



**CONCILIATION  
RESOURCES**

# **UNDER THE PALL OF WAR:**

## **IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE FOR PEACE PROCESSES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

Discussion paper



# **UNDER THE PALL OF WAR: IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE FOR PEACE PROCESSES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS**

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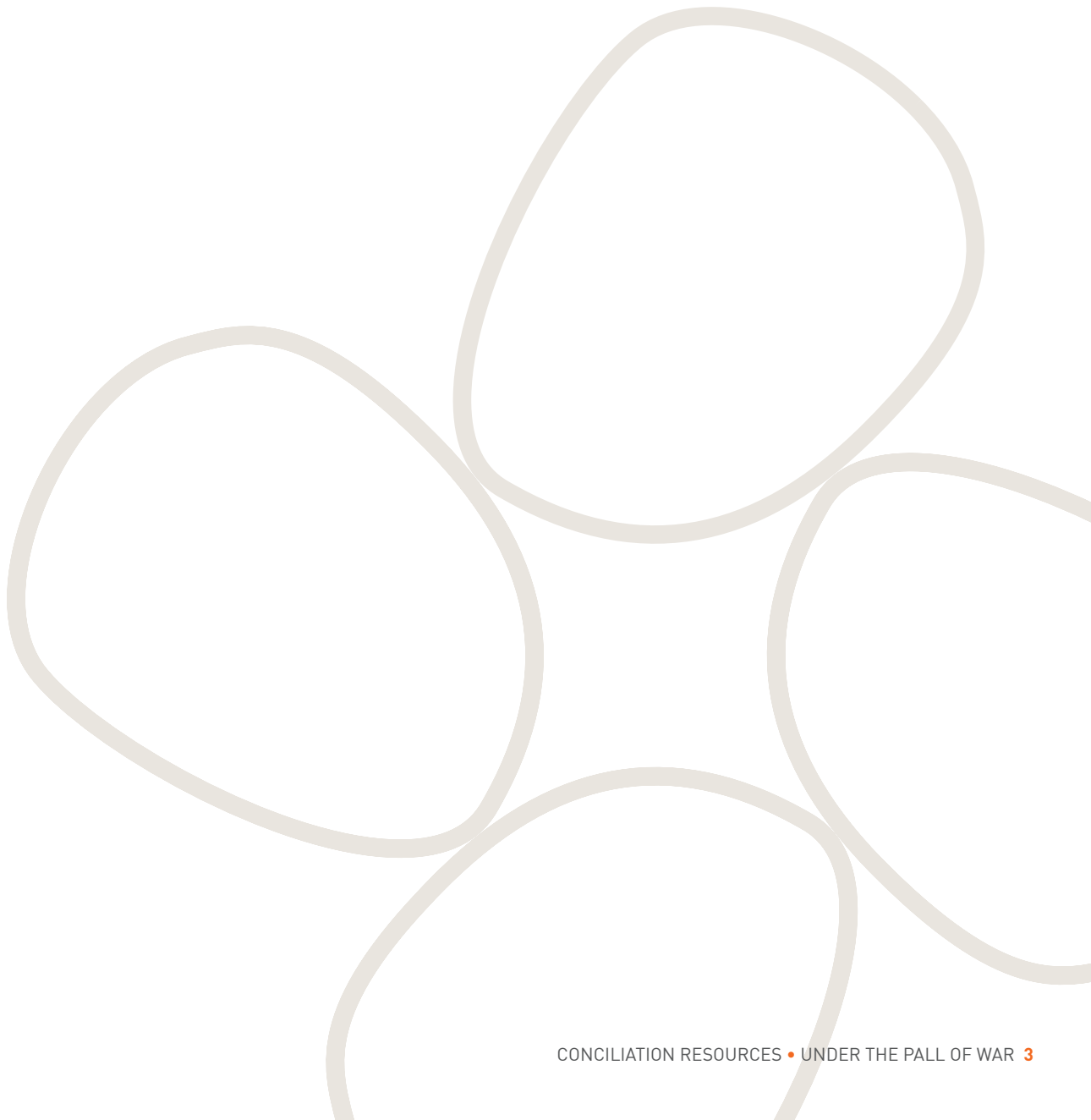
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered Europe's security architecture, with far-reaching and unpredictable implications for conflicts in neighbouring regions where Russia plays a role. This discussion paper focuses on the impacts of war in Ukraine on the peace processes of the South Caucasus, a region fractured by protracted conflicts dating back to the 1990s.**

A first impact is the precipitous decline in Moscow's capacity to maintain its already challenged position as the primary security actor in the South Caucasus. After Turkish support helped Azerbaijan to overturn the status quo in the Karabakh conflict in 2020, Russia appeared to reassert itself by brokering an end to that conflict which assured Russian interests. War in Ukraine, however, has in its first year substantially depleted both Russia's material capacities as a military power and, as importantly, its reputation as a security patron to states and communities in the South Caucasus, and Eurasia at large.

A second impact is the acceleration of the already evident decline of multilateral institutions in the South Caucasus. While the Geneva International Discussions convening Abkhaz, Ossetian, Georgian, Russian and United States representatives have continued despite successive postponed meetings, the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) responsible for mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan has effectively disintegrated. In its place rival Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations tracks mediated by Russia and the European Union (EU) have appeared.

A third impact is a renewed securitisation of the South Caucasus, reflecting declining belief in both Russian security guarantees and capacity to deter violence. Repeated escalations in Armenian-populated parts of Karabakh after February 2022, in which Azerbaijani forces advanced beyond previously agreed lines of contact, exposed the fragility of the Russian peacekeeping mission in the territory. In September cross-border strikes on Armenia exposed the ineffectiveness of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which has consistently declined to support member-state Armenia.

Diminished perceptions of Russia as a security actor and the decline, and in some cases collapse, of multilateral mediation infrastructure have left a dangerous security vacuum in the South Caucasus. Three dynamics have emerged that seek to fill this vacuum.

The first dynamic is the EU's evolution into direct mediation and, temporarily at least, security monitoring roles in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context. EU mediation began before Russia's invasion but has accelerated since then and at the time of writing is directed towards supporting the signing of an inter-state agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This agreement will reportedly not, however, encompass issues relating to the situation in Armenian-populated Karabakh.

The second dynamic is the proposal of new regional formats, such as the '3+3' platform aimed at bringing Russia, Iran, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia into a regional grouping exclusive of Euro-Atlantic actors. This project faces numerous obstacles, from the absent or troubled relations among several of the group's prospective members, to the increased costs of co-operation with Russia and Iran as a result of war in Ukraine, to the South Caucasus states' continued desire – albeit at different scales and intensities– for partnership with Euro-Atlantic actors.

The third dynamic is a fragile trend towards increased bilateral relations among some of the region's states. Turkey and Armenia initiated a new effort to normalise their relations in January 2022, yet Russia's invasion has recast Turkey's regional and global role in ways that diminish the value to Ankara of normalising ties with Yerevan. Armenia and Azerbaijan have also multiplied the number of negotiations tracks and have set precedents of unmediated meetings among their top diplomats. New bilateral dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan are nevertheless extremely vulnerable, above all to renewed violence in Karabakh or across the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border.

For advocates of peace in the South Caucasus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had mixed effects. On the one hand, the invasion has disrupted the international ecology of conflict resolution for the long term, with Moscow seeking to displace it with a 'regionalised' world order in which great powers dominate 'their' neighbourhoods – by force when necessary. Coming soon after the widespread discrediting of peacebuilding that accompanied the second Karabakh war in 2020, and combined with new operational challenges related to the sanctions regime and its impacts especially on communities in contested territories, South Caucasian horizons for peace initiatives may seem bleak.

Yet the invasion has also sharpened perceptions of the risks to fractured regions such as the South Caucasus of a normless international order dominated by great powers to the detriment of local agency. After the 2020 Karabakh war, regional connectivity emerged as a key focus for potential peacebuilding in the South Caucasus;

the connectivity agenda has been powerfully reinforced by Russia's actions in Ukraine. At the same time, the invasion has vividly demonstrated the risks of historicised irredentism, militarisation and securitised identity narratives in the service of power. For the South Caucasus these considerations point to the urgency of practical and cultural work to reconnect a fractured region and construct identities that can co-exist within it.

For Euro-Atlantic policy actors, this report identifies three interlinked perspectives that can usefully inform strategy for the South Caucasus. First, policies in the region should not be framed as part of a larger 'Russia policy', nor should developments in the South Caucasus be read exclusively through the prism of Russian-Western

rivalry. Second, Euro-Atlantic actors need to remain keenly aware of the impacts of sanctions, and other measures designed to inflict damage on the Russian economy, on the 'in-between' states and entities with extensive ties with Russia. Western policy also needs to extend a general exemption from the Russian sanctions regime to peacebuilding alongside humanitarian activity. Third, European actors in particular need to invest in the articulation of a long-term vision for the South Caucasus. This vision may not offer immediate answers to the region's current challenges, but it can set core parameters enabling a more strategic and less reactive approach to developments in the region over the longer term.

## INTRODUCTION

**Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shattered Europe's security architecture, with far-reaching and uncertain implications for the numerous other conflicts in Eurasia where Russia plays a role. This discussion paper focuses on the impacts of war in Ukraine on the conflicts and peace processes of the South Caucasus, a region fractured by protracted conflicts over the contested territories of Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>1</sup>**

Perceptions of Russia's capacity to deter violence and provide security guarantees are critical in all of the unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus. Russia's military performance in the war in Ukraine to date has profoundly shaken these perceptions. While it is impossible to predict outcomes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, some of its impacts on the fragile conflicts in the South Caucasus can be identified now, and their implications for policymakers and practitioners considered.

The South Caucasus has witnessed periodic violent escalations since numerous wars over territorial status and self-determination accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Most recently, the second Karabakh war in 2020 resulted in a major shift in Azerbaijan's favour, as its forces reclaimed most of the territories lost to Armenians in the 1990s. The 2020 war prefigured the 2022 war in Ukraine in several key respects, such as the decline of normative constraints on the use of the force, the marginalisation of multilateral

organisations espousing 'liberal' conflict resolution norms, and the poor performance of Russian-equipped armed forces. Many in the South Caucasus see the tepid international response to the use of force in Karabakh in 2020 as establishing a permissive environment for the invasion of Ukraine. For others, notably in Azerbaijan, the two wars are distinct since the 2020 war largely restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, while the 2022 invasion violated Ukraine's.

The 2020 war also underlined the South Caucasus' position at a mid-point in Eurasia's contested landscape subject to distinct Russian strategies visible in different parts of the continent. In the western parts of the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, Russia openly challenges international norms such as territorial integrity and the non-use of force. In its eastern parts, such as Central Asia, it builds alternative institutional and security frameworks upholding a regional order in which it plays the central role. This approach can be understood as a 'hub and spoke' strategy, promoting centripetal connections through 'spokes' linking regional states to a Russian 'hub' rather than lateral ties among them.<sup>2</sup> In the South Caucasus, located at Eurasia's mid-point, both strategies are present, adapting and flexing unevenly according to specific opportunities.

This means that the impacts of war in Ukraine on the South Caucasus will not be consistent, since the roles and expectations of Russia differ in the region's different conflict settings. While Russia is widely perceived as a party actively involved in the Georgian conflicts, in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context it has been careful to position itself as a neutral third party pursuing friendly relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia brokered ceasefires in the early 1990s and deployed peacekeeping forces to both territories, as part of a Joint Control Commission in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia as part of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping force, in parallel to the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). Russia's role evolved over time – from imposing economic and political sanctions on Abkhazia as part of a blockade by the CIS in the mid 1990s, to distributing Russian passports to local populations in the early 2000s. In 2008 Russia intervened militarily in the war in South Ossetia and subsequently recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Moscow then established military bases in both and subsequently signed agreements with each stipulating varying degrees of association.

In the context of the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war, Russia intervened not as a military actor but as a mediator, brokering the ceasefire and deploying peacekeepers to those parts of Karabakh still under Armenian control. Russia sought to prove itself the indispensable security actor in Eurasia, enforcing a new security regime with the consent of local actors, which accorded Moscow the central role through peacekeeping and control of both existing and prospective transit routes across Azerbaijani and Armenian territory.<sup>3</sup> Russia's brokerage of the 2020 Karabakh war contrasted with its open support of secessionist challenges to states such as Georgia seeking closer associations with Western structures, and is more reminiscent of its subsequent role in mobilising the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to restore order in Kazakhstan following violent protest in January 2022.

Variable and context-dependent roles are also true of other external powers, notably the European Union (EU). In the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian contexts, the EU has, since 2008, played the role of mediator as a Co-Chair of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) together with the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The EU has also to some extent played the role of security provider through the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), whose area of deployment is limited to the Georgian-controlled side of contested boundary lines.

In the Armenian-Azerbaijani context, the EU had until late 2022 played no role as a security provider, being engaged instead in support of peacebuilding and, since mid-2021, in a direct mediation role. Following cross-border strikes on Armenia in September 2022, however, the EU committed to the deployment of a two-month observer mission to Armenia, drawing on EUMM personnel, to facilitate the process of border demarcation in anticipation of the widely discussed possibility of an agreement being signed between Baku and Yerevan at the end of the year.<sup>4</sup>

Outside powers are therefore active in different roles and sectors in relation to the South Caucasus conflicts, and, for various reasons, are constrained in the exercise of their power. No single outside power holds a monopoly or exerts uncontested hegemony across security, economic and governance linkages across this fractured region. This points to the potential for either competitive or collaborative mediation efforts. The prospects for the latter remain dim for as long as Russia and the Euro-Atlantic powers stand off against one another over Ukraine.

In a worst-case scenario, already fragile South Caucasus peace talks may fissure under the pressure of increasing competitive dynamics among outside actors under conditions of multipolarity and continuing multilateral decline. With Russia over-extended in Ukraine and unable to enforce security guarantees in the South Caucasus, advocates of the use of force see fewer costs associated with military strategies. On the other hand, Russian over-extension elsewhere can also be seen as opening up space for new peace and mediation initiatives. Whereas many observers foresaw a new era of Russian hegemony in the South Caucasus when the Kremlin brought the 2020 Karabakh war to an end, the invasion of Ukraine has re-opened space and opportunity in the region for other players, notably Turkey and the EU.

The South Caucasus, as in the 1990s, has once again become a focal point of competitive influence-seeking by outside powers. Similar to the 1990s, this competition is moderated by the fact that no outside power has the capacity to exclude others from the region. If collaboration is too much to hope for, cohabitation is inevitable.<sup>5</sup> Competition in the 2020s is also moderated, however, by contemporary factors not present in the 1990s. These include global multipolarity, signalling the availability of patrons other than the West to small regional states. A second and related factor is that alternatives to 'liberal' approaches to conflict resolution have been widely used and promoted by major regional powers. Third, after decades of state-building the regional states of the South Caucasus exercise more agency today than in the 1990s.

Outcomes in the South Caucasus consequently emerge at the dynamic and unpredictable interface between often over-extended outside powers, rival visions of stability and regional political elites balancing short-term interests in preserving power and, at least in principle, long-term interests in peace.

# A MULTILATERAL COLLAPSE?

**Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated the already advanced decline of multilateral governance and mediation institutions in the South Caucasus. It brings specific challenges for the region's two formal mediation platforms, the GID and the OSCE's Minsk Group. It has also weakened the impact of all of the multilateral institutions involving the region's states, from the United Nations (UN) to the Russian-led CSTO. As a result, the institutional landscape for conflict resolution and stabilisation in the South Caucasus has been radically reordered at a time of heightened geopolitical flux.**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the culmination of a wider trend towards the re-legitimation of the use of force and coercive diplomacy by major powers in international relations. The invasion was intended by Russia to signal the onset of a new era in which major regional powers would determine outcomes in their neighbourhoods, free of norms associated with the heyday of post-Cold War Western dominance in the 1990s. Those norms, often referred to as the 'liberal peace', saw the resolution of conflicts as ideally taking place through democratic transitions and participatory processes addressing grievances and human rights.

Russia, however, had previously been active, for example in Chechnya and Syria, in developing an alternative model of stabilisation, sometimes referred to as 'authoritarian conflict management'.<sup>6</sup> This approach rejects norm-based and participatory approaches to conflict resolution in favour of more pragmatic acceptance of power hierarchies and the coercive suppression of insurgencies. Authoritarian conflict management also often involves the establishment of parallel negotiation processes outside of multilateral institutions such as the UN or OSCE, which are then controlled by regional powers. The establishment of the Astana Process for talks addressing the Syrian civil war convened by Russia, Turkey and Iran and excluding Euro-Atlantic powers is an example of this 'duplicate-to-dominate' strategy.

Authoritarian conflict management can be efficient in the short term and bring seemingly impressive results where liberal approaches have failed, but its avoidance of addressing root causes can lead to the return of violence in the mid to long term. Russia's brokering of an Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire in 2020 is an example of how this approach can effectively terminate violence

in the short term yet leave its underlying causes in place. Russia's success with such techniques was further reinforced by precedents created by Western powers' invasion of Iraq without UN approval and NATO's bombing of Serbia and the eventual recognition of Kosovo. These and other examples undermined Western powers' advocacy of their own putative norms and reflected a weakening of normative constraints on violence.

## The OSCE's Minsk Group and the GID

This new kind of international relations is resistant to a law-based, norm-governed global and regional order, and presents challenges to all norm-orientated and value-based multilateral actors. Weakened by their commitments to consensus and veto-holders respectively, the OSCE and the UN face uncertain future roles in any negotiated end to the war in Ukraine. In the South Caucasus, OSCE mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan through the Minsk Group, led since 1997 by a troika of French, Russian and United States Co-Chairs, had already been marginalised by the 2020 Karabakh war.

Although tentative announcements regarding the potential resumption of the Minsk Group's mission were made in September 2021, this was pre-empted by the Russian invasion. After 24 February the French, Russian and US Co-Chairs ceased to communicate as a unified entity: this signalled the end of the Minsk Group's historical role as an exceptional theatre of Russian-Western collaboration despite geopolitical rivalry elsewhere in Eurasia. Many in the South Caucasus, especially in Azerbaijan – as the party always least satisfied with Minsk Group mediation – considered the platform dead.

Russia's invasion was nevertheless soon followed by reinstated US commitments to resolution of the South Caucasus conflicts. In August 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken appointed Ambassador Philip Reeker to the role of Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations, in effect continuing in the role previously played by US Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group. The US restated its commitment to a long-term political settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and "the importance the United States places in the Geneva International Discussions on Georgia".<sup>7</sup> Reactivated US commitment was also attested by Blinken's mediation of a meeting between senior Armenian and Azerbaijani diplomats following the September violence. A previously scheduled visit by House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Yerevan, the highest-ranking US official to ever visit post-independence Armenia, also highlighted US interest in the region.<sup>8</sup>

The suspension of OSCE mediation leaves a number of unresolved issues in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context. First, the issue at the core of the conflict – the status and security of the Karabakh Armenian population – remains tied to the OSCE mandate. Baku and Yerevan remain far apart on this issue, while the Karabakh Armenians continue to demand a political-territorial status outside of Azerbaijan. The EU has initiated a new mediation track between Armenia and Azerbaijan (see below) at the bilateral level, directed towards the negotiation of an inter-state agreement that would not encompass the issue of status for the Karabakh Armenian population. This reflects Azerbaijan's determination in the light of the 2020 war to, as far as possible, de-internationalise negotiations on the status of the contested territory and reframe it as an internal matter. As a result of the demise of OSCE mediation and Armenia's defeat in 2020, security issues in Armenian-populated Karabakh are now formally negotiated between Azerbaijan and Russia, with informal communication also taking place between Baku and the de facto Karabakh Armenian authorities, but these platforms are limited to ceasefire and humanitarian issues and do not address questions of governance.

The GID is also seriously challenged by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Already tense dynamics have become more strained, with strong EU positioning on Ukraine complicating its role as mediator in talks in which Russia is a participant. Two rounds were postponed, though the EU, UN and OSCE Co-Chairs have continued to engage with all participants and reconvened with a meeting in early October 2022. The GID survived numerous postponements during the Covid-19 pandemic, and all acknowledge that if the GID ceases to operate it will be extremely difficult to recreate a space where this range of different stakeholders can come together, resulting in opportunity costs if it were to be dissolved. At the same time, the doubts that existed prior to February 2022 about how much can be achieved within the format of the GID have been reinforced by the war in Ukraine.

## Russian-led multilateral organisations

Russia's invasion, and the progress of the war to date, have also significantly weakened Russian-led multilateral structures built around understandings of Russian power and influence. For the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), established in 2015, the war presents a new crisis for an organisation that was already facing problems. Economic ties with Russia face the impacts of the catastrophic effect of the war on the Russian economy, which, under wide-ranging sanctions, plunged rapidly into recession. Those ties also now carry the risk for EAEU members of the secondary impact of sanctions. Continued participation, economically and politically fraught for EAEU members,

is seen by the Kremlin as a critical litmus test of loyalty, even as the Western sanctions regime undermines trade among them.

Russia's other principal multilateral instrument, the CSTO, similarly faces a new crisis. As an organisation widely criticised for sluggish and non-committal responses, the CSTO had bolstered its credibility in January 2022 through its unprecedentedly rapid intervention in support of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev after protests ended in mass violence in Almaty and other cities in Kazakhstan. However, CSTO members have responded in diverse ways to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including by ruling out recognition of secessionist republics in Donbas, let alone their subsequent annexation by Russia. The CSTO's reputation was further damaged in April 2022 after intense fighting broke out between two of its members, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, killing at least 140.

In the South Caucasus, CSTO responses to member-state Armenia's appeals for support in the face of cross-border incursions by Azerbaijan in 2021–22 have been consistently evasive. CSTO reluctance to affirm Armenia's definition of its own security threats drive popular demands in Armenia that the country's membership in the organisation be reconsidered, and seemingly resulted in Armenia's refusal to sign off on documents at a high-level CSTO summit held in Yerevan in November 2022.

Visible demonstrations of the limits to the CSTO's capacity to act as a collective security organisation both challenge Russia's 'hub and spoke' approach to building regional order and further diminish the standing of Russian security guarantees.

## The Eastern Partnership

The EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) is another multilateral structure in a state of flux. The EaP had already witnessed a significant degree of differentiation, with three members signing association agreements with the EU (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), a fourth an enhanced partnership agreement (Armenia), a fifth still engaged in the prolonged negotiation of a strategic partnership agreement (Azerbaijan) and the sixth member suspended as of 28 June 2021 (Belarus).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further reinforced the trend towards differentiation, as the EU increasingly focuses on bilateral relations with each of the South Caucasian states rather than a regional policy encompassing them all. Ukraine's accelerated application for EU membership, a direct outcome of Russia's invasion, provided cover for Georgian and Moldovan applications. The EU's acceptance of Ukrainian and Moldovan candidate status, while also making the same status for Georgia conditional on delivering on a set of EU-defined priorities, introduced a further layer of



differentiation to what had been previously framed as the “association trio” of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. All, though, continue to pursue a pathway to eventual membership. In the South Caucasus, this reinforces regional fracture since there is little indication that Armenia and Azerbaijan are likely to follow Georgia’s path to closer association with the EU in the foreseeable future, highlighting the distinct position Georgia occupies in any South Caucasian regional framework.

If normative constraints on violence have weakened, then the core international norms challenged by Russia’s invasion, namely sovereignty, territorial

integrity and independence, have been strengthened by the unprecedented unity and forcefulness of the European and North American mobilisation in support of Ukraine. Even if fault lines in the common front have also been evident, this response indicates that challengers of these norms will receive even greater resistance in the future than they have in the past. This means that secessionist conflicts elsewhere in Eurasia will more than ever be read through a state-centric interpretive framework depicting all unrecognised or partially recognised republics as artificial instruments of other states’ coercive diplomacy and homogenising all of the region’s conflicts as instances of occupation.

## RENEWED SECURITISATION

**War in Ukraine is driving renewed securitisation of the South Caucasus at multiple levels. First, Russia’s disastrous military performance over the first 10 months of the war and general over-extension have diminished confidence in Russian security guarantees, even as Russia is deprived of alternative sources of leverage in the South Caucasus. Second, perceptions that states seeking to reintegrate secessionist territories will use force to do so are driving new spirals of insecurity. Third, Russia’s invasion has devalued neutrality and reinforced the quest for effective security patrons among the ‘in-between states’ of the Eastern Neighbourhood.**

In this new setting, states and communities with Russia as their security patron are in a particularly challenging situation, characterised by both declining confidence in Russian guarantees and deeply asymmetric relationships with Russia that make the search for alternatives difficult.

In different ways Russia plays the role of security guarantor for all populations within contested territories in the South Caucasus. In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has been the principal sponsor, recognising the territories as independent states in August 2008, and stationing a significant military presence in each. More recently, as part of the ceasefire Russia brokered bringing the second Karabakh war to a close in November 2020, it deployed a nearly 2000-strong Russian peacekeeping mission to Karabakh, meaning that Russian forces were now deployed in all of the secessionist entities of the South Caucasus. In Azerbaijan, this new reality drives fears that Karabakh might increasingly resemble Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a long-term Russian

protectorate. This in turn would complicate the return of Azerbaijan’s internally displaced communities, a key national priority for decades, to the country’s south-western parts.

Redeployments of Russian military personnel from South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Ukraine flagged the potential for Russian over-extension in the context of a significantly longer and more destructive war in Ukraine than Moscow had anticipated. Widespread reports of appalling conditions for Russian soldiers at the front have also corroded perceptions of Russian military capacity. For Russian peacekeeping missions these altered perceptions have diminished the symbolic capital of Russian security guarantees. This is especially relevant for missions such as the one in Karabakh, where the force deployment is small relative to the area covered, and where the mission’s mandate has never been defined.<sup>9</sup> If Russia’s peacekeeping deterrent in Karabakh lies in ‘the power of its flag’ rather than the armaments of its mission, then these perceptions are significant. Repeated escalations in Armenian-populated parts of Karabakh followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in which Azerbaijani forces advanced to new positions and demonstrated the limits to the Russian peacekeeping mission’s ability to prevent violence in the territory.<sup>10</sup>

Recurring escalations have in turn driven concern among populations in the contested territories of the South Caucasus of renewed violence being used as a ‘solution’ to secessionism. In Karabakh and Armenia fears abound that a renewed Azerbaijani military effort may seek to retake the whole of the territory if Armenia does not meet Baku’s terms in the inter-state agreement currently being negotiated. Repeated escalations demonstrate the inability of the Russian peacekeeping mission to serve its purpose. Combined with increasingly negative Azerbaijani media coverage of the mission, an Azerbaijani refusal to renew the mission’s mandate in 2025 looks considerably less implausible than before the war in Ukraine. Termination of the mission’s mandate

would set the stage for a Russian withdrawal and the potential for a mass exodus of the Armenian population. Fears that Georgia could open a second front against Russia in Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia (an agenda that some officials in Ukraine have actively encouraged) also create new spirals of insecurity among both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian divides, in spite of strong popular and political support for a peaceful resolution of conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

Foregrounding security as the primary vehicle through which an economically weakened Russia can exert leverage in the South Caucasus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also highlighted the risks of non-alignment and the vulnerability of states and communities embedded within complex relationships with security patrons. Swedish and Finnish applications for NATO membership have demonstrated the fragility of neutrality as an alternative to alignment.<sup>12</sup> Azerbaijan finds its solution in the close and dependable relationship it enjoys with Turkey. Georgia has strong relations with Euro-Atlantic actors but Western security guarantees have limited reach in the South Caucasus. Those within a Russian security orbit – Armenia and the unrecognised or partially recognised republics – face both increasing insecurity and deeply asymmetric pressures to demonstrate loyalty.

Security in the South Caucasus consequently faces a period of high volatility, typical of any system where the principal security patron is in decline. Though weakened, Moscow retains a 'controlling share' in security arrangements across most of the region. Security linkages with Russia are perceived by Azerbaijan and Georgia as threats that Baku and Tbilisi would like to see removed from the region. In contested territories and Armenia, Russian security linkages are seen as the sole, if weakened and unreliable, guarantee against new wars with larger neighbours. Overall, this is a volatile context generating contradictory impulses among various regional actors both to challenge and to deepen Russian security linkages.

Moreover, with its economic levers likely to be limited in the medium term, Russia is both more likely to rely on security linkages as its primary lever of influence in the South Caucasus and to have a reduced capacity to do so effectively. The Kremlin has also demonstrated that it is so far not willing to enter a more structured relationship to share security provision in the South Caucasus even with Turkey, a state with which Russia has developed common approaches to security in other conflict regions.<sup>13</sup> There is consequently a security vacuum in the region today, with perilous and unpredictable consequences.

## IMPACTS FOR THE MEDIATION OF SOUTH CAUCASUS CONFLICTS

War in Ukraine has accelerated already long-present trends towards the disintegration of mediation structures in the South Caucasus drawing their legitimacy from globalised yet 'unipolar' norms. Growing multipolarity across the world has been reflected in increased disunity within global mediation bodies such as the UN and the OSCE, undermining their capacity to deliver negotiated resolutions of conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Outside of global governance structures, regional powers have sought to fill the normative vacuum left by incapacitated multilateral mediation, fielding alternative mediation initiatives. Ceasefires brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran in Syria, Russian and Turkish offers to mediate in Libya, and Russia's mediation of the end of the 2020 Karabakh war are all examples of this trend. These mediation efforts are more focused on authoritarian conflict management models that privilege incumbent state actors and suppress wider claims to representation, as compared to the kinds of stabilisation envisioned in UN and OSCE mediation efforts.

In the South Caucasus three dynamics have emerged that in different ways fill the space left by the collapse of multilateral mediation structures and declining confidence in Russian security guarantees.

### The European Union's mediation initiative between Armenia and Azerbaijan

The non-viability of OSCE mediation has given space to the EU to propose its own mediation initiative between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Confirmed at meetings in Brussels between the leaders of the two countries and European Council President Charles Michel beginning in December 2021 and continuing through 2022, the EU is offering support not only with the resolution of technical issues such as border demarcation, including through the deployment of a two-month civilian observer mission to Armenia in October-December 2022, and potential financial support to kick-start new infrastructural and economic linkages between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but with the drafting of a peace treaty.<sup>15</sup> The EU also continues to support 'track two' peacebuilding initiatives at the civil society level.

Although greeted with formal Russian protest, the EU's emergence as mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan was carefully framed by EU officials as not competing or at least not in conflict with existing (i.e.

Russian-brokered) agreements. In its favour, the EU can depict itself as a mediator above national interests; moreover, while their perspectives on association with the EU differ significantly, both Yerevan and Baku are strongly in favour of an enhanced mediation role for Brussels. This steers the process away from the one outcome which both seek to avoid: a Russian monopoly on managing the conflict between them.

For Baku, EU mediation is also taken to further reduce prospects for a return of the OSCE's Minsk Group and to provide openings for the mobilisation of EU financial resources. For Yerevan, at least on paper, in the absence of the OSCE the EU represents a multilateral organisation more likely to attribute importance to human and minority rights and the conflict's continued internationalisation. This belief has, however, been shaken by the EU's perceived failure to foreground issues of human rights and democracy in its relationship with Azerbaijan, which is seen as more transactionally orientated towards Azerbaijan's capacity to supply gas to European markets.

Structurally, the EU offers two further assets which may enhance its capacities as mediator. First, it is the only outside power with the economic resources to credibly invest in new economic linkages and connectivity infrastructure. Brussels has committed to working with an 'Economic Advisory Group', "which seeks to advance economic development for the benefit of both countries and their populations".<sup>16</sup> Second, as a multi-sectoral actor the EU can potentially link mediation initiatives to its other development and governance initiatives across the divide. A persistent criticism of the OSCE's Minsk Group was its detachment from both civil society and from societies at large. The EU, potentially, can bridge peacebuilding, development and mediation initiatives in ways that are mutually reinforcing.

The EU's capacity to successfully mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan nevertheless also faces several significant challenges. While the short-term deployment of civilian observers to Armenia is a notable departure for the EU in this context, its mediation offer does not come with a corresponding security offer, as security provision still remains in Russia's hands. Without a de-securitised regional context more conducive to investment and development, the EU will be unable to leverage its economic power.

The EU also stands at one remove from the security and status issues relating to the Karabakh Armenian population, which many consider both the heart of the conflict and still unresolved. These issues remain de jure within the mandate of the OSCE's Minsk Group and de facto subject to negotiation between Russia and Azerbaijan, until and unless a still politically fraught dialogue is opened between Baku and the Karabakh Armenian population. While the EU asserts its commitment to a comprehensive peace agreement, the

issues contested by the parties are now scattered across a landscape of fractured negotiation tracks and agendas, some of them beyond the EU's reach. Azerbaijan has made it clear that it seeks EU support only in the areas of technical and economic assistance, rather than issues of status and security for the Armenians of Karabakh. Relegation to a purely technical and economic role, however, would further batter the EU's reputation as a normative, values-based actor.

In this compartmentalised peace process, it is uncertain to what extent any single mediation initiative can make lasting progress without ultimately being woven into a comprehensive and inclusive agreement. Individual great powers may be able to induce, compel or simply force deliverables that eluded multilateral mediators for decades. But in a context of great power competition and outside of a legitimating international mandate, such progress may be vulnerable to perception and challenge as geopolitical unilateralism, driving a spiral of fractured and competitive initiatives. The Minsk Group's permanent troika, composed of France, Russia and the United States, was established in 1997 to address precisely this problem.

Moreover, OSCE decline and EU ascent marks a shift in the identity of actors espousing 'liberal' norms of conflict resolution from a supra-regional, inclusive multilateral actor to one clearly associated with a Western geopolitical pole. This shift sharpens the rivalry between 'liberal' and 'authoritarian' models of stabilisation, rather than the inclusive, if ultimately ineffectual, post-Cold War architecture aimed at containing Russian-Western rivalry. Nevertheless, while it will continue for the time being to be paralysed by war in Ukraine and the veto power of its members, the OSCE remains the sole regional security organisation of which Armenia, Azerbaijan, European states, Russia, Turkey and the United States are all members. This fact alone means that the OSCE may have a role to play in the future of the South Caucasus, whether or not this takes the specific form of the Minsk Group.

## New proposals for regional formats

A second trend is the emergence of proposals for new multilateral formats engaging some external powers and excluding others. Following the 2020 Karabakh war, Ankara and Baku proposed a new regional format referred to as the '3+3', ostensibly including Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and the three surrounding regional powers, Iran, Russia and Turkey.<sup>17</sup> Tehran and Moscow have signalled support for such a platform, potentially seeing scope to repeat the success of excluding Euro-Atlantic powers from the Syrian peace talks through the Astana Process. However, while many observers in the region agree that in principle regional institutional architecture is needed in the South Caucasus, the prospects for the '3+3' format face several key challenges.

A first obstacle for '3+3' is the absence of diplomatic relations among some of the dyads within the format. While Armenia and Turkey have engaged in a new normalisation effort, the process has faltered (see below). The obstacles confronting Georgian-Russian normalisation are even more challenging. Furthermore, the consolidation of the '3+3' format as a coalition driven by the anti-Western motivations of some of its principal members is uncertain because the scope and scale of these motivations differ. Russia's current anti-Western perspective is structural and systemic, whereas Turkey's is selective and policy-specific.<sup>18</sup> Other obstacles confronting '3+3' include the disincentives for small states to enter into common frameworks that build in asymmetries with larger powers, and the competitive dynamics, both existing and potential, among the three regional powers. War in Ukraine has also narrowed the chances for '3+3' by increasing the costs of multilateral cooperation with Russia.

Iran's potential participation in a '3+3' also raises a range of issues. Both the second Karabakh war and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have exposed Iran's ambiguous regional positioning in the South Caucasus. With Tehran perceived as having been – at best – indifferent to Azerbaijan's defeat in the 1990s and protracted frustration in its conflict over Karabakh, Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war surfaced numerous latent tensions in Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. While Iran welcomed a curtailed Euro-Atlantic presence in the South Caucasus, it did not welcome an increased Turkish presence, new vulnerabilities in the security of its border with Armenia – with which Iran has a pragmatic relationship conditioned by geography – or the growth in Azerbaijani ethno-nationalism linking the Republic of Azerbaijan to Iran's own substantial ethnic Azerbaijani population concentrated in the north-western provinces neighbouring Azerbaijan. Throughout 2021–22 Azerbaijani-Iranian relations were volatile, periodically escalating to include more open expressions of irredentism focused on Iran's ethnic Azerbaijani population among the Azerbaijani political elite and Iranian and Azerbaijani war games along the two states' common border.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time both Iran and Azerbaijan have been upgrading their diplomatic ties with the other state's primary adversary. Regularly reiterating its support for Armenia's territorial integrity, Iran strengthened its presence in southern Armenia by opening a consulate in the southern Armenian town of Kapan in October 2022. In November of the same year, Azerbaijan announced it would open an embassy in Israel, a long-anticipated move affirming the deep strategic ties between the two countries, which in turn influences Azerbaijani-Iranian relations. These dynamics present significant fractures undermining the potential of the '3+3' format.

Iran's subsequent positioning in the Russian-Ukrainian war has further complicated the issue. Reported Iranian agreements in October 2022 to supply Russia with weapons, coinciding with the Russian shift to a strategy targeting Ukrainian civilian populations and infrastructure, significantly raised the cost of cooperation with Tehran, specifically prejudicing the relations between any country doing so and Euro-Atlantic partners.<sup>20</sup> This matters both for relations with Iran and for the '3+3' platform more generally because none of the three South Caucasus states seeks a total exclusion of the West, even if again the scope and scale of their pro-Western motivations differ. Georgia's pro-Western perspective has traditionally been structural and expansive, though there is arguably more caution and contention associated with it now than previously. In addition, the '3+3' framework emphasises a South Caucasus regional setting which is a source of ambivalence for some in Georgia who identify more with other regional spaces, such as a Black Sea region. Armenian and Azerbaijani motivations vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic powers are more selective and sector-specific, yet both countries see Western ties as critical to their navigation of power asymmetries closer to home.

## New bilateral dynamics

A trend toward increased bilateral interactions among some of the region's states was observable already prior to war in Ukraine, between Armenia and Turkey. These neighbours had previously engaged in two prior efforts to normalise their relations in 1991–93 and 2007–10. On both occasions developments between Armenia and Turkey's close ally Azerbaijan – Armenian advances on the battlefield in 1993 and Azerbaijani objections in 2009 – obstructed progress on a process that was never prioritised in its own right. The 2020 war removed core grounds for Turkish reluctance to normalise relations with Armenia – the occupation of Azerbaijani territories – and in December 2021 new envoys were appointed by Ankara and Yerevan to take up a new process.

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, regional analysts invested in Armenian-Turkish normalisation sustained hopes that as a relatively low-profile process in Eurasia's conflicted landscape it might succeed. Armenia's leadership was committed to normalisation, and for Turkey it offered a potentially useful input into improving relations with Euro-Atlantic actors and into a more complete set of diplomatic relationships – and by implication more influence – in the South Caucasus. Turkey ultimately seeks relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia that are not controlled by Russia. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine changed this calculus. Turkey's importance to Europe, the United

States and NATO increased dramatically, lessening the need for normalisation with Armenia to offset Turkey's frayed relationships with Western capitals. Motivations for Ankara to pursue the process weakened, and while the process continues, Armenian assertions of Turkish stalling grew after war in Ukraine began. With its own motives for pursuing normalisation diminished, Turkey is also more likely to prioritise ally Azerbaijan's interests by making steps forward in the Turkey-Armenia talks contingent on Azerbaijan's satisfaction with progress in its own process with Armenia.

Armenian-Turkish normalisation therefore appears to be once again largely contingent on developments in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, following the emergence of new bilateral dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which multiplied in the context of Russian- and EU-mediated tracks through 2021–22. While separate bilateral contacts between foreign ministers or executive leadership advisors may not sound remarkable, in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context they are revolutionary considering the many years of no contact outside of tightly choreographed meetings convened by the OSCE's Minsk Group and dedicated exclusively to peace process issues. Foreign ministers Jeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan engaged for the first time ever in direct bilateral talks in Tbilisi in July 2022, and telephone calls between the two ministers are now reported as if routine. A separate track has developed between Secretary of the Armenian National Security Council Armen Grigoryan and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Azerbaijani President Hikmet Hajiyev.

These bilateral dynamics are tied to ostensible commitments given by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to begin preparations for a peace treaty, announced in Brussels in April 2022 and reaffirmed in August.<sup>21</sup> After that, Baku and Yerevan exchanged their respective definitions of the negotiation agenda, which while coinciding on several common agenda points differed on the core question of whether and how the issues of status and security for the Karabakh Armenian population would be addressed. While Baku sees security in Karabakh as part of its agenda with Russia, it seeks to avoid any re-opening of discussions of status in negotiations with Yerevan. Yerevan on the other hand sees an ongoing discussion of the rights and safety of Karabakh Armenians as essential for progress, particularly in the light of domestic opposition after a major speech in the National Assembly in which Nikol Pashinyan called for a lowering of Armenian ambitions with regard to the political-territorial status of the Karabakh Armenian population.<sup>22</sup>

War in Ukraine on the one hand created the space for the new Armenian-Azerbaijani bilateral dynamic to emerge. Russia's heavy military losses in Ukraine, coming so soon after the disastrous performance of Russian-equipped Armenian forces in 2020, and its reticence to come to Armenia's defence particularly during Azerbaijani cross-border strikes on 13–14 September 2022, have reinforced doubts in Armenia regarding the long-term viability of reliance on a Russian security umbrella. These doubts are driving a new impetus among senior Armenian policy-makers to reduce the number of security threats that Armenia faces. On the other hand, however, perceptions of waning Russian power also reduce Azerbaijani incentives to frame its bilateral approach to talks with Armenia in ways that appear to accommodate Armenian concerns. With much of the world united in support of Ukrainian territorial integrity, Baku may feel that now is a unique historical opportunity to impose a peace on its terms. The risk of this approach would be instability in Armenia that would disrupt any agreements reached in the short term, and perceptions of an illegitimate or punitive peace that could drive its unravelling in the longer term.

The new bilateral dynamics between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain extremely fragile, complicated by the absence of a unified negotiation agenda or framework for a comprehensive mediation of the issues at stake. Russia and the EU appear to be mediating on many of the same issues, but with differing emphases, a situation likely to result in forum-shopping. Both have been able to convene Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders and establish mechanisms on specific issues, yet implementation remains uncertain. Moreover, a vocal minority in Armenia associated with the former ruling Republican Party of Armenia and its allies remains implacably opposed to peace negotiations with Azerbaijan.

In contrast to Armenia and Azerbaijan, war in Ukraine has brought into sharp relief the paralysis at the heart of Georgia's responses to conflict. The shift in the political calculus post-invasion, driven by fears in Abkhazia of significant increase in political pressure, and indeed, existential crisis, has apparently not translated into a willingness to establish new channels for direct communication. To the contrary, rhetoric and positions on both sides appear to have hardened, putting pressure on international presence in Abkhazia and reducing the already minimal scope for engagement by external actors that preceded the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The intersection of geopolitical interests with highly polarised domestic politics in Tbilisi leaves little room to take action in relation to conflict; any steps that could be framed as accommodating Russian interests are perceived as being too toxic to risk.

# CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY IN PEACEBUILDING

## **The shock waves of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, coming less than two years after the seismic shifts of the 2020 Karabakh war, have had varied and, in some ways, contradictory impacts on the space for pro-peace narratives in the South Caucasus.**

Successive episodes of violence in the South Caucasus and the absence of mass movements in favour of peace, despite decades of international support to peacebuilding, appear to challenge the notion that conflicts can be resolved peacefully. This appears consistent with a wider backdrop of global decline in the popularity and legitimacy of 'liberal' models of stabilisation privileging democratisation, human rights and participation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a further devastating effect as a seemingly permanent disruption of the international ecology of conflict resolution norms and institutions within which, even if inconsistently, peace narratives were discussed.

Yet while critical reflection on previous experience with liberal ideals is necessary, Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and the world order it appears to seek to bring into being – is also driving a re-evaluation of local agency and responsibility in many parts of the South Caucasus. In a multipolar world order defined by regional powers in friction and competition, the prospects for fractured regions such as the South Caucasus are dim. Moreover, authoritarian approaches to conflict management in the region tend to rely on borrowed power and to create openings for external influence. The second Karabakh war and Russia's war in Ukraine have solidified understandings of the vulnerability of the South Caucasus to outside powers and the pathways from protracted conflicts to domination by outside powers. In some circles this is driving new discussions on the possibilities for greater local agency and cross-divide solidarity in the region.

Peace activism in the Armenian-Azerbaijani context faces multi-layered obstacles. Perceptions of its pervasive collapse during the 2020 war and the near-total invisibility of voices for peace led to a wide-ranging discreditation of peace activism that converged with a profound questioning of founding principles and values. In Azerbaijan this has combined with a wide-ranging de-institutionalisation of independent civil society ongoing since 2014, making networks and organisations committed to peace narratives challenging to sustain. In Armenia, while a substantially wider space for independent civil society activism exists, peace activism has been made toxic by association with the 2020 defeat and the sense of threat emanating from ongoing violent episodes since the 9 November 2020

ceasefire. For as long as diplomatic goals are pursued coercively, there is little space for peace activism to be seen as reasonable or legitimate.

In the Georgian-Abkhaz context, for the first time since before war in 2008, there has been public discussion of the possibility of a resumption of war as a means to resolve Georgia's conflicts and weaken Russia at the same time by opening up a second front. Georgian public opinion in recent years had shifted in favour of greater compromise to reach solutions with Abkhaz and South Ossetians.<sup>23</sup> Only 2% of young people surveyed in 2021 were in favour of resolving the conflicts by force,<sup>24</sup> with the overwhelming majority supporting a peaceful resolution of the conflicts. Despite unwillingness to sign a non-use of force agreement, the fact that the Georgian government has been consistent in its rejection of the potential use of force, has not, however, translated into wider support for initiatives to kick-start dialogue and intensify efforts to find mutual solutions. In Abkhazia, there is also little room to prepare the population for the kind of steps needed to shift the conflict dynamic. For civil society actors in Abkhazia, most of whom are Russian passport holders, even appeals to end the bloodshed in Ukraine are not without risk.

The deepening of geopolitical fault lines over war in Ukraine, and the constraints on civil society in some parts of the South Caucasus – real or perceived – on speaking out against war, have created a more hostile backdrop for informal peace processes. Explicit framing in Georgia of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 as a sequence that began with Russian aggression against the Georgian population in Abkhazia in 1992–93 leaves little room for more nuanced discussion and denies the Abkhazians agency. It is hard to envisage in this context the acknowledgement of multiple experiences of, and responsibilities for, aggression and suffering in the early 1990s that is necessary if Georgians and Abkhaz are to envisage some form of mutually acceptable coexistence or normalisation in relations.

War in Ukraine has also created new operational challenges for peacebuilders. Sanctions imposed on Russia are impacting the whole region, leading to rising prices and the potential, together with the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, to cause humanitarian crisis, particularly among the less well-off and more isolated communities in the region. In Abkhazia, which is largely dependent on the Russian economy, and whose banking system and telecommunications are linked to Russia, the impact is extreme. Large numbers of Russian passport holders in Abkhazia are vulnerable following Putin's partial mobilisation and threats to revoke citizenship under certain conditions, and at risk of falling foul of stringent legislation to prevent 'fake

news'. Peacebuilding initiatives are fragile in this new environment. Previous channels used to transfer funds to Abkhaz civil society organisations via Russian banks now contravene sanctions. The logistics of organising dialogue meetings, or other events outside the region, have become more complex due to the EU decision not to recognise Russian passports issued in breakaway territories in Georgia,<sup>25</sup> limitations on travel from Russian airports, and significant increases in prices for travel and accommodation in the locations that remain viable.

At the same time, among peacebuilding circles across the South Caucasus, war in Ukraine appears to have galvanised discussions on the nature and agenda for peace activism. The 2020 war spurred thinking on how to reconceptualise and de-couple Armenian-Azerbaijani peace activism from rigid, projectised and donor-facing workstreams, towards more flexible and adaptable networks that reach beyond a narrow understanding of 'civil society'. Across the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict divide there is more of a shared understanding that military victory strengthens authoritarianism, which in turn obstructs pathways to a legitimate and lasting peace.<sup>26</sup> The historicised irredentism and narrative of Ukraine as an artificial and illegitimate construct, used by President Vladimir Putin to justify the Russian invasion, echoes similar local discourses in the South Caucasus, such as growing irredentist Azerbaijani imagery focused on Armenia.<sup>27</sup> Russia's

invasion serves as a warning of how in the absence of normative constraints, such historical discourses can be leveraged to support and justify mass violence with disastrous consequences for all.

Russia's invasion has consequently materialised a need for regional exchange and discussion of South Caucasian regional identity or agency. Discussion of the potential for re-opening transit routes and the new importance of the 'middle corridor' on account of war in Ukraine requires by necessity a cross-regional conversation that starts to challenge some of the physical fracture across the region. Shared interests in a South Caucasus that is more resilient to external pressure and instability are perhaps also a reaction to the new manifestations of multipolarity and a shared sense of vulnerability. At a time when the South Caucasus is again experiencing the pull of competing external influences, yet in a context in which no single outside power can impose itself exclusively, the importance of solidarity among those sharing a peace agenda across the region's dividing lines has been heightened. Indeed, while the prospect of the South Caucasus as a thoroughfare or bridge between east and west is a long way off, the convergence of multiple different interests in this region, and the need for engagement to manage this, can perhaps ultimately be employed in the interest of cohesion and stability.

## CONCLUSION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has diminished Moscow's capacity to maintain its dominance as the primary security actor in Eurasia. The subsequent course of the war in Ukraine has seriously depleted both Russia's material capacities as a security actor and, as importantly, its reputation as a security patron to states and communities in the region.

In the South Caucasus these outcomes signal both risks and opportunities. Historically, violence has always been most acute in the South Caucasus at times of decline among regional or global hegemony and their associated international orders. Particularly under conditions of multipolarity, a security vacuum in the South Caucasus could be filled with new violence and insecurity. Recurring escalations along Armenian-Azerbaijani lines of contact and increasingly securitised Iranian-Azerbaijani relations point in this direction. Alongside risks, however, and despite the persistent fracturing dynamics, there are not only opportunities but imperatives to engage with the South Caucasus and develop a more cohesive regional vision that could lay the basis over the longer term for a more secure region.

It is consequently crucial that even as global attention is absorbed by war in Ukraine, Western policy actors should maintain focus and bandwidth on the South Caucasus. Investing political capital in the South Caucasus now may help to prevent escalation, and/or enable potential opportunities in bilateral peace processes to be seized, particularly when accompanied by continued programming support to local actors promoting the peaceful resolution of conflict. In the longer term the inevitable focus on rebuilding Ukraine must entail a wider regional vision encompassing the Black Sea and the South Caucasus. And the potential, should Georgia gain candidate status, for an EU member-state in the South Caucasus, would necessitate a new regional vision beyond the Eastern Partnership.

Maintaining a clear-eyed focus on the South Caucasus requires Western policy actors to foreground three interlinked conceptual perspectives. First, policies in the region should not be framed as part of a larger 'Russia policy', nor should developments in the South Caucasus be read exclusively through the prism of Russian-Western rivalry. This also includes avoiding the analytical streamlining of conflicts in the former

Soviet Union as if their causes and dynamics were all identical. Generalisations risk reductive understandings that flatten local realities. The root causes of South Caucasus conflicts are local, and ultimately depend on local agency and agreement to be resolved. Russia-centricity diminishes the ability of outside actors to accurately assess bilateral and regional dynamics or engage on the full range of local drivers sustaining conflict, and can contribute instead to ineffective policies based on competition and confrontation.

Second, Euro-Atlantic actors need to remain keenly aware of the impacts of sanctions and other measures designed to inflict damage on the Russian economy on the 'in-between' states and entities with extensive ties with Russia. Dependence on Russia creates pressures to demonstrate formal compliance with the latter's aims in Ukraine, or at least evasion tactics aimed at avoiding overt contradiction with the Kremlin, such as abstention or absence from votes on United Nations General Assembly resolutions denouncing Russia for its actions. This dependence also means that societies reliant on Russia will also be seriously, if indirectly, affected by Western sanctions on Russia. Particularly for people living in unrecognised or partially recognised entities, decades of isolation and blockades have engendered deep dependencies on Russian financial, energy, infrastructural and other systems. Western governments need to adopt a nuanced approach to dealing with the political and economic pressures on these 'in-between' societies – assisting them to balance their interests and providing economic support to offset the unintended consequences of sanctions. Western governments also need to include peacebuilding activity alongside humanitarian activity in a general licence or exemptions from Russian sanctions – not only in Ukraine but in surrounding or adjacent areas such as the South Caucasus where there is a risk of conflict escalation and a need for conflict prevention activity.

Third, European actors in particular need to invest in the articulation of a long-term vision for the South Caucasus. In the context of inevitably more contingent US interests in the region and the dramatic weakening of multilateral frameworks such as the UN and OSCE, it falls to Europe – and specifically the EU – to articulate a strategic vision for its relationship with a region that will always be its neighbour. This vision may be long-term and it may not have immediate answers to the region's current challenges, but it can establish some core parameters enabling a more strategic and less reactive approach to developments in the region. A longer-term strategic vision is needed as a counterpoint to alternative trajectories for the South Caucasus. These might include new multilateral formats that institutionalise power asymmetries and exclude European actors, or interlinkages with other global and regional rivalries, further embedding the quest for geopolitical patrons and perpetuating the associated dynamics of regional fracture.

A critical element of a European vision for the South Caucasus is the role that the EU can play in upgrading the region's infrastructure to meet the likely future demand for access and transit through the 'middle corridor' circumventing more contentious and risky alternatives. The connectivity agenda unites a critical mass of stakeholders, not least the states and societies of the South Caucasus itself, and offers important forward-looking perspectives for opening up a region held down for too long by blockades, closed borders and frontlines. Initiatives directed at facilitating and enhancing regional economic ties and technical cooperation offer pathways to new transactional relationships. At the same time a deeper and more sustainable transformation requires the building of trust through more effective challenge of embedded conflict narratives, which in turn necessitates wider participation in peace processes.<sup>28</sup>

A strategic vision for the region must therefore encompass wider participation in order to challenge, and present possible alternatives to, conflict-driven, zero-sum and deeply securitised identities. If the fundamental fears, needs and memories driving these identities are not addressed, there is a risk of rebuilding without reconciling, laying the basis for new spirals of insecurity in the future.



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