

South Caucasus at the Crossroads of Geo-Strategical Interests: New Era of Regional Security or New Challenges to Peace- Building?

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Abstract – The paper explores the new situation emerged in South Caucasus region after the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, three conflicts broke out in South Caucasus, and none of them is not yet settled. This fact makes the region more unstable, deeply volatile and continually disintegrated. The political regimes of intra and extra-regional countries, especially regional autocratic ones, have a negative impact on conflict resolution and peace-building process in South Caucasus.

The whole potential of this region can't be revealed and exploited without settling frozen and/or unfrozen conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The unsolved conflicts will lead to a permanent regional instability and uncertainty by giving chance to extra-regional actors for the use of their geo-strategical interests. The regional instability is transformed into a stable tool for the extra-regional actors, especially autocratic ones, to interfere and to keep pseudo-mediation by promoting their own interests.

The issues of regional communications' unblocking, borders' demarcation and delimitation as well as regional integration possibilities are discussed. The exploration of these issues showcased the need for a common platform or practically experienced concept of regional peace-building that have to be shared by all regional countries.

Keywords – South Caucasus, regional conflicts, the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh, unblocking of communications, demarcation, delimitation, consociationalism.

I. A COMPLEX OVERVIEW

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caspian Sea and South Caucasus has become the focus of considerable international attention, primary because it is one of the oldest and potentially richest oil and gas producing areas in the world. The regional military operations in the 1990s as well as August 2008 Russian-Georgian 5-days war and the unilateral recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia changed the situation in the region (Kakachia, 2011, p. 15). But the region has become more unstable and volatile only after 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh 44-days war that fundamentally influenced the geo-strategical situation of the region by creating new and unprecedented challenges to security and stability.

In this context, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has an important historical background which gained its sovereignty after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This conflict has been the most important issue in the South Caucasus from 1992 until today (Semercioglu, 2021, p. 49). In comparison with other territorial conflicts of the region, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is quite different and is the most difficult one because of its ethnic roots and historical aspect. It is

evident that the Soviet Union's policy towards South Caucasus has put "silent mines" that exploded after its collapse by destabilizing the region and by giving a permanent chance to already post-Soviet Russia to play the role of the third objective party as a mediator or arbitrator which in reality is deeply subjective. This conflict is not yet settled, and the risk of escalation still remains even after Russian peacekeepers deployment in the conflict zone.

Since 1990s the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has had escalation and deescalation phases, but the situation in South Caucasus has considerably changed after the 44-days war launched by Azerbaijan on September 27, 2020. The result of the war has only changed the status-quo but a peaceful settlement for the conflict has not been reached. By taking into account the differences between conflicting parties' positions as well as actions of other actors such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Western countries (especially USA and France as co-chairs of Minsk Group) this paper tends to answer the following question: *is it possible to build a secure region in South Caucasus when geo-strategical interests of intra and extra-regional actors are not balanced and harmonious?*

The war ignited by Azerbaijan caused several damages not only to the infrastructure of Nagorno-Karabakh but also to civilians who were obliged to quit their homeland and migrate to Armenia. As a result of the war, the conflicting parties signed a declaration of cease-fire with the Russian mediation on November 9, 2020 but not all points of it are currently respected. Especially, the release of all Armenian prisoners of war – military and civilian – detained during and after the war between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh is not respected despite several calls from different officials and organizations which strongly demanded and continue to demand an immediate and unconditional release of them. Baku has to refrain from any arbitrary and to fully implement the Tripartite Ceasefire Statement, which foresees an exchange of prisoners of war, hostages and all other detainees, as well as the remains of fatalities. It means that it is early to state that a real peace can be achieved because the work of Minsk group co-chairs is still not restored. Azerbaijan even on these days continues to violate the territorial contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh which is under the responsibility of Russian peacekeepers according to the November 9 statement.

It has to be reminded that after gaining independence, Azerbaijan primarily signed a "Military Training Cooperation Agreement" to establish, train and improve the Azerbaijani army, activities such as military training, cooperation and logistic support were initiated in 1992. In this context, Azerbaijani students had been sent off to the Turkish army military academies for education and also military advisors have sent to Azerbaijan (Yüce, 2016, p. 56).

This proves that Turkey has always been interested to become an indirect party of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and tried to be involved in the settlement process because of promotion of its own national interests such as so called "Zangezur Corridor". By taking into account this intention Turkey as a stakeholder of this regional conflict took part in 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh 44-days war by supporting Azerbaijani interests diplomatically and militarily and by providing weapons and technical support. For the first time after the collapse of Soviet Union, Turkey has entered the region and opened a joint military facility with Russia near Nagorno-Karabakh in the Aghdam region to help monitor the ceasefire (Kucera, 2021). This is a stark indicator of geo-strategical interests shifting in the region. This unprecedented cooperation comes as Azerbaijan was seeking a Turkish counterweight to a newly strengthened Russian influence in the South Caucasus.

The absence of Western efforts to promote a regionally-grounded policy is creating openings for another player such as Turkey, illiberal power, is making significant inroads through South Caucasus just as the West seems to be backing away. This has further splintered the region by corroding already weak regional ties and activating extra-regional alliances that do little for regional resilience among these states, jeopardizing core US priorities in Eurasia. For example, the 2020 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh showcased NATO-member Turkey, as patron of Azerbaijan, coordinating an offensive war against neighboring Armenians. The war ended with a Russia-brokered agreement that wedged Russian peacekeepers deeper into the region. It was a major victory for Azerbaijan and Russia, establishing a peacekeeping presence that will only deepen authoritarianism inside Azerbaijan, while complicating the democratization pathway in both Georgia and Armenia. It also created conditions for a proxy war which may yet ignite between various regional powers, pulling in Turkey and Iran, with Russia as a perennial stakeholder in this region (Ohanyan, 2021, p. 34).

Once considered a "crossroads of civilization", the South Caucasus has emerged as a crossroad of energy-export routes – spurring renewed competition in the region. The 44-days war radically transformed the geopolitical pattern in the South Caucasus. But there was a process that preceded this new situation. This was the 5-days war in 2008 that influenced the region in several ways. First, after that war, Georgia lost its previous central role in the region, which may endanger many investment programs

(including energy) previously linked to that country. Second, due to the break in relations between Georgia and Russia, Moscow lost part of its influence on the whole region, with the European Union and Turkey striving to fill that gap. Third, the 5-days war showed everybody how fragile South Caucasus stability is and how dangerous an armed conflict may be in this region (Kakachia, 2011, p. 19). In this context it is important to add that the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh deeply changed the balance of forces in the region by giving a chance not only to Russia to be militarily presented in the conflict zone (the third conflict in South Caucasus in line with Abkhazia and South Ossetia) but also to Turkey to enter the region with its geopolitical interests and by signing an agreement on June 15, 2021 (Declaration of Shushi) with Azerbaijan regarding trade, energy security and military cooperation. For now, Turkey has become one of the key players in South Caucasus. And this was done with Russia's consent based on mutual interests not only in this region, but also by considering the Middle East peculiarities, especially in Syria as well as the perspective of Turkish-Russian mutual interests is going to be deepened due to Turkey's position regarding Russia's war in Ukraine. Turkey stays the only NATO-member state that accurately continues its multidimensional cooperation with Russia and tries to be a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. In this regard, somehow the situation in South Caucasus depends on the way and price of Ukrainian conflict resolution because this will clarify the trends of geopolitics in South Caucasus.

It has to be highlighted that the 2020 November trilateral agreement radically changed the geopolitical configuration of the region by giving Moscow a central role it last held in the Soviet era three decades ago. As a result of the agreement, a Russian peacekeeping mission of approximately 2000 men was deployed to both Karabakh and the Lachin corridor between Karabakh and Armenia for an initial five years, with the possibility of renewal (de Waal, 2021.). But in Summer 2022 Russia's peacekeepers agreed to practically leave the Lachin corridor by giving territorial advantages to Azerbaijani military forces for gaining new tactical positions in this terrain.

After the signing of trilateral cease-fire agreement and according to it, Armenia took actions and followed the points of its responsibilities but the Azerbaijani side is still continuing to practically deny some of them. Moreover, it continues interim shelling on localities and civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as on Armenian borders after gaining some territorial advantages in Armenia's southeast and northeast directions.

The Azerbaijani aggression is expressed also against the Armenian cultural heritage of Nagorno Karabakh. In this regard the European Parliament has recently adopted a resolution that 'strongly condemns Azerbaijan's continued policy of erasing and denying the Armenian cultural heritage in and around Nagorno-Karabakh (Avetisyan, 2022). It came after the Azerbaijani authorities announced plans to erase Armenian inscriptions on churches Azerbaijan claims are Caucasian Albanian which is not true.

All these actions showcase that the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs format restoration becomes a necessity. Earlier on December 7, 2021 - U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov, and French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian, representing the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries, expressed support for the resumption of direct dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan under the auspices of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs. The Co-Chair countries called on the sides to continue the dialogue between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan begun at meetings held in New York in September and Paris in November, as well as to continue contacts at the leadership level to promote a lasting and sustainable peace in the region.

The Co-Chair countries called on Armenia and Azerbaijan to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric and provocative actions and to implement in full the commitments they undertook on November 9, 2020 and reconfirmed on November 26, 2021 in their joint statements. The Co-Chairs also called on both sides to continue their engagement and to make concrete progress on humanitarian issues — including, inter alia, detainees, demining, missing persons, voluntary return of displaced persons, and the protection of historic and cultural sites, and to work constructively to resolve other outstanding issues, such as border delimitation and demarcation and the restoration of economic and transportation links. The Co-Chair countries also noted with concern recent incidents on the non-demarcated Armenia-Azerbaijan border and reaffirmed that the use or threat of force for resolving border disputes is unacceptable. The Co-Chair countries also reminded Armenia and Azerbaijan of their obligation to comply with the requirements of international humanitarian law and urged the sides to lift immediately all restrictions on international humanitarian organizations accessing conflict-affected areas and populations.

The Co-Chair countries encouraged the sides to welcome them to the region as soon as possible to allow them to assess the situation on the ground first-hand, to make tangible progress in implementing humanitarian initiatives discussed at the meetings

noted above, and to reach agreement on an agenda for future engagements. They also reiterated their strong support for the continuing work of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chair in Office (PRCiO) in the region and encouraged the sides to cooperate fully with his efforts.

The Co-Chair countries reaffirmed their commitment to working with the sides to find comprehensive solutions to all remaining issues related to or resulting from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in accordance with their mandate in order to promote a secure, stable, prosperous and peaceful future for the South Caucasus region.

There is a necessity that the status of Nagorno-Karabakh must be determined through negotiations within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group.

All these actions showcased that Co-Chair countries tried to create a trusty atmosphere to further steps but the Azerbaijani side was and is not fully intended to continue the cooperation. On the contrary, it alleges the Karabakh conflict is now resolved (de Waal, 2021). Baku is attempting to assert sovereignty through force and ethnic cleansing while denying Armenians the right to self-determination (Galitsky, 2021).

The November 2020 ceasefire agreement halted the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, but a sustainable peace agreement remains far from reach. By providing economic support and fostering dialogue and reconciliation, international actors can play a role in this long-term project.

II. 3+3 FORMAT: A NEW PLATFORM FOR REGIONAL STABILIZATION?

On the background of OSCE Minsk Group in 2021 a new political platform called 3+3 has been launched by Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan aimed at stabilizing the South Caucasus region. This format was considerably promoted by above mentioned countries when especially Georgia has abstained to participate to it. The peculiarity of this format is that Western powers and mainly USA and France which are officially Minsk Group Co-Chairs, are practically absent from it because the first 3 countries of this format are the South Caucasus recognized ones: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and the next 3 countries are neighboring ones: Russia, Turkey and Iran. During this period in the framework of 3+3 format two meetings have been organized but there is still some uncertainty regarding it which is probably a mixture of economics and geopolitics. The first meeting in Moscow on December 10, 2021 showcased that without Georgia's participation, this format will not function correctly and will not have a huge impact on the region because it already couldn't unify all countries for a common purpose. Without Georgia which is the only country that has borders with all 3 initiators of this format: Turkey, Russia, and Azerbaijan, the 3+3 will not succeed. By taking into account the need for regional stability, without Western powers, predominantly the USA and the EU, and only with this balance of forces the South Caucasus can really become stable. Otherwise, 3 big states such as Russia, Turkey and Iran will impose their politics and will to 3 small ones. In this respect, for developing more balanced region other actors have to be involved in the region politically, economically, and logistically. Only in this case the unblocking of communications will be effective and will serve to the interests of all parties by fully respecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity that were emphasized by European Council's president Charles Michel¹ during the last meeting on December 14, 2021 in Brussels.

But it has to be stated that the international community and international organizations (UN, NATO, etc.) did not take a peaceful stand in terms of the process of resolving the dispute in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the past 30 years. Particularly its provision of increasing the efforts of the Minsk Group used the event to diplomacy could not give a solution to the matter. At the same time, the involvement of the regional countries such as Russia, Iran, and the Armenian lobby in the EU and USA made the solution of the problem more difficult. The fact that the USA does not pay enough attention to the developments in this region due to its focus on the presidential elections held in November 2020, increased the influence of Russia and Turkey in the region. On the other hand, Azerbaijan has increased the effectiveness of all national power elements, especially its military capability, compared to the Azerbaijan's success in this conflict declared the emergence of a powerful state in the South Caucasus. The largest share in this success undoubtedly belongs to Turkey's political, military, and moral support. By the policy applied and the result obtained in this process increased the effectiveness of Turkey in the region and the international system (Semercioğlu,

¹ See more in detail: **European Council Statements and remarks 14 December 2021**. Statement of President Charles Michel following the trilateral meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/14/statement-of-president-charles-michel-following-the-trilateral-meeting-with-president-ilham-aliyev-and-prime-minister-nikol-pashinyan/>

2021, p. 58). After one year of war, on 17 March 2021, the Russian Minister of Defence S. Shoigu has declared that Russian-Turkish cooperation in Nagorno-Karabakh was not a simple operation.² In general, the analysis of pre and post-war realities gives some assumptions that the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh was a good deal between Russia and Turkey to share the region and zones of influence.

III. UNBLOCKING OF COMMUNICATION AND DISTRUST TO "CORRIDORS"

If Russia could be seen as the current leader in the competition for influence in the South Caucasus, Iran could be considered an outsider. Iran's policy in the Caucasus is based primarily on its own security and economic considerations. Domestic inputs and constraints, primarily the presence of a significant Azerbaijani minority in Iran and its interests and confrontations beyond the region, including that with the United States, also influence Iran's policies toward the region. However, the major Iranian concern in the region is not economic but strategic and its main objective is to expand its influence, for historic, economic and political reasons. In recent years, Iran also sees the role in energy security issues in the region and stands a good chance of being a future contributor to existing and planned pipelines through the Caucasus (Kakachia, 2011, p. 18).

After the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey and Azerbaijan put in circulation a new term called "Zangezur Corridor" – from Turkey to Azerbaijan through the territory of Armenia. This claim is a real threat to Armenia's sovereign territory, to Armenia-Iran state border, and is a serious factor destabilizing the region.

In this respect, some complications on the Iran-Armenia highway were created by Azerbaijan in order to force it to agree to the implementation of the Zangezur corridor project, important for Baku – a road through the territory of Armenia, which would pass from Turkey to Azerbaijan, through Nakhichevan that is currently surrounded by the lands of Armenia. Armenia's categorically negative position on this project has been repeatedly stated: Azerbaijan will not get a road through the territory of Armenia, which will not be under the control of Yerevan. The same position was repeated in Tehran by the Armenian Foreign Minister, who went there on a visit against the background of the Iranian-Azerbaijani aggravation. Mirzoyan also reiterated that Azerbaijan does not fulfill the clauses of the November 9 agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh and is actually putting forward new demands. Yerevan appealed to the text of the trilateral ceasefire agreement (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia), and stated that the document referred to the unblocking of communications in the region did not mention any corridor.

The French Ambassador in Armenia referring to the statements of the Azerbaijani side on the so-called, 'Zangezur Corridor' said that the expression 'corridor' should be removed.³ The 'corridors' have left a very bad memory in the history of diplomacy, such as the Danzig corridor. He believed to work on the basis of the trilateral statement of January 11, 2021 signed between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which envisages the restoration of regional channels of communication between the countries of the region and their neighbors. France is fully prepared to work with the countries of the region to launch the region's transport infrastructure. The discourse regarding the corridor couldn't find any support within other western countries too.

The border with Armenia is of strategic significance for Iran. During the Iranian visit of the presidents of Turkey and Russia, the issue of the Armenian-Iranian border was also emphasized. The spiritual leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei referred to possible plots to block the border between Iran and Armenia and said: "If there is such a policy, the Islamic Republic will oppose it, for this border is a 1000s-year-old connecting route".⁴ They should never think that they can threaten the thousand-year global highway and create an obstacle for Iran.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a danger for Armenia because of potential "political trade" with Turkey. Russia is not entirely interested in being an honest peacemaker and a trusty ally.

Locked in a bloody conflict less than two years ago, Armenia and Azerbaijan are seeking to agree on a peace deal under the auspices of the European Union (EU). Meanwhile, Turkey and Armenia — also long at odds — have also made progress towards

² See more in detail: **Russian-Turkish cooperation in Nagorno-Karabakh was not a simple operation**. Retrieved from: <https://factor.am/349063.html>, (20.01.2022).

³ See more in detail: **Status of Nagorno-Karabakh must be determined through negotiations within framework of OSCE Minsk Group: Jonathan Lacôte**. Retrieved from: <https://www.1lurer.am/en/2021/07/23/Status-of-Nagorno-Karabakh-must-be-determined-through-negotiations-within-framework-of-OSCE-Minsk-G/522329>, (23.07.2021).

⁴ See more in detail: **Khamenei warns Erdogan not to block the Iranian-Armenian border**. Retrieved from: <https://mediamax.am/en/news/region/48068/>, (19.07.2022).

a rapprochement. Russia — which has troops in both countries — can take no credit for these developments, and is likely to be concerned about the progress made by what it sees as its arch-foe (Ukraine's troubles really began in 2013 when it was poised to sign an EU association agreement with the bloc.) It is a depressing reality of early 21st century geopolitics that long-term dispute resolution and Russia are widely regarded as antithetical (Avdaliani, 2022).

IV. “PERSIAN GULF - BLACK SEA” PROJECT OR GEO-STRATEGICAL ARROW “INDIA-IRAN-ARMENIA-GEORGIA”

The new situation in the South Caucasus has created not only difficulties but also opportunities for the implementation of new projects and communication directions. One of them is the “Persian Gulf - Black Sea” project that considers the geo-strategical interests of India, Iran, Armenia and Georgia. This project rejects the interests of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Russia also is not deeply interested in the implementation of this project.

Armenia and Iran see the solution of the regional problems in the development of an alternative transport route, which will exclude the territory of Azerbaijan. The latest official reports of both countries talk about the joint implementation of the “Persian Gulf - Black Sea” project, which will pass through the territory of Iran, Armenia and Georgia and should become an outlet for India to the European market. An alternative transit route [Tatev-Kapan road] for Iranian trucks in Armenia has been already paved. And there will no longer be a need to use the previous road that passes through Azerbaijan. This shows divergences of interests between intra and extra-regional actors. Actually the geo-strategical arrow “Persian Gulf – Black Sea” is the counter-strategy of “Zangezur Corridor” arrow in which are interested Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia.

In this context recent fresh clashes on the Armenian-Azeri border have highlighted the harsh reality: the Second Karabakh War has changed the status quo, but failed to resolve the conflict. Thus, the situation in the South Caucasus will remain highly explosive for a long time, heading toward more conflict and potentially pitting Russia and the regional powers, Turkey and Iran, against one another (Trenin, 2021).

The Second Karabakh War, which broke out in the fall of 2020, was a turning point, and not only for its participants, Armenia and Azerbaijan. It changed the political and military balance in the South Caucasus, facilitated the further rise of Turkey as a regional power, and marked out both the limits of Russia's influence in the South Caucasus, and the limits of the United States and European Union's real interest in this part of the post-Soviet space (Trenin, 2021).

For the moment, the Russian leadership has been relatively successful in its tactical maneuvering. By balancing between the two warring sides, Moscow has managed to retain Armenia as an ally and Azerbaijan as a partner. Russia conceded the reality of the Turkish presence in the Caucasus, saved some face as the only intermediary between Yerevan and Baku, and showed its willingness to work with any Armenian leadership loyal to Russian interests. At the same time, Russia has managed to avoid a discussion about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. These maneuvers are all well and good, but they were either already used toward the end of the war, or only remain significant as a way of buying time. In the latter case, efforts must be made to ensure this time is not frittered away (Trenin, 2021). But there is no doubt that the current configuration of forces in the South Caucasus can be reviewed after the Ukrainian war.

4.1. Construct roads and eliminate the blockade

The construction of new roads and the elimination of blockade can be seen as first steps forward to a secure and reliable region. Any option that might imply a blockade must be excluded. Any communication that will run through the territory of Armenia must be under the control of Armenia. Secondly, for Yerevan it is vital to develop the India-Iran-Armenia-Georgia geo-strategical arrow, which will give new communication opportunities not only to these countries but the whole region. This direction is related to the North-South route. Its implementation began several years ago, but received real opportunities only at the beginning of the summer of 2021, when it will be provided with significant financial support by the European Union. The northern part of this road – from the side of Georgia, for the most part is paved. The most large-scale and labor-intensive part remains – the southern one. The European Union will provide financing of 600 million Euros for the construction of this section.⁵ Iran is intending to enter the Caucasus exclusively through Armenia and Georgia, bypassing Baku and Ankara. Thus, Tehran also emphasizes the important role of Yerevan for diversifying its supplies.

⁵ See more in detail: **Minister Looks Forward To EU Funding For Armenian Road Project**. Retrieved from: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31356555.html>, (13.07.2021).

V. DELIMITATION AND DEMARCATION: HOW TO DO IT?

Another issue for the regional stability is related to the process of delimitation and demarcation of borders which has to be done only according to the best international practice and experience. This is an urgent agenda that regional actors need to pay attention on.

It is important to constate that Armenia has never put forward preconditions for launching the process of delimitation and demarcation of the border with Azerbaijan. Armenia rightly demands the fulfillment of all obligations stipulated in trilateral agreement, including security measures.

There is an important circumstance: when the Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces stand close to each other, any political process can affect this situation and trigger aggravation. Armenia suggests mirrored withdrawal of troops from the border and deployment of border troops so that the delimitation and demarcation process goes smoothly. During a meeting in Sochi Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders agreed to take steps to raise security and stability on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and work towards setting up a bilateral demarcation and delimitation commission⁶ but it is really important to highlight that this commission will be effective only if Minsk Group Co-Chairs are also involved in it.

A big problem for starting this process is that groups of Azerbaijani troops illegally crossed the Armenian state border on May 12, 2021 and advanced about 3 km into Armenia's sovereign territory in Gegharkunik and Syunik regions allegedly to "adjust the borders." Part of them pulled back later, but some are still in Armenian sovereign territory.

On May 27, 2021 Armenia proposed that Armenian and Azerbaijani troops withdraw from the border areas to the places of their permanent deployment, suggesting that Russia deploy Russian border guards along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border - from Sotk (Gegharkunik) to Khoznavar (Syunik). After that, according to the plan, it would be possible to begin the delimitation and demarcation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. It has to be stated that the process is not yet started.

Yerevan demands that the international community respond to the aggressive policy of Azerbaijan, which is directed against Armenia's sovereignty, territorial integrity and regional security.

Aftermath of Azerbaijani forces advancement and violation of contact-line in the zone of Russian responsibility in last months, the situation in Karabakh is highly aggravated. This showcases that only the Russian presence in Karabakh is not entirely sufficient for an effective peacekeeping. In this regard, besides Russia, a question of international peace-keeping operation has to be considered too because in the background of the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan tends to escalate the conflict and gain territorial advancements in Karabakh. In this context, on March 25, 2022, The US State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs said on Twitter that "US is deeply concerned about gas disruptions and Azerbaijan's troop movements. Armenia and Azerbaijan need to use direct communications channels to immediately de-escalate" (Donfried, 2022.). Other western countries such as Greece, France expressed concerns too. These reactions showcased that the international community is really concerned about this situation.

5.1. Antalya Diplomacy Forum – A Step Forward in Armenia-Turkey Relations?

On March 15, 2022 Armenia's Foreign Minister has participated to Antalya Diplomacy Forum on the invitation from Turkish side. This was the 3rd meeting with Turkish officials after Moscow and Vienne. Earlier the two countries appointed Special Representatives for the dialogue between Armenia and Turkey. Armenia's Foreign Minister reaffirmed to continue negotiations without preconditions aimed at full normalization of relations between two countries. The keystone of Armenia-Turkey negotiations is the circumstance of "no preconditions" which, if fully respected by Turkey, will lead the process to positive outcomes. In general, the existence of bi-lateral dialogue between Armenia and Turkey is a positive trend. The dialogue is better than its absence. But a real deal aimed at restoration of relations or borders unblocking can't be achieved under Turkey's ultimatum or preconditions. Turkey has to reduce its allegations and remake its discourse on "Zangezur Corridor" because no document contains this formulation.

⁶ See more in detail: **Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to bilateral commission in Sochi summit.** <https://oc-media.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-agree-to-bilateral-commission-in-sochi-summit/>, (27.11.2021).

Indeed, fractured regions nourish authoritarianism and state weakness. Many countries with hybrid systems in Eurasia are faced with the challenge of building and consolidating authentic democratic institutions in deeply divided geopolitical environments. Managing geopolitical competition in the post-communist space has become a critical component for effective breakthroughs and subsequent consolidations of democratic outcomes (Ohanyan & Kopalyan, 2022, p. 24, 45).

European actors are the principal external advocates of regional cooperation and unity within the South Caucasus. However, they have had varying levels of success in advancing genuine state-level collaboration between the three countries. The areas where there has been most progress are the environment, energy, and transport and border management. The EU is the principal actor involved with issues of good neighbourliness and regional cooperation, which are fundamental elements of its policies related to its periphery (German, 2012.)

Autocratic regimes are no less brittle than dictatorships elsewhere, and as such pose a threat to European and Eurasian stability and security. Dictatorships become sources of reactionary pushback against regional stability and its prerequisites of accountable governance (Ohanyan, 2021, p. 39.). Azerbaijan, with its hereditary autocracy, is a unique case persisting in the South Caucasus. The democratic trends across its borders in Georgia and Armenia have exacerbated Azerbaijan in its path to authoritarian consolidation. In this respect, the success in the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh serves as a good precondition for building more centralized and personalized political power in Azerbaijan.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of above mentioned issues, circumstances and facts showcases that the current situation in South Caucasus became more complicated than it was before the 44-days war in Nagorno-Karabakh. For now, the quantity of issues has increased. The unblocking of communications as well as delimitation and demarcation of borders are necessary but not sufficient for peace-building and stability of the region if they are not realized with the consideration of mutual interests and with the respect of the international law. Undoubtedly, the solution of these issues will have a positive impact on the region. But at the same time the peace-building in South Caucasus depends not only on the unblocking of communications such as railways and roads, demarcation and delimitation or other tasks to do. For a long term stability it is very important to find a right balance of forces in the region. No extra-regional power must have a dominance in the region, especially countries with autocratic rules and intentions. In line with this process the possibility for the implementation of a new model of peaceful coexistence in this volatile region where democratization becomes more and more vital has to be considered too. The rich multiethnic structure of the region with its religion, national, language, and cultural heritage has to be respected by all intra and extra-regional countries.

In this respect, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus has been unable to find a model for regional cooperation or form regional organizations. Over the past three decades, various initiatives for regional cooperation have been proposed, including the “Peaceful Caucasus Initiative” (Eduard Shevardnadze), “Stability Pact for the Caucasus” (Süleyman Demirel, on January 16, 2000), “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, August 13, 2008), and “United Caucasus” (Mikheil Saakashvili). But none of these proved successful or long-lasting because each failed to satisfy all of the key members of the wider region (Kaleji, 2022). For sure, this does not mean that a new platform or concept can’t be proposed. Taking into account the new realities, a new concept has to be included in the regional agenda.

Likely the option for a relevant model for peace-building largely fitting with the regional peculiarities would serve as good tool to build up sustainability and achieve peace in the South Caucasus. And in this respect, the question of consociationalism as a democracy model designed for plural states and societies as an accurate model of peace-building and regional security has to be inserted in the political agenda. Very likely, the consociationalism will lead the region to a democratic path of development and will guarantee reconciliation, stability, and peace in South Caucasus. In this case the unblocking of regional communications will be done by the full respect of regional countries sovereignties, and the peace in the region will be maintained by all parties.

Only the sustainable democratization in South Caucasus will open a new era of regional security and make the stabilization possible. This will lead to the fostering of stateness when intra and extra-regional actors will respect the geo-strategical interests of each other by creating unifying and not dividing lines.

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