

SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AMID THE WEAKENING OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

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Russia's failures in Ukraine and the deepening of the Kremlin's isolation from the West caused by Russian aggression are undermining positions of Russia in the international arena. This affects Moscow's presence in certain regions, weakening its influence in the South Caucasus. The countries of the region are getting a historic chance to get rid of the Kremlin's oversight.

Yet Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, for one reason or another, do not show any intention of openly opposing Russia. They are ready to take advantage of the consequences of Russia's decline, but do not want to make direct efforts to ensure it. This, as well as the continuing Russian presence in the region (in the form of military contingents, support for pro-Russian political forces, and covert agents), makes it difficult to completely emancipate from Moscow's imperial supervision.

1. Russian Influence in the South Caucasus: Past and Present

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, Russia remained a core player in the South Caucasus. For some time, Moscow's retention of this role fully satisfied the West, which considered it appropriate to leave the region in some kind of zone of Russian responsibility. In fact, the United States and Europe were ready to give Russia an unofficial "patent" for resolving Caucasian problems, without having the proper capacity and resources to actively intervene in regional affairs. This, in particular, can explain Moscow's involvement in the work of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was designed to resolve the Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Russia relied on its military power and experience of dominating the region for almost two centuries. It viewed the South Caucasus ("Transcaucasia" in Russian colonial

terminology) as an integral part of its zone of influence. However, its claims were constrained by the specifics of the region, whose peoples have a rich history of state-building. The strengthening of their national identity contributed to the gradual weakening of Russian influence and required Moscow to make additional efforts to keep the region in Russia's orbit.

Until February 2022, Russia managed to slow down the process of losing ground in the South Caucasus by skillfully playing the card of interstate conflicts in the region. Even the defeat of its regional ally, Armenia, in the 44-day war rather benefited Russia, which tried to offer a new status quo in the conflict zone by organizing the signing of a ceasefire statement on November 10, 2020¹. The defeat in the war even further tied Armenia to Russia. At the same time, the deployment of Russian troops in the territories of Karabakh, not controlled by Baku, gave Moscow an additional lever in its relations with Azerbaijan. Georgia was also in the zone of projection of Russian influence, which was exerted by both force (the 2008 aggression and occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region) and hybrid means (support for pro-Russian forces in Georgian politics, in particular Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops affected the global security architecture and reformatted the regional security system. Moscow hoped for a quick victory, which would be the beginning of the restoration project "USSR 2.0". Instead, Russia's failures have negatively affected its geopolitical position and thus weakened its ability to maintain dominance in the South Caucasus.

The military defeats of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine undermine the image of the Russian army's power, which has long been an essential element of Moscow's influence. The Kremlin has tried to present itself as a mighty, non-alternative security guarantor capable of providing stability and protection in exchange for concessions in pursuing an independent foreign policy. Obvious miscalculations in the planning of military aggression against Ukraine and particular failures on the battlefield cast a shadow over the reputation of the Russian army as an effective force. This raises doubts about the ability of Russia to fulfill its commitments and guarantees.

That said, one should not overestimate the importance of redeploying Russian troops from the South Caucasus to participate in the aggression against Ukraine for the military balance of power in the region. Naturally, the depletion of Russian resources and their reorientation to the Ukrainian direction make it virtually impossible for Moscow to take active steps in the Caucasus. In this context, the immediate threat to Tbilisi from a possible attack from the occupied Tskhinvali region has undoubtedly decreased. Also, the distraction of Russia's focus to its aggression against Ukraine has made it easier for Azerbaijan to

¹ Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation. *Kremlin.ru*. 10.11.2020. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

secure its interests in Karabakh. Nevertheless, Russia’s military presence in the South Caucasus is still “showing the flag” in its relations with the countries of the region. Therefore, the presence of even the smallest Russian military contingent in the occupied territories of Georgia and Azerbaijan, as well as in Armenia, gives Moscow additional arguments in shaping relations with the respective countries.

What is more important for Russia’s influence in the South Caucasus is the Kremlin’s political isolation in the international arena by Western countries. It undermines Moscow’s position as an authoritative center of power in international relations. The toxicity of the Russian regime must be taken into account by the countries of the region (although in this case it does not lead to a complete severance of ties). They have to take into account that certain actions and contacts with Russia may be interpreted in the West as signs of solidarity with Russia and will lead to a worsening of relations with European and North American partners. Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia have excellent potential to balance their foreign policies, yet in any case, they must take into account the factor of escalating confrontation between Russia and the West.

Along with that, the imposition of sanctions against Russia opens up additional economic opportunities for the countries of the region. On the one hand, as Europe refuses to buy Russian energy resources, Azerbaijan is strengthening its position as a supplier to the European market². On the other hand, the countries of the South Caucasus can be used to circumvent Russia’s sanctions. This is demonstrated by the growth of imports of sanctioned goods to the countries of the region. For example, according to available data, in 2022, imports of microchips to Armenia from the United States increased by 515%, and from the EU—by 212%. And 97% of the products of this type imported to Armenia were exported to Russia³.

2. Policies and Interests of the Countries of the South Caucasus

2.1. Azerbaijan: restoration of territorial integrity is above all

Azerbaijan is the most powerful state in the region, which pursues an independent foreign policy, avoiding a clear positioning within the Russia-West confrontation.

Azerbaijan’s ultimate goal is the final restoration of its territorial integrity. Normalization of relations with Armenia and mutual recognition of borders is considered one of the tools to achieve this goal, as it should record Yerevan’s renunciation of its claims

² EU agrees deal with Azerbaijan to double gas exports by 2027. *Euronews*, 18.07.2022. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/07/18/von-der-leyen-heads-to-azerbaijan-to-secure-new-gas-import-deal>

³ Swanson A., Stevis-Gridneff M. Russia Is Importing Western Weapons Technology, Bypassing Sanctions. *The New York Times*, 18.04.2023. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/18/business/economy/us-russia-chips-sanctions.html?fbclid=IwAR0b0hv1tVh5OICjl_Ui6MLInwQwmf-gPy8sjhGAGWu6RIHlvfXt-sL7XU

to Karabakh. Baku is also stepping up its efforts to create a transport corridor to Nakhchivan through Armenian territory by opening the Zangezur corridor. These are the central issues for the current foreign policy of Azerbaijan.

For Baku, it is fundamental to regain full control over all occupied territories. Azerbaijan views the future of Karabakh through the prism of victory in the 44-day war. The matter of any compromises and concessions (regarding the so-called “status” of the region) is unacceptable not only to the Azerbaijani authorities, but also to Azerbaijani society. Azerbaijan clearly emphasizes that it considers the conflict to be over, and the only unresolved question is the restoration of Azerbaijani jurisdiction over the territories where Russian military forces have been deployed since 2020. Baku declares its readiness to grant citizenship and relevant rights to the Armenian population of Karabakh who lived in the region before the conflict, as well as to their descendants. Baku has repeatedly indicated its readiness to engage in a dialogue with representatives of the local Armenian community, aiming to agree on practical aspects of Karabakh’s reintegration⁴.

In the international arena, Azerbaijan is ready to engage in dialogue with Armenia on various platforms offered by both Russia and Europe. For Baku, the main thing is to ensure that its conditions and demands are fulfilled. Along with this, Azerbaijan is skeptical about international mediation efforts (in particular, because of the inefficiency of the OSCE Minsk Group, which has been demonstrated over the decades of its functioning), and does not support the deployment of any additional peacekeeping forces in the region. The Azerbaijani authorities see the continuation of the EU mission in the Armenian-Azerbaijani border area as a threat to their interests, as they fear that it will be used by the Armenian lobby and will protect the interests of Yerevan alone.

Azerbaijan is trying to utilize the high level of relations with Russia to strengthen its position in the conflict with Armenia. By maintaining friendly relations with Russia (cemented by the signing of a declaration on allied cooperation on February 22, 2022⁵), the Azerbaijani authorities want to improve their position in the region, in particular, to make progress in the liberation of the occupied territories of Karabakh. Baku hopes that Moscow will be able to force Yerevan to make concessions. This explains the caution of the Azerbaijani authorities in their public rhetoric regarding Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and their refraining from supporting Ukrainian resolutions in the UN General Assembly.

Nevertheless, Baku considers the Russian military presence in Karabakh to be a forced step. Azerbaijan has no interest in keeping it there in the future. The country is

⁴ Baku offered to hold a second meeting with representatives of the Armenian population of Karabakh (in Russian), *Anadolu Agency*, 13-14.03.2023. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/в-баку-предложили-провести-вторую-встречу-с-представителями-армянского-населения-карабаха/2844252>

⁵ Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. *President.az*. 22.02.2022. URL: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55498>

already making efforts to prepare the ground for the withdrawal of the Russian contingent from Karabakh in 2025—after the expiration of the 5-year deployment period established by the November 10, 2020 ceasefire statement⁶. For Moscow, maintaining a presence in the region (and, more broadly, the continuation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan) is a valuable geopolitical asset that it is willing to protect. However, the diversion of all attention and resources to the Ukrainian direction complicates Russia's ability to intervene.

Azerbaijan is using the current situation to increase pressure on Armenia (and, tacitly, on the Russian contingent). Limited military operations on the line of contact during 2022, which resulted in the improvement of Azerbaijani forces' positions, as well as diplomatic efforts that led to the restoration of Azerbaijani jurisdiction over the city of Lachin, are elements of Baku's integrated strategy. The blocking of the Lachin corridor by Azerbaijani activists is another element of it. Organizing such an action would be impossible without the approval and support of official Baku. However, in no way can it be seen as a special operation under the guise of public opinion. The position of the protesters regarding the inadmissibility of illegal mining in the temporarily occupied territories, as well as the demands for access to the fields by Azerbaijani experts, is reasonable and, more importantly, supported by the vast majority of Azerbaijani society. Similarly, the Azerbaijani public is legitimately outraged by the facts of the transfer of weapons and ammunition to the territory of Karabakh for illegal Armenian formations, as well as provocations in the area of the demarcation line (in particular, mining of roads in the liberated territories).

The opening of the checkpoint on the Lachin route⁷ is another step forward in the final de-occupation of Karabakh, which would be hard to achieve without Russia's bogging down in Ukraine. In the meantime, Azerbaijan again faces a negative assessment of events in the Lachin corridor from the West. This is illustrated by the decision of the International Court of Justice in The Hague to demand the unblocking of the transportation route and the prompt reaction of the U.S. State Department to the installation of an Azerbaijani checkpoint on it⁸. For Azerbaijani society, this is yet another indication of the policy of double standards, damaging the reputation of the West. This hinders the real reorientation of the Azerbaijani-Armenian peace process away from Russia's monopoly and toward new platforms that Europe has been trying to offer over the past year.

Dissatisfaction with the position of its Western partners does not prevent Baku from

⁶ Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation. *Kremlin.ru*. 10.11.2020. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384>

⁷ No:220/23, Statement on establishment of the border checkpoint by the Republic of Azerbaijan at the starting point of the Lachin-Khankandi road (EN/RU). *Republic of Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 23.04.2023. URL: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no22023?fbclid=IwAR1QH3h5GoW8iNYCeDLu2TuNyxCKjbP5fGISy1QB1sEX4zVbET-ZoumVbMs>

⁸ Actions on the Lachin Corridor. *US Department of State*, 23.04.2023. URL: <https://www.state.gov/actions-on-the-lachin-corridor/>

using Europe's desire to diversify energy sources to its advantage. Azerbaijan continues to enhance its position by signing contracts with European countries on the relevant issue, replacing Russia in the markets. Also, together with Georgia, Romania, and Hungary, a project is being implemented to lay a submarine cable to transmit Azerbaijani electricity through the Black Sea⁹.

Azerbaijan's political system remains stable. This is facilitated by the weakness of the opposition forces and the implemented personnel changes in the system of state administration, designed to consolidate power in the hands of Ilham Aliyev. After the victory in the 44-day war, the position of the President of Azerbaijan is stronger than ever. Even opposition-minded circles recognize the merits of the current government in ensuring a breakthrough on the Karabakh direction¹⁰. Therefore, Baku's policy is predictable and will not be subject to radical changes.

2.2. Armenia: cautious attempts to balance

Armenia remains in a challenging geopolitical situation in the new regional environment shaped by the results of the 44-day war. The military defeat dealt a heavy blow to the country's position. Moreover, it destroyed the euphoria of past victories that was present in Armenian society, replacing it with a sense of uncertainty. All the theoretical paradigms that existed in Yerevan (regarding the belief in the invincibility of the Armenian army and reliance on Russian security guarantees) have crumbled to dust. In fact, Armenia is facing the task of recognizing the fundamental changes that have taken place in the region and radically rethinking its own policy. However, even if the current Armenian government realizes this, such conditions are still difficult for the population to accept. Also, Yerevan's room for maneuver is narrowed by its total dependence on Russia, which has effectively turned Armenia into a satellite of Moscow.

At the same time, Armenia has a positive image of a democratic country in the West, which has been further strengthened after the 2018 Velvet Revolution and the coming to power of Nikol Pashinyan. He has a reputation as a pro-Western politician, and this makes it easier for Yerevan to establish contacts with the United States and Europe. In reality, this is a simplistic approach that does not reflect Pashinyan's real positioning and does not take into account the extent of Russian influence on Armenian politics¹¹. At the same time, in the face of Moscow's apparent unreadiness/unwillingness/inability to defend Armenia's

⁹ Georgia, Azerbaijan, Hungary and Romania signed an agreement on green energy (in Russian). *Echo of the Caucasus.*, 17.12.2022. URL: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32181046.html>

¹⁰ Kopchak V. Domestic Political Aspects of the 44-Day War for Karabakh: Interests and Policies of the Warring Parties and Key External Actors (in Ukrainian). *Settlement of frozen conflicts: the experience of the Second Karabakh War and its lessons for Ukraine*. K., 2022. P. 40-41.

¹¹ Kopchak V. Domestic Political Aspects of the 44-Day War for Karabakh: Interests and Policies of the Warring Parties and Key External Actors (in Ukrainian). *Settlement of frozen conflicts: the experience of the Second Karabakh War and its lessons for Ukraine*. K., 2022. P. 34

interests, Pashinyan and his entourage are nevertheless making cautious attempts to diversify the country's foreign policy (although they are taking place only within the tight limits established by the longstanding domination of Russia).

Pashinyan found himself in a distressing situation, both in terms of the foreign policy balance of power (where Armenia is caught between several warring centers of power) and in the context of the domestic political situation (where the objective need for reconciliation with its neighbors is in conflict with the revanchist sentiments of a part of society). Therefore, its policies, statements, and actions are aimed at finding a delicate balance and are often characterized by inconsistency and ambiguity.

This is exactly what Armenia's rhetoric on the Karabakh conflict looks like. Official Yerevan is more and more often paying lip service to the absence of claims to control Karabakh. Still, Pashinyan seeks to move the issue of the region's future beyond the Armenian-Azerbaijani border settlement and criticizes actions of Baku aimed at restoring Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

The situation is complicated by the contradictions between the Armenian authorities and Karabakh Armenian leaders, who can be used by Moscow to project influence on Armenia. The arrival of Russian oligarch Ruben Vardanyan in Karabakh should not be seen only as the Kremlin's intention to consolidate control over the temporarily occupied territories of Azerbaijan, where Russian troops are currently deployed. Rather, Vardanyan was seen in Moscow as an alternative to Pashinyan in the struggle for power in Armenia (as a kind of analog to Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia). The fact that the incumbent Prime Minister was able to retain power even after losing the 44-day war by winning the 2021 snap parliamentary elections was largely determined by the extreme toxicity of his opponents, representatives of the old elite (such as Robert Kocharyan), to the Armenian electorate. Moscow probably sees Vardanyan as a kind of "new face" that it wants to present to the Armenian electorate.

Given this, as well as the growing toxicity of the Russian regime due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Armenian authorities are taking certain steps to distance themselves from Moscow. Another important reason for this is the disappointment in the actions of the Russian Federation, which failed to protect Armenian interests during the escalation of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in September 2022. Under these circumstances, Armenia is trying to attract peacekeeping players alternative to Russia (the EU mission on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border) to the conflict zone.

However, in the geopolitical context, Yerevan's rhetoric looks like an attempt to play both sides of the fence. On the one hand, Armenia has declared its refusal to host CSTO

exercises on its territory¹². On the other hand, the news of the Armenian military's involvement in the U.S.-led exercises was quickly refuted¹³. Contradictory statements were made by Yerevan regarding its readiness to comply with the decision of the International Criminal Court regarding Putin, although it is clear that there is no real threat of the Russian leader's arrest on Armenian territory.

Armenia is also trying to show its readiness to normalize relations with Azerbaijan and Türkiye in the public sphere. Nevertheless, Armenian signals on this track remain controversial. An important step of solidarity with Ankara was the sending of humanitarian aid to the victims of the devastating earthquake of February 6, 2023. Also in the sports sphere, a demonstrative signal of improved relations was the holding of a football match between the national teams of Türkiye and Armenia in Yerevan¹⁴. Meanwhile, provocations continue on the sporting track in relations with Azerbaijan as the Azerbaijani flag was burned at the opening of the World Weightlifting Championships in the Armenian capital¹⁵. It seems that Yerevan is trying to repeat the events of more than a decade ago, when an attempt was made to normalize Armenian-Turkish relations as part of the so-called "football diplomacy", but without resolving the conflict with Baku.

2.3. Georgia: escalation of the internal political struggle between the pro-Russian government and the pro-European opposition

Georgia itself has suffered from Russian aggression. However, over the past decade, Tbilisi has demonstrated a consistent softening of its position toward Russia. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the unwillingness of Georgian authorities to actively confront Russia once again clearly demonstrates their pro-Russian character.

In its official rhetoric, Tbilisi demonstrates the intention to take advantage of the situation to improve Georgia's position against the background of a weakening Russian Federation. At the same time, certain actions of the Georgian authorities show signs of deliberate implementation of a policy aimed at undermining Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. The authorities continue to test the level of public resistance to their desire to curtail the democratic course. A striking example is the legislative initiative to register "foreign agents", which is similar in nature to its Russian counterpart. Mass protests in early March 2023 brought a victory to the opposition, forcing the authorities to withdraw the controversial bill, which had been criticized by the Western partners of Tbilisi¹⁶. The street

¹² Sotnikov D. Armenia refused to hold CSTO exercises on its territory (in Russian). *Deutsche Welle*, 10.01.2023. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/armenia-otkazalas-provodit-ucenia-odkb-na-territorii-strany/a-64337254>

¹³ Mkrtchian A. Armenia Confirms Non-Participation In U.S.-Led Drills. *Azatutyun.am*, 07.04.2023. URL: <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32354054.html>

¹⁴ Hamalian S. Can football help normalise relations between Armenia and Turkey? *Euronews*, 24.03.2023. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/24/can-football-help-normalise-relations-between-armenia-and-turkey>

¹⁵ Azerbaijan slams flag burning at weightlifting event in Armenia. *Al-Jazeera*, 15.04.2023. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2023/4/15/azerbaijan-slams-flag-burning-at-weightlifting-event-in-armenia>

protest demonstrated to the Georgian authorities certain limits that they should not go beyond. However, the ruling Georgian Dream party retains control over the system of government and can continue its de facto subversive activities against Georgia's European prospects using more cautious tactics.

The continuing struggle between the government (the Georgian Dream party, founded by Russian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili) and the opposition (various political forces, the most powerful of which remains the United National Movement of supporters of former President Mikheil Saakashvili) is a key element of domestic political life in Georgia. Ivanishvili's pro-Russian positions determine the current foreign policy course of Tbilisi, including its response to Russian aggression against Ukraine¹⁷. Georgia continues to declaratively condemn Russia's actions and does not forget to remind that it has suffered from its aggression. Yet, the Georgian authorities avoid systemic actions that could be perceived as directed against Russia (they refrain from joining sanctions and have not agreed to transfer weapons to Ukraine).

Its representatives also prevented Georgian voluntary fighters from leaving for Ukraine. However, this step should be viewed not only from the perspective of Ukrainian-Georgian bilateral relations, but also the domestic political situation in Georgia. Obviously, the Georgian Dream fears the consolidation of forces opposed to it and their gaining combat experience, which is possible in the ranks of the Georgian Legion in Ukraine¹⁸.

It should be noted that even within the Georgian government, there is a certain difference in the reaction to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Some politicians are more critical of Russia's actions. In particular, this approach is demonstrated by the President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili, which causes her to distance herself from the Georgian Dream, which helped this independent politician win the 2018 presidential election¹⁹.

The fate of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, now imprisoned, remains a factor in destabilizing the domestic political situation in Georgia. The deterioration of his health is used by the opposition to accuse the authorities of political repression, aimed at the physical elimination of opponents. At the same time, the Saakashvili factor has a rather negative impact on the prospects of the Georgian opposition. The politician has a loyal circle of supporters who consider him a symbol of pro-European transformations in Georgia and are ready to fight for his release. However, a significant part of Georgian society clearly rejects

¹⁶ EU condemns Georgia's 'foreign agents' law as protest continue. *Euractiv*, 08.03.2023. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-condemns-georgias-foreign-agents-law-as-protest-continue/>

¹⁷ Bedwell H., Abelsky P. Georgia Wants Russia to Leave Its Land in a Ukraine Peace Deal. *Bloomberg*, 01.02.2023. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-01/georgia-wants-russia-to-leave-its-land-in-a-ukraine-peace-deal?srnd=premium-europe>

¹⁸ Volsky: the revolutionary scenario is fueled by the fighters who returned from Ukraine (in Russian). *Echo of the Caucasus*, 10.03.2023. URL: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32312062.html>

¹⁹ Zamikula M., "Dream" can bring to the presidency (in Ukrainian). *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*, 30.11.2018. URL: <https://zn.ua/ukr/international/mriya-do-prezidentstva-dovede-295631.html>

Saakashvili, which caused not only by Russian propaganda but also by objective factors (the leadership style of this politician, abuses of law enforcement agencies during his time in power in dealing with street protests).

The split in society is demonstrated by a March 2023 sociological survey published by the International Republican Institute. A third of Georgians do not support the idea of sending Saakashvili to another country for treatment. The society is almost equally divided on his fate: 37% believe that he should serve his sentence and receive treatment in a Georgian prison; 25% believe that he should be allowed to go abroad for treatment, but should continue to be imprisoned upon his return; 31% believe that the President of Georgia should pardon him for humanitarian reasons²⁰. Meanwhile, Zourabichvili is critical of Saakashvili and has repeatedly stated that she is not going to grant him clemency. Thus, the disputes over his fate hinder the consolidation of those forces that do not support the pro-Russian course of the Georgian Dream to one degree or another.

Public attitudes toward the situation are demonstrated by the latest ratings of Georgia's leading political forces. Data for March 2023 show a gradual decline in support for the Georgian Dream. According to the survey, the party remains the most popular political force in the country, but only 19% of respondents are ready to support it²¹, while in September 2022 this figure was 25%²². Yet, this is not a reason for optimism in the United National Movement. Its rating is currently at 14%, and has increased by only 2% over the past six months. Thus, in the face of disappointment in the government's actions, there is no flow of its electorate to the primary opposition force. The fact that this political party has the highest negative rating should be of concern to the UNM supporters. In any case, 39% of the Georgian population is not ready to vote for it. The anti-rating of the Georgian Dream is 34% of respondents and is the second result.

The results of the study reveal a deep polarization of society and growing frustration with the leading political forces in Georgia. This is also confirmed by the rating of specific personalities in society. Leaving aside the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, the only influential personality whose level of trust exceeds his anti-rating is Kakha Kaladze (formerly the most successful Georgian football player; now the mayor of Tbilisi and one of the leading figures of the Georgian Dream, who at the same time demonstrates a different position from the general trend of the party on certain issues). He is viewed favorably by 52% of respondents; negatively by 44%. The rating and anti-rating of the President of Georgia S. Zurabishvili remain approximately at the same level (48% and 47%). Other personalities represented in the survey are more likely to cause a

²⁰ National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia, March 2023. *International Republican Institute*, 25.04.2023. URL: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgia-march-2023/>

²¹ National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia, March 2023. *International Republican Institute*, 25.04.2023. URL: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgia-march-2023/>

²² Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia, September 2022. *International Republican Institute*. URL: https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IRI-Poll-Presentation-Georgia-September2022_Final.pdf

negative attitude among the electorate. It is interesting that the indicators of Mikheil Saakashvili (rating—36%, anti-rating—59%) and Bidzina Ivanishvili (rating—35%, anti-rating—58%) are virtually identical.

There is a demand in Georgian society for new faces and political projects. The Russian Federation is exploiting the situation to undermine Tbilisi's European prospects. It is unable to exercise direct control over the territory of Georgia through the pro-Russian regime, as the government's openly pro-Russian policy would be met with strong rejection by a large part of society. However, by supporting individual politicians and lobbying for conservative ideology, Moscow is trying to drive a wedge in relations between Georgia and the West.

The People's Power movement, formed in 2022, is becoming a tool for undermining relations between Georgia and its partners. It was founded by several deputies of the Georgian Dream (Sozar Subari, Dimitri Khundadze, Mikheil Kavelashvili) who left the ruling party. Currently, the movement's parliamentary faction consists of 9 members and takes a tough anti-Western stance.

The functioning of the movement may be either a Russian operation or a project of Bidzina Ivanishvili's entourage, which is not ready to openly abandon its pro-Western course but needs formally independent proxies to promote this idea and come up with radical initiatives.

3. Prospects for Regional Development in the Face of Weakening Russian Influence

The current crisis in the world order has far-reaching consequences for the South Caucasus. The gradual weakening of Russia's position globally may encourage other players to become more involved in the region. However, this does not always have positive consequences for the region.

The United States and Europe (primarily France) are interested in expanding their influence in the South Caucasus. Still, their potential remains limited. The reasons for this are both geographical factors and the ambiguous position of some South Caucasus countries (Azerbaijan) and certain political forces (ultra-conservative circles of regional politics, which are often used by the Kremlin to its advantage) towards Western policy.

The Euro-Atlantic community's ability to project its influence in the South Caucasus may be enhanced if relations between the West and Türkiye improve. Ankara can play the role of a kind of conductor of NATO's interests in the region—but only if the current Turkish government is defeated in the 2023 elections, which could lead to the normalization of Türkiye's relations with its Alliance partners.

At the same time, for Türkiye, which has regained its geopolitical weight in the international arena, the South Caucasus is the gateway to Central Asia and the keystone to the projects of consolidating the Turkic world. Their success should not be attributed exclusively to Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party; pan-Turkism is generally supported by the Turkish political elite. Therefore, the overall strategy of strengthening Türkiye's presence in the region as part of deepening its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan will continue regardless of the election results.

Iran is not happy with the current balance of power in the region, as well as the prospect of a direct corridor between Azerbaijan and Türkiye. The weakening of the influence of Tehran's partner in the South Caucasus, Moscow, is perceived by the Iranian regime as another threat, and prompts it to pursue a more aggressive regional policy aimed at combating what Tehran considers a threat. In particular, this leads to the escalation of Iranian rhetoric towards Azerbaijan. Tehran is actually already waging a hybrid war against Baku. An important tool in the hands of the Iranian regime is the religious factor, which is used to infiltrate agents into Azerbaijani territory. Recently, provocations near the borders have become more frequent, such as the Iranian army's exercises, which are clearly unfriendly to Azerbaijan.

However, an open conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, Azerbaijan has a powerful military potential and is capable of seriously resisting potential Iranian aggression. Second, the Republic of Türkiye will not allow an act of armed aggression against its strategic ally. The provisions of the Shusha Declaration of June 15, 2021, oblige Ankara to respond to such a threat²³. Thirdly, an attack on Azerbaijan could cause large-scale unrest among the Azerbaijani population in Iran, threatening the internal political stability of the Iranian regime and the territorial integrity of Iran as a whole.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

As Russian influence in the region is weakening, the countries of the South Caucasus are addressing their own challenges in the first place. They have limited potential as Ukraine's allies:

- Azerbaijan, despite its friendly relations with our country, is building its foreign policy outside the West-Russia conflict.
- Armenia remains in the orbit of Russian influence. The presence of Russian military presence on Armenian territory complicates the process of reorienting Yerevan's foreign policy.

²³ Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey (Full Text). *Avim.org.tr*. 17 June 2021, URL: <https://avim.org.tr/en/Bulten/SHUSHA-DECLARATION-ON-ALLIED-RELATIONS-BETWEEN-THE-REPUBLIC-OF-AZERBAIJAN-AND-THE-REPUBLIC-OF-TURKEY-FULL-TEXT>

- Georgia, with pro-Russian forces in power, cannot be considered a real ally of Ukraine. Despite the ongoing domestic political crisis and the split in society, it is unlikely that the government in Tbilisi will change in the near future.

Accordingly, Ukraine should form rational expectations of possible support from them.

In the case of Azerbaijan, this means public humanitarian measures and only non-public support in case of more serious issues.

In the case of Georgia, the support includes public and informational measures (support within multilateral platforms such as the UN, formal involvement of Georgia in Ukraine's initiatives that do not require significant practical actions from Tbilisi).

In the case of Armenia, support from the official authorities is excluded. We can only count on the informational support of anti-Russian forces within the country that advocate a change in the foreign policy of Yerevan. At the same time, public actions on their part are of great importance, as they demonstrate to the world the failure of Russia's total control over even its satellites.

Based on this, when formulating regional policy of Ukraine, it is advisable to pay attention to the following issues:

1. Relations with the countries of the North Caucasus should be built exclusively on the basis of an unbiased rational assessment of Ukraine's national interests and the positions of the states of the region regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine. It is necessary to avoid building regional policy in the paradigm of confrontation between democracies and authoritarian regimes. As a result, relatively democratic Armenia remains in the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, while Azerbaijan, whose political regime is subject to harsh criticism from the West, supports Ukraine.

2. Certain partners (primarily France) will try to promote Armenian interests, including by insisting that there are parallels between Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Any attempts to involve our country in shaping the image of Armenia as a kind of "Ukraine of the South" must be resisted in order to maintain the positive dynamics of relations with Baku and Ankara.

3. In relations with the Georgian political elite, it is not expedient to be guided solely by the party logic of government-opposition confrontation. Instead, it is necessary to study the positions of individual politicians (especially with regard to relations with the West and assessment of Russian aggression) and develop relations with those who demonstrate views acceptable to Ukraine. Special attention should be paid to establishing contacts with figures who have positive ratings in Georgian society (Kakha Kaladze deserves priority attention).

4. The Saakashvili factor should not become a central issue in Ukraine-Georgia relations. Ukraine should make due efforts to protect the interests of its citizen, but this issue should not be turned into a major element of relations. One should take into account that even those politicians who do not currently share the openly pro-Russian course of the Georgian Dream (e.g., Georgian President Zourabichvili) have critical views of Saakashvili.

5. Given the generally pro-Ukrainian position of the population of the South Caucasus countries, an information campaign should be stepped up to convey narratives favorable to Ukraine to the relevant audience (the negative impact of Russian imperial policy on the region, demonstration of the weakening of the Russian Federation). To this end, special attention should be paid to developing contacts of the anti-imperial expert network, which should involve experts from Ukraine and the region (such as G. Vasadze, R. Mehrabyan, M. Muradov, R. Rajabov, A. Rustamzade, etc.).

6. Considering the low quality of coverage of events in the South Caucasus in the Ukrainian press, it is advisable to introduce closed briefings for media representatives, where they would not only explain the official position of Ukraine, but also provide expert assessment of the situation. In particular, it is necessary to correct the existing problems with the coverage of events around the Karabakh conflict, which in the Ukrainian press are influenced by Western (Armenian) narratives. This, in turn, not only causes criticism from Azerbaijani partners, but also in some aspects contradicts Ukraine's own official assessments of Russian aggression (if we draw analogies between the two wars).

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