



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG

The South Caucasus: Reviving Regional Cooperation?

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Tbilisi
June, 2024



POLICY PAPER

ISSUE #44 | JUNE 2024

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This publication was produced in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) South Caucasus Office. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of GIP or the KAS South Caucasus Office.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Tracey German, “The South Caucasus: reviving regional cooperation or fostering authoritarian regionalism?”, Policy Paper No. 44, Georgian Institute of Politics, June 2024.

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Executive Summary

The events of recent years have exacerbated existing fault lines across the South Caucasus, meaning that the three states do not appear to be any closer to the existence of any form of unified political region than they were in the early 1990s; positive interdependence and cooperation between all three states still remains the exception and to date there has been little sign that these dynamics will re-energise genuine regional cooperation. This Policy Paper examines the question of whether current regional (and global) dynamics present the states with a unique opportunity to pursue regional cooperation and integration initiatives. Against a backdrop of great power competition, increasing global uncertainty and instability, and the changing geopolitical context in the wider region, the three states have an opportunity to use their agency and exploit the situation to their mutual advantage, working together to ensure stability and security. Shared goals could help mitigate against the impact of great power competition and facilitate the development of trust between former adversaries.

Introduction

There has been significant change in the South Caucasus (and wider Black Sea region) in recent years, triggered by Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and Azerbaijan's seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. These events – along with the Second Karabakh war in 2020 – have emphasised a continuing reliance on military instruments of power and the use of force to achieve strategic objectives, contributing to a deterioration in the region's security environment and prompting growing polarisation. There have also been shifts in its geopolitical landscape as the three states recalibrate their relations with other actors, prompting a change in regional alignments across the South Caucasus: Armenia has become alienated from Russia, whilst Georgia had been taking a more cautious approach in order to avoid provoking Moscow, whilst drifting away from the West, a trend that has accelerated in 2024. The EU has also become increasingly active in the region, taking a proactive approach as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and enhancing its cooperation with Azerbaijan over the import of natural gas.

These changes raise the question as to whether the current regional dynamics in the South Caucasus present the states with a unique opportunity to pursue regional cooperation and integration initiatives. In late 2023, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan unveiled a new plan for regional cooperation, the Crossroads of Peace, that focused on connectivity and capitalising on the South Caucasus's geographic location as a land bridge between Asia and Europe, Georgian ex-Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has expressed his country's readiness to work with Armenia and Azerbaijan to establish lasting peace in the South Caucasus (Mandaria 2023). However, in spite of this positive rhetoric, there is little sign of genuine regional cooperation that includes all three states.

Shifting geopolitical realities across the region have been intensified by Russia's war in Ukraine. This has contributed to a rise in the influence and engagement of Türkiye, China and Iran, as well as the EU, threatening Russia's hitherto dominant position. 'Europeanisation' appears to be under threat from 'Easternisation' and there is a danger that regional cohesion becomes defined by an increasing turn to authoritarian practices and disillusionment with the promises of democracy.

The South Caucasus as a region

For all of the change that there has been in the South Caucasus over recent years, there are also a lot of continuities, most notably, its geographic location and the divided state of the region. The South Caucasus has been described as the 'most notoriously fractured' of the regions that comprise post-Soviet Eurasia (Broers 2018), with long-running fractures between the three states as well as within them. The events of recent years have exacerbated existing fault lines and fractures, meaning that the three South Caucasus states do not appear to be any closer to the existence of any form of unified political region than they were in the early 1990s; positive interdependence and cooperation between all three states still remains the exception.

There is little consensus about what actually constitutes a 'region', there are no natural regions: all are socially constructed and therefore politically contested (Nye 1973, 80). What matters is how political actors perceive and interpret the idea of a region and the notion of 'regionness' (Hurrell 1995, 38-9). This goes some way to explaining the continuing challenges of understanding the South Caucasus as a unified political region. Despite geographical proximity and contiguity, the degree of interaction and interdependence between the three states remains limited and typically bilateral. There is little sense of 'regionness' between the three states, who all seek to ally with other regional actors, notably Russia, Türkiye, Iran and the West, particularly the US and EU. Regional cohesiveness can be shaped by a range of different elements, including social elements such as ethnicity, religion and history, economic interdependence and trade networks, regime type, ideology or institutional frameworks. These elements may foster a common sense of identity, shaping collective action within a specific geographic area. However, regional cohesion and collective action is not necessarily based solely on positive interdependence – it may also be shaped by negative trends, such as enmity or authoritarianism.

There is some cooperation and intra-regional interaction, particularly in terms of transit infrastructure and at the civil society level, but it generally reflects geopolitical realities and the different strategic orientations of the three states. Furthermore, it is often driven by negative factors, as well as external dynamics, rather than by any positive internal desire to unite as a 'region'. There is significant cooperation at the bilateral level, but this is very limited at the pan-regional level. Inclusive regionalism projects instituted by the governments of all three South Caucasus states, are weak, ineffective and have tended to be dominated by Russia, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) or CSTO. Nevertheless, the process of regionalisation is relatively strong, as evidenced by migration, trade and investment flows, informal networks boosted by the Soviet legacy. The key difference between regionalism and regionalisation is that the former is driven by state policy or conscious action by a state or group of states; by contrast, regionalisation tends to be driven by autonomous economic or social processes. However, despite the geopolitical shifts that have been occurring across the wider South Caucasus region in recent years, to date there has been little sign that these dynamics will re-energise genuine regional cooperation.

Unifying the states of the South Caucasus

Enmity does not have to be the only legacy of war and violence: the example of Europe, and the creation of the European Union (EU), is illustrative of the more positive dynamic that war can be for the development of regional initiatives. The EU is also one of the most prominent examples of how regionalism can act as a mechanism to prevent conflict and tie former adversaries together. Originally established as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, the initial aim of the initiative was to ensure that no single country would be able to manufacture weapons, making war 'not only unthinkable but materially impossible' (The Schuman Declaration 1950). For decades it focused on building stability through cooperation and integration in the economic and political spheres, reflecting the theory of neofunctionalism, the idea that initial integration in limited functional (or economic) areas creates a dynamic towards further integration in other areas (Mitrany 1975).

Pashinyan's 2023 Crossroads of Peace proposal hinted at this neofunctionalist thinking, raising the prospect of attempting to stabilise the dynamic situation in the region by seeking limited economic cooperation and integration between the three states. Although on the one hand, the region's geographical positioning has created challenges throughout history, it also offers the states of the region advantage in a globalised world. It is often portrayed as a crossroads or land bridge between East and West, a key connection between manufacturers in Asia and Western markets. The three states could further operationalise their geographic position as a bridge between Europe and Asia with infrastructure and connectivity projects that could revitalise regional cooperation. One of the advantages of infrastructure projects is that there is a much greater role for private companies and autonomous economic processes, rather than relying solely on state policy.

To date, infrastructure development in the South Caucasus has been focused on the development of new oil and gas pipelines, which have tied states in the region together, both physically, politically and economically, boosting regionalism. Pipelines physically connect states, necessitating cross-border cooperation at all levels, thus the energy arena has been a key driver of growing regionalism in the South Caucasus, as evidenced by the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye and their collaboration on export pipeline projects. However, whilst pipelines (and other infrastructure) physically connect states, necessitating cooperation, they also reflect political realities: in spite of offering the shortest (and thus cheapest) route from the Caspian across to Türkiye, Armenia's disputes with Azerbaijan and Türkiye has seen it excluded.

The current focus of infrastructure development in the South Caucasus is on transport initiatives such as rail transit along the East-West axis, moving goods from Asia to Western markets. This coincides with the ambitions of both Georgia and Azerbaijan, who have long sought to establish themselves (and the wider region) as key transport hubs between Europe and Asia. This goal was boosted in 2017 with the inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line, which links Azerbaijan to Georgia and Türkiye. The railway has recently modernized a 114-stretch of the route, to increase its capacity from one million tons per year to five million, increasing cargo transportation between Asia and Europe.¹

1. The leaders of the three countries have also pledged to simplify customs procedures along the route, facilitating freight transit.

The BTK is part of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), a 6,500-km multi-modal route, which links China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye via train (including the BTK) and ferry. It is also part of the Middle Corridor transit route from Asia to Europe, which has become far more attractive since Russia's invasion of Ukraine undermined the viability of the northern transit route. In 2023 the TITR handled 2.8m tonnes of cargo, an 86 per cent increase on 2022; it is hoped it will handle 4m tonnes in 2024, rising to 10m tonnes over the medium term and World Bank (2023) forecasts anticipate a tripling of trade volume along the Middle Corridor by 2030.²

In May 2024 it was announced that a Chinese consortium was the sole bidder for a contract to develop the deep-water port at Anaklia, on Georgia's Black Sea coast.³ It is hoped the development of the port will enable it to become a strategic trading hub between China and Europe, as part of the Middle Corridor, although previous plans to develop it became mired in scandal. A deep-water port will allow larger vessels to dock, increasing the volumes being transported along the East-West axis. However, there is some concern about the growing role of China in the region, particularly its growing ties with Georgia. According to reports, the companies involved in the port development are all state-owned Chinese companies that have extensive global experience, alongside international controversy and scandal (Standish & Pertaia 2024).

The BTK is presented as an example of successful regional cooperation, with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze describing the railway as 'one of our most noteworthy [bilateral] achievements' that 'promises to foster connectivity between numerous nations' (Government of Georgia 2023). Furthermore, at the rail link's inauguration in 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan maintained that the route could promote 'political peace, security and stability, and social prosperity' (Güder 2017). However, Armenia continues to be excluded from the majority of transregional infrastructure projects, reflecting the geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus, and undermining Erdogan's claims that such projects can promote peace and stability.

The restoration of a Soviet-era rail link between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhchivan could further boost the connectivity of the wider South Caucasus. The re-opening of the Zangezur corridor would shorten transit times between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and could also lead to the re-establishment of a rail link between Armenia and Iran, ultimately facilitating the development of a North-South transport corridor connecting the Persian Gulf with the Black Sea. However, while this route would cross Armenian territory, Azerbaijan has sought to gain extraterritorial rights to operate it, which has been opposed by Yerevan. Both Ankara and Baku are keen to see this route become operational, because of the economic benefits. The 2020 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan specifically references transport connections and, in late 2023, Aliyev suggested that the Zangezur corridor was a crucial step towards the opening of borders with Armenia (Aze.Media 2024). However, neither side trusts the other, hindering progress on an agreement. The second option, the Aras corridor, would bypass Armenia entirely, routing through Iran and connecting Azerbaijan to the Persian Gulf, as well as the Black Sea. Rail freight between Iran and Azerbaijan increased by 28 per cent between March 2023 and February 2024, partly due to the impact of sanctions and trade restrictions imposed on Russia prompting countries to seek alternative routes to access European markets (van der Laan 2024).

2. In 2022, trade through the 'northern corridor' via Russia decreased by 40 per cent while the volume of cargo through the Middle Corridor grew sixfold compared to 2021. In 2022, trade through the 'northern corridor' via Russia decreased by 40 per cent while the volume of cargo through the Middle Corridor grew sixfold compared to 2021 (Eldem 2022).

3. The consortium comprises China Communications Construction Company Ltd and China Harbour Investment. Construction will be subcontracted out to China Road and Bridge Corporation and the Qingdao Port International Company (Mandaria 2024).

Whilst Armenia remains left out of East-West transnational infrastructure connectivity projects, the construction of the North-South road corridor will boost Armenia's links with the global economy, connecting the country with Georgia's Black Sea ports, facilitating better access to international and regional markets and creating greater cross-border connectivity. Yerevan has also revived plans to develop a dry port based near Gyumri that would provide the country with a connection to the trade corridors running across the South Caucasus. According to reports (Benson 2024), the government is seeking to transform Armenia into a 'transit, transport and export-focused manufacturing hub' with the establishment of a free-trade zone, featuring multi-modal air, rail and trucking facilities connected to warehouses and industrial parks.

It is not just about transport infrastructure; there are also ambitious plans to connect the electricity transmission networks of Georgia to Europe via the Black Sea Submarine Cable project, a 1,195km-long subsea cable running under the Black Sea from Anaklia in Georgia to Constanta, Romania (Gutbrod 2023). This would boost European energy security, enabling it to import electricity generated from renewable sources in Georgia, which has significant hydropower potential: hydropower constitutes over 80% of the country's generating capacity and from 75% to 90% of its power generation. However, the scale of the project is daunting: there is currently no subsea cable of its proposed length in operation. There are also plans to run subsea telecommunications cables from Armenia and Georgia into Europe (European Investment Bank 2023).

Speaking at the Silk Road Forum in Tbilisi in October 2023, Pashinyan unveiled his blueprint for regional cooperation that focused on connectivity and capitalizing on the South Caucasus's geographic location. The Armenian prime minister has described the development of new transit routes as beneficial for all countries in the region. His Crossroads of Peace plan proposes the reopening of Azerbaijan and Türkiye's land borders with Armenia, offering an additional transit route with checkpoints on borders and key roads, as well as the restoration of railway routes from Armenia to Nakhichevan and Türkiye, as an alternative to plans for the Zangezur route (Mandaria 2023). Key elements of the plan include the development of rail infrastructure, oil pipelines and electricity transmission networks, all of which would remain under the jurisdiction of the country they were transiting. Stressing the imperative of peace in the region, Pashinyan's plan accentuates the central role that economic links and infrastructure development could play in the development of genuine regional cooperation that includes all three South Caucasus states.

Regional dynamics and Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a dramatic shift in the international and regional security environments, triggering changes in the power and influence of actors in the South Caucasus. Although Russia has traditionally been the dominant power in the region since the early 19th century, the war has disrupted this, challenging the Kremlin's hegemonic position and facilitating the emergence of other actors.

The most dramatic change has occurred in Russia's relations with Armenia: once a vital strategic partner and security provider, Russia is now perceived as an unreliable neighbour who was unable (or unwilling) to assist its ally when needed and Yerevan has sought to 'de-Russify' its policies. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) also demonstrated its impotence, refusing to aid Armenia when Azerbaijan's forces shelled its territory in September 2022, despite the organisation's mutual assistance clause.⁴ In September 2023, Pashinyan painted a stark choice for Armenia (Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia 2023): in his view, the country could either be a sovereign, free and democratic independent state or a 'frightened, outlying province.

In contrast to Moscow's apparent disinterest and impotence, which appear to have compromised its position as a security guarantor in the South Caucasus, the EU has strengthened its position in the region since 2022. It emerged as an alternative mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan, reflecting a desire to ensure security and stability on its periphery, and has also sought to increase its supply of natural gas from alternative suppliers (in this case Azerbaijan), ensuring a diminution of Russian influence. Western actors have also been actively seeking to undermine Russia's role in the region: in April 2024, the EU and US offered Yerevan a combined economic assistance package worth over US\$350m, partly aimed at helping the country reduce its economic dependence on Russia. In a joint statement, the two acknowledged the 'substantial progress' that Armenia had made since 2018 on democratic and justice reform and expressed their commitment to continue supporting it 'as it further strengthens its democracy and the rule of law, in line with our shared values and principles' (Avetisyan 2024). France has also affirmed its commitment to supporting Armenia, provoking tensions with Azerbaijan.

Other actors have also become increasingly engaged and effective in the South Caucasus. While Türkiye's presence has grown visibly since the 2020 Karabakh war, the increased focus on the Middle Corridor as a key transit route from Asia to Europe post-2022 has further boosted Ankara's prominence and influence. Iran has also sought to consolidate its relationship with Armenia, whilst also developing its relationship with Russia, particularly in the defence sphere. Finally, some analysts have pointed to the 'Easternisation' of geopolitics in the South Caucasus, with growing ties between states in the region and both China and India. All three states have seen increased Chinese investment in transnational infrastructure projects. Over the past year, Beijing has signed a strategic partnership agreement with Tbilisi, which includes potential investment for key infrastructure projects, most notably the Black Sea port of Anaklia, and the two countries have introduced a visa-free regime for their citizens.

4. Article IV of the CSTO charter states that aggression against one signatory will be perceived as aggression against all and that 'all other Member States at the request of this Member State shall immediately provide the latter with the necessary aid, including military.' However, in spite of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan invoking the organisation's collective defence provision on September 14th 2022, the CSTO ruled out providing any assistance. This is not the first time that the organisation has refused a request from Armenia - it did the same in 2021 - and the CSTO summit held in Yerevan in November 2022 was marked by protests and calls for Armenia to leave the organization.

China represents an important source of foreign investment that comes without either Russia's strings of coercion or the West's strings of conditionality. Chinese engagement thus provides the South Caucasus states with strategic leverage, offering a counterbalance to Russian dominance, whilst simultaneously undermining Western influence. China's growing presence in the region is useful for both sides, offering diversification for the South Caucasus states and providing Beijing with another link in its integrated infrastructure projects across Eurasia, as well as access to European markets. India has also become increasingly active in the region, concluding a range of defence contracts with Yerevan, whilst it is also a significant trade partner of Azerbaijan. Thus, Russia's war against Ukraine has opened the door for non-regional powers, such as China and India, to expand their bilateral ties in the region, shifting the geopolitical trajectory away from the Russia-Western binary that has predominated for so long. However, it also risks consolidating the rise in illiberal practices and authoritarian forces of governance. Regional cohesion could become defined more by this illiberal turn than any positive dynamics of integration.

The political environment has become increasingly unfavourable with a rise in illiberalism across the wider Caucasus, reflecting broader global trends. In recent months both the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, have won their fifth terms of office, whilst in Türkiye, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues to consolidate his strong grip on power. Georgia is in danger of a turn towards authoritarian practices, at odds with both its declaratory commitment to European integration and popular sentiment. Freedom House's annual report on the state of political freedom in a range of European and Central Asian countries, *Nations in Transit 2024* (Smeltzer & Karppi 2024), accused the Georgian Dream coalition of bringing democratization to a standstill and creating a 'semi-consolidated authoritarian regime' instead. Georgia's Europeanisation efforts are under threat, most notably from the introduction of a Foreign Agents Law, described by the Council of Europe's top constitutional law body as 'anti-democratic' and sharing 'numerous similarities' with laws adopted by Russia, Hungary and Kyrgyzstan (Gavin 2024).

By contrast, there has been democratic renewal in Armenia, which is seeking to improve its relations with Western actors and reduce its reliance on Russia. The three states appear to be moving in different political directions and adopting different models of governance. At the same time, in spite of efforts to reduce their dependence upon Russia, both Armenia and Georgia have seen their economic dependence on their northern neighbour increase since 2022.

Thus, the war has exacerbated the polarisation of the South Caucasus, both between and within states. This has been most evident in Georgia, which has refused to impose sanctions on Russia. The war has exposed the difficulties of being located on the margins of Russia and Europe at a time when actors are expected to pick a side.

Obstacles to sustainable peace and stability

If current trends continue, there is a danger that the South Caucasus becomes unified by an illiberal, authoritarian regionalism that challenges the effectiveness of existing liberal multilateral organisations such as the EU. Geography matters, states cannot change their neighbourhood: the South Caucasus is located in a challenging neighbourhood that includes the wider Black Sea region and the Middle East, both of which have seen the outbreak of war in the past two years, as well as the regional powers of Russia, Türkiye and Iran. These three states prioritise regime security and the realisation of spheres of influences, as they seek to counter US hegemony and Western influence in their own neighbourhoods.

The biggest obstacle preventing the South Caucasus countries developing successful cooperation and integration moving forwards is the absence of trust, which is fundamental to both war termination and subsequent peacebuilding efforts.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Russia's war in Ukraine has amplified long-running trends in the South Caucasus, exacerbating historic divisions and political fracture, increasing polarisation across the region. This makes it difficult to envisage the development of successful trilateral regional initiatives including all three states in the near-term.

1. *The three states should continue to capitalise on the region's geographic location, pursuing infrastructure and connectivity projects that are beneficial for all. Fostering limited functional cooperation in mutually beneficial economic areas could be linked with trust-building measures and create the dynamics towards further cooperation in other areas. Critically, it is important to ensure greater involvement for private companies and bottom-up processes, rather than relying solely on state-led activity.*

2. *Doubts over the trustworthiness of an adversary (or an ally) shape an actor's thinking, making it very difficult to address the underlying drivers of conflict and instability. The development of trust and confidence-building measures in a regional setting should be prioritised, ensuring that states pursue their strategic objectives through cooperation and consensus, rather than coercion, leveraging cooperation in limited functional areas to deepen integration in other areas.*

3. *Multilateral organisations such as the EU could offer further support and expertise to ensure that the turn towards illiberalism does not gather pace and become entrenched. Such organisations need to ensure that they are being consistent and unambiguous in their messaging and signalling to both partner and aspirant countries. They should also tailor their assistance to the needs of each country depending upon their democratic trajectory.*

The South Caucasus has become a microcosm of the emerging multipolar international order, where the interests of various local, regional, and global powers intersect. International attention is rightly focused on the situation in Ukraine, but much greater attention needs to be paid to the shifting dynamics in the Caucasus and wider Black Sea region: the new geopolitical realities emerging here may well shape the regional and global security environment for years to come.

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