



Geopolitical Trends Affecting EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

Dr George Vlad NICULESCU,

Head of Research, The European Geopolitical Forum

February 24, 2022 will remain a landmark in European history: it is the date when the post-WWII European security system crashed. On that date, Russian troops massively marched over the Ukrainian borders.

NATO and the E.U. have strongly reacted against Russian war in Ukraine. So far, this has resulted in strengthening NATO's military posture on the Eastern flank and re-writing the NATO Strategic Concept to better counter possible Russian aggression against its Central and Eastern European members. The E.U. have also started implementing rounds of sanctions against Russia, and have granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while conditionally promising a similar status to Georgia.

Meanwhile, Russian forces have strengthened their control over Donbas, and parts of Southern Ukraine, and have threatened to expand their occupation across the whole Northern shore of the Black Sea to establish a land bridge to Transnistria, the Eastern separatist province of Moldova. Ukrainian successful counter-offensives last autumn, in North-Eastern and Southern Ukraine (Kharkiv and Kherson areas), have somewhat changed this strategic picture, but they haven't fundamentally altered it.

Those most recent Russian and Western strategic moves across the Northern and Western Black Sea shores, respectively, have added to setting-up a Russian-Turkish condominium over the South Caucasus, in the wake of the 44 days war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Consequently, the Wider Black Sea regional balance of power is currently in flux with the Northern seashore controlled or seriously threatened by Russia (partly on land, and the rest from the sea), while NATO is bolstering its positions in the West. Turkey is in the South and controls the Black Sea Straits, while Russia and Turkey share power in the Caucasus.

Republic of Moldova

In the wake of the Russian war in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova is facing new geopolitical realities:

In response to an imminent security threat from Russia, Chisinau could either keep freezing the Transnistrian conflict to reassure Russia of its “neutrality” or openly challenge the Transnistrian separatism and being sucked into the Ukrainian war.

How could Moldova survive the current Wider Black Sea turmoil?

So far Moldova has taken a more active stance against the war in neighbouring Ukraine. Chisinau condemned the Russian invasion, largely respected the international financial sanctions on Russia, and voted against Russia in several international forums. It also welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. Moldova had declared constitutional neutrality, while actively pursuing European integration and eventual E.U. membership.

However, Moldovan politics is largely split over the geopolitical orientation of the country, with the pro-Russian political parties in the opposition.

Furthermore, Moscow has strong leverage on Chisinau due to its client relations with the separatist regime of Transnistria backed-up by a Russian “peacekeeping” contingent.

This is why, at present, Moldova is geopolitically caught between the indispensable need of European/Western financial and economic aid to help it keep the economy afloat throughout a multitude (energy, economic, humanitarian, and security) of crises, and Russian direct security threat and geopolitical manipulation of the Transnistrian regime. In such harsh circumstances, the outcomes of the Ukraine war might be decisive for the continued existence and the geopolitical orientation of the Republic of Moldova. To maintain the sovereignty and independence of the state, as well as to keep alive its European integration aspirations, Moldova

might need to navigate in-between the conflicting interests of the E.U., Russia, and Turkey. Ultimately, Moldova must extensively practice strategic prudence and a careful “walk on a tight rope between the E.U. and Russia”. It should be also striving to anchor its embattled energy and economic security to E.U. member Romania with which it is sharing the bulk of history, language, and culture.

Georgia

Georgia has taken a particularly prudent attitude towards the war in Ukraine, while continuing to strongly claim its Euro-Atlantic and European aspirations. Georgian experts claimed that there are two competing philosophies within the Georgian society: supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream are frightened by the 2008 Russian invasion, do not believe in the ability of the West to protect the post-Soviet states from Russian aggression. Whereas many other Georgians believe in the irreversibility of the collapse of the Soviet empire and the loyalty of the West to its declared values. (<https://jamestown.org>) Moreover, after the start of the war in Ukraine, Georgia eschewed imposing sanctions against Russia. And Georgian Prime Minister I. Garibashvili said that his country “will never again fight against the Russian Federation” (<https://www.kommersant.ru>).

The E.U. has differentiated between Georgia and its Associated Trio fellows, Ukraine and Moldova, by recommending the former should gain a “European perspective” and be admitted as a formal candidate for European Union membership once it fulfilled certain conditions, such as reducing political polarization, strengthening the independence of the judicial system, and bolstering anti-corruption.

Georgia is currently mostly emulating (although at a much smaller scale) Turkey’s regional balancing. The Russo-Turkish informal understanding over the geopolitical picture of the South Caucasus, the long-term conflict with Russia over its separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the lack of any Western security guarantees are pointing at strategic prudence as Tbilisi’s safest choice. In such circumstances, continuing to cultivate close economic and security relations with neighbouring Turkey might actually provide its best security guarantees. These might be crucial for preserving Georgia’s widely popular Euro-Atlantic and European aspirations in the middle of the “geopolitical storm” ravaging the Wider Black Sea region. Most likely, this might also be the safest option for maintaining Georgia’s key transit role in ensuring European energy security.

Armenia and Azerbaijan

More than two years after the Russian-mediated ceasefire in the 44-day Karabakh war, the two South Caucasian neighbours are apparently stuck on their way towards peace. A Peace Agreement has still to be negotiated, while periodic disputes and military clashes have shattered their efforts to peace. That is mainly because their November 2020 Trilateral Statement jointly with Russia left open a wide range of key issues for stabilizing their relations, some of which have become bones of contention.

Within the currently fluid geopolitical context, what are the prospects of peace negotiations?

At the geopolitical level, the OSCE Minsk Group and its Russian, US and French co-chairs have been de facto side-lined on behalf of the Russian-Turkish strategic partnership over the South Caucasus. Meanwhile the EU has become actively involved in the mediation of the peace negotiations, besides its continued support to peace building. The US has also become involved in mediating the peace negotiations, most likely as a way to building leverage to undermine Russian authority in the region, and to strengthen the role of Azerbaijan in containing Iranian influence in the South Caucasus. Consequently, at present, there are three negotiations frameworks (led by Russia, the EU and the US, respectively), but the actual talks have actually stalled in the wake of the ongoing quasi-blockade (since December 2022) of the Lachin corridor (connecting the Armenian inhabited parts of Karabakh with Armenia) by Azerbaijani “environmental activists”.

The war in Ukraine has worsened the geopolitical context within the South Caucasus (Eastern Wider Black Sea) which has significantly contributed to the current state of play. In the wake of the November 2020 ceasefire in the second war over Nagorno-Karabakh some had warned that “the largest geopolitical risk stemming from the new pattern of “balance of power” conflict management is that it might end up entangled with the ongoing Russia-West geopolitical confrontation”.

Unfortunately, this is where we are today. For example, the recent decision of the EU to deploy a civilian monitoring mission in Armenia has annoyed Moscow whose own proposal to deploy a CSTO observer mission on its border with Azerbaijan had been rejected by Yerevan, last end November. That was the case since the CSTO (of which Armenia is a member) stopped short of condemning repeated Azerbaijani incursions into Armenia over the last two years. Russian concerns have originated in Moscow’s perception that by sending a CSDP mission in Armenia the EU might be gradually encroaching on its sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, given

Armenia's status as Russian strategic ally. In fact, the most recent tensions within the Russian-Armenian alliance have emerged from the complex equilibrium Moscow had struggled to maintain between Baku and Yerevan, obviously at the expense of the latter. Russia's apparently reduced attention to the management of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict might have also been caused by its current focus on the war in Ukraine. Which has obviously raised serious concerns in Yerevan, while it might have created new opportunities for Baku to restore full sovereignty over its territory.

However, the greatest challenge currently facing Armenia and Azerbaijan is the resumption of their peace negotiations. To that end they need to effectively deal with the inherent (political, socio-economic, administrative, security, and other) obstacles ahead, and strive to keep a prudent geopolitical balance in their deals with Russian, EU, and US mediators.

Conclusion

We are facing a very dangerous war in Ukraine, which might end up into a new Eastern European regional chaos. Building a new regional order is inevitable. What is going to be Russia's future role in it? If we look at the history, we see that building a "Westernized" Russia has always been a lovely pipedream. And whether Russia was included in the new regional order or not, peace in EU's Eastern Neighbourhood will continue to be shaped by its long-term strategic interests and threat perceptions. This is the inescapable geopolitical context of our Eastern neighbours who should either deal with Russia with highest strategic prudence or risk their continued existence as sovereign, independent states. Unfortunately, this is one of the saddest lessons we should have learned from the infamous Russian war in Ukraine.