

“New Security Arrangements for the South Caucasus”

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17 November 2023, 09:40 - 11.15, PANEL 1: “Political Polarization and Its Dangers – Retaking the Initiative”

Many thanks for the opportunity to speak freely. This is not always the case in Brussels despite living in a democracy with a culture of freedom of speech.

Nilufer Narli [*a previous speaker in the same panel*] is right – political polarisation in our societies is worsening – this is an understatement. We now live in a world where the employment of force as a means of resolving disputes has become more and more prevalent. This is madness:

Russia has used force in Ukraine to achieve its objectives, Azerbaijan has used force in Karabakh to get back control over its internationally recognized territory, Hamas has used violence/force against Israeli civilians to remind the international community that the Palestinian question had remained without a viable solution, and the Israeli government responded by using overwhelming force in Gaza to deny the ability of Hamas to conduct similar terrorist operations in the future. Polarisation has played a major role in all of these conflicts.

Where does political polarisation come from in the context of our discussion?

End of Cold War and the sense of West is best: Post-cold war drive to expand Western values as widely as possible and to promote policies of democratisation and economic liberalisation around the world.

Multiple instruments to expand policies (USAID, EU aid, NGOs). Privatisation and economic reform – transition to democracy and to the market. Real agenda behind it was to expand EU and US business interests with little regard for the development of the countries (ECT).

Export of norms and policies by the US and EU, supported by other Western countries.

Paternalism and engrained sense of superiority (being on the right side of history – language of US and EU politicians. Treating Russia as a junior partner)

This is not necessarily a bad thing. The US and the EU were in the driving seat during the 1990s. Ex-Soviet countries were in disarray. But at the same time, you had NATO expansion and promotion of coloured revolutions which were perceived by some, most notably Russia, as part of a post-Cold War competition for power. In essence, a policy environment emerged where Russia was becoming more and more isolated, and the EU/US were seeking to integrate other CIS countries into the West.

Position of the West became more entrenched, and Russia found itself in a corner. It started to respond with contra-narratives. Blame game begins and is amplified in the echo chambers. Space for compromise narrows. The real crisis emerged over Ukraine in 2013-14.

Political polarisation is a very dangerous phenomenon, something we tend to take for granted and only contemplate when it's too late (antisemitism, Islamophobia).

Tendency to separate nations or blocs and to allow a narrow few to make the decisions for the entire collective.

Polarisation tends to create the context for a conflict. In essence, it's a form of propaganda or narrative spreading. The anti-Western narrative in Russia has been highly developed and very convincing, and it played on the minds of mainstream population. In the mirror, the anti-Russian narrative in the EU and US – Russia is an important economic partner, but it remains a security challenge. Increasingly the latter.

This division did not create the war in Ukraine, but it allowed both sides to justify their positions. Russian population has bought the need to go into Ukraine based on the narrative that was cultivated. Did the Russian population buy this narrative due to political polarisation or due to various forms of domestic repression?

Russian population has also bought Kremlin's narrative that ethnic Russians were repressed in Donetsk and Luhansk. Conversely, Ukraine is now politically polarised to the degree that it may end up giving up part of its territory in the framework of a future peace deal with Russia. Is the distance between Russia and Ukraine too large for a future peace deal?

How will three decades of polarisation affect the peace and efforts to secure a sustainable solution for the region? Was this an appropriate environment in which peace could be achieved?

Turning now to the South Caucasus: there had been such a wide rift between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, built up over 30 years (no people to people contact, competing narratives, fierce lobbies facing off against one another in third countries), so that Armenians were not prepared to make any territorial concessions to Azerbaijan while Azeris supported the war to restore its territorial integrity (second Karabakh war)

Did the political polarization of Azerbaijanis against Armenians contribute to the second Karabakh war? What role did polarisation play in the outbreak of the second Karabakh war? The real cause was Baku willing to restore territorial integrity by any means, including by force, but when you had totally polarised societies it has become much easier to justify violent actions.

Situation on the ground has changed twice since 2020 – NK is about to be dissolved following the military operation by Azeri forces in September.

The regional balance of power prior to the second Karabakh war has been reversed. Azerbaijan is now holding military superiority and it moved to a “winner takes all” strategy in peace negotiations.

Armenia was left in a state of uncertainty, but it has had little choice apart from accepting the status quo.

Is this the end of this story? And is peace attainable in this environment?

Mood in Baku Vs Yerevan: what would you do now if you were Ilham Aliyev – promote a policy of keeping these gains and maintaining the status quo, or developing a wider regional vision?

Peacebuilding in South Caucasus

Work of the European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) in 2012-2015 – preaching economic integration in a post-conflict environment. Emphasis that in a post-conflict environment territorial integrity and national sovereignty are less important than regional stability and cooperation.

Soviet era togetherness shifted to post-Soviet polarisation based on ethnic lines fuelled by intense propaganda – people/countries drift apart, major animosities arose. Peace became elusive and it has become much easier to justify violence. We came to a game-changing moment: the second Karabakh war and last September's Azerbaijani anti-terrorist operation to take back all of Karabakh.

Apparently, we are heading towards a two-states solution, rather than integration of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh back into Azerbaijan.

Can we move towards economic integration and interdependency in the region based on the Benelux model? Or are we moving towards the Egypt-Israel, or Israel-Jordan models?

External actors have always meddled in the South Caucasus, and this has generally not helped.