

27 - 2013 GenevaPapers

Caucasus 2025: A Vision

Foreword by Ambassador
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Acknowledgements

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), which made the seminar on the South Caucasus held in November 2012 and this report possible. The rapporteurs are likewise indebted to Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini, a renowned Swiss diplomat and expert on conflicts and conflict resolution with more than 15 years of engagement with the region, for the *Foreword* to this report. Her insightful comments on the future of the South Caucasus region set the tone for the seminar, which generated rich discussions and ideas.

A note of gratitude is also extended to Dr Natalia Mirimanova, Mr Thomas de Waal and Dr Vicken Cheterian for their invaluable contribution to the success of the seminar. Lastly, special thanks go to the seminar participants who submitted very stimulating written contributions as a basis for the discussions, and demonstrated, through their engagement, the merits of their undertaking.

Introduction

Over 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the South Caucasus region remains embroiled in both internal and international conflicts, with no end in sight in either case. Strikingly, even though South Caucasian societies have developed and opened up to the world, the political configuration of the region still reflects the stigma of the first years of post-Soviet independence – when ethnic and political divides emerged or re-emerged, creating a lasting pattern of insecurity and instability.

The high hopes for the region that occasionally emerged from the intensive, multi-faceted diplomatic efforts deployed since the early 1990s ultimately failed to produce any clear outcomes. Negotiation processes remain stymied and prospects for new developments are currently limited, while suspicion and distrust continue to undermine relations between states and entities in the region.

This complicated situation has a direct negative impact on local populations, who are often constrained by closed borders and front lines that prevent necessary communication and interaction. It also hampers the prosperous development of the region and its capacity to find its proper place at the crossroads of Europe, Russia, Central Asia and the Middle East.

In this context, it is important to move away from the current political developments in the region and to examine the basic factors that underpin the divides, as well as the essential conditions that would help to create a better environment and pave the way towards a more cooperative, and possibly integrated, region. This can be illustrated by putting forward a vision of the South Caucasus in 2025 that could help shape a possible horizon for the region.

But it is also important not to lose sight of the concrete constraints of the current situation. Among the conditions conducive to a better environment, it is crucial for local populations to be able to move beyond political and ethnic divides and reconnect with one another, at least in some aspects of societal and economic life. A great deal of effort has already been made to bridge communities and revive basic patterns of cooperation. However, much remains to be done, despite the political constraints that all too often hamper such endeavours.

It is against this backdrop that the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), with the support of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, launched an informal dialogue in 2012 between independent experts from all parts of the South Caucasus. This dialogue included not only the three Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and the regional key players Russia and Turkey, but also Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.¹ The project, called ***Caucasus 2025: A Vision***, features several elements, including analyses, seminars and publications, and may inspire concrete initiatives on the ground.

On 15-17 November 2012, the GCSP hosted the first seminar of the project “*Caucasus 2025: A Vision*” which was held under Chatham House Rule. Twenty-four independent experts from the South Caucasus and the region participated and exchanged views and ideas with three principal aims in mind:

1. To examine current divides in the region and present suggestions for an alternative scenario for the South Caucasus by 2025;
2. To highlight some concrete domestic measures and initiatives that would immediately contribute to promoting regional cooperation and integration in areas such as the free movement of people, dialogue, culture, economy, trade, energy, transport, and the environment;
3. To offer preliminary findings regarding key issues that policymakers should consider in order to enhance regional cooperation.

A preliminary clarification was necessary since the South Caucasus region is a notion without a precise definition. To a large degree it is understood that geography and history have made the South Caucasus a region in and of itself, bounded by the Caspian Sea to the east and the Black Sea to the west and by the two Caucasian mountain chains to the north and south. Located at the cross-roads of large empires (Persian, Russian, Turkish) and areas of influence (Europe, Iran, Russia, Turkey), South Caucasian communities share a common history of assimilation with and resistance against those powers. Furthermore, despite the occasional ethnic clashes between them, these numerous communities essentially co-existed peacefully in past centuries and had a high degree of interaction at regional level, in contrast to the current situation.

¹ The toponyms in this Conference Paper should not be seen as political statements. For ease of reading, the term “de facto” has been omitted in some cases when referring to the de facto authorities of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, but is nonetheless implied.

Foreword: On the difficulty to Make Peace²

The South Caucasus is one of the richest regions of the world in terms of cultural variety, customs and traditions. It is a melting pot of different religions and ways of life, and its linguistic diversity is probably unique in the world, as the variety of its nature and the many landscapes which stretch from one end of the South Caucasus to the other.

The South Caucasus is also one of the most complex regions of the world and certainly of the former Soviet Union where we have a high concentration of unresolved conflicts within a very small area. In addition, the complexity of its history is such that even today, history has an impact and is a serious obstacle for any forward-looking policies. If one adds to this complexity the impact of powerful neighbours and what we used to call spheres of influence, then we have a picture of contingencies which are not easy to overcome.

The conflicts in the region are by no means new and have not just been a product of the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. But in some way the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought to the forefront all the underlying injustices, tensions and political ambitions which have exploded in some kind of volcano with a multitude of conflicts. They are all by no means resolved; on the contrary, sometimes we have the feeling to be caught in some form of deadlock. And that's how, for roughly 20 years, we have been struggling with an almost unbearable legacy.

“Why is it so difficult to make peace?” is a question I am often asked, especially here in Switzerland where we have the unbelievable privilege to go back to 1848 to find our last war, a religious war between Catholics and Protestants, of course, with an underlying political struggle! 160 years without war is a real privilege and

2 Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini, *Keynote Speech on “Caucasus 2025: a Vision for the future”* prepared for the opening of the Seminar. A renowned Swiss diplomat, Ambassador Tagliavini was appointed by the Council of the European Union in 2008 as Head of the International Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia which presented its Report to the EU Council in September 2009 (www.iiffmcg.ch).

we do understand this. But, you may understand why my Swiss fellow citizens have some difficulties in understanding why it is so difficult to make peace!

Everyone has an answer or maybe several answers to the question as to why it is so difficult to make peace. But one may also agree that the answer may not be the same as the neighbour's answer. Most of your answers would probably rather be one side of the medal and hardly give a full and fair picture of the situation.

Here is my view of the major obstacles to a peaceful solution in many of the unresolved conflicts, not only in the Caucasus, but wherever a conflict has broken out and peace is not in sight.

Here are 10 obstacles to a successful and sustainable peace. The list is by no means exhaustive, but certainly a solid starting point:

1. It takes two for tango

In any conflict, both parties (or better, all parties) need to sincerely commit themselves to peace (which is more often not the case!). I remember many times when, in the conflict over Abkhazia, we were very close to an agreement (on security guaranties or on some form of return of IDPs/refugees, etc.), and suddenly, at the last moment, everything collapsed, and we had great difficulties to resume our peace talks again!

Usually, the reaction of the conflicting parties was: "this is the work of a third force"; but this seems to me a bit too easy, as an explanation. In fact, after every war it is just very difficult to really be able to come to a common consensus. And the longer the conflict lasts, the more difficult it becomes to resolve it as vested interests become stronger as more time passes.

When we speak about the South Caucasus, we need to acknowledge that there are always several layers of a conflict:

- Local (often an ethnic conflict, frequently on the basis of historic and unresolved injustices);
- Regional (big regional powers, often powerful neighbours);
- International (very often the East-West divide, very often it is about spheres of influence).

Only if and when there is a will to settle a conflict on all three of these levels, will there be a chance for conflict settlement and a sustainable peace.

Very often it is indeed difficult, if not impossible, for conflicting parties to free themselves from the overwhelming influence of outside powers and to settle their conflict peacefully.

2. Prevention – the magic word!

A conflict usually doesn't break out from one day to another. It takes months and years, sometimes decades until parties go to war. Until that moment, there are multiple signals and signs which hint to a serious deterioration and the imminent danger of war.

In our Report on the August 2008 conflict in Georgia, Uwe Halbach, one of our experts of the region, called it the “count-down to war” with numerous:

- Provocations
- Incidents
- Hostile rhetoric and threat of force (which, by the way, is forbidden by the UN Charter).

Add to such an increase of tension some outstanding international political events which create an unfavorable context as was the case in the lead up to the August 2008 conflict in Georgia and we come close to a situation where a conflict can be triggered easily. I just recall the international situation in 2008: there was Kosovo's declaration of independence and its subsequent broad recognition by mainly Western countries in spring 2008, at the same time NATO debated over a NATO membership perspective for Georgia; in such a context, the best preventive measures may come too late, especially, when the decision to go to war has already been taken in several capitals!

3. Loss of trust

One of the biggest obstacles to conflict settlement is, no doubt, the loss of trust. After any conflict, there is a massive, almost insurmountable erosion of confidence, and subsequent hostile events in the post-conflict period create an atmosphere in which nobody trusts anybody.

The biggest efforts to bring the conflict parties together and to promote confidence may be swept away with one minor incident.

Trust is a fragile plant, sometimes it takes more than a life to re-establish it; mistrust may accompany you through your whole life like a Pavlovian response; in such a situation even the best intended confidence building measures do not help, especially if they are seen as a trick to outsmart the other side.

And of course, hostile rhetoric, defamation, denigration and the threat of force are powerful tools to keep mistrust alive!

4. The (fatal) legacies of the past (or who is guilty?)

Arbitrary political decisions of the past, arbitrary border delimitations, forced migration policies, etc., are heavy legacies for any conflict region, and I would call them facts of life which more often we can't change. We have to live with them no matter how difficult, unfair, unpleasant and unacceptable they are. All our efforts must strive to overcome all these injustices with fair arrangements as the alternative is war and therefore no solution; war is just a devastating disaster which takes away any chance for a peaceful future for many years, decades and sometimes centuries to come.

There is another treacherous approach: very often parties to a conflict are – for understandable reasons – unhappy with their neighborhood or with an arbitrary border; but instead of making every effort to find peaceful solution, they sometimes heavily rely on outside actors (the US, Russia, Turkey, etc.), but, as we all know, such an approach is dangerous.

5. The traps

Conflict parties often are subject to psychological mechanisms which determine their behavior in a given conflict.

Uwe Halbach (mentioned above) identified 4 types of traps:

- The history trap - a powerful trap with a fatal cultivation of legends and narratives; as we all know, the narratives differ significantly between the conflicting parties; and this makes it very difficult to start to think in terms of compromise or concessions which (in my opinion) are the only way to overcome a conflict.
- The victim trap: every conflict creates its victims, usually on both sides; the victim trap is a typical side effect of conflicts with violence on both sides. Feeling a victim very often leads to the demonization of the other side in the conflict, creating, so to say, an additional obstacle; nothing done by the other side is good, everything is heavily criticized, and so people who were good neighbors for a long time all of a sudden must hate each other!
- The isolation trap: people who used to live in a neighborhood get separated through a conflict, and they get isolated from their former neighbors; and very often the information about your former neighbors who now live in (so called) “enemy territory” is manipulated. This leads to a situation

where entire generations do not know their former neighbors as they represent the “other (enemy) party in the conflict”.

- The habituation trap (“die Gewöhnungsfalle”): a very frequent trap whereby both or all conflict parties are convinced that historically they are right in their aspirations and firmly believe the other side to be wrong. If one gets used to such a conviction it is almost impossible to change your mind. Such a pattern frequently applies to territorial claims!

6. The seven rules of nationalism

Nationalism is another feature of many unresolved conflicts and I would call it a “killer” of any attempt to make peace. And here I would like to quote David Pugh, a former member of the Norwegian Refugee Council, who in my eyes gave a very accurate picture of what nationalism may produce and how difficult it is consequently to get out of the corner. In his seven rules of nationalism he spoke about another region, not about the Caucasus, but his considerations seem to apply also to other conflicts:

Rule 1: If an area was ours for 500 years and yours for 50 years, it should belong to Us, you are merely occupiers!

Rule 2: If an area was yours for 500 years and ours for 50 years, it should belong to Us. Borders must be respected!

Rule 3: If an area was ours 500 years ago, but never since then, it should belong to Us, it is the Cradle of our Nation!

Rule 4: If a majority of our people lives there, it must belong to us. They must enjoy the right of self-determination!

Rule 5: If a minority of our people lives there, it must belong to Us. They must be protected against your oppression!

Rule 6: All the above rules apply to Us, but not to you!

Rule 7: *Our* dream of greatness is Historical Necessity, yours is Fascism!

We know unfortunately how powerful and almost insurmountable obstacle nationalism can be!

7. Compromise and Concession

Compromise and concessions are the golden formula for good neighborhood and friendly relations among the people. However, in many regions of the world and especially where there are conflicts, compromise and concessions are considered a weakness, not as strength. There can be no peace without compromise and concessions.

8. The spoilers

They are all over all over; every conflict has its spoilers.

Sometimes, the spoilers are well known political or public figures that are not interested in peace but just in their profit town profit (we all know some of them, arms dealers, smugglers, but sometimes also powerful corporations). And – once more – they are not interested in the settlement of a conflict as they make their money from unresolved conflicts to the detriment of entire populations.

9. “Après moi le deluge”

After many years in conflict regions I have come to the conclusion that often conflict parties are not interested in finding a solution if it is not totally and completely on their terms. They have their agenda and that’s all they care about. If as an negotiator you try to elaborate on the advantages of a peaceful settlement, if you remind your interlocutors of their responsibility for the future of their region, their country or their children, they usually react with reluctance: “après moi le déluge” (I don’t care about the future, devil may care!).

These interlocutors have what I would call a “tunnel vision”, so to say a narrow-minded view on the course of the events. They want a solution at their conditions, nothing less... regardless of the consequences for generations to come!

10. On the need to investigate wars and conflicts

My experience with the International Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia teaches me that wars, massacres and other atrocities should be investigated if the people and nations involved want to have a minimum of chance to overcome the conflict. That’s why I am pleading for a solid investigation of conflicts; regardless of the difficult standing such inquiries may face sometimes when they are rejected by one or the other side or both. I continue to believe that a thorough investigation helps in many ways not to fall in old patterns, narratives

and traps which make it every time more difficult to find a solution to an unresolved conflict.

You all remember the August 2008 conflict in Georgia around secessionist South Ossetia. For the people in the region, the outbreak of the conflict was of no major surprise, yet it was a disaster for all concerned. But for most of us from outside the region the war was rather unexpected. The world was looking at the opening of the Olympic Summer games in Beijing, and all of a sudden – as it was perceived – there was a war in the middle of Europe!

In this Georgian crisis the European Union stood up as a decisive international actor; you all remember the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy who after five days of war negotiated a cease-fire agreement between the presidents of Georgia and Russia. A few weeks later, the EU sent an observer mission to the conflict zone. But more important, the Council of the EU established a so-called International Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the origins and the course of the August 2008 conflict in Georgia. I had the honor to be appointed the Head this fact-finding mission.

The subsequent Report, which I handed over to the EU Council just 9 months later, comes to the conclusion, that the military conflict between Russia and Georgia was indeed triggered by a Georgian offensive on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. But the Report also clearly says that the August 2008 conflict in Georgia was preceded by a long, very long escalation of tension, incidents and provocations in which all parties, Georgia as well as Russia, but also the secessionist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have participated, and therefore all of them have a responsibility in that conflict. In our Report we further came to the conclusion that both Georgia and Russia acted against established international law. The Report which has over 1000 pages elaborates in detail the underlying causes and the context of the conflict and its historic roots; it has also set, with its detailed elaboration, new standards in many questions of highest political actuality with regard to international law, humanitarian law and human rights law. The Report did not only contribute to calm down the tense situation in the region, it also has become a kind of reference book on the conflicts in Georgia. At the beginning, all the attention focused on the question of who was guilty. But we always cautioned against such a simplistic and narrow-minded approach – the conflict is so much more complex and the responsibilities are so much more shared; at the same time, since the publication of the Report it has become more difficult to come up and sustain unfounded accusations against each other.

Let me also stress that the fact-finding turned out not only to be an instrument for the sake of a better understanding of what really happened, but also as a dissuasive tool against possible impunity and as a discouragement for any similar political adventurism;

In other words, the EU mandated investigation did not only contribute to de-escalate and de-emotionalize the situation on the ground, the fact that we published our findings helped to avoid speculations; it also helped to argue against the cultivation of one-sided legends and narratives. Of course, such an inquiry is not a panacea, but it may be a contribution to a better understanding of what has really happened!

To conclude let me quote the Report: “It should be stressed that the fact-finding mission was strictly limited to establishing facts and was not a tribunal. The mission believes that there can be no peace in the South Caucasus as long as a common understanding of the facts is not achieved.”

Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini

Part I :

Caucasus 2025 – A Vision

From status quo to cooperation

The South Caucasus region remains fragile and unstable after more than two decades of ethnic and political divide. This situation is partly inherited from the Soviet era and partly caused by the inability of the countries/entities in the region to properly manage interaction between – and the integration of – ethnic communities. These divides have solidified rather than eased constructively during this period, leading to the current status quo. Negotiation mechanisms aimed at defusing tensions and possibly resolving contentional issues in relation to the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia contexts as well as the Armenia-Azerbaijan standoff over Nagorno-Karabakh (the so-called “frozen conflicts”) are both limited in their capacity to influence the parties and constrained by diverging interests. Consequently, they have failed to produce significant outcomes that could impact the status quo.

The enduring political status quo was a much-discussed topic at the seminar given that it is perceived either as a significant risk or an essential advantage, depending on the viewpoint of participants. It may indeed provide temporary relief for some regional actors that feel pressured by other actors and that share a perception of threat and vulnerability. This is clearly the case with respect to Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which all claim that the protective presence of a third party such as Armenia or Russia is essential for their survival in the absence of negotiated conflict settlements. It is also likely the case in regard to Armenia, which benefits from a security guarantee from Russia.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan and Georgia perceive the status quo as a major risk, since it deprives them of what they consider the right solution to their bilateral or internal conflicts. The status quo essentially maintains what they regard as a violation of their territorial integrity that poses a severe threat to their domestic security and stability. Questions relating to external security and military presence are therefore extremely divisive issues in the region.

Participants concluded that the status quo should not exist indefinitely and that it is absolutely necessary to find political solutions to the current conflicts in the region. They argued that the status quo underpinning the current insecurity and

instability may be regarded as a temporary option that in no way constitutes a sustainable solution or satisfactory situation, even for those who benefit from it.

This approach was the baseline for participants' reflection on a possible vision of the South Caucasus by 2025 and was based on their conviction that the current divides deprive the region of the normal conditions for development and interaction that would ultimately be beneficial to all.

The goal of the seminar was not to systematically review options for possible solutions to the regional divides – an ambition that largely outstrips the capacity of a seminar. Instead, it had the more modest goal of examining essential elements that could help to overcome the most disruptive aspects of the current divides and contribute to paving the way towards cooperative, integrative and sustainable regional development.

The international context and the role of the EU

All participants shared the view that the political context at both international and local level is, and will remain, an essential factor in shaping developments in the South Caucasus. They agreed that regional powers such as the European Union, Iran, Russia, Turkey and the United States all have a considerable political, cultural, and economic presence and influence in the South Caucasus.

Russia is historically a pre-eminent actor in the region where it possesses significant leverage, in particular through its direct military presence in Armenia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This presence, in addition to securing Russia's position in the region, also contributes to the perpetuation of the status quo.

The opinion was expressed that other regional powers certainly hold different views on the way the region should develop. But neither the US – still the leading external actor along with Russia – nor the EU or Turkey seem to be in a position to seriously affect the current status quo. The role of Western powers is, according to some participants, to bring the conflicting parties together and provide opportunities for direct interaction and information sharing in order to foster trust between them.

The European Union is a much desired but insufficiently active player in the region, in the view of all participants. They claimed that the EU should play a more dynamic role, both in terms of its participation in the conflict settlement

processes and as a model for the democratization, development and integration of the region. In the absence of any other model, the EU is the reference. Even though integration into the EU is a remote, albeit not unrealistic, prospect, the EU at least shows a way to move forward beyond the current divides. The EU Eastern Partnership Programme, contributing to the democratization of the South Caucasus and the creation of economic (and potentially political) conditions and opportunities there, was positively assessed by participants. Nevertheless, despite these positive sentiments, it was also pointed out that substantial EU support only fully materializes in cases where the recipient has a realistic chance of gaining EU membership. EU peace building efforts around Europe are particularly successful when they promote peace *inside the European Union*. Since no South Caucasus country is likely to become an EU member in the near future, peace building efforts should not rely unduly on this eventuality. A proposal was also made to create a Caucasus Peace Liaison Office in Brussels.

Turkey is an influential actor and a strong economic partner in the region. The view was expressed that Turkey has adjusted its position in the past two years to reflect a more realistic approach towards its influence in connection with the unresolved dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. This shift seems related to the fact that Turkish public opinion is against Turkish interference in this dispute out of fear that it would have a negative impact on Turkish-Caucasus relations. Furthermore, Turkey and Russia are in a position of “competitive cooperation,” resulting in Turkey’s unwillingness to openly flout Russia’s will.

The spillover effects of the Syrian conflict and the crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme on the Caucasus were also addressed by some participants, who hinted in particular that Azerbaijan might consider a military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh in the event of a military strike against Iran. Others argued that whatever happens in Iran, it would not be in Azerbaijan’s interest to launch a military confrontation with Armenia and possibly Russia, and that Azerbaijan’s Western partners, which have a huge stake in the South Caucasus energy corridor, would likely try to prevent any such adventurist action. Yet, the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh poses the highest security risk in the region due to the ongoing military build-up, the tensions on the front lines, and the persistent bellicose rhetoric between the parties.

A renewed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, according to some participants, would not resolve this issue, but could eventually lead to the deployment of international peacekeepers to the disputed territory. This, in turn, might jeopardize Russia’s

regional pre-eminence. Some participants contended that a possible decrease in Russia's influence in Armenia and Azerbaijan and the deployment of an international peacekeeping operation to Nagorno-Karabakh might lead to a crisis spill-over into the North Caucasus, an event that could ultimately result in the region slipping out of control.

The conflict settlement processes

As co-actors in the conflict settlement processes, some international actors retain influence over the regional dynamics. The participants did not engage in an in-depth examination of the current status of the international negotiation processes embodied in the Minsk Group and the Geneva Talks. However, while recognizing that these talks had contributed to preventing further military confrontations, they deplored the fact that they had not put an end to the regional conflicts. Participants also argued that these negotiation processes should be boosted, in order to improve monitoring capacities that would in turn reduce security risks and enhance the sense of security within the local population.

The OSCE Minsk process, co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States, remains the only formal channel of communication between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Participants agreed that it is thus all the more important that this mechanism be maintained and reinvigorated in order to at least prevent renewed hostilities, if not to resolve the dispute. The prospects of seeing the Minsk Group launch new initiatives in 2013 are nevertheless remote, since this is an electoral year in both Armenia and Azerbaijan and neither will be able to demonstrate much flexibility.

The Geneva Talks are the main channel of communications between the parties. Though a fragile process due to perennial distrust between the parties and their conflicting interests, the Geneva Talks have been able to set up a monitoring mechanism called Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) on the Administrative Boundary Lines. This mechanism provides a venue for regular contacts between Abkhaz and Georgian officials alongside representatives of the Russian forces, the UN and the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). Still, some participants deplored the restricted international presence in the conflict regions, which prevents international institutions from fully achieving their primary goal of contributing to the protection of local communities.

A view was largely shared that there are three essential points in every peace and conflict settlement process that are also applicable to the conflicts in the South Caucasus:

- *There will be no peace without fair and just solutions;*
- *The solutions must come from inside the region, with the international community providing external support;*
- *Conflicts will not be solved overnight. Additionally, there must always be a “face-saving” clause for the party or parties that lose more than the others.*

Participants also discussed several key issues when considering next steps in the South Caucasus:

- The importance of a trained international peacekeeping force (or other presence) in the region capable of acting in an emergency situation;
- Ongoing discussions by international actors centred on the dangers of a renewed outbreak of hostilities;
- The inclusion of international jurisdictions and judicial experts to insure investigation and inquiry in the event of a breach of international legal norms;
- Involvement of a commission tasked to work on a conflict settlement process;
- Inclusion of elder statesmen in the conflict settlement process;
- Introduction of a mechanism to monitor the public discourse and outreach of the parties to the conflict;
- Introduction of a mechanism to monitor the freedom of movement of people and goods between the parties to the conflict, which could help to avoid the creation of an “enemy image”;
- Stressing the importance of mutually beneficial cooperation in areas such as the energy, water, and transportation sectors.

The local dimension

Though international actors retain a significant capacity to exert influence in the South Caucasus, participants agreed that the main drivers of political develop-

ments in the region are local political actors. The interests and behaviour of the elites in the region are the ultimate determinants shaping the political context towards change or the status quo. Participants pointed out that the profound divides in the region are underpinned by several factors over which local political actors have direct influence, and which would have to be properly addressed before solutions could be envisaged:

- The dilemma caused by mutual insecurity: communities feel directly threatened by others, creating spiralling needs for further security on both sides. Security concerns are, in the view of many participants, the main trigger of the regional divide;
- The absence of common ground between divided communities: the diverging interpretations of security needs; the diverging interpretation of common history; and the perception of interaction between communities as a zero-sum game are reinforcing the sense of divide;
- The absence of common perspectives between divided communities: the so-called “frozen conflicts” prevent communities from thinking beyond the current divides about alternative options for reconciliation and common development prospects;
- The absence of common ground and perspectives is exacerbated by a lack of dialogue and any interaction between communities due to the restrictive policies developed by leadership over the years and mutual suspicion between communities.

In addition to these fundamental characteristics of the regional divides, participants also identified a number of hurdles which maintain a climate conducive to the perpetuation of divisions and prevent the development of initiatives aimed at improving the regional environment. They mentioned, inter alia, the following:

- Contact with “the other side”: There is an unwritten rule that contact with “the other side” in a conflict situation is akin to treason. This expectation hinders peaceful cooperation and poses a challenge for anybody attempting to promote peace and dialogue. In the view of some participants, this could be mitigated, for instance, by high profile visits from opinion leaders to the “other side”.
- Independent media and strong institutions: Generally, state-controlled media and weak institutions benefit the status quo. Participants therefore

considered it important to support independent media and democratic institutions in order to empower civil society. However, some participants felt that liberalization could also mean “more extremism” and not always lead to more democratic societies : a freer press, for example, could potentially lead to a more extreme press.

- Diaspora communities as peace builders: Diaspora communities from states such as Armenia and Azerbaijan have successfully integrated with each other in many countries, in particular in Russia, where Moscow is a telling example. Participants expressed the view that these diaspora communities could be used to dispel negative stereotypes about one another within their home countries.
- Efforts should be pursued to develop a “Caucasian House”, consisting of six subjects divided evenly, with three internationally recognized subjects and three non-recognized subjects co-existing in an informal setting.

Georgia, the new factor

The Government of Georgia installed in the wake of parliamentary elections held on 1 October 2012 has displayed an increasingly dynamic approach to territorial issues. Participants acknowledged that, despite persistent obstacles, the changing situation presents new opportunities. A number of “friendly measures” taken by the new Georgian Government during its first few weeks in power were viewed by participants as moves aimed at reducing perennial tensions. The measures include: amendments to the law on the occupied territories; recognition of certain documents issued in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; the appointment by Georgian Prime Minister Ivanishvili of Zurab Abashidze as his personal representative for relations with Russia; a plan to re-establish the Sokhumi-Gali-Zugdidi railway line; and the suspension of Pik-TV, a channel which took a critical stance towards Russia. Participants acknowledged that the new Georgian political context could help break the deadlock with Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and possibly restore some form of cooperation between Georgia and its northern neighbours.

Participants were extremely cautious, however, regarding any idea that a fundamental breakthrough towards normalization could take place for as long as the two breakaway regions continue to claim international status and Russia maintains its recognition of them. A reversal of the Russian position in this matter is unlikely and the deadlock on this issue may prove to be a lasting point of contention and an impediment to full normalization between Moscow and Tbilisi. Furthermore, Tbilisi still remains committed to advancing its relationships with the EU and

NATO, with the latter regarded as a particularly sensitive issue by Moscow. Yet, restrictions surrounding “softer” issues, such as visa requirements, the recognition of documents, and trade (in the context of Russia’s accession to WTO) might be eased and could provide some immediate evidence of Georgia’s new intentions and the way Moscow envisages its relations with that country.

Some participants observed that the prospect of possible – albeit modest – changes in relations between Georgia and its northern neighbours is encouraging, in sharp contrast with the situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, which shows no sign of progress.

Part II: The Way Forward

The second part of the seminar was devoted to a discussion on the way forward; namely, on ways and means to enhance cooperation between local and regional actors, despite the existing divisive issues, border constraints and mutual mistrust that hamper the development of normal relations between regional communities. The focus was set on practical cooperation aimed at facilitating some form of integrative cooperation between communities, as well as on building mutual trust.

The discussion was sub-divided into different topics, including trade and economic cooperation, trans-border cooperation on energy and infrastructure issues, trans-border movements of people, and dialogue promotion. Participants addressed the numerous security, political, economic and psychological challenges that regional communities face when starting cooperation or enhancing a previously existing relationship. The discussion also revealed the various concrete expectations local communities may have in regard to developing, or resuming, forms of regional cooperation.

It is worth emphasizing that the participants frequently addressed EU involvement in the region, as already noted earlier. It was largely agreed that this involvement is beneficial to the region (and certainly less controversial than NATO's involvement). The EU Eastern Partnership was praised as a project with large potential, with participants expressing the view that an extended partnership would be extremely positive for the South Caucasus. Conversely, some participants deplored what they perceived as the EU's insufficient engagement in the region to date and the fact that any active EU role on the ground, beyond that of 'soft' power, cannot reasonably be expected. Participants also stressed the increasing role that the EU could play in fostering cooperation initiatives over the dividing lines, thus lowering tensions in the region. But for this to be achieved, the EU would also need the full and non-conditional support of all parties.

Trans-border trade and economic cooperation

Participants noted that four issues would have to be factored into proposals for economic cooperation in the South Caucasus:

1. Security and politics take precedence over profit in economic projects across conflict borders.

2. Economies in the region are asymmetric in their size and operation – i.e. in their degree of corruption, liberalization and economic weight.
3. There is no legal framework for regional projects, especially infrastructure projects. The existing transport and energy routes follow conflict divides and reinforce divisions.
4. Economies in the breakaway entities are hard to integrate into regional projects due to the political and legal obstacles that prohibit their participation in the international economy.

At the same time, the economies of those entities are not very attractive from the point of view of investment or exchange. In addition, politically conditioned assistance from the partner states undermines the initiative to boost domestic production, trade, IT and other sectors, which in turn weakens the economy and creates stronger dependence on external aid. It is important to include the private sector in various programmes of business development to boost the advancement of skills and attitudes necessary for doing business in today's world.

Two conceptual approaches towards achieving regional economic cooperation in the South Caucasus are running in parallel. One is that a political solution must preclude any economic cooperation. The other considers that economic cooperation based on regional needs can be used as a mechanism and incentive to facilitate the search for political solutions.

This first approach largely reflects the current state of affairs in the South Caucasus, where political interests often prevail over economic considerations and conflicts are addressed mainly from an exclusively political perspective. Parties to the conflicts in the South Caucasus often see economic concessions as an unacceptable weakening of their political position. They also tend to make economic opportunities dependent on political gains, which can be paraphrased by this frequently voiced opinion: "There will never be cooperation with the other side as long as the latter does not accept political concession." Although economic cooperation has a political dimension in many instances, it is taken exclusively as a political tool in this approach, instead of being recognized for its own merits.

As some participants noted, the South Caucasus region is often characterized by a lack of economic vision: when there is a dialogue about regional economic cooperation, specific conversations tend to focus on politics, rather than on economics.

The rationale for the second approach, which maintains that economic cooperation may be a tool to enhance dialogue in the context of a search for political solutions, is that potential economic gain could also be used as an incentive to encourage reluctant leaders, and possibly communities, to become more constructive. This approach holds that positive behaviour will be fostered as a result of economic cooperation. It is supported by many examples of situations wherein disputes have been shelved after economic cooperation has been boosted. Economic cooperation alone will not provide the solution to the related conflicts, but it will contribute to improving the environment from which a solution may emerge.

In the same vein, participants observed that economies in the Caucasus are largely dependent on the political situation. For example, there is no trade between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a result of the conflict between the two countries. There is, however, trade between Azerbaijan and Georgia, exemplified by an extensive railway and pipeline network. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey are building a Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line that excludes Armenia's participation because of the political situation. The Azerbaijani Oil Fund is financing the BTK in Georgia; political considerations suggest that a similar financial engagement would not be available to Armenia.

Participants also stressed the disconnect between political lines and economic spaces. This disconnect means that trade within a natural geographic area is hindered (or forbidden) for political reasons. For example, Abkhazia and South Ossetia currently trade with Russia, and very little with mainland Georgia (e.g., although trans-Inguri trade between Abkhazia and Georgia has never stopped, the flow of goods moves primarily from Georgia to Abkhazia and is formally illegal). Other actors are also unable to trade with Abkhazia and South Ossetia for political reasons. But some participants also pointed out that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are more integrated into the North Caucasus along socio-political, and recently economic lines than they are into the South Caucasus.

On the other hand, some participants noted that trade and human contact persist across conflicted borders, although these links have been forced to move underground and operate in a semi-legal arena. Any efforts to further trade relations within a politically conflicted situation should look to these pre-established trade routes and try to consolidate these channels.

A clarification was provided by one participant regarding Georgian-Russian negotiations on Russia's accession to the WTO. In the customs administration agree-

ment of 9 November 2011, neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia are mentioned. In fact, this agreement avoids all notions of borders and territories and is couched in strictly status-neutral terminology. For example, the three trade corridors which Georgia and Russia agreed to establish are specified by grid points and not by geographical names. This agreement created a virtual system of indirect data sharing for the purpose of monitoring trade flows. An independent Swiss company will monitor customs administration at the entry and exit points of the three corridors, which are located on undisputed Georgian and Russian territory.

Participants made a number of additional comments:

- The structure of trade differs from one country to another. As one participant observed, trade conducted by Armenia and Georgia occurs predominantly within the South Caucasus region, while over half of Azerbaijan's trade takes place with extra-regional partners. These differences have political implications insofar as Azerbaijan is less dependent on the regional environment for its own development.
- Regional Integration: It would be worthwhile to further consider the idea of a "Caucasian House", consisting of six subjects, which would address issues of common interest. These six subjects would be represented evenly, with the three internationally recognized subjects and three non-recognized subjects co-existing.
- One participant pointed to the problems associated with "unilateral trade acts". The opening of the "International Airport" in the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, was claimed to be a business operation, though in reality it was just as much a political gesture. In the view of this participant, such initiatives may be questionable from an economic point of view; they also serve to heighten political tensions.
- Trade between residents of conflicting zones: among various examples of trade cooperation between residents across conflict lines (and also in times of conflict), the "Ergneti Market" is an important reference, even though it operated in a legal grey zone. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was the most important market in the South Caucasus and one of South Ossetia's main sources of revenue. Trade between Georgia and South Ossetia continued even during times of deep tensions between them. This shows that cooperation can survive in the lower echelons of society, despite prevailing divides. In the view of the participants, this form of cooperation must be supported and recognized as a potentially important tool for any future peace building efforts. Nevertheless, the Georgian and South Ossetian

experts voiced concern that, in the absence of a legal framework, such a market would likely be taken over by black market trade.

- Several markets have re-emerged since the 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia, notably in areas adjacent to the conflict lines between Abkhazia and Georgia on one hand, and Georgia and South Ossetia on the other hand. However, not all of these markets are official and well-established; some participants stressed the need for these activities to be further consolidated.

Trans-border cooperation in energy and infrastructures

Participants addressed various issues and concrete projects aimed at boosting regional cooperation in the energy and infrastructure sectors.

A key component of Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia economic integration and trade liberalization will be the facilitation of free movement across their conflict borders. This is a huge challenge, since numerous formal and informal restrictions have been imposed to impede the free movement of people. It is possible, however, that local integration and liberalization could also be supported by micro-level cooperation in the water and energy sectors in the area.

The Azerbaijan-Armenia context is even more complicated. There is no movement of people across the international border between the two countries or across the Line of Contact surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and the districts controlled by Armenia. The border area is closed and restricted as a military zone.

- The Sochi-Sukhumi-Tbilisi-Yerevan Railway. This project was debated in 2004-2005, revived in the election campaign of the “Georgian Dream” coalition and raised again when Prime Minister Ivanishvili took office. It represents a classic case of economic considerations subject to prevailing security and policy concerns. The Georgian Government shelved the project after the Abkhaz de facto Government refused to re-open talks. The project is still potentially viable, however, and is regarded as a “game changer” by many experts in the South Caucasus.
- Micro-scale cooperation on water security between the adjacent Nagorno-Karabakh and undisputed Azerbaijani territories. The Sarsang water reservoir is on the Nagorno-Karabakh side of the divide, but is a major source

of supply for Azerbaijani territory. Currently, the dispensation of water is a politically motivated process. Negotiations and agreement on a mutually beneficial Sarsang water regime would be an important economic stepping stone and would serve to ease tensions between the two territories.

- The Jokhaz Dam on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border may become another example similar to the Inguri hydro power plant that connects Abkhazia and Georgia. The dam currently does not function, largely as a result of sporadic sniper shooting. This has caused major problems for irrigation and agriculture on both sides of the border. The two states could use the needs of the border farmer communities as the basis for an economically-driven security arrangement.
- Joint construction and exploitation of the Tkvarcheli thermal power station in Abkhazia would contribute to the development of a regional energy grid.

Trans-border movements of people and dialogue promotion

Cooperation in these areas might provide a real opportunity to enhance confidence building, if started quickly at regional and local levels. In the view of the participants, the so-called low-level initiatives, if organized and coordinated properly, could have a strong impact on preparing societies for peace. They should be targeted at different groups including journalists, women, young people, conflict veterans, refugees and IDPs, intellectuals (writers, scientists), artists, sportspeople, officials and NGO representatives.

Participants agreed that a number of confidence building measures and *low-level practical* projects, such as cultural exchanges, the revision of history books and training for journalists, should be undertaken to help reduce tensions between the parties to the conflict. They also recognized, however, that there is a limit to what such programmes can achieve and that there is therefore a need for political authorities to follow up by promoting dialogue and peace building measures.

Particular attention was paid by participants to the problems of hate and bellicose narratives. The eradication of hate speech, which is prevalent in all forms of media (TV, print, radio, and internet), is one of the greatest challenges to overcome in fostering better community relations. Among other proposals to resolve this problem, participants recommended that a formal list of “forbidden words” be compiled as a step towards doing away with hate speech in the media and thereby

improving community relations. This would necessitate implementation measures and, at some point, the cooperation of the authorities at various levels.

Participants also discussed a number of interesting initiatives at various levels that are worth exploring further:

Regional level

- Establishment of a joint centre for crisis prevention that would analyse developments and provide forecasts with a view to limiting any escalation of violence.
- Creation of hotlines between foreign and defence ministers, also made accessible to senior officials from these ministries, as a confidence-building measure and to promote regional solutions to regional problems.
- Facilitation of cooperation between civil society organizations in the countries of the South Caucasus, including in conflict regions.
- Creation of a single inter-governmental structure in the South Caucasus as a framework to address the most pressing issues.
- Communication within societies: Unlike younger generations, the older generations in the South Caucasus (persons aged 40 or more) have memories of and shared histories with other Caucasian communities. It is important to foster dialogue between these two generations with a view to disproving the negative stereotypes attributed to “others” by younger generations in the South Caucasus.

Bilateral level

- Promotion of intercultural and interfaith dialogue, including increased cultural and education exchanges (between universities, think tanks, business organizations, journalists, etc.); co-production of films and teleconferences promoting peaceful coexistence; and pan-Caucasian cultural festivals and sports competitions. One source of inspiration was a project that brought Turks and Greeks into a room and the Greeks were asked: “What do you think the Turks think about the Greeks” and vice versa. They then asked the Turks what they actually thought about the Greeks. This served to open up a dialogue and break down barriers created by misinformation and stereotypes. Another example given was an orchestra in Turkey with musicians from Armenia, Greece, Turkey

and most other ethnic groups in Turkish society who perform songs in all the different languages of the region (see “Whose is this song” at <http://www.der.org/films/whose-is-this-song.html>). In yet another project, a Greek filmmaker travels throughout the Balkans asking people she meets where a specific folk song comes from. Citizens from each country that she visits claim that the song mentioned is a unique part of their cultural heritage. In reality it is part of a shared history. Participants were of the view that this type of project would be very useful in the South Caucasus.

- Development of year-round tourism across the borders would increase intercultural exchange and benefit all regional economies.
- Joint restoration of the ancient Armenian site of Ani in Turkey, opening up the historic land bridge between the two countries for pedestrian crossing, and gradually creating a free tour and trade zone along the border that could stimulate thinking on alternative futures for the region. In this case, joint management of the Arpaçay/Akhourian dam straddling the Turkish-Armenian border and ongoing dialogue (that has never stopped) between border authorities of both sides could serve as a positive example of overcoming political obstacles for the settlement of technical problems.
- Armenia-Azerbaijan cooperation on environmental issues should continue, in particular to prevent fires in pastureland and farming areas in border areas.
- Establishment of working contacts between Georgian and South Ossetian Health Ministries to facilitate South Ossetian emergency cases’ access to high-tech medical care in Georgia.

International level

- Establishment of a high-level international consultative group mandated to assess issues, share best international practices in confidence building, and search for solutions.

Participants also discussed the role that history has played, and will continue to play, in the conflicts in the South Caucasus. It was observed, for example, that the international community thought in the 1990s that conflicts in the South Caucasus were being fuelled by nationalism. Yet these conflicts were, in large part, the result of the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

History has unfortunately become an instrument of conflicts, as many participants noted. The historical debate has become an ideology of antagonism: historical narratives essentially function to provide legitimacy for the current leaderships in the South Caucasus. Concretely, emphasizing past conflicts serves to justify huge military expenditures, as well as nationalistic and bellicose narratives. In addition, past traumas play an important role, as each new clash brings with it symbolic references to past fears and plays on mass psychology.

Thus, the international community needs to use independent analysis to deconstruct the debate in the South Caucasus. It should focus on bridging conflicting views and perceptions and creating a forward-looking dialogue, rather than nurturing past divides. A forward-looking dialogue could be especially effective if it is combined with efforts by civil society in the South Caucasus. Academics with a particular historical knowledge can play an important role in deconstructing political ideology. Such initiatives can be used as a peace building tool.

What is missing in the historical narrative in the South Caucasus, noted some participants, is not general history but particular stories of individuals who deviate from the stereotypes and standards of division set by some official institutions. The international community should work to support narratives that illustrate stories emphasizing the shared history of the South Caucasus, without concealing the realities of the conflicts. Honesty in this regard is essential in fostering harmonious relationships between peoples of divided communities.

Participants made several specific proposals:

- Common history project: Such projects, aimed at gathering historians from all regional communities in order to write elements of shared history, have precedents in Southern Europe. For example, a Southeast European *Joint History Project* resulted in the publication of a textbook edited by a group of Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Greek, Macedonian, Serbian and Turkish historians to promote intercultural understanding among high school students. This could inspire historians and experts in the South Caucasus to undertake a similar project, which would necessarily have to address issues of concern to all communities – including minorities.
- Another proposal is to promote a free thought network: for example, a group of interested people invite speakers to a private space and record speeches on the internet. After the speeches, they engage via the internet in a free discussion based on the topics the speakers covered – a low-cost and simple way of creating intellectual discussion in countries with restricted

freedom of expression. This model could also apply to a more elaborate and structured network that would connect intellectuals and/or journalists and enable them to comment on current events of direct relevance to the people and communities of the region. Similarly, a lecture being held at Yerevan University could be simultaneously broadcast at Baku University, possibly leading to a subsequent common discussion on the subject.

- Another proposal refers to history and the importance of collecting oral accounts of historical value from individuals that might deliberately be left out of official records.

Conclusion

Participants expressed deep appreciation for the inclusive and constructive nature of the discussions, which confirmed that divides can be overcome if there is willing on the part of all the actors concerned. While many issues were addressed, much remains to be done in order to translate ideas into concrete proposals. This will be the next challenge. The organizers advised that they plan to hold a follow-up seminar in 2013 based on the outcomes of the first seminar. It will aim at engaging in in-depth discussion on concrete proposals for trans-border cooperation, which will be clearly identified by participants from all regions of the South Caucasus.

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- Outlines of the participants' contributions

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- Managing relations with external players
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- Assessing probabilities

Session 3: The Ways Forward : Defining Common Interests

- Facilitating conflict resolution
Measures to be envisaged in dialogue promotion, rule of law and democracy
Facilitating cross-border movements of people
Measures to be envisaged in travel, business, health care, education

Session 4: The Ways Forward : Defining Common Interests

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Measures to be envisaged in:
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