

## FROM CONFLICT TO PEACE? STATENESS ASSESSMENT OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS COUNTRIES AT THE CROSSROADS OF POLITICAL PROCESSES FROM 2017 TO 2022

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### Abstract

The article reflects on the sustainability and security perspectives of the South Caucasus region. While discovering the different approaches to the notion of “stateness” and its assessment methodologies, the article brings up the problems of insufficient clarification of the concept, the need for further work on its conceptual and functional formulations. As the assessment also covers the non-recognized states, the peculiarities, difficulties and possibilities of stateness assessment of non-recognized states are revealed. The article proposes a definition of stateness and an integral model for stateness assessment, which would make it possible to carry out the stateness assessment of both recognized and non-recognized states within the framework of one model. With the help of the developed ‘Peace Index’, the article comprehensively assesses the levels of stateness of the three recognized: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan; and the three non-recognized states of the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia through all four fields of stateness – political, economic, social and security for the years of 2017 to 2022. On the basis of the carried-out assessment, the article articulates policy recommendations for the South Caucasus countries and the region as a whole - guiding how to handle the current delicate situation in this strategically and geopolitically important region. The article suggests a) an immediate regional integration, b) economic cooperation as a key for conflict resolution, c) change of peace mediation format, d) support to the reconsideration of government-civil society relations format, making the civil societies of the South Caucasus states the inner constant peace-demanders and development-forcers - as the package-wise steps to transfer the South Caucasus region from conflict to peace

**Keywords:** stateness, sustainability, state effectiveness, assessment, peace, resilience, South Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh.

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## Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union more than two dozen of countries (including the South Caucasus states) declared their independence and had to undergo a unique process throughout the history of mankind: post-Soviet transformation (Torosyan, Sukiasyan 2014). The societies of these countries faced unprecedented challenges along the way of formation of statehood and stateness, as neither experience, nor knowledge of previous decades was applicable, at the same time being compelled to cope with another not less complicated transformational process: globalization. But the problem is even more complicated for the group of those countries, which haven't been recognized, as there exist additional difficulties for stateness, particularly, conditioned by challenges and consequences of conflict phase, stringent limitation of international relations and its consequences, lack of experience and knowledge of building sovereign state, etc. The afore-mentioned is a prolific base for state fragility and failure – as a result imposing a great threat to domestic and regional stability and security, and hence requires precise study. The Five-Day War in 2008 (in South Ossetia), April 4-Day War in 2016 (in Nagorno-Karabakh) and 2020 44-Day-War (in Nagorno-Karabakh) came to prove that the neglect of the stateness processes in the non-recognized states can and, in fact, is bringing destabilization to the whole region. Suffice to note, that the destabilization is seen not only in the security field, but also flows into economic loses, political and social decline.

However, the issues of stateness (especially of non-recognized states) have been understudied. So, the point is not only the study of the problems, but the presentation of an assessment tool, which would help indicating the existing and potential problems and their roots - for their prompt solving. An integral model of assessment of 'stateness' the Peace Index (developed by the author) is a new integral assessment index, which not only gives an opportunity for the comprehensive assessment of non-recognized states, but also to assess them alongside with the recognized ones. It's also noteworthy that index is composed of 4 field-indexes: political, economic, social and security, and their sub-indexes, which comprehensively represent each field. Integral assessment of stateness allows to record simultaneously both progress and regress in all the fields of stateness, hence giving an opportunity to the states and international community to focus on the problem areas and to promptly undertake their solution process. Such approach would allow fighting against security threats and destabilization, thereby fostering peace and security, which conditioned the name of the Peace Index. Using the assessment model - Peace Index, this paper will comprehensively assess the levels of stateness of three recognized: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan; and the three non-recognized states of the South Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia through all four fields of stateness – political, economic, social and security for the years of 2017 to 2022.

### What is “stateness” and how can we assess it?

This article is not only representing a comprehensive and compound topic, reviewing a complex notion of “stateness”, but is also the ‘closing chapter’ of the large-scale research project of 10 years. Having reviewed the core features and conditions of state-building (Petrosyan 2016a) and stateness (Petrosyan 2016b; Manukyan 2018a) – including post-conflict contexts, segregated field and integral stateness assessment models (Manukyan 2020a), as well as the difficulties pertaining to the assessment of stateness of not only recognized, but also non-recognized states (Petrosyan 2016c; Manukyan 2020a; Manukyan 2020b), it was not only possible to come up with a comprehensive definition of stateness, but also to use it as an axis for the developed index, enabling the synchronous assessment of recognized and non-recognized states. But before jumping into the developed definition and index, it should be noted that though the concepts and models of assessment of stateness have started to develop since the 60s of the past century, they are still in the stage of elaboration and improvement. The term of stateness was first suggested by J. Nettl in his article “The state as a conceptual variable” (Nettl 1968) published in 1968, where he mainly focused on the idea of independence of variables of ‘stateness’ and ‘nationness’. But still the concept of stateness remains not distinct enough, as further tough work on its conceptualization and operationalization is needed. It can be explained by objective difficulties of formulation of the notion, which are associated with the complexity of the notion and the variety of views (Meleshkina 2011, 11). The diversity of the viewpoints on ‘stateness’ concept can be clearly demonstrated by the study of works dedicated to this issue.

The studies dedicated to the issue of stateness focus on giving definitions to separate components of stateness process: 1) attempts offering conceptual definitions of statehood (Nettl 1968; Tilly 1975; Tilly 1985; Spruyt 1996; Lindberg 2001; Lindberg 2009; Lehbruch 1993; Fukuyama 2004; Fukuyama 2005; Bartolini 2005); 2) search of strategic types of stateness (Rae 2002, Brubaker 1996, Linz and Stepan 1996); 3) conceptualization and institutionalization of communities’ political construction (Lijphart 2007; Lijphart 1977; Lijphart 1969; Libaridian 2023; Daalder 1974; Lehbruch 1993; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Caramani 2004); 4) the process of creation of states and nations (Moore 1968; Rokkan 1973; Rokkan 1987; Rokkan 1980; Rokkan and Valen 1962; Eisenstadt and Rokkan 1973); 5) the impact of historical institutionalization (Pierson 2000; Pierson 2004; Mahoney 2001; Collier and Collier 1991; Skocpol 1979; Skocpol 1985; Ziblatt 2006; Lange and Rueschemeyer 2005); 6) attempts of multilateral study of stateness, but, in fact, still facing problems with comprehensiveness (Fritz 2007; Bartolini 2000), but comprehensive conceptual works and empirical comparisons are still missing.

Can we assess stateness?: Yes, and in political science there exist two methods of stateness assessment (Manukyan 2020a):

- the assessment of segregated fields of stateness by separate indexes (Freedom in the World, Worldwide Governance Indicators, Human Development Index,

State Fragility Index and Warfare, Index of Economic Freedom, Political Atlas of the Modern World 2010)<sup>1</sup>,

- the assessment of stateness by integral models (Fragile States Index<sup>2</sup>) (Melville et al. 2010; Melville and Stukal 2011).

However, all the existing indexes – both integral and segregated field assessment, had some specific fragile points, particularly taking into account the comprehensiveness of our approach. At the same time all of them are not only eliminating the assessment of non-recognized states, but, logically, also fail to represent sub-indices that are so vital for assessing non-recognized entities, which, as a rule, are also in post-conflict phase. Simultaneously, there was also a need to ensure assessment objectivity, the equivalence of assessment criteria for all the states and the universality, i.e. applicability of each sub-index to all the states – no matter recognized or non-recognized. For the solution of the afore-named problems we have developed an integral model for the assessment of ‘stateness’, which remains at present the main evaluative and analytical tool of ‘stateness’ available: an integral model of assessment of stateness, the main evaluative and analytical tool of which should be the ‘stateness’ – as the state’s capacity of performing its main functions, becoming a full member of international community and a subject of international law. This definition has been elaborated in the result of comprehensive study of all the factors ensuring the processes of state-building and stateness. That same study led to the idea, that statehood/legal personality is a constituent part, particularly, in fact, the very basis and driving force ensuring state development and sustainability. The lack of it inevitably leads to a number of problems for stateness, which will be hereinafter practically shown on the example of the reviewed non-recognized states. So, one can assume that non-recognized status is a real challenge for a state, but the dilemma is that a number of states - both recognized pretty long time ago and comparatively freshly recognized – are in a way worse situation than some non-recognized states, though they enjoy the privileges of being recognized and do not have to face the challenges deriving from being non-recognized. So, though statehood/legal personality is a must and basis for the efficiency of state-building and stateness processes, the existence of it is not automatically ensuring development and sustainability (Manukyan 2020b).

This is the reason why the index aims to represent an integral model of assessment of stateness, which will be applicable both for recognized and non-recognized states. The creation of a model, which will have a practical implementation, can become truthfully helpful tool for identifying the existing and potential problems. Integral assessment of stateness allows to record simultaneously both progress and regress in all

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Freedom House. 2022. “Freedom in the World.” Accessed July 16, 2023. [https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world#.U\\_io2cV\\_vVc](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world#.U_io2cV_vVc); The World Bank Group. 2023. “Worldwide Governance Indicators.” Accessed July 21, 2023. <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>; UNDP. 2023. “Human Development Index.” Accessed August 14, 2023. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>; The Fund for Peace. 2023. “Fragile States Index.” Accessed June 11, 2023. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>; The Heritage Foundation 2023. “Index of Economic Freedom.” Accessed July 16, 2023. <http://www.heritage.org/index/>.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Center for Systemic Peace. 2020. “State Fragility Index and Warfare in the Global System 2019.” Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist/warlist.htm>; Center for Systemic Peace. 2021. “Polity IV Project.” Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>.

the fields of stateness hence giving an opportunity to the states and international community to focus on the problem areas and to promptly undertake their solution process. Such approach would allow fighting against security threats and destabilization, thereby fostering peace and security. Within the “Peace Index” a precise methodology has been developed, which would allow to carry out as objective evaluation as possible for each state. As the index assesses stateness level of both recognized and non-recognized states, there was a need to develop a methodology, which could have been implemented for the both, which was indeed a real challenge (Manukyan 2020a, Manukyan 2020b).

**Table 1. Peace index**

<b>Political Index</b>	<b>30</b>
State legitimacy	5
Political stability	5
Governance effectiveness	5
Constitutionality and rule of law	5
The right to vote	5
Effective Mechanisms against corruption	5
<b>Economic Index</b>	<b>30</b>
GDP per capita (USD)	5
Fiscal balance (GDP %)	5
Import / Net exports (GDP %)	5
External debt to GDP ratio (%)	5
Efficient income distribution (Gini coefficient)	5
Economic freedom	
<b>Social Index</b>	<b>30</b>
Employment indicator	5
Quality of public services	5
Accessibility and quality of health care and mandatory medical insurance	5
Literacy rate and quality of education	5
Minimal social conditions and protection of rights of refugees and IDPs	5
Environmental protection	5
<b>Security Index</b>	<b>30</b>
Quality and Efficiency of Security Agencies	5
Border and customs control	5
Absence of secessionist tendencies, civil wars, units having territorial claims, illegal armed units, not self-determination conflicts and domestic armed conflicts	5
Absence of foreign military bases and peacekeeping missions	5
Absence of illicit activities (drugs, illegal arms, trafficking)	5
Absence of external threats	5

The Peace Index assessment is a three-level system for assessing and processing the results: 1) case-study; 2) cluster analyses – according to the regions (with both recognized and non-recognized states within the region), as well as separate cluster analyses only for the non-recognized states; 3) global comparison (see Table 1).

For each of the outlined assessment levels has been developed a precise methodology, which would give an opportunity to solve the proposed tasks within each level as efficiently as possible (see Table 1 and Table 2). At the same time, within the scope of each level of assessment and processing of results detailed reports are planned to be published.

### **Case-Study**

Within “Peace to World” model each sub-index has a precise assessment criterion. I.e., if each sub-index is assessed within 5 points, then there should be pre-determined criterion for each point (0-5) representing in which case this or that condition within the sub-index will be given this or that score (See below the example of pre-determined criterion for one of the sub-indices).

<b>State Legitimacy</b>	
State power ratified by the people and exercised in accordance with constitutional principles	5
A number of non-serious problems in government-society relations	4
Problems in government-society relations, violations of constitutional principles by the authorities are recorded	3
A divide in government-society relations, the authorities violate the constitutional order	2
The government-society connection is disrupted. the authorities do not enjoy the people’s trust and regularly violate the constitutional order	1
Lack of legitimacy. the authorities were not elected by the people, there is no government-society connection	0

The political, economic, social and security indexes, each comprised of 6 sub-indexes and being assessed within 0-30 points, also have pre-determined positional ranking framework:

1. 25-30
2. 19-24
3. 13-18
4. 7-12
5. 0-6

A special five-level positional ranking methodology is developed for the “Peace Index”, which will help to group the results according to the following levels:

2. Sustainable – 100-120
3. Middle level of sustainability – 75-100
4. Fragile – 50-75
5. Under the threat of failure – 25-50
6. Failed – 0-25

Table 2. Stateness Assessment of the South Caucasus States by “Peace Index”

	RECOGNIZED STATES OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS															NON-RECOGNIZED STATES OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS																				
	ARMENIA					GEORGIA					AZERBAIJAN					NAGORNO-KARABAKH					ABKHAZIA					SOUTH OSSETIA										
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005						
<b>Political Index</b>	19	23	19	16	17	16	23	22	19	15	16	15	10	11	11	11	11	11	17	17	17	13	13	13	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3
State legitimacy	3	5	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
Political stability	3	3	3	2	1	1	4	3	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
Governance effectiveness	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	4	4	4	3	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Constitutionality and rule of law	2	3	3	2	3	2	4	4	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
The right to vote	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Effective Mechanisms against corruption	4	5	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Economic Index</b>	18	16	18	15	17	18	18	18	20	15	17	18	21	22	24	19	23	22	9	9	7	7	7	8	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
GDP per capita / USD/	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Fiscal Balance GDP	2	2	3	1	2	3	3	2	3	1	1	2	3	4	5	1	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Import / Net exports /GDP %/	4	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	2	3	3	5	5	5	4	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Public debt to GDP ratio%/	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Efficient income distribution / Gini coefficient /	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	3	2	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Economic freedom	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	4	4	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Social Index</b>	22	22	21	17	20	19	21	21	22	18	22	22	16	16	15	14	15	16	17	18	16	16	16	13	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4
Employment indicator	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Quality of public services	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Accessibility and quality of health care and mandatory medical insurance	3	3	3	2	4	4	3	3	4	2	4	4	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1





## **Stateness Assessment of the South Caucasus States by “Peace Index” 2017-2022**

It is vital to detect the most significant problem in each state, which is the factual starting point of all the other problems in these entities. Instead of compelling states to adhere to a universal model of good governance, development, stability, and so forth, a unique approach should be developed for each particular case (see Table 2). A vivid example for this is East Timor, where the UN’s demand of ‘universality’ ended in fragility close to that of a failed state.

### **Recognized trio**

Georgia - the promising state of the South Caucasus, used to be firmly moving towards consolidated democracy, has found itself in a situation, where its central problem is the rapid and drastic decline of democracy. Before the rounds of political crises Georgia has faced since 2019, the central problem of the state could have been named poor communication and cooperation between the civil society and civilians, but not decline of democracy, especially a drastic and rapid one.

### **Policy recommendations**

Georgia’s international reputation as being committed to European values such as democracy, the rule of law, and an independent judiciary is at great risk. This hasn’t affected the investments greatly, but it definitely would. The democratic regression has already negatively affected Georgia’s opportunities to attract Western businesses that have left Russia (were making their products in Russia). Now the country’s economics is yet improving, but the politics drains it down. A state heading towards consolidated democracy, should not let itself transform into a state regressing to autocracy. It is rather easy to represent policy recommendations for Georgia, as the European Commission has done the greater deal of the job and provided Georgia with a 12 points list of improvements that need to be made before candidate status can be considered<sup>3</sup>. But more importantly, these amendments are aimed at stabilization, recovery and democratic advancement of the state. So, in summary, Georgia needs to establish an independent anti-corruption body to hold the government accountable for its actions, pursue strict laws aimed at “de-oligarchizing”, encourage diverse political representation and resolve the issue of severe political polarization. Of course, there are also points covering the need of reconsideration and adoption of a new judicial policy that would bring forth reforms aimed at improving transparency and independence of the state’s judicial branch. In fact, the Commission and other European institutions have vividly expressed their willingness to help Georgia in these processes. And after one round of the Georgian Government’s failure or/and non-willingness (from June to December, 2022) to carry out the reforms, the latter has the second round of chance.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: European Commission. 2022. “Opinion on the EU membership application by Georgia.” Accessed June 24, 2023. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_22\\_3800](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_22_3800).

So, the ball is once again on the Georgian Government's court. If failed again, that would indicate they were purposeful to do it, and a big wavy red flag for the Georgian society.

Talking about the society: one of the 12 points is directed to ensuring the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes at all levels, which is vital for Georgia's democratic advancement. Despite being heavily targeted and harassed by the Government, the civil society is still a powerful force in Georgia. Apparently, the members of the society, who are either non-interested, or are non-informed, are outnumbering the ones, who are ready to step up and make an effort for their state's future. This is, to some extent, the result of civil society's oversight and mistargeting. And there is no better timing for the civil society to start working even harder: this mainly entails start working with broader strata of society, especially with elder generation and habitants of peripheries/remote settlements, who are the main target of electoral fraud.

All the 12 points outlined by the European Commission are undoubtedly vital, but addressing the issue with polarized and personalized political environment is an emergency. The increased polarization of political space between Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party and Saakashvili's United National Movement will continue at the expense of Georgia's democratic transition, democratic institution-building and the common good of Georgian society. Season this polarization with inter-society battles between the defenders of traditional values and those who favor greater social, cultural, and religious diversity, and you will get the "happy train" riding straight to autocracy. The EU should focus on reforms boosting an environment friendly for the emergence of new alternative political forces. The ruling party and the opposition have contradicting opinions on major topics. And the inability to reach a consensus has resulted in a situation, where currently there are insufficient dedicated democrats in parliament to defend democratic principles against an overbearing executive. In fact, democratic institutions are exposed to strong political interests, with most actors in parliament and the justice system being either unable or unwilling to resist them.

Though the EU's decision to not offer Georgia candidate status disappointed a nation that has long aspired to join the bloc, it would hopefully be a good wake-up call for the citizens. In fact, the mass rallies both in June, 2022 and December, 2022, were a bright manifestation that the Georgian society would not tolerate any alternative to their European future.

Georgia's democratic decline is not only merely a Georgian issue, it is a serious regional issue: Georgia has been the beacon of democracy of the region, and the South Caucasus just can't lose its loadstar. The only prospect this region can have is through democracy, so it is not only about the Western partners' money and effort input to this state, but also the democratic and peaceful future of a whole region.

Oil-rich Azerbaijan is in a way better economic shape than the other states of the region, however its economic improvements were not translated into social and political reforms, leading to its central problem – rich state, poor people. Gap between the socio-political and economic scores is eye-catchingly massive. Though its successful oil and gas policy and improved investment climate, the center-periphery gap is immense: the wealth is concentrated in the capital, whereas the peripheries are

experiencing extreme poverty and poor standards of living. Extensive corruption and embezzlement of already three decades has resulted into the concentration of the state benefits and wealth in the hands of the ruling clan and its companions accompanied by already annual international corruption and offshore scandals. In fact, embezzlement-oriented government and their satellites are solely concerned about their own profit, shaping the political system in a way that would facilitate their activity.

### **Policy recommendations**

The international society should bear in mind that the social-economic problems faced by the society would inevitably lead to yet another rise of distrust and discontent with the ruling regime. The ruling regime would undoubtedly do everything to keep its power, including the genocide of Nagorno-Karabakh population and the resumption of another war (this time directly with Armenia), as they would try to repeat the success of boosting their approval rating by military victory. For more than two decades the ruling regime was using the need of constant rearmament as a justification of state's wealth not transferring into social welfare, however in reality it has been a justification of their large-scale embezzlement. As the change of the ruling regime is not what is forecasted in the nearest future, the international society - mainly the organizations dealing with peace and security matters – should make an effort to compel the ruling regime to restrain from starting another war. Both war with Armenia and civil uprising can be ruinous for the most sustainable field of its stateness level - economic development results and prospects. Actually, if civil uprising could be “just” erosive and retarding for the economic progress, the war may cause the actual destruction of it, e.g., the gas and oil reservoirs, pipelines and/or railway roads, hindering the effectiveness of the investments, mainly foreign ones, in the country.

Instead, currently the West, especially the EU, is not decently backlashing some extremely troublesome events (e.g. the blockade and as a result serious humanitarian disaster they caused in NKR), as they are reviewing Azerbaijan as an alternative gas supplier. They even went so far as to call Aliyev a “trustworthy partner” and his regime a “reliable” one, whereas before the gas deal, they were not very happy with him and his deeds. So, in fact, they are silencing their democratic voice in exchange to gas supply. But the irony is that the alternativism of the deal and the mission of lessening the energy dependence from Russia has been failed: Azerbaijan is buying the gas<sup>4</sup> for re-exporting it to Europe, but at much higher price. So, Russia is still exporting its gas, and Azerbaijan is over-profiting both by obviously getting a great deal of money for re-exporting and having the EU in its pocket. But, the West, and especially the EU, should be back on track for the sake of the democratic and humanistic principles they are the bearers of.

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<sup>4</sup> The shipments under the terms of the agreement signed between SOCAR and Gazprom began on November 15 and will run until March 2023. The total amount will be up to 1 billion cubic meters of gas up to March next year (Source: “Russian gas supplies to Azerbaijan start on November 15 under new sales and purchase agreement.” *Gazprom*, November 18, 2022. Accessed July 16, 2023. <https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2022/november/article559243/>).

Armenia is truthfully the most shattered state of the region of 2017-2022 years, the central problem of which is the lack of decent state-policy and effective action plans. Post-Soviet social system transformation saw little success in this country, which led to the rise of political-economic-security bouquet of problems. The only possible solution could have been the implementation of efficient problem-solving and social-system transforming action plans, which was not what was happening in Armenia of 2018-2022 years.

### **Policy recommendations**

Vital decisions are on agenda, hence Armenian Government should stop erratic drifting: there is no better timing for the Government to start planning, planning and once again planning. The quite visible attempts of the Government to change the political and integrational vector of the state, implies taking measures for ensuring the economic, industrial and energy security of the state in advance. And any measure assumes very precise action plans and road maps. And more importantly, all the processes Armenia goes through – be it the change of the political vector or moreover, the peace deal, need a guarantor, which the Government has yet failed on ensuring. At the same time, the Government is in great need for well-trained diplomats, as this is not the best timing for amateurs' training in this extremely pivotal turnover for the country.

And what is more vital – the Government should perceive that weak-skinned is no way equivalent to being peaceful, it's weak-skinned, period. There are a number of realities that the Government should at last put up with: 1) concessionary policy, where there are so many compromises only from one side, is destructive for the state and its statehood perspectives, as everybody would try to take away anything they can from the weak; 2) giving up on own sovereign territories, as well as betraying the struggle for the right of peoples to self-determination is horrendous, and would be forgiven neither by the own people, nor the enemies - for the latter perceived as a sign they can try to get more; 3) the peace sought only by one side is not and will never be peace, quite the opposite. Yet another important note: the Government should start undertaking the responsibility for any state failure: constantly blaming "the formers" for any problem is, mildly saying, strange, especially for the problems emerged very late into their ruling period, as the current Government is ruling for already 5 years and has spread its power to all the 3 branches of the state. That has been a decent amount of time and power for making at least one positive and durable amendment for the state. At the same time, the society's frustration with them is getting bigger literally daily, so the ruling regime should stop being even a worst regeneration of the former regime. The Armenian society was assuming there won't be any force worse than the formers, but the current one is proving them wrong, showing the new horizons of being unbearable. So, the Armenian Government have a lot on its plate for the sake of not only Armenia's well-being, but simply being.

## Non-recognized trio

When studying entities like Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is rather hard to distinguish the central problem, as the number of problems and all their side-effects is indeed spectacular. However, deep and comprehensive study allows for the disclosure of the central problem in each of these states, which is the same in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite the fact that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are characterized by rather bad governance – permanently facing problems like inability to fulfil their basic functions and to provide public goods and services, extreme political instability<sup>5</sup>, poor administrative coordination, a high rate of corruption, the central problem is the steady decrease of control over their own statehood, particularly the control over political, economic, social and security processes, which are gradually being passed on to their ‘patron’ state Russia<sup>6</sup>. As a result, any assistance mission is bound to hit this ‘wall’, i.e., it is practically impossible to help a state overcome any issues, while that particular state is transferring state functions to a ‘patron’ state at the same time. Especially when that ‘patron’ state is not very interested in ensuring welfare, stability, security, and the like, but rather seeks to ensure its control over the entity, more precisely - its territory. This means that a vicious circle is being created, which makes it practically impossible to amend any of the stateness fields. Unless this situation is fixed, there won’t be any visible progress in improving the stateness level of these entities. Nevertheless, this is not an easily amendable problem, as neither the local governments, nor the ‘patron’ state see a problem in this situation: in fact, the latter is getting the desired, whereas the governments are enjoying all the privileges of a non-controlled status coupled with the ‘patron’ state’s permissiveness of their illicit activities and embezzlement. In recent years a number of Russian officials have started voicing concerns about the large-scale embezzlement of Russia’s funding, but it was directed not to solving the problem of corruption and embezzlement, but to impose another dose of political pressure on the entities. Hence neither party has a true interest in changing this set-up, which is so beneficial to them.

## Policy recommendations

So, yet the only obtainable solution could be the employment of a bottom-up assistance policy – supporting the societies of these entities in issues like human rights, social

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<sup>5</sup> In Abkhazia Prime Ministers are frequently replaced: 5 Prime Ministers in 5 years, and 2 Presidents were forced out of office amid anti-governmental protests, the current one – Aslan Bzhania is likely to become the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Source: “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership.” December 23, 2014. Accessed July 16, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/47288>; “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia.” November 24, 2008. Accessed July 16, 2023. <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902151096>; “Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on the State Border.” March 19, 2016. Accessed July 16, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/51539>; “Agreement with Abkhazia on a unified Russian military base in the republic.” October 6, 2011. Accessed July 16, 2023. <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/12951>; “Treaty on Alliance and Integration between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia.” May 20, 2015. Accessed July 16, 2023. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/49493/print>.

development, and in developing a functioning civil society. It is noteworthy that the societies of these entities have themselves more than once boycotted the devolving of broader power to Russia. This ongoing criticism is a sign of hope that if assisted by other external actors, there could be a change towards establishing and developing human rights, social development, and more importantly – a civil society. And the functioning civil society would be hopefully understanding the need of launching dialogue with Georgia. Any delay is making assistance more complicated, as at the behest of Russia both South Ossetia and Abkhazia are eliminating the activity of NGOs (especially the ones with foreign funding) in their territories. In South Ossetia NGO legislation amendment made in 2014<sup>7</sup> is very similar to Russia's 'foreign agents' law of 2012, and deliberately increased the oversight capacity over NGO activity, especially the ones with foreign funding – constraining them to more detailed and more frequent reporting. Until 2020 NGOs in Abkhazia used to get their funding mostly from abroad and were able to execute a certain influence on the government's policies, however in 2020 pandemic and economic downturn made Abkhazia sign an agreement with Russia that called for changes in a number of laws, including amendments that would give broader rights to Russian investors and impose restrictions on local NGOs that receive foreign funding<sup>8</sup>.

And finally for Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) the central problem is the threat of extinction. Before September 27, 2020, the central problem was the war: not 'frozen, not 'hot', but full with everyday tension across the whole borderline, where soldiers and sometimes even civilians were wounded or shot dead. After the 'hottest' 2020 44-day-war, when Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh, not 'frozen, not 'hot' war has been transferred to Armenia-Azerbaijan borderlines. This situation is kept alive by the continuous and immense financial input from the conflicting parties on each side of the conflict, currently especially in the case of Azerbaijan. The 2020 44-days war was a crushing blow for Nagorno-Karabakh (full with Azerbaijan's war crimes, even against the civilians), but aftermath of it has become an everyday struggle for existence (for people living there).

### **Policy recommendations**

A good starting point could be the OSCE Minsk Group addressing the problem of sale of more and more dreadful weaponry to both sides of the conflict, especially by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair country- Russia, while at the same time also restraining any other state from doing the same. Simultaneously, a change of the OSCE Minsk Group format should be initiated, particularly the rationality of format of three co-chair

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<sup>7</sup> Source: Law of the Republic of South Ossetia "On Non-Profit Organizations." Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://ugo-osetia.ru/politika/ofitsialno/zakon-respubliki-yuzhnaya-osetiya-o-nekommercheskikh-organizatsiyakh> (in Russian).

<sup>8</sup> Source: "Program for the formation of a common social and economic space between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia based on the harmonization of legislation between the Republic of Abkhazia and the Russian Federation." Accessed June 7, 2023. [http://presidentofabkhazia.org/upload/iblock/dc5/programma-1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2bIYhoxFbOL8wnV\\_k-9i35RokgOyKt6xqPWvB3YaWKySLebxjrIVbqMp0](http://presidentofabkhazia.org/upload/iblock/dc5/programma-1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2bIYhoxFbOL8wnV_k-9i35RokgOyKt6xqPWvB3YaWKySLebxjrIVbqMp0) (in Russian).

countries, which in their turn have deliberately divergent and colliding policies and interests.

Certainly, another round of an armed conflict, more accurately – invasion, would take place the moment the Russian peacekeeping forces leave Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the further presence of the Russian peacekeeping troops is under a big question mark both from ideological/ethic and functionality considerations: ideological/ethic consideration lies in the fact that “can a country, who started a bloody war on another nation, be the peacekeeper/protector of the other?”; functionality consideration lies in the ability and resources of Russia to provide to their peacekeeping troops to do their job considering the largescale war they started and for a long time are engaged in, and especially after their anticipated defeat in the Ukrainian war. Hence, though Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were relying on Russian support and asked the latter for a more vivid one, that would be just a temporary remedy, where “remedy” is extremely questionable. The blockade was a vivid example of that, as the Russian peacekeeping forces had the opportunity to resolve the problem right away, as they are the ones authorized to do so by the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020.

The people of Nagorno-Karabakh should persist on immediately transferring peacekeeping mandate to another peacekeeping mission (more preferably the EU/UN/NATO) and on opening air corridor and ensuring its security, which would be the only sustainable and durable solution.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

The cumbersome region of the South Caucasus can be researched and, what is more important, understood and given accurate policy recommendations, if the following peculiarities and challenges are taken into account:

- First and foremost, it is “rich” with 3 recognized and 3 non-recognized states in one teeny-tiny region – a phenomenon not found elsewhere. So, in order to discover and solve the region’s challenges, the non-recognized states should also be researched and assessed, no matter what attitude one has over their existence. The idea of researching these entities is not about accepting, recognizing or encouraging them, it’s about the accurate and comprehensive assessment of the challenges the regions faces/may face.
- It is a region of strategic position, hence of vital importance for modern-day superpowers (all of them + local big players - Turkey and Iran): one can notice the echoes of Cold War continue to play out in this region decades after the collapse of the USSR and the realignment of the global world. Once being a “crossroads of civilization”, in our days it has transferred into a crossroads of energy routs, becoming of pivotal importance for the energy, economic and security interests of the West and Russia. As a result, e.g., the South Caucasus region finds itself in the midst of the “battlefield”, where Russia has been longing to strengthen its energy monopoly over the Europe and Europe has been trying to lessen and in longer perspective – terminate, its energetic dependency

from Russia. However, the EU has failed in its search of alternative supply, as it opted for buying gas from Azerbaijan, which, in its turn, buys the gas from Russia and resells it to the EU, but at way higher price.

- It is a region, which suffers from significant economic disparities, especially Armenia and Georgia, as well as, of course, the non-recognized entities. In the case of Azerbaijan, though the state's economic situation is not that challenging as in the cases of Armenia and Georgia, but the phenomena here is that though state is in good economic shape, the people of Azerbaijan are still suffering from extreme poverty issues. A set of common economic problems have been prevailing in the region for 3 decades, which were also accompanied by the Covid 19 pandemic consequences for the last 3 years. The unsettled conflicts have created, so called, "no-go zones" in the region, making the trade and free movement between the states tangled, costly and in some cases even not secure, at the same time hindering the possibility of establishing truly investment-friendly environment in the region. At the same time, migration, brain drain and high rates of poverty for already three decades have been eroding the prospects of overcoming the economic problems.
- It is a region of 3 unsettled conflicts and sequential security issues. While researching it, one should acknowledge the complexity and interrelated nature of security threats in the region: either separately or jointly, the unsettled conflicts, inner-state power struggles, transnational crime, foreign interference, geopolitical and geo-economic battle over the region, all aggravate the current and potential regional security threats. There used to be a false trend of calling the conflict in the South Caucasus region "frozen", which is extremely not accurate. Though conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia are in a kind of a sleeping mode, they have not gone anywhere, moreover - resolved. Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is also far from being resolved, despite Aliyev's assurances. As a consequence of 2020 44-Days-War in Nagorno Karabakh, the presence of Russian peacekeepers and Turkish military observers has created a very fragile and complicated geopolitical configuration in the region. All in all, 2008 5-day-war, 2016 April 4-day-war, 2020 44-days-war and Azerbaijan's constant attacks on Armenia's sovereign territories have shown how fragile is the stability and how disastrous is any armed conflict in this region, making it, mildly saying, not an investment friendly one.
- It is a region only geographically: the lack of economic/political/any integration and cooperation between the recognized trio and, mildly saying, tense relations with the non-recognized trio have put ray of doubt on whether the South Caucasus can be considered a region of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead, the geographical perception of the region is extended due to tighter relations with the economic and political power centers of the eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. The fragmentation of the region has reached to the extent of a closed borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan (and Turkey) since 1993. In fact, the lack of historical experience of collaboration and integration issue have made it a region of solo-players: each having its own route of integration and strategic partnership: Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and strategic



partners with Russia – at the same time, with tight ties with the EU, Georgia is trying hard for EU membership, Azerbaijan wants none of it, instead preferring keeping up with Turkey’s “Great Turan” plans.

### **Policy recommendations for sustainable peace and security in the region**

To address the afore-mentioned challenges, a number of steps should be taken both by the South Caucasus states and the international society. The multi-layered and cumbersome nature of the regional issues makes them hard addressable and soluble, hence the policy recommendations are directed to the actors, who can be eager to assist. The following steps are proposed to undertake in short-term perspective and “package”, i.e., instantaneous logics:

#### *I. Integration is a must and emergency: regional peace and security is not obtainable without it!*

The South Caucasus states should start working on regional integration without further ado, trying to shape a “Steal and Coal Union”-like entity. Why particularly a Steal and Coal Union like entity? As Schuman has noted in 1950, “The solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible”. This is the motivational precedent for the region, as if France and Germany were able to reconcile after two world wars and form a strong unity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the South Caucasus states should be able to do the same in the 21<sup>st</sup> one. Obviously, the South Caucasus states have not been able or, to be more precise, haven’t had the political will to establish peace for 3 decades. And who can be the best candidate to assist the process? - the EU, which might repeat its success – this time being able to reconcile a way smaller region than it had to do in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If succeeded, aside from being able to cope with social-economic and security challenges, the South Caucasus states would be able to stand as a united front against the geopolitical storm that has been raging for the last 30 years in the region and the upcoming 30 are not leaving hope for any chill.

Why this rush? Any further war between Azerbaijan and Armenia lessens the possibilities of success and deepens the crisis: Azerbaijan just keeps on starting war on sovereign territory of Armenia, settling its troops further into Armenia’s sovereign lands, as well as would definitely try to invade the remaining part of Nagorno-Karabakh, as soon as the Russian peacekeeping troops would leave the region in 3 years or before that – with Russia’s “blessing”. Another option is by constant military assaults make Armenia to finish delimitation and demarcation process and recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.

#### *II. Economic cooperation is the key for conflict resolution.*

Currently a kind of a deadlocked circle is established: though the regional economic cooperation and subsequently regional integration could be the perfect pathway for conflict resolution, in essence the conflict resolution lies as the precondition for any economic and regional cooperation. At the same time, another deadlock is the diverse economic integration trajectories of the South Caucasus states, hence the solution to the

economic cooperation should be found in the most facile layout, as if not to further complicate the already complicated situation, i.e., not messing up with the current economic integration configurations. As the three recognized states of the South Caucasus are the part of Eastern dimension of EU's Neighborhood Policy - Eastern Partnership, the EU has the precise leverages to propose a "joint association agreement"-like document, which should be certainly anchored around first and foremost economic cooperation and interdependence, which would make the South Caucasus states more than non-reluctant to cause any drama to the established situation, as it would inevitably mean causing big drama to their own economy.

*III. The change of the peace mediation format (the hardest to fulfill).*

Peace is what one cannot find in this region. Hence, something has been obviously going wrong with peace mediation format for conflict resolution processes over Nagorno-Karabakh (the OSCE Minsk Group) and Abkhazia/South Ossetia (the lack of it). If one thinks that conflict resolution process is a tough one in Nagorno-Karabakh, he is not familiar with the one over Abkhazia and South Ossetia: the lack of conflict resolution process for almost 2 decades has hampered the process a lot. These entities are simply under Russia's control (occupation - if you wish), and, in fact, Russia is not letting any peacekeeping or monitoring mission to enter these entities since 2008. So, any mediation initiative should get Russia's permission. Here one thing is for sure: Georgia wouldn't be reluctant to work, moreover, trust Russia its peace and security perspective.

In the case of the conflict resolution process over Nagorno-Karabakh, a change of the OSCE Minsk Group format should be initiated, particularly the rationality of format of three co-chair countries (the USA, Russia and France), which in their turn have deliberately divergent and colliding policies and interests. However, the further presence of the Russian peacekeeping troops is under big question mark both from ideological/ethic and functionality considerations: ideological/ethic consideration lies in the fact that "can a country, who started a bloody war on another nation, be the peacekeeper/protector of the other?"; functionality consideration lies in the ability and resources of Russia to provide their peacekeeping troops to do their job considering the largescale war they started and for a long time are engaged in, and especially after their alleged defeat in Ukrainian war. At the same time, currently in Armenia there is a visible shift of public moods over the strategic partnership with Russia and membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as Russia is currently and in the upcoming years would try hard to maintain the current situation of episodic slow-motion war, where they (CSTO in pack) "don't see" how Azerbaijan periodically starts armed conflict against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. What concern Russia more is placement of its troops in strategically important locations in the South Caucasus region, even by the cost of genocide of Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and, why not, of Armenia itself.

So, what can be done in such a delicate situation? One should start from reviewing the regional and global players. So, the regional players: Iran is fighting for establishing and maintaining peace in the region, whereas Turkey does the mere opposite. International players: Russia is not even reviewed as an option for Georgia and has lost Armenia's trust, as for the last 2 decades has manifested that finding a

sustainable solution is not its goal; the USA has not been interested in the region for the last 15 years, however recently is active (on the highest congress level), and only time would show whether those are baby steps of coming back to the region or just a one-time action before November midterm elections, the EU temporarily deployed 40 EU civilian monitoring experts along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan (the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP) by deploying EU observers from the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia) with the objective of monitoring, analyzing and reporting on the situation in the region (ended in 19 December, 2022, and a new mission (initially mandate of two-years) starting its work on 20 February, 2023) and the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia in distant 2008. Though the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia was a great start, but just 40 monitoring experts were not enough to cover the whole borderline, and the Azerbaijani and especially Russian politicians have been trying to discriminate the effectiveness of that mission, hence the EU should have made an effort, as “you never get a second chance to make a first impression”. The vital example is the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, comprised of 200 monitors, which is referred as not very effective, as it is not preventing anything. Actually, it is not a fair judgment, as the goal of a monitoring mission is not prevention, but problems reporting, which the mission is fulfilling. However, it is not what these types of conflicts need, instead they need a rough-tough mediation, which is not the EU’s story. Therewith, the EU doesn’t have strong mechanisms for conflict resolution and after some time it should pass the baton: the UN is a better option – with the US as the main player, of course, if the latter would be interested (Kosovo has been a vivid example). The same for Abkhazia and South Ossetia – the ongoing EU monitoring mission across the borderline (only from Georgian side, obviously), should be handed over to the big old peacekeeper – the UN. Would that be hard? Yes! Is there any other option to come to a solution? No!

One thing is for sure - Russia would fight for staying at least in the mediation pack: taking into account its significant military presence in Armenia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and peacekeeping troops in Nagorno-Karabakh. One cannot be that naive to think that Russia would one day just take its whole weaponry, equipment and troops and go away from the region (even in case of defeat in Ukraine), can one? However, if the first policy recommendation, i.e., regional integration, would be fulfilled, it would be quite possible with a joint effort to tell Russia “sorry, not sorry”.

#### *IV. Civil society as the inner peacekeeper and development-forcer.*

The only solution to an ongoing regional peace is the constant social demand of restraining from any further armed conflict, the main demander of which should be the civil society. There is still an immense work to be done in this field in the South Caucasus states, as the civil society is yet consolidating in Armenia and Georgia, but decimated by continuously increasing repression in Azerbaijan, hence currently they would not be able to execute that role without support. At the same time, the civil society organizations share the same troublesome feature in all the South Caucasus states (as well as in many post-Soviet ones): not having state support and funding, they get foreign ones and find themselves kind of obliged to represent fund-givers satisfying oriented researches, as a result reducing their objectivity, credibility and what is more important - the effectiveness of support to problem solving. At the same time, a few

“chosen ones” work with the governments, more accurately say and do whatever the government wants, hence cannot be considered authentic members of civil society.

So, the solution could be the support to the process of reforming and reconsidering the format of government-civil society relations: their relations should be elevated to a formally established interaction format, where 1) the civil society would become inseparable part of decision-making process – on constant basis providing the needed studies and policy recommendations; 2) the governments would stop treating these organizations as merely grand-seekers, instead would approach them as the vital driving force towards sustainability and development. Undoubtedly, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum is an immense help, but a reconstruction of government-civil society relations is needed. This is the only way to craft the civil society of this region as a two-sided sword, which would make both the governments and the societies of their states to stick to idea of so much needed peace.

### **Supplementary material**

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2023.2.5.011>

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

### **Ethical standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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