

Building Confidence in the South Caucasus: Strengthening the EU's and NATO's Soft Security Initiatives

Policy Recommendations¹

Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus

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Current Events in the South Caucasus

The local arms race between Armenia and Azerbaijan is preventing the respective governments from addressing critical social issues. For the moment, the Azerbaijani economy still enjoys the windfall of oil and gas revenue, but this situation cannot endure as reserves will begin to dwindle. There is virtually no contact between the two countries besides meeting of their presidents under Russian auspices or in the framework of different conflict workshops (some of them however years ago). The recent Armenian Parliamentary elections have not produced appreciable change; however, opposition is steadily mounting, and new political actors seem undeterred even by threats.

The recent election of Ivanishvili as Prime Minister of Georgia seems to have provided the grounds for maintaining the goal of Western integration in parallel with improved relations with Russia. Ivanishvili's control of parliament is partial; his Georgian Dream coalition has won 85 of 150 available seats; Presidential elections are due in October 2013. Saakashvili's political fortunes have been severely reversed since the election of Ivanishvili, who has undertaken a massive anti-corruption drive. The new government faces still difficulties, is confronted with a volatile situation and must be thus pragmatic: improving Russia-Georgia relations as well as relations with breakaway

entities while at the same time maintaining a Euro-Atlantic agenda. In this latter objective, the government has elected an approach that emphasises process as opposed to status. The government seeks to "be as close as possible" to NATO and EU membership, but there is the acknowledgement that if membership is not offered, at least the process of reform will have been beneficial to Georgian society.



The renaming of the Georgian "Ministry of Reintegration" to that of "Reconciliation" is a concrete step in the framework of the newfound pragmatism (law still to be signed by President Saakashvili). This may re-open the door to the possibility of new relations between Tbilisi and

its breakaway entities (especially Abkhazia). If not, then new concepts of relations will have to be entertained, which respect Georgia's territorial integrity, and ensure Abkhaz development and safety. There is little likelihood that additional countries will recognize Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence, which will mean that their citizens will remain in legal limbo. As this will generate pressure on the regions' leadership, there may be an opportunity developing for solving the issue of separatism constructively. The idea of a new concept of "shared sovereignty" could very well emerge in future discussions between Tbilisi and its breakaway entities.

Taking Stock of EU and NATO Confidence-building Initiatives

When taking stock of the soft-security activities of the EU and NATO, the RSSC Study Group found that there was lack of public awareness of available programs and activities of both organizations. This is of central importance: the greater the awareness, the greater is the trust in the institutions. There is a need to raise awareness especially of the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office. EU Special Representative Ambassador Lefort is the figurehead of all EU efforts, and works bilaterally without getting too deeply involved in the domestic politics of the countries.

The EU has affected a significant rapprochement in the region, mainly through Georgia, and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which expresses a sense of "belonging" of Georgia to the European space, and strong connections that have a security bearing. As a new institution, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office constitutes a platform of European NGOs, networks of NGOs and think tanks which are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict. The EU is seen as a united and unifying institutional actor, but the test case for its credibility as stabilizing influence rests with the South Caucasus region.

There is a moderate regional desire to get closer to the Euro-Atlantic structures, even if membership is not clearly possible or desired. Visa liberalization can be seen as a critical component to break the isolation of the South Caucasus. This is an issue that is held in common with the South East European experience, and it is a demand that is well known to EU and NATO authorities. The EU's Eastern Partnership Programme could ease visa requirements for South Caucasus residents.

This suggestion supports the notion of enhancing educational and cultural exchanges between the South Caucasus and Euro-Atlantic states, and also within the South Caucasus itself.

In this regard, the activity of some organizations in the region imply that the development of a common history

curriculum or policies oriented towards mutual cultural property protection could contribute to rehabilitating mutual favorable images of the societies involved in the conflicts. In that last regard, the work of some organizations in the region argue that the development of a common history curriculum or policies oriented towards mutual cultural property protection would contribute to rehabilitate the image of the communities of the region towards one another.

On the whole, the EU's and NATO's soft security initiatives are being applauded, even where there are no hard security guarantees through NATO. IPAP and PARP, despite offering limited tools, represent the political weight of the Alliance in the region by the potential for security guarantees. Far more effective and useful are the efforts at public diplomacy deployed by the Alliance. With NATO, public diplomacy is the most effective soft-security tool.



Regional Cooperation Initiatives: Breaking Isolation from Within

Renewed attention was given to the work of the Minsk Group, arguing that there was a cruel need to review and expand its mandate. The escalation of the "sniper war" which is not included in the 1994 cease-fire agreement, threatens to destabilize the situation, and is a topic that should be within the OSCE's purview of the Minsk Group. The activities of the Minsk Group seemed limited to periodical meetings, interspersed with occasional press releases or communiqués. Although it is widely acknowledged that diplomacy requires tranquility and privacy to be effective, openness may invite distracting media attention. Greater transparency on the part of the Minsk Group and the OSCE was desired.

The necessity exists to widen commercial transit networks, especially for oil and gas. The Minsk Group could entertain the connection of Armenia to the wider network of

oil and gas transit in the region, though Armenia seems to be incorporated into the Iranian energy system to a great extent.

Breaking isolation in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian cases requires a legislative review of the Georgian law on occupied territories, which makes it difficult for constituents of the breakaway entities to interact overtly with the rest of Georgia. The predominant theme is the necessity to widen the Minsk Group's mandate and make its activities more transparent. Incentives with enhancing educational activities, which incorporate an access to Europe, are a matter of individual choice, not only national integration with European norms.



Going forward: Generating Incentives and Motives for Cooperation

The Georgian-Russian relations have improved considerably since the October 2012 in Georgia, reflected in the positive media attention of Georgia in the Russian press. Two potential areas of closer cooperation between Georgia and Russia are tourism and educational exchanges. These might be later on followed by intensified exchanges in trade, media and cultural programmes.

Areas of common security interests such as emergency management cooperation can act as levers towards positive spill-over effects, producing incentives for cooperation in the medium term. Common economic challenges, such as opening the region of Nagorno-Karabakh for transit of oil (see above) and railways could also stimulate dialogue. Renewed emphasis on the importance of supporting civil society in the region was stressed, including the delegation of independent civil society search for mutually acceptable solutions. This prospect applies especially to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; however, civil society in Azerbaijan might as yet be unable to consider such a role for itself. In this context, the EU will focus on the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement as an incentive for cooperation, an initiative that followed the general public will. In the security realm, ideas pertaining to hard-security

initiatives, but focusing on mutual threats and risks of an objective nature (as opposed to the security dilemmas at work in the region) have been put forward. Contact could be encouraged on security-relevant topics that affect the whole region's significance for other actors. For example, in the domain of emergency management, discussions could take place in a spirit of "cold cooperation" over the need to mitigate against natural disasters. These are initiatives that could take place under the aegis of NATO Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Committee (EADRCC). Not only does it give the Alliance a positive role in the region that is not offensive to Russia, but it also puts it in the position of honest broker on several security-relevant issues, while at the same time addressing interests that are mutual to all three countries.

Summary of Recommendations²

1. Focus on Strengthening Civil Society Initiatives

It is preferable to generate change from the grass roots than from the elite level. This does not mean however, that official channels of communication, say, between the OSCE and the respective regional actors, or institutional processes, such as PARP and IPAP for NATO, should be abandoned. Nor does it mean, and the RSSC Study Group insists on this, that civil society support should aim at regime change or interference in national affairs.

The EU and NATO are urged to multiply opportunities for regional grass roots and sub-governmental involvement in cultural protection and education. The aim of such initiatives would be to improve the public image of communities in conflict and break the cycle of prejudice. On the other hand, the point of "mutual cultural protection", which could take the form of exchanges between communities, would be to demonstrate the respective governments' good faith when it comes to minority relations or relaxation of tensions.

2. Strengthen EU and NATO Soft-Security through Awareness-Raising of Soft-Security Initiatives

While the case for increasing OSCE/Minsk Group transparency has been made above, the significant successes of the EU and NATO programmes should be publicised more fully in the region.

The RSSC Study Group recommends that NATO increase funding and attention for public diplomacy initiatives in order to increase its already high level of effectiveness, and welcomes the addition of voluntary national contribution (VNC) positions at the NATO Liaison Office in Tbilisi. In particular, opportunities for funding through the NATO Science for Peace programme should be publicised more in the region. An interesting idea to explore could be how to make

IPAP reforms consistent with CSTO (not NATO) membership. The results of such an enquiry could spell the beginning of rapprochement between NATO and the CSTO, as well as NATO and Russia. More importantly, making IPAP reforms consistent with CSTO membership, albeit laborious, could also provide for wider defence transformation in the region and beyond.

From the EU side, one can only applaud the creation of a European Peacebuilding Liaison Office, but its work and impact need to be made manifest in the region. The EU approach should demonstrate greater reliance on empathy. For example, mediation should take place in acknowledgement of the security concerns of the parties, even if at the same time the EU insists on non-recognition of breakaway entities.



3. Focus on Process, not Status

NATO and the EU are attractive to the region, but for any integration (however defined) to take place, there needs to be a convergence of values. To realise this aim a number of methods have been put forward by the participants;

- a. The countries in conflict should de-link issues; EU and NATO would be well-advised to provide incentives for this approach. Starting a comprehensive dialogue on post-conflict scenarios involving joint regional energy and infrastructure projects among interested businesses and experts would be a step in the right direction. Economic incentives could better work in case the EU undertook a bolder role in conflict management building upon a new vision for peace in the South Caucasus reinforced by comprehensive, integrated and sustainable cooperation enabling free movement of people, goods, services and capital at the regional level, which would ultimately lead to economic integration and the opening of all closed borders. For example, the EU may bring the powerful message of focusing creative energies on fostering regional economic cooperation, rather than striving to maintain an unacceptable status quo or threatening the use of force.
- b. Commit to conditionality. When engaging with the countries in the region, EU and NATO should make clear that there is something to lose in non-cooperation.
- c. Develop a balanced approach in regard to youth in the entire region. Youth in the South Caucasus are flexible and open to new ideas as are youth all over the world. However, youth in the South Caucasus are still influenced by indirect memories about the conflict and the enemy images existing in each society involved in the conflicts. It is important to overcome the image of the enemy in regard to the “other” party to the conflict. It is necessary to create frameworks for their involvement, communication, and cooperation in different inter- and intraregional programs. These programs could provide greater understanding and instill empathy across these groups.
- d. Engage in “cold cooperation”. Opportunities for positive spill-over effects in the security realm can be triggered by each country identifying areas of common interest. EU and NATO involvement could be secured to permit cooperation on those areas, breaking the cycle of mistrust.

1. These Policy Recommendations reflect the findings of the 7th RSSC workshop on “Building Confidence in the South Caucasus: Strengthening the EU’s and NATO’s Soft Security Initiatives” convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus” from 14 – 17 March 2013 in Tbilisi, Georgia. The event was co-hosted by the Austrian National Defence Academy, the Directorate General for Security Policy at the Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports and the Georgian Ministry of Defence. They were prepared by Frederic Labarre, RSSC Co-chair, valuable support came from Ernst M. Felberbauer and Edona Wirth from the Austrian National Defence Academy.
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