22censure%22%7D&s=2&r=18>.

⁹ Keynote speech at the Dialogue for Future conference on “Building resilient civil societies and defending democracies in the EU and its Eastern neighbourhood,” Berlin, 29 November 2022.

ical, anti-establishment parties at the expense of traditional parties' constituencies somehow resembles the radicalisation of, respectively, the left wing of the Democratic Party and the right wing of the Republican Party in the U.S., even though the immediate outcomes may not be that visible yet, as multi-party systems with a tradition of political dialogue and compromise between mainstream actors allow for coalitions such as the coalition between the Social Democrats, Free Democrats and Greens in Germany.

At the same time, the tendency to demonise political opponents or even foreign dignitaries, based on ideological preferences has been apparent at the international level as well. In a recent example, John O'Brennan, professor of European Politics at the Department of Sociology at Maynooth University, Ireland, rather trivially labelled the president-elect of Argentina, Javier Milei, a "dictator" already on the day of the latter's inauguration.¹⁰

Yet, while polarisation is by and large a negative phenomenon, it is still, in a sense, a feature of life in liberal democratic societies, or non-democratic countries where, at least, a significant segment of the population may afford dissent (Iran is one such example). Polarisation is hardly possible in outright totalitarian dictatorships having their opponents in jails and shutting down virtually any possibility of expressing dissenting opinions. Totalitarian regimes in the making may force dissenters into emigration, or so-called "internal emigration" in cases where open dissent is punishable but the living standards remain high enough to serve as an excuse for not emigrating while keeping one's mouth shut. Russia may currently be seen as an example of the latter, where the divide between those who have preserved the opportunity to express their opinion by means of emigration and their relatives and acquaintances in Russia is often across the ideological lines in support or against the aggressive war against Ukraine.

¹⁰ John O'Brennan's X account, 10 December 2023, <https://twitter.com/JohnOBrennan2/status/1733799388873457852>.

Polarisation in Armenia: Caused by Different Factors, Supposing Different Solutions

As regards aspiring democracies, besides the domestic political context, the level of exposure to foreign influence matters. While established democracies have also experienced hostile propaganda, psychological operations, attempts to interfere in elections and other “hybrid” hostile actions, for weaker states such actions pose an existential threat, as the democratic order or even state sovereignty as such can be at stake, because the state and society are less resilient and sometimes all the more vulnerable because of the previous traumatic national experience.

In the Armenian case, political polarisation can be observed since the early stages of independence. Disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories started being a part of the Armenian political discourse long before the Internet became available. The top propaganda topic, successfully exploited by extreme nationalists and eventually leading to a “soft coup” in 1998, was the “selling of Karabakh” where propaganda labelled any suggestions about solving the conflict on the basis of a compromise as “defeatism”. Another, perhaps even more absurd propaganda narrative was based on the conspiracy theory claiming that the shortage of electricity in 1992–1995 had been created by the government deliberately.¹¹

It is hardly a coincidence that the “selling of Karabakh” narrative is again one of the principal topics of the current propaganda campaign against Nikol Pashinyan’s government, led by the Russian as well as by local media, non-governmental organisations and other structures disseminating Russian narratives which also mostly coincide with the rhetoric of the parliamentary opposition groups connected with two former presidents, Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan. Another recurrent propaganda narrative is the notion of the “perfidious West” allegedly trying to corrupt national “traditional” and “spiritual” values and to promote apostasy of traditional religious beliefs, i.e. the teaching of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and sexual perversions.

¹¹ Armen Grigoryan, “The origins and use of some propaganda techniques and conspiracy theories”, Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs paper series, March 2020, <http://www.lragir.am/en/2020/03/11/74292>.

In the aftermath of the 44-day war in 2020, and particularly ahead of the snap parliamentary elections in June 2021, polarising rhetoric intertwined with media manipulations, disinformation, hate speech and *ad hominem* attacks intensified, as the opposition sought to take advantage of the recent psychological trauma experienced by the population. While the numerous opposition-controlled media claimed that state officials responsible for the military defeat were; “traitors” not fit to conduct negotiations, that a coup or was inevitable, or that civil unrest would follow, closer to the election day the opposition leaders themselves entered the campaign, sometimes using hate speech targeting prime minister Nikol Pashinyan’s voters, and hurling expletives on Pashinyan, as would be typical for adherents of the criminal subculture.¹² In turn, Pashinyan and his associates also adopted harsh rhetoric and used some personal epithets such as “human traffickers” against the opposition leaders, though avoiding hate speech.¹³

Another important feature of the opposition’s rhetoric ahead of the elections was the false dilemma “security vs democracy”, i.e., the notion that democracy is contradictory to Armenia’s security interests. Such rhetoric, based on the demand to keep the alliance with Russia as the exclusive security framework and to surrender some elements of state sovereignty, while abstaining from development of ties with the West, has been persistent. More recently, this kind of propaganda has mostly focused on attempts to discredit the Western mediation efforts, the EU Mission in Armenia, the government’s careful attempts to diversify its foreign policy, as well as pressuring the government into opening of the so-called “Zangezur corridor” under Russian control.¹⁴ That political direction may perhaps be best epitomised by Robert Kocharyan’s suggestion that joining the union state with Russia would be a possible solution for having influence in the region.¹⁵

¹² Edgar Vardanyan, “Hate speech, militant and offensive rhetoric in the pre-election period” in *Snap parliamentary elections 2021: Analysis of the parties’ programmes and rhetoric*, Armen Grigoryan and Zohrak Hovhannisyan, eds. (Yerevan: Centre for Policy Studies, 2021), 78, 92–93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78, 91.

¹⁴ Emma Gabrielyan, “Security-related concepts constructed on false narratives: Security or democracy”, *Aravot*, 12 December 2023.

¹⁵ Gevorg Tosunyan, “One of the solutions for having influence is joining the union state”, *Civilnet*, 17 February 2022, <https://www.civilnet.am/news/650356/գործոն-դառնալու-լուծումներից-մեկը-կարող-է-լինել-միութենական-պետություն-ձևավորումը-քոչարյան/>.

Some Immediate Needs

It may be summarised that there is a significant difference between the causes and the mode of polarisation: in Armenia, unlike the Western countries, there is no ideological cleavage between the right and the left. The dispute is mainly between proponents of ever closer attachment to Russia and gradual detachment accompanied by diversification of international cooperation frameworks. Accordingly, the latter model of development is the target of hostile propaganda and psychological operations polarising society.

On 24 October 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia summoned the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, Sergey Kopyrkin, and handed a note of protest, stating that a television programme broadcast by the Russian First TV channel on 23 October “included offensive and absolutely unacceptable statements addressed to high-ranking officials of the Republic of Armenia”.¹⁶ The mentioned TV programme, along with invectives against Pashinyan because of Armenia’s allegedly “anti-Russian” foreign policy, also portrayed Pashinyan, several other government officials and some civil society activists as “George Soros’ puppets”.¹⁷ Few weeks later, in December, the National Commission on Television and Radio suspended the licence of the local broadcaster of Sputnik Armenia for 30 days and issued a fine for offensive remarks and encouragement of illegal acts by Russian political commentator Tigran Keosayan.¹⁸

The growing necessity to deal with Russian propaganda – an issue Armenian officials can hardly pretend not to notice anymore – reminds that a rather preposterous legal arrangement allows for a loophole in order to keep the Russian TV channels on air. Article 44 of the Law on Audiovisual Media

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, “The Ambassador of the Russian Federation was summoned to the MFA of the Republic Armenia”, 24 October 2023, https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2023/10/24/Arm_Rus_Amb/12296.

¹⁷ “Nikol Pashinyan: The Harbinger of Doom”, 1TV.ru, 23 October 2023, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/kukly-naslednika-tutti/vypuski/nikol-pashinyan-predvestnik-bedy-kukly-na-slednika-tutti-vypusk-ot-23-10-2023>.

¹⁸ “Armenia suspends licence of Russian broadcaster Sputnik”, Euractiv.com, 21 December 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/armenia/news/armenia-suspends-licence-of-russian-broadcaster-sputnik/>.

adopted in July 2020, which regulates television and radio broadcasting, provides that only Armenian media companies may get slots in the public multiplex, unless an international agreement is concluded before the law comes into force; meanwhile, by a transitional provision, the exclusion of foreign broadcasters came into force on 1 January 2021. As the law was being discussed, then deputy speaker of the parliament, Alen Simonyan, asserted that including foreign-language TV channels in the public multiplex would be “nonsensical” and, at the same time, mentioned that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was negotiating the possibility to keep broadcasting Russian channels.¹⁹ The head of the National Commission on Television and Radio, Tigran Hakobyan, noted that no other country allowed politics-oriented foreign broadcasters on the public multiplex, but licences could still be issued based on international agreements.²⁰ In any case, as an intergovernmental agreement allowing Russian channels’ broadcasting was signed in late 2020, it confirmed the understandable doubts that the transitional provision had only been adopted only to favour Russian broadcasters.

Aside from the evident possibility to stop broadcasting Russian TV channels in the public multiplex, more drastic measures could particularly take into account Moldova’s experience.

While TV stations in Moldova were banned from broadcasting news and analysis programmes from Russia since 2022, more recently over 50 websites were blocked for “online content used in the war of information against the Republic of Moldova”, and the licences of six domestic TV channels have been suspended.²¹ Regarding the latter, as already mentioned in previously published policy recommendations,²² Armenian regulatory authorities

¹⁹ “Alen Simonyan: It is nonsense that the multiplex includes foreign language channels, yet the ministry of foreign affairs is negotiating having Russian channels”, Tert.am, 30 June 2020, <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2020/06/30/Alen-simonyan/3332501>.

²⁰ Narine Ghalechyan, “In no other country does the public multiplex include foreign TV channels mainly focusing on politics”, RFE/RL Armenian Service, 29 July 2020, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30755516.html>.

²¹ “Moldova blocks access to Russia’s main news agencies”, Reuters, 30 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-blocks-access-russias-main-news-agencies-2023-10-30/>.

²² Armen Grigoryan, “Sustainability of the EU-Armenia cooperation: Disinformation resilience component”, Open Society Foundations-Armenia policy fellowship paper, 2022,

should also study the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of NIT S.R.L. v. the Republic of Moldova, where the Court found no violation of the right to freedom of expression and information in a case concerning the revocation of broadcasting licence of a television station with non-transparent funding, which used to promote hate speech,²³ in order to mitigate the risks posed by Armenian broadcast media with non-transparent funding.

Reducing social polarisation would require actions to decrease the influence of hostile propaganda and psychological operations. While improvement of cybersecurity and digital skills, development of strategic communication skills, media literacy, fact checking activities, other measures of building democratic resilience are important, the need for legal amendments and executive action cannot be overestimated.

<https://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ՀՀ-ԵՄ-համագործակցության-շարունակականություն.-տեղեկատվական-անվտանգության-բաղադրիչը.pdf>

²³ Case of NIT S.R.L. v. the Republic of Moldova (Application no. 28470/12), 5 April 2022, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-216872>.

Time for Peace in the South Caucasus: Prospects and Challenges

Razi Nurullayev

Introduction

According to experts,¹ the peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia has never been this close. Azerbaijan has fully restored its territorial integrity, which was in fact the main obstacle down the road to peace. The Armenian side, at least declaratively, does not express any territorial claims to Azerbaijan. Recently both countries released a joint statement expressing “their intention to normalize relations and to reach the peace treaty on the basis of respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.”²

Is it the perfect time for peace? Maybe, but there are still obstacles down the road, although not so obvious. These obstacles can be overcome, but not without strong will and commitment from external actors. The only question is whether these actors will show this will and commitment.

Situation on the Ground

Current Dynamics in the Region

Azerbaijan and Armenia are currently engaged in talks regarding a peace agreement. The draft of the future document is currently being discussed between the two countries. At the end of November 2023 Armenian Foreign Ministry announced³ that Yerevan submitted a sixth proposal to Azerbaijan

¹ Eugene Chausovsky. Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace might finally be on the Table. *Foreign Policy*, 3 November 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/03/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-nagorno-karabakh-economic-connectivity/>.

² Armenia, Azerbaijan agree to exchange POWs, take steps on normalising ties. France24, 7 December 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20231207-armenia-azerbaijan-to-exchange-pows-take-steps-on-normalising-ties>.

³ Burc Eruygur. Azerbaijan calls on Armenia to avoid ‘Unnecessary Delays’ in Peace Talks. Anadolu Agency, 21 November 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/azerbaijan-calls-on-armenia-to-avoid-unnecessary-delays-in-peace-talks/3060518>.

for a peace agreement. At the beginning of December, the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and the Office of the Prime Minister released a joint statement expressing the two countries' intention to normalize relations and reach a peace treaty based on respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴

The document also announced an agreement on the exchange of 32 detained Armenian military servicemen for 2 Azerbaijani servicemen, "driven by the values of humanism and as a gesture of goodwill."

The joint statement of Baku and Yerevan was welcomed by the U.S. State Department, the President of the European Council Charles Michel, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

Prior to the statement's release, there was intense diplomatic discourse between the US and Azerbaijan. This tension appeared to be alleviated following a phone conversation between US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Subsequently, James C. O'Brien, the Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, made a visit to Baku. Following the visit the US Department of State declared:

Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James C. O'Brien had a positive and constructive meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during his visit to Baku on December 6. The two discussed our countries' deep historical ties and the importance of the bilateral relationship. Assistant Secretary O'Brien told President Aliyev the United States would welcome the upcoming visits of the Azerbaijani Central Bank Governor and Energy Minister to Washington, and that Secretary Blinken looks forward to hosting Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan in Washington soon for the next round of peace negotiations.⁵

And recently Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan spoke about the possibility of signing a peace treaty with Azerbaijan by the

⁴ Nargiz Mammadi. Azerbaijan, Armenia Forge Historic Rapprochement with Joint Statement. Caspian News, 9 December 2023. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-armenia-forge-historic-rapprochement-with-joint-statement-2023-12-9-0/>.

⁵ Office of the Spokesperson. Assistant Secretary O'Brien's Meetings in Baku. Media Note, 7 December 2023. <https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-obriens-meetings-in-baku/>.

end of 2023 “thanks to the launch of a bilateral dialogue and a high degree of agreement on the key document”.⁶

Despite positive recent dynamics it is still challenging to predict the specifics of the upcoming negotiations right now. The outcome will likely depend on the West’s sustained efforts in this direction and the unfolding of future geopolitical events.

What Obstacles Lie Ahead?

Although the joint statement lays a solid foundation for a successful peace agreement, numerous obstacles still lie ahead. These challenges pertain not only to the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but also to wider geopolitical issues.

While Armenia is slowly attempting to shift its alignment from Russia towards the West, Azerbaijan remains suspicious of the involvement of Western nations in the peace process. Since September, Azerbaijan has been expressing dissatisfaction with France and the U.S., both of whom have served as mediators in the conflict during the 1990s.

It is important to mention that Azerbaijan does not at all oppose the return of ethnic Armenians to Karabakh. On the contrary, Baku states that it is ready to accept Karabakh residents of Armenian origin as its citizens. As Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov has stated:

While taking the counter-terrorism measures Azerbaijan acted in an exemplary manner. No single Armenian resident was forced to leave. On the contrary, Azerbaijan made consistent calls for local Armenians to stay and reintegrate as equal Azerbaijani citizens.

Our Government took subsequent efforts to address the humanitarian and socio-economic needs of local residents, including by declaring a comprehensive plan for their future reintegration on the basis of Azerbaijani citizenship, which is exclusively an internal matter of Azerbaijan.

⁶ Yerevan Ready to Sign Peace Treaty with Baku until 2024. *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 10 December 2023. <https://en.vestikavkaza.ru/news/Yerevan-ready-to-sign-peace-treaty-with-Baku-until-2024.html>. [Note from the editors: this is not the same Armen Grigoryan as in this booklet. Also, the word “until 2024” is more likely than not a mistranslation from Russian the correct translation would read “in 2024”].

Such an approach by Azerbaijan is in stark contrast to Armenia's continued refusal to redress the violated rights of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis it has forcefully expelled from its territory.⁷

How can Armenians return if this will happen? Azerbaijan is unlikely to accept an international guarantee for their return. Again, this scepticism stems from Baku's lack of complete trust in Western countries, stemming from a historical track record that demonstrates a perceived lack of objectivity in handling Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict matters, as previously mentioned.

Armenia, on the other hand, does not recognize Russia as a mediator in its conflict with Azerbaijan. This stance is understandable given that Russia has not consistently demonstrated itself to be a reliable partner in any direction. Throughout the course of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Moscow's behaviour has been perceived as "shifty" or inconsistent.

There have been instances where Russia's actions or statements were interpreted as favouring Armenia's interests. This perceived bias has caused resentment and anger in Azerbaijan, further complicating the already tense situation.

However, the current situation presents a different dynamic: Armenia now has concerns about Russia's neutrality. These concerns are particularly heightened considering Russia's existing military base in Armenia.

Furthermore, Russia's recent statements towards Armenia's existing government have added another layer of complexity to the situation. These statements have been interpreted by some as an indication of Russia's shifting stance, further fuelling Armenia's concerns about Russia's neutrality.

Another major regional player is highly trusted by Azerbaijan as the two countries are strategic allies. However, Ankara is not highly trusted by Armenia.

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan. Statement by Minister Jeyhun Bayramov at the 30th Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council. 30 November – 1 December 2023. <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/speech-osce-30th-meeting-en>.

Considering the aforementioned context, how can the pace of the peace process be accelerated?

One option is the formation of a group composed of representatives from Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian civil society organizations, to monitor the situation and provide updates to the international community. This group could also stimulate civil discourse in domestic politics and generate numerous recommendations to alleviate the situation for both domestic politicians and international stakeholders.

Initiatives from the West might be aimed to bolster this process. Generally, such initiatives could earn Azerbaijan's trust if Baku perceives a sincere intention to support the peace process without favouring any side.

Overcoming Deep-Seated Beliefs and Prejudices

The disagreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia is really old and complex, involving history, culture, and land. This has caused strong feelings and biases in both countries. To solve these deep-seated problems, a long-term plan that encourages both sides to understand each other better, talk more, and make peace is needed.

While culture may not initially appear to be a critical area of focus for conflict resolution practitioners engaged in activities to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, it is nonetheless important to consider. It can provide positive examples of coexistence and demonstrate how Armenians and Azerbaijanis share similarities despite dominant nationalist narratives that suggest otherwise. Acknowledging and respecting cultural differences could be instrumental in promoting peace and resolving conflicts.⁸

What other measures can address deep-seated beliefs and prejudices between people of Azerbaijan and Armenia?

Talking and understanding each other: It is really important to talk and understand each other. Regular meetings, maybe set up by neutral people or international groups, can provide a safe place for open chats. This can help

⁸ Onnik James Krikorian. Opinion: Culture can play a Critical Role in Armenia-Azerbaijan Peacebuilding. *Commonspace.eu*, 21 March 2023. <https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/opinion-culture-can-play-critical-role-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-building>.

everyone see what they have in common, what problems they face, and what they hope for, which can lead to better understanding and empathy.

Learning and sharing cultures: Learning about each other and sharing cultures can help change how we see each other. School programs that focus on being tolerant, appreciating diversity, and understanding each other's cultures and histories can help create a more welcoming story. Things like cultural exchanges, joint school projects, and programs that involve young people can allow direct interaction, which can help get rid of stereotypes and build empathy in the next generation.

Working together on shared goals: Working together on things that both sides care about can help build cooperation. By working together on projects in areas like protecting the environment, growing the economy, or healthcare, both countries can see the real benefits of working together, which can build trust and show that peaceful living together is possible.

Responsible media and information: The media and information play a big role in shaping how/what people think. It is important to encourage responsible news that avoids strengthening stereotypes or stirring up tensions. By focusing on stories of working together, shared history, and times when people from both sides have been friendly to each other, we can fight against dividing stories and build a sense of shared humanity.

Involvement of local communities: Local communities play a big role in efforts from the ground up. Supporting and empowering local groups that are dedicated to building peace, reconciliation, and building connections between communities can have a big impact. These groups often work directly with the communities affected, helping to grow understanding and trust from the ground up.

Support from the international community: The ongoing efforts of the international community to facilitate dialogue and peacebuilding initiatives between Azerbaijan and Armenia are vital. International organizations and diplomatic interventions can provide frameworks for negotiations, offer expertise in conflict resolution, and support confidence-building measures.

Commitment for the long haul: Overcoming deeply held beliefs and prejudices is a slow process that requires ongoing commitment, patience, and resilience from everyone involved. A real commitment to peace and a shared vision for a future based on mutual respect and recognition of each other's rights and aspirations are fundamental to this effort.

To address the deep-seated beliefs and prejudices between Azerbaijan and Armenia, a comprehensive, ongoing, and collaborative effort is needed on many fronts. By talking, promoting learning and cultural exchange, encouraging working together, shaping responsible media stories, empowering local communities, and getting international support, these countries can lay the foundations for a future built on understanding, trust, and peaceful living together.

Economic Cooperation

For centuries, the South Caucasus has served as a vital link in the trade routes that joined the East and West. Despite its small size, this region held immense significance as it lay at the intersection of the Great Silk Road. This ancient trade route was traversed by countless caravans, transporting goods from the East to the West and vice versa. Baku played a pivotal role in the Caucasus region during these times. It functioned as a major hub, facilitating the movement of goods and people across this important trade route.

The strategic location of the South Caucasus, nestled between Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, has made it a hotbed of various political, military, religious, and cultural conflicts. Over the centuries, this region has witnessed the expansionist ambitions of numerous great powers. These powers have vied for control over this region, given its strategic importance and the role it plays in connecting different parts of the world. This has led to a rich and complex history, filled with rivalries and power struggles, that continues to shape the region to this day.

Any merchants crossing the Caspian Sea on their vessels would use the South Caucasus as a hub to deliver their goods further to its final destination. Aside from that, the region is rich with oil and natural resources, which at these times was already considered a valuable resource. According to historians, oil has been produced from open wells around Baku from as early as the

Middle Ages. It was traded both west to Europe and east across the Sea to Asia.

In the contemporary context, it is noteworthy that Azerbaijan and Georgia, two nations in the South Caucasus, have a robust history of collaboration on various energy projects. This includes significant initiatives like the Southern Gas Corridor and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

In 2022, the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Georgia amounted to \$772 million, with exports contributing \$636 million and imports making up the remaining \$136 million.⁹ This collaboration spans across multiple economic sectors, demonstrating the strength of their bilateral ties.

The potential for further strengthening these energy ties exists in the exploration of joint renewable energy projects. In the future, a comprehensive peace agreement with Azerbaijan may also enable Armenian participation.

To elevate their national economies, the South Caucasus republics could benefit from institutional reforms, support for small and medium enterprises (particularly in rural areas), fostering an investment-friendly environment, and adopting best practices from developed nations. New or expanded projects and frameworks introduced by foreign partners are likely to be welcomed by local governments.

As previously mentioned, a crucial step towards the economic integration of the South Caucasus is the formation of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. This should be accompanied by mutual recognition of territorial integrity. Such a significant agreement could act as a catalyst for considerable progress in the region, ultimately leading to economic growth and prosperity.

Just an example: experts suggest that peace could result in savings on military expenditure in Armenia, amounting to up to 2.8% of GDP.¹⁰

⁹ Azerbaijan Georgia's Third Biggest Trade Partner. AzerNews, 21 February 2023. <https://www.azernews.az/business/206584.html>.

¹⁰ Joint Paper by Experts from Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Economic Benefits of Peace in the South Caucasus. *Geneva Centre for Security Policy Strategic Security*, Issue 31, September

While it will take time for these nations to coexist peacefully and develop productive cooperation, concerted efforts in this direction can expedite the journey towards a prosperous future. Subsequently, economic and other relations between Baku and Yerevan can be gradually restored, contributing to the transformation of the South Caucasus into a more developed and safer region.

Learning from the Baltic States

The Baltic nations, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past few decades. Being under Soviet rule for decades – just as the South Caucasus countries, they managed to become thriving members of the European Union and NATO. The journey they have taken towards integration and growth provides valuable lessons and could potentially serve as a roadmap for the South Caucasus region, which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, in their pursuit of integration and stability.

One of the key elements of the Baltic countries' journey towards integration has been their unwavering commitment to democratic ideals and the building of institutions. Following their independence, they prioritized the establishment of transparent governance, the enforcement of the rule of law, and the promotion of democratic principles. This steadfast commitment to the consolidation of democracy laid a robust foundation for economic growth and political stability. Countries in the South Caucasus could emulate this approach by fortifying their democratic institutions, ensuring the enforcement of the rule of law, and fostering accountable governance to bolster their regional integration efforts.

Another crucial aspect of the Baltic nations' success has been their dedication to economic reforms and innovation. They embraced market-oriented policies, attracted foreign investments, and focused on modernizing their economies through technology and education. This progressive approach to economic development resulted in significant growth and enhanced competitiveness. The South Caucasus could adopt a similar strategy by prioritizing

2023. <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/ssa-2023-issue31-the-economic-benefits-of-peace-in-the-south-caucasus>.

economic diversification, investing in technology and education, and cultivating a business-friendly environment to propel integration and prosperity.

The Baltic countries have been proactive in their pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration, which has significantly influenced their regional alignment and improved their security. Being part of the EU and NATO has given them a platform for cooperation, security assurances, and heightened geopolitical significance. South Caucasus nations could reap similar advantages by fortifying their relationships with European institutions, fostering regional collaboration, and striving for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. This would enhance regional stability and security. Of course, this will not be an easy journey, but it is a goal worth striving for.

In addition, the Baltic States' emphasis on cultural exchange, interpersonal contacts, and regional cooperation has fostered closer relationships and mutual understanding among neighbouring countries. Initiatives that encourage cultural dialogue, educational exchanges, and collaborative projects have contributed to building trust and cooperation. These efforts could serve as a model for the South Caucasus in fostering regional harmony and mutual understanding among diverse communities.

To put it simply, the Baltic countries have done an amazing job integrating and developing, and their success story could be a great example for the South Caucasus region. If the South Caucasus nations focus on democratic values, make economic reforms, cooperate regionally, and aim for Euro-Atlantic integration, they could create a roadmap towards stability and prosperity. They could also achieve closer regional integration, just like the Baltic states did on their path to European integration and cooperation.

Conclusion

To summarize, the current state of affairs in the South Caucasus appears to be more hopeful than it was in the recent past. However, this newfound stability is delicate and can be easily disrupted by any reckless action or deliberate provocation. Furthermore, the existing peace process is not without its flaws and is open to revisions. Azerbaijan's goal is to create a situation that benefits all parties involved by ensuring prosperity and development

through various projects. The signing of a peace agreement with Armenia is a crucial step in this direction.

The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan is non-negotiable and cannot be a topic of discussion under any circumstances. As such, the process of opening communications with Armenia can only commence once the delimitation and demarcation process between the two countries is finalized, and a document mutually recognizing territorial integrity is signed.

Azerbaijan's stance on this issue is unambiguous – Baku is prepared to foster cooperation with Armenia, provided that Yerevan acknowledges its territorial integrity. Once this condition is fulfilled, Azerbaijan is willing to participate in any framework or program that will contribute to the economic development of the South Caucasus.

In conclusion, the introduction of fresh perspectives and the participation of new stakeholders could be instrumental in addressing current challenges and answering all questions. However, this is only applicable for actors who respect international law and have a genuine desire to contribute to the development of the South Caucasus. It is crucial to note that these new approaches and players must have a sincere interest in the region's development and must adhere to the principles of international law. Only then can they truly contribute to resolving the current issues and answering the pressing questions that face the South Caucasus today.

Exploring the Dynamics of Political Polarization and Healing Divisions

Niliifer Narlı

Introduction and Background

Political polarization is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that continues to evolve. At the same time, it is worsening; and the intensification of political divisions is causing upheaval in societies worldwide, affecting both emerging democracies and well-established ones.¹ Understanding the numerous underlying factors, patterns, and catalysts of polarization through country-specific analyses is of utmost importance. This paper addresses three major questions. First, exploring the global phenomenon of escalating political polarization in selected countries, what valuable lessons can we glean from the experiences of other nations? Second, what are the similarities in the patterns of polarization across different countries? While the second question aims at understanding the different roots, patterns, and drivers of polarization based on country studies, the third question addresses the following problem: Once societies have become deeply polarized, what can they do to start healing their divisions? Thus, this paper provides a comprehensive examination of the origins, drivers, development, and repercussions of political polarization and its various forms, including ideological and affective types, while also proposing potential remedies, all informed by a thorough review of the existing literature and secondary sources.

This is significant as political polarization creates risks for democracy and for conflict resolution and peace-building because it obscures “the substance of policy arguments, unhinging the implementation of long-standing policies,

¹ “The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider.” *Pew Research Center*, (2017), N. Gidron et al. *Toward a Comparative Research Agenda on Affective Polarization in Mass Publics*. APSA Comparative Newsletter, (2019), and T. Carothers and A. O’Donohue. *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*. (Washington DC: Brookings, 2019).

and increasing the resistance to any change”.² Peril to democracy arises when citizens become deeply divided, leading to the prevalence of an “us versus them” mindset.³ Political polarization is a major challenge to sustaining an open society.

A recent survey⁴ on political polarization that included 32,000 respondents in 28 countries confirmed that this phenomenon is on the rise. Edelman Team studied the measurement and roots of polarization, and the Edelman Team noted that polarization is both a “cause and consequence of distrust,” creating a self-fulfilling cycle. Edelman’s study offered a list of “severely polarized” countries. These included Argentina, Colombia, the United States, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden. The second category of “high political polarization,” or countries classified as “at risk,” included Brazil, South Korea, Mexico, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. As “moderately polarized countries,” Australia, Ireland, Canada, Kenya, Thailand, and Nigeria were listed.⁵

Another study of nine diverse countries with higher levels of political polarization, namely Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, Türkiye, and the United States, highlighted the role of political leaders in dividing societies. That study also revealed the negative impact of polarization on democratization.⁶

Given the destructive impacts of polarization on peacebuilding and on democratic culture and institutions, the present study was undertaken with the aim of investigating several critical drivers of political polarization, including the media landscape, the influence of social media, cultural and identity-related issues, political memory, economic disparities, residential segregations, polarized political parties, leadership dynamics, and prevailing discourses, as

² Y. M. Kim et al. “Ambivalence Reduction and Polarization in the Campaign Information Environment: The Interaction between Individual and Contextual Level Influences.” *Communication Research* 40, (2013), 389.

³ J. T. Jost et al. “Cognitive-Motivational Mechanisms of Political Polarization in Social-Communicative Contexts.” *Nature Review Psychology* 1, Issue 10 (2022).

⁴ (Edelman, 2023) The Edelman Trust Barometer, a New York-based public relations and marketing consultancy firm, explored political polarization globally with this survey.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Carothers and O’Donohue, op. cit.

well as perceptions of imminent threats. Moreover, the consequences of political polarization and its substantial implications for society are explored, such as eroding social cohesion, diminished cooperation and trust within the fabric of society, and the fostering of scepticism towards parties engaged in negotiation processes. Finally, this paper extrapolates valuable insights aimed at bridging divides and fostering peace within the South Caucasus region, where political polarization remains a complex and deeply ingrained problem.

Political Polarization Studies: Trajectory of Studies and Shifting Focus

Research on political polarization examines the growing ideological rifts and divisions within societies, particularly concerning political convictions and allegiances. Scholars from diverse fields, including social science, political science, and various other disciplines, frequently investigate what triggers political polarization, its repercussions, and its potential remedies. An examination of the trajectory of political polarization studies reveals that they began much earlier in the United States compared to Europe. The role of partisan identity in the choices of US voters was discussed by Campbell et al. and by Converse et al. in the 1960s. Bauer documented earlier polarization studies in the United States dating back to the 1980s, the majority of which addressed issues at both the elite/party level (e.g., Poole & Rosenthal, 1984; Stone et al., 1990, Nivola et al., 2007) and the public level (e.g., Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). Other notable examples from this body of literature include the works of Layman and Carsey (2002), Layman et al. (2006), Baldassarri and Gelman (2008), Hetherington (2009), Fischer and Mattson (2009), Hetherington et al. (2016), Lelkes (2016), Böttcher and Gersbach (2020), and Canen et al. (2021). On the other hand, political polarization studies being conducted by European scholars in the 2010s include the works of Adams et al. (2012), Baylis (2012), Down and Wilson (2010), Balčytienė and Juraitė (2015), and Munzert and Bauer (2013).

Examination of the early literature on polarization studies shows that, for an extended period, scholarly examinations of polarization primarily centered on political parties and their systems.⁷ Many definitions of polarization

⁷ R. J. Dalton. "The Quantity and the Quality of Party Systems: Party System Polarization, its Measurement, and its Consequences." *Comparative Political Studies* 41, Issue 7 (2008),

emphasized the ideological gaps between the stances of parties, candidates, or voters along the left-right spectrum. Frequently cited instances in the Latin American context included the polarization observed between Colombia's Liberal Party and Conservative Party, spanning much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the divide between Peronism and Radicalism in Argentina during the latter half of the twentieth century.⁸

Studies of polarization have recently increased in volume and their focus has shifted from political parties toward perceptions of polarization as a societal phenomenon.⁹ In this framework, people's identities and interests align along a singular axis of division, leading to the formation of political groups engaged in a competitive "either-or" relationship that often overshadows their other, typically intersecting, identities.¹⁰ Analytical emphasis has transitioned towards investigating the origins and causes of polarization, examining the roles played by polarizing actors, understanding their strategic and ideological objectives, and studying how the opposition responds to this dynamic and politically charged phenomenon. The role of media in polarization is also receiving more attention.¹¹ Moreover, the second generation of polarization studies, starting in the early 2000s, focused on the importance of political polarization for daily life and identity. Along these lines, Green *et al* argued

R. H. Pildes. "Why the Center does not Hold: The Causes of Hyperpolarized Democracy in America." *California Law Review* 99 (2011), and Z. Enyedi. "Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization: The Role of Party Politics in De-democratization." *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, Issue 4 (2016).

⁸ C. Abel. *Conservative Party in Colombia, 1930–1953*. Doctoral Diss. University of Oxford, (1974), J. A. Peeler. *Latin-American Democracies: Colombia, Costa Rica, Venezuela*. (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books 2014), and M. S. Talanquer. *States Divided: History, Conflict and State Formation in Mexico and Colombia*, Doctoral Diss. Cornell University (2017). See also: A. P. Whitaker. "Left and Right Extremism in Argentina." *Current History* 44, Issue 258, (1963), and S. Olivieri and M. Horenstein. "Income Polarization in Argentina: Pure Income Polarization, Theory and Applications." *Economica* 50, (2004).

⁹ A. Urman. "Context Matters: Political Polarization and Political Trust." *Media, Culture and Society* 42, Issue 6 (2020), and S. A. Levin et al. "The Dynamics of Political Polarization." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, Issue 50, (2021).

¹⁰ J. McCoy, T. Rahman and M. Somer. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, Issue 1, (2018), and N. McCarty. *Polarization: What Everyone should Know*. (London: OUP, 2019).

¹¹ J. Yang et al. "Why are 'Others' so Polarized? Perceived Political Polarization and Media Use in 10 Countries." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 21, Issue 5, (2016).

that party identification constitutes a genuine form of social identification intertwined with intense emotions.¹²

Conceptual Issues: Definitions and Types of Polarization

Political polarization refers to the increasing ideological division and hostility between different political groups or parties within a society.¹³ Studies on the definition of polarization have relied on the identification-alienation framework (Duclos et al., 2004). These studies related polarization “to the alienation that individuals and groups feel from one another, but such alienation is fuelled by notions of within-group identity”.¹⁴ In building a relevant conceptual framework, it is important to keep in mind that political polarization is a societal process. It is a dynamic, political, and relational phenomenon.¹⁵ Moreover, it is a complex phenomenon with multiple underlying causes, and it can manifest in various ways, such as “ideological,” “affective,” “cultural,” or “partisan” polarization.¹⁶

Wilson *et al* identified four types of political polarization: ideological polarization, affective polarization, institutional polarization, and perceived or false polarization. Ideological polarization predominantly revolves around differences in political perspectives, entailing the divergence of political opinions and positions.¹⁷ Affective polarization is more heavily centered on identity-based comparisons between groups within and outside of a specific identity. It reflects the “degree to which political partisans dislike, distrust, and avoid the other side”.¹⁸

¹² D. P. Greene, B. Palmquist and E. Schickler. *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹³ P. DiMaggio, J. Evans and B. Bryson. “Have Americans’ Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?” *American Journal of Sociology* 102, Issue 3, (1996), and P. C. Bauer. “Conceptualizing and Measuring Polarization: A Review.” Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (2019).

¹⁴ Jean-Yves Duclos, J. Esteban and D. Ray. “Polarization: Concepts, Measurement, Estimation.” *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* 72, Issue 6, (2004), 1737.

¹⁵ Carothers and O’Donohue, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ A. E. Wilson, V. A. Parker and M. Feinberg. “Polarization in the Contemporary Political and Media Landscape.” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34, (2020).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Wilson et al. *op. cit.*, 223.

Affective polarization arises from group identities and affiliations, and as a concept, it is rooted in research that explores the influence of identity in the realm of politics.¹⁹ It arises from the dynamics outlined in social identity theory.²⁰ Research on affective polarization examines how the prominence of identity within certain groups, such as political parties, can intensify feelings of hostility towards those outside of the group.²¹ Affective polarization capitalizes on emotions; hence, it has been shown to be a problematic phenomenon with dangerous consequences for sustaining democracy and building peace in post-conflict settings. Affective political polarization has increased dramatically in the United States, in Europe, and elsewhere over the last decade.²²

Institutional polarization may involve elites, the media, or social media. Elite polarization, referring to divides affecting political parties and elected officials, is often studied by contrasting it to mass polarization.²³ Several studies have argued that political elites and party activists²⁴ are increasingly polarized,

¹⁹ L. Mason. "A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, Issue S1, (2016), and from the same author "Ideologues without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, Issue (S1), (2018).

²⁰ H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, eds. *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. (Monterey CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979). Social identity theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, such as ethnic identities and political beliefs. This categorization contributes to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, fostering polarization.

²¹ S. L. Gaertner et al. "The Common Intergroup Identity Model: Recategorization and the Reduction of Intergroup Bias." *European Review of Social Psychology* 4, Issue 1, (1993) and Iyengar et al. "Affect, not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, Issue 3, (2012).

²² A. Reiljan. "Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines." *European Journal of Political Research* 59, (2020) and Iyengar et al. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, (2019).

²³ J. Adams, J. Green and C. Milazzo. "Who Moves? Elite and Mass-Level Depolarization in Britain 1987–2001." *Electoral Studies* 31, Issue 4, (2012).

²⁴ K. L. Saunders and A. I. Abramowitz. "Ideological Realignment and Active Partisans in the American Electorate." *American Politics Research* 32, Issue 3, (2004), and J. R. Thornton. "The Impact of Elite Polarization on Partisan Ambivalence and Indifference." *Political Behaviour* 35, (2013).

but the general populace remains less polarized and much of the public remains moderate.²⁵ Such scholars dispute “the myth of a polarized America” and “suggest that the ‘culture war’ commonly conjured up in the media is a fictive construction”.²⁶

Perceived or false polarization entails the perception of more polarization than actually exists.²⁷ Here, misconception and prejudice play key roles in inflaming the perception of polarization. Misconceptions about opposing groups, such as the incorrect assumption that they maintain views entirely incompatible with one’s own, play a more significant role in fostering dislike of out-groups.²⁸ Research on polarization reveals that partisans have dramatic misunderstandings of the demographic makeup of opponent parties, wildly overestimating the proportion of those with stereotypical social identities.²⁹ A study by Enders and Armaly demonstrated that the degree of liking and trust between individuals from different political parties is more strongly influenced by their perception of polarization than by the actual differences in their ideological beliefs.³⁰ In simpler terms, people tend to base their trust and liking for others across party lines on their perception of how divided or polarized the political landscape is, rather than on actual differences in their political ideologies. This suggests that perceived polarization plays a significant role in shaping interpersonal relationships between individuals from different political backgrounds.

²⁵ M. P. Fiorina, S. J. Abrams and J. C. Pope. *Culture Wars? The Myth of Polarized America*. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005) and from the same author and M. S. Levendusky. “Disconnected: The Political Class vs. The People.” *Red and Blue Nation* 1, (2006).

²⁶ D. Baldassarri and B. Bearman. “Dynamics of Political Polarization.” *American Sociological Review* 72, Issue 5, (2007), 784.

²⁷ Wilson et al. op. cit.

²⁸ M. S. Levendusky and N. Malhotra. “(Mis-) Perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, Issue S1, (2016), and A. M. Enders and M. T. Armaly. “The differential effects of actual and perceived polarization.” *Political Behavior*, 41, (2019).

²⁹ D. J. Ahler and G. Sood. “The Parties in our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and their Consequences.” *Journal of Politics* 80, Issue 3, (2018).

³⁰ A. M. Enders and M. T. Armaly op. cit.

After discussing these four types of political polarization, Wilson *et al* presented a theoretical model of causal connections between types of polarization.³¹ A theoretical model of causal interconnections between polarization types emerges. In this model, rising institutional polarization among political elites, partisan media, and social media can produce false (illusory) polarization among the electorate. False polarization can, in turn, fuel affective polarization, and especially dislike of opponent parties, which may foster actual ideological polarization over time as people become more loyal to their own parties in the face of increasing animosity for opponents.

Roots and Drivers of Political Polarization

Edelman's survey is a convenient starting point for understanding the origins and drivers of polarization. The work of Edelman's pollsters highlights key factors such as widespread distrust, fraying social cohesion, and perceptions of unfairness. Edelman's Team surveyed global polarization in 28 countries, identifying several drivers of global political polarization: "Economic Anxieties," "Institutional Imbalance," "Class Divide," and the "Battle for Truth." These factors offer crucial insights into the multifaceted nature of societal polarization, shedding light on underlying causes and facets. Regarding "Institutional Imbalance," Edelman's survey reported a sustained decline in public trust across various institutions spanning more than six decades.

This decline is particularly evident in perceptions of government incompetence and ethical lapses, while both government bodies and news media contribute to a reinforcing cycle of distrust. Interestingly, "scientists" and "scholars" emerge as the most trusted categories, while government "leaders" and "journalists" rank among the least trusted. In the realm of the "Battle for Truth," Edelman's analysts argued that media "echo chambers" have replaced a once-shared media landscape, exacerbating polarization. The findings of Edelman's team suggest that polarization itself amplifies mistrust, forming a self-perpetuating cycle. They also underscore the fact that polarization acts as both a cause and consequence of distrust, perpetuating a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Moreover, the analysts were concerned about the erosion of civility and the weakening of the social fabric, both of which lead to polarization. Edelman's survey indicates that, globally, 65% consider the

³¹ Wilson et al. op. cit., 224, Figure 1.

present lack of civility as the most severe it has ever been. Additionally, 62% express concerns that the social fabric lacks the necessary strength to foster a shared purpose, which is crucial for mitigating polarization.³²

Based on the literature, the present study identifies the following roots and drivers of political polarization: (i) the media landscape, including digital and social media; (ii) cultural and identity issues; (iii) a sense of victimization; (iv) economic inequality/disparities; (v) the role of political leaders; (vi) lack of trust; (vii) geographic/residential sorting; (viii) perceived threats; and (ix) threats and crises.

Media Landscape, Including Digital and Social-Media

The ways in which information is disseminated and consumed play significant roles in political polarization. When individuals tend to consume and trust information from sources that mirror their beliefs, it potentially results in misinformation and a scarcity of shared facts. With the rise of cable news and social media, this selective process has gained momentum and produced more content to be consumed, leading to echo chambers where groups of like-minded users construct and bolster a shared narrative. On social media, echo chambers emerge where individuals are exposed primarily to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs.³³ Several studies have demonstrated that the internet does not challenge our preconceptions and biases; instead, it reinforces them, intensifying opinion polarization.³⁴ This filtration often excludes dissenting perspectives and diverse voices, limiting exposure to a broader range of viewpoints. This phenomenon is primarily

³² Edelman Communications. *Edelman Trust Barometer*. 15 January 2023. www.edelman.com/news-awards/2023-edelman-trust-barometer.

³³ E. Brugnoli et al. "Recursive Patterns in Online Echo Chambers." *Scientific Reports* 9, Issue 1, (2019), and J. Jiang, X. Ren and F. Ferrara. "Social Media Polarization and Echo Chambers in the Context of Covid-19: Case Study." *JMIRx Med* 2, Issue 3, (2021).

³⁴ E. Gilbert, T. Bergstrom and K. Karahalios. "Blogs are Echo Chambers: Blogs are Echo Chambers." *Proceedings of the 42nd International Conference on System Sciences*, (January 2009), W. Quattrociocchi, A. Scala and S. Sunstein. "Echo Chambers on Facebook." *Social Science Research Network*, ssrn.com, (2016), P. M. Dahlgren. *Media Echo Chambers: Selective Exposure and Confirmation Bias in Media Use, And its Consequence for Political Polarization*. Doctoral Diss. University of Gothenburg, (2020), and Baumann et al. "Emergence of Polarized Ideological Opinion in Multidimensional Topic Spaces." *Physical Review X* 11, Issue 1, (2021).

orchestrated by social media algorithms, which prioritize content that aligns with our personal preferences, thus guiding us into a reassuring, self-reinforcing content stream.³⁵ Significantly, algorithms prioritize content that elicits strong emotional reactions, thereby magnifying divisive and extreme perspectives and exacerbating affective polarization.³⁶ Selective exposure through an echo chamber dynamically fuels negative affect towards others and out-groups and it increases false polarization.³⁷ Polarized online environments select for and reward actors who are willing to express extreme and outrageous views thus undermining moderate voices.³⁸ The group polarization theory, as elucidated by Cinelli *et al* underscore how echo chambers function as mechanisms that reinforce existing group viewpoints, ultimately pushing the collective ideology toward the extreme end of the spectrum.³⁹

Consequently, there has been a surge in negativity and blame circulating through social media, leading to further polarization. Political extremists use more negative language than moderates, which triggers out-group hostility.⁴⁰ Political polarization in the digital sphere poses a serious challenge to many democracies globally as it often increases affective polarization and makes mutual understanding and the bridging of opposing parties more difficult.⁴¹

³⁵ See P. Jolicoeur and F. Labarre. "I Like you to Death: Social Media and Radicalization." In F. Labarre and G. Niculescu, eds. *Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape*. (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, 2022).

³⁶ S. Fischer and Y. Lelkes. "Emotion, Affective Polarization, and Online Communication." In R. Nabi and J. Gall Myrick, eds. *Emotions in the Digital World: Exploring Affective Experience and Expression in Online Interactions*. (London: OUP, 2023), 201.

³⁷ M. Nordbrandt. "Affective Polarization in the Digital Age: Testing the Direction of the Relationship between Social Media and Users' Feelings for Out-group Parties." *New Media and Society* 25, Issue 12, (2023).

³⁸ J. A. Frimer et al. "Extremists on Left and Right Use Angry, Negative Language." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45, Issue 8, (2019).

³⁹ Cinelli et al. "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, Issue 9, (2021), and from same authors "Conspiracy Theories and Social Media Platforms." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, (2022).

⁴⁰ Frimer et al. op. cit.

⁴¹ M. Yarchi, C. Baden and N. Kligler-Vilenchik. "Political Polarization on the Digital Sphere: A Cross-Platform, Over Time Analysis of Interactional, Positional and Affective Polarization on Social Media." *Political Communication* 38, Issue 1, (2021).

Cultural and Identity Issues

Societal debates about cultural and identity issues, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, immigration, and education, can lead to polarization.⁴² These issues often have strong emotional and moral components and can hence fuel affective polarization and make compromise more difficult. Studies have revealed how “cultural fault lines” could deepen political polarization.⁴³ Nationalistic sentiments and the promotion of ethnic identities can fuel polarization as different groups seek to assert their cultural and political rights. Related to identity issues, primordial ties that are rooted in ethnicity, language, religion, or shared historical experiences can impact the formation of political parties and the alignment of voters. Political affiliations can become intertwined with these ties, leading individuals to identify with a certain political party while seeing another as an enemy. Ethnic and sectarian divides can be aligned with particular political parties and further polarize societies.

Cultural divides frequently intensify polarization, especially in realms like political memory⁴⁴ and the construction of narratives around national historical events. Narli *et al* investigated how the recollection of recent history has divided Republican and pro-Islamic political factions in Türkiye and how the contentious politics of memory and historical storytelling have exacerbated political polarization. As seen in the Turkish context, such divisions in historical narration penetrate cultural storytelling, impacting public and private narratives, themes, and the interpretation of history. Consequently, diverse

⁴² DiMaggio, et al. op. cit.; J. B. Luguri and J. L. Napier. “Of Two Minds: The Interactive Effect of Construal Level and Identity on Political Polarization.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, Issue 6, (2013), Y. Kim and S. Zhou. “The Effect of Political Conflict News Frame on Political Polarization: A Social Identity Approach.” *International Journal of Communication* 14, (2020), 22, and E. M. Uslaner. *National Identity and Social Cohesion*. (London: OUP, 2023), 241.

⁴³ Y. Shi et al. “Cultural Fault Lines and Political Polarization.” *Proceeding of the 2017 ACM on Web Science Conference*, (2017), 213–217.

⁴⁴ Politics of memory is the totality of policies and practices like commemoration rituals regulating what to remember and forget and how to remember past events. Memory is frequently communicated through engagement in various social activities at specific locations in association with artifacts (Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Mitchell, 2003). These commemorative practices are inevitably influenced by power dynamics (Ashplant et al., 2000; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003).

and divided memories and narrations emerge, often aligning with distinct political ideologies.

Moreover, political party polarization could produce new divisions in lifestyle and lead to diverse and polarized cultural creations. When partisan politics becomes deeply ingrained in societal structures, it tends to permeate various aspects of life, including cultural tastes. A study of Twitter data in the United States showed how partisan divisions on public policy extend to cultural tastes and lifestyle preferences.⁴⁵ This divergence widens the chasm in cultural and even aesthetic preferences between various partisan groups.

Sense of Victimization

The way people remember the past could incite a sense of victimization. There is a complex interplay between victimization, radicalization, and polarization, and even political violence. McCauley and Moskaleiko argued that individuals who feel victimized or perceive their group as oppressed are more susceptible to radicalization. The sense of victimization can create a powerful motivation to seek a radical solution, as individuals may come to view violence or extreme actions as necessary to address their perceived grievances. They also explored the role of social networks and group dynamics in the radicalization process. They posited that individuals are more likely to embrace radical ideologies when they are part of social networks that reinforce and amplify their grievances.⁴⁶ Politics of memory, as the policy of narrating the past for a particular political purpose, is critical in creating a sense of victimization in order to mobilize people to take radical positions and actions to divide people.⁴⁷

Political leaders who intend to boost polarization often resort to mobilization of memory for exploiting historical or cultural wounds to gain political

⁴⁵ Shi et al, op. cit.

⁴⁶ C. McCauley and S. Moskaleiko. "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways towards Terrorism." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, Issue 3, (2008).

⁴⁷ A. Pemberton and P. van Eck-Aarten. "Narrative as a Paradigm for Studying Victimization and Radicalization." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, (2017), F. Villamil. "Mobilizing Memories: The Social Conditions of the Long-Term Impact of Victimization." *Journal of Peace Research* 58, Issue 3, (2021).

benefits. Narratives of victimhood are powerful tools used by populist leaders in mobilizing support.⁴⁸ Exploring the political appropriation of victimhood is crucial today, as victimhood has evolved into a pivotal tool shaping how individuals and groups perceive themselves and construct their roles as political actors.⁴⁹

Economic Inequality/Disparities

Economic disparities increase political polarization as individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds may have divergent views on taxation, social welfare, government spending, and economic policy.⁵⁰ Socioeconomic disparities can also contribute to political polarization, as marginalized groups may feel excluded from the political process.⁵¹ It is worth noting that income inequality and political polarization have experienced significant surges in many parts of the world in the past few decades.⁵² Factors such as rising income inequality act as a crucial factor in fuelling political divisions regardless of whether it occurs in the developed or developing world.⁵³

Role of Political Leaders

Political elites, including leaders and influential figures, play a significant role in shaping public opinion and thus in political polarization. A study of Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, Türkiye, and the United States showed the role of political leaders in increasing polarization.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ J. Meijen and P. Vermeersch. "Populist Memory Politics and the Performance of Victimhood: Analysing the Political Exploitation of Historical Injustice in Central Europe." *Government and Opposition*, (2023).

⁴⁹ R. Seoighe. "Discourses of Victimization in Sri Lanka's Civil War: Collective Memory, Legitimacy and Agency." *Social and Legal Studies* 25, Issue 3, (2016), and R B. Horwitz. "Politics as Victimhood, Victimhood as Politics." *Journal of Policy History* 30, Issue 3, (2018).

⁵⁰ J. Voorheis, N. McCarty and B. Shor. "Unequal Incomes, Ideology and Gridlock: Howy Risising Inequality Increases Political Polarization." (21 August 2015).

⁵¹ Y. Gu and Z. Wang. "Income Inequality and Global Political Polarization: The Economic Origin of Political Polarization in the World." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 27, Issue 2, (2022).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Carothers and O'Donohue, op. cit.

These leaders persistently heightened fundamental cleavages and firmly embedded them across society. The study by Carothers and O'Donohue offers examples of how political leaders can use inflammatory and divisive rhetoric and victimization narratives in order to contribute to polarization by framing issues in ways that demonize opponents and make compromise seem unacceptable. Such leaders use polarization as a strategy for electoral victory or long-term plans for transforming the political order and society.⁵⁵

Once societies are divided into mutually distrustful camps, affective polarization becomes very deep at both the elite and public levels and this process distances groups from any type of dialogue or reconciliation. All types of political leaders use polarization for political gains. However, it is more problematic in the case of personalist politicians who often focus on societal polarization as they see it a valuable endeavour. They often adopt rhetoric to divide society for their own political interests while weakening societal pillars to erode public trust in them, destroying democracies in the long term. Frantz *et al* showed that greater personalism within democracies is often accompanied by an increased likelihood of political polarization, attempts by incumbents to consolidate power, and, ultimately, declines leading to the collapse of democratic institutions.⁵⁶

Lack of Trust

Edelman's survey also revealed the significance of mistrust for political polarization. A lack of trust in institutions, including the government, the media, and other societal pillars, can contribute to polarization, as people may be more likely to believe and support extremist views in the absence of trusted sources.⁵⁷ This can also generate more radicalism.

⁵⁵ McCoy and Somer, op. cit.

⁵⁶ E. Frantz, A. Kendall-Taylor, C. Nietzsche and J. Wright. "How Personalist Politics is Changing Democracies." *Journal of Democracy* 32, Issue 3, (2021).

⁵⁷ Uslander, op. cit., E. Theiss-Morse, D. G. Barton and M. W. Wagner. "Political Trust in Polarized Times." In: B. Bornstein and A. Tomkins, eds. *Motivating Cooperation and Compliance with Authority: The Role of Institutional Trust*. (New York: Springer, 2015), and H. E. Brady and T. B. Kent. "Fifty Years of Declining Confidence and Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions." *Daedalus* 151, Issue 4, (2022).

Perceived Threats

When individuals perceive existential threats to their group identity, way of life, or values, they may become more polarized as a response to protect what they hold dear.⁵⁸ Perceived threats to group identity enhance affective polarization because within the realm of social psychology, the challenges and threats presented by different groups intensify intergroup emotions, fostering positivity within one's own group and negativity toward other groups.⁵⁹ These dynamics also contribute to heightened intergroup separation, a central element of affective polarization, as documented by previous research.⁶⁰

Facing a shared threat from a common enemy can increase polarization. Populist leaders seize crises as opportunities to articulate and channel various societal grievances against establishment elites or against their rivals. Fears produced by a crisis can be manipulated by leaders for energizing their political base and consolidating their powers.⁶¹ This consolidation of rival factions often benefits populist leaders, as seen in the case of the United States. The COVID-19 crisis, for example, reinforced political polarization in the US and Europe.⁶²

Consequences of Political Polarization

The discussion on the roots and forms of political polarization is significant as it is detrimental to democracies due to its potential for generating conflicts and damaging trust in societal pillars. This problem is clearly addressed in the literature summarized above.

⁵⁸ D. M. Mackie, T. Devos and E. R. Smith. "Intergroup Emotions: Explaining Offensive Action Tendencies in an Intergroup Context." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, (2000), and E. A. Renström, H. Bäck and R. Carroll. "Intergroup Threat and Affective Polarization in Multi-Party Systems." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 9, Issue 2, (2021).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ W. G. Stephan, O. Ybarra and K. Rios. "Intergroup Threat Theory." In: T. D. Nelson ed. *Handbook of Prejudice Stereotyping and Discrimination*. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc. 2015).

⁶¹ K. M. Roberts. "Performing Crisis? Trump, Populism and the GOP in the Age of Covid-19." *Government and Opposition*, (2022).

⁶² S. Jungkunz. "Political Polarization during the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Frontiers in Political Science* 3, (2021).

The negative consequences of political polarization can be categorized as debilitated social cohesion and reduced cooperation, weakened policy implementation, and perturbed political engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Strategies to Mitigate and Prevent Political Polarization

Political polarization not only damage trust and but also interpersonal trust, which is critical for the healthy functioning of societies and economic development. A country with higher levels of trust tends to experience lower corruption, better development, and a more prosperous economy.⁶³

In some regions, such as the South Caucasus, primordial ties play a significant role in shaping party alignment need special attention. These ties, which intertwine ethnic, regional, and ideological factors complicate political polarization further. In the South Caucasus, political parties and factions align themselves along ethnic or religious lines, intensifying polarization. This alignment has been a major factor influencing the region's political dynamics. Moreover, these primordial ties can extend to regional affiliations. Within the ethnically diverse nations of the South Caucasus, parties often align themselves with specific regions, deepening the connection between politics and regional identities.

Based on this study and the literature discussed above, various strategies to mitigate political polarization can be offered:

- Promoting media literacy in the formal education curriculum and in adult education to help individuals critically evaluate information sources and avoid fake news and echo chambers.
- Writing and promoting a new narrative for nations and for regions to diminish the impact of old divisive narratives.

⁶³ Francis Fukuyama. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

- Emphasizing civics education and critical thinking in schools in order to make people more open-minded and to promote a better understanding of democratic values and institutions.
- Cross-partisan dialogue: Encouraging conversations and cooperation between individuals with differing political beliefs. Conversations between supporters of opposing political parties can reduce affective polarization and dislike of out-partisans. However, this effect is conditional upon the topics addressed in the conversation. Sensitive topics could have a negative impact in this type of dialogue endeavour.

Considering the peculiarities of the South Caucasus, where the interplay of primordial ties creates a complex political landscape characterized by deepening polarization, this paper has more specific recommendations:

- Parties need to navigate a delicate balance to address the diverse interests and identities of the population.
- Carefully consider historical, cultural, and geopolitical dynamics to promote stability and inclusive governance in the region.
- Raise awareness about fake news pitfalls, and fostering dialogue among conflicting parties are crucial steps.

These recommendations offer valuable insights for fostering trust both nationally and regionally, facilitating improved economic cooperation and fostering peace-building efforts in the region.

References

- Abbasov, I., Delihuseyinoglu, H., Pipia, M., Rumyantsev, S., & Sanamyan, E. (2016). Ethnic groups and conflicts in the South Caucasus and Türkiye. *Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation*, 181–227.
- Abel, C. (1974). *Conservative Party in Colombia, 1930–1953*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford).
- Adams, J., Green, J., & Milazzo, C. (2012). Who moves? Elite and mass-level depolarization in Britain, 1987–2001. *Electoral Studies*, 31(4), 643–655.
- Adams, J., De Vries, C. E., & Leiter, D. (2012). Subconstituency Reactions to Elite Depolarization in the Netherlands: An Analysis of the Dutch Public's Policy Beliefs and Partisan Loyalties, 1986–98. *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(01), 81–105.
- Ahler, D. J., & Sood, G. (2018). The parties in our heads: Misperceptions about party composition and their consequences. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(3), 964–981.
- Ahmar, M. (2007). Sectarian conflicts in Pakistan. *Pakistan Vision*, 9(1), 1–19.
- Alex-Assensoh, Y. M. (2005). *Democracy at risk: How political choices undermine citizen participation and what we can do about it*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Alon, I., & Bar-Tal, D. (2016). *Role of trust in conflict resolution*. Cham: Springer.
- Ashplant, T. G., Dawson, G., & Roper, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Commemorating war: The politics of memory*. Transaction Publishers.
- Balčytienė, A., & Juraitė, K. (2015). Systemic media changes and social and political polarization in Europe. In *European Media in Crisis* (pp. 20–42). Routledge.
- Baldassarri, D., & Bearman, P. (2007). Dynamics of political polarization. *American Sociological Review*, 72(5), 784–811.
- Baldassarri, D., & Gelman, A. (2008). Partisans Without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(2).
- Bauer, P. C. (2019). Conceptualizing and measuring polarization: A review. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/e5vp8>.
- Baumann, F., Lorenz-Spreen, P., Sokolov, I. M., & Starnini, M. (2021). Emergence of polarized ideological opinions in multidimensional topic

- spaces. *Physical Review X*, 11, 011012.
- Baylis, T. A. (2012). Elite consensus and political polarization: Cases from Central Europe. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 90–106.
- Böttcher, L., & Gersbach, H. (2020). The great divide: drivers of polarization in the US public. *EPJ data science*, 9(1), 32.
- Brady, H. E., & Kent, T. B. (2022). Fifty years of declining confidence & increasing polarization in trust in American institutions. *Dædalus*, 151(4), 43–66.
- Brugnoli, E., Cinelli, M., Quattrociocchi, W., & Scala, A. (2019). Recursive patterns in online echo chambers. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 20118.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Canen, N. J., Kendall, C., & Trebbi, F. (2021). *Political parties as drivers of us polarization: 1927–2018* (No. w28296). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Carothers, T., & O’Donohue, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Democracies divided: The global challenge of political polarization*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(9), e2023301118.
- Cinelli, M., Etta, G., Avalle, M., Quattrociocchi, A., Di Marco, N., Valensise, C., Galeazzi, A., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2022). Conspiracy theories and social media platforms. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 101407.
- Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., Rusk, J. G., & Wolfe, A. C. (1969). Continuity and change in American politics: Parties and issues in the 1968 election. *American Political Science Review*, 63(4), 1083–1105.
- Cornell, S. E. (1997). Conflicting identities in the Caucasus. *Peace Review*, 9(4), 453–459.
- Dahlgren, P. M. (2020). Media echo chambers: Selective exposure and confirmation bias in media use, and its consequences for political polarization.
- Dalton, R. J. (2008). The quantity and the quality of party systems: Party system polarization, its measurement, and its consequences. *Comparative political studies*, 41(7), 899–920.

- DiMaggio, P., Evans, J., & Bryson, B. (1996). Have American's social attitudes become more polarized? *American journal of Sociology*, *102*(3), 690–755.
- Down, I., & Wilson, C. J. (2010). Opinion Polarization and Inter-Party Competition on Europe. *European Union Politics*, *11*(1), 61–87.
- Duclos, J.-Y., Esteban, J. M., & Ray, D. (2004). Polarization: Concepts, Measurement, Estimation. *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society*, *72*(6), 1737–1772.
- Enders, A. M., & Armaly, M. T. (2019). The differential effects of actual and perceived polarization. *Political Behavior*, *41*, 815–839.
- Enyedi, Z. (2016). Populist polarization and party system institutionalization: The role of party politics in de-democratization. *Problems of Post-communism*, *63*(4), 210–220
- Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. J., & Pope, J. C. (2005). *Culture Wars? The Myth of Polarized America*. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Fiorina, M. P., & Levendusky, M. S. (2006). Disconnected: The political class versus the people. *Red and blue nation*, *1*, 49–71.
- Fiorina, M. P., & Abrams, S. J. (2008). Political Polarization in the American Public. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *11*(1), 563–588.
- Fischer, C. S., & Mattson, G. (2009). Is America Fragmenting? *Sociology*, *35*(1), 435.
- Fischer, S., & Lelkes, Y. (2023). Emotion, Affective Polarization, and Online Communication. *Emotions in the Digital World: Exploring Affective Experience and Expression in Online Interactions*, 401.
- Frantz, E., Kendall-Taylor, A., Nietzsche, C., & Wright, J. (2021). How personalist politics is changing democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, *32*(3), 94–108.
- Frimer, J. A., Brandt, M. J., Melton, Z., & Motyl, M. (2019). Extremists on the left and right use angry, negative language. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *45*(8), 1216–1231.
- Fukuyama, F. (1996). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. Simon and Schuster.
- Gaertner, S. L., Dovidio, J. F., Anastasio, P. A., Bachman, B. A., & Rust, M. C. (1993). The common ingroup identity model: Recategorization and the reduction of intergroup bias. *European review of social psychology*, *4*(1), 1–26.

- Geertz, C. (1963). The integrative revolution: primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states. In *Old societies and new states: The quest for modernity in Asia and Africa* (pp. 105–157).
- Geukjian, O. (2016). *Ethnicity, nationalism and conflict in the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh and the legacy of Soviet nationalities policy*. Routledge.
- Gidron, N., Adams, J., & Horne, W. (2019). Toward a comparative research agenda on affective polarization in mass publics. *APSA Comparative Politics Newsletter*, 29, 30–36
- Gilbert, E., Bergstrom, T., & Karahalios, K. (2009, January). Blogs are echo chambers: Blogs are echo chambers. In *2009 42nd Hawaii international conference on system sciences* (pp. 1–10). IEEE.
- Gluckman, P., Spoonley, P., Bardsley, A., Poulton, R., Royal, T. A. C., Sridhar, H., & Clyne, D. (2023). Addressing the challenges to social cohesion.
- Green, D. P., Palmquist, B., & Schickler, E. (2004). *Partisan hearts and minds: Political parties and the social identities of voters*. Yale University Press.
- Gu, Y., & Wang, Z. (2022). Income inequality and global political polarization: The economic origin of political polarization in the world. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 27(2), 375–398.
- Hetherington, M. J. (2009). Review Article: Putting Polarization in Perspective. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(02), 413–448.
- Hetherington, M. J., Long, M. T., & Rudolph, T. J. (2016). Revisiting the Myth: New Evidence of a Polarized Electorate. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 321–350.
- Hodgkin, K., & Radstone, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Contested pasts: The politics of memory*. Routledge.
- Horwitz, R. B. (2018). Politics as victimhood, victimhood as politics. *Journal of Policy History*, 30(3), 552–574.
- Huddy, L. (2001). From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory. *Political psychology*, 22(1), 127–156.
- Iyengar, S., Sood, G. & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology. A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76(3), 405–431.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.

- Jahani, E., Gallagher, N. M., Merhout, F., Cavalli, N., Guilbeault, D., Leng, Y., & Bail, C. A. (2020). Exposure to common enemies can increase political polarization: Evidence from a cooperation experiment with automated partisans.
- Jiang, J., Ren, X., & Ferrara, E. (2021). Social media polarization and echo chambers in the context of COVID-19: Case study. *JMIRx med*, 2(3), e29570.
- Jost, J. T., Baldassarri, D. S., & Druckman, J. N. (2022). Cognitive-motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1(10), 560–576.
- Jungkunz, S. (2021). Political polarization during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3, 622512.
- Kim, Y. M., Wang, M., Gotlieb, M. R., Gabay, I., & Ederly, S. (2013). Ambivalence reduction and polarization in the campaign information environment: The interaction between individual- and contextual-level influences. *Communication Research*, 40, 388–416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650211431884>.
- Kim, Y., & Zhou, S. (2020). The effects of political conflict news frame on political polarization: A social identity approach. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 22.
- Layman, G. C., & Carsey, T. M. (2002). Party Polarization and ‘Conflict Extension’ in the American Electorate. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(4), 786–802.
- Layman, G. C., Carsey, T. M., & Horowitz, J. M. (2006). Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9, 83–110.
- Lelkes, Y. (2016). Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 392–410.
- Levendusky, M. S., & Malhotra, N. (2016). (Mis) perceptions of partisan polarization in the American public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 378–391.
- Levin, S. A., Milner, H. V., & Perrings, C. (2021). The dynamics of political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(50), e2116950118.

- Levy, B., Babb-Guerra, A., Batt, L. M., & Owczarek, W. (2019). Can education reduce political polarization? Fostering open-minded political engagement during the legislative semester. *Teachers College Record*, 121(5), 1–40.
- Luguri, J. B., & Napier, J. L. (2013). Of two minds: The interactive effect of construal level and identity on political polarization. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(6), 972–977.
- Mackie, D. M., Devos, T., & Smith, E. R. (2000). Intergroup emotions: Explaining offensive action tendencies in an intergroup context. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 602–616. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.4.602>.
- Martin, G. J., & Webster, S. W. (2020). Does residential sorting explain geographic polarization? *Political Science Research and Methods*, 8(2), 215–231.
- Mason, L. (2016). A cross-cutting calm: How social sorting drives affective polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 80(S1), 351–377.
- Mason, L. (2018). Ideologues without issues: The polarizing consequences of ideological identities. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 82(S1), 866–887.
- McCartney, W. B., Orellana, J., & Zhang, C. (2021). “Sort Selling”: Political Polarization and Residential Choice.
- McCarty, N. (2019). *Polarization: What everyone needs to know*®. Oxford University Press.
- McCauley, C., & Moskaleiko, S. (2008). Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism. *Terrorism and political violence*, 20(3), 415–433.
- McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16–42.
- McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2021). Overcoming polarization. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(1), 6–21.
- Meijen, J., & Vermeersch, P. (2023). Populist Memory Politics and the Performance of Victimhood: Analysing the Political Exploitation of Historical Injustice in Central Europe. *Government and Opposition*, 1–19.
- Middleton, D. Edwards, D. (1990): Collective remembering.
- Mitchell, K. (2003). Monuments, memorials, and the politics of memory. *Urban Geography*, 24(5), 442–459.

- Moral, M. (2017). The bipolar voter: On the effects of actual and perceived party polarization on voter turnout in European multiparty democracies. *Political Behavior*, 39(4), 935–965. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9386-0>.
- Munzert, S., & Bauer, P. C. (2013). Political Depolarization in German Public Opinion, 1980–2010. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1(01), 67–89.
- Narlı, A. N., Akyıldız, K., & Bircan, T. (2023). The Polarization of Traumas and Selective Remembering: Competing Political Memories of Military Coups in Contemporary Türkiye. *Sociology Lens*.
- Nivola, P. S., & Brady, D. W. (Eds.). (2007). *Red and blue nation?: characteristics and causes of America's polarized politics* (Vol. 1). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nordbrandt, M. (2023). Affective polarization in the digital age: Testing the direction of the relationship between social media and users' feelings for out-group parties. *New media & society*, 25(12), 3392–3411.
- Olivieri, S., & Horenstein, M. (2004). Income polarization in Argentina: Pure income polarization, theory and applications. *Económica*, 50, 39–66.
- Pardos-Prado, S., & Riera, P. (2015). The attitudinal implications of the cartel party thesis. *Party politics and democracy in Europe: Essays in honour of Peter Mair*, 83–100.
- Peeler, J. A. (2014). *Latin American Democracies: Colombia, Costa Rica, Venezuela*. UNC Press Books.
- Pemberton, A., & van Eck-Aarten, P. (2017). Narrative as a paradigm for studying victimisation and radicalisation. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–16.
- Pildes, R. H. (2011). Why the center does not hold: the causes of hyperpolarized democracy in America. *California Law Review*, 99, 273.
- Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (1984). The Polarization of American Politics. *The Journal of Politics*, 46, 1061–1079.
- Rapp, C. (2016). Moral opinion polarization and the erosion of trust. *Social Science Research*, 58, 34–45.
- Reiljan, A. (2020). “Fear and loathing across party lines” (also) in Europe: affective polarisation in European party systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 59, 376–396.
- Renström, E. A., Bäck, H., & Carroll, R. (2021). Intergroup threat and affective polarization in a multi-party system. *The Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 9(2), 553–576.

- Roberts, K. M. (2022). Performing Crisis? Trump, Populism and the GOP in the Age of COVID-19. *Government and Opposition*, 1–19.
- Quattrociocchi, W., Scala, A., & Sunstein, C. R. (2016). Echo chambers on Facebook. *Available at SSRN 2795110*.
- Santoro, E., & Broockman, D. E. (2022). The promise and pitfalls of cross-partisan conversations for reducing affective polarization: Evidence from randomized experiments. *Science Advances*, 8(25), eabn5515.
- Saunders, K. L., & Abramowitz, A. I. (2004). Ideological realignment and active partisans in the American electorate. *American Politics Research*, 32(3), 285–309.
- Seoighe, R. (2016). Discourses of victimization in Sri Lanka’s civil war: Collective memory, legitimacy and agency. *Social & Legal Studies*, 25(3), 355–380.
- Shi, Y., Mast, K., Weber, I., Kellum, A., & Macy, M. (2017). Cultural fault lines and political polarization. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM on web science conference* (pp. 213–217).
- Stephan, W. G., Ybarra, O., & Morrison, K. R. (2009). Intergroup threat theory. In T. Nelson (Ed.), *Handbook of prejudice*. Mahwah, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Stephan, W. G., Ybarra, O., & Rios, K. (2015). Intergroup threat theory. In T. D. Nelson (Ed.), *Handbook of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination* (2nd ed., pp. 255–278). Mahwah, NJ, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stone, W. J., Rapoport, R. B., & Abramowitz, A. I. (1990). The Reagan Revolution and Party Polarization in the 1980s. In L. S. Maisel (Ed.), *The Parties Respond*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–48). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Talanquer, M. S. (2017). *States Divided: History, Conflict, and State Formation in Mexico and Colombia* (Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University).
- Theiss-Morse, E., Barton, D. G., & Wagner, M. W. (2015). Political trust in polarized times. *Motivating cooperation and compliance with authority: The role of institutional trust*, 167–190.

- Thornton, J. R. (2013). The impact of elite polarization on partisan ambivalence and indifference. *Political Behavior*, *35*, 409–428.
- Urman, A. (2020). Context matters: political polarization on Twitter from a comparative perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, *42*(6), 857–879.
- Uslaner, E. M. (2015). Congressional polarization and political trust. In *The Forum* (Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 361–373). De Gruyter.
- Uslaner, E. M. (2022). *National Identity and Partisan Polarization*. Oxford University Press.
- Uslaner, E. M. (2023). National Identity and Political Polarization. In *National Identity and Social Cohesion*, 241.
- Villamil, F. (2021). Mobilizing memories: The social conditions of the long-term impact of victimization. *Journal of Peace Research*, *58*(3), 399–416.
- Voorheis, J., McCarty, N., & Shor, B. (2015). Unequal incomes, ideology and gridlock: How rising inequality increases political polarization.
- Wang, T., & Shen, F. (2018). Perceived party polarization, news attentiveness, and political participation: a mediated moderation model. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *28*(6), 620–637.
- Warner, B. R., Horstman, H. K., & Kearney, C. C. (2020). Reducing political polarization through narrative writing. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *48*(4), 459–477.
- Weber, T. J., Hydock, C., Ding, W., Gardner, M., Jacob, P., Mandel, N., & Van Steenburg, E. (2021). Political polarization: challenges, opportunities, and hope for consumer welfare, marketers, and public policy. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *40*(2), 184–205.
- Whitaker, A. P. (1963). Left and Right Extremism in Argentina. *Current History*, *44*(258), 84–116.
- Wilson, A. E., Parker, V. A., & Feinberg, M. (2020). Polarization in the contemporary political and media landscape. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, *34*, 223–228.
- Yang, J., Rojas, H., Wojcieszak, M., Aalberg, T., Coen, S., Curran, J., Hayashi, K., Iyengar, S., Jones, P. K., Mazzoleni, G., Papathanassopoulos, S., Rhee, J. W., Rowe, D., Soroka, D., & Tiffen, R. (2016). Why are “others” so polarized? Perceived political polarization and media use in 10 countries. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *21*(5), 349–367.

Yarchi, M., Baden, C., & Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2021). Political polarization on the digital sphere: A cross-platform, over-time analysis of interactional, positional, and affective polarization on social media. *Political Communication*, 38(1–2), 98–139.

Online Sources

Pew Research Center. (2017). The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider. Retrieved November 2, 2023, from <https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/>.

Edelman. (2023, January 15). Edelman Trust Barometer. <https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/2023-edelman-trust-barometer>.

PART II: Building an Integrated South Caucasus: A Merger of Alternative Peace Plans?

The Future of Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations after the Military Takeover of Nagorno Karabakh by Azerbaijan

Benyamin Poghosyan

The September 2023 Military Offensive of Azerbaijan and Aftermath

Since the launch of the first Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) war in the 1990s, the region's status has been at the core of the conflict. This issue has been the primary focus of negotiations and different settlement options put forward by the OSCE Minsk Group – package solution, phased approach, Common State, Key West, Kazan document, Lavrov plan – which all failed to find a mutually acceptable solution for the status of Artsakh. At the end of the day, Azerbaijan decided to solve this issue by military force. Azerbaijan probably came to this decision in the early 2000s, hoping it could get more by deploying military force than by any negotiated solutions. Azerbaijan was cautiously waiting for the geopolitical window of opportunity, which appeared in 2020 as a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, elections in the U.S. and growing misperceptions of Armenia-Russia relations after the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

The 2020 Artsakh War has significantly changed the balance of power in the region. It underscored Türkiye's growing role and influence and simultaneously resulted in the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Artsakh. However, it did not solve the issue of status, as despite losing a significant part of its territory, the self-proclaimed Artsakh Republic continued its existence. Azerbaijan was clear that it would not tolerate the existence of the Artsakh Republic and would use force, if necessary, to finish with it. Baku was waiting for another window of opportunity, and it soon arrived, first in the form of the Russia-Ukraine war and then through Armenia's recognition of Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan in October 2022, May and July 2023.¹

¹ Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022, <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->

On September 19, 2023, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic.² Abandoned by all, authorities of the Republic were forced to accept Azerbaijani demands, starting the dissolution of the self-defence army and, on September 28, declaring that the Republic would cease to exist by the end of 2023.³ The destruction of the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic triggered a massive forced displacement of Armenians from their homeland. As of early October 2023, more than 100,000 Armenians had left Nagorno Karabakh for Armenia.⁴ Azerbaijani officials sought to reject the claims of forced displacement, stating that this is a personal decision of Armenians and that Azerbaijan is ready to provide necessary rights to Armenians within Azerbaijan's constitutional framework.⁵ However, the duration of the conflict has left the Armenian side understandably doubtful.

The influx of refugees will put an enormous economic burden on Armenia, a less than three million country. Armenia registered strong economic growth in 2022 and the first half of 2023, but it cannot cope with the problems without massive international assistance. The promised support from the EU, the U.S., and a handful of other countries must be significantly increased.

president-michel-6-october-2022/, Press remarks by President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/14/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/>, Press remarks by President Charles Michel following trilateral meeting with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/15/press-remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-trilateral-meeting-with-president-aliyev-of-azerbaijan-and-prime-minister-pashinyan-of-armenia/>.

² "Azerbaijan launches new military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh." Al Jazeera, 19 September 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/19/azerbaijan-launches-new-anti-terror-offensive-in-nagorno-karabakh>.

³ "Nagorno-Karabakh will cease to exist from next year. How did this happen?" CNN, 29 September 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/28/europe/nagorno-karabakh-officially-dissolve-intl/index.html>.

⁴ "Number of internally displaced persons from NK stands at 100,632." *ArmenPress*. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1121185.html>.

⁵ See Razi Nurullayev's paper in this Study Group Information Booklet.

The reaction in Armenia to these events has been somewhat surprising. The government made it clear that Armenia would not intervene to prevent the destruction of Nagorno Karabakh.⁶ Most Armenians went to social media, lamenting the lack of actions by Russia, the EU, and the U.S. Many were genuinely surprised that for Russia and the collective West, geopolitical or economic interests had more value than the fate of 100,000 Armenians who lived in Nagorno Karabakh.

Most Armenians appeared to live in a parallel universe where the world powers were acting based only on values. The second reaction of Armenian society was the quest to find culprits. The list was quite long – starting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and ending with President of the European Council Charles Michel, with Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, and even U.S. President Joe Biden somewhere in the middle. Another trend was to show support or displeasure by changing social media profile photos, putting pictures either taken in Nagorno Karabakh or with cultural and historical monuments of Nagorno Karabakh.

Many Armenians also took part in numerous private initiatives to support the forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh, but all knew that this would not continue forever. Several months later, many would be overwhelmed by the problems of their daily lives, and few would continue to support Karabakh Armenians, as was the case with the forcibly displaced Armenians from Shushi and Hadrut due to the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war.

What is mainly missing are the debates and discussions on what should be done now, after Azerbaijan finished with Nagorno Karabakh by force. There are two ways forward – the first path is to concentrate on the humanitarian issues of the forcibly displaced persons from Nagorno Karabakh, seeking to accommodate some of them in Armenia and forget about the 32 years of existence of the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic. Part of this strategy is the talk about the “right of return” of Armenians to Nagorno Karabakh and the discussions about to whom Armenia should apply to

⁶ “Armenia not involved in military operations and doesn’t maintain an army in Nagorno-Karabakh – PM Pashinyan.” *ArmenPress*. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1119891.html>.

secure that right – the UN, the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the international Court of Justice, the U.S., or other countries such as France, or, to put this in other words, who should become the “saviour of the Armenians” this time.

Option two envisages the perception of the fact that the world will pass through a very turbulent transition phase from a unipolar system to something different. It is too challenging to assess this new order, but it can be argued that the South Caucasus will be part of this turbulence and transition. Thus, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus will continue to change, including the balance of power and the relations between key players. It fully applies also to the future of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno Karabakh. However, if Armenia sits and waits, it will probably continue to lose, as it has been losing since 2020.

The first thing which should be done, and it should be done immediately, would be to repeal the decree of the president of the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic on the dissolution of the Republic. Without going into legal battles about the legality of this decree, it is clear that if it is not repealed, it will significantly complicate any actions to reverse the situation beyond 2023. The repeal of the decree will mean that both the president and parliament of the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic will continue to function until spring 2025, as both were elected in the spring of 2020 for five years. They should continue to function in Yerevan, or, if the Armenian government thinks that Azerbaijan will use their functioning as a *casus bello* to justify its new aggression against Armenia, discussions should be held to find another country which may allow these bodies to function.

Cancelling the September 28 decree does not mean Armenia should withdraw from negotiations with Azerbaijan on a peace treaty. An Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty, including the recognition by Armenia of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan within Soviet Azerbaijan borders (86,600 square km.), has nothing to do with the existence of the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic.

The Future of Negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan

While the last Armenians left Nagorno Karabakh, many seek to understand the future of peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The process started immediately after the end of the first Karabakh War in 1994, was paused during the 2020 war, and resumed in 2021. In 2022, three platforms were established – Moscow, Brussels, and Washington – but the war in Ukraine prevented any potential cooperation between Russia and the West. There were moments in 2022 and 2023 when many had hoped that a peace agreement was within reach, but escalations followed rounds of negotiations. In 2023, Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers met twice in Washington,⁷ while several rounds of negotiations took place in Russia, Brussels, and Chisinau.⁸

In general, there are two visions concerning the impact of the destruction of the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic on the negotiations. According to the first narrative, the issue of Nagorno Karabakh has been one of the main obstacles on the road to peace. Armenia recognized Nagorno Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. Still, Armenia demanded an international mechanism for the Baku-Stepanakert dialogue, international presence in Nagorno Karabakh, and special guarantees to ensure the rights and security of Armenians. Azerbaijan rejected all these claims, thus creating an impasse in the negotiations. Now, as the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic will cease to exist in a few months, this may facilitate the peace process, making it easier for Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach a deal. The supporters of this narrative believe that the international community should assist Armenia in coping with refugees and use this momentum to push forward for the signature of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement at the earliest. According to this scenario, recent events in Nagorno Karabakh may also significantly weaken Russia's position in the region. After the exodus of Armenians, it will be challenging for Russia to secure the extension of the peacekeepers' mandate beyond November 2025, while the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace

⁷ Foreign Ministry of Armenia. “The Trilateral meeting of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, the United States national security advisor to President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan.” 26 June 2023. https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2023/06/28/arm_usa_aze/12067.

⁸ “Pashinian Satisfied With Fresh Talks With Aliyev.” <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32441591.html>.

agreement and normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations may facilitate the further drift of Armenia away from Russia, especially as the inaction of Russian peacekeepers triggered more anti-Russian sentiments among Armenians.

According to the second vision, Nagorno Karabakh is not the only thorny issue in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The enclaves, the “Zangezur corridor”, and the recently emerged concept of “Western Azerbaijan” and Azerbaijani demands that tens if not hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis should settle in what many consider Armenia remain challenging barriers on the road to any agreement. The destruction of Nagorno Karabakh will allow Azerbaijan to focus all its resources on Armenia, forcing Yerevan’s hand to accept these demands. The lack of action by any international actor regarding the Azerbaijani attack on Nagorno Karabakh may create a temptation in Azerbaijan to launch additional attacks against Armenia, similar to incursions that happened in May, November 2021, and September 2022; while these attacks may or may not be preliminary agreed with external players. In this scenario, the end of Nagorno Karabakh will mark the beginning of a new phase of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, this time focused on Armenia.

It is challenging to assess whether peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is within reach. However, one thing is clear: the second humiliation of Armenia within three years has already triggered significant backlash among Armenians. Many are still in shock, which is why Yerevan witnessed only small protests in late September 2023. However, many Armenians are fed up with permanent defeats, and there is a growing feeling that Armenia, in the long-term perspective, should become stronger to reclaim its position in the region. In the current environment, any attack of Azerbaijan against Armenia, regardless of pretexts or reasons, will only strengthen this feeling among Armenians and will be a direct path to long-term instability and conflicts in the South Caucasus.

The Necessity to Preserve Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nagorno Karabakh

Worrying signs are coming from Azerbaijan about Baku’s intention to change the cultural heritage of Nagorno Karabakh. Azerbaijan announced that the Gandzasar monastery had been “vandalized by Armenians.” The

State Service for the Protection, Development, and Restoration of Cultural Heritage attached to the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan announced that “violating the norms and principles of international law, the occupying country carried out illegal repair and restoration works in one of the most significant monuments of Christian architecture in Caucasian Albania.”⁹ The notion of the “Caucasian Albania” is widely used by Azerbaijan in its “history wars” against Armenia and in efforts to “prove that Armenians appeared in the South Caucasus only in the early 19th century.”¹⁰ The same ideas have been extensively in use since the end of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War to challenge the history of Dadivanq, a mediaeval monastery complex located in the security zone that was established around Nagorno Karabakh after the 1992–1994 first Karabakh war.¹¹

It is very tempting to go deep into history and bring pieces of evidence from multiple foreign sources, written both before and after Christ (BC and AD), which speak extensively about the rich Armenian history and culture on the territory of the South Caucasus, or mention the writings of numerous distinguished modern historians and other scholars about the vibrant Armenian culture present in Nagorno Karabakh for millennia. The main problem is that any such attempts will destroy almost non-existent trust between parties, deepen hatred and animosity, and hamper any efforts to bring long-term stability to the South Caucasus.

Another burning issue in this regard is the access to graveyards by displaced people. Graveyards and respect to deceased people have a special significance for the people of the South Caucasus. This was a problem for Azerbaijanis in the period of 1994–2020, and now, as all Armenians were forced to leave Nagorno Karabakh, they face the same issue.

It is worth mentioning that we all are very aware of Azerbaijani frustration and anger at the situation in the security zone established by the self-declared Nagorno Karabakh Republic during the 1992–1994 first Karabakh war. One

⁹ “Azerbaijan Claims that Dadivank Monastery Belongs to Udi Cultural Heritage.” *Monument Watch*. <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-claims-that-dadivank-monastery-belongs-to-udi-cultural-heritage/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

cannot exclude that Azerbaijani leadership is well aware of these sentiments and, by taking steps to humiliate Armenians, seeks to harness these feelings and increase its prestige among Azerbaijanis.

It is challenging to go deep into the personal and collective psychology of conflict-inflicted human beings and groups and to find explanations for some actions or inactions. However, as relevant specialists hopefully will deal with these issues and may offer some long-term solutions, what should and can be done now is to send a clear message to Azerbaijani authorities by all actors who influence Baku. The message should be straightforward – any actions to destroy or distort the Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno Karabakh will directly provoke more conflict and hatred. It will undermine any actions to bring stability and peace to the region.

Some may argue that probably Azerbaijani leadership is not interested in peace and stability. However, regardless of the real intention of Azerbaijani leadership, those interested in regional peace and stability, including the Council of Europe, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other actors, should take necessary steps to prevent the dangerous path of cultural wars in the region.

The Geopolitical Implications of Possible New Attacks by Azerbaijan against Armenia

While many in Armenia seek to overcome the shock from the violent demise of the self-proclaimed Artsakh (Nagorno Karabakh) Republic and support some 105,000 forced displaced persons who entered Armenia after September 19 military offensive of Azerbaijan against Nagorno Karabakh, experts and politicians are taking steps to assess the geopolitical implications of the recent events for the South Caucasus. Some anticipate a significant weakening of Russia's position in the region. The absence of Armenians in Artsakh may result in the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the area, if not now, then at least after November 2025.

Meanwhile, the destruction of the republic triggered additional anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia. The leading civil society representatives publicly demanded the withdrawal of Armenia from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), pushing out the Russian military base and border troops

from Armenia.¹² According to this logic, the destruction of Artsakh may also facilitate the signature of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which will pave the way for normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations. For Armenia, normalizing relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye will make it easier for Armenia to start moving away from Russia, as Yerevan will not fear additional Turkish and Azerbaijani attacks.

However, as some begin to imagine a peaceful South Caucasus free of Russian presence, many argue that the tragic end of the 35-year struggles by Armenians to live in their homeland without intimidation and fear will only bring more conflict and suffering to the region.

If Azerbaijan decides to attack Armenia, it will have profound implications for regional geopolitics. In this case, only Russia and Iran will have a real possibility to take any actions on the ground. Neither the U.S. nor European countries have any troops deployed in Armenia, and they have no political desire to send troops to Armenia to fight against Azerbaijan. The EU has a civilian mission deployed in Armenia. However, in the event of large-scale hostilities, the observers cannot do anything and would be evacuated to Yerevan or perhaps out of Armenia. The EU and the U.S. may use extensive diplomacy, including phone calls, statements and threats of sanctions. However, more is needed to have a tangible impact on Baku's decision-making process.

Russian troops are in Armenia, and some are deployed in the country's southern region. Will Russia intervene militarily to protect Armenia, which, despite a growing bilateral relations crisis, is still a *de jure* ally of Russia? Given the ongoing war in Ukraine and Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's importance for Russia, Moscow probably would like to mediate diplomatically, seeking to organize another summit of leaders in Russia to send a message to everyone once again that Russia still calls the shots in the Caucasus. Russia would like to use the situation to finalize its vision of restoring communications in the region, convincing Armenia to accept the control of Russian border troops

¹² "Withdrawal from CSTO and integration with NATO, this is how participants of forum in Brussels see Armenia's future." https://arka.am/en/news/politics/withdrawal_from_csto_and_integration_with_nato_this_is_how_participants_of_forum_in_brussels_see_arm/.

over the transportation routes passing from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan via Armenia, as was envisaged by the November 10, 2020 statement.

Direct military intervention by Iran may put in danger the strategic alliance agreement Türkiye signed with Azerbaijan in June 2021. It is also unlikely that Iran will launch military actions in the South Caucasus without Russia's consent, and Russia has no interest in seeing an Iranian military presence in the South Caucasus.

Thus, the most probable outcome of a new Azerbaijani incursion against Armenia will result in more Russian and, potentially, Iranian influence over Armenia and reduced Western presence.

In any case, Azerbaijan has not faced any consequences from anyone for the displacement of Artsakh Armenians. There were standard statements of concern from several capitals, promises to provide humanitarian aid to Armenian refugees from Artsakh and calls on Azerbaijan to ensure the rights of those Armenians who would wish to return to Artsakh, as was mentioned in the recent joint U.S.-EU statement.

New Demands by Azerbaijan

After the 2020 Six-Week War, Azerbaijan made three additional demands from Armenia. Item number one is the so-called enclaves, territories within Soviet Azerbaijan administrative borders, which were within Soviet Armenia. There is much confusion on the legal aspects of the appearance of those enclaves, as well as on numbers and area, and Soviet Armenia has its enclave within Soviet Azerbaijan. However, after the 2020 Six-Week War, Azerbaijan put this issue on the agenda, also using the recognition of Azerbaijani territorial integrity under the Alma-Ata declaration of 1991 (86,600 square km) by Armenia. Now Azerbaijan speaks about eight Azerbaijani villages occupied by Armenia with an overall 109 square kilometres of territory and uses the word “liberation” if Armenia fails to give back those territories via negotiations.¹³

¹³ “Baku Claims ‘Territory Occupied by Armenia.’” <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32633207.html>.

Item two is the “Zangezur corridor,” which would connect Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhichevan, and with Türkiye via Armenia. The issue of restoration of communications was part of the November 10, 2020 trilateral statement, including the routes from western regions of Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan and the role of Russian border troops. The term “corridor” was not mentioned. However, Azerbaijan connected this issue with the functioning of the Berdzor (Lachin) Corridor, arguing that as Armenians did not see any Azerbaijani officials while traveling from Armenia to Artsakh via Berdzor, Azerbaijanis should not see any Armenian officials while traveling from Azerbaijan proper to Nakhichevan via Syunik.¹⁴ This argument became pointless after the departure of Armenians from Nagorno Karabakh. While verbally recognizing Armenian sovereignty over Syunik, Azerbaijan now insists that Armenia should provide special guarantees to ensure the safety of those Azerbaijanis who will travel from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan via Armenia, without any talk about the safety of Armenians who may travel from Armenia to Iran via Nakhichevan. The concept of special guarantees is vague and can be subject to manipulation.

Item number three relates to the concept of “Western Azerbaijan.” This concept received prominence in Azerbaijan after the 2020 Artsakh War, as Azerbaijani authorities implied that part of Armenian territories are historical Azerbaijani lands, and Azerbaijanis were forcefully displaced from their homeland. According to this narrative, Azerbaijanis should come to Armenia, and Armenia should ensure their security, safety, educational and religious rights.¹⁵ Initially, many thought Azerbaijan created this concept to force Armenia to accept the loss of Artsakh, telling Armenians that if they continued to speak about Artsakh, Azeris would about Western Azerbaijan. However, even after the destruction of the Artsakh Republic, Azerbaijan has not dropped this concept. Azerbaijan will continue to use these demands to pressure Armenia and postpone the signature of any agreement with Armenia.

¹⁴ “Legal regimes of Zangezur, Lachin corridors should be same: Aliyev.” *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/legal-regimes-of-zangezur-lachin-corridors-should-be-same-aliyev/2447608>.

¹⁵ “President Aliyev: Azerbaijanis Should Peacefully Return to Western Azerbaijan.” *Caspian News*. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-aliyev-azerbaijanis-should-peacefully-return-to-western-azerbaijan-2022-12-26-29/>.

Perspectives of No Peace Agreement in Upcoming Years

October-November 2023 probably will remain in the history of Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations as a strange period full of hopes, disappointments, and confusion. Immediately after September 2023, there was a feeling that a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was within reach. However, only two months after, in early December 2023, no one talked about any upcoming peace agreement, and no one even knew when and where Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations may resume. There could be different explanations for this situation.

Some experts argue that Azerbaijan lost its interest in a peace agreement after “closing the Nagorno Karabakh chapter” by force and is interested in having a “no war, no peace” situation with Armenia to be able to continue to put pressure on Armenia to satisfy its demands on enclaves and corridors. Others believe Azerbaijani leadership is not interested in the peace agreement because it needs a unifying idea to rally the population behind it, much like the raising of the Azerbaijani flag did in the early 2000s. Azerbaijan’s leaders need a new dream to secure the loyalty of the population for the next 20 years, and the concept of “Western Azerbaijan” or the “Return of Azerbaijanis to their homeland/territory of current Armenia” may become a new idea to rally the population. In this context, any peace agreement with Armenia, regardless of the context, may kill the concept of Western Azerbaijan. Thus, Baku is not interested in signing any document.

Other experts blame everything on the transformation of the world order and the Russia-West confrontation. They believe that Russia will do everything to prevent the signature of a peace agreement in the Western capitals, viewing it as another blow to its prestige in the region. Thus, Russia pressures Azerbaijan to reject the resumption of negotiations on Western platforms. At the same time, Armenia does not want to continue negotiations with Russia due to the deterioration of Armenia-Russia relations.

In 2024, election campaigns will start first in Russia, then in the EU, and later in the U.S.¹⁶ If everything seems apparent with the results of the March 2024

¹⁶ “10th European Parliament election on 9 June 2024.” *German Federal Electoral Commission*. <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/europawahlen/2024.html>, “America’s Choice 2024.” *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2024>.

Presidential elections in Russia, the situation in the EU and the U.S. is more complex. It is challenging to assess whether current EU leadership, including European Council President Charles Michel, will keep their positions or whether we will have new leaders who may not be interested in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. If a Trump-like figure returns to the White House in January 2025, this may significantly impact U.S. foreign policy, including in the South Caucasus. Moreover, we should not forget about the upcoming Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Azerbaijan in the first half of 2025 and the parliamentary elections in Armenia in June 2026.

In current circumstances, it is doubtful there will be a peace agreement in the short to medium term. Mediators and facilitators should prepare themselves for such a future. The international community should send a clear message to Azerbaijan that the absence of a peace agreement cannot serve as a justification for further military attacks against Armenia, even for taking control over the enclaves. As the prospects of a peace agreement become increasingly elusive, mediators and facilitators should put more effort into conflict management, seeking to avoid military escalations by facilitating talks even without any hope for short-term breakthroughs. Meanwhile, as Armenia and Azerbaijan brace themselves for another period of uncertainty, more effort should be put into fostering confidence and security-building measures. One of the options here could be the expansion of Armenia-Azerbaijan dialogues to include experts from other regional countries – Georgia, Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, which will allow them to discuss realistic scenarios for the region's future in a frank manner.

Euroregion “South Caucasus”

Andrzej Klimczuk

Geographically, the South Caucasus is undoubtedly a region with well-defined natural borders, its space being covered by three independent states – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It should be emphasized that these three countries have different religions, alphabets and currency. These countries also chose different paths of political development and priorities of their countries’ foreign policy.

In the course of more than 30 years of independence, the South Caucasus lost the chance, unlike the Baltic states, to establish a stable and secure space with broad prospects for economic cooperation. Just the opposite happened, with the emergence of divisive lines, separating nations and diminishing prospects of shared prosperity.

It seems that now is the moment when some pre-emptive moves, an impulse or a kind of escape forward is needed. The only thing that unites the interests of the South Caucasus countries are issues related to access to the economies and resources of richer partners (EU, Türkiye, Russia, USA, China, etc.). And the single most important element binding the interests of these countries together is the issue of infrastructure – roads, communications, railways, energy connectivity, raw materials, fuels, etc. What has already been achieved in this matter, even to a modest extent, shows that it triggers both positive dynamics, but also creates opportunities in which all parties can benefit.

If one does not take the conflicts into account, a simple glance at the map and assessment of the South Caucasus’ potential is enough to make it clear that there are very few regions globally that possess such immense geopolitical and geo-economic opportunities. In addition, the region has ample transit and tourist potential, important natural resources of international significance, and an educated, almost 100% literate society, and a relatively cheap labour force. In other words, all the necessary factors are in place for the South Caucasus to succeed and to occupy, as a region, a worthy place in

international relations networks and to respectively ensure average European living standards for the population with sustainable prospects of further improvement.

The creation of the Euroregion “South Caucasus” will not only bring Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia closer to the European Union, but will also bring benefits such as:

- Stability and security in the region that would contribute to the success of the three individual countries;
- Integration and trust that would trigger a cumulative effect;
- Following successful examples of regional cooperation like the Benelux and Visegrad Four groups;
- Building up a European model of cooperation – a common space, the four freedoms, and symbolic borders;
- Saving billions in military expenditures and rediverting this funding towards social services;
- Developing and exploiting fully the region’s common economic and transit potential;
- Improving confidence in the future.

The benefit for the South Caucasus countries, resulting from the creation of the Euroregion “South Caucasus”, would be obvious – starting the process of uniting geopolitical potential and economic interests. A more distant perspective could be the abolition of trade barriers, customs and borders, and the construction of a system of free movement of people, goods and services. Without creating artificial and bureaucratic concepts of a political or ideological nature, it is possible to escape in this way by showing the societies of the three countries of the Caucasus the obvious benefits that affect their everyday life (sustainable security, increased mobility, greater openness to tourism, reduction of poverty, eliminating differences and underdevelopment, etc.). What used to be a barrier (borders, poor roads and lack of communication) may become a binder, showing that common interest can prevail over particularism and political or ethnic divisions. The European Union should take under consideration setting up a new format of cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

This would mean:

- A common market;
- A shared external security system;
- Strong stability and higher security guarantees;
- Multiplication of resources;
- Shared infrastructure projects;
- Increased attractiveness of the region;
- Increased foreign direct investment (FDI);
- Better living standards;
- Better prospects for future generations.

The European Union has a lot to offer by extrapolating to the South Caucasus the European spirit, principles and standards of cooperation, eventually contributing to trust and reconciliation, and opening new transport communications. The EU has to be more active in engaging in such areas as democratization, good governance and rule of law. An integral part of this process is strengthening the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, pursuing public administration reform, establishing a compact, well-structured, concise and professional civil service, and the effective functioning of institutions in the areas of law enforcement and market economy.

Conclusions

1. During the thirty years that have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and achieving independence, the states of the South Caucasus have not taken advantage of the impressive potential entailed in regional cooperation, their attractive collective geopolitical and geo-economic position, and transit capacity.
2. The South Caucasus has gone through different periods of history, but this stage of development is particularly important, as its ability to build a strong, developing and successful region is decreasing. In theory, it is possible to build a successful national state individually, outside the regional context, although the EU accession process demonstrates that a regional collective effort proves to be much more effective.

3. Creating a Euroregion “South Caucasus” is therefore urgent.
4. The future of the South Caucasus primarily depends on the three states themselves, their ability and vision, the capacity to observe the overall picture of regional developments and assist each other, and shared activity in order to help the population of the states perceive a new reality.
5. There is still an opportunity to give the South Caucasus a new lease of life and a second wind, which can take it through the problems lying ahead. This would be possible, provided that it is accompanied by patience and tolerance. A restructured political will and efforts to understand the opponent’s view could become the heart of change.
6. The security and stability, economic development and integration of the South Caucasus largely depends, hopefully, on the degree of democratization of Russia as the most powerful regional player; At present Russia is the only external force, which links its own interests and influence strengthening capacity in the South Caucasus destructively by using military force and its defence industry to wield influence.
7. The European Union should play a stronger and more active role in all formats of the negotiation process in order to achieve the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the South Caucasus, as well as in the process of building a stimulating environment for the region’s political stability and economic prosperity.
8. Time is running out to show radical improvements in the culture of cooperation and the quality of targets, ultimately building up a common vision to treat the region as a shared space for three nations and a means of embodying common interests. Otherwise, the South Caucasus will lose the chance to modernise the region and further integrate it into the wider dynamic tendencies entailed in trans-European cooperation processes.

9. The recent developments in Karabakh makes the perspective of Armenia-Azerbaijan Treaty closer. Accordingly, the prospect of trilateral cooperation in the South Caucasus should gain momentum.
10. A stable and integrated South Caucasus will make a serious contribution in a broader regional security system that will bring greater stability in adjacent areas.

PART III: External Factors of New Security Arrangements in the South Caucasus

Geopolitical Dilemma of the South Caucasus: Keeping Russia Down, the West In, Iran Out

Vasif Huseynov¹

Introduction

The South Caucasus has long been subject to a dynamic interplay of power and influence, marked by a complex history of shifting alliances and territorial disputes. As the world witnesses a period of geopolitical reconfiguration instigated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and a more assertive global power competition, the implications of these changes have reverberated in the South Caucasus. This article delves into the intricate landscape of the South Caucasus, exploring its evolving geopolitical dynamics and the potential emergence of a new security order.

Traditionally, this region has been under the considerable influence of Russia, which has regarded it as a part of its “zone of privileged interests.” However, Moscow’s regional dominance has faced challenges, primarily due to its unexpected military setbacks in Ukraine and economic troubles at home. This shift in the global geopolitical landscape has created opportunities for other external actors to fill the void left by Russia’s diminished influence.

Meanwhile, the three countries of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – have been strategically positioning themselves to capitalize on the changing dynamics, safeguard their national interests, and enhance their independence. These recent developments in regional politics signal a significant transition toward a new security order, prompting an examination of the unfolding transformation and its potential consequences for the future of the South Caucasus.

This article seeks to shed light on the ongoing transition and assess its implications, exploring the decline of the Russia-dominated security order and the

¹ 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.

emergence of a possible new security framework in the South Caucasus. As we delve deeper into the intricate geopolitical shifts within the region, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the emerging security order and the opportunities and challenges it presents for the countries and actors involved.

The article also aims to develop policy recommendations designed to offer policy options for these countries to take maximum advantage of the present geopolitical transition in the South Caucasus. It is argued that the erosion of the Russian hegemony offers an opportunity to minimize the Russian influence in the South Caucasus and take measures against its resurgence in the future. Towards this end, the article proposes targeted, coordinated and joint policy initiatives for the three regional countries and their Western partners. It is emphasized that this cooperation between the sides should not aim at only minimization of the Russian role but also prevention of the intervening attempts of the southern neighbour of the South Caucasus, Iran. Hence, the formula developed here is as follows: Keeping Russia down, the West in, and Iran out.

Shift in the Power Balance of the South Caucasus

The Russia-Ukraine war opened a new chapter in the history of international relations and had likewise significant implications for the South Caucasus. Facing an unexpected military debacle in Ukraine and massive economic troubles at home, Russia began to face challenges in this region. Russia's regional aspirations face challenges, especially concerning Armenia and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Georgia appears to be attempting to find a balance with Russia while seemingly distancing itself from its pro-Western aspirations.²

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus that has a territorial conflict with Russia and feels threatened by its Northern neighbour. The Georgian government has been therefore attentive to the potential spillover of the Ukraine conflict into its territories. These security threats have prompted Tbilisi to reevaluate its foreign policy concerning the EU and the USA while

² Régis Genté. "Broken Dream: The Oligarchs, Russia, and Georgia's Drift from Europe." European Council on Foreign Relations. 21 December 2022.

reducing its emphasis on aspirations to join NATO. In parallel, the government of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili attempts to diversify the country's foreign policy by establishing stronger ties with China and refraining from an all-out confrontation with Russia.

Georgia has also stood out as one of the few countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia that significantly increased its trade with Russia after the West imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its aggression against Ukraine. In the year following the onset of the conflict, the overall trade between Georgia and Russia surged by nearly 22 percent, despite objections from the EU and the United States.³ The Georgian government has exhibited a resolute commitment to maintain its newly adopted multi-dimensional foreign policy, irrespective of criticism and occasional pressure from Western powers.⁴

The developments involving Armenia and Azerbaijan exhibited significant differences when compared to those concerning Georgia, marking the erosion of the Russia-dominated security order in the region. One pivotal development in this context revolved around the involvement of external mediators in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations. Prior to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia had been the primary mediator in these talks, but in 2022 and 2023, the EU and the USA assumed a more active role in mediating. The Kremlin referred to these actions by Western powers as “geopolitical games,” with the apparent goal of diminishing Russia's influence in the South Caucasus.⁵

Nevertheless, Moscow failed to keep the process under control. Most importantly, Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other's territorial integrity in the EU-mediated summit of the leaders of the two countries on the sidelines of the first gathering of the European Political Community in Prague, on October 6, 2022. The recognition of the Karabakh region by Yerevan

³ “‘Ridiculous’ to Rope Georgia into Western Sanctions against Russia, PM Says.” *Politico*, 24 May 2023.

⁴ Georgi Kandelaki. “Russia is losing in Ukraine but Winning in Georgia.” *Atlantic Council*, 31 August 2023.

⁵ Vasif Huseynov. “Regional Tensions Loom over Multilateral Initiatives in South Caucasus.” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 20 Issue 61, April 2023.

as part of Azerbaijan was a development that was not planned by the Kremlin, whose representatives were proposing to leave the issue of the status of Karabakh to future generations. A month after the Prague summit, Russian diplomats clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with Armenia's recognition of Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan. For instance, on November 1, 2022, Russia's Ambassador to Yerevan, Sergei Kopyrkin, told reporters that "In our opinion, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is an issue that should be left to the next generations, when the conditions for a solution to the problem acceptable and fair to all are in place."⁶

To the dismay of the Kremlin, Azerbaijan continued to gradually restore its sovereignty over the Karabakh region and prevented the military supplies by Armenia and Russia to the separatist regime in Karabakh. Azerbaijan's installation of a checkpoint at the Lachin road on April 23, 2023, to the frustration of Russia whose Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov categorically opposed this move during his visit to Baku two months ago, dealt a major blow to Russia's role in Karabakh.⁷

Until September 2023, Azerbaijan sought to resolve the conflict through diplomatic means. Towards this purpose, Baku invited the representatives of the Armenian community of Karabakh to meetings in the Azerbaijani cities or Europe. The rejection of these proposals by the separatist regime resulted in Azerbaijan's anti-terror operations against the illegal military units in Karabakh on 19–20 September, 2023. In less than 24 hours, the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan succeeded to force the separatist regime into capitulation. This has resulted in the end of the so-called "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic".

Moscow did not intervene or publicly condemn Azerbaijan. It can be assumed that Russia did not want to risk its overall relations with Azerbaijan and the country's major ally Türkiye. This has been affected by the growing importance of the two countries for Moscow in the context of the disruptions of Russia's relations with many countries due to the Ukraine war. The

⁶ "Del on Karabakh Status should be delayed, says Russia." *Azıtatıyın*, 1 November 2022.

⁷ "Russian FM comments on proposals to open border checkpoints on the Lachin Road." 28 February 2023.

fact that the Azerbaijani government succeeded to restore its territorial integrity without sacrificing its independence vis-à-vis Russia or any other big power was an accomplishment few would have thought to be possible. In the aftermath of the elimination of the separatist regime, Azerbaijan emerged as a more assertive regional player with its territorial integrity restored and the Karabakh card in the hands of Moscow as a leverage against Baku gone.

The decay of the Russian dominance in the South Caucasus is being observed also in the relations between Yerevan and Moscow. There have been a wide range of decisions by the Armenian government over the last two years that has strictly annoyed the Russian leaders. These decisions have been related both with Armenia's relations with Russia and the country's attempts at deepening relations with the West. Yerevan invited a monitoring mission of the European Union to observe the military situation in the country's border with Azerbaijan. In parallel, the government of Prime Minister Pashinyan was less receptive to the offer of the Russian side to deploy such a mission of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Yerevan took further steps to distance itself from Russia's military bloc. In January 2023, it refused to host an exercise of the bloc and on March 10 of that year it renounced its right to take part in the bloc's leadership rotation. In spite of the objections and threats by the representatives of Russia at various levels, Yerevan also proceeded with the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), committing Armenia to arrest Russian President Vladimir Putin should he visit Armenia. The joint military exercises of Armenia and the United States in September 2023 were seen in Moscow as another unfriendly move. Foreign Minister Lavrov said

We deplore Armenia's actions. We have said this... Of course, the announced agreement about joint Armenian-American exercises looks all the more unusual since Armenia has been refusing to participate in CSTO exercises for two years now.⁸

These political tensions are replicated in the media sphere as well. Russia's state-funded media channels target the Armenian premier and his cabinet members accusing them of being the agents of the West and seeking to demolish Armenia-Russia relations. Simultaneously, the Armenian media

⁸ Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation. Minister Lavrov's Statement and Answers to Media Questions following the G20 Summit. 10 September 2023.

accuse Russia of ceding Karabakh to Azerbaijan and failing to fulfil its security commitments to Armenia within the CSTO and other bilateral agreements. Pashinyan meanwhile is depicted by Russian media and political circles as a prospective “Zelensky,” alluding to the Ukrainian President, under whose presidency Russia-Ukraine relations deteriorated into a war.

Against this backdrop, the Armenian government is concerned that Moscow seeks to force a regime change in Yerevan. Some officials stated that Russia deliberately tried to drag Armenia into the fighting in Karabakh on September 19 and 20 with the purpose of destabilizing the country. “Since this scenario did not work out, now they are already trying to achieve their goal on the streets. They are trying to change the government in Armenia,” said Armen Grigoryan, secretary of the Armenian Security Council, in an interview with local media.⁹ Grigoryan’s statement came amid protests in Yerevan demanding Pashinyan’s resignation over his mishandling of the situation in Karabakh.

These simmering tensions have been further enflamed by public criticism from officials on both sides. Dmitry Medvedev, deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, criticized Pashinyan for his engagement with NATO and concluded with the suggestive phrase “imagine what awaits him.”¹⁰ In alluding to Russia’s role in the anti-government protests, the Armenian premier criticized Moscow’s alleged intervention:

Some of our partners are making more and more efforts to expose our security vulnerabilities, now putting not only our external but also internal security and stability at risk, violating the ethics of diplomatic, interstate relations in the process.¹¹

Nevertheless, Armenia’s exit from the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union as well as its departure from Russia’s orbit altogether does not seem real. It is important to note that Russia remains a major trading partner for Armenia and an important conduit to Iran. Thus it seems “unrealistic to expect that Armenia fundamentally alters its foreign policy orientation towards

⁹ “Grigoryan: Attempt was Made to Draw Armenia into Larger Regional Conflict. Now they Try to Replace Government.” *News Armenia*, 21 September 2023. See Benyamin Poghosyan’s chapter in this Study Group Information booklet.

¹⁰ “Dmitry Medvedev: Guess What Fate Awaits Him.” *Mediamax*, 19 September 2023.

¹¹ “Pashinyan slams Russia amid continuing protests in Yerevan.” *Azatutyun*, 24 September 2023.

the West without these dependencies being addressed and mitigated.”¹² Hence, it is not surprising that despite all the above-mentioned tensions, the Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan asserts that his country is not changing foreign policy vector and does not plan to exit the CSTO.¹³ However, this statement may be a rhetorical attempt to calm Russia’s concerns while Yerevan is gradually pursuing its policies to diversify the country’s foreign policy.

Towards a New Security Order

These developments in the geopolitical sphere of the South Caucasus provide enough ground to conclude that the Russia-dominated security order of the South Caucasus has significantly weakened. The confrontation between the West and Russia and the latter’s setback in the war against Ukraine have prompted two republics that had uni-directional policy vectors to adopt elements of Azerbaijan’s balanced foreign policy strategy. This strategy entails the pursuit of a neutral stance between the West and Russia, steering clear of provoking either side through excessive alignment with one. With Armenia, this policy course is bound to incur Russia’s antagonism. Given Armenia’s extensive reliance on Russia across various domains, Moscow’s frustration with Pashinyan’s balancing act appears justified.

As observed in the earlier sections, Moscow’s decline as a dominant actor in the region leads to the growing role of other external actors in the regional affairs. For the countries neighbouring the South Caucasus (Iran, Russia, and, to some extent, Türkiye), the intervention and geopolitical positioning of faraway countries in this region is inadmissible and a grave national security threat. For instance, the “encroachment” of external players into the South Caucasus is not observed with concerns only in Moscow, but also in Tehran.

This was made clear by Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian on October 23, 2023, before the meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, that was organized on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting

¹² “RCDS Insights: Armenia’s ‘Anti-Russian’ Turn.” *RCDS*, 14 September 2023.

¹³ “Armenia says its foreign policy not changing despite fraying Russia ties.” *CivilNet*, 11 October 2023.

of the 3+3 regional cooperation platform in Tehran. “The presence of outsiders in the region will not only not solve any problems but will also complicate the situation further,” he stated without elaborating but with an implicit reference to the EU and United States.¹⁴

Iran sees the new realities in the region as a chance to obtain more active role in the geopolitical map and economic structure of the South Caucasus. It has, however, by default limited space in the region given more active and substantial presence of Russia and Türkiye in the region.

This emphasis on the regional actors as the legitimate players to deal with their local problems in the South Caucasus has been supported by Russia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye. For instance, on September 16, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Türkiye, proposing a quadrilateral format of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian, and Turkish leaders, hinted that local disputes needed to be resolved by the countries of the region – not interlopers.¹⁵

Baku also started to emphasize the importance of regional solutions to regional problems, in particular, in reaction to France’s decision to provide military supplies to Armenia. This played a critical role in Baku’s refusal to attend the EU-mediated meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders together with the French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and the President of the Council of the European Union Charles Michel in Granada, Spain, on October 5. The Azerbaijani Press Agency, with reference to an “exclusive source,” reported that “Baku does not see the need to discuss the problems of the region with countries far from the region. Baku believes that these issues can be discussed and resolved in a regional framework.”¹⁶

Thus, the rise of the “regional solutions by regional actors” approach in the South Caucasus takes place in parallel with the decay of the Russia-dominated regional security order. This may constitute a new security order in the

¹⁴ “Iran hosts Armenia-Azerbaijan Talks. Russia Says Main Issues Resolved in Nagorno Karabakh.” *Reuters*, 23 October 2023.

¹⁵ “Türkiye sees solution of Azerbaijan-Armenia peace issue within framework of regional states.” *AzeriNews*, 19 September 2023.

¹⁶ “Reasons for Azerbaijan’s Refusal to attend the Granada Meeting Revealed.” *Azerbaijan News Agency*, 4 October 2023.

region; an order that is not dominated by any other extra-regional actor and with stronger agency of the local states. In this order, the interests and concerns of the three surrounding powers, namely Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, would be prioritized over those of other powers that are not from the region. The success of this approach would be critical to prevent a military escalation in the South Caucasus that the erosion of Russia-dominated order and “intervention” of non-regional players may invite.

The convening of the second meeting of the 3+3 format after almost two years of delay on October 23, 2023 and the expression of intent to hold the next meeting in the near future can be analysed as a supporting argument in this context. It is worth recalling that this configuration was introduced by the leaders of Azerbaijan and Türkiye following the 44-Day War in December 2020. The initiative addresses the three countries of the South Caucasus plus three neighbouring powers (Russia, Iran, and Türkiye). Currently, Georgia has opted to abstain from participating due to its territorial conflict with Russia. The initiative, even without Georgia, has faced a number of challenges, including Iran’s increasingly aggressive policies in the region.¹⁷ Hence, the sides could not come together again for almost two years after the initial gathering of deputy foreign ministers in Moscow in December 2021.

This time, the sides came together at the level of foreign ministers on October 23. They stressed the “importance of platforms like the Consultative Regional Platform ‘3+3’ in providing opportunities for constructive dialogue and establishing mutually beneficial cooperation between the countries of the region”.¹⁸ The ministers agreed that the next meeting will be held in Türkiye on a date to be specified later. They also confirmed that the platform remains open to Georgia’s participation, though Tbilisi has not indicated any willingness to join.

If the new order in the region takes hold and Georgia continues to uphold a balanced approach in its foreign policy, some breakthrough toward Tbilisi’s participation in the 3+3 format and eventually breaking the deadlock over the Georgia-Russia conflict may be expected. This situation would diminish

¹⁷ Huseynov, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Joint Communiqué of the Second Meeting of the 3+3 Platform*. 24 October 2023.

the geopolitical dimension of this conflict by making it less a matter of the West-Russia rivalry and hence make Russia more interested in substantial talks for the resolution of this conflict.¹⁹ Overall, the geopolitics of the South Caucasus are passing through a period of transformation and promises more political dividends and prosperity for the regional countries if they manage to tackle this process successfully and with no hostilities.

What Role for the West in the New Security Order?

The EU and the United States have played an important role in the politics of the South Caucasus since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was partly thanks to the West that the local countries succeeded to diversify their economic outreach diversifying their dependency on the Russian market and solidify their newly found independent statehood. In this context, Azerbaijan and Georgia achieved more, as Armenia relegated to a Russian satellite after it occupied 20 percent of the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan with the political and military support of Moscow.

The projects that have been implemented through the joint efforts of Azerbaijan and Georgia along with their Western partners, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor helped regional countries to strengthen their sovereignty and national security. The role of the two South Caucasian countries as a gateway to the countries of the Central Asia in their “very difficult neighbourhood” is regularly acknowledged by U.S. officials. Azerbaijan and Georgia are key countries on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, that connects Europe with Asia. The Middle Corridor provides the European Union with a critical alternative to the New Eurasian Land Bridge, also known as Northern Corridor, that passes through Russia and Belarus. On the other hand, this corridor opens up a passage for the Central Asian countries to reduce dependency from the Northern Corridor to reach out to the European market. For instance, the launch of the exports of the

¹⁹ For more details about geopolitical dimension of the conflict, see: V. Huseynov. “Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity.” *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, 1 No. 1, Summer 2020. Available at: <https://cspjournal.az/post/vicious-circle-of-the-south-caucasus-intra-regional-conflicts-and-geopolitical-heterogeneity-418>. (Accessed: 15 November 2023).

Kazakhstani oil via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline this year plays an increasingly important role for Kazakhstan's efforts for diversification. There are also reinvigorated efforts supported by the United States and EU to bring Turkmen natural gas to Europe via the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is a "reliable partner" of the West in the sphere of energy security, said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Baku on July 18, 2022, following the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on the increase of the Azerbaijani gas exports to the EU from 12 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year to 20 bcm by 2027.²⁰ In December 2022, Azerbaijan agreed with Georgia, Romania and Hungary to construct an electric cable running under the Black Sea to carry Azerbaijani green energy to Europe. These deals are widely seen as "part of wider European Union efforts to diversify energy resources away from Russia amid the Ukraine war".²¹

As President Aliyev often notes, transnational connectivity and energy projects, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor, would not have been possible without U.S. support. This partnership has helped not only Azerbaijan but also Georgia and the countries of Central Asia to diversify their geopolitical landscape and strengthen their independence in the face of various threats and challenges.

The EU and the United States have been a critical partner for Azerbaijan and Georgia to diversify their foreign policy and build an independent stance vis-à-vis other powers. Georgia's awarding of EU candidate status is proof of the effectiveness of this policy. This move by Brussels will be a source of motivation and support to all the pro-Western political and social groups in the country. This has a big potential to serve as a deterrent for the political groups who seek to downplay the European aspirations in Georgia's foreign policy.

The West has likewise supported Armenia to reduce her dependency on Russia and pursue more balanced policy internationally. The EU and the USA

²⁰ "Azerbaijan is a Reliable Partner of Europe." *Report AZ*, 17 December 2023.

²¹ "EU and Azerbaijan Enhance Bilateral Cooperation, including Energy." *European Council*, 18 July 2022.

have, however, failed to do it without damaging their relationship with Azerbaijan. The biased support of some Western countries, in particular France, to Armenia spoiled the image of the EU and undermined its honest-broker role of the EU in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. For instance, the decision to supply weapons to Armenia by the French government negatively affected the relations between Azerbaijan and the EU. Hikmet Hajiyev, foreign policy advisor to President Aliyev, related Azerbaijan's refusal to join the EU-mediated Granada summit on October 6, 2023 with France's anti-Azerbaijani policies. "France's biased actions and militarization policy... seriously undermine regional peace and stability in the South Caucasus and put at risk European Union's overall policy towards the region."²²

The awkward November 5, 2023 visit by German Foreign Minister Annabella Baerbock, during which she referred to Azerbaijani cities with their Armenian appellation and uninformed claims about Azeri internally displaced persons (IDPs) did not help matters.

The deterioration of relations between Azerbaijan and the EU, along with the collapse of the Brussels platform for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks, pose threats to both sides and does not help the peace negotiations between Baku and Yerevan.

The EU stands as Azerbaijan's foremost trading partner, contributing to 65 percent of its total foreign trade.²³ Likewise, Azerbaijan holds the position of being the primary trading partner of the EU in the South Caucasus and plays a crucial role in supplying energy to the EU. Beyond these economic connections, numerous other factors, such as connectivity and geopolitical considerations, underscore the need for both parties to uphold a close relationship and collaborate in addressing shared challenges. Baku continues to need this partnership in the aftermath of the restoration of the country's territorial integrity and the elimination of the separatist regime in Karabakh.

²² X page of Hikmet Hajiyev, 5 October 2023. Available at: <https://twitter.com/HikmetHajiyev/status/1709892377324724646>. (Accessed: 29 October 2023).

²³ "Azerbaijan's Trade Turnover with Other European Countries Decreases." *AzerNews*, 20 January 2024.

EU-Azerbaijani relations – more precisely, the Brussels format of the Armenia-Azerbaijani peace talks – are likewise important to reach negotiated solutions over the remaining disputed questions between Baku and Yerevan. The EU's support and facilitation of the peace treaty negotiations between the two countries remain critical for the process. It is worth recalling that it was thanks to the EU-mediated negotiations that Armenia and Azerbaijan recognized each other's territorial integrity in October 2022 and opened a path to peace and reconciliation.

The EU's support is important also to promote regional integration in the South Caucasus and develop a cooperation platform amongst the three countries. The first ever meeting amongst the prime ministers of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in October 2023, on the sidelines of the Silk Road Forum in Tbilisi, was a move that raised hopes in the region for regional integrity.²⁴

Without any doubt, the EU, unlike some other countries neighbouring the South Caucasus, stands to support and benefit from this integration. Closer ties amongst the three countries of the region will unleash their potential as an economic partner and connectivity hub for the EU, amongst many other benefits. That said, the reactivation of the Brussels format and the revitalization of the constructive role of the EU in the South Caucasus should happen sooner rather than later.

This cooperation between the West and the three countries of the South Caucasus should pursue multiple purposes. Above all, the sides need to solidify their ties and iron out their differences in order to act jointly vis-à-vis common challenges. The signing of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace treaty and the pursuit of balanced policies by the EU and its leading member states vis-à-vis the countries of the region is of utmost necessity towards this end.

Secondly, this cooperation needs to enhance the independence of the regional countries from Russia. The sides should however avoid transforming this partnership into a demarche against Russia. The core security concerns and interests of Russia in the South Caucasus should not be entirely disregarded, as the three local countries cannot afford an overt confrontation with

²⁴ “Azerbaijani, Armenian PMs meet in Georgia.” *AZTV*, 27 October 2023.

Russia. Russia's military presence in the territories of Armenia and Georgia, and the Russian peacekeeping contingent in the Karabakh region remain a security factor that cannot be ignored. Hence, the end game of the West-South Caucasus cooperation should be keeping Russia down in this region, not out, at least for now.

Thirdly, the West's engagement with the South Caucasus needs to take into account the Iranian factor. In contrast to Russia, Iran lacks significant economic and military leverage over the countries of the South Caucasus. Against the backdrop of deteriorating Azerbaijan-Iran relations since the Second Karabakh War, Iran's influence in Azerbaijan has been notably restricted. Consequently, Tehran perceives the decline of Russian influence in the South Caucasus as an opportunity. Simultaneously, Iranians view the potential rise of the West in the region's geopolitics with concern, prompting Tehran to seek entry into the region to avert undesirable developments. It is crucial for both the EU and the United States to assist the South Caucasus countries in preventing Iran's interference and maintaining regional stability. This should be incorporated into the agenda of the communications between the official representatives of the Western powers and those of the regional countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the South Caucasus finds itself at a pivotal moment in its geopolitical history, characterized by a shifting landscape of power and influence. The long-standing Russia-dominated security order in the region, which has persisted since the end of the Soviet Union, is now showing signs of decay. The geopolitical repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, coupled with Moscow's unexpected military setbacks and economic challenges, have created an environment in which the balance of power is undergoing significant changes.

Moving forward, the West's engagement with the South Caucasus must address several crucial aspects. Firstly, it should aim to solidify ties and resolve differences to address common challenges collectively. The reactivation of the Brussels format of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace talks and the revitalization of the EU's constructive role are imperative for regional stability.

Cooperation should focus on enhancing the independence of regional countries from Russia with a cautious approach to avoid antagonizing it. Any attempt to put an end to Russia's presence in the region with a conspicuous disregard to its interests and concerns could risk confrontation and violent escalations. The tragic events in Ukraine since March 2014 and the war in Georgia earlier in 2008 show that idealistic policies are naïve when it comes to Russia. Given escalating great power rivalries, it is now more crucial than ever for the South Caucasus countries to recognize and factor in this reality. The countries of the region should strive to serve as a bridge between the West and the East instead of an overt alignment with one side at the expense of their ties with the other.

Lastly, Western engagement must consider the Iranian factor. It is crucial for both the EU and the United States to assist the South Caucasus countries in preventing Iran's interference and maintaining regional stability. This should be incorporated into the agenda of the communications between the official representatives of the Western powers and those of the regional countries.

In the evolving geopolitical landscape, the West's role in the South Caucasus remains pivotal, with the overarching goal being to foster a new security order that prioritizes regional cooperation, mitigates external interference, and safeguards the interests of local actors. The end game should be a balanced approach – keeping Russia down, the West in, and Iran out.

References

- Apa.az, *Russian FM comments on proposals to open border checkpoints on the Lachin road*, February 28, 2023, Available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/russian-fm-comments-on-proposals-to-open-border-checkpoints-on-the-lachin-road-397531/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Apa.az, *Reasons for Azerbaijan's refusal to attend the Granada meeting revealed*, October 4, 2023, Available at: <https://en.apa.az/social/reasons-for-azerbajians-refusal-to-attend-the-granada-meeting-revealed-exclusive-413407> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Azatutyun.am, *Deal on Karabakh's Status Should Be Delayed, Says Russia*, November 1, 2022, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32110598.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Azatutyun.am, *Pashinyan Slams Russia Amid Continuing Protests in Yerevan*, September 24, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32606928.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Azernews.az, *Azerbaijan's trade turnover with European Union countries decreases*, January 20, 2024, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/business/220620.html> (Accessed: February 25, 2024).
- Azernews.az, *Türkiye sees solution of Azerbaijan-Armenia peace issue within framework of regional states*, September 19, 2023, Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/214961.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- AzTV.az, *Azerbaijani, Armenian PMs meet in Georgia*, October 27, 2023, Available at: <https://aztv.az/en/news/27203/azerbajani-armenian-pms-meet-in-georgia> (Accessed: February 25, 2024).
- Civilnet.am, *Armenia says its foreign policy not changing despite fraying Russia ties*, October 11, 2023, Available at: <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/754017/armenia-says-its-foreign-policy-not-changing-despite-fraying-russia-ties/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- 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 (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Genté, R. "Broken Dream: The oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's drift from Europe", European Council on Foreign Relations, December 21, 2022, Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/broken-dream-the-oligarch-russia-and-georgias-drift-from-europe/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

- Huseynov, V. “Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity”, *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 2020.
- Huseynov, V. “Moscow warns EU against Geopolitical Games in the South Caucasus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 79, May 2022.
- Huseynov, V. “Regional Tensions Loom Over Multilateral Initiatives in South Caucasus”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 20, No. 61, April 2023.
- Kandelaki, G. *Russia is losing in Ukraine but winning in Georgia*, August 31, 2023, Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-is-losing-in-ukraine-but-winning-in-georgia/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Mediamax.am, *Dmitry Medvedev: “Guess what fate awaits him”*, September 19, 2023, Available at: <https://mediamax.am/en/news/foreignpolicy/52549/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Mid.ru, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions following the G20 Summit*, September 10, 2023, Available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1903728/ (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- 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/ (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- News.am, *Grigoryan: Attempt was made to drag Armenia into larger regional conflict, now they try to replace government*, September 21, 2023, Available at: <https://news.am/eng/news/782453.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Politico.eu, *‘Ridiculous’ to rope Georgia into Western sanctions against Russia, PM says*, May 24, 2023, Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/economic-sanctions-from-georgia-would-not-affect-russias-economy-pm-says/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Rcds.am, *Rcds Insights: Armenia’s “Anti-Russian” Turn*, September 14, 2023, Available at: <https://rcds.am/en/rcds-insights-armenias-anti-russian-turn.html> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Report.az, *EC President: Azerbaijan is reliable partner of Europe*, December 17, 2022, Available at: <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/ec-president-azerbaijan-is-reliable-partner-of-europe/> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).
- Reuters.com, *Iran hosts Armenia-Azerbaijan talks, Russia says main issue resolved in Nagorno-Karabakh*, October 23, 2023, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-talks-idCAKBN31M04W> (Accessed: October 29, 2023).

How External Factors are Complicating the “Gordian Knot” of the South Caucasus?¹

Yeghia Tashjian

The geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus have once again made the headlines of international media and analytical centres. Scholars have been questioning whether Russia is distancing itself from the region. Armenian officials have been questioning Russia’s motives in the region and aiming to diversify their security relations. Meanwhile, Russia, heavily involved in the war in Ukraine and dependent on Türkiye and Azerbaijan for trade transit routes, is navigating the narrow complexities of the post-2020 Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) War regional architecture and keeps asserting itself as the main power broker in the region (i.e. brokering the 2020 trilateral ceasefire agreement, brokering another ceasefire deal on September 20, 2023) through compromise or political flexibility. This flexibility is causing friction in Moscow-Yerevan relations and pushing Armenia to seek Western diplomatic and military aid to counter Azerbaijani aggression in the region.

The new political and economic partnerships are further tightening the “Gordian Knot” of the South Caucasus. This vulnerable region is beginning to import geopolitical tensions from the neighbouring regions due to the intersection of political and economic interests between local and key regional actors. The post-November 10, 2020 balance of power has brought new players to the regions such as Türkiye, Israel, and India where each is aiming to shape the regional political landscape based on its geo-economic and geopolitical interests. This paper will analyse how the region is importing three main geopolitical tensions from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and

¹ Parts of the paper have already been published in Tashjian, Yeghia. “The Geopolitical Background of the Moscow-Yerevan Rift and Russia’s Future in the Region”, *The Armenian Weekly*, September 20, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/09/20/the-geopolitical-background-of-the-moscow-yerevan-rift-and-russias-future-in-the-region/> as well as in Tashjian, Yeghia. “How are external factors complicating the political landscape in the South Caucasus?”, *The Armenian Weekly*, November 29, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/11/29/how-are-external-factors-complicating-the-political-landscape-in-the-south-caucasus/>.

South East Asia, and two key geo-economic developments within the context of the economic corridors and expansion of the BRICS which will affect the South Caucasus.

The Impact of War in Ukraine on the South Caucasus

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the broader geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West over Eurasia have created new tensions in the South Caucasus. The war has created a political vacuum that other actors such as the European Union are eager to fill. Already, the EU monitoring mission on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border has been perceived as a success by the EU and raised some concerns in Russia. Meanwhile, the ongoing war in Ukraine has created new alliances and rivalries and with Russia's passive stance towards the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Yerevan started seeking new security partners to defend its borders against Azerbaijani incursions.

It is not a secret that many in Russia, including high officials, are suspicious of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's motives toward their country. The Armenian leader has speculated that Russia seems to be leaving the region.² However, Russia still views the region as its "near abroad." From the Russian perspective, if it leaves the South Caucasus, its only route to the Middle East will be endangered, Iran and Türkiye will clash over the new geopolitical space, and sectarianism will spread north making the North Caucasus vulnerable to political instability.

Despite Yerevan's attempt to diversify its security relations and foreign policy orientation, Russia has been quick to assert that there is no alternative to Russian mediation in the region. In one of my conversations with an Azerbaijani expert, he argued that if Russia's plan in Ukraine goes bad and it feels desperate to leave the South Caucasus, it will make sure to "burn [the region] to the ground so that everyone, mainly the West, understands that under Russia's influence [it] was better and stable."³

² "Pashinyan: Russia itself leaves the region." *Mediamax*, September 3, 2023, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/politics/52356/>, last accessed 12/11/2023.

³ A Twitter conversation with an Azerbaijani expert whom I want to keep the name anonymous, September 18, 2023.

Many high-level Russian officials have affirmed this. In a TV interview, Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, stated "We have information that they (the West) are signalling to the Armenians, 'Come to us, kick the Russians out of your territory, remove the (Russian) military base and border guards too, the Americans will help to ensure your security.'"⁴ He also criticized Yerevan for hosting the EU observing mission instead of the CSTO mission proposed by Moscow.⁵

Fearing that the diplomatic crack between Russia and Armenia may create new regional tensions, Iran has engaged in proactive diplomacy. Where Iran's defence Minister Mohammadreza Ashtiani once again reaffirmed his country's position that it "will not accept any change in the borders."⁶ To impose pressure on Azerbaijan, Iran also once again mobilized its troops on its border with Azerbaijan. Iran's FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian also met with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan in Tehran on September 3, 2023, a few days after the September 19 Azerbaijani escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, to discuss multiple regional issues, including in the South Caucasus.

Ankara and Tehran have been competing for influence in the South Caucasus. While Russia is distracted by its war in Ukraine, Türkiye's influence has increased (especially after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war), as it fully supports Azerbaijan's pressure on Armenia to open an extraterritorial "corridor" (known as the Zangezur corridor) connecting Azerbaijan to its exclave Nakhichevan and Türkiye through Armenian territories. On September 16, only three days before the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh, and in response to Iran's proposal to cooperate in the South Caucasus⁷ on the basis of the 3+3 format,

⁴ Astghik Bedevian. "Russia's Lavrov Blasts West's 'Provocative' Policy On Armenia." *Azattyun*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/32415683.html>, last accessed November 12, 2023.

⁵ Giuliano Bifulchi. "Pashinyan's Complain About Russia Underlined Armenian Swinging Foreign Policy." *Special Eurasia*, September 4, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/09/04/pashinyan-russia-armenia/>, last accessed 12/11/2023.

⁶ "No war to outbreak in Caucasus region, Iran defence min. says." *MEHR News Agency*, September 13, 2023, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/206034/No-war-to-outbreak-in-Caucasus-region-Iran-defence-min-says>, last accessed 12/11/2023.

⁷ "Iran supports 3+3 format in South Caucasus: FM." *Iran Press*, July 23, 2023, <https://iranpress.com/content/227604/iran-supports-33-format-souIran%20supports%203+3%20format%20in%20South%20Caucasus:%20FMth-caucasus>, last accessed November 12, 2023.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan offered “to hold a top-level four-party [(2+2)] meeting on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue”⁸ with the heads of states of Russia, Türkiye, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Within this context, Türkiye’s Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure noted that work on the opening of the “Zangezur corridor” would begin shortly.⁹

In an interview to the Italian daily *La Repubblica*, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan confessed that relying solely on Russia for guarantees had been a “strategic mistake.”¹⁰ Viewed from the Kremlin, the PM’s words can be seen as a signal to invite foreign (mainly Western) actors to challenge Russia’s influence thus creating additional tension between the two CSTO formal allies. Meanwhile, Armenia’s distancing from Russia and without finding any alternative security umbrella will further expose it to geopolitical and military threats. This is why authorities in Yerevan must analyse the regional developments from a geopolitical perspective and take Russia’s interests into consideration and diversify their security relations without antagonizing Russia. Armenia cannot turn into a Western “sacrificial sheep” in the region to score political goals against Russia.

How the Indian-Pakistani Rivalry is Impacting the Geopolitics of the Region

The rivalry in South Asia between India and Pakistan is another tension imported to the South Caucasus. After Armenia’s defeat in the 2020 war, the country became more politically and economically isolated. Due to its poor infrastructure compared to Azerbaijan, Chinese investments related to the

⁸ “Türkiye suggests four-party meeting on Karabakh to Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia.” *TASS*, September 16, 2023, <https://tass.com/world/1675847>, last accessed November 12, 2023.

⁹ “Türkiye to start ‘Zangezur corridor’ opening work in coming months, Turkish official says.” *News.am*, September 13, 2023, <https://news.am/eng/news/780432.html#:~:text=In%20the%20coming%20months%2C%20the,oF%20Turkic%20States%2C%20APA%20reports>, last accessed November 12, 2023.

¹⁰ “Pashinyan on Armenia’s problems and a ‘crisis of international law and order.’” *JAMnews*, September 4, 2023, https://jam-news.net/pashinyans-interview-with-la-repubblica-news-paper/?fbclid=IwAR1UAE3FQI9osstPDsc_tfkA_st4U9VvEqzSts1x6fQPEIEwzuryfP_oEF84, last accessed November 26, 2023.

Belt and Road Initiative, concentrated on Baku and sidelined Yerevan. This of course has benefited India.

India was one of the first countries with which Armenia sought to establish security relations. In recent years, high-profile visits have characterized bilateral relations, and this was solidified with India's PM Narendra Modi's meeting with PM Nikol Pashinyan in New York in September 2019 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.¹¹ Later, Yerevan and New Delhi coordinated their positions on the issue of Kashmir and Azerbaijani aggression on Armenia.

Of course, the Indian-Armenian rapprochement has a political component. On September 29, 2022, the leading Indian newspaper *Economic Times*, published an article titled "India cannot ignore the dangerous adventures of the 'three brothers' in Armenia and elsewhere."¹² The article warned that if the Turkish-Azerbaijani-Pakistani axis is cemented in the South Caucasus, then it will move southward and they will cooperate in other theatres such as Kashmir. The article also considered Pakistan's role in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war in support of Azerbaijan. Within this context, the article mentioned "It is probably in India's interest that Armenia puts up a stand and not be trampled upon because of a power vacuum (in South Caucasus) caused by Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine."¹³

Finally, in September 2022, Yerevan and New Delhi signed a military agreement with the aim of arming the Armenian army with heavy weapons amid the Azerbaijani military incursions deep into Armenia's international borders.¹⁴ The deal included significant export orders of India's indigenous

¹¹ Government of India. "Meeting of Prime Minister with the Prime Minister of Armenia." *Ministry of External Affairs*, September 26, 2019.

¹² Pranab Dhal Samanta. "Analysis: India can't ignore dangerous adventures of '3 Brothers' in Armenia and elsewhere." *Economic Times*, October 6, 2022, https://m.economic-times.com/news/defence/view-india-cant-ignore-dangerous-adventures-of-3-brothers-in-armenia-and-elsewhere/amp_articles/94518499.cms, last accessed November 10, 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Yeghia Tashjian. "Armenia-India Relations: From Politics to Arms Trade." *The Armenian Weekly*, October 5, 2022, <https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/05/armenia-india-relations-from-politics-to-arms-trade/>, last accessed November 10, 2023.

Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launchers (MBRL), anti-tank missiles, rockets, and ammunition worth US \$250 million.¹⁵ It is not the first time Armenia has purchased weapons from India. Already, in 2020, India landed a US \$43 million order to supply four Swathi counter-battery radars to detect and track incoming rocket or artillery fire. According to WION News, these systems can “track incoming artillery projectiles and pinpoint the location of enemy gun positions for counter-action.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, the arms deal has raised serious concerns in Baku. The head of the Foreign Policy Affairs department of Azerbaijan’s Presidential administration, Hikmet Hajiyev, raised this matter during his meeting with the Indian ambassador in Azerbaijan, arguing that

...at a time when Azerbaijan is negotiating a peace treaty with Armenia, the supply of deadly weapons by India opens the way to the militarization of Armenia and aggravates the situation, hindering the establishment of sustainable peace and security in the South Caucasus region.¹⁷

The irony of this announcement was that Baku continues to arm itself with Turkish and Israeli heavy weapons but complains when Armenia purchases weapons to defend itself.

What we can conclude is that India’s arms sales to Armenia go beyond a “business-as-usual” relationship. As seen in Indian media, Indian analysts and commentators argued that these arms deals have geopolitical implications, as India aims to establish itself as a reliable defence partner globally and secure its regional interests by containing Pakistan and Türkiye’s

¹⁵ Anurakti Sharma. “All you need to know about India’s Pinaka deal with Armenia and the course of war with Azerbaijan.” *Times Now News*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in-focus/all-you-need-to-know-about-indias-pinaka-deal-with-armenia-and-the-course-of-war-with-azerbaijan-article-94567499>, last accessed November 10, 2023.

¹⁶ C Krishnasai. “India to export Pinaka rocket launchers, ammunition to Armenia in \$250m deal: Report.” *Wion News*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/india-to-export-pinaka-system-other-ammunitions-to-armenia-under-250m-deal-report-520819>, last accessed November 10, 2023.

¹⁷ “Azerbaijan conveys concerns to India’s ambassador over country’s expanding military co-op with Armenia.” *Trend.az*, July 23, 2023, <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3777529.html>, last accessed November 10, 2023.

ambitions in the region.¹⁸ While Yerevan is unable to purchase Iranian weapons due to fears of US or Western reaction, Tehran is becoming a transit route for Indian weapons reaching Armenia.

The Israeli and Iranian Factors and the Impact of the War in Gaza on the Region

Israel views the region from the prism of containing Iran. Azerbaijan is a key energy and security partner for Israel as it supplies Tel Aviv with 40 percent of its oil needs and in return gets access to arms.¹⁹ Over the last years, Israel has sold Azerbaijan ballistic missiles, drones, munitions, and air defence systems. Meanwhile, Baku views Tel Aviv as a “gateway” to Washington, aiming to cooperate with pro-Israeli lobbies to counter the strong Armenian lobby in the US. Moreover, there is a joint US-Israeli-Azerbaijani desire to contain Iran in the region.

Meanwhile, Iran views the Azerbaijani-Israeli security cooperation as a threat to its national security and territorial integrity and tends to regard Armenia as a valuable partner in the region.²⁰ In addition, Iran fears that the “Zangezur corridor” through Syunik could jeopardize Iranian interests by cutting the Armenian-Iranian border and threatening the Persian Gulf-Black Sea Corridor (also known as the North-South Transport Route) connecting Georgia to Iran via Armenia, which is viewed as an alternative road to the “International North-South Transport Corridor” (INSTC) connecting Iran to Russia via Azerbaijan’s railways and highways. Iranian officials and experts have occasionally called for the prevention of the establishment of a “NATO” or “Turanic” corridor connecting Türkiye directly to Central Asia

¹⁸ Yeghia Tashjian. “The Geopolitical Implications of India’s Arms Sale to Armenia.” *The Armenian Weekly*, August 9, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/08/09/the-geopolitical-implications-of-indias-arms-sale-to-armenia/>, last accessed November 10, 2023.

¹⁹ “Azerbaijan appoints first ever ambassador to Israel amid Iran row.” *Reuters*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/azerbaijan-appoints-first-ever-ambassador-israel-amid-iran-row-2023-01-11/>, last accessed November 27, 2023.

²⁰ Yeghia Tashjian. “Is Iran making a comeback to the South Caucasus?” *The Armenian Weekly*, October 20, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/20/is-iran-making-a-comeback-to-the-south-caucasus/>, last accessed November 8, 2023.

via Armenia.²¹ For this reason, Iran offered an alternative “corridor” (called the Aras corridor) connecting Azerbaijan proper to Nakhichevan via its territories.²²

In early September 2023, the US-backed the India-Middle Eastern-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) became an open challenge to China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” and to Russia’s and Iran’s “International North-South Transport Corridor.” Russia and Iran expressed silent concern over the IMEC as it bypasses them. Türkiye’s President, for his part announced that “there is no corridor without Türkiye”²³ during the G20 summit held in New Delhi. This is one of the key reasons why Russia is eyeing the opening of communication channels in the South Caucasus in order to not only control the North-South but also the West-East routes (via Syunik) connecting Europe to China.

Meanwhile, the prolongation of the war in Gaza may create new challenges or opportunities in the South Caucasus. Israel being “sidelined” from the South Caucasus due to its internal distraction may push Azerbaijan to be more dependent on Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. Another option would be that Iran would be distracted from the South Caucasus or a possible direct clash between Tel Aviv and Tehran may turn the region into a new battlefield.

The Battle of Corridors and the Geo-Economic Future of the Region

It is not a secret that Russia views the South Caucasus as its gateway to the Middle East and economically aims to expand to new markets in the south. Within this context, on February 2023, the Valdai Discussion Club published a report titled “The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric

²¹ Yeghia Tashjian. “Iran calls for a ‘Wake-Up Call’ to Moscow in South Caucasus.” *The Armenian Weekly*, July 26, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/07/26/iran-calls-for-a-wake-up-call-to-moscow-in-south-caucasus/>, last accessed November 8, 2023.

²² “Strategic Significance of the new Azerbaijan-Iran Railway Project: Shaping South Caucasus Geopolitics.” *Special Eurasia*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/10/09/azerbaijan-iran-railway/>, last accessed November 27, 2023.

²³ “Erdogan says India-Gulf transport corridor won’t work with Türkiye exclusion.” *The New Arab*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/Turkiyes-erdogan-slams-india-gulf-israel-transport-corridor>, last accessed November 8, 2023.

World” arguing that Russia is now orienting its trade towards Asia and the importance of the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf will increase in the near future.²⁴

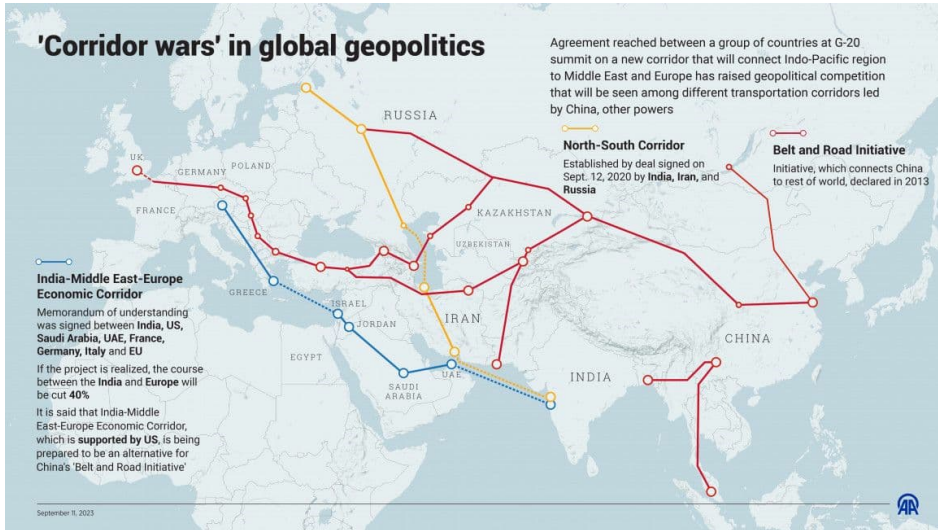


Figure 1: 'Corridor Wars' in global geopolitics²⁵

Türkiye and Iran are the only transit routes for Russia to the Middle East. With Iran, through the INSTC Russia is connected through highway and railway via Azerbaijan (Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran are aiming to finalize the remaining Astara-Resht section (164 km) of the railway). To enhance regional interconnectivity and consolidate its position, Moscow is aiming to open the transport routes and revive the Soviet-era railways between Azerbaijan-Armenia-Türkiye. Baku for its part, insisted on an “extraterritorial transport corridor.”²⁶

²⁴ Vitaly Naumkin and Vasily Kuznetsov. “The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World.” *Valdai Discussion Club*, February 2, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/the-middle-east-and-the-future-of-polycentric-wor/>, last accessed May 23, 2023.

²⁵ Giorgio Cafiero, “What India’s economic corridor means for the Middle East”, the New Arab, September 13, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/what-indias-economic-corridor-means-middle-east.> [Elmurod Usubaliev/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images].

²⁶ Karlen Aslanian. “Baku’s Assurances On No Claim For Extraterritorial Corridor Viewed As ‘Manipulative’ In Yerevan.” *Radio Liberty Europe*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32125609.html>, last accessed October 25, 2023.

Moscow believes that opening the transport routes in the South Caucasus would bring stability and minimize tensions as economic interdependency will be enhanced. Türkiye, too is in favour of this idea, however, its main objective is to have an open corridor via Armenia linking it to Azerbaijan to have free access to the Turkic countries of Central Asia.²⁷ Iran, too is in favour of opening routes, however, Tehran is cautious of Türkiye's growing political and military influence in the region and opposes the establishment of any extraterritorial corridor via Armenia that may cut the strategic Armenia-Iran border.²⁸ For this reason, Iran is pushing Armenia to construct its "North-South Transport Route Corridor" (NSTRC also known as the Black Sea-Persian Gulf Corridor), connecting the Georgian Black Sea ports to Iran's in the Persian Gulf. However, it is estimated that this ambitious project (which bypasses Russia and Türkiye and is partially funded by the EU and Iran) will be finalized by 2030–2032.²⁹

Regionally, opening trade routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan would encourage the opening of Armenia's Gyumri border with Türkiye's Kars, unify the railway systems of Russia (as Russia controls the railway system in Armenia) and Türkiye, and create an additional corridor for communication between Türkiye and Azerbaijan – and a potential link to the INSTC. The restoration of the railway connection on the Yeraskh-Julfa-Meghri-Horadiz route will push Armenia to become not only a bridge in the INSTC but also the Türkiye-backed "Middle Corridor" linking Europe to China.³⁰

In recent years, Türkiye started adopting a "Multilateral Transportation Policy" aiming not only to sustain economic relations with neighbouring countries but also to expand its political and cultural relations beyond its

²⁷ Diego Cupolo. "Nagorno-Karabakh: What the Zangezur Corridor means for Türkiye and the region." *Türkiye Recap*, October 4, 2023, <https://Türkiyerecap.substack.com/p/nagorno-karabakh-what-the-zangezur>, last accessed October 20, 2023.

²⁸ Yeghia Tashjian. "Iran calls for a 'Wake-Up Call' to Moscow in South Caucasus." *Armenian Weekly*, July 26, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/07/26/iran-calls-for-a-wake-up-call-to-moscow-in-south-caucasus/>, last accessed October 25, 2023.

²⁹ "China participates in Armenia's North-South Highway project." *CGTN*, September 11, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-09-11/China-participates-in-Armenia-s-North-South-Highway-project-1dfmpV4Cnmw/index.html>, last accessed October 18, 2023.

³⁰ "Agreement reached on Yeraskh-Julfa-Meghri-Horadiz route restoration." *Nems.am*, June 3, 2023, <https://news.am/eng/news/763517.html>, last accessed October 25, 2023.

surrounding regions and turn the country into a regional transit hub.³¹ The “Middle Corridor” serves Türkiye to fulfil this strategic goal. The corridor enables Türkiye to become a bridge and connect Europe either via Istanbul or the Mediterranean port of Marsin to Georgia (either through land or sea), pass via Azerbaijan, and access to Kazakhstan via the Caspian Sea and then reach its final destination in China via a connection of railways and highways.

A key milestone of the “Middle Corridor” is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye), inaugurated in 2017 which offers uninterrupted trade between China and Europe. For this purpose, the Georgian railway company announced that it started collaborating with Azerbaijani and Kazakh companies to create a new shipping route between the Georgian port of Poti and Constanta in Romania.³² To facilitate this process, Azerbaijani and Georgian leaders visited Central Asia and signed new economic agreements. According to Tuba Eldem the disruption caused by Russia’s war on Ukraine has raised the profiles of alternative routes like the “Middle Corridor.”³³ This is true also of the Zangezur corridor;

the importance of opening the Zangezur Corridor and of its continuation via the Kars-Nakhichevan railway line... will not only enable Azerbaijan unrestricted access to its Nakhichevan exclave without needing to pass through any Armenian checkpoints but it will also provide Türkiye a direct route to the Caspian basin and Central Asia.³⁴

However, as Türkiye’s main objective is to have access to Central Asia either via the operative routes from Georgia or the potential routes from Armenia, Ankara may face some obstacles from Moscow and Tehran.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Turkish Republic. “Türkiye’s Multilateral Transportation Policy.” https://www.mfa.gov.tr/Türkiye_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa, last accessed October 25, 2023.

³² “Iran and Russia Seek New Sanctions Evasion Corridor.” *Georgia Today*, September 29, 2022, <https://georgiatoday.ge/iran-and-russia-seek-new-sanctions-evasion-corridor/>, last accessed May 24, 2023.

³³ Tuba Eldem. “Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity.” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs SWP*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>, last accessed May 24, 2023.

³⁴ Ayya Lmahamad. “Azerbaijan, Türkiye discuss boosting cargo flows to BTK, Middle Corridor.” *AzeriNews*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.azerinews.az/business/196213.html>, last accessed May 24, 2023.

- Russia, fearing Türkiye's rapprochement with China is trying to pressure Armenia to open the strategic routes in Syunik connecting Armenia to Azerbaijan so that the latter would have access to its exclave and Türkiye via a Russian-controlled route. Yerevan is reluctant and insists that any road passing via its territory should be solely under its sovereignty and Azerbaijan and Türkiye simultaneously should also open the trade routes in front of Armenia for import-export purposes. Russia has a geopolitical objective here. By controlling the trade routes in Southern Armenia, it not only increases its leverage over Yerevan and Baku but also controls the north-south and east-west trade crossroads connecting China to Europe. The implementation of this vision would be part of Russia's long-term plans aimed at securing favourable partners that can guarantee its political and economic influence in the region and prevent any future potential NATO expansion over its imagined zone of influence.³⁵
- If a direct trade route is established between Türkiye and South Caucasus-Central Asia via Armenia, Iran would lose its transit route, and its geopolitical and geo-economic role in the region would erode. Azerbaijan's current only gateway to its exclave of Nakhichevan (bordering Türkiye) is Iran, hence having a direct connection to the region, and then Türkiye would minimize Iran's geo-economic importance in the region. Many Iranian officials even called for the establishment of a corridor via Armenia as a "NATO" or "Turanic" corridor endangering the Armenia-Iran border.³⁶ For this reason, Iran has used the "carrot and stick" tactic towards Azerbaijan, and engaged in military exercises on its northern border whenever it saw a possible military escalation between Yerevan and Baku. To defuse tensions, Tehran offered an "alternative corridor" to connect Azerbaijan proper to its exclave via its territories which Baku accepted.³⁷

³⁵ Javad Heiran-Nia and Mahmood Monshipouri. "Raisi and Iran's Foreign Policy Toward the South Caucasus." *The Muslim World, Special Issue: The Domestic Politics of Iran. The International Relations of Iran* 113, Issue 1–2, (Winter-Spring 2023), 120–139, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/muwo.12460>, last accessed October 25, 2023.

³⁶ Tashjian, op. cit.

³⁷ Heydar Isayev. "Azerbaijan-Iran normalization on the horizon." *Eurasianet*, October 10, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-iran-normalization-on-the-horizon>, last accessed October 26, 2023.

Reflection

The November 10, 2020, trilateral statement signed between Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian leaders failed to bring peace to the region. Russia's war over Ukraine complicated the geopolitical balance of power in the South Caucasus and made Armenia vulnerable to Azerbaijani incursions which culminated with the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and the ethnic cleansing of its people from the region. All these happened in front of the Russian peace-keeping forces. The vacuum after the February 2022 war has pushed the EU, Türkiye, and Iran to take a greater role in the region however, Russia still has the upper hand and monopoly over the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as Baku moves closer to Moscow and rejects EU-mediated efforts for conflict settlement.

As mentioned in the paper, the region due to its vulnerability has also imported conflicts from South Asia and the Middle East. India has jumped in as the main weapon supplier to Armenia and has condemned Azerbaijan's military aggression aiming to contain the rising Turkish-Azerbaijani-Pakistani detente. Moreover, the ongoing escalation in Gaza between Hamas and Israel may further complicate the South Caucasus if Iran gets directly involved in the Middle Eastern conflict as a direct clash between Tel Aviv and Tehran may turn the South Caucasus into an Iranian-Israeli chessboard.

Geo-economically, regional trade interconnectivity may impact the future of the region. Economic interconnectivity is crucial for the South Caucasus, as it could attract foreign direct investment and bring stability. Politically, the facilitation of trade along the INSTC corridor will consolidate Russia's influence in the South Caucasus and Iran's position as a bridge between the South Caucasus and the Persian Gulf. The control over the trade routes passing from Armenia will be crucial in maintaining control over the regional trade route. Meanwhile, small or medium-sized countries, to preserve their strategic position in the region, will continue to balance alliances or bandwagon and join regional economic blocs to consolidate their position in the region.

Bibliography

- Amirjanyan, Anzhela. “Unveiling Geopolitical Dynamics Around ‘Zangezur Corridor’”, *Caucasus Watch*, October 24, 2023, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/insights/unlocking-the-zangezur-corridor-a-geopolitical-game-changer-in-the-south-caucasus.html?fbclid=IwAR0bqB3qANQYfmUDSMjYhSCUrNkRE8hAHr4wkiwHiZxWHxjEQ4ARjYRvRXQ>.
- Aslanian, Karlen. “Baku’s Assurances on No Claim For Extraterritorial Corridor Viewed As ‘Manipulative’ In Yerevan”, *Radio Liberty Europe*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32125609.html>.
- Bifolchi, Giuliano. “Pashinyan’s Complain About Russia Underlined Armenian Swinging Foreign Policy”, *Special Eurasia*, September 4, 2023, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/09/04/pashinyan-russia-armenia/>.
- CGTN. “China participates in Armenia’s North-South Highway project”, September 11, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-09-11/China-participates-in-Armenia-s-North-South-Highway-project-1dfmpV4Cnmw/index.html>.
- Cupolo, Diego. “Nagorno-Karabakh: What the Zangezur Corridor means for Türkiye and the region”, *Türkiye Recap*, October 4, 2023, <https://Türkiye-recap.substack.com/p/nagorno-karabakh-what-the-zangezur>.
- Eldem, Tuba. “Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity”, *German Institute for International and Security Affairs SWP*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C64/>.
- Georgia Today. “Iran and Russia Seek New Sanctions Evasion Corridor”, September 29, 2022, <https://georgiatoday.ge/iran-and-russia-seek-new-sanctions-evasion-corridor/>.
- Heiran-Nia, Javad and Monshipouri, Mahmood. “Raisi and Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward the South Caucasus”, *The Muslim World*, Special Issue: The Domestic Politics of Iran The International Relations of Iran, Volume 113, Issue 1–2, Winter-Spring 2023, February 21, 2023, pages 120–139, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/muwo.12460>.
- Iran Press. “Iran supports 3+3 format in South Caucasus: FM”, July 23, 2023, <https://iranpress.com/content/227604/iran-supports-33-format-souIran%20supports%203+3%20format%20in%20South%20Caucasus>

:%20FMth-caucasus.

- Isayev, Heydar. “Azerbaijan-Iran normalization on the horizon”, *Eurasianet*, October 10, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-iran-normalization-on-the-horizon>.
- JAMnews. “Pashinyan on Armenia’s problems and a ‘crisis of international law and order’”, September 4, 2023, <https://jam-news.net/pashinyans-interview-with-la-repubblica-newspaper/>.
- Krishnasai, C, “India to export Pinaka rocket launchers, ammunition to Armenia in \$250m deal: Report”, *Wio News*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/india-to-export-pinaka-system-other-ammunitions-to-armenia-under-250m-deal-report-520819>.
- Lmahamad, Ayya. “Azerbaijan, Turkiye discuss boosting cargo flows to BTK, Middle Corridor”, *Azer News*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.azernews.az/business/196213.html>.
- MediaLine. “Russia and Europe – Before and After Ukraine”, March 14, 2022, <https://themedialine.org/mideast-mindset/russia-and-europe-before-and-after-ukraine/>.
- Mediamax. “Pashinyan: Russia itself leaves the region”, September 3, 2023, <https://mediamax.am/en/news/politics/52356/>.
- MEHR News Agency. “No war to outbreak in Caucasus region, Iran defence min. says”, September 13, 2023, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/206034/No-war-to-outbreak-in-Caucasus-region-Iran-defence-min-says>.
- Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. “Meeting of Prime Minister with the Prime Minister of Armenia”, September 26, 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?31863/Meeting+of+Prime+Minister+with+the+Prime+Minister+of+Armenia>.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Türkiye’s Multilateral Transportation Policy”, Republic of Türkiye, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/Türkiye_s-multilateral-transportation-policy.en.mfa.
- Naumkin, Vitaly and Kuznetsov, Vasily. “The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World”, *Valdai Discussion Club*, February 2, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/the-middle-east-and-the-future-of-polycentric-wor/>.
- News.am. “Agreement reached on Yeraskh-Julfa-Meghri-Horadiz route restoration”, June 3, 2023, <https://news.am/eng/news/763517.html>.

- News.am. “Türkiye to start ‘Zangezur corridor’ opening work in coming months, Turkish official says”, September 13, 2023, <https://news.am/en/news/780432.html#:~:text=In%20the%20coming%20months%2C%20the,oF%20Turkic%20States%2C%20APA%20reports.>
- Pars Today. “Российский контейнерный поезд отправился из иранского Инчебуруна в Саудовскую Аравию”, August 27, 2023, [https://pars.today.ir/ru/news/iran-i187834.](https://pars.today.ir/ru/news/iran-i187834)
- Prime Minister Office of Armenia. “Statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the President of the Russian Federation”, November 10, 2020, [https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2020/11/10/Announcement/.](https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2020/11/10/Announcement/)
- Ritter, Scott. “Iran’s SCO Membership as Game Changer”, *Energy Intelligence*, July 21, 2023, [https://www.energyintel.com/00000189-77bb-dc99-afbd-f7fbf5050000.](https://www.energyintel.com/00000189-77bb-dc99-afbd-f7fbf5050000)
- Samanta, Pranab Dhal. “Analysis: India can’t ignore dangerous adventures of ‘3 Brothers’ in Armenia and elsewhere”, *Economic Times*, October 6, 2022, [https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/view-india-cant-ignore-dangerous-adventures-of-3-brothers-in-armenia-and-elsewhere/amp_articles/94518499.cms.](https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/view-india-cant-ignore-dangerous-adventures-of-3-brothers-in-armenia-and-elsewhere/amp_articles/94518499.cms)
- Sharma, Anurakti. “All you need to know about India’s Pinaka deal with Armenia and the course of war with Azerbaijan”, *Times Now News*, September 30, 2022, [https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in-focus/all-you-need-to-know-about-indias-pinaka-deal-with-armenia-and-the-course-of-war-with-azerbaijan-article-94567499.](https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in-focus/all-you-need-to-know-about-indias-pinaka-deal-with-armenia-and-the-course-of-war-with-azerbaijan-article-94567499)
- Special Eurasia. “Strategic Significance of the new Azerbaijan-Iran Railway Project: Shaping South Caucasus Geopolitics”, October 9, 2023, [https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/10/09/azerbaijan-iran-railway/.](https://www.specialeurasia.com/2023/10/09/azerbaijan-iran-railway/)
- Tashjian, Yeghia. “Armenia-India Relations: From Politics to Arms Trade”, *The Armenian Weekly*, October 5, 2022, [https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/05/armenia-india-relations-from-politics-to-arms-trade/.](https://armenianweekly.com/2022/10/05/armenia-india-relations-from-politics-to-arms-trade/)
- Tashjian, Yeghia. “How are external factors complicating the political landscape in the South Caucasus?”, *The Armenian Weekly*, November 29, 2023, [https://armenianweekly.com/2023/11/29/how-are-external-factors-complicating-the-political-landscape-in-the-south-caucasus/.](https://armenianweekly.com/2023/11/29/how-are-external-factors-complicating-the-political-landscape-in-the-south-caucasus/)

- Tashjian, Yeghia. “Iran calls for a ‘Wake-Up Call’ to Moscow in South Caucasus”, *The Armenian Weekly*, July 26, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/07/26/iran-calls-for-a-wake-up-call-to-moscow-in-south-caucasus/>.
- Tashjian, Yeghia. “Is Iran making a comeback to the South Caucasus?”, *The Armenian Weekly*, October 20, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/10/20/is-iran-making-a-comeback-to-the-south-caucasus/>.
- Tashjian, Yeghia. “Russia, INSTC and Regional Trade Interconnectivity”, *The Armenian Weekly*, April 26, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/04/26/russia-instc-and-regional-trade-interconnectivity/>.
- Tashjian, Yeghia. “The Geopolitical Background of the Moscow-Yerevan Rift and Russia’s Future in the Region”, *The Armenian Weekly*, September 20, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/09/20/the-geopolitical-background-of-the-moscow-yerevan-rift-and-russias-future-in-the-region/>.
- Tashjian, Yeghia. “The Geopolitical Implications of India’s Arms Sale to Armenia”, *The Armenian Weekly*, August 9, 2023, <https://armenianweekly.com/2023/08/09/the-geopolitical-implications-of-indias-arms-sale-to-armenia/>.
- TASS. “Türkiye suggests four-party meeting on Karabakh to Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia”, September 16, 2023, <https://tass.com/world/1675847>.
- The New Arab. “Erdogan says India-Gulf transport corridor won’t work with Türkiye exclusion”, September 13, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/Turkiyes-erdogan-slams-india-gulf-israel-transport-corridor>.
- Tomikel, John and Henderson, Bonnie. “Russia and the Near Abroad”, second edition, *Allegheny Pr*, 2003, <https://www.amazon.com/Russia-Near-Abroad-Second-Tomikel/dp/0910042888>.

Interviews

A Twitter conversation with an Azerbaijani expert whom I want to keep the name anonymous (September 18, 2023).

Divyanshu Jindal, a Research Associate at NatStrat, Center for Security and Strategic Studies in India, interviewed on August 29, 2023.

External Factors Related to the New Security Environment in the South Caucasus¹

Nika Chitadze

Introduction

Wars between Russia and Ukraine and Azerbaijan and Armenia have focused global attention on the wider Black Sea Area and Caucasus. In addition to military losses, those large-scale military conflicts have had substantial political repercussions. This study deals with the analysis of the impact of recent events in the region. Special attention is paid to “Great Power” interests.

Taking into consideration the current realities, it should be pointed out that since Azerbaijan restored its control over her territories that it had lost after the first Karabakh war, the Russian influence has significantly decreased. At the same time, Russia is threatened by the eastward enlargement of the EU and NATO. It is unacceptable for Russia to come closer to the Western structures of any nation that is considered to be inside its “sphere of influence.” On the other hand, as a result of Azerbaijan’s success, Türkiye is bolstering its position in the area and creating new chances for energy cooperation with Azerbaijan. The significance of Azerbaijan’s energy resources in Türkiye’s complex economic system is increasing.

Important economic projects in the region, discussed in the previous contribution to this Study Group Information booklet, have considerably expanded the Caucasus region’s economic and political significance.² The South Caucasus is an important transit corridor, so it is easy to see Russia and Türkiye’s desire for regional dominance.³

¹ Parts of this contribution are taken out of N. Chitadze, *Geopolitics* (Tbilisi: Universal, 2011), and out of N. Chitadze, *The Russia-Ukraine War and Its Consequences on the Geopolitics of the World* (IGI Global 2023).

² See Yeghia Tashjian’s paper in this booklet.

³ G. Antadze. 2023. *Geopolitical lights and shadows of the Karabakh war*. Retrieved January 13, 2023 from: <https://www.geocase.ge/ka/publications/294/yarabaghis-omis-geopolitikuri-shuq-chrdilebi>.

The Impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict on the Caucasus Regional Security System: From Vulnerability to Fragile Stability

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has had a substantial impact on the regional security of the Caucasus. As a result of the fragility of the region, it receives a great deal of attention in international politics, and there are active interventions by foreign nations and multilateral institutions – not always resulting in harmonious outcomes. During the battle, it became evident how fragile the region's stability was and how easily it could be disrupted by external and internal pressures. After the fighting, the different geopolitical actors in the region have agreed to keep the peace to a certain extent, but it remains unknown how long it will prevail. A stable and peaceful South Caucasus region requires greater communication and diverse economic initiatives that contribute to the integration process and the restoration of political relations between the countries and warring parties. All parties should seek peace, and their goals should be to preserve stability. Yet, the question of political interests must be considered.

Geopolitical Interests of Great Powers in the Caucasus Region

The political stability of the South Caucasus is dependent not only on the three governments in the region but also on the policy of the leading “geopolitical players” on a global and regional scale, the European Union, the United States, Iran, Russia, Türkiye, China. The region's long historical past is marked by weak statehood and unresolved military conflicts.

Separatist movements are the foremost security threat in the South Caucasus region. Among the unresolved disputes involving foreign factors, these stand out. It appears that Russia is the primary actor in the confrontations, including those with Türkiye, which has its own geopolitical goals. Also, the expanding and increasingly permanent regional conflicts in the Middle East have a considerable impact on the conflicts in the South Caucasus.

Consider the roles of the main players in the South Caucasus: America, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. The American factor in the South Caucasus is far greater and more valuable than that of other countries, and it is permitted to dominate the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Caspian Sea, making

it the dominant country in the region and allowing it to decrease China's position as its chief rival. The United States became interested in the Caspian region at the close of the twentieth century when then-President Bill Clinton named it one of the top priorities. In 2002, the United States' interest in the South Caucasus countries increased. This period coincided with the intersection of American and Russian interests in the Black Sea-Caspian region.

The Russian factor has had a very negative impact on the South Caucasus region, particularly on Georgia's relations with Russia, as Georgia has since declared a pro-Western course and begun actively working towards joining Euro-Atlantic structures, while relations with Russia have become extremely tense. Russia initiated an aggressive military policy and acted as the primary inspiration for ethnic hostilities. Russia views the South Caucasus region as part of its sphere of influence, and its approach against new participants is highly hostile, as evidenced by the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. Through its military, political, and economic operations, Russia seeks to increase its influence and control over the region.

The Iranian role in the South Caucasus is quite intriguing. Iran seeks to expand its influence in the region, which is impacted by a variety of factors. It is interested in energy resources and diminishing the power of Türkiye in the region. The conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is a different matter because it is caused by "Southern Azerbaijan" (up to 15 million ethnic Azerbaijanis settled in northern Iranian territory). All of this poses a possible challenge to the territorial integrity of Iran. In this context, Iran was able to create partnership relations with Russia while diminishing the power of the United States and Türkiye.

Türkiye is regarded as a regional power. Azerbaijan is viewed as its principal ally, as it has historically had an antagonistic relationship with Armenia. Türkiye's area of economic interest is the South Caucasus, which includes energy and transport routes, as well as geographically close ties with Georgia, which facilitates a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan. In contrast to other neighbouring nations, Türkiye has consistently supported Georgia's territorial integrity and worked as a mediator.

Politically, economically, and militarily, the role and influence of the above-mentioned great powers are substantial in the South Caucasus region. Also

analysed are the contemporary politics and conflicts of the Caucasus countries, as well as the principal dangers and threats that obstruct the creation of peace and stability in the aforementioned region.

Let us analyse the interests of the foreign actors in the region more deeply.

America's Role in the South Caucasus

In the 1990s, due to the global geopolitical situation and the Clinton administration's aim to strengthen American foreign policy, the South Caucasus gained strategic significance in Washington's view. The Caspian Sea region and its oil and gas deposits were the focus of American attention, and Washington saw these deposits as an alternative to the Persian Gulf's resources. In addition, according to America's strategic perspective, Azerbaijan and the other countries of the South Caucasus represent a vital transportation corridor for eastern resources heading to Western markets. In addition to energy security, the United States considers Azerbaijan's resources as a component in its policy towards Russia, as Russia still tries to develop the energy industry based on Soviet vestigial legacy infrastructure.

In light of the above-mentioned interests, the United States has become one of the most influential actors in the region. In following policies of the previous administration in the area of energy, security, and diplomatic relations, the Obama administration was well prepared, despite Russia's continued dominance in this region.

The policy implemented in the South Caucasus enabled the United States to diminish the position of Russia and Iran, which played a significant role in this region during the 1990s. Since 1993, the United States' presence in the South Caucasus has damaged the interests of those actors. American strategy in the region aimed primarily to expand the realm of democracy and free commerce, and most crucially, the sphere of influence of NATO.

The cooperation structures of NATO provide the countries of the South Caucasus with a multilateral framework within which they may address security-related issues. This cooperation also enables them to draw on the Alliance's experience to adapt their defence structures and capabilities to meet these challenges, as well as to benefit from Alliance assistance in pursuing

deeper reforms. Since the early 1990s, NATO and the South Caucasus countries have been cooperating, with all three countries actively participating in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, a dialogue platform established by NATO in December 1991 as a first step toward the integration of former Warsaw Pact members. Despite the East-West division, which was replaced by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997, all three nations jumped at the chance to join the Partnership for Peace program in 1994. The primary security challenges, such as terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, are a significant element in NATO's intention to deepen the discussion and reinforce security in the South Caucasus.

The United States participated directly and financially in the promotion of democracy in the South Caucasus region. Direct financial assistance was offered in several areas, including reforms of the state machinery, decentralization, the improvement of women's rights, and the promotion and development of civil society.

Before the most recent outbreak of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the United States had hoped to conclude the dispute by a peaceful and diplomatically-mediated settlement. It did so principally through the OSCE Minsk Group, which includes the United States as a co-chair, as well as Russia and France. Armenia and Azerbaijan in general have strengthened cooperation and integration with the West – particularly through initiatives like the EU's Eastern Partnership program and NATO's Partnership for Peace program – while weakening Russia's political and economic influence. The US also tried to enhance Armenian and Azerbaijani internal institutions through reforms and anti-corruption measures to foster democracy and make them less subject to foreign influence.

Now that a new military and political reality in Nagorno-Karabakh has emerged, and Russia and Türkiye are playing their roles in this theatre, the United States must rethink its Nagorno-Karabakh policy and its overall relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

To separate itself from the more powerful Russo-Turkish military presence, the US should focus on diplomatic and economic activities in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In addition, the United States can strengthen commercial connections with Armenia and Azerbaijan while encouraging private sector

engagement in cooperative infrastructure and transportation projects in the area with Türkiye.

To be sure, the United States' ability to engage Azerbaijan on this subject is severely limited. This is especially true when it comes to domestic political pressure, especially from the powerful Armenian-American lobby. Given that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has maintained tough language in the aftermath of the cease-fire agreement and has been chastised by democratic groups for authoritarian concerns.

Türkiye

Türkiye is one of the driving forces in the region. Based on the understanding that there can be no vacuum in international relations, the Turkish leadership has put forward several initiatives to strengthen relations with the kindred Turkic peoples of Azerbaijan. Türkiye, realizing Russia's inability to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue on its own, switched to political and military-technical support for Azerbaijan. Türkiye has two interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: on the one hand, it seeks to build a counterbalance against Armenian supporters with the help of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, she wishes to solidify her position as a regional force by taking part in the negotiations.

Türkiye was the first country to officially recognize the independent Republic of Azerbaijan in August 1991, and diplomatic relations were established in January 1992. Türkiye became an important player in both the growth of the Azerbaijani military industry and the preparation of the Azerbaijani army for modern standards built on the notion of "one nation – two states." In this way, Türkiye is Azerbaijan's most important military partner.

In addition, Türkiye actively supports its main ally in the Caucasus both economically and politically. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has consistently backed Azerbaijan's demands for the withdrawal of Armenian occupants from Nagorno-Karabakh and neighbouring districts. On September 28,

2020, Erdogan remarked that given the failure of international attempts to end the issue, Azerbaijan should “take matters into its own hands.”⁴

With the help of Türkiye, Azerbaijan is involved in several integration structures aimed at creating a “Turkic world” in which Ankara plays a dominant role. Today, Türkiye and Azerbaijan are bound by the Agreement on Strategic Partnership and Mutual Assistance, signed in Baku on August 16, 2010, on mutual assistance, which involves several measures to preserve the territorial integrity of the signatory countries.⁵

These measures include:

- providing the Azerbaijani side with military equipment;
- material and technical support for the needs of the defence industry;
- joint development and production of military equipment;
- conducting joint exercises and training specialists for the needs of the armed forces;
- material and technical support of the army.

With a sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, Türkiye now has greater opportunities to consolidate its position. Her tight commercial links with Azerbaijanis are expected to grow, as is its access to the Georgian market. Türkiye’s economic and political dominance in the South Caucasus might be enhanced as a result of this. Türkiye’s expanding regional clout raises concerns about the changing Turkish-Russian dynamic, which contains both competition and cooperation. This dynamic might have ramifications for the United States’ ties with NATO partner Türkiye as well as Russia.

Iran

The Islamic Republic’s leadership is working to achieve social and military-political stability in the Caucasus, based on Iranian pragmatism. Azerbaijan is a major nation for the development of special ties with Iran because of its

⁴ “Türkiye Sides with Azerbaijan Against Armenia’s Occupation, Erdogan Says.” *Daily Sabah*, October 1, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/Türkiye-sides-with-azerbaijan-against-armenias-occupation-erdogan-says>.

⁵ Administration of the President of Azerbaijan, 2022. *Declaration on the establishment of the Council on Strategic Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye has been signed*. Retrieved from: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/721>.

ethnic composition, with around 16 percent of the country's population being ethnic Azerbaijanis residing in the northern border areas.

Azerbaijan is particularly crucial to Iran as an energy-rich country. Although the conflict with Sunni Türkiye in Shiite Iran is not primarily motivated by religious and ideological considerations, this component has a considerable impact on relations. The primary religion of Azerbaijan, for example, is Shiism, which draws it closer to Iran, yet the Republic of Azerbaijan gravitates towards Türkiye culturally, ethnically, and linguistically. Iran's position on the Karabakh issue is neutral, but insists on a political solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.

The relationship between Tehran and Yerevan is based on the global context. Iran, which is under sanctions, is attempting to build ties with Armenia by offering its territory and seaports for cargo transit. Armenia also receives Iranian energy exports. The Armenia-Iran gas pipeline, which was built with Gazprom's help, was inaugurated in 2007.

As a result, despite Iran's evident religious focus, it is clear that on matters of foreign policy, the Islamic Republic advocates a balanced and realistic approach. Given the strengthening of relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, as well as the Azerbaijani side's increased purchases of Israeli weaponry, Iran's neutrality and condemnation of hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has prevented it from taking a pro-Azerbaijani stance. Azerbaijan and Israel's close military-technical collaboration raises serious discontent in Iran.

In Iran, Armenia is seen as a "complementary neighbour" and the "only" adjacent nation from whom Iran does not fear military, political, or economic challenges. Tehran and Yerevan have both maintained a high degree of trust and good neighbourly diplomatic ties.

EU

The South Caucasus is one of the few energy corridors that might allow the EU to diversify access to the Caspian area's energy resources and use it as a transit region. The execution of three projects connected to alternative gas pipeline routes – the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), the Trans-Adriatic

Pipeline (TAP), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines – all depend on stability in the South Caucasus. Thus, this region is critical to the EU. Geographic closeness, oil resources, pipelines, and the challenges connected with international crime and trafficking make regional stability vital interests.

However, when Azerbaijan retook her captive territories from Armenian occupation, the EU has stood mostly silent. Meanwhile, Russia and Türkiye acted and determined the outcome. It was unavoidable that the EU would remain on the sidelines of the war; procedural and bureaucratic slovenliness and conflicting intra-EU interests have prevented her from intervening more decisively.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have never been considered for EU membership. Instead, the EU's bilateral relationship with both countries has always been ambiguous. Extensive energy linkages in Azerbaijan have never resulted in governance influence, instead allowing Azerbaijan greater regulatory autonomy. The depth and breadth of Armenia's relationships with Russia have drastically reduced the possibilities of an Armenia-EU partnership.

Lastly, as the recent war has proven, there is no obvious role for a soft power actor like the EU in the difficult power politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, other than to pay the bills for post-war rehabilitation and development.

The EU must be honest about what it can achieve while still remembering two essential benefits: First, the EU is an alternative to hegemonic regionalism. In a region ripped apart by great power competition and friction, the EU's approach to Armenia and Azerbaijan is more horizontal and consistent. Second, the EU has no desire for a monopoly in the region. Rather, her participation is intergovernmental, working with other countries, organizations, and mandates to construct infrastructure that supports peace.

Russia

Russia has long favoured a multi-polar security environment which would allow her to individually coerce smaller countries, and exact influence in such a way as to never fear them rising together against her, guaranteeing her control over one-sixth of the globe. Accordingly, many believed that the victory

of Atlanticism in the “Cold War” was a temporary event, which would be followed by the rise of Eurasianism. However, at the current stage, as a result of Russia’s economic and military weakening, it can be said that the importance of Russia as one of the leading geopolitical forces has been thoroughly shaken.

A clear example of this is the fact that Russia is losing its geopolitical influence on the post-Soviet space. Examples of this are Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan’s attempts to export oil and gas produced on their territory to the international market through Georgia; the gradual ejection of Armenia from the Russia-led CSTO, and increasing pressure from that country to have Russia withdraw its troops from Gyumri.

Also, it is necessary to note that Russia is gradually losing its influence in the mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan and therefore in solving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. In 2023, Azerbaijan managed to establish full control over her territory, which is recognized as a territory of Azerbaijan by the international community. In addition, during a meeting with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EU expressed its readiness to deploy its monitors on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

However, Russia remains a dominant actor in the region, if only because of the thousands of Russian draft-dodgers who fled to Georgia, artificially bolstering trade between the two countries.

Conclusion – Perspectives for Regional Cooperation

Despite the apparent resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijani conflict, and the rapprochement of sorts that has been observed between Tbilisi and Moscow, the prospect of intra-regional cooperation remains limited by a number of factors. First is the distance between elite intentions and popular needs. Even in an improving democracy like Georgia, there is evidence that the ruling party believes it can behave with near impunity against the wishes of its constituents. In Armenia, the situation is reversed; the seething intransigence of a section of the electorate forces the elite to collude with their mortal enemy Azerbaijan to militarily remove Nagorno-Karabakh as an election issue.

This latter problem leads into the second reason, which is the inexplicable reluctance of the constituents of all South Caucasus countries to realistically assess their respective conditions. Constrained by those conditions – Armenian reluctance to negotiate, Georgian obsession with NATO, or Russia’s own socio-political and strategic demise – it becomes impossible to conceive of alternative futures for the region.

One should not discount the relative successes of the last few months in the South Caucasus, namely, the attribution of EU candidate status to Georgia. But this too poses problem; the over-reliance on the large international organizations and the international community to carry the torch for the South Caucasus countries has become a palliative for responsible policy-making. This is true of Armenia which rings every doorbell in search of a new hegemon, it is true of Georgia, with its EU/NATO dreams, and it can even be said that it is true of Russia, which is reduced to beg for weapons from China and North Korea to continue the war in Ukraine. Azerbaijan for its part, is fully content with its cosy relationship with Türkiye. On these counts alone, we will find ourselves discussing regional cooperation for years still in the future with little prospect of success.

References

- Administration of the President of Azerbaijan, 2022. Declaration on the establishment of the Council on Strategic Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Türkiye has been signed. Retrieved from: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/721>.
- Antadze G. 2023. *Geopolitical lights and shadows of the Karabakh war*. Retrieved January 13, 2023 from <https://www.geocase.ge/ka/publications/294/yarabaghis-omis-geopolitikuri-shuq-chrdilebi>.
- Asatiani S. 2022. *South Caucasus at the Crossroads: Complex Reality and Great Expectations*. Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Foundation.
- Chitadze, N. 2011. Geopolitics. Universal.
- Chitadze, N. 2023. The Russia-Ukraine War and Its Consequences on the Geopolitics of the World. IGI Global. Information Science Reference. Pennsylvania, USA. Retrieved from: <https://www.igi-global.com/book/russia-ukraine-war-its-consequences/313958>.
- Daily Sabah, 2020. “Türkiye Sides with Azerbaijan Against Armenia’s Occupation, Erdogan Says”, Retrieved from: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/Türkiye-sides-with-azerbaijan-against-armenias-occupation-erdogan-says>.
- Lezhava, N. 2022. *South Caucasus at the Crossroads: Complex Reality and Great Expectations*. Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Foundation.
- Shatakishvili, D. 2023. Economy of South Caucasus in Post-Crisis Period and Future Perspectives. GFSIS. Retrieved from: <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/opinion-papers/200-expert-opinion-geo.pdf>.
- UN, 2005. Basic Facts about the United Nations. UN Department of Public Affairs.

New Security Arrangements in the South Caucasus

Henry Wathen

Entropy, Hyper-Connectivity, No Guarantors and No One Is Neutral

Georgia's Post-2008 Security Arrangements as a Model

To discern tendencies for new security arrangements in the South Caucasus, a bigger picture with global trends should be considered. In attempting to characterize the current state of global interactions, four overarching trends could be identified: (1) entropy, (2) hyper-connectivity, (3) the dissolution of neutrality, and (4) a lesser role for external guarantors of agreements and so-called security guarantees.

Let us begin by exploring the concept of entropy. In contrast to the past, where multinational organizations like the UN and OSCE dominated, we are now observing a shift towards bilateral agreements and various *ad hoc* formats. There is no longer a single, predominant authority setting rules and norms. Instead, states engage in direct bilateral agreements, leading to a more entropic and decentralised international system.

Simultaneously, we find ourselves in an era of hyperconnectivity, a phenomenon widely acknowledged by experts. I mean by that how issues are interlinked, such as Sweden's NATO accession being tied to US export of F-16 planes to Türkiye. Also, hyper connectivity is exemplified by the near instant reactions and repercussions of a short tweet by former US President Trump.

In addition, I am saying that no one can remain truly neutral in today's interconnected world. Whether it be Europe or the US, isolation is no longer a feasible option. The consequences of conflicts in the Middle East or Eastern Europe reverberate globally, forcing nations to grapple with interconnected challenges. Then, let us also acknowledge that security guarantees and guarantors to peace agreements are misleading terms. There is never a total

guarantee for any action in international relations. Interests and public discourse guide states' actions.

Furthermore, peacekeeping models evolve as well. Gone are the days when the key actor on the ground are neutral blue helmets operating under a detailed mandate from the UN Security Council. Instead, we witness a shift towards security arrangements that involve specific countries or regional organizations shaping the peacekeeping contingents, as exemplified by the recent UN Security Council resolution for Haiti with a Kenyan lead on forming a stabilising force.

Now, let us turn our attention to the South Caucasus, a region that has been at the forefront of shaping new peacekeeping strategies. Notably, the 2008 conflict between Russia, Georgia, and primarily South Ossetian separatists showcased a unique approach. The six-point agreement and subsequent implementing measures, brokered through intense shuttle diplomacy, is an interesting model for future conflict management/conflict resolution processes. However, the subsequent agreements and their implementation demonstrated varying perceptions and roles, emphasizing the complexity of contemporary peacekeeping.

The six-point agreement of 12 August 2008 primarily functions as a ceasefire arrangement, featuring only a few additional provisions. Among these, a crucial element is the initiation of discussions concerning security arrangements for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the time, France's President Nicolas Sarkozy, concurrently holding the presidency of the European Union, engaged with Russia's President Dimitriy Medvedev and Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili. This interaction led to a consensus on the six points.¹

Following this, the agreement was presented by Medvedev to the respective leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, who then signed the Russian language version. This secondary step holds significance as it underscores Russia's role. While Georgia perceived Russia as a party to the conflict, Russia positioned itself as a mediator and peacemaker. Less than two weeks after the agreement, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

¹ Protocol on agreement (The Medvedev-Sarkozy-Saakashvili plan), *University of Edinburgh Peace Agreement Database*, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/view/724>.

In September 2008, an additional agreement, known as the implementation measures, was negotiated directly between France and Russia, excluding Georgia. From the Russian perspective, this agreement solidified security arrangements with Russia as a provider in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Additionally, EU monitors were to be deployed to the territories controlled by Georgia outside the administrative boundary lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This particular arrangement serves as a potential template for contemporary peace operations, with Russia on one side of a conflict divide and the European Union on the other, involving Georgia.²

As stipulated in the six-point agreement, discussions began on “security and stability arrangements for Abkhazia and South Ossetia”, referred to as the “Geneva International Discussions” (GID). The GID platform was created fulfilling Georgia’s insistence to negotiate with Russia, while the latter facilitates participation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The US, which also participates, is the party that the Russians see as their primary counterpart in the talks. A troika of the UN, OSCE and EU representatives co-chair the format.

Drawing parallels with current geopolitical situation, similarities can be identified between Georgia’s post-2008 model of security arrangements and what is taking shape through the ongoing developments around Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russian peacekeepers are stationed on the Azerbaijani side, while EU monitors operate on the Armenian side. Notably, this differs due to Russia’s presence in Armenia. Further comparisons can be made with the Russian, Iranian and Turkish involvement in Syria, particularly regarding de-escalation zones established in the Astana agreement. These arrangements recognize external factors as active subjects with distinct agendas, deviating from the pretence of being neutral peacemakers. A report by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation summarises the shortcomings of the Astana process with the following: “... the conflict parties were the guarantors of their own bargain and they were free to decide whether to permit humanitarian aid or honour a ceasefire.”³

² “Dmitry Medvedev and Nicolas Sarkozy agreed on additional measures to the Georgian-South-Ossetian conflict resolution plan adopted on August 12, 2008.” *President of Russia*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/968>.

³ Gregor Jaecke and David Labude. “De-escalation zones in Syria.” *Konrad Adenbauer Stiftung*, June 2020. <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/7938566/De-escalation+zones>

Comparing all of the above to ongoing talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, we witness a pattern of multiple formats and principles agreed upon in different meetings. This underscores the entropic nature of international relations, where comprehensive peace agreements may no longer be negotiated in a single venue, but rather through various channels. Point by point may be agreed upon in different meetings and with different mediators.

As for any normative and legal aspects of international relations, these must align with the ground-level power dynamics rather than relying solely on international organizations with professed altruistic intentions. Both military power and diplomacy are tools for countries to assert their interests. International organisations merely serve as platforms where diplomatic activity takes place.

In the recent past, we have witnessed the emergence of new external actors in the South Caucasus, beyond the three Caucasus countries. China, Türkiye, Iran and India, and others, have become more assertive in the region, engaging in infrastructure projects, security, and diplomatic initiatives.⁴ This diversification of actors adds a layer of complexity to the region, making it imperative to consider the varied interests and influence of these emerging players.

Looking ahead, it is plausible to anticipate additional actors entering the scene. Financial interests from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, coupled with potential diplomatic initiatives from countries like Brazil, Argentina, or Pakistan, further highlight the growing complexity of the geopolitical landscape. The involvement of nations with a tradition of contributing troops to the United Nations, such as Pakistan and India, could significantly impact the dynamics in the South Caucasus. These large nations could for example deploy brigade-size units in support of their respective client state in the South Caucasus. One brigade of three thousand troops is a manageable deployment for India, but would make a significant difference for small Armenia.

+in+Syria.pdf/4a717753-1fff-352b-b6ff-1abba5f7fdb8?version=1.1&t=1592814733641, p. 7.

⁴ For an overview of Chinese engagements see: Katja Kalkschmied. “Chinese lending specifics and projects in the Caucasus region: A look into project-level data.” *Discourses in Social Market Economy*, 11, 2022. <http://ordnungspolitisches-portal.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-11-Kalkschmied.pdf>.

As for possible new diplomatic formats which may evolve, recall the above description of the GID. Imagine an equivalent platform developing for talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The latter would likely insist on Türkiye being at the table. Armenia would want the EU and US to participate. Russia has, by deploying peacekeepers to Karabakh, invited itself to the table. In addition, the characteristics of the new security arrangements in the South Caucasus will be influenced by the outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine. Thus, Azerbaijan and Türkiye, meeting with Armenia, the EU and the US is an imagined format. It is also possible that this lineup will never convene altogether. As in a way, we already have discussions with all the said partners. Modern communication and messaging connect all these parties and the principles they agree upon even if they meet separately. The format may continue to be imagined, but the discussions are not. In today's digitalized information landscape new meetings and new agreements surface in our flow in a pace that is hard to keep up with. That is the new reality.

In conclusion, the South Caucasus can be seen as a microcosm of the broader trends shaping international relations. The entropic nature of bilateral agreements, the inseparability of global events due to hyperconnectivity, and the diminishing concept of neutrality all together characterize the contemporary geopolitical landscape. As we navigate this intricate terrain, it becomes evident that the future of international relations lies in recognizing and adapting to these evolving trends.

Epilogue

Frederic Labarre

Many readers will have felt perplexed by the eclectic nature of this Study Group Information booklet relative to the workshop that gave it its title “New Security Arrangements for the South Caucasus”. In reality it is important to acknowledge that, as concerns security arrangements (a deliberately broad term), topics such as political polarization, the existence of reliable peace agreements, and external influences have a definite impact on what those arrangements can produce.

One may consider political polarization more in detail here, and link this with the impact from external influences. This link produces a sobering thought for anyone interested in either the integration of the South Caucasus as a strategic space in its own right, or seeing the region orient its fortunes towards Euro-Atlantic partners. Namely, the increasingly hostile political climates in established democracies, the rise of the isolationist far right in North America (including Canada), coupled with the threat of an inexplicably pro-Russia far right in Europe seem to be gaining steam.

This may spell disaster for any plans – whatever their origin – to see an effective rapprochement between the South Caucasus and the West. With it, security arrangements will remain moribund. The open hostility now brewing against wider involvement in Eurasia (including Ukraine and the South Caucasus) is bound by the idea that the whole former Soviet Union is unreformable and hopelessly gives credence to Vladimir Putin’s “civilisationist” fever dream. In terms of identity management, never mind security arrangement, things have seldom looked worse for the South Caucasus.

Five short years ago, the RSSC SG looked on hopefully at the rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and at Georgia’s diplomatic renaissance. It is easy to blame the current malaise on the effects of COVID-19 and the Ukraine war. We should not be satisfied with simply saying that such events are outside even the more authoritative of authoritarian leaders, and that the *tabula rasa* which emerged was impossible to prevent. Yet the facts

are there. Efforts should have redoubled not only in spite of those crises, but because of them.

The inability for the region to seize upon such moments of authority to forge a new path forward remains perplexing. The 2020 Karabakh War should have produced an adequate peace settlement, but it only invited the potentially perpetual deployment of Russian troops in the region. Thankfully, Russia's regional ambitions appear to have been dashed indirectly by Ukraine's unexpected success at exposing the Russian Army's criminal ineptitude. In turn, this has emboldened Azerbaijan to complete its 2020 victory in September 2023, after Armenia's ill-advised intransigence at the negotiating table. Also, Russia's war in Ukraine prompted Russians to emigrate to Georgia. Some to escape the bellicosity of the Russian political elite, others to pursue their business without sanctions. Even if it appears that this trend has slowed down or is already declining (around a third of Russians who immigrated to Georgia in 2022 are likely to have left the country or travelled on), the political ambivalence of some Russians who have emigrated should not go unmentioned. In effect, one may be pro-Putin but anti-war, anti-war and anti-Ukrainian, pro-war and anti-Putin. The fact that they are anti-mobilization does not betray a deeper loyalty to the regime necessarily. And so, these factors reflect themselves in South Caucasus societies. The Pashinyan government cannot manage the State or even run election campaigns without the spectre of the Artsakh issue looming over it, the Georgians' politics also become ambivalent after nearly two decades being pro-West.

The West should be wary of cookie-cutter categories and easy labels. The situation in the South Caucasus was rendered more complicated by the Ukrainian war. Russians, it has been demonstrated, mostly consume the media sources they trusted at home. They do not trust "enlightened émigré" platforms like *Meduza*, or the *Moscow Times*. Our own constituencies and elite become overcome by this complexity, and are all the more ready to settle for easy explanations. This is how political polarization in the South Caucasus and outside of the South Caucasus affects security arrangements; at seeing the inability of the region to sort out its own challenges, our own policymakers are forced to agree with the isolationist tendencies currently on the rise in our societies.

A peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan would have gone a long way in showing that the region's leadership has acquired maturity after 30 years of conflict. More to the point, it would have evacuated both Russia and Iran from the region, and made it more stable still. Instead, what we see are disjointed appeals to faraway hegemonies to join in on the "promises" of the South Caucasus bestowed by its strategic location.

If our earlier analysis was not clear enough about the implications, it is worth repeating. No one will come to the aid of, or invest in, the South Caucasus when its members perpetuate the image of a region forever at war with itself. No one. Let us not be confused naïvely by the self-serving interventions of late; French recognitions of the Armenian genocide, or American demonstrations of military companionship merely soothe their respective diasporas. The same with the promises of a future EU accession of Georgia. This is the commercial version of the promise of NATO membership that was made in 2008. The game in the South Caucasus is not fully played, and there is an urgent need to throttle Russian and Iranian ambitions there. The Euro-Atlantic partners seem to be unconvinced that it should be their job to do this in the region. They need to see the region come together for it to be helped more fully. Otherwise, the "help" bestowed by those powers to the South Caucasus may not always benefit Armenian, Azerbaijani, or Georgian interests in the long run.

All the diplomatic skill and activity of NATO and EU countries will be devoted in making Russia pay for what it has done to Ukraine in a way that will cost them the least possible. This activity may take the shape of pressure on Russia's perceived supporters. The South Caucasus can easily find itself in the middle of that fight. If there was a reason for the region to develop its own way, this is it.

Constituents from the South Caucasus – to begin with, RSSC SG contributors – should seriously task themselves with defining the societal "pillars" of their region even before they decide on their common orientation. What place should there be for government intervention in private affairs (to reduce the risk of oligarchic monopolization, for instance)? Or should oligopolistic tendencies be allowed to run free and create a neo-feudal society? What role for the state in health care and education, or should the private sector run that, too? The region should develop its own recognizable (and

interoperable, some would say) standards, and lead by their example. These standards should not only be appealing, but be a function of the South Caucasus' own brand of excellence. There needs to be a conscious drive away from the politics of mimicry, which lead whole societies to replicate the appeals of other social visions, without the prerequisite normative and financial investments. Whether at individual, group, or state level, “sounding” and “looking” western does not lead to acceptance lest fundamental principles are integrated *de profundis*. This is why this this RSSC SG has prided itself for nearly 12 years in maintaining the regional flavour and accents of the South Caucasus in all it does.

There is a large body of opinion in the South Caucasus that believes that an imposing “victory” would aptly restore confidence. I have used quotation marks to underline the kiplingesque flavour of victory; its gifts are always dubious. It should be preferable if this grand achievement took the form of new self-imagined destinies, creatively arrived at with purely regional talent. But the region's best talents have already left. They are being replaced by Russian speakers, and worse, by Russian “thinkers”. The quotation marks mirror those used for victory. Without the capacity to propel itself forward in a meaningful way, the South Caucasus will melt into the Russian civilization.

Georgia has received candidate status from the EU, leading to euphoric demonstrations in the street. But what is being celebrated? What “meaning” does this “status” have? Does it signify achievement by that society – real merit in the achievement of its destiny – or is merely the euphoria one feels when they realize they can “relax” and go back to normal? More than likely, more pain lies in the future of the South Caucasus. Pain in certain decisions to be made – such as a peace treaty – or pain in withstanding suboptimal outcomes – realizing that the West might be unwilling to carry the ball for the South Caucasus. It is difficult to say how much time is left when one's watch is broken.

In future workshops, the RSSC SG may renew the concerted effort at focusing attention on matters of intimate importance to the South Caucasus, after it has so thoroughly evaluated the impact of geopolitics on the region. That was the easy part. An honest appraisal of what prevents movement forward, the creation of new and original solutions, that is really difficult because it

requires imagination and creativity. The fantasies of Russia occupying the South Caucasus (and its imagined benefits) must be set aside. The potential for a pan-Turkic world is equally anachronistic. Hegemons can be relied on for only one thing; caring for their own interests. International law, imperfect as it is, at least is neutral. Hence the need for a treaty not only for Armenia and Azerbaijan, but perhaps the whole South Caucasus. Should this be brought about, then perhaps the international community – assured that it would not be drawn into another proxy contest – might look on favourably at the region. But setting emotions aside in favour of intellect will be needed. And then the common creation of a new reality may be brought about.

PART V: Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group

Executive Summary of Recommendations

- The Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process must be unblocked and pushed forward to achieve a conclusion as soon as possible.
- EU, US and Russian negotiation platforms should take a step back from the frontline of peace mediation to allow for an urgent resumption of meetings between the countries' leaders.
- The contents of Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations should become more transparent to the public. The civil societies in both countries should be consulted on possible solutions to remaining divisive issues.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan should consider signing a bilateral agreement on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) after a peace agreement has been achieved.
- Following the conclusion of a peace agreement, the EU should extend its technical support to Armenia and Azerbaijan on the delimitation and demarcation of the common borders.

Situation Analysis

The RSSC SG sought to further address a host of security problems with consequences far beyond the South Caucasus region. One of those problems has been the *dénouement* of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Another is Georgia's *rapprochement* with Russia. In the 26th RSSC SG workshop the co-chairs sought to raise a number of questions, such as: What form of conflict resolution can be expected between the belligerents? Could there be a regional solution in order to move from conflict to peace? How could such a solution meet the competing interests and strategic goals of regional powers like Russia, Türkiye, and Iran? How could the states of the South Caucasus best deal with the Russia-West confrontation over Ukraine and the ensuing regional strategic competition? Would better coordination among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia be feasible, and could it work as an incentive or a

hindrance to re-building a new, functioning framework for stability and security in the South Caucasus?

New security arrangements – particularly arrangements springing from more pragmatic approaches – may take advantage of the deteriorating security climate between larger powers. Indeed, there is a likelihood that the attention given by great powers to the region will be tempered by their greater interests in other regions. Russia's travails in Ukraine have definitely reduced its ability to influence, let alone control, Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign and security policies, and have also influenced its military deployments in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Iran has taken advantage of this distraction to assert its own interests in the South Caucasus.

However, this also provides the countries of the South Caucasus with the opportunity to develop alternative arrangements to help the region keep its own identity. RSSC SG panelists underlined the shifting orientation of the South Caucasus largely to the detriment of the West. For example, faced with the current stalemate concerning existing negotiation platforms for the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement, a new "3+2" (Russia, Türkiye, Iran + Armenia, Azerbaijan) negotiation platform has been pushed as an alternative option by speakers from both sides. Albeit extremely relative, this strategic change is nevertheless observable by degree. Azerbaijan's pragmatic policy-making and non-alignment allows it to reconcile apparently disparate relationships with the West through occasional projects and policies (mostly aimed at maintaining an outlet for its fossil fuel deliveries). Armenia's connection with its diaspora has created links with powerful Armenian communities in Western countries. The orientation of the Georgian public towards EU and NATO integration needs no elaboration here, even though the appetites of the ruling government there may not align with those ambitions. Thus, a realistic assessment of the South Caucasus' Westerly course has to remain under consideration. The elaboration of regional security arrangements may offer each state a way to relieve the region from the meddling of large powers, while at the same time preserve their political margins of manoeuvre.

Political polarization within the South Caucasus countries owing to the rapid changes of fortunes in the region may impact the prospects for stability and

peace. This is why urgent pleas are made to accelerate the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan and to stick to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course.

Political Polarization and Its Dangers

Domestic political discourse and ideology influence a state's foreign policy formation. Consequently, increased political polarization and extremist ideology across the political spectrum will affect the bilateral and international relations of states. Political polarization has demonstrably affected Georgia's ability to shape solutions to complex problems. The prospect of territorial re-integration seems to have taken a back seat to the chasm which has developed between the public's Western aspirations and the government's apparent Russian leanings. The outcome of peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan increasingly becomes hostage to allegations of "soft" ethnic cleansing in Nagorno Karabakh, but while the Azerbaijani population seems united around a "winner takes all" strategy *vis-à-vis* Armenians, the intransigence of parts of the Armenian population may put the Pashinyan government in a difficult situation.

Polarization on foreign policy issues is also the result of external influences – such as the influx of Russian immigrants in Georgia, Russian disinformation directed at local societies, or mediators of the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan being regarded as politically biased. Panelists proposed solutions to mitigate the dangers of political polarization. An important aspect was the breaking of stereotypes and prejudices regarding ethnic groups living together in the same state as well as the development of media literacy and civic education to counter disinformation. The goal is to change narratives towards finding common regional solutions rather than feeding different perceptions, and to facilitate personal interaction between Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Furthermore, reducing external involvement in trilateral frameworks for dialogue and cooperation was said to be a necessary step in order to move forward. The Benelux countries were cited as an example of small-scale regional integration.

Building an Integrated South Caucasus

One of the aims of this Study Group is to foster the notion of an integrated strategic persona for the South Caucasus, enabling it to emerge as a regional actor in its own right, promoting its interests constructively as a group of countries. So far, the unresolved conflicts have been the main hindrance to regional integration. From this perspective, the most important strategic variable to have changed during the last years has been the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. This conflict acted as a brake to regional integration, as did the still unresolved conflict between Georgia and its breakaway regions supported by Moscow.

While the risk of military confrontation remains relatively high, it is worth reflecting on the mediation and negotiation efforts and formats to date. Additionally, ways to create new tools to support responsible diplomacy need to be considered. Progress on this front has been limited by the fact that the substance of Armenian-Azerbaijani peace talks has been shielded from view. Regardless, the focus was on the preferred process and perceived content of the negotiations between the two countries. The current stumbling blocks are the disagreements between the parties on key issues: The need for international guarantees and arbitration; preferences regarding the mediation frameworks; the urgency of signing a peace treaty; geopolitical fragmentation among the three South Caucasian states leading to different geopolitical imperatives and priorities; the relevance of the Trilateral Statement of November 2020 in the aftermath of the demise of Nagorno-Karabakh; the enclaves in the territory of the other country inherited from Soviet times. The situation with Georgia's separatist territories remains as intractable as ever, and, with the current Georgian prudent and pragmatic approach towards Russia, it may remain frozen for many years. The building of a new Russian naval base in Abkhazia will create a new security threat against Georgia in particular, and the Wider Black Sea in general. To mitigate such security threats, a diplomatic "coalition" of Black Sea riparian states and enhanced cooperation with Central Asian states seeking unimpeded access to the Black Sea via the South Caucasus were suggested.

External Factors of New Security Arrangements in the South Caucasus

Normative, legal, or other solutions which could be put in place with the help of Western organizations and institutions and with other Black Sea littoral states were proposed in order to preserve the security of maritime trade, the “adaptability” of existing international legal regimes (like the Montreux Convention or the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), and the eventual creation of structures or procedures to alleviate regional instability. In this discussion, great hope has been attached to the Western-less “3+2” and “3+3” (in case Georgia dropped its concerns *vis-à-vis* Russia) cooperation platforms. Misperceptions regarding the EU’s role and objectives in the South Caucasus region, confusions regarding its internal and external operational procedures as well as its abilities and capabilities are not favourable towards the advancement of new security arrangements in the South Caucasus. However, the EU should stay committed and some even argued its role and capabilities deployed in the region should be expanded. The input of the European Union – not only as a security provider through the ongoing EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia and the EU Mission in Armenia, but also as an investor in a potential Euro-region project – should be promoted and emphasized. In the definition of the outlines of a new security arrangement for the South Caucasus, technical solutions were regarded to be a first step. While technical solutions have political implications, the effects of politics on solutions for the common good may be tempered by EU conditionality on its participation.

The impact of actors from well outside the region – such as India and China – may affect the prospect of a regionally-generated security arrangement by virtue of the attraction they create for individual countries in the South Caucasus. In short, external actors have the power to enforce unilateral solutions on preferred bilateral relationships. From this perspective, the implications of a potential competition between the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) over regional integration in the South Caucasus were considered.

Policy Recommendations

- The Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process must be unblocked and pushed forward to achieve a conclusion as soon as possible (although it was acknowledged that there is no urgency on the Azerbaijani side). The participants firmly believe that the mutual trust which is currently absent will be more easily generated by the rapid signing of a formal peace treaty.
- The current stalemate regarding platforms for Armenia-Azerbaijan summit meetings should be overcome. Georgia could offer a compromise venue for such meetings and for the eventual signing of a peace agreement. Meanwhile, EU, US and Russian negotiation platforms should take a step back from the frontline of peace mediation to allow for an urgent resumption of meetings between the countries' leaders.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan should take responsibility for, and mutually agreed action against, any violations of a peace agreement, and give up on the search for security guarantees and international arbitration mechanisms, which have proved highly ineffective in managing other conflict/post-conflict situations. This recommendation opens the door to discussions on the potential augmentation of the EU presence and peace monitoring in the region, in close consultation with both Baku and Yerevan.
- Arbitration should be undertaken by the countries of the region, on condition that they are not party to a dispute or accused of a treaty breach. For example, an allegation made by country A against country B can only be investigated and arbitrated by country C. An allegation made by country B against country C can only be investigated and arbitrated by country A, and so on.
- The contents of Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations should become more transparent to the public. The civil societies in both countries should be consulted on possible solutions to remaining divisive issues in view of their extensive knowledge and experience in dealing with each other, which they have acquired, *inter alia*, within the framework of the EU, and track 2-diplomacy projects of the EU member states.

- After a peace agreement has been signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the two countries should consider signing a bilateral agreement on Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), in line with the 2011 Vienna Document. Georgia could also be involved in a potential South Caucasus CSBMs trilateral security arrangement.
- Following the conclusion of a peace agreement, the EU should extend its technical support to Armenia and Azerbaijan on the delimitation and demarcation of the common borders; subsequently, FRONTEX should help the two neighbouring countries to protect their newly demarcated borders against trans-border security risks and threats.
- The commitment to disarmament should be renewed – and perhaps the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty should be re-established for the South Caucasus.
- A recurring recommendation is the development of a dedicated structure to enable the region to prioritize and decide on matters of common interest.
- One approach could be a “mini-Marshall Plan” for the whole South Caucasus supported by the EU and the US with the mandate of supporting a tri- or quadri-national (with Türkiye) natural resource management corporation/entity. The creation of such infrastructure and intra-regional connectivity projects would form the basis of “new security arrangements”.
- The three countries would also be expected to open the door of cooperation and to extend benefits of such a security arrangement to the authorities of un-recognized territories and their population.
- Corollary, structures could also be set up to ensure that the ownership of such an arrangement remains within the purview of South Caucasus interests. These would include specialized tri-national colleges to train the personnel needed to maintain this infrastructure.
- Injections of funds would be conditional upon the commitment of all South Caucasus countries to intra-regional connectivity, with a view to

creating a publicly-traded company akin to the Suez Canal/Panama Canal companies, or the Saint-Lawrence Seaway project.

- Although the involvement of the EU would be welcome to facilitate the development of such infrastructure and processes, all three countries would be expected to commit politically to using such a plan's financial resources to build the infrastructure.
- The arrangement detailed in the point above would focus on managing regional water, food, crop, pollution control and energy security. Naturally, this could include activities in the commercial sector like tourism and economic relationships.

List of Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CFE	Conventional Forces in Europe
CPAC	Conservative Political Action Conference
CSBMs	Confidence and Security Building Measures
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DHA	Discourse-Historical Approach
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FM	Foreign minister
GDP	Gross domestic product
GID	Geneva International Discussions
IAO	Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IMEC	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MBRL	Multi-barrel rocket launchers
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member(s) of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSTRC	North-South Transport Route Corridor
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSCE MG	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group
PM	Prime minister
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
TANAP	Trans-Anatolian (Gas) Pipeline

TAP	Trans-Adriatic (Gas) Pipeline
TITR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
U.S./US	United States of America
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNM	United National Movement
USD	United States dollar
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

List of Authors and Editors

Nika CHITADZE, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi

Armen GRIGORYAN, Center for Policy Studies, Yerevan

Vasif HUSEYNOV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku

Andrzej KLIMCZYK, Georgian Strategic Analysis Center, Tbilisi

Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Nilüfer NARLI, Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul

George Vlad NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Razi NURULLAYEV, “Region” International Analytical Center, Baku

Benyamin POGHOSYAN, Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies, Yerevan

Yeghia TASHJIAN, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs – American University of Beirut

Henry WATHEN, Peacetalk, Geneva

The year 2023 has been a ferment of activity for the South Caucasus. Georgia received EU candidate status, but without any security guarantees. In September, Azerbaijan’s military actions shattered the chance for any Armenian-led autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh. This was met with broad silence from the international community. It was therefore necessary that experts come together to discuss “alternative security arrangements” in the broadest terms possible, taking into consideration the impact of polarization on the shaping of security arrangements. The speakers’ contributions analyse the current political situation in the South Caucasus and give an outlook on possible steps towards lasting peace in the region.

ISBN: 978-3-903359-94-9



26th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”