



Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA

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Key points:

- 1) In Belarus, Western democracy trumped geopolitical calculations. Or did it?*
 - 2) Deeply rooted in the unfinished business of Europe, the current tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean risk shifting multiple regional balances of power.*
 - 3) How the failing OSCE multilateralism might be replaced by de facto Russian-Turkish conflict management in Nagorno-Karabakh.*
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1) In Belarus, Western democracy trumped geopolitical calculations. Or did it?

In spite of its widely acknowledged geopolitical importance in a currently strained Russia-West relationship (geopoliticalfutures.com), Belarus has never been referred in this publication so far. A formal, though difficult, ally of Russia in both the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Belarus' relationship with the West was also problematic due to its poor record on human rights and democracy. In the run-up to the presidential elections of last August, Belarus' relations with the West had slightly warmed up, apparently due to political and economic (i.e. energy policy) divergences between Minsk and Moscow. This recent evolution was highlighted by the U.S. state secretary Mike Pompeo's visit to Minsk, last February: *"Pompeo's visit demonstrates increased support of the country's sovereignty and its strategic location in light of the ongoing negotiations between Moscow and Minsk on the creation of the union state"* (<https://theglobepost.com>). Moreover, eleven days before the latest presidential elections a diplomatic row broke out between president A. Lukashenko and Moscow around the so-called "Wagner incident". That was the latest opportunity for *"Lukashenko to ramp up his anti-Russian rhetoric"*, while *"the Kremlin, bewildered, saw this as the Belarusian ruler's attempt to win acquiescence in the West for his re-election on a pro-sovereignty, anti-Russian ticket"* (D. Trenin- <https://carnegie.ru>).

On August 9, the allegedly rigged presidential elections in Belarus have been won by the incumbent president with a landslide victory. The massive protests against what has been perceived by many in Belarus as another stolen election have challenged the geopolitical outlook of Belarus and of its controversial president. The violent reaction of the security forces against peaceful protesters, and

the rejection of dialogue with, and arrest of some members of, the Coordination Council (gathering representatives of the opposition) triggered calls in the West for: *"the EU must end its geopoliticking in Belarus. Rather than pretending that its recent warming of ties with the Lukashenko regime has bolstered the country's sovereignty, the EU must return to putting its fundamental values front and centre."* (J. Forbrig- <https://gmfus.org>) Such calls have widely and swiftly spread among political leaders and mainstream media so that one could conclude that in Belarus, the quest for promoting Western democracy trumped geopolitical calculations. Not surprisingly, president Lukashenko, in an interview to Russian journalists on September 9, jumped on this inadvertent political boon by claiming that: *"The West seeks to carry out a colour revolution in Belarus solely in order to prepare a springboard for the same revolution in Russia."* (www.jamestown.org).

After an initial hesitation, the West eventually understood that Russia had no reason to rush into intervening in Belarus since a weak Lukashenko plaid well into its strategy to control the geopolitical orientation of the country. Instead, Moscow decided to use the lame-duck Lukashenko to get Belarus politically, economically, and strategically closer to Russia and turn their new relationship into an example to be followed by other post-Soviet states. When Lukashenko's short term role in shaping a "Rublezone" (<https://intellinews.com>) and in taking forward the Union State with Russia would have been fulfilled he might be replaced with another politician more competent to build and sustain a "managed democracy" *a-la-russe*. Reshaping the current Constitution in order to transform the current authoritarian presidential system into a parliamentary democracy might be a first logical step in that direction (jamestown.org and intellinews.com).

However, Russian response to Lukashenko's call for help from Moscow against the massive socio-economic unravelling of his country has blunted the Western pro-democratic soar to Belarus while falling back towards more pragmatic approaches.

By mid-September, in the wake of a productive summit of presidents Putin and Lukashenko, in Sochi, Western analysts warned against past emotional mistakes in relations with Belarus by recalling that political sanctions had rather strengthened Russian leverage over Minsk than democratic reforms *per se* (jamestown.org). This understanding has brought up more realistic geopolitical assessments of the new situation: *"As in a chess endgame, too bold a move for any of the players could spell doom. The same is true of the EU. [...] if Europe is seen to support the democratic opposition too openly, this paradoxically could throw a lifeline to Lukashenko."* (T. de Waal – carnegieeurope.eu).

Therefore, given Moscow's almost exclusive leverage over Lukashenko, Brussels might largely leave Moscow lead the political transition in Belarus, while it would start *"planning for Belarus after Lukashenko"* (T. de Waal). In theory, that might be a sound plan, unless EU's input to the process was too small or too late for enabling concrete progress in regaining its lost influence over Minsk, in the post-Lukashenko era. In practice, it means that the E.U. should revisit its Belarus policy so that it focused more resources on incentivizing and supporting pragmatic approaches to political transition.

2) Deeply rooted in unfinished business of Europe, the current tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean risk shifting multiple regional balances of power.

In the [July 2020](#) issue dealing with the tense relationship between the E.U. and Turkey we noted an escalating dispute between Greece and Turkey

over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. Over the last couple of months, this regional dispute has swiftly become militarized. In late August, France, Greece, Cyprus and Italy were engaged in military exercises involving ships and planes off the Cypriot coast. Their alleged purpose was to deter Turkey from further energy exploration in disputed waters, something Ankara had been doing for several weeks with vessels guarded by its warships and jet fighters (<https://www.nytimes.com>).

Earlier this year, Turkey sent survey and drilling ships to explore gas fields off Cyprus. After Greece rejected that Turkish move while re-asserting its determination to defend its territory, Turkey overflew Greek islands with fighter jets and deployed naval vessels into the area. In August, a Greek frigate collided with a Turkish one protecting the survey ship, prompting a French decision to aid Greece.

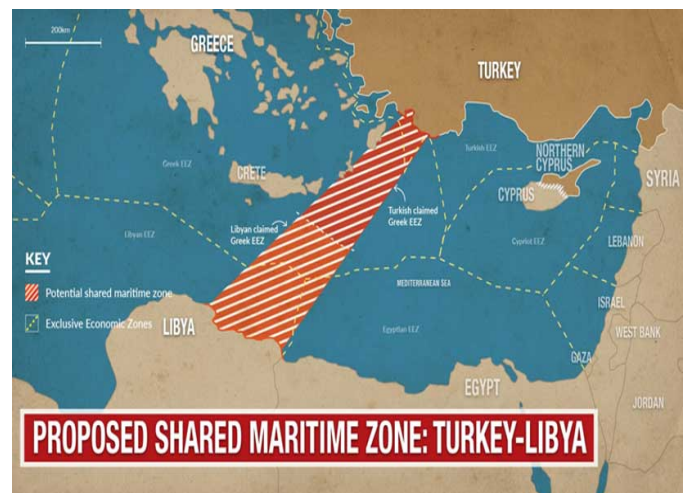


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The current crisis has grown around the politically motivated exclusion of Turkey from multinational initiatives aimed at the discovery and exploitation of massive natural-gas fields against the backdrop of a controversial international legal framework (i.e. the UNCLOS). As more gas has been discovered and plans for its exploitation have been drawn up, the regional countries have asserted their rights to

often-overlapping offshore exclusive economic zones (EEZ). For example, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and Italy have planned to build the EastMed pipeline aiming to carry natural gas to European consumers. In the wake of Turkey's deal with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) aiming to establish a joint EEZ, that was immediately contested by Greece, Cyprus (and by extension by the whole of the E.U.) and Egypt, president Erdogan has vowed to block the construction of this pipeline.

Recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have been deeply grounded into older 20th century European unfinished business including the Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus, and the status and EEZ rights of the myriad of Greek islands in the Aegean Sea situated just next to the Turkish coasts. Expectations that by having Cyprus join the E.U. European leaders would get additional leverage to manage the centuries-old Greek-Turkish conflict had been clearly overestimated. Most recently, the E.U. has increasingly embraced the positions of Greece and Cyprus while finding itself at loggerheads with Turkey on multiple accounts.

BREXIT and the partial retrenchment of the U.S. from the European and MENA security affairs have further eroded the ability of the U.S. and of NATO to put a lid on the Greece-Turkey conflict, while having the latter increasingly entangled with the Middle Eastern geopolitical cauldron. Furthermore, over the last few years, Russia's military incursions in Syria and Libya, as well as Moscow's rising tensions with NATO, U.S., and the E.U. over a growing list of divisive issues have further complicated the regional geopolitical outlook in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On the other hand, the fading Turkish interest for joining the E.U. and its growing assertiveness as a regional power in a geopolitically complicated neighbourhood have dramatically unravelled the post-Cold War E.U.-Turkey strategic relationship. At the same time, current tensions in the Eastern

Mediterranean risk putting under serious strain multiple regional balances of power in neighbouring areas, extending from South-Eastern Europe to the Wider Black Sea, as well as across the Eastern part of the MENA region.

Within this increasingly competitive security environment, the current crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean has become a litmus test for EU's ability to become a key actor on conflict management and settlement within Europe's neighbourhoods. (S. Ulgen- carnegieeurope.eu). Not surprisingly, in the last decade of September, Germany's mediation efforts have resulted into a Greek-Turkish agreement to restart exploratory talks regarding their territorial disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean (stratfor.com). Meanwhile, J. Stoltenberg, the secretary general of NATO, has successfully mediated the establishment of a military de-confliction mechanism between Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean aiming to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents, in air and at sea (nato.int).

Turkey's recent discovery in mid-August of a major gas field in the Black Sea might have somewhat cooled off Ankara's stance on the Eastern Mediterranean energy resources. On the other hand, exclusive initiatives, such as the recently established Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, aimed at increasing regional cooperation and joint efforts to exploit offshore gas, by Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Italy, Greece and Cyprus are likely to blunt, if not completely cancel, the mediating efforts of Germany and NATO to find multilateral, inclusive solutions to the current tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

3) How the failing OSCE multilateralism might be replaced by *de facto* Russian-Turkish conflict management in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Since the morning of September 27, 2020 the protracted conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has entered a new phase featuring heavy military

clashes involving air and land operations along the whole line of contact between the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh Republic and Azerbaijan, allegedly including a limited number of artillery or missile strikes targeting areas situated deeper on the territory of Armenia and Azerbaijan. In essence, this has been a resumption of the 1992-1994 war that had been interrupted by a ceasefire signed by all parties, under Russian mediation, in May 1994.

This new outbreak of violence did hardly come up as a surprise. Over the last few months, many local and international experts have warned on the danger of a large scale resumption of hostilities in Karabakh. For example, an EGF Tweet of July 15 warned that: [the July 2020 escalation was] *"A stark reminder to #OSCE Europe that it sits on top of a powder keg in #SouthCaucasus which might blow up at any time, unless it was properly attended with innovative ideas for CSBM, peace building, and preparing populations for peace."* (@EGF_Brussels). Or on September 10, an article from <https://caucasuswatch.de> concluded that: *"a new outbreak of violence in the Caucasus with unforeseeable consequences appears to be entirely possible"*.

The July 2020 conflict escalation in Tovuz/Tavush, a region situated far away from the Nagorno-Karabakh line of contact, followed by joint military drills conducted by Armenia and Russia, and Azerbaijan and Turkey, respectively, heralded the closing of the latest window of opportunity for the peace process. As we concluded in the Foreword of the recent EGF Nagorno-Karabakh Research Digest: *"in 2020, the NK peace process is dangerously deadlocked, and its current state of play could result in a return to large scale warfighting. Not only the credibility and the effectiveness of the Co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group were increasingly questioned by the Azerbaijanis, but the basic framework of the solution to the conflict [also known as the*

Madrid/Basic Principles, which were the bedrock of conflict resolution so far] promoted by them over the last 13 years was deemed as the main cause of the current deadlock in negotiations by the Armenians" (<http://gpf-europe.com>).

The emergence of this new phase of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, whereby the failing OSCE multilateralism might be replaced by *de facto* Russian-Turkish conflict management, could have major geopolitical implications for the South Caucasus. They were summarized as: *"Azerbaijan's military offensive on the Armenia-controlled Nagorno Karabakh enclave threatens to spiral quickly into a wider regional conflict, one that pits Russia and Turkey in a volatile proxy theatre."* (R. Giragosian- asiatimes.com). Or, from a different perspective: *"It may fall to Ankara and Moscow to fill a diplomatic vacuum and convince their respective allies to return to the negotiating table. Despite sharp differences with Russia and Turkey on many fronts, the United States and its European allies would be wise to encourage and shape such a forum."* (M. Bryza- www.atlanticcouncil.org). Meanwhile, a joint call, on October 1, by the presidents of the U.S., Russia, and France (as OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs) on Armenia and Azerbaijan to cease the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh have been so far completely ignored by all belligerents.

In fact, the key driver of the current geopolitical upheaval in the South Caucasus has been president R.T. Erdogan of Turkey. In the wake of the new outbreak of war, his public calls for a full Armenian withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory, while asking Azerbaijan to take the matters in their hands, and condemning what he said were nearly three decades of failure by major powers to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute have dramatically shifted the pattern of the Azerbaijani foreign and security policy and the Armenian narrative on the conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan.

On the one hand, Azerbaijan, emboldened by Turkey's unconditional political and military support, might have decided to re-energize the deadlocked peace process by changing the territorial *status quo* in the field, and force the Armenians to come back to the negotiations table. For example, L. Broers, Caucasus program director at the London-based think tank Chatham House, noted via Twitter that the clashes could be *"an intentional but limited aims operation [on the part of Azerbaijan] aimed at recovering territories [and] consolidating [a] more advantageous new ceasefire, packaged as a military win."* (al-monitor.com) On the other hand, Moscow's perceived siding with Armenia, and the Western preference for conflict management, in spite of their roles as key mediators in the peace process, might have precipitated a significant change in Baku's foreign policy aiming to move away from balancing among, and maintaining an equidistance to, all regional actors (Russia, Turkey, U.S., E.U., Iran) towards openly siding with Ankara, at least in a short term perspective (visegradinsight.eu).

This strategic shift of Azerbaijani foreign policy might have pushed Yerevan closer to a regional escalation strategy against the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in the hope to defend the favourable post-Cold War territorial *status quo* by pitting Turkey against Russia and the West. In that vein, prime minister N. Pashinyan was recently warning in an interview with France24 that: *"Turkey has a clear objective of reinstating the Turkish Empire. Don't be surprised if that policy succeeds here, don't be surprised if they attempt to incorporate into their empire not only the Greek islands but expand further into continental Europe. If Turkey succeeds in this, wait for them in Vienna"* (france24.com). If successful, such a strategy could eventually lead to a complete breakdown of the shaky East European post-Cold War order.

Against the backdrop of the current upheaval in the Caucasus, all eyes are pointing now at how Moscow and Ankara would manage their new regional power struggle, building upon their recent experiences in Syria and in Libya. A Russian official statement issued in the wake of a phone call between the two foreign ministers on October 2, sounded mostly optimistic: *"They [the ministers] reaffirmed their readiness to closely coordinate the actions of Russia and Turkey to stabilise the situation in order to return the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to a peaceful negotiation channel as soon as possible."* (intellinews.com) However, concrete outcomes of this agreement were not visible yet by the time of closing this issue of the "EGF Geopolitical Trends".

Nevertheless, it appears that, at least for now, peace in Karabakh is rather hanging on the broader balance of power between Russia and Turkey than on the ineffective multilateralism practised for so many years by the OSCE Minsk Group. As such, the South Caucasus region is increasingly moving away from the Eastern European affairs, while risking being thrown into the Middle Eastern cauldron.



About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at www.gpf-europe.com.

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Mr. George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently acting as the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also currently acting as co-Chair of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group of the [PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes \(PfPC\)](#). In October 2019, he has successfully defended his PhD thesis on "[SECURITY SCENARIOS PLANNING IN THE GEOPOLITICAL AREA FROM THE BALTIC SEA TO THE WIDER BLACK SEA \(INTER-MARIUM\)](#)" at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (NSPSPA) Bucharest. He has also academic experience as a member of several other PfPC working groups, as well as assistant professor and/or visiting lecturer at the NSPSPA, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University, NATO Studies Centre, and the PfP Training Centre from Bucharest (1997-2004). Mr. Niculescu has been involved in several international research projects sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation), the European Commission (HiQSTEP Project), and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. His full CV and list of publications could be found [here](#).

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