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The South Caucasus' Russia quagmire

Georgia accelerates its European course, Armenia remains in the Russian sphere of influence, and Azerbaijan attempts a geopolitical balancing act

Russia's war against Ukraine is sending shockwaves through the South Caucasus. Across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, however, politicians and citizens have reacted in myriad ways, underlining once more just how divergent these three countries' paths have been since independence from the Soviet Union 30 years ago.

Azerbaijan is officially what the Kremlin wants Ukraine to be: neutral. Indeed, President Ilham Alijev is currently chair of the Non-Aligned Movement. In practical terms, Baku seeks to maintain a balance between Turkey and the erstwhile hegemonic power of Russia. The strategic alliance it agreed with Moscow on the eve of the war on Ukraine in many ways mirrors the 'Shusha Declaration' drawn up with Ankara in 2021. Azerbaijan is thus attempting to pull off the tricky feat of coordinating its foreign policy with two occasionally allied but often competing regional powers.

The sympathies of the population, though, are with the Ukrainians. A large demonstration in Baku called for solidarity with Ukraine. The protest was met with restraint by a police force that has, in the past, forcibly broken up even women's rights demonstrations. Since the Karabakh conflict began in 1988, Azerbaijan has stuck rigorously to the principle of 'territorial integrity', naturally placing it on Kyiv's side, while the Armenians emphasise the Karabakh Armenians' right to self-determination. After returning from Moscow, President Alijev immediately dispatched 24 tonnes of humanitarian aid to the country being attacked by his official alliance partner Russia. Under the banner of neutrality, oil-rich Azerbaijan is thus attempting to consolidate its independence from Moscow and broaden the scope of its foreign policy.

In Armenia, the West's contrasting reactions to the wars of 2020 and 2022

From the perspective of the authoritarian regime in Baku, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was successfully 'resolved' by the 2020 war: swathes of territory previously under Armenian

are the source of much bitterness.

control were retaken by Azerbaijan after 44 days of brutal fighting. Backed by Turkey, Azerbaijan's war of aggression was not punished by sanctions – despite flagrant breaches of international law.

Not even during active conflict did the EU consider a moratorium on energy imports from the Caspian Sea state, which provides less than five per cent of the bloc's crude oil imports; nor did ongoing fighting prevent the Trans Adriatic Pipeline supplying Azerbaijani gas to Italy from being completed. Quite possibly, this cemented Moscow's conviction that the international community would tolerate a militarily imposed change to the status quo. As a result of Western sanctions against Russia, Baku is now hoping to boost its own energy exports to the EU. Given the limited production and export capacities, however, there is little scope for short-term expansion.

Armenia's bitterness

In Armenia, the West's contrasting reactions to the wars of 2020 and 2022 are the source of much bitterness. Despite being essentially sympathetic to the plight of Ukraine, Armenians complain of 'Western double standards' in response to states that break the peace. As a result of its defeat in 2020, Armenia is more reliant than ever on its security partnership with Russia, leading the government to avoid any statement on the war in Ukraine.

The remaining Armenian population in Karabakh, meanwhile, is dependent on Russian peacekeeping troops for its survival. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan is upping the pressure: on 8 March, damage to a pipeline on Azerbaijan-controlled territory cut off Karabakh's gas supply, leaving more than 100,000 people battling low temperatures with no heating. Armenian communities have repeatedly come under fire, with Azerbaijan's military conducting campaigns of intimidation seemingly aimed at inducing the Armenian population to leave the region.

Georgia has received over 20,000 Russian migrants already, though the welcome here has been less warm.

The Armenian capital Yerevan, on the other hand, has experienced a new wave of immigration as well-educated Russians in particular – among them journalists and human rights activists but also IT specialists and even entire firms – have turned their back on Moscow and other cities. On some days, as many as 37 planes from Russia have been

landing at Zvartnots airport.

The government and private sector initiatives have attempted to take advantage of this influx, offering new arrivals help with finding work and setting up companies. Whether this '*brain gain*' will compensate for the expected decrease in remittances being sent home by Armenian migrant workers in Russia is open to question. Overall, the probable collapse of the Russian economy will have predominantly negative consequences for the South Caucasus – not just in relation to migrant workers, but also because Russia is the main export market for many of the region's manufactured goods.

Georgia's fear

Georgia too has received over 20,000 Russian migrants already, though the welcome here has been less warm. One online petition is even demanding the reintroduction of visa requirements for Russians, who should, the argument goes, remain in Russia instead and fight the Putin regime from within.

This reflects the conflicted relationship with Russia that has defined Georgia since the August War fought between the two countries in 2008. Georgians fear that Moscow will one day use the presence of a Russian minority as a pretext for military action against Tbilisi. Since Russia recognised the 'independence' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, it has had military infrastructure on the Georgian side of the Greater Caucasus range, barely 40 kilometres from the capital Tbilisi.

These fears have resulted in a huge wave of solidarity with Ukraine, as expressed not only in regular mass demonstrations on Rustaveli Avenue, but also in the blue-and-yellow decorations displayed in numerous shops. Companies and individuals have been collecting large amounts of financial and humanitarian aid, and a former defence minister has gone to fight for the Ukrainian side, along with other Georgian volunteers.

Even in the face of war between Russia and Ukraine, the South Caucasus remains deeply divided.

According to a current poll, more than two thirds of the population expect Georgia to be the next victim of Russian aggression if Ukraine is defeated. Its government, meanwhile, has faced criticism over its cautious response. Though it has provided modest humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, it has also refused to sign up to sanctions against Russia and, according to media reports, a plane chartered to take Georgian fighters to Ukraine was denied

permission to land in Tbilisi.

In civil society, there are concerns that the sometimes rather clumsy justifications for this perfectly understandable caution will hamper Georgia's chances of joining the EU. Prime minister Irakli Garibashvili, however, has publicly proclaimed that sanctions are futile and that he needs to focus solely on Georgia's national interests. In protest, Ukraine has withdrawn its ambassador from Tbilisi.

Nevertheless, Georgia has – hot on the heels of Ukraine – now hastily submitted an application for EU membership, having previously announced it would do so in 2024. Its chances of success are questionable, less because of the Georgian government's attitude towards Ukraine and more because of its tense relations with the EU.

These have continually worsened in recent years, primarily because of the slow pace of judicial reform and the lack of protection for minority rights. Following violent protests against journalists as part of the *Pride Parade* in summer 2021, the prime minister even flirted publicly with the idea of an 'illiberal democracy' à la Viktor Orban. From a Western European perspective at least, such musings can only make Georgian EU membership a less attractive proposition.

Even in the face of war between Russia and Ukraine, the South Caucasus remains deeply divided: Georgia is clinging to its goal of EU membership, Armenia is still firmly in Russia's sphere of influence, and Azerbaijan is juggling competing powers. The war may be shaking the region, but these three states continue to pursue the same entrenched paths as before.



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