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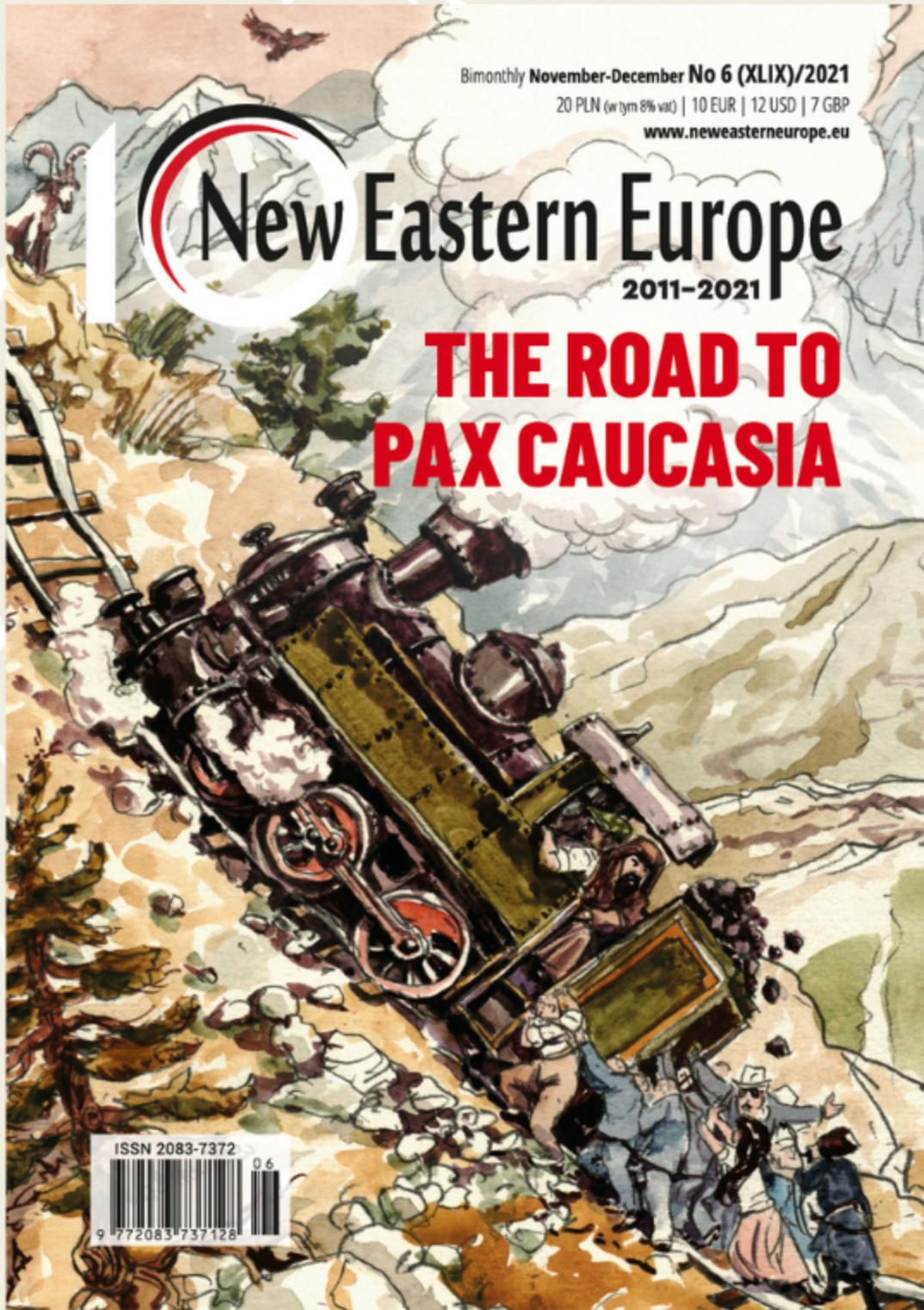
## THE ROAD TO PAX CAUCASIA

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# The position of Georgia within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

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Georgia has great interest in advancing **peaceful and neighbourly relations** with the other countries of the South Caucasus. Now, there is an opportunity to strengthen ties among the three countries. However, a realistic approach towards these relations is needed to achieve modest success in the short and medium-terms.

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The main aim of Georgian policy in the South Caucasus is to sustain peace and stability while ensuring neighbourly relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tbilisi adhered to this approach during the so-called Second Nagorno-Karabakh War last year. In particular, the statement of the National Security Council of Georgia published on October 3rd 2020 serves as a proof of such a commitment. This statement stresses that the active armed conflict should come to an end as soon as possible.

Specifically, Georgia did not allow the transit of military supplies to either state and declared a willingness to take on the role of a negotiator between the conflicting parties. This announcement had two fundamental points. Georgia not only demonstrated its approach towards the conflict, but it also showed its readiness to actively participate in dialogue regarding the situation in the region. Moreover, this statement sent a message to Georgia's two largest national minorities that it aims to maintain stability and uphold the rule of law.

## Regional realities

By briefly evaluating the security council's statement and Georgia's response to the conflict, it becomes clear that Tbilisi responded by doing as much as it could while being aware of regional realities. During the normalisation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the media frequently raised the question as to what extent Georgia's efforts had been coordinated with western partners. Addressing this question, we should not forget that every step taken by the Georgian authorities was made with regional realities and Georgia's potential in mind. It is also crucial to understand that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should not be the only reason for an alignment of western and Georgian policies regarding the South Caucasus. It is important to remember that the roots of this co-operation stem from large-scale transport projects, such as the South Caucasian natural gas and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipelines, to name but a few.

A fair evaluation of the West's presence and influence in the South Caucasus matters as much as the quality of its activities. It is impossible to talk about Georgia's efforts to foster western presence in the South Caucasus without admitting that the West must maintain its presence in the region itself, first and foremost, and be willing to respond to Georgia's initiatives. The Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement signed on November 10th 2020 together with various associated documents discuss the creation of new transport corridors on the territories of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Although an evaluation of these projects does not lie within the scope of this article, I would like to discuss if they could hinder the transit and transport potential of Georgia. Overall, I believe that those who have a pessimistic outlook on the situation may be slightly exaggerating.

Firstly, no large transportation initiative can exclusively be subject to geopolitical ideas and an inflexible line of thinking. It is important to consider its investment model. In other words, any project can safely be set aside in the absence of a clear financial and investment plan. Otherwise, the whole project may come to nothing and be quite an adventure. Geopolitical considerations on their own would not be enough to implement projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasian gas pipeline or the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. After all, they have to be financially profitable in the first place. Furthermore, developing trust in a new transport corridor takes years to develop. It also takes time and effort to develop and deal with the various geopolitical and geoeconomic characteristics of a specific project. Any issues associated with Georgia's transport corridors were already settled a while ago.

Moreover, some aspects of the agreement on new transport corridors involving Armenia and Azerbaijan lack precision. Certainly, it appears that various de-

tails have not been settled once and for all. It remains unclear how safe these transport connections will be and if the Russian Federation can guarantee their safety and stay neutral regarding both parties. It should be remembered that the transport corridors that go through Georgian territory guarantee the export of cargo traffic from a nearby seaport on the Black Sea shore. This aspect is also of great economic importance, especially with regards to investment. In general, there are two major reasons why Georgia's transit routes are so attractive. Firstly, the country's political system, although far from perfect, guarantees transparent legislation that creates a welcoming business environment. At the same time, the Georgian market is better integrated with the western markets than those of the other two South Caucasus states. Due to this, Baku and Yerevan could benefit greatly from closer co-operation.

During the conflict, the media frequently asked to what extent Georgia's efforts had been **coordinated** with the West.

### **A factor of regional powers**

It is interesting to follow up on the role of Russia and Turkey in the region in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia's impact in this regard is peculiar. Moscow had to be very careful to maintain balance in its relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. Neither of these states were hostile to Russia and this encouraged Moscow to adopt more sophisticated and complex policies compared to other post-Soviet military conflicts and wars. This could also be the reason behind the rather general and unclear wording of some of the ceasefire agreement statements.

Additionally, Russia had to consider its bilateral relations with Turkey, as their interests overlap not only in this region but in other parts of the world as well. Despite Moscow's tactical interest in cooperating with Ankara, Russia did its best to try and limit the role of Turkey after the end of hostilities. For instance, the November 10th agreement aims to limit Turkish military involvement in a ceasefire monitoring centre. Russia has also managed to neutralise attempts by Turkey and Azerbaijan to expand Ankara's role within the OSCE Minsk Group.

Turkey retains an important position in Georgia's regional outlook and remains one of its most prominent partners. Of course, Ankara is an essential regional security player and has consistently supported Georgia's NATO aspirations. As a result, Georgian-Turkish relations could deter Russian influence over the South Caucasus. While Turkey is mainly interested in a more profound partnership with Azerbaijan, it appears that it is also seeking to normalise its relations with Yerevan.

### Is a tripartite alliance possible?

It is difficult to argue against the potential benefits that a tripartite partnership could bring to all the countries of the South Caucasus. In addition to strengthening peacebuilding and security issues, such a partnership would make the South Caucasus stronger and economically more attractive. Unfortunately, the reality we are living in today does not provide any ground to be optimistic about the situation from a short to medium-term perspective.

Overall, it seems that Tbilisi's individual relationships with Armenia and Azerbaijan are playing a key part in the politics of the South Caucasus region as a whole. Georgia, therefore, has an important role to play in maintaining the general quality of relations between the states in the region. This is the reality of the region today and ignoring it is not feasible. This shows the valuable role that Georgia is playing in the ongoing political processes in the South Caucasus, at least in relation to the economy. This makes domestic changes and the integration of Georgia into a civilised international community even more vital. 

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