

ESSAY

Russia in the politics of South Caucasus countries after 2022

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Abstract

The research question is how national governments and civil societies reflect Russian involvement in the decision-making process of South Caucasus countries in 2022–2024? The structure of the research includes two sections: 1) Strategic interests of the countries of the South Caucasus and Russia in 2022–2024; 2) Changing the role of Russia in the South Caucasus in 2022–2024. In result of the research it was revealed that opting for a policy of normalization Georgia cannot renounce its territory (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Azerbaijan has been the most consistent among the Caucasian countries in challenging Russian hegemony in the region. This trend intensified after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: Azerbaijan increased humanitarian aid to Ukraine; pro-Ukrainian sympathies in Azerbaijani society were expressed through a number of leading media outlets that openly supported Kyiv. Baku unilaterally reviewed the ceasefire agreement - 2020, mediated by Russia. Amid the international isolation of the Kremlin, Azerbaijan began to play a much larger role for Russia. Baku is important link in the chain of diplomatic and economic ties of Putin's regime. Russia tries to maintain productive relations with Baku, even at the expense of its long-time ally Armenia. Yerevan revises its foreign policy, favouring a pro-Western vector. In Yerevan, the pro-Russian opposition organized rallies against the current government. Moscow and Baku both gained mutual benefits: Russia destabilized the situation in Armenia, and Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity. However, these actions of Moscow struck at its influence in the region, marginalizing Russia and its "guarantees." The Caucasus provides a clear example of Russia's inability to continue playing the role of a major power: it simply lacks the strength and means.

Keywords

South Caucasus, region, the decision-making process, Russia, Russo-Ukrainian war

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Introduction

This research is empirical; such type of research unlocks tools that allow for causal claims and explanations of developments and practices of international politics. The research question is how national governments and civil societies reflect Russian involvement in the decision-making process of South Caucasus countries in 2022–2024?

Triangulation of research was achieved through using several qualitative methods (collecting data from media and secondary sources, Internet research, documentary investigation, and discourse analysis). Discourse analysis serves as the main method for analyzing the collected material. Jacques Derrida's maximalist formula: "Everything is a discourse" is taken as the basis. Poststructuralist discourse analysis intellectually originates from the works of Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan in which discourse is analyzed as the total of social practices, within which senses and meanings are reproduced. Social practices formulate discursive event, and at the same time, discursive event formulates them. Methodology of DA consists of three stages. On the first stage (description) a researcher divides a text into sentences/propositions and groups them defining the links. On the second stage (interpretation) the researcher correlates the text with the activities making assumptions about the details. On the third stage (explanation) he/she makes an evaluation, taking into account a social context of the speech acts.¹

Nowadays in Ukrainian political science about two dozen articles built with using DA as a main methodology, including international relations. And the quantity of these works is growing fast. So, we can talk about some sort of "fashion" on DA amongst political scientists from post-communist countries who want to reject from Marxism but finds something more or less close to habitual approach. Ukrainian researchers through studying of tag-phrases and specific vocabulary of mass-media pay attention first of all to problems of political elite, political image; sovereignty and democracy, democratization; identity formation, dissolution, and fixation; identity politics, crisis of identity, nationalism and xenophobia; cultural life, intellectual and ideational practices. Special part of DA studies in Ukraine today remain its adoption for International Relations. Researchers focus on studying geopolitical game in post-Soviet space, two different models of development – Western and Russian, foreign policy choices.²

For understanding the role of DA is important its clear interdisciplinary perspective. Discourse theory and analysis are meant to compliment, not to replace,

¹ O. Brusylovska, "Critical Discourse Analysis in International Relations Studies: The cases of Russia and Ukraine," *Rhetoric and Communications* no. 43 (2020), http://journal.rhetoric.bg/?page_id=2688.

² Brusylovska, "Critical Discourse Analysis in International Relations Studies."

transformation theory. Theory of discourse, ideology, universality, and hegemony is one of the most valuable parts of DA today. Hegemony is described as a situation of antagonism and domination; this suits modern and especially post-communist realities very well.

The structure of the research includes two sections: 1) Strategic interests of the countries of the South Caucasus and Russia in 2022–2024; 2) Changing the role of Russia in the South Caucasus in 2022–2024.

Strategic interests of the countries of the South Caucasus and Russia in 2022–2024

According to international relations specialists, the Russian Federation utilizes local conflicts as a tool of influence within the post-Soviet space.³ Russia maintains that it is not at war with Georgia and Ukraine; rather, these “events” are a consequence of conflict with the Western world, which seeks to control territories that were formerly part of the Soviet Union.⁴ Russian State Duma Deputy Y. Fedorov stated that Armenia improperly withdrew from the Soviet Union.⁵ And this means that Russia, as the legal successor of the USSR, has the right to control these territories. Although in reality, Armenia acted in accordance with the Soviet constitution. As noted by V. Gasparian, a strong Armenia that defends its interests and controls its territory is not beneficial to Russia.⁶ The events of recent years have confirmed the words of S. Grigoryan, that “Russia is not interested in a peaceful agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and continues to manipulate: as soon as a peace initiative passes to the Russians, clashes immediately occur between Armenians and Azerbaijanis”.⁷ This controlled instability will allow Moscow to maintain its peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh and control Yerevan; at the same time, it will tie Azerbaijan’s hands. As for Georgia, its relations with Russia deteriorated with the arrival of the pro-Western President M. Saakashvili. His rhetoric was anti-Russian, which led to Russia’s war against Georgia in 2008, resulting in Georgia losing about 20 per cent of its territory. In 2012, the “Georgian

³ V. Telvak and V. Masnenko, “Ukraine Crisis: the Russian-Ukrainian war through the eyes of BBC News correspondents,” *Herald of Cherkasy University. Series: Historical Sciences* no. 2 (2021), http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/VchuI_2021_2_17; I. Todorov, “Russia’s hybrid wars against Ukraine: myths and reality,” *Scientific Bulletin of Uzhhorod University. Series: History* no. 1 (2020), http://nbuv.gov.ua/UJRN/Nvuust_2020_1_43.

⁴ S. Lavrov, “It’s not about someone winning this war,” *Russia in Global Politics*, 2014, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Rech-idet-ne-o-tom-chtoby-kto-to-pobedil-v-etoi-voine-17233>.

⁵ “State Duma deputy called Armenia an “illegal state”,” *Korrespondent*, 2022, <https://korrespondent.net/world/4538018-deputat-hosdumy-nazval-armenyui-nezakonnym-hosudarstvom>.

⁶ Y. Panchenko, “Escape from Russian “hugs”: how Armenia begins the path to EU membership,” *European Truth*, 2024, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2024/03/15/7181763/>.

⁷ I. Oliynyk, “The 30-year conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh may end in favor of Azerbaijan. The end of the war between Yerevan and Baku?,” *Prohibition*, 2023, <https://zaborona.com/30-richnyj-konflikt-za-nagirnyj-karabah-mozhe-zakinchytysya/>.

Dream” of B. Ivanishvili came to power and announced a continuation of the pro-Western policy, but at the same time, a readiness to normalize relations with Russia. After 2012 informal meetings between government representatives and diplomats took place in Prague, however, this process had certain limitations because the main condition of the Georgian side was for Moscow to withdraw its decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Kremlin did not want to change its position, so it was a dead end.

The situation changed with the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The position of both the Georgian and Armenian governments was so cautious that many experts called it cynical.⁸ Georgia, which itself experienced the military invasion of the Russian army, chose “the Turkish model” of relations with Russia: according to former press attaché of the Georgian Embassy in Ukraine B. Korchilava, “Georgia has achieved ephemeral stability. I cannot call the Georgian government pro-Russian, but it plays with Russia out of fear. They are afraid to lose what they have, so they try to play the Turkish model. But it should be noted that what is allowed to a big player is not always acceptable for small Georgia”.⁹ The Georgian government condemned Russian aggression but did not join the West’s economic sanctions against Russia. The Georgian economy demonstrates very high growth rates - the country’s GDP grew by 10.1% in 2022, and by 7.5% in the previous year. Such growth was ensured by the mass influx of re-locators from Russia, as well as by the refusal to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation, which made Georgia an important exporter and intermediary for re-export to the Russian market.¹⁰ The pro-Russian turn in Georgia’s policy became even more apparent after the change of prime minister on February 8, 2024. He was replaced by I. Kobakhidze, a “pro-Russian hawk within the Georgian Dream”: “We will not impose sanctions against the Russian Federation, we will not punish our country and people... We calculated that imposing sanctions against Russia would ruin Georgia’s economy. If we imposed sanctions, we would have had an economic decline of at least 10% to 18%”.¹¹

⁸ A. Avetisyan, “Armenia stands alone in support for Russia in Council of Europe,” OC Media, 2022, <https://oc-media.org/armenia-stands-alone-in-support-for-russia-in-council-of-europe/>; K. Kakachia and S. Kakabadze, “Creeping Finlandization or Prudent Foreign Policy? Georgia’s Strategic Challenges amid the Ukrainian Crisis,” PONARS Eurasia, 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/creeping-finlandization-or-prudent-foreign-policy-georgias-strategic-challenges-amid-the-ukrainian-crisis/>; N. Nalbandian, “Yerevan Defends Opposition to Council of Europe Action against Russia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenian Service, 2022, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/31730695.html>.

⁹ S. Gudkova, “Chronicles of the war in Georgia: what mistakes should Ukraine and the West avoid in the confrontation with Russia,” RFI, 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/uk/>.

¹⁰ G. Hajiyeve, “Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran Sign Declaration on North-South Transport Corridor,” *Caspian News*, 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-russia-iran-sign-declaration-on-north-south-transport-corridor-2022-9-11-0/>.

¹¹ Y. Panchenko, “Even more pro-Russian Georgia: why the change of government in Tbilisi will only accelerate rapprochement with Moscow,” *European Truth*, 2024, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2024/01/30/7178547/>.

After the military campaign of September 2023 the international community gradually came to understand that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was almost over. The current problem has become the format of negotiations, which are being conducted along two main directions. On the western front, significant progress has been made for some time, but France's involvement, from Azerbaijan's perspective, has brought more harm than benefit. This negative perception stems from France's supply of military equipment to Armenia. Various statements made by European and American bureaucrats perceived in Baku as anti-Azerbaijani.¹² The Azerbaijani side, to salvage the process, proposed the Georgian platform as an alternative: either direct Azerbaijani-Armenian negotiations or Azerbaijani-Armenian-Georgian regional cooperation frameworks.¹³

For a long time, Armenia did not object to Russia's mediation in achieving peace with Azerbaijan, but, failing to receive adequate diplomatic and political support, it attempted to rely on Washington and Brussels.¹⁴ However, both sides agree that the problems of the Caucasus should be resolved within the region, excluding external intervention. Positive shifts in this direction have become more noticeable. The warring parties realized that Moscow sought to create a transport corridor called the "Zangazur Corridor" based on the trilateral agreement signed by I. Aliyev, N. Pashinyan, and V. Putin on November 10, 2020. The purpose of the corridor is to connect the main part of Azerbaijan with the exclave of Nakhchivan through the southernmost province of Armenia, Syunik. Baku insisted on the opening of the Zangazur Corridor as a precondition for reaching peace with Armenia, while Armenia was only willing to provide regular communication with Azerbaijan. However, after the statement by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in support of Armenia's territorial integrity, Baku became more inclined to compromise. Later, another example of understanding was the meeting of state commissions on the demarcation of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which, at Baku's proposal, took place not in a third country but on the Ijevan and Kazakh sections of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.¹⁵

At the end of February 2024 that Prime Minister N. Pashinyan for the first time publicly stated his country had suspended participation in the CSTO and did not

¹² S. Neset, M. Aydın and A. Strand, "The role(s) of external actors, Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry," *CMI Report* no. 4 (2023): 58.

¹³ S. Neset and M. Aydın, "Changed dynamics after the Second Karabakh war, Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry," *CMI Report* no. 4 (2023): 13.

¹⁴ M. Aydın and S. Neset, "The geopolitical impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry," *CMI Report* no. 4 (2023): 19.

¹⁵ A. Pashayan, "Attitude towards peace. Yerevan is interested in signing a peace treaty with Baku. The process is complicated by the uncompromising approach of Azerbaijan," *IO*, 2023, <https://www.ipg-journal.io/ua/rubriki/zovnishnja-politika-ta-bezpeka/nalashtovanist-na-mir-1980/>.

rule out a full withdrawal later. According to the head of the Armenian government, the so-called Collective Security Treaty was not being implemented, especially in 2021–2022. “This could not go unnoticed by us. We suspended our participation”.¹⁶ This statement is important because it makes impossible to continue the status quo in relations with Moscow when Yerevan publicly expressed dissatisfaction but avoided a rupture.

At the same time, in Yerevan, a decision was made to withdraw Russian border guards from the Zvartnots Airport. This was announced by the Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia, Armen Grigoryan. A few days later, Prime Minister Pashinyan named the deadline for the Russians to leave the capital’s airport by August 1 (under the 1992 agreement, Russian border guards control Armenia’s borders with Iran and Turkey), but there was no mention of their withdrawal and the closure of the Russian military base in Gyumri. However, as Armenian politicians put it, this may only be possible after a peace agreement is reached with Azerbaijan.¹⁷

The most eloquent evidence of a sharp turn in Armenia’s politics was the statement by Foreign Minister A. Mirzoyan about the possibility of seeking membership in the EU.¹⁸ As Armenian political scientist R. Melkonyan stated, this idea was supported by both supporters of the current government and a significant part of the extra-parliamentary opposition. About 40% of Armenians called Russia an enemy: “For many of those who are not ready to vote for Pashinyan, the idea of EU membership is quite desirable. Therefore, there is no reason to doubt that in the event of a referendum, this idea will not receive a stable majority, it simply does not exist”.¹⁹ The leader of the European Party of Armenia, T. Khzmalyan, clarified: “Obviously, we are facing a very difficult year ahead, as Russia will use all the levers at its disposal to stop or at least complicate Armenia’s path to the West”.²⁰ Thus, Yerevan has no choice but to avoid conflict with Russia until the last moment, particularly by not pedalling an exit from the Eurasian Union.²¹

For Yerevan, it is also important to expand the circle of partners and allies, hence the emphasis on deepening relations with the United States, the EU, the East, and

¹⁶ “The CSTO threatens the national security of Armenia – Pashinyan,” *Militarnyi*, 2024, <https://mil.in.ua/uk/news/odkb-zagrozhuje-natsionalnij-bezpetsi-virmeniyi-pashinyan/>.

¹⁷ Panchenko, “Escape from Russian “hugs”: how Armenia begins the path to EU membership,” 2024.

¹⁸ A. Izvoschikova, “Armenia is considering the possibility of EU membership against the background of contradictions with the Russian Federation - Reuters,” *Public News*, 2024, <https://suspilne.media/702132-virmenia-rozgladae-mozlivist-clenstva-v-es-ta-tli-superecnostej-z-rf-reuters/>.

¹⁹ Panchenko, “Escape from Russian.”

²⁰ Panchenko, “Escape.”

²¹ S. Anglim, “Endgame in Karabakh – Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Utility of Land Power in the 2020s,” *Military Strategy Magazine*, 2024, <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/exclusives/endgame-in-karabakh-azerbaijan-armenia-and-the-utility-of-land-power-in-the-2020s/>.

India. Armenia faces several obstacles on its path to the West. Firstly, numerous pro-Russian influence agents are incorporated into the government bodies; the opposition in parliament is represented by parties of former pro-Russian presidents, S. Sargsyan and R. Kocharyan. Secondly, there are problems in the military command, which remains Soviet-style: most of them graduated from the Frunze Military Academy.²² Thirdly, Armenia's geographical location is worse than of Ukraine, which shares borders with four EU and NATO countries, allowing for reliable supply chains to counter Russian aggression.

In summary, since the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, South Caucasus countries have been inclined to maintain neutrality and consider Russia's interests. Official figures voiced support for territorial integrity and calls for a ceasefire.²³ Direct condemnation of Russia was not voiced considering the need to maintain contacts with Moscow. Azerbaijan behaved the most independently and increased humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Pro-Ukrainian sympathies in Azerbaijani society were expressed through a number of leading media outlets that openly supported Kyiv, and the government not only did not prevent this but also banned the activities of many Russian propaganda media.²⁴ It can also be concluded that the Russian-Ukrainian war opened up an opportunity for Baku to regain Karabakh and begin the process of reintegrating the region. Yerevan is more interested in signing a peace agreement than Baku, but the prolonged uncertainty has provided room for manipulation by both states from external actors.

Changing the role of Russia in the South Caucasus in 2022–2024

A new balance in the region was ultimately established as a result of the second Karabakh war: Moscow had to reconcile with the situation where it no longer had exclusive influence in the region, sharing it with Turkey, which from 2022²⁵ actively supported Baku in the matter of returning Nagorno-Karabakh.

²² A. Horodysky, "When your ally is Russia. Armenia is looking for a new direction of foreign policy," RFI, 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/uk/міжнародні-новини/20230426-коли-твій-союзник-росія-вірменія-шукає-новий-напрямок-зовнішньої-політики>.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, "Answers of the Foreign Minister of Armenia to the questions of 'Armenpress' news agency," 2022, https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2022/06/17/Armenpress_FM/11504; T. Giuashvili, "The South Caucasus in an 'Interregnum'? The shifting power dynamics in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine," *STG Policy Briefs* no. 32 (2022), <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/75091>; A. Mirzoyan, "Ilham Aliyev: 'War Was Inevitable; Minsk Group Dead'," *Hetq*, 2022, <https://hetq.am/en/article/145646>.

²⁴ A. Musaev, "Kazakhstan Approves Military Intelligence Protocol with Türkiye," *Caspian News*, 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-approves-military-intelligence-protocol-with-turkiye-2022-8-11-21/>.

²⁵ "Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey," *Azerbaijan State News Agency*, 2022, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Shusha_Declaration_on_Allied_Relations_between_the_Republic_of_Azerbaijan_and_the_Republic_of_Turkey-1809375.

On February 22, 2022 the “Declaration on Allied Interaction” and on June 24, 2022 the “Agreement between the governments of Azerbaijan and Russia on cooperation in the field of international information security” signed between Azerbaijan and Russia.²⁶ This raised concerns that Moscow had thus secured itself from further criticism by Azerbaijani media.²⁷ However, over time, it turned out that no fundamental changes had occurred in the country’s information policy. On October 24, 2022, criticism of Russia and Iran was voiced on the Azerbaijani State Television channel, officially recognizing for the first time that Russia was conducting an aggressive war of conquest in Ukraine. So, Roskomnadzor after February 24, 2022, blocked access to popular Azerbaijani websites in Russia (“Minval.az”, “Haqqin.az”, “Oxu.az”, “Baku.WS,” and “Caliber.az”). Experts had no doubt that the reason for these measures was the objective information about the Russo-Ukrainian war, citing official Ukrainian sources. This was a significant blow to these media outlets, as the Russian diaspora accounted for 30% to 50% of their views.²⁸

From an analytical perspective, the shift in Azerbaijan’s policy was explained by its desire to have a free hand in negotiations with Armenia from a position of strength.²⁹ An additional “bonus” for the Azerbaijani leadership was the opportunity, without fearing resistance from Russia, to articulate a vision for the future fate of the Russian peacekeeping contingent, whose chances of continuing their presence in Azerbaijan, including Nagorno-Karabakh after 2025, looked slim.

This was also understood in Armenia and led to an intensification of its own security searches beyond the Russian-Armenian strategic relations. On October 13, 2023, the President of the Republic of Armenia, V. Khachaturian, signed a declaration ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Additionally, the President of Armenia signed a declaration to the parliament “On recognizing the retrospective jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court by the Republic of Armenia,” a possibility provided by Article 12 part 3 of the Statute.³⁰ In 2024, Pashinyan voiced an ultimatum to Russia, the consequence of which should be the withdrawal from the CSTO.

²⁶ “Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation,” President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, 2022, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55498>.

²⁷ D. Sammut, “Ukraine poses a dilemma to the three South Caucasus countries, but they have still one important card they can play,” Commonsense.eu, 2022, <https://www.commonspace.eu/analysis/ukraine-poses-dilemma-three-south-caucasus-countries-they-have-still-one-important-card>.

²⁸ Y. Panchenko, “Despite the Russian ban: how Azerbaijan is changing its attitude to the war in Ukraine,” *European Truth*, 2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/experts/2022/03/22/7136409/>.

²⁹ US Department of State, “Continued Peace Talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Press release,” 2023, <https://www.state.gov/continued-peace-talks-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan/>.

³⁰ The President of the Republic of Armenia, 2023, <https://www.president.am/en/signed-laws/item/2023/10/13/President-Vahagn-Khachaturyan-signed-law/>.

Since Yerevan's turnaround was associated with Pashinyan, who stated that strategic partnership with Russia was a mistake, starting from 2023 Russian propaganda intensified its statements against him. Calling Pashinyan a traitor, Russians tried to create a negative association to undermine trust in his actions. RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan reassured: "Why are we apologizing, I don't understand? And to whom? To a bald-hearted, dishonourable Judas... having sold his own people for a meagre pension promised to him somewhere in the woods with a barbecue by the pool?".³¹ General Director of the "Russia Today" agency Dmitry Kiselyov on "Russia-1" mentioned that "Armenia will become 'the second Ukraine'".³² The Kremlin aspired for the pro-Russian opposition, led by Kocharyan, to come to power in Yerevan.

For today Russia cannot miss the opportunity to punish the Armenian government through Azerbaijan. A. Yunusov believes that Azerbaijan's victory will sow instability in Armenia, which could potentially lead to the overthrow of the Pashinyan government. For decades Russia has relied mainly on economic levers of influence over Armenia. But economic risks, even as significant as those arising from severing economic ties with Russia, seem secondary compared to the prospect of a new war with Azerbaijan,³³ making Armenia's detachment from Russia more predictable.

For Azerbaijan's future, there are two diametrically opposed views. Some analysts³⁴ believe that the victory in Karabakh has inaugurated a new era for Azerbaijan. Consequently, in its foreign policy, Azerbaijan will continue to adhere to maintaining relationships with both Western and Eastern countries. The share of Azerbaijani energy resources is expected to increase annually due to the growing economic isolation of the Russian Federation in the West. Refined and forecasted reserves of oil with condensate and gas as of January 1, 2023, are estimated at approximately 8.43 billion tons in oil equivalent. The main focus of Baku's actions is directed at developing the country's gas transportation system for transit to the EU, Turkey, and India. The alliance between Ankara and Baku has reached a strategic level in various areas. During the 44-day war, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces utilized Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UAVs, modern armoured vehicles, and weaponry. In addition, joint military coordination centres operate where Turkish instructors

³¹ E. Brailyan, "“Armenia can become the next Ukraine”: Russian propaganda and Nagorno-Karabakh,” Detector Media, 2023, <https://ms.detector.media/propaganda-ta-vplivi/post/33066/2023-09-28-virmeniya-mozhe-staty-nastupnoyu-ukrainoyu-rosiyska-propaganda-ta-nagirnyy-karabakh/>.

³² Brailyan, "Armenia can become the next Ukraine."

³³ O. Volovych, "The South Caucasus in the geopolitical triangle "Turkey – Russia – Iran"," Borysfen Intel, 2020, <https://bintel.org.ua/analytics/voenni-voprosy/armii-voorugenie/pivdennij-kavkaz-v-geopolitichnomu-trikutniku-turechchina-rosiya-iran/>.

³⁴ A. Ergun, "Azerbaijani perspectives on the geopolitical situation, Changing Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. Prospect for Regional Cooperation and/or Rivalry," *CMI Report* no. 4 (2023).

train Azerbaijani military personnel. Georgia has joined the military-technical cooperation, rapidly expanding contacts in this area with Baku and Ankara. President Aliyev is actively working on political and military-technical cooperation with Israel, Georgia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kazakhstan, creating a powerful partner alliance that, with the participation of Turkey, can ensure stability in the region. Other analysts³⁵ argue that the more Azerbaijan consolidates power over Karabakh, the more it becomes dependent on Russia. Moscow still maintains a military presence in Karabakh, and despite the decision of the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities to dissolve themselves, Russian troops are unlikely to leave soon.

Regarding Georgia, the geopolitical factor must be considered:³⁶ without sufficient support from the US and the EU, it will be forced to return to Moscow's sphere of influence. Therefore, their policy during 2022–2024 appeared extremely cautious in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Conclusions

Russia's positions in the South Caucasus region were quite strong until 2022. In 2020 the Second Karabakh War ended with the mediation of Russia. By deploying a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh with the hope of establishing a permanent military base, Moscow managed to strengthen its presence in the region. However, its policy in Georgia was only partially successful: opting for a policy of normalization, Georgia cannot renounce its territory (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). This is the red line where all negotiations between the two countries stop.

Azerbaijan has been the most consistent among the Caucasian countries in challenging Russian hegemony in the region. This trend intensified after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: Azerbaijan increased humanitarian aid to Ukraine; pro-Ukrainian sympathies in Azerbaijani society were expressed through a number of leading media outlets that openly supported Kyiv. Russia withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh. Some peacekeepers were sent to join the occupation forces in Ukraine, significantly undermining Russia's authority in the region. Baku unilaterally reviewed the ceasefire agreement from November 10, 2020, mediated by Russia. Amid the international isolation of the Kremlin, Azerbaijan began to play a much larger role for Russia. Baku is one of the most important links in the chain of diplomatic and economic ties that Putin's regime maintains with the rest of the world. Therefore, Moscow cannot afford to quarrel with Azerbaijan. Losing its influence in the region, Russia tries to maintain productive relations with Baku, even at the expense of its long-time ally Armenia. Yerevan consistently

³⁵ R. Mammadli, "Azerbaijan and Russia: common interests are growing. To change the security architecture in the South Caucasus, it is time for the West to take concrete actions in the region," *IO*, 2023, <https://www.ipg-journal.io/ua/rubriki/zovnishnja-politika-ta-bezpeka/azerbaidzhan-ta-rosija-spilnikh-interesiv-staje-bilshe-1889/>.

³⁶ N. Samkharadze, "3+3 Minus One: Georgia's South Caucasian Challenges and Prospects," *Georgian Institute of Politics Policy Brief* no. 37 (2022).

revises its foreign policy, increasingly favouring a pro-Western vector. During the “anti-terrorist measures” in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, Russia and its peacekeepers did not take active steps to cease fire, which was their duty under the ceasefire agreement. Part of the Russian peacekeeping contingent withdrew from their positions and silently observed the combat actions. Russian propaganda accused the escalation of the capitulation of Nagorno-Karabakh on Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan, who allegedly turned away from Russia. In Yerevan, the pro-Russian opposition organized rallies against the current government. Moscow and Baku both gained mutual benefits: Russia destabilized the situation in Armenia, and Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity. However, these actions of Moscow also unexpectedly struck at its influence in the region, marginalizing Russia and its “guarantees.” The Caucasus provides a clear example of Russia’s inability to continue playing the role of a major power: it simply lacks the strength and means.

Ethics and consent

Ethics and consent is not required for this article.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.