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THE 3+3 REGIONAL COOPERATION AND GEORGIA: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

SOSO DZAMUKASHVILI

175

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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During the past decades, many initiatives have been proposed for regional cooperation in the South Caucasus, mainly coming from Georgia and Turkey. In 1999, the then Georgian President, Eduard Shevardnadze, conceived the idea of the 'Peaceful Caucasus Initiative' with an objective to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states in the region. In the following year, a similar proposal was laid down by the then Turkish Prime Minister, Suleyman Demirel, who intended to create the 'Stability Pact for the Caucasus' initiative. Later in 2008, the then Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, floated plans to establish the 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform' that would bring the three states of the South Caucasus together with Turkey and Russia in order to tap the sustainable economic development of the region. In 2010, the then Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, promoted the idea of the 'United Caucasus' platform (Kaleji 2021). Despite coming up with a plethora of ambitious cooperation initiatives, none of the leaders managed to push their initiatives to come into motion.

In December 2020, after the end of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, Erdoğan once again made a proposition for a new regional cooperation platform (Daily News 2020). Nevertheless, unlike previously, this time he suggested creating a new format, the Six Country Regional Cooperation Platform (3+3),* which would encompass the three states of the South Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia) together with the greater regional powers surrounding the region (Turkey, Russia and Iran). The platform was envisioned to enhance sustainable peace in the region through implementing economic, trade, transport and infrastructure projects (Reuters 2020). During his speech at the victory celebration in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku, Erdoğan underlined the need for such regional cooperation in the South Caucasus, especially in the transport sector, as it could be a "win-win game for all participating sides" and could even turn a new page in the long-severed Turkey-Armenia ties (Deutsche Welle, 2020; Reuters 2020a). Iran and Russia immediately showed interest and enthusiasm towards the project. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, even made trips to the other five countries envisaged in the proposed platform to discuss the ways of cooperation and "coordination on regional issues."

* Even though Georgia refused to become part of the initiative, and it is currently '3+2,' this paper refers to the platform as '3+3' when discussing it in general. '3+2' is used to underline Georgia's absence in the format.

At the first glance, the concept behind the 3+3 initiative is attractive as it has been designed to promote sustainable peace through economic and infrastructure projects. However, the subtext behind the regional cooperation might be providing illiberal regional players with a new political tool to enhance their geopolitical power in the South Caucasus. This might create serious problems for the security environment for Georgia.

An Opportunity for Regional Influence

The geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus has undergone shifts in the wake of the second Karabakh War. Since the November 2020 ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which was moderated by Moscow, Russia accrued an additional pivot for boosting its influence in the region. The Kremlin's leverage has been substantially bolstered through the deployment of 2,000 peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh aimed to "control the ceasefire and the cessation military actions" in the conflict zone. Simultaneously, neither the EU nor the US has attempted to actively intervene in the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan which gave way for the Kremlin to emerge as the main conflict mediator (Dzamukashvili, 2021; Tass 2020). Hence, Moscow has been "keen" on Erdoğan's proposal to further strengthen its foothold in the South Caucasus (BBC 2020). On October 6, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, even made an announcement that Moscow was committed to the establishment of a new 3+3 format to "address the issues of security, unblocking economic and transport ties" (Anadolu Agency 2021).

Russia's enthusiasm toward the project came as no surprise as the Kremlin has long sought to boost its leverage and undermine the 'Western encroachment' in the region of its "special interests." Moscow has been interested in isolating its neighborhood from Western influence and making it difficult for the US and NATO to strengthen cooperation with the region, especially with its strategic partner, Georgia (Cooley 2017). It would be naïve to believe that the only aim of the initiative is boosting the economy and infrastructure of the region, especially given Russia's track record in the South Caucasus. The six-party regional platform would serve Moscow as a *modus operandi* to gradually build a new reality in its southern neighborhood and to dominate the smaller countries of the region. It is noteworthy to mention that Moscow was not keen about a similar initiative, the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which

Erdoğan proposed in 2008 after the Russo-Georgian war. Turkey and Russia found themselves embroiled in a trade dispute after Ankara had allowed US ships to transit the Bosphorus Strait to provide aid to Georgia following the Russian aggression (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2008). At the same time, the revitalization of the relationship between Ankara and Yerevan was out of the question in the Kremlin since maintaining hostile relations between Armenia and Turkey as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan was a lever for Moscow to keep greater influence over the region. However, the outcome of the second Karabakh war changed the situation and while Russia does not favor increasing Turkish presence in the region, it has accepted the new realities and takes as much advantage as possible. Now, being the major moderator between Baku and Yerevan, Moscow will be able to use '3+3' as a new opening to further enhance its influence and, at the same time, keep the ever-increasing Turkish influence in the region in check.

In the meantime, Turkey has also gained influence on the processes taking place in the region. Having immensely contributed to Azerbaijan's victory through arms supplies, Ankara has accrued little but unprecedented military presence in the region. Prior to the war, Ankara solely used to be an economic player in the region. Nevertheless, the situation has been changing as the Turkish armed forces are now present in Azerbaijan as part of a joint Russian-Turkish military facility. Ankara and Baku regularly hold joint military drills on Azerbaijani soil which may also host a Turkish military base in the near future (Khachatryan 2021). During his visit to Baku in June 2021, Erdoğan mentioned that there was a possibility for Ankara to build a base in Azerbaijan under the Susa Declaration on Allied Relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey which he and President İlham Aliyev signed on June 15. The agreement calls for stepped-up cooperation between Ankara and Baku in the military sphere (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2021).

The Turkish government realizes Russia's importance in the region and despite a somewhat competitive relationship with Moscow, it has sought to work with the Kremlin for the sake of achieving its own regional ambitions. For instance, since the end of the war, Turkey, alongside Azerbaijan, has been pushing for the construction of a transport link between Azerbaijan and Turkey via southern Armenia that could solidify Ankara's transport connection with the South Caucasus and, at the same time, boost the region's geo-economic importance, something that largely attracts Azerbaijan as well (Dzamukashvili 2021).

Iran could potentially gain more than any side of the initiative. Tehran was largely absent in the war and did not gain a new footing in the South Caucasus like Turkey or Russia. Sanctioned by the US, Iran has been on the lookout for new economic and infrastructure opportunities. Iran sits astride two important trans-continental transportation corridors that cross the South Caucasus: the North-South Corridor and the Persian Gulf–Black Sea Transit Corridor (Caucasus Watch 2021). With the region being a potential gateway for Iran, new land routes via Armenia and Georgia would play an essential role for Tehran’s economy, providing it with a transport corridor to the Black Sea and on to Europe. Furthermore, Iran remains the only country that has maintained regular diplomatic relations with all three countries in the South Caucasus which could additionally boost its prominence in the region (Kucera 2021). While Armenian-Turkish relations have not yet been restored, and relations between Georgia and Russia have been severed since 2008, Tehran would be the only participating side to obtain a leading position in the platform and host high-level meetings.

Additionally, in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war, Baku took control of the territory critical for Iran’s land transportation routes. The Azerbaijani government has imposed a tough policy on entries into the territory via Armenia, furthering tensions that developed between Tehran and Baku (Kucera 2021a). In this situation, a six-party cooperation initiative could combine these two strategically significant transit corridors. Tehran could warm tensions with Azerbaijan and guarantee the safe passage of its trucks headed towards Armenia. Through developing trans-border rail networks under the framework of a six-state initiative, Iran could enhance its status as one of the major regional players in the South Caucasus.

Security Concerns

In December 2021, Russia hosted the inaugural meeting within the scope of the 3+3 initiative where Georgia was absent. Even though the Georgian flag was waving next to the heraldry of the participating states in Moscow, Tbilisi reiterated that engagement in this regional platform would be “very hard” considering “no process towards de-occupation,” noting that sovereignty and territorial integrity were “red lines” (Agenda 2021). Strikingly, the position of the Georgian Foreign Minister, David Zalkaliani, has been ambiguous as he has also underlined that Georgia’s participation in regional initiatives was important “not to fall behind the developing

processes in the region.” However, the statement was followed by public outrage which pushed the government to officially decline participation in the format in November 2021. Tbilisi’s move *de facto* turned the initiative into ‘3+2’ even though it is still referred to as ‘3+3’ by the other five participating states. Strikingly, representatives of these five countries have stated that the “door [of the initiative] remains open to Georgia” (Agenda 2021a). This is a blatant indication that the signatories still hope that Georgia will change its stance toward its membership of the format.

The initiative poses a threat for Georgia as it is inherently incompatible with the country’s national interests. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 20 percent of Georgia’s internationally recognized territory, remain occupied by Russia - one of the members of the platform that openly claims to be the major actor within the initiative (Detsch 2020). For more than a decade, Russian occupying forces have demarcated along, and allegedly beyond, the administrative lines between Georgia and occupied territories in a process referred to as ‘illegal borderisation’ or ‘creeping occupation.’ The abduction and imprisonment of Georgian citizens on the territory under separatist control and humanitarian difficulties in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been unresolved problems for Tbilisi for more than a decade (Paul 2018). In addition, Russia has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the 2008 August war and has built a substantial military presence in both breakaway territories. Since the war, Tbilisi and Moscow have had no diplomatic relations, with the Abashidze-Karasin dialogue being the sole communication channel between the two countries.

Kremlin officials often reiterate that Russia is the major mediator in the South Caucasus, even at meetings with delegations of other participating states of 3+3, indicating that maintaining the leading position in the region of its “privileged interests” is a top priority for the Kremlin. Russia already enjoys immense leverage over Armenia and Azerbaijan and its presence as a moderator of the conflict to different extents is requested by both countries. Yerevan is even more eager to see its allied Russia more actively engaged in conflict resolution processes to defend its own interests (Minzarari 2020). For instance, at the Sochi Summit in December 2021, both the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, and the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, praised Russia for successfully regulating the conflict and reconciliation processes (Dzamukashvili 2021b). These circumstances provide fertile ground for strengthening Russia’s leverage

and political resources in the South Caucasus to dominate the regional cooperation format. Russia's willingness to assert itself as a leader of the 3+3 initiative has already been symbolically demonstrated with the first meeting being held in Moscow (Azernews 2021). Hence, potential participation in a regional body along with Russia would be a non-starter for Tbilisi unless Moscow ends its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For Georgia, participation in the initiative would mean jeopardizing its sovereignty and territorial integrity. As mentioned above, the Kremlin recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Considering this fact, Georgia's participation in the '3+3' would be accepting the reality of the '3+3+2' where Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be participating sides. Thus, Moscow would utilize the initiative as an additional *raison d'état* to support and justify the "independence" of Georgia's breakaway regions. Membership in a political formation with Russia as a leading actor, within which Georgia would have to fulfil commitments delegated by the Kremlin, would be internationally regarded as a *de jure* change of Georgia's foreign policy orientation as well as "giving up the fight for sovereignty" (Batiashvili 2021).

Encircled by Russian Leverage

The Kremlin's leverage over the South Caucasus may unfold serious risks for Georgia as a successful implementation of the '3+2' format could further solidify Russia's position as a dominant regional player. Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, Tbilisi has been eager to break free from Moscow's sphere of influence and has been committed to acquiring membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU, NATO). Since then, around 70-80 percent of Georgia's population has expressed support for integration into the European Union and NATO while Russia has been considered the biggest threat by the majority of the population (Jam News 2020). The shifts in Georgia's foreign policy orientation in the first half of the 2000s have been deemed a security challenge by the Kremlin as part of the West's plan to impede Russia's foreign policy and undermine its sovereignty (Dzamukashvili 2022c). While becoming part of the 3+3 platform would be equal to subverting Georgia's sovereignty, its absence in the format might not mitigate other concerns either. Georgia's long-term rejection of the format would drive Russia to utilize the initiative to establish an unfavorable reality for Georgia; that is, geopolitical and geoeconomic isolation. Recently, the Kremlin has been explicitly demanding security

assurances from NATO, such as ending the open-door policy, ruling out membership of Georgia and Ukraine and limiting troops' and arms' deployment on the Alliance's eastern flank (The Telegraph 2022). Without the active engagement of the US and the EU in the South Caucasus, Western soft power in the region would be doomed to fade. The lack of Western leverage and an active presence of influential non-democratic actors, such as Russia, Turkey and Iran, would start a sort of chain reaction that could undermine Georgia's tangible steps taken towards the integration within Western institutions and alter the process of democratization and Europeanisation. Georgia has already faced a series of political crises that have posed serious challenges to its quality of democracy (Dzamikashvili 2021d: 88-89). While these challenges have not been overcome even with the active engagement of the country's Western partners, such as the EU and the US, the diminished democracy reinforcing impact and the presence of a political architecture imposed by authoritarian actors could create a fertile ground for authoritarianism, corruption and a lack of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. On the other hand, by eventually crowding out Western presence from the South Caucasus, the Kremlin would lever the new geopolitical reality to coerce Tbilisi toward the Russian orbit.

The 3+3 initiative (or 3+2 without Georgia) is in its embryonic stage and as Georgia has opted out from being a part of it, there is a possibility for Tbilisi to end up in a sort of political isolation as well. Tbilisi could be concerned over possible transport corridors that could bypass Georgia (Coffey 2021). The construction and restoration of railway and land routes across the region, as provided in the 2021 January trilateral agreement between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, has envisioned a new transit reality for the South Caucasus. According to the deal, Armenia could acquire a new transit function, while Azerbaijan would have the opportunity to further diversify its transport connections with global markets. While new connections would bypass Georgia, they could potentially downgrade the country's regional transit role.

However, the possibility of this scenario is extremely low, at least in a short term. Even though Georgian leaders want to be part of future infrastructure projects in the South Caucasus, recent history shows that Georgia can do so without allying itself with stable authoritarian actors such as Russia or Iran. Over the past two decades, Georgia has already been at the heart of most of the region's key infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-

Ceyhan pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor. These successful initiatives have been implemented without any regional formats similar to '3+3.' Moreover, these transport and energy links have functioned for more than two decades which makes it extremely difficult for Moscow to substitute them with new projects. The only factor that could somewhat decrease Georgia's transit importance could be the Zangezur corridor (Azerbaijan-Armenia-Nakhchivan transport link) that could be incorporated in the 3+3 initiative (Lomsadze 2021). However, systematic tensions between Yerevan and Baku still put a question mark over the future of the transport link. Substituting routes that cross Georgia with the Zangezur corridor require sustainable peace and reconciliation between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Meanwhile, Georgia should be wary with regard to trade and economic relations with Russia. Tbilisi should try to avoid becoming overly dependent on trade with its northern neighbor. Even though '3+2' might not be posing an immense threat to Georgia in the short term, it is paramount to take necessary measures for the Georgian government to mitigate long-term risks. To avoid possible isolation, Georgia should continue deepening its strategic partnership with Turkey and Azerbaijan in trade, energy cooperation and transport. At the same time, Georgia should remain its pro-Western orientation and be committed to Euro-Atlantic integration. Tbilisi should try and take on the role of mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan jointly with the EU to assist the conflicting sides to resolve the border demarcation and delimitation issues. This could be done under the framework of the Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative, which was announced by the Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, in September 2021, from the rostrum of the United Nations General Assembly (Gharibashvili 2021). Brussels has already shown interest in supporting the reconciliation between the two South Caucasian states as the European Council President, Charles Michel, has already hosted a trilateral meeting. The Georgian government could be an addition to this format and it could provide a round table for its neighbors and the EU for further discussions in Tbilisi.

On the other hand, the region is desperate for the West's active engagement. Now is the time for Washington and Brussels to step up to the plate. First of all, the US and the EU should continue exercising their leverage to reinforce Georgia's commitment to democratic reforms and the rule of law. To increase its soft power in the region, Western actors should be more proactive in terms of engaging in peace and reconciliation processes in the South Caucasus and act as moderators, creating

additional discussions platforms for Baku and Yerevan. As for the EU, it should revitalize the Eastern Partnership Initiative and transform its 'one size fits all' approach to Eastern Partnership states by adopting sustainable country-specific policies that will be in compliance with national aspirations and necessities (Glurjidze and Dzumukashvili 2021). Diverging the interests of the EU's member states hinders Brussels from keeping the EaP on the agenda as the EU's transformative tool in the region. To continue effective democracy-building processes in the region, member states should speak with one voice about the depth of the sectoral integration in the Eastern Partnership policy.

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