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Sailing the South Caucasus through Troubled Waters towards Regional Integration

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Just like other parts of Eurasia,¹ the South Caucasus is facing a new breed of East-West geopolitical competition interwoven with three evolving challenges:² 1) a growing ideological gap between Russia and the West; 2) the chronic persistence of protracted conflicts; 3) the dilemma of the post-Soviet states: European vs. Eurasian integration.

More specifically, the South Caucasus geopolitical landscape is shaped by:

1. Geopolitical competition between Russia and the West in the wake of the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, which effectively brought the era of European cooperative security to an end.
2. Growing Russian regional assertiveness, whereby the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is increasingly used as a vehicle to counter strides towards European integration, while OSCE-led conflict resolution is manipulated to create geopolitical leverage over the regional states.
3. A tacit Russian-Turkish partnership of convenience, basically motivated by both parties' focus on different fronts: Russia is engaged in the geopolitical confrontation with the West over Ukraine, while Turkey has been absorbed by the fluid evolutions in the Middle East (particularly in Syria and Iraq).
4. The inability of the EU to exert, or at least claim, a bolder regional role because of its own institutional constraints and lack of appetite for new CSDP missions in the aftermath of the Euro crisis.
5. NATO's self-restrained regional role limited to soft security cooperation in the "28+1" format, driven by its refocus on deterrence and defense of the territory of its Eastern members against a resurgent Russia and the fact that the region is less of a strategic priority in the wake of unwinding the ISAF operation in Afghanistan.

Overall, the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West over Ukraine may have a negative impact on the South Caucasus: it may either freeze the current status quo, or it may push it into the whirlwind of instability around Ukraine. Two factors seem decisive for this analysis:

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¹ The term "Eurasia" is used hereafter to refer to the territory of the former Soviet Union, bar the Baltic states.

² For details see George V. Niculescu, "The Evolving Challenges in Eurasia," Brief Analysis, Center for East European and Asian Studies, 5 March 2013, available at <http://www.cseea.ro/publicatii/view/brief-analysis/the-evolving-challenges-in-eurasia>.

1. Russian progress in ensuring geopolitical control of Ukraine may rather tend to support the first option. Otherwise, faced with a stalemate in Ukraine, Moscow might have to deal with a strategic dilemma: either expand its confrontation with the West in the South Caucasus or reinforce the status quo to avoid annoying Turkey and prevent it from taking action.
2. Turkish tacit acceptance of Russian incursions in Ukraine may also favor the status quo in the South Caucasus, while Ankara's brazen reaction—via NATO or directly—may dramatically raise the risk of instability in the South Caucasus.

Against this complex and deeply worrying regional background, where Russia and Turkey (re)emerge as the dominant regional powers, what strategic policy changes might Western decision makers envisage consolidating their position as a viable South Caucasus player? From a methodological perspective, I address these questions through the lens of the evolving challenges in Eurasia.

Unresolved European Security Issues Linger

The geopolitical competition between Russia and the West became predictable after President Vladimir Putin stated in April 2005: "Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory."³ The seeds of the new confrontation were planted into those words, while alluding to both the goal and the strategy of the new Russian resurgence.

However, this statement came after two rounds of NATO enlargement (1997 and 2004) and after the Big Bang enlargement of the European Union (2004). Moreover, it came after the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, and brought pro-Western leaders into top state positions seeking NATO and EU membership for their countries. In response, Russia suspended the implementation of the CFE Agreement from 2007, while in the summer of 2008 it fought and won the Five-Day War against Georgia. Afterwards, Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia's "independence." The Russian-Georgian War was Russia's reaction to NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit decision to recognize Georgia and Ukraine as aspirants for NATO membership.

Both the suspension of the implementation of the CFE Treaty as well as the recognition of the independence of the Georgian breakaway republics enshrined a very clear geopolitical message from Moscow: Russia was not happy with the current European security arrangements built around the OSCE Decalogue and it no longer felt obliged to fulfill its commitments. In 2009 the Russian president at the time, Dmitry Medvedev,

³ Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," 25 April 2005, The Kremlin, Moscow, available at http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml.

came up with a proposal to discuss a new European Security Treaty, allegedly aiming to create a common undivided space in the Euro-Atlantic region to finally do away with the Cold War legacy. To that end, Medvedev suggested formalizing the principle of indivisible security in international law as a legal obligation pursuant to which no nation or international organization operating in the Euro-Atlantic region was entitled to strengthen its own security at the expense of others (nations or organizations). Eventually, the West rejected this Russian proposal as it felt it might have prohibited future enlargements of NATO and the EU.

In that very same year, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership, aiming to create the conditions to accelerate the political association and further economic integration of six partner countries from Eurasia. This EU initiative has been perceived by the Russians firstly as a geopolitical process because of the wide-ranging consequences of what the EU thought was a purely technical, norm-setting process of modernization and, secondly, it was seen as a competitor to the Eurasian integration in the former Soviet space.

In December 2013, after the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit where former president Yanukovych refused at the last minute to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, the Ukrainian crisis began. Following the Euromaidan protests of pro-Western Ukrainians and the unexpected ousting of Yanukovych by the Ukrainian Rada, Moscow quietly annexed Crimea. It has also stirred up and supported pro-Russian insurgents in Eastern Ukraine to the outright dismay of the West, which responded with waves of economic and political sanctions. At present, the area from Vancouver to Vladivostok has been overtaken by a new East-West geopolitical competition, while *Realpolitik* rather than cooperative security seems to prevail in shaping the future fate of Eurasia.

The Ideological Gap between Russia and the West

Over the last few years, many international observers have noted a widening gap between perceptions in the West and in Russia regarding democracy and individual rights and freedoms. Russia and the West seem to have embarked on another ideological competition in many respects similar to that of the Cold War. The difference is that Moscow now supports a sort of a mixture of state-based nationalism and autocratic traditionalism to counter Western support for democracy and individual freedoms across Eurasia. Others bluntly refer to the current dominant Russian ideology as “anti-Americanism.”

Not only has Russia gone in the wrong direction in terms of sustaining the values of democracy and individual rights and freedoms, but may also have projected a negative influence beyond its borders:

With Russia setting the tone, Eurasia (consisting of the countries of the former Soviet Union minus the Baltic states) now rivals the Middle East as one of the most repressive areas on the globe. Indeed, Eurasia is in many respects the world’s least free sub-region, given the entrenchment of autocrats in most of its 12 countries.⁴

⁴ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2013: Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance,” available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2013>.

The 2013 presidential election in Georgia boasted Eurasia's best rankings on Freedom House's Freedom in the World scale,⁵ earning a "Partly Free" status and scoring a 3 for both political and civil rights (on a scale of 7, 1 being the highest score). It was widely regarded as fair and honest, marking a further step toward the consolidation of democracy. Meanwhile, under strong Russian political pressure, Armenia gave up its plans to initial an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU and decided to join the Eurasian Customs Union instead. It has kept the same "Partly Free" status and scores for political and civil rights from the previous years (5 and 4, respectively). Moreover, Azerbaijan again received a "Not Free" status because of low political rights scores (6 on a scale of 7) and its civil liberties rating, which declined from 5 to 6, due to property rights violations and crackdowns on opposition and civil society in light of the presidential elections.

Under the mildly Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey, like Russia, shares a certain incompatibility with European democratic values. While the early 2000s provided hopes for the supporters of democracy and individual rights and freedoms in Turkey, tightly linked to the strong drive towards Europeanization, recent years have seen a reversal of that trend: "Turkey has experienced marked deterioration on some central pillars supporting a balance of power, such as the media and the judiciary."⁶ The Turkish commitment to democratic principles and to European integration has significantly declined among most political forces as well as in the public opinion. Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that Turkish leaders do not consider themselves Western, neither in terms of managing domestic affairs, nor in foreign policy matters. Yet the huge distinction between Moscow and Ankara's attitudes towards the West is that while Moscow pursues conflicting positions against the West almost every time, Ankara proves more pragmatic: in contrast to Russia, Turkey is "a power with which the West can work. [...] [although] whenever Turkey and the West do cooperate, it will be because their interests happen to align rather than as a result of shared values."⁷

The current geopolitical competition between Russia and the West is likely to worsen the state of democracy in the South Caucasus in the years to come. That might be the case, as "Russia's intervention in Ukraine, which amounts to acts of war, openly flaunts the principles on which the post-Cold War order in Europe is based, posing a challenge both to the European Union and the United States. A winner-take-all approach undermines the prospect of establishing functioning liberal democracies around the EU's periphery."⁸ Moreover, "as a consequence of placing security and stability high on the

⁵ Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2014," available at www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2014.

⁶ Diba Nigar Göksel, "Turkey and the EU: What Next?" The German Marshall Fund of the United States, "On Turkey" series, 5 December 2012.

⁷ Svante Cornell, Gerald Knaus, and Manfred Scheich, *Dealing with a Rising Power: Turkey's Transformation and Its Implications for the EU* (Brussels: Centre for European Studies, 2012).

⁸ Michael Leigh, "A Strategy for Europe's Neighborhood," The German Marshall Fund of the United States, *Europe Program Policy Brief* 1:1 (September 2014).

agenda of ENP countries, the Ukraine crisis has also pushed democracy and democratization lower on the list of their priorities.”⁹

Other factors are also likely to affect democracy in the South Caucasus. For example, the EU’s prolonged economic crisis and preoccupation with its own future has dimmed its appeal as a model to many in the East European neighborhood. Other external influences, including intolerant forms of religious activism and extreme nationalism fed by the persistence of protracted regional conflicts, are increasingly shaping the policies of regional states. In addition, the Russian propaganda machine emphasizes “the misgivings” of Western societies and the pains and sacrifices a country needs to make in order to join the West, while “Russia’s penetrating, vivid messages are ineffectively counteracted by the boring, vague responses of European and national governments.”¹⁰

Consequently, if it continues with its current policy of unabatedly emphasizing the conditionality of stronger engagement with regional actors from the democracy status, the West risks excluding itself from Eurasia as “the odd boy in town.” It is increasingly obvious that, under these circumstances, promoting liberal democratic standards for political rights in the South Caucasus might become a liability for the West, as they would heavily undermine its leverage in shaping regional engagements. To maintain its position in South Caucasian affairs, the West should probably tone down its criticism of the “undemocratic governance systems” and replace it with a pragmatic goal of defending regional economic and security interests. Maintaining a minimal standard for the observation of civil rights may offer a face-saving solution for how to respond to previous commitments. That would also imply seeking new regional arrangements according to common interests, not necessarily based on the acceptance of common values. For example, enhancing the level of engagement with Azerbaijan may be required to consolidate regional governance in the South Caucasus.

A multipolar approach to broader Eurasian geopolitics might also be needed, as the decline of Western influence in the world could weaken the parameters of global stability in the coming years. Promoting the universalism of Western values could possibly further accelerate such negative changes. It is quite likely that sharing democratic values would make it possible to preserve the current Western alliances, while a pragmatic approach to democratic values may attract new allies and break potential anti-Western alliances. The leverage created by sustaining increased regional involvement in Eurasia by Iran, India and China, aside from Russia and Turkey, should be also considered from this perspective.

The Resolution of Protracted Conflicts

The unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus (in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh) are undermining efforts to build up effective regional cooperation and generating regional instability as well as asymmetric security risks. The existing conflict

⁹ Alina Inayeh, Daniela Schwarzer, and Joerg Forbrig, eds., *Regional Repercussions of the Ukraine Crisis* (Washington D.C.: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.

management mechanisms have not yielded the expected outcomes, which may have rather a lot to do with the lack of regional strategic leadership. In a plea for better coordinated strategic leadership of the existing crisis management mechanisms, international experts have been calling on Russia, the United States and Europe to reenergize conflict resolution in the Euro-Atlantic area. To that end, developing new means to strengthen diplomacy, supplementing traditional negotiations with contributions by civil society and building up public support for peaceful conflict resolution are often favored as examples.

Over the last decade, Turkish foreign policy, crafted by current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, shifted towards engaging in all neighboring areas as a means of gaining recognition as simultaneously a European, Middle Eastern, Balkan, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf and Black Sea power. In fact, these multiple regional identities have driven Turkey towards a multifaceted foreign policy aiming “to promote good neighborly relations with all, to replace disagreement with cooperation, to seek innovative mechanisms and channels to resolve regional conflicts, to encourage positive regional change, and to build cross-cultural bridges of dialogues and understanding.”¹¹ In the view of many experts, Turkey may deserve a bolder regional role in resolving the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus. On the other hand, Turkey has only been marginally involved in conflict resolution so far, partly to protect its strategic partnership with Russia from potential contentious issues and partly because Turkish involvement was not welcome by some local, regional and international actors.

Russia has become a problem for Europe since the OSCE system failed to achieve its goals in the post-Cold War era, while Moscow has sought to impose its own security arrangements on Europe. It was NATO and the EU that brought peace to former Yugoslavia, while the OSCE has continuously failed to bring up conflict resolution in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. Moscow has simply ignored the OSCE Decalogue in Ukraine/Crimea and in Georgia while seeking to justify itself by alluding to others who have previously done the same (e.g. NATO in Kosovo).

The chronic persistence of the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus (and in Transnistria) might also be seen as Russia’s refusal to accept the OSCE rules. A parallel can be drawn between the ongoing Ukrainian crisis and the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and Transnistria. In all these cases, Russia tacitly prevented a peaceful solution to the conflicts, while formally playing the role of a peacemaker/provider of humanitarian relief. Moscow may continue to do so until a more favorable geopolitical configuration of the European security system is agreed upon with the West. Otherwise, it may implement the policy of the *fait accompli*, whereby it may solve the protracted conflicts on its own terms, irrespective of what the OSCE and its other members say or do. The Russians have already played out this scenario in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine and may apply it in the South Caucasus as well. However, “The region e.g. the Eastern

¹¹ Valeria Giannotta, “Turkish Foreign Policy Evolution and Goals under the AKP Government,” *Balkananalysis.com*, 19 January 2012, available at <http://www.balkananalysis.com/turkey/2012/01/19>.

Partnerships area) requires security architecture that takes the current challenges into consideration, and demands determined action by the West towards solutions to the frozen conflicts.”¹² Therefore, the West might take a more proactive and imaginative role in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. For example, it may consider initiating multilateral talks with the authorities from Sukhumi, Tskhinvali and Tbilisi about options for conditional recognition of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while more boldly proposing the use of the EU’s military peacekeeping assets and capabilities for conflict resolution in the South Caucasus.

Conflict resolution in the South Caucasus might actually become a test case for developing new European security rules and mechanisms, which could integrate Russia and Turkey in a different way than since the end of the Cold War. In this vein, the West should work more actively with both Russia and Turkey on resolving the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus with the goal of overcoming the chronic deadlock that has persisted since the end of the Cold War. A multilateral approach could ensure better regional strategic coordination of the existing crisis management mechanisms, strengthen the regional ownership of the peace processes, in particular through developing and implementing a joint post-conflict regional vision, and even counter the fears of Russian-imposed solutions harbored by some local actors.

However, the way forward to meet such a goal may not be an easy ride given Russia’s failure to adapt its conflict resolution policies to multilateral approaches, particularly in Georgia. The road is steep in light of Turkey’s unresolved issues with some of the main parties of the protracted conflicts, most notably with Armenia. Furthermore, current U.S. foreign policy attaches a relatively low priority to conflict resolution in the South Caucasus and the EU has institutional constraints regarding its involvement in conflict management and resolution in its neighborhoods and is unable “to carry out a wider range of military tasks to protect its interests and project its values.”¹³

The European vs. Eurasian Integration Dilemma of the Post-Soviet States

The steps taken by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan to create a Eurasian integration process have spurred suspicions in the West about an emerging geopolitical project aiming to rebuild the Soviet Union (or the Czarist Empire) into a new institutional outfit. Consequently, a Western myth of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as a means to “re-Sovietize” Eurasia has emerged. This interpretation has not been supported by the reality of the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) so far. However, according to most experts, the EEU project might be evolving towards deeper political integration:

Nonetheless, events between the invasion of Georgia and the armed seizure of Ukrainian territory in 2014 forced policy makers and international affairs specialists worldwide to acknowledge the possibility that the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin has reorganized its entire foreign and domestic policy in order to pursue a single

¹² Inayeh, et al., *Regional Repercussions*.

¹³ Daniel Keohane, “Strategic Priorities for EU Defence Policy,” *FRIDE Policy Brief* No. 146 (2013).

objective, namely, the establishment of a new kind of union comprised of former Soviet republics and headed by Russia itself.¹⁴

In addition, experts have highlighted a blatant incompatibility between the DCFTA agreements, signed by the EU and a number of post-Soviet states, and the commitments that should be made by members of the ECU (the current precursor to the EEU). This incompatibility is apparently posing a dilemma to the post-Soviet states between setting up free trade with the EU and joining the ECU/EEU, while causing both Russia and the West to focus on geopolitical competition.

Turkey has a unique position regarding European integration and trading with Russia: on the one hand, Ankara is locked into a customs union with the European Union, though its prospects to become a full-fledged member anytime soon are rather minimal. On the other hand, Turkey has developed a vibrant economic and trade relationship with Russia over the last decade. Bilateral trade relations have increased by a factor of seven since 2001, making Russia Turkey's second-largest trade partner after the EU. Ankara has had no better policy choice than being a core promoter of regional economic integration, and has struggled to make the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) an effective tool to achieve that goal. Over the last year or so, Turkey went further in getting closer to Russia in terms of economic association. In November 2013, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asked President Putin for help in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Furthermore, in June 2014, Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, publicly invited Turkey to become a member of the EEU. This invitation, issued by the political figure who 20 years ago first proposed the Eurasian economic integration project, might have been motivated by the need to acquire an external guarantee that the EEU would not evolve into the precursor of a new Russian empire. In an indirect response to this invitation, in July 2014, during bilateral talks with his Russian counterpart in the margins of the G20 trade ministers meeting in Sydney (Australia), Turkish Economic minister Nihat Zeybekçi suggested establishing a Free Trade Zone between Turkey and the EEU. Expert discussions on this proposal may already be underway as of last September.

The South Caucasus countries have been highly divided in their approach to the European vs. Eurasian integration dilemma and the current geopolitical competition between Russia and the West has pushed them into making undesired choices. The first "victim" was Armenia.

The announcement of Armenia's decision to join the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) by President Serzh Sargsyan in Moscow at the beginning of September 2013, following the conclusion of a lengthy four-year negotiation with the EU on an Association Agreement and a DCFTA, took many by surprise. However, experts on the South Caucasus had known for years that Yerevan had almost irremediably linked its security and economy, and particularly its energy sector, to Russia. In fact, Armenia

¹⁴ S. Frederic Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2014).

chose to partially sacrifice its independence and sovereignty for the sake of keeping a convenient *status quo* in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict against a shifting strategic balance in favor of Azerbaijan. One year later, on 10 October 2014 at a summit held in Minsk (Belarus), President Sargsyan signed Armenia's accession treaty to the EEU. However, Yerevan has continued to pursue European integration, while taking into account its new trade commitments by seeking to conclude an Association Agreement Light, or a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Plus.

While Armenia joined the EEU, becoming what experts call a "reluctant follower" of the Eurasian integration project, Georgia has chosen the path to European integration at the expense of Eurasian integration. On 27 June 2014, the prime minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, signed an Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU, thereby joining, besides Ukraine and Moldova, what experts call the "European integrators" group. Although the Association Agreements fall short of guaranteeing future membership in the EU, they aim to deepen EU's political and economic relations with the Eastern Partners, and to gradually integrate these countries into the EU's internal market.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan seems to have sided with the so-called "rejectionists" group (including also Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), who simply prefer to stay away from any form of regional integration, seeking instead to become increasingly self-reliant. Economic analyses are practically unanimous in noting that due to the structure of the Azerbaijani economy, mainly fueled by energy exports to Europe, "the negatives [consequences of EEU membership] outweigh the positives." Even semi-official Russian analysts have acknowledged this, with one noting that "if Azerbaijan joins the Customs Union, that it is jointly with Turkey and this will not happen soon because of the nature of the Azerbaijani economy."¹⁵ However, one Azerbaijani expert finds that "A stronger Russia than in the 1990s may further enhance its geopolitical clout in various, subtle ways so as to develop and execute problem-solving scenarios that would gratify not only Russia's interests but also the entire post-Soviet neighborhood. Such a move could urge CIS political leaders to accept [the] Kremlin's rules and eventually integrate their countries into a Eurasian Union."¹⁶ Such views clearly refer to the West's inability to offer viable solutions to the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus, specifically in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, while Russia seems able (but not yet willing) to manipulate both Baku and Yerevan into a peaceful settlement. This strengthens the case for proactive Western involvement in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus.

The West may begin to lay the foundations for sustaining post-conflict regional economic cooperation in the South Caucasus, while "in its relationships with its Eastern partners, the EU should avoid imposing a choice between itself and Moscow, and should

¹⁵ E. Ismayilov, "Russia Expects Azerbaijan's Accession to Eurasian Customs Union Jointly with Turkey," *Trend*, 11 October 2013, available at <http://en.trend.az/capital/business/2200218.html>; and Starr, et al., *Putin's Grand Strategy*.

¹⁶ Elkhan Nuriyev, "How the West Helps Putin Fulfill His CIS Strategy," *Moscow Times*, 6 April 2014, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/how-the-west-helps-putin-fulfill-his-cis-strategy/497604.html>.

instead highlight the benefits of closer relations.”¹⁷ This way, it may both circumvent the dilemma of European vs. Eurasian integration and make a significant contribution to the peaceful resolution of the protracted conflicts. A vision for peace in the South Caucasus reinforced by comprehensive, integrated and sustainable cooperation would ultimately enable the free movement of people, goods, services and capital at the regional level. It may also lead to economic integration and the opening of all closed borders. The EU may specifically work towards developing options for harmonizing the European and Eurasian integration normative systems, building upon Turkey’s interest to maintain Free Trade Areas with both the EU and the EEU, and on Armenia’s desire, as a new member of the EEU, to keep the door open for broader cooperation with the EU. Georgia and Azerbaijan may also support this vision, provided they see it as a key element eventually leading to the resolution of the protracted conflicts within their territories.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, the South Caucasus has sailed in both turbulent and uncharted waters. The countries of the region have been deeply divided in their priorities for regional integration. The current geopolitical competition between Russia and the West has raised the stakes for the region’s future and added new political, economic and security risks, challenges and opportunities. This article has pointed to some of them, while suggesting ways for the West to help these countries decrease risks, face challenges and benefit from opportunities.

It is becoming increasingly clear that in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, the West will seek to prevent Russian attempts to “re-Sovietize” Eastern Europe and Central Asia by an emerging strategy of “containing Eurasian integration.” The defense aspects of this strategy became apparent at the NATO Summit in Newport in early September 2014. With the reversal of Armenia’s European integration efforts and its subsequent integration with the EEU, the South Caucasus has become a contested area. Consequently, guidelines for containing Eurasian integration in the South Caucasus could emerge rather soon.

The main points of this paper suggested that the focus of a new Western strategy on the South Caucasus should take a constructive, power-sharing approach. From this perspective, the resolution of the protracted conflicts should become a key Western priority. Such an approach might, on the one hand, halt Russian geopolitical games in the region and, on the other hand, may open the door to developing new European security rules and mechanisms in the OSCE area. To that end, a more proactive and imaginative role of the West should be considered for engaging both Russia and Turkey in effective conflict resolution. For example, the West could lay the foundations for sustaining post-conflict regional economic cooperation in the South Caucasus as a way to circumvent the dilemma of the post-Soviet states caught in-between competing European and Eurasian integration processes. In order to maintain its relevance in Eurasia, the West

¹⁷ Inayeh, et al., *Regional Repercussions*.

might also need to tone down criticism of regional players' "undemocratic governance systems," while proposing a minimal standard for civil rights. Instead, it may rather pragmatically defend its regional economic and security interests by seeking new regional arrangements according to common interests and not necessarily common values.

To what extent the West, Turkey and Russia are prepared for constructive power-sharing rather than competitive approaches to the South Caucasus is unclear at this stage. As history has proven, decision makers often find competition more attractive than cooperation, as the latter implies partially giving in to some objectives to enable compromise. What is often forgotten, though, is that the risk of losing everything through competition is much higher than the risk of losing something through cooperation. Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a crisis or even a war to find out the different amplitudes of said risks. It is for the Western, Turkish and Russian leaders to decide what would be the best political choice not only for their people, but also for the Caucasian states as well.

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