

"THE UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN INTEGRATION"

***BSIS, University of Kent, Brussels, 8 December 2011
Provisional summary of seminar findings***

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On December 8 2011, The European Geopolitical Forum staged a seminar on the topic **"The Unresolved Conflicts in the South Caucasus: Implications for European and Eurasian Integration"** at the University of Kent/Brussels School of International Studies. The seminar represented a concerted attempt by the organizers to provide a platform for a lively and objective roundtable debate where experts of different orientations would have the opportunity to engage in a frank exchange of positions on the highly sensitive subject matter of South Caucasus unresolved conflicts. In contrast to many events taking place in Brussels, the organizers of the December 8 seminar did not have the objective of taking sides in political disputes, or seeking to promote the merits of one side at the expense of the other.

Rather, the organizers aimed to create an environment where unbiased yet rigorous expert opinions could be heard and exchanged, both amongst each other but also in the presence of international political decision makers. The organizers aimed to invigorate fresh forms of thinking with a view to contributing towards eventually ending the current stalemates separating the disputing Caucasian parties. Given their work on the region, seminar participants took the position that inter-state Caucasus political deadlock prevents the peoples of the region from enjoying unhindered social and economic development. This is a problem of structural proportions for the entire region, and increasingly the European Union, looking ahead.

Although seminars of this type are never simple to arrange, the European Geopolitical Forum, which organized the event, was able to bring relevant experts from Armenia, Georgia, Turkey to the event, whilst also attracting Brussels-based Azerbaijani representatives and further international experts working on the region. Despite the diversity of views which emerged in the seminar, the European Geopolitical Forum has attempted provide a "flavour" for the discussions which have taken place by setting out a provisional set of conclusions arising out of the seminar, below. It should be added that the nature of these conclusions is very much provisional, open to further discussion, and that they represent the views of the above mentioned authors, as opposed to the seminar participants as a whole.

It is worth mentioning that the seminar was preceded by a discussion-meeting of Azerbaijan's minister of foreign affairs, Dr. Elmar Mammadyarov, with representatives of civil society groups from Brussels, which was hosted by the organization, Security and Defence Agenda, on 7 December 2011, and was followed by a students' debate on whether "unrecognised political enclaves should have the right to independent statehood and self-determination: the case of the South Caucasus", held at

BSIS, University of Kent on 9 December. The content of discussions at these meetings has been taken into account by the above mentioned authors with respect to the provisional summary conclusions set out below. The authors participated in the discussions on December 7 and 9, and thought it wise to include some of the issues arising out of these in the document set out below, given the relevance and interconnectivity of information arising.

Provisional seminar conclusions in brief

The Geopolitical Context in the South-Caucasus

Twenty years after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the South Caucasus is facing the prospects of another geopolitical vacuum:

- US interest in the region has gone down dramatically; Washington is downscaling its regional involvement;
- NATO, constrained additionally by its interests to cooperate with Russia on Missile Defence and Afghanistan, can't do more than it currently does, i.e. soft security cooperation;
- the EU's institutional constraints, and lack of appetite for new CSDP missions, in the context of the euro-crisis, prevent it from exerting or at least claiming a bolder regional role;
- Russia is asserting its dominance over OSCE-led conflict resolution processes, which is undermining any joint positions substantially different of its own, in particular on Abkhazia and South Ossetia;
- Turkey, which is more focused on building up its own role as a regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, apparently attaches relatively minor priority to conflicts resolution in the South Caucasus;
- The Russian-Turkish partnership in the Wider Black Sea seems to be also dwindling due to diverging interests of the two regional powers in the Eastern Mediterranean, and on Caspian energy transit;
- The Russian Federation is currently more concerned with sorting out its internal political issues in the run-up to the presidential elections in March 2012, as well as with strengthening its political grip on the Federal Republics of the North Caucasus.

Resolution of the Unresolved Conflicts in the South Caucasus

Conflict resolution is not foreseeable in the short term since:

- The appetite for compromise in the capitals of most of the conflicting parties has not yet reached the momentum needed to trigger sound peace processes in the South Caucasus ;
- Public opinion in the region is hardly prepared for a compromise eventually leading to peace, and much work still needs to be done in this area ;
- The interests and aspirations of local populations in the break-away political entities (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh) has been seldom taken into account in the negotiations thus far;

- The strategic context is not yet conducive to peace. Prospects for regional economic or political integration are largely absent. The regional security vacuum is unlikely to be filled either by relevant international organizations (OSCE, EU, NATO, CSTO) or by regional powers (Turkey and Russia) and is likely to persist. Persisting divergences in policy over strategic questions between Russia and the West are unlikely to lend themselves to stability (NATO's Missile Defence, Iran, Syria, Trans-Caspian pipeline, etc).

In the short term, the international community should be aiming at conflict management/containment rather than conflict resolution, while in the medium, and longer term, political, institutional, and societal modernization matched by concrete steps towards economic integration, confidence and security building measures, and people to people contacts in the framework of strengthened civil societies may eventually lead to conflict resolution.

The Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh

- Lack of mutual trust and the absence of a consensus oriented approach to conflict resolution are obvious on both sides. Armenia has focused more on a historical approach and points to Azerbaijan's bellicose declarations and booming defence budget. Azerbaijan, under the influence of its new status as a member the UN Security Council, now appears to focus its approach on persuading Armenians to return the occupied territories of Azerbaijan as a trigger for further compromise solutions, while floating economic incentives including integration of Armenia into major regional energy infrastructure projects.
- There is hope for further progress of the negotiations since apparently both parties seemed to support the so called "Madrid updated principles", although they were displaying diverging views on their implementation.
- A big issue among the two countries seem to be the involvement of N-K authorities in the negotiations process, with the Armenians claiming that they should be a distinctive party in negotiations, while the Azerbaijanis are rejecting any kind of communication with N-K authorities. However, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis would support people to people contacts involving Armenian locals, Azerbaijani IDPs from N-K, and Armenian IDPs from Azerbaijan.
- Involvement of the EU in the resolution of this conflict, as a co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, has been proposed. However, both conflicting parties seem wary, apparently for different reasons (Azerbaijan feeling the EU is biased against supporting its territorial integrity, while Armenia prefers to maintain a key role for France).
- The Franco-German model of rapprochement after WWII was also highlighted in the discussion. However, one conflicting party suggested that this approach could only be introduced into discussions after some level of agreement over the nature of a settlement would be in evidence.

Implications of the Unresolved Conflicts on European and Eurasian Integration

- These issues were just marginally touched upon during the seminar, mainly from the perspective of the political leverage they could offer to major regional players, and of maintaining the geopolitical fragmentation of the South Caucasus: Georgia on track to European integration; Azerbaijan's drive towards strengthened cooperation with the EU influenced by the ups and downs of Turkish-EU relations; and Armenia struggling to navigate between its heavy security dependence on Russia, and its European aspirations.
- However, the current geopolitical picture might be dramatically changing, basically at any time, under the threat, or as a consequence, of a new war in the South Caucasus.
- Economic and trade implications of the unresolved conflicts were also addressed by one speaker who referred to the need to regularize the "suitcase trade" by strengthening border management according to the Cyprus model, as well as to developing "cluster economic projects" between Georgia and its break-away territories.