



March 2019

NEW DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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The Revolution in Armenia in April 2018 brought new dynamics for the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. In Georgia, the 10th anniversary of the Russian-Georgian War and the presidential elections showed the difficulties in the peace process with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, especially when it comes to diverging narratives. The International Crisis and Conflict Management in the South Caucasus is still torn between domestic developments, a profitable status-quo for the elites and the question, if the conflicts need more or less international attention.

“Frozen” Conflicts

Efforts to resolve the conflicts in the South Caucasus date back to the early 1990s, yet still concern the international community. Despite being often classified as “frozen”, the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh claim human lives, bring hardships and restriction for the local population and remain a both legally and politically hot topic in the region.

Although the root causes of conflict and the dynamics in South Ossetia and Abkhazia differ, both regions claim to defend themselves against Georgian domination and highlight their right to self-governance. For Georgia, the respect of its territorial integrity is crucial, while Russia justifies its interference with the protection of Russian citizens in the breakaway regions. However, the majority of the population in the breakaway regions received their Russian citizenship only in 2002.

Rising tensions in the early 2000s led to an escalation in August 2008, the so-called Russo-Georgian “Five-Day-War”. As a consequence, two ongoing missions of

the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) were cancelled.

From 1992 to December 2008 the OSCE mission supported the Georgian government in the fields of rule of law, democracy, human rights and conflict resolution. The UN monitoring mission to Georgia (UNOMIG) monitored the ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia. UNOMIG was ceased in June 2009 due to a lack of consensus in the UN Security Council. The EU Monitoring Mission to Georgia (EUMM), started as an unarmed, civilian mission in 2008, took over the tasks of the UN mission. Since then it supports the 6-point-agreement, which was negotiated under EU mediation. Contrary to UNOMIG and the OSCE missions, the EUMM has no access to the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh dates back to 1988. The conflict developed into an inter-state war, lasting until 1994. After the escalation of the conflict in 1992, the OSCE established the Minsk Group to mediate between the conflict parties. The Group is co-chaired by representatives from France, Russia and the United States. The government of Nagorno-Karabakh, however, is not recognized as a conflict party. Additionally, the OSCE provides monitoring on a regular, but not permanent basis. As it has no fact-finding component, it remains mainly a symbolic mechanism unable to prevent ceasefire violations. There are usually less than 30 deaths per year in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Yet, the violent flare-up in April 2016 with an estimated 200 deaths marked a major setback to the peace process. In this „Four-Day-War“ Azerbaijan shifted the line of contact for the first time since 1994. The political fronts remain entrenched since and peace talks were stalled. In May 2018, the most recent clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces along the border with the Azerbaijani exclave Nakhichevan claimed four more lives.

Status of International Conflict and Crisis Management

For Georgia, the most relevant formats of conflict resolution are the Geneva International Discussions (GID) and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM). The GID are based on the ceasefire agreement of August 2008 between the EU, Russia and Georgia. The format is facilitated by a body of representatives from the OSCE, the EU and the UN. The discussions, which take place every three months, are attended by representatives from Russia, the U.S., Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The talks, however, have been overshadowed by mutual distrust between Georgian and Russian officials since the very first GID rounds in 2008. While Georgia claims a de-facto Russian occupation of its territory, the Kremlin denies any direct involvement in

the Abkhaz and South Ossetian-Georgian conflicts. Yet, the advanced cooperation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the Russian Federation since 2008, as well as several recent cases of deaths and killings of Georgian citizens in the disputed areas, negatively affected the climate at the GID from Tbilisi's point of view. Moscow, however, regularly voices its concerns over closer Georgia-NATO relations, most recently at the last GID round in December 2008. Despite the assessment of a “relatively calm and stable” situation on the ground by all parties involved at the GID, no substantial progress towards peace has been achieved by this format so far.

The two IPRMs in Ergneti (with South Ossetia) and in Gali (with Abkhazia) remain the most important opportunity to address humanitarian and security-related issues. The format is chaired by the OSCE and the EUMM and brings together representatives from Russia, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Georgia, once a month. However, due to the blacklisting of 33 South Ossetian and Abkhaz officials for alleged human rights violations in June 2018, the Gali IPRM was suspended. South Ossetia boycotted the Ergneti IPRM between September and December 2018, because Georgia issued arrest warrants for two Ossetian security officers.

The most relevant format of international conflict management in Nagorno-Karabakh is the Minsk Group. Currently, this peace format is in a deadlock. The format is criticized for being intransparent, as peace negotiations are restricted to track-1 diplomacy, being the political elites. They take place behind closed doors and are dominated by geopolitical rivalries. This also applies for the so-called “Madrid Principles”, a set of possible solutions to the conflict discussed since 2007, which remain mostly a secret to the public. The new Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan tries to bring about a change by posting information about the meetings on social media. Furthermore, in September 2018, a direct operational line of com-

munication was established between him and the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev. This direct line should prevent future escalations, as the one in May 2018. Bilateral talks were resumed in fall 2018, yet the Minsk Group remains the main forum for conflict resolution.

Political Changes: New Dynamics Ahead

Without a doubt, the Armenian Velvet Revolution set a crucial change in the South Caucasian political landscape. The presidential elections in Georgia could have an impact on conflict resolution efforts too.

The protests in Yerevan in April 2018 were directed against prime minister Serzh Sargsyan and the ruling Republican Party. They are considered to be the largest protests in a former Soviet republic since the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine in 2013/14 and the largest in Armenia since the late 1980s. The man in the center of the movement was Nikol Pashinyan, who was elected as prime minister through early elections in December. The main motives of mobilization during the protests were the carve for reforms and the fight against ruling corruption and nepotism. Unlike the Euromaidan movement, the protests had no pro-Western orientation, but were primarily dominated by domestic issues. Pashinyan has a clear stand on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh: It belongs to Armenia and its territory should be fully re-integrated into the state. He favors international crisis settlement formats for resolving the conflict, but urges for local representation and transparency.

Nevertheless, there has been no clear positive impact on conflict resolution that can be linked to the Velvet Revolution. Reforms and a broad public discourse, however, might lead to other formats of conflict resolution, especially on the level of civil society. Despite these new dynamics in Armenia, Baku's position did not change. Azerbaijan is still wary of Yerevan's peaceful intentions. Any compromise, however, requires concessions by both parties.

The last direct presidential elections in Georgia in 2018 marked the transformation towards a parliamentary system. Salome Zurbishvili was elected as the first female president of Georgia. Her statements concerning the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are quite vague. She has a clear stance on the legal status of both breakaway regions: The territories still belong to Georgia, implying that there can be no negotiation on the territorial status. She further urges for additional capacities and new measures within the EUMM. As the constitutional reform of 2017 cut the powers of the president, the president's position can have only limited impact on the settlement process.

The year 2018 marked the 10th anniversary of the August war between Georgia and Russia. Both sides commemorated the events with diverging narratives. The Georgian side kept quiet about the fact that the attack on Tskhinvali in 2008 was a decision by former president Saakashvili. The Russian perception of just responding to Georgia's reaction neglects Moscow's provocative actions since 2006. The relevance of diverging perceptions is showcased by the heavy critique Zurbishvili faced for her "pro-Russian" position. In fact, she was just citing the EU's Tagliavini report, acknowledging that the first shooting on South Ossetia was started by Georgia.

The presidential candidate faced heavy criticism for saying that Georgia started hostilities against South Ossetia in 2008. For Tbilisi, diplomatic relations cannot be fully restored as long as Russia is involved in the break-away regions, even though Georgian-Russian economic and social relations have significantly improved over the last decade.

Challenges for Conflict Resolution

The South Caucasus is torn between liberal peace and authoritarian conflict management, which opens windows of opportunity for external influence. Liberal approach-

es require a thorough democratization of the region, while authoritarian approaches seek to establish hegemonic control of territory, economy and public opinion to prevent conflicts from escalating. The Velvet Revolution broke the security vs. democracy nexus for the first time, demonstrating that a democratic government can provide security as well. At the moment, sticking to some authoritarian elements appears to be more stable, than conducting a comprehensive reform process.

There is no consensus amongst analysts, whether the conflicts in the South Caucasus need more international attention or need to be de-internationalized. On the one hand, more international attention could pressure the conflict parties towards settlement. On the other hand, external actors might spoil or prolong the peace process by bringing in their own interests and positions.

Last but not least, narratives do play a role in conflict resolution. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not willing to give up their de-facto independence, while Georgia must recognize, that this claim did not only come up because of Russian support. First steps, like the recognition of Abkhazian identity documents by Georgian authorities, could be a chance for gradual rapprochement.

Outlook and Recommendations

Overall, these findings indicate that conflict resolution remains a hypothetical and distant idea, as the status-quo in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh is not ideal, but stable. The GID, IPRM, EUMM and Minsk Group already provide the tools for conflict resolution, yet still there is no consensus amongst the actors on possible settlements. Paradoxically, at

the moment, the most successful way to keep “negative” peace in the region is not to solve the conflicts. However, this is not a sustainable and transformative solution.

- More European capacities should be mobilized for track-3 diplomatic efforts. Inter-ethnic confidence-building and people-to-people contact should be tackled in a more thrustful way.
- The prolonging of the EUMM mandate in December 2018 and the continuation of the Ergneti IPRM are positive signs. The EU should strive for a continuation of the Gali IPRM and further help mitigating the negative effects of borderization in Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
- Negative peace is not sustainable in the region and especially unprofitable for civil society. Future conflict management must address tensions between liberal and authoritarian approaches, e. g. by strengthening democratic institutions and processes in the region.

Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher: Republic of Austria / MoD, Roßbauer Lände 1, 1090 Vienna

Edited by: National Defence Academy Vienna/IFK, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Vienna

Periodical of the National Defence Academy

Printing: ReproZ, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Wien



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