

# Navigating Geopolitical Dynamics: The Complex Interplay of Interests in the South Caucasus

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**Abstract:** The South Caucasus holds immense geopolitical significance for key global players, including Russia, the United States, Türkiye, and the European Union (EU). This region, comprising Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, is strategically positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, with crucial implications for regional stability, energy transit, and great power competition. For Russia, the South Caucasus represents a vital sphere of influence and a buffer zone against Western encroachment. Türkiye's interests in the South Caucasus, on the other hand, extend from economic partnerships to cultural and historical ties. It actively participates in infrastructure projects like the Middle Corridor, enhancing its role as a regional energy hub. The EU emphasizes the South Caucasus as a crucial area for energy diversification and transportation infrastructure. Projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor and the Eastern Partnership policy demonstrate the EU's commitment to fostering political and economic ties, promoting democratic values, and enhancing regional stability. The US views the South Caucasus through the lens of energy security, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 Crimean events. It seeks to diversify European energy sources by engaging with countries like Azerbaijan, fostering security cooperation, and potentially expanding NATO influence in the region. In light of these interests, this paper focuses on how the various powers (Russia, Türkiye, and the West) assert their interests and how the states of the region can take advantage of this increased interest.

**Keywords:** South Caucasus, geopolitics, global powers, strategic partnership, security concerns

## Introduction

The South Caucasus, a region nestled between Europe and Asia, has long been a crucible of geopolitical competition and strategic importance, attracting the interest of major powers such as Russia, Türkiye, the United States, and the European Union. This mountainous terrain, comprising the countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, stands at the crossroads of historical trade routes and energy corridors, rendering it a critical juncture for the geopolitical ambitions of global players.

The South Caucasus has a rich history shaped by diverse cultural influences, ancient trade routes, and the ebb and flow of empires. In the modern era, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a transformative period for the region, leading to the emergence of independent states. However, this newfound sovereignty also intensified geopolitical rivalries as external actors sought to assert influence in this strategic and resource-rich landscape.

On the whole, the geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus are complex and multifaceted, shaped by historical animosities, ethnic complexities, and territorial disputes. The former conflict, such as the Karabakh issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan, added an additional layer of complexity to the geopolitical landscape of the region. The following highlights how the different powers (Russia, Türkiye, and the West) assert their interests and how the states in the region can take advantage of this increased interest.

## The geopolitical intersection of great power interests

The actions and interests of powerful nations frequently intersect, leading to complex dynamics and potential points of conflict or cooperation. The geopolitical intersection reflects the overlapping pursuit of influence, security, economic advantage, and other strategic objectives (Bárkányi & Vasa, 2023). In practical terms, this intersection occurs when multiple great powers share an interest or stake in a particular geographic region, economic zone, or global issue. These intersections can lead to various outcomes, including diplomatic

negotiations, alliance-building, economic partnerships, or, conversely, geopolitical competition and tensions. The many interests of the powers concerned are also reflected in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. These include energy, economic interests, strategic partnership, security concepts, and possible NATO enlargement and presence.

### ***The importance of energy in the region***

The South Caucasus is crucial for energy geopolitics, particularly in terms of oil and natural gas transit routes. The US has been interested in diversifying energy sources and routes to reduce dependence on Russian energy, and projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline aim to provide alternative routes for Caspian energy resources to reach global markets (South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) — TRANS CASPIAN RESOURCES, INC (TCRI), 2020).

Similarly to the US, the EU has a vested interest in diversifying its energy sources and routes. With its energy infrastructure, the South Caucasus is crucial for the EU's efforts to reduce dependence on Russian energy. Projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor, which includes the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), aim to bring Caspian gas to Europe, bypassing Russia (TANAP - the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project, n.d.). The EU also seeks to foster economic ties with the countries of the South Caucasus, aiming to enhance trade relations and support economic development in the region. The Eastern Partnership, an initiative launched by the EU, includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, fostering cooperation on trade, political association, and various reforms.

Russia, on the other hand, seeks to maintain control over energy transit routes from the South Caucasus to Europe. Competing pipeline projects, such as the Southern Gas Corridor, challenge Russia's dominance in the energy sector and impact its influence over European energy supplies.

Türkiye has an interest in energy cooperation with the South Caucasus nations. Projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline contribute to Türkiye's energy security by providing access to Caspian energy resources.

Major powers are also typically interested in controlling or influencing transportation corridors. For example, Türkiye is actively involved in the development of the Middle Corridor, which enhances connectivity between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, as it links Central Asia and the Zangezur Corridor to the South Caucasus (between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan and Armenia). All of this further increases the interest of the great powers and regional players in the region (Vasa & Barkanyi, 2023), and it will substantially shape the future of the South Caucasus.

### ***Strategic partnerships***

The US has sought strategic partnerships with the countries of the South Caucasus, e.g. Georgia and Azerbaijan. These partnerships are driven by shared interests in regional stability, counterterrorism efforts, and support for democratic governance. The US also promotes democracy and governance reforms in the South Caucasus, aiming to foster stable and transparent political systems. However, this has sometimes led to tensions with countries in the region as they balance between Western aspirations and pressure from other major powers.

The EU also places a strong emphasis on promoting democratic values, good governance, and the rule of law in the South Caucasus. Its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) outlines its commitment to supporting political reforms, human rights, and the establishment of democratic institutions in partner countries. However, the EU faces challenges in maintaining unity and cohesion in its approach to the South Caucasus, given the diverse interests and priorities of its member states. As a result, divergent views on issues such as the Karabakh conflict or relations with Russia can create complexities in formulating a unified EU strategy (Eastern Partnership, 2023).

Russia, for its side, has historical ties with many South Caucasus nations that stem from the imperial past and the Soviet era. This historical connection, combined with cultural and linguistic affinities, influences Russia's approach to the region. Russia engages in economic partnerships with the countries of the South Caucasus, including trade agreements and economic cooperation, and these partnerships can be leveraged to exert influence and strengthen political ties.

Türkiye shares historical and cultural ties with many South Caucasus nations, particularly Azerbaijan and to some extent with Georgia. These ties are rooted in common historical experiences, linguistic connections, and cultural affinities, which influence Türkiye's engagement with the region. Türkiye aims to strengthen economic ties with the South Caucasus countries through trade agreements and economic partnerships, and this expanding economic cooperation can both benefit Türkiye's economy and contribute to regional stability (Maximilian, 2021).

### ***Security concerns and NATO enlargement***

The South Caucasus has been a zone of competition among major powers for influence. The US has sought to counterbalance Russian influence in the region by supporting the sovereignty and independence of countries like Georgia and Azerbaijan. This has sometimes put the US at odds with Russia, which sees the region as part of its traditional sphere of influence.

The EU, on the other hand, has been involved in conflict resolution efforts in the region, notably in the Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It supports diplomatic initiatives and contributes to peacebuilding efforts, aiming to stabilize the region and prevent the escalation of conflicts. The EU is also interested in effective border management in the South Caucasus to address security concerns and manage migration flows. The location of the region as a transit route for people and goods makes it relevant to the EU's efforts to enhance border security and combat illegal migration. Furthermore, the EU aims to maintain a delicate balance in its relations with Russia in the South Caucasus. While pursuing its own interests and supporting the sovereignty of South Caucasus countries, the EU seeks to avoid unnecessary confrontation with Russia, recognizing its influence in the region.

The US has supported the aspirations of some South Caucasus countries, particularly Georgia, to join NATO. This has been a point of contention with Russia, which views NATO enlargement as a threat to its security. The US also provides military assistance and training to strengthen the defence capabilities of the South Caucasus nations (NATO, 2023).

Maintaining a strong military presence in the South Caucasus is also a key aspect of Russia's geopolitical strategy. Russia has military bases in Armenia, and it has historically played a role in regional security dynamics, partly to protect its interests and maintain its influence in the region. In addition, Russia maintains relationships with various actors in the South Caucasus, often playing a balancing act between different countries. For example, while it has close ties with Armenia, Russia also seeks to engage with Azerbaijan and Georgia to protect its broader interests in the region. Since Russia perceives potential threats to its national security in the South Caucasus, especially regarding the presence of NATO forces, which it views as encroachment on its borders, this perception shapes Russia's military and diplomatic actions in the region.

Türkiye has been involved in security and defence cooperation with Azerbaijan and, to a certain extent, with Georgia. Shared concerns about regional stability and security challenges contribute to collaborative efforts, including military training and joint exercises. Türkiye has also shown interest in playing a diplomatic role in regional conflicts, particularly in relation to the Karabakh issue. For example, Türkiye's support for Azerbaijan during the 2020 conflict and its willingness to engage in diplomatic efforts indicate its desire to influence conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. Türkiye also seeks to exert political influence in the South Caucasus, aligning with its broader foreign policy objectives. This may involve diplomatic initiatives, political alliances, and engagement with regional organizations to enhance its standing in the region. Türkiye promotes cultural and educational exchanges with South Caucasus nations as well. Initiatives such as scholarships and exchange programs aim to foster people-to-people connections, enhancing mutual understanding and cultural ties (Vardanian, 2022).

In contrast, Russia views the South Caucasus as part of its traditional sphere of influence and seeks to maintain influence over the political and economic affairs of the region. This has led to tensions with Western powers, especially when it comes to issues such as NATO expansion and the presence of Western-backed projects in the region. Therefore, Russia aims to counterbalance and limit Western influence in the South Caucasus. Efforts to strengthen ties with the South Caucasus nations and discourage their alignment with Western institutions,

such as NATO or the European Union, are part of Russia's strategy to maintain regional dominance.

Finally, Türkiye's NATO membership and its relationship with the powers of the West introduce another layer of complexity. While Türkiye maintains ties with its Western allies, its regional policies may sometimes diverge from those of other NATO members, leading to potential contradictions in its geopolitical stance. Türkiye also maintains a balancing act in its relations with Russia, which is also a significant player in the South Caucasus. Although it seeks cooperation with Russia on certain issues, Türkiye may differ on its geopolitical objectives in the region, creating a delicate balancing act in its foreign policy.

## **National perspectives and great powers on the changing geopolitical situation**

Azerbaijan maintains a pragmatic relationship with Russia, balancing economic ties, especially in the energy sector, with a desire for sovereignty. Azerbaijan and Türkiye, on the other hand, share strong cultural and historical ties. Türkiye has been a key ally, offering support in the Karabakh conflict, while economic cooperation and energy projects underscore the strategic partnership between the two countries. Furthermore, while Azerbaijan has diversified its partnerships, particularly in the energy sector, its relations with the EU and the US have been pragmatic, and human rights concerns and governance issues have at times strained these ties.

Armenia has a strategic alliance with Russia, marked by military cooperation and the presence of a Russian military base. Russia has also played a pivotal role in the Karabakh conflict, contributing to Armenia's security. In contrast, Armenia and Türkiye historically have strained relations, largely due to the so-called "Armenian controversy", and the two countries lack diplomatic ties, which affects regional stability. Finally, Armenia seeks to balance its close ties with Russia by engaging with the EU and the US. Economic cooperation, democratic reforms, and human rights issues shape these relationships.

Georgia's relations with Russia have been strained since the 2008 war. Russia supports breakaway regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which contributes to ongoing tensions. Türkiye and Georgia, meanwhile, maintain strong economic ties, with energy projects, cultural affinities, and diplomatic cooperation also characterizing their relationship. Georgia aspires to deepening its ties with the EU and the US, seeking support for Euro-Atlantic integration. These relationships are crucial for security cooperation, economic development, and democratic reforms.

In the following, the paper examines the impact of the great powers in each country of the region in detail, as well as the benefits that the states of the region can derive from this influence.

### ***Azerbaijan - from a difficult past to a fruitful future***

In the lead-up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan maintained positive relations with Russia. Initially pursuing a pro-Russian policy, Azerbaijan's stance shifted during the first Karabakh conflict (1988-1994), marked by events like Black January and the Khojali massacre, which led to a growing anti-Russian sentiment. President Abulfaz Elchibey's rise to power (1992-1993) and his pro-Western foreign policy further strained relations with Moscow (Дмитрий Ефимович Фурман, 2001).

The situation improved after President Heydar Aliyev's election (1993-2003), with relations normalizing and strengthening by the mid-2000s. Factors such as Vladimir Putin's leadership, the Azeri economic potential, and collaboration in the military and defence field contributed to this positive shift. In 2008, trilateral talks on the Karabakh settlement were initiated by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (Официальный сайт президента Азербайджанской Республики, 2010), involving Azeri President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, which resulted in a declaration that affirmed commitment to a political resolution (Встреча Президента Азербайджана Ильхама Алиева и Президента Армении Сержа Саргсяна при посредничестве Дмитрия Медведева, 2008).

The economic ties between the two countries flourished during the late 2000s, with Azerbaijan purchasing gas from Russia until it achieved commercial gas production in 2007. This self-sufficiency made it possible for Azerbaijan to export gas to its neighbouring countries. Agreements between Gazprom OJSC, Transneft, Lukoil, and the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) underscored this deepening economic cooperation. Collaborations also extended to industrial production, including the manufacturing of KAMAZ and GAZ (Россия нашла трамплин для рывка на рынки третьих стран: Азербайджан, 2018).

This positive trajectory continued in 2010, marked by agreements on the state border, visa-free travel, and the use of the Samur River. Trade volume between Russia and Azerbaijan increased by 17 percent year-on-year between January-June 2010, totalling USD 848.6 million, with Russia exporting various goods to Azerbaijan (Итоги визита президента России в Азербайджан).

Azerbaijan's imports to Russia are characterized by minerals, as well as gas, textiles, cotton, agriculture, and various other products. Russia has been a significant foreign trade partner for Baku in recent years, ranking third after Türkiye and Italy. In 2019, the trade volume between Russia and Azerbaijan reached USD 3.2 billion (Ежегодная статистика внешней торговли по странам. 2019), although it experienced a 10% decline in 2021, amounting to USD 2.9 billion (Russia - Azerbaijan 2021 bilateral trade hits US\$3 billion). A roadmap outlines the development of key areas in Russian-Azerbaijani cooperation until 2024, focusing on removing trade barriers, enhancing transport, establishing joint ventures, fostering fiscal and tax cooperation, intensifying mutual visits, and strengthening humanitarian relations (Межгосударственные отношения России и Азербайджана. 2021).

Military cooperation between the two countries has also shown a developing trend over the decades. From 2010 to 2019, Russia was Azerbaijan's main partner in military cooperation. On 24 September, 2021, President Ilham Aliyev announced that Azerbaijan will purchase new types of weapons and military equipment from Russia. He also noted that such relations between Baku and Moscow will continue to develop and strengthen in the future (Совина, 2021).

Cultural and educational ties between Russia and Azerbaijan are also robust. The opening of the Russian Information and Cultural Centre in Baku in January 2011 (Российский информационно-культурный центр, Баку (Азербайджан) | Проект “Русский музей: виртуальный филиал,” 2011), and the operation of the Baku branch of Moscow State University since 2008 (Invest Tyumen, 2023) highlight the depth of cultural relations. In 2020, the Russian mediation efforts led by President Vladimir Putin played a crucial role in a significant shift in the Karabakh war. A stable ceasefire was agreed on 9 November, 2020. Russia participated in the talks as a national entity and as the co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group. On 11 January, 2021 (Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2023b), at Vladimir Putin’s initiative, trilateral talks involving Russian President Vladimir Putin, Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan, and Azeri President Ilham Aliyev also took place. These discussions covered the progress in implementing the 2020 declaration on Karabakh, addressing regional challenges, providing assistance to war-affected areas, and advancing trade, economic, and transport relations (TASS, 2021).

After a year and a half of cool Russian-Azerbaijani relations, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev participated in October 2023 in the summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in the Kyrgyz Republic (unlike his Armenian counterpart Nikol Pashinyan) (Putz, 2023).

Thus, the current improvement in the relations between Russia and Azerbaijan comes after years of mutual distance. For Azerbaijan, this improvement brings certain benefits, as Russia is at least a partner with predictable political positions, unlike the EU’s approach to the South Caucasus, which seems less consistent. Due to the stalemate in Ukraine, Russia is also forced to act more restrained in the South Caucasus.

As for Türkiye, Azerbaijan holds a significant position in Ankara’s policy, with strong political and strategic cooperation, as well as crucial historical ties based on common linguistic and cultural affinity (Balcı, 2014, p. 46). The close relationship between Ankara and Baku is often characterized as “one nation, two states” (İncekaya, 2021). During the 1990s, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Türkiye aimed to establish a robust alliance with Azerbaijan and the newly independent Turkic republics in Central Asia, reviving the Pan-Turkic ideology

(Balcı, 2017, p. 229.). The goal was to unite all Turkish nations under Ankara's leadership and form a Turkish union, but the idea failed, without having a significant effect on the bilateral relations between Baku and Ankara.

The leaders of Azerbaijan, including Abulfaz Elchibey (1992-1993), Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003), and from 2003 onwards, his son Ilham Aliyev, have actively sought strong ties with Türkiye. Ankara has supported Azerbaijan in both the Karabakh conflicts and regional security matters (Sarıahmetoğlu, 2016, p. 98.), such as the tension with Iran in 2012 (Balcı, 2014, p. 46.). In return, Azerbaijan has backed Türkiye's goals of enhancing integration with the Turkic republics of Central Asia. Türkiye relies on Azerbaijan as a crucial energy supplier, and close political and economic cooperation could reduce Türkiye's energy dependence on Russia (Yesevi, 2015, p. 28). Additionally, Baku serves as a vital gateway for Türkiye to foster more effective relations with the Turkic nations of Central Asia (Biró, 2021, 54-55).

Economically, energy cooperation plays a pivotal role, with numerous Turkish companies operating in Azerbaijan, and the oil and gas pipelines (BTC, BTE, TANAP) being essential for Türkiye (Roberts, 2012, p. 77-85). Religious and cultural cooperation is also growing, with the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet) collaborating with Baku's religious leader (Lepeska, p. 2015), and various Turkish Islamic movements, mostly affiliated with the Gülen movement (Yavuz, 1999), having a presence in Azerbaijan.

Ankara's support for Baku during the Karabakh war in the autumn of 2020 was a logical extension of the strengthening Azerbaijani-Turkish relations, showcasing Türkiye's steadfast policy in the neighbouring region. This move challenged the status quo and ran counter to Moscow's interests, which traditionally seeks to maintain a balance of power in the South Caucasus. In fact, while an operation to reclaim the Armenian-controlled territories had been contemplated, such a decision was unlikely before the summer of 2020 (Chiragov, 2021). The Turkish leadership may not have actively participated in the process to avoid potential military responses from Russia, and it was a risk Azerbaijan alone might not have dared to take (Górecki & Chudziak, 2021, p. 5), as the large-scale operation posed a direct challenge to Moscow's interests in upholding regional power dynamics.

The backdrop to the war was Azerbaijan's unprecedented interest in Turkish military technology. Azerbaijani arms purchase during the first nine months of 2020 exceeded USD 123 million, marking a sixfold increase compared to the previous year (Toksabay, 2020). This included the acquisition of drones and other military equipment.

Throughout the conflict, President Erdoğan and other prominent Turkish politicians provided strong support for Azerbaijan. Their statements consistently called for the complete withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories, and they criticized the West for allegedly reinforcing Yerevan's pro-Armenian stance with a sense of impunity. Moscow's relatively restrained reaction to the outbreak of hostilities seemed influenced by Ankara's involvement, making any potential Russian intervention more costly. Simultaneously, by avoiding direct confrontation with Türkiye, Russia justified its passivity by emphasizing that the fighting occurred in *de jure* Azerbaijani territory, which was not covered by the guarantees Moscow had previously given to Yerevan (Balci, 2020).

The 2020 Karabakh war marked an apex in the development of the Baku-Ankara alliance, solidifying Ankara's influential position in all respects regarding the South Caucasus (Egeresi, 2022, p. 3–10.). Nonetheless, this does not alter the fact that Russia remains a key player in the region, possessing a broad array of instruments, particularly political and military ones.

The ceasefire and subsequent agreements underscore the need to acknowledge Ankara's presence in the South Caucasus (Biró, 2023, 284). On the one hand, Moscow appears to be taking Ankara's interests into account, empowering them to some extent (Erdoğan, Putin discuss Upper Karabakh, 2020). In September 2021, both armies also conducted military exercises just 300 meters from the Lachin corridor (Huseynov, 2021). President Aliyev, in the meantime, is keen on preserving Azerbaijan, with its predominantly Shiite population, as a secular state and preventing the spread of Sunni Islamist ideology or excessive Turkish dominance in Azerbaijan (Meister, 2021, 6).

The conflict in Ukraine in 2022 has also left its mark on the South Caucasus. It was clear that Russia's importance and power in the region was gradually diminishing, and the country was being squeezed out.

The aftermath of the one-day Karabakh war in 2023 also showed the growing regional importance of Azerbaijan. The reintegration of Karabakh paves the way for a link between the Zangezur Corridor and the Middle Corridor, which has broader geopolitical consequences (Al-Jazeera, 2023).

On the other hand, Azerbaijan and the EU have had a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in force since 1999. Negotiations for an enhanced agreement began in February 2017, although they have not yielded results thus far. The EU is Azerbaijan's primary trading partner, accounting for approximately 52% of the country's total trade in 2022, primarily due to its oil and gas exports to the EU (comprising nearly 4.1% of EU oil imports and around 3.7% of gas imports in 2022 by net mass). Azerbaijan commenced gas exports to the EU in December 2020, following the completion of the Southern Gas Corridor project. In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan expressed their intention to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor by 2027 (Reuters, 2023).

Azerbaijan's victory in the six-week war with Armenia over Karabakh launched in September 2020 further solidified President Aliyev's position. As a result of the ceasefire on 9 November, Azerbaijan regained control over territories neighbouring Karabakh that had been occupied by Armenian forces for over 26 years. This allowed hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people to contemplate future returns. Azerbaijan also took control of parts of Karabakh, a former autonomous region internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but inhabited by Armenians. In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a counter-terrorist operation, leading to the defeat of Armenian forces and ultimate dissolution of the self-proclaimed republic. Within days, the entire Armenian population, over 100,000 people, fled to Armenia from Karabakh (Al-Jazeera, 2023).

The EU actively participates in the efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly through the mediation of the President of the European Council. It emphasizes the need to mutually respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, define state borders. Since February 2023, European observers have been stationed in Armenia, although Azerbaijan has not consented to the deployment of EU observers on its border.

The Azerbaijani-French relationship significantly deteriorated in the aftermath of the Karabakh events due to a large Armenian diaspora in France (Pekçetin, 2023). In addition, Azerbaijan has favoured the EU negotiation track since 2021, but the negative reactions to the military operation seem to have prompted a reconsideration of its foreign policy.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan has sought to distance itself from Russia, presenting itself as a new energy partner for Europe. It has committed to delivering at least 20 billion cubic meters of gas annually to the EU by 2027 (O'Byrne, 2023). The revitalization of EU-Azerbaijan relations also led to the initiation of peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia, mediated by the EU and the US in parallel with the existing Russian-led framework.

Azerbaijan also collaborates with the Allies and other partner countries across various domains, including security and defence reform as well as counter-terrorism. Prioritizing support for the country's reform endeavours remains crucial.

Azerbaijan's association with NATO commenced in 1992, when Azerbaijan became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. This platform for dialogue was succeeded in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which unites all Allies and partner countries in the Euro-Atlantic region. Since Azerbaijan has a sustained interest in safeguarding critical energy infrastructure, particularly against terrorist threats, the Ministry of National Security has also partnered with NATO elements to establish an International Anti-Terrorism Training Centre (NATO, 2023). Enhancing access to information and raising public awareness regarding NATO and the advantages of NATO-Azerbaijan collaboration constitute another pivotal area of cooperation.

On the other hand, some NATO allies have shifted their attention to preparing Armenia and Azerbaijan for potential conflict following the attack on Karabakh (Marsden, 2023).

Washington has an opportunity to enhance its position in the region by acknowledging the new realities and actively contributing to a positive outcome of the peace dialogue between Yerevan and Baku. To achieve this, Washington should refrain from discussing Karabakh, recognize that Azerbaijan has restored its territorial integrity and sovereignty over the region, and bring a conclusive end to this matter.

### ***Armenia - in the face of adversity and difficulties***

Russia holds a unique position in Armenia's foreign and security policies, mirroring Armenia's distinctive role in Moscow's Caucasus policy. Post-Soviet relations between Russia and Armenia have been notably stable, characterized by continuous development. Primary areas of collaboration encompass security policies and economic cooperation, with partial engagement in cultural and humanitarian matters. The ongoing close ties are exemplified by consistent communication between Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and President Vladimir Putin (since 2018), along with regular dialogues between Foreign Ministers Sergei Lavrov (since 2004), Zohrab Hrachiki Mnatsakanyan (2018-2020), and his successor, Ararat Mirzoyan. In 2020, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, the two countries maintained good contact through meetings in Geneva, Moscow, and Yerevan, including 20 telephone consultations (Двусторонние отношения, 2022).

In particular, military-political collaboration with Russia is pivotal within Armenia's defence and security strategies. The presence of a Russian military base in Armenia and using Russian border guards contributes significantly to Armenia's defence along its borders with Türkiye and Iran. Armenia is an active founding member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the only representative of the organisation in the South Caucasus. Armenia's deep integration with Moscow is also underscored by its membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Eurasian Economic Union since 1991, gaining full membership in the latter in 2015 (СМОЛЬЕВ & ГУКАСЯН, 2018).

Furthermore, Russia stands as Armenia's primary investor and trading partner. Russian investments increased by one and a half times between 2017 and 2020, reaching USD 2.6 billion, predominantly in the energy and transport sectors (Sergey Minasyan, 2013). Armenia purchases natural gas from Russia at a preferential price of USD 165 per 1,000 m<sup>3</sup>, a substantial discount compared to the European rate of USD 2,100 per 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> (TASS, 2023). Key players in the Armenian energy sector include Russian companies such as Gazprom Armeni and Tashir (ЗАО Газпром Армения, 2023), the latter controlling electricity distribution systems (Ташир, 2023). Additionally, the Expo-Russia Armenia international

industrial exhibition in Yerevan in October 2022 (ZARUBEZH-EXPO, OJSC, 2023) indicates the strengthening trade and economic relations between the two nations.

In August 2021, the Armenian government unveiled its program for the period 2021-2026, outlining ambitious objectives for the country's peaceful, sustainable, and inclusive development. The plan includes a comprehensive economic reform program aimed at fostering a growth model driven by exports and investments (Экономика Армении вырастет на 5,5% в 2021 году – прогноз, 2021).

In addition, cultural and humanitarian cooperation has seen active development, with the preservation of historical memory playing a significant role. On 24 April, 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Armenia to participate in events commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian controversy. Moscow State University also established an outpost in Yerevan the same year, and Armenia maintains a strong interest in Russian-language higher education, evident in the significant number of Armenian students enrolled in Russian higher education institutions (Министерство иностранных дел, 2023).

Collaboration between the two Ministries of Culture is also vibrant in the cultural and humanitarian spheres. For example, the cooperation program for 2019-2021 was executed even amid the challenges posed by the pandemic (Министерство иностранных дел, 2023). Additionally, various cultural events, including those in the Armenian city of Goris, which was designated as the CIS Capital of Culture in 2018, are regularly organized to strengthen ties between the two nations.

As for Türkiye, it has maintained chilly relations with Armenia, except for a brief period of time. Türkiye recognized Armenia's independence at the close of the Soviet era and contemplated establishing diplomatic ties with Yerevan. However, these ties were short-lived. In 1993, as a show of solidarity with Azerbaijan, Türkiye closed its shared border with Armenia in protest against the Armenian occupation of Karabakh during the first and second Karabakh wars, causing a significant deterioration in Ankara-Yerevan relations (Tait, 2009).

When discussing Türkiye-Armenia relations, it is essential to consider the events that took place in 1915 within the Ottoman Empire. Armenia views the massacre of its population during World War I as genocide,

a stance that differs from the international community's perspective (De Waal, 2021). Türkiye rejects the genocide accusations, acknowledging abuses but vehemently disputing their extent (Palabıyık, 2017). Ankara also contextualizes the events within the Russian-Turkish wars, which affected all the involved parties.

Relations between the two countries improved somewhat in the 2000s, under the AKP government and Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" principle. Initiatives were taken in 2008 with the help of "football diplomacy," leveraging football matches between Türkiye and Armenia (Çaman & Akyurt, 2011, p. 57.). Turkish President Abdullah Gül and his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sarkisyan utilized these events to foster dialogue and normalize relations.

Nonetheless, the estrangement between the two countries deepened with the 2015 agreement between the Russian and Armenian defence ministers to establish a joint air defence system, which increased Russian influence in Armenia. Diplomatic relations showed no improvement in subsequent years, with Armenia condemning Türkiye's 2019 offensive in northeastern Syria (Statement by the MFA of Armenia on the military invasion by Türkiye in north-eastern Syria, 2019).

At the same time, recent developments indicate some progress in diplomatic relations. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced in December 2021 that special envoys from Türkiye and Armenia were expected to hold a first meeting in January 2022 to discuss steps toward normalization. Russia expressed support for the negotiations, emphasizing the global benefit of restoring neighbourly relations (Bir, 2021). Assessing the negotiation results in January 2022, Çavuşoğlu emphasized the confidence-building measures and the goal to strengthen relations (Daily Sabah, 2022). There were several additional meetings subsequent to this, and following each meeting, the parties involved released concise statements asserting that the normalization of relations would take place without any preconditions. The Armenian government, alongside a segment of the expert community and some political circles, appeared to embrace this narrative, expressing contentment that the process was advancing without prerequisites. Overall, significant breakthroughs and outcomes are yet to be realized (Poghosyan, 2023).

As for the European Union, Armenia's relations with the EU are based on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017 and fully implemented on 1 March, 2021. Replacing the previous 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, CEPA deepens bilateral relations in various areas while ensuring compatibility with Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (The EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement Enters Into Force | EEAS, 2021). The EU-27, accounting for approximately 16% of Armenia's total trade in 2022 (Armenia, 2023), is the country's second-largest trading partner after Russia. In May 2018, Armenia underwent a significant political change when peaceful street protests, known as the Velvet Revolution, brought opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan to power (Foster, 2019). The new government embarked on an ambitious reform program in line with EU values, focusing on the rule of law, transparency, and the fight against corruption.

Furthermore, actively engaged in efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan through the mediation of the President of the European Council. Since February 2023, the EU has deployed civilian observers along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border as part of the EU mission in Armenia (Mgdesyan, 2023). The EU also underscores its firm support for Armenia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democracy.

The relationship between Armenia and NATO commenced in 1992, when Armenia became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. This platform for dialogue was succeeded in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which convenes all Allies and partner countries in the Euro-Atlantic region. In addition, Armenia joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994, initiating bilateral cooperation (NATO, 2023).

While NATO does not play a direct role in the negotiations addressing the Karabakh conflict, the organization encourages all parties involved to persist in their endeavours toward a peaceful resolution. Since 2002, Armenia has been actively engaged in the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP), enhancing the capability of its forces to collaborate with NATO forces on various operations. A significant goal for Armenia involves ensuring democratic control over its armed forces, with NATO providing support for the integration of civilian personnel into the Armenian Ministry of Defence.

Armenia actively participates in NATO-led operations and collaborates with the Allies and other partner countries across various domains. A primary focus for NATO involves strengthening political dialogue and offering targeted advice and assistance to support Armenia's endeavours in democratic, institutional, and defence reforms. In 2008, Armenia became a part of NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) to reform its professional military education institutions (NATO, 2023). DEEP played a crucial role in shaping the Armenian Military Education Concept, developing specialized training courses and establishing the National Defence Research University in Yerevan. The Armenian Ministry of Defence also joined NATO's Building Integrity (BI) program in 2013. Following the completion of the NATO Self-Assessment and Peer Review Process, which commenced in 2014, Armenia is set to benefit from tailored support through NATO BI, aimed at enhancing good governance practices and reducing corruption risks within the defence sector (The Building Integrity Programme, 2023).

### ***Georgia - a multitude of questions, with positive developments***

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's relations with Georgia have been marked by challenges. The armed conflicts involving Georgia and Ossetia (1990-1992) and Georgia and Abkhazia (1992-1993) have played a significant role in the distancing of the once "brotherly" republic from Russia (ICG, 2004, Ачугба, 2007). Georgia adopted an anti-Russian policy closely tied to its approach of forcefully resolving conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After the Rose Revolution of 2003 (Дональд Рейфилд, 2017), Russian-Georgian relations in Georgia's history reached a low point under Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013) (Peimani, 2009). The 2008 Russo-Georgian war further deteriorated relations between the two countries (Речь Саакашвили на Генассамблее ООН смутила Россию, 2013), leading to the Georgian side severing diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation on 2 September, 2008 (Интерфакс, 2021). Thereafter, formal relations between Russia and Georgia were mediated by Swiss diplomats, with Georgian and Russian advocacy sections based in the respective Swiss embassy of Moscow and Tbilisi. In recent years, Georgia has pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, which has led to

a focus on the task of a close rapprochement with the EU and rapid integration into NATO (Зонова Т.В., 2007). In October 2010, Georgia also unilaterally announced the introduction of a visa-free regime for Russian citizens living in the North Caucasus republics of the Russian Federation without consulting Russia (Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2022).

On the other hand, Russia remains Georgia's second most important foreign trade partner in terms of bilateral trade volume (after Türkiye). This is reflected in the fact that trade between the two countries reached USD 1.33 billion in 2019, a 1.7-fold increase compared to 2014 (Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2022). In July 2014, Russia lifted almost all restrictions on Georgian imports, including a ban on importing a number of agricultural products (Проблемы в отношениях России и Грузии, 2019). This has boosted trade between the two countries. The main articles of Georgia's exports to Russia are ferroalloys, wine, and water. Russia exports oil products, gas, wheat, and coal to Georgia. Active foreign trade relations are also underpinned by the fact that Russia had become Georgia's leading exporter of coal by 2021 (Азербайджан вошел в топ-5 крупнейших экспортеров угля в Грузию, 2022).

On 9 March, 2018, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili expressed readiness to normalize bilateral relations with Moscow (TASS, 2018). However, after the 2018 elections, President Salome Zurbishvili rejected cooperation with Russia, considering it an enemy, and citing the issues in the breakaway regions and the conflict in Ukraine (Саломе Зурабишвили: не время дружить с Россией). Anti-Russian protests since the summer of 2019, initiated by the ruling party, have further strained this already challenging relationship (Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2023).

Despite these political tensions, cultural, sports, scientific, religious, and business relations between the two countries have experienced a revival. At the end of 2017, 939 Georgian citizens were studying in Russian educational institutions, with 330 funded from the federal budget and 609 on a contractual basis (ICG, 2018, p. 18).

As for Türkiye, Georgia's independence in 1991 facilitated positive relations between Ankara and Tbilisi. This relationship is crucial for Türkiye, as Georgia serves as a gateway to Central Asia and facilitates

the transportation of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea to the Turkish ports and the international markets (Göksel, 2013. 8). For Georgia, Türkiye is a gateway to Europe, particularly considering its aspirations for EU membership. Additionally, in the face of its conflicts with Russia, Georgia views Türkiye as a balancing regional power, essential for overcoming the economic challenges that have emerged since the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict (Otarashvili, 2013).

The change of power resulting from the 2003 Rose Revolution and Saakashvili's electoral setback in October 2012 did not have an adverse impact on the relations between Türkiye and Georgia (Balçı, 2014, p. 50). However, the periodically revived Russian-Turkish rapprochement has occasionally had a negative effect on Turkish-Georgian relations. Georgia's pro-Western policies and its approach to NATO complicate Türkiye's dual pursuit of amicable relations with both Russia and Georgia. The diplomatic initiative to establish the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which encourages regional actors to address regional issues, quickly revealed the limitations of Türkiye's influence in its immediate surroundings (Fotiou, 2009).

Another challenge in the Ankara-Tbilisi cooperation relates to religious matters. Georgians, particularly the influential Church of Georgia, resent the religious activities of certain Turkish groups in Georgia, especially in Ajaria (Balçı, 2014, p. 51). The construction of new mosques or the restoration of the older mosques abandoned during the Soviet era has been received poorly by some sections of the population, who perceive these as a threat to their Christian identity. One source of tension was the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi, which was restored by Türkiye as a symbol of the Ottoman past and Turkish presence in the area (Dispute about Aziziye Mosque, 2012). To address these tensions, Türkiye offered to restore old Georgian churches in Türkiye (Turkey renovating Georgian church, 2013).

While Tbilisi benefits significantly from diversifying its foreign policy, this also increases its dependence on both Ankara and Baku (Górecki & Chudziak, 2021, p. 4). Turkish capital notably prevails in certain parts of the country, which is evident in strategic facilities such as the Port of Batumi (European Commission, 2023) and the airports of Batumi and Tbilisi, operated by TAV Airports Holding (TAV Airports, 2023).

A protocol signed on 31 May, 2011 and effective since 10 December, 2011 enables Turkish and Georgian citizens to travel to each other's country with their national identity documents. Tourist data from the Georgian Statistical Office between 2018 and 2020 indicate that citizens of Azerbaijan were the primary visitors to Georgia, followed by Armenians and Russians, with Turkish citizens ranking fourth (Inbound Tourism - National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2022).

To further enhance bilateral relations, the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSC) mechanism was established. The first HLSC meeting was held in Ankara on 19 July, 2016, with the second round taking place in Tbilisi on 23 May, 2017 (Political Relations between Türkiye and Georgia, 2022). The third round is anticipated to take place in Türkiye. Ankara staunchly supports Georgia's territorial integrity, it does not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and hopes these conflicts can be peacefully resolved within the framework of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Additionally, Türkiye supports Georgia's efforts toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

Another significant aspect of the relationship is the return of Ahıska Turks to their homeland (Political Relations between Türkiye and Georgia, 2022). Türkiye is actively addressing this matter, aiming to remove the obstacles to the return process. Thousands of ethnic Georgians live in Türkiye, and a smaller number of Meshkheti Turks reside in Georgia (Minority Rights Group). Overall, despite the occasional disputes and disagreements, cooperation remains generally cordial due to the centuries-old historical and cultural ties between the two countries.

As for the EU, the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, entered into force in July 2016. Georgia has made significant efforts to align its legislation with EU standards, leading to visa liberalization for short stays in the Schengen Zone starting from March 2017. The EU is Georgia's primary trading partner, comprising approximately 21% of its total trade in 2021. The EU provides over EUR 100 million in technical and financial support to Georgia annually, focusing on economic development, good governance, freedom of movement, and education.

As part of Team Europe's efforts to assist partner countries in coping with the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, a tailored response package of EUR 183 million was offered to Georgia. This package

mobilizes a combination of existing and new resources to provide specific support to the people and strengthen Georgia's macro-financial stability (Together Against COVID-19 - EU for Georgia, 2022).

On the other hand, Georgia's political and media environment is characterized by sharp polarization. Moreover, questionable developments in recent years indicate a significant decline in democracy and a continuous undermining of civil liberties. These include widespread impunity for high-level corruption, instances of police violence, a persistent lack of independence and transparency in the judiciary, restrictions on media freedom, verbal and physical attacks on journalists and opposition media workers, and ongoing stigmatization (Georgia: Statement by the High Representative on the Adoption of the "Foreign Influence" Law | EEAS, 2023). Additionally, the 2018 presidential election, the 2020 parliamentary elections, and the 2021 local elections witnessed numerous irregularities and abuses (Georgia Parliamentary Elections 2020: OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report, 2021).

Faced with the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgians have placed their hopes on closer ties with the EU and NATO. The EU has reiterated its strong support for Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, as emphasized in the European Parliament resolution of 14 June, 2018, titled "Occupied territories of Georgia ten years after the Russian invasion (European Parliament - RC-B8-0275/2018, 2018)." The EU supports the efforts for conflict resolution through its Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, its observer mission, and instruments promoting stability and peace, complementing the international talks in Geneva. The annual strategic security dialogue between the EU and Georgia signals mutual trust in the relationship. Georgia has made significant contributions to several operations that fall under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy framework, based on the agreement on Georgia's participation that came into effect in 2014 (Strong Commitment: EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia Is the First CSDP Mission to Have Representation by All 28 Member States | EEAS, 2019). A negative development is that Georgian authorities have increasingly adapted to the Kremlin in recent years, which is evident in their refusal to join the EU sanctions against Russia and the re-launching of direct flights between Georgia and Russia.

Following Ukraine's urgent request to join the European Union in the face of the Russian invasion, Georgia submitted its application for candidate status on 3 March, 2022 through an expedited procedure, alongside the Republic of Moldova (EU enlargement policy, 2022). In line with the opinions issued by the European Commission and considering the alarming regression of democracy in recent years, the European Council decided on 23 June to only acknowledge the "European perspective" for Georgia, while Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova were granted candidate status.

The Georgian Parliament has established thematic working groups to address the 12 main priorities identified by the European Commission, initiating the process of addressing these issues. However, at the seventh meeting of the EU-Georgia Association Council held in Brussels on 6 September, 2022, the EU expressed serious concerns that there had been no significant progress in Georgia, and further negative developments were observed in terms of democratic norms and the rule of law (European Council, 2022).

On the other hand, Georgia stands as one of NATO's closest partners, aspiring to secure membership in the Alliance. Since 2008, the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) has provided a crucial framework for close political dialogue and cooperation, reinforcing the reform efforts and the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The journey toward eventual NATO membership is advanced through the formulation and execution of successive Annual National Programmes. A comprehensive range of practical cooperation has evolved between NATO and Georgia over time, actively supporting the country's reform initiatives and its ultimate goal of becoming a NATO member. Georgia actively participates in the NATO-led Operation Sea Guardian and collaborates extensively with the Allies and other partner nations (NATO - Allied Maritime Command, 2023).

In July 2018, heads of state and government convened with Georgia, adopting a declaration that commemorated the tenth anniversary of the NGC. At the 2022 Madrid Summit, the Allies endorsed a set of tailored support measures for Georgia, recognizing it as one of NATO's partners that is profoundly impacted in the current security landscape by external threats and interference stemming from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine (Nato, 2022).

Overall, alliance with the Western countries mainly serves security purposes for Georgia; aspects of Western culture have not gained traction in Georgia and are indeed facing some pushback.

## Conclusion

The South Caucasus stands as a geopolitical chessboard, where the major powers strategically position themselves to advance their interests in energy security, economic cooperation, and regional stability. The interplay of these powers, each with its unique set of objectives and historical ties, shapes the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, creating a dynamic and sometimes volatile arena of international competition and cooperation. The future of the region will undoubtedly be influenced by the evolving strategies and interactions of these great powers.

Furthermore, the South Caucasus is characterized by a delicate balance of power and complex relationships. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia navigate their ties with Russia, Türkiye, the EU, and the US, each pursuing national interests amidst regional challenges and global power dynamics. The ongoing quest for stability, economic development, and the resolution of conflicts will continue to shape the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus.

Overall, the region is a focal point for geopolitical competition, with the major powers vying for influence. Russia maintains its historical ties, Türkiye asserts itself culturally and economically, while the EU and the US aim to enhance regional stability, democracy, and economic development. The South Caucasus also serves as a crucial transit route for energy resources. Infrastructure projects (e.g. pipelines and transportation corridors) shape the geopolitical landscape and influence relations with external actors. For these reasons, the South Caucasus is increasingly recognised as an important region. The countries in the region have different characteristics and different power influences, therefore the question is how this region will make use of the opportunities of the near future.

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