



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

How the war in Ukraine has changed views on Russia in the South Caucasus

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Highlights

- The South Caucasus is the region of fault lines of confrontation between West and East: the West vs Russia and the West vs China.
- Armenia had been shifting its foreign policy before the war in Ukraine, so the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Armenia has been minimal.
- The war in Ukraine has exposed Russia's military weakness, which might affect Russia's mediation role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.
- Before the war in Ukraine, Russia had sticks, but no carrots, while the West had carrots and no sticks. After Russia invaded Ukraine, it has lost its sticks whilst the West has acquired them.
- There is no illusion that Russia is going to leave the region. Russia is still viewed in the region as a security provider and an 'arbiter'.
- There is a negative trend in Georgia's public opinion towards Russia. However, considering Georgian economic dependency on Russia, the Georgian government's attitude towards Russia remains ambiguous.

Summary

The Contact Group convened in May to discuss how the war in Ukraine has changed views on Russia in the South Caucasus, namely in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

An Armenian speaker pointed out that the South Caucasus had always been a fault line of confrontation between West and East. But in the expert's opinion, the war in Ukraine has not impacted Armenia much, as its foreign and domestic affairs had already been changing since the 2018 Armenian revolution.

A speaker from Azerbaijan argued that in Azerbaijan, Russia is perceived as a country with imperial ambitions, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine contributed to this picture further. However, Russia is also viewed as a security provider and a mediator in the region. Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Western support to the country have shown that Russia has no longer either sticks or carrots while the West has both. Therefore, the war in Ukraine has drastically changed Russia's role in the region.

A participant from Georgia explored the ways in which Russia's war in Ukraine changed Russia's influence on and role in Georgia. Despite Georgia's significant economic dependency on Russia, the country is viewed increasingly negatively by the majority of the Georgian population. However, the Georgian government's attitude towards Russia remains ambiguous – it condemns the invasion but is not interested in sanctioning Russia.

The South Caucasus in international relations

The expert from Armenia argued that the South Caucasus is where we find fault lines of confrontation between West and East: mainly the West vs Russia, but also the West vs China. From the Russian point of view, which dates back to the Primakov doctrine, Russia sees this region as a sphere of influence, with the ultimate goal of restoring Russian dominance in the former Soviet republics. On the contrary, the United States perceives itself as a state that can contain regional powers, as explained in Brzezinski's book 'The Grand Chessboard'.

The impact of the war in Ukraine on Armenia

The Armenian expert highlighted that the war in Ukraine had not significantly impacted Armenian foreign affairs. Armenia had been shifting its foreign policy before the war, particularly after the 2018 Armenian revolution that brought pro-Western politician Nikol Pashinyan to power. Despite having close relations with Russia and being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, with Pashinyan at the helm, Armenia has started to change its orientation towards the West.

The speaker speculated that it is with this end in mind that Pashinyan had 'provoked' the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, although he ultimately lost it. The present situation in Nagorno-Karabakh is 'very critical'. The war in Ukraine has also exposed the military weakness of Russia, which might affect Russia's mediation role in the conflict.

Azerbaijan after the war in Ukraine

The Armenian speaker believes Azerbaijan is in an ambiguous situation as it has good relations with both Russia and Turkey. Azerbaijan keeps the door to Russia open – two days before the invasion of

Ukraine, both parties signed the Declaration on cooperation. However, according to the expert, Azerbaijan is more interested in closer relations with Turkey, considering the latter's membership in NATO and connections with the West. The Armenian speaker concluded that the war in Ukraine had not drastically impacted Azerbaijan.

The expert from Azerbaijan slightly disagreed with the Armenian participant. On the one hand, Russia has been perceived in Azerbaijan negatively, as a country with imperial ambitions, which sees the region as its sphere of influence. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the current war in Ukraine have damaged the image of Russia in Azerbaijan even more.

However, on the other hand, due to the lack of Western engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia has reinforced its role in the region as a security provider and a mediator (although the latter is more that of an 'arbiter').

As the speaker from Azerbaijan noted, before the war in Ukraine, Russia had sticks but no carrots; while the West had carrots and no sticks. Now, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Western support to the country, Russia has had neither, and the West has had both. Therefore, the image of the West in the whole region is changing for the better, while Russia's power in the region is weakening. However, the Azerbaijani speaker pointed out: 'there is no illusion that Russia is going to leave the region'. In conclusion, unlike the Armenian speaker, who argued that there had been no significant change since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in took place in February 2022, the Azerbaijani speaker is confident that Russia's role in the region has drastically changed.

Georgia-Russia relations after the war in Ukraine

According to the speaker from Georgia, Russia's influence has always been dominant in the region, but it has been adversely affected by the war in Ukraine. There is a negative trend in Georgia's public opinion towards Russia. However, Russia continues to impact Georgia's economy – 1.5 million Russians fled to Georgia after the start of the war, and many have stayed there. Over 50,000 legal entities have been opened in Georgia by Russian nationals.

Georgian dependency on Russia is, however, not only economic but related to security too. The recent decision by the Russian President Vladimir Putin to waive the visa requirement for Georgian citizens is considered to be another provocation from Russia to undermine Georgia's EU candidacy status.

It was highlighted that the Georgian government's attitude towards Russia is somewhat ambiguous. Although the government supports the West and condemns the invasion of Ukraine, it appears uninterested in sanctioning Russia, as it worries 'not to provoke Russia.'

Regarding Georgia's accession to the EU, the Georgian speaker noted that technically Georgian institutions 'work well', and it was a political decision by the EU not to grant Georgia the candidate status at this stage. According to polls, more than 80% of Georgians want Georgia to join the EU, whilst at the same time recognising the country's heavy dependence on trade with Russia. Yet the EU should take partially the blame for being undecisive on the EU membership for Georgia.

One of the participants asked the Georgian speaker whether Russia can invade Georgia, or annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thereby preventing Georgian Euro-Atlantic aspirations? The Georgian expert's response was that although such fears exist, it is doubtful that Russia has presently the capacity to carry out such an attack.

***Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinninmont –
janek@europeanleadershipnetwork.org***