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Geopolitical Trends

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

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## Key points:

1) Thinking Beyond the War in Ukraine: What Likely Futures for Eastern Europe/ Inter-marium?
2) Energy War in Europe: How Geopolitical Competition Is Reshaping Global Markets.
3) Geopolitical Suspicions and Status Uncertainties Might Bog Down Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace.

**1) Thinking Beyond the War in Ukraine: What Likely Futures for Eastern Europe/Inter-marium?**[1]

Thursday, February 24, 2022 will remain a landmark in European history: it is the date when the post-WWII European security system crashed. On that date, Russian troops massively marched over the Ukrainian borders. As explained in our previous issue, this crash, predictable for several years, has been completed by the escalation of the Donbas conflict into a wider Eastern European war.

In a televised speech that day, president V. Putin portrayed that conflict as one waged against the West as a whole. He argued that the West aimed to use Ukraine as a springboard to invade and destroy Russia: "*It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns*." He went further to explain that the purpose of Russian "special operation" on the territory of Ukraine was to protect people in Donbas: "*To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation*". (https://nytimes.com)

In return, Western countries expressed their outrage with the Russian invasion of a sovereign European state, and triggered a gradually expanding economic war against Russia, while bolstering the defences of NATO members bordering Ukraine, and delivering billions USD/Euro in economic and military aid to Kyiv. In the first day of the war, president J. Biden announced an unprecedented package of sanctions and export controls coordinated with European and Asian allies, to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine: "*If we don't move against him now with these significant sanctions, he will be emboldened. […]Putin chose this war. And now, he and his country will bear the consequences.*" While the US secretary of state A. Blinken summarized the Western strategy in this war: "*The strategy that we've put in place — massive support for Ukraine, massive pressure against Russia, solidarity with more than 30 countries engaged in these efforts — is having real results*", US secretary of defence L. Austin defined "*America's goals for success*": Ukraine to remain a sovereign, democratic country, able to protect its territory, while Russia should be "*weakened*" by the war, and not able to reproduce very quickly its military capabilities anymore. (https://washingtonpost.com)

As we signalled in our previous issue, the post-Cold War European order is in tatters, while a new European order is yet to be born, and there seems to be little appetite to imagine and negotiate it. Nevertheless, at least over the medium and longer term, this is the only alternative to regional war in Eastern Europe/ Inter-marium.

While most of the international media and experts' analysis have addressed the roots, evolution, implications, and possible outcomes of the new Ukraine war, we have chosen to think beyond the ongoing war in Ukraine with the view to assess the likely futures of Eastern Europe/Inter-marium in the wake of that war.

However, this scenario planning exercise would rely on various assessments on how the Ukraine war might end. There are many expert opinions about that. For example, Christopher Chivvis foresees only "*two paths toward ending the war: one, continued escalation, potentially across the nuclear threshold; the other, a bitter peace imposed on a defeated Ukraine that will be extremely hard for the United*

[1] Covering the geopolitical area overlapping the Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU with the Inter-marium, as defined by the STRATFOR geopolitical expert, George Friedman. It would comprise the territories of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

*States and many European allies to swallow.*" In the former scenario, Washington and some of its allies would seek to fight on, including by supporting a Ukrainian insurgency. He thought that the more effective NATO support to Ukraine was, the more the Kremlin would likely be willing to risk attacks on safe havens in NATO territory. These operations could lead to a massive escalation that would open the door to a much wider war between NATO and Russia. The latter scenario, providing that a puppet Ukrainian government was installed with the backing of Russian forces, might put the West in front of a dilemma: either to further escalate the war (former scenario) or to compromise on the right of Ukraine to remain a sovereign, independent, and democratic state. (https://carnegieendowment.org)

George Friedman foresaw a political end of the war where the Russian president would be replaced by the *siloviki* and oligarchs with another leader who would be more open to geopolitical compromise with the West: "*Ukraine might collapse. Russia might collapse. The Russian army may devise a strategy to win the war. A settlement that is respected might be reached. All of these are possible, but I don't see much movement in any of these directions. A political end is what I would bet on, with the Russians taking the short end of the stick.*" (https://geopoliticalfutures.com)

And Richard Haass, the president of the Council of Foreign Relations, suggested three possible futures for the Ukraine war: one favourable to Russia whereby Putin were prepared to cease major military operations in exchange for keeping a large swath of Ukraine. In that case the war would probably continue at some level with Western support for Ukraine. A second one where due to a military stalemate things would stand more or less where they did before the invasion, with Russia occupying Crimea and exercising de facto control through its proxies over parts of the Donbas. Such a future would come about if Ukraine took back some of what Russia has gained over the past months, but neither Ukraine nor Russia were able to achieve decisive military progress. A stalemate was likely to result in an open-ended conflict since Ukrainian leaders would likely reject leaving any Ukrainian territory under Russian control. A third future, defined by an Ukrainian military success, where Russia would be forced to accept the pre-2014 *status quo*. Nevertheless, Haass discarded this future as president Putin would never accept it, and might escalate the war instead. In exchange, he advised that taking back Donbas and Crimea should be better left for the post-war or even for post-Putin period, when it could be traded-off for the relief of Western sanctions on Russia. (https://foreignaffairs.com)

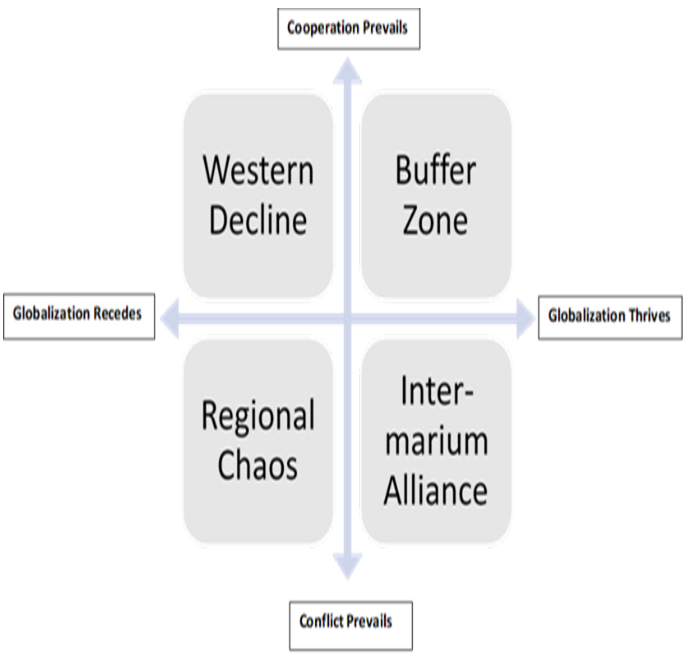
On the other hand, Valdai Club Programme Director Andrey Sushentsov, argued for a future "Cold Peace": "*We must admit that the new security system in Europe will be based on mutual hostility. But this will be a variant of hostility that precludes provocative behaviour. Such behaviour is possible only in a situation where no one believes that the other side will attack* you*. After the outbreak of hostilities on February 24, there is no such belief among the NATO countries anymore.*" (https://valdaiclub.com)

Meanwhile, Serghey Karaganov, a harsh critic of the post-Cold War European security order who thought that Ukraine was being built by the US and other NATO countries as a spearhead of aggression or at least of military pressure to bring NATO's military machine closer to the heart of Russia, foresaw as this war's probable endgame "*a new treaty, maybe with Zelensky still there. Probably it would mean the creation of a country in South and South-East Ukraine that is friendly to Russia. Maybe there will be several Ukraines.*" More concretely, he thought that post-war Ukraine must be a completely demilitarized neutral country with no heavy arms, whose security should be guaranteed by outside powers, including Russia, and which wouldn't be allowed to host military exercises if one of the guarantors was against it. In short, his vision foresaw that "*Ukraine should be a peaceful buffer.*" (https://www.corriere.it)

How would those possible outcomes of the Ukraine war impact on the future of Eastern Europe?

To make a long story short I'd refer here the findings of my PhD research on "Western Confrontation With Russia: Security Scenarios Planning In The Geopolitical Area From The Baltic Sea To The Wider Black Sea (Inter-Marium)", finalized in summer of 2019. That doctoral research started from the assumption of four empirical scenarios being most likely for Inter-Marium in 2025-2030:

1. An Inter-marium Alliance: New Cold War.
2. The Buffer Zone: Power Sharing and Limited/Controlled Stand-off.
3. Western Decline: European and Trans-Atlantic Unity broken.
4. Regional Chaos: Turning Confrontation into War.




Scenario-Matrix for the Confrontation between the West and Russia in the Inter-marium, 2025-2030

They had been developed and their validity tested by means of the scenario planning method combined with a regional geopolitical analysis. On that basis, a scenario matrix was drawn up along two clusters' axes: globalization thrives vs. globalization recedes; and cooperation vs. conflict prevails in relations between the West and Russia.

If Russia wins in Ukraine, further regional escalation is likely as explained by Chivvis and Haass, which might be heading Eastern Europe towards the Regional Chaos (Regional War) scenario. Meanwhile, the "Cold Peace" suggested by Sushentsov and the neutral de-militarized "peaceful buffer" Ukraine, as suggested by Karaganov, might lead to the Inter-marium Alliance or New Cold War scenario, or a variant of it in case the EU and NATO survived geopolitical defeat in Ukraine.

In case of a military stalemate in Ukraine, as suggested by Haass, Eastern Europe might be heading towards the New Cold War scenario with the possibility for a medium term escalation towards the Regional Chaos scenario, that is again regional war.

Finally, in case Ukraine wins under the conditions suggested by Haass, Eastern Europe might be moving towards the Buffer Zone scenario (Western power sharing with Russia and limited/controlled stand-off). The Buffer Zone scenario might also emerge in case Ukraine collapsed under the socio-economic and humanitarian burdens of war, and new political leaders agreed to submit the country to Russian dominance if not direct rule. That would imply a *de facto* (and possibly also *de jure*) disappearance of the Ukrainian state.

Irrespective of the outcome of the Ukraine war, the Buffer Zone scenario might also come up in case the Trans-Atlantic relations broke down either due to the emergence of a new Trumpian leader in Washington, due to the emergence of a strategic distraction of the US towards another region of the world, or as a consequence of a breakdown of the EU. The latter might be possible if, under strong domestic socio-economic pressure, older Western European members might reconsider their current position against Russia, while some of the new Central and Eastern European members might choose to remain aligned with the US, in a conflictual posture, for fear of Russian Western expansionism. In case an agreement on a Buffer Zone security arrangement with Russia failed, Eastern Europe might shift towards the Western Decline (i.e. European and Trans-Atlantic unity broken) scenario in the former two cases, whereas in the latter case the New Cold War scenario might best describe the future geopolitical order of Eastern Europe.

In the light of the endgames suggested here above, it seems that the New Cold War and Regional War scenarios are the most likely futures for Eastern Europe. In contrast, the Buffer Zone scenario is the least likely for now, as it would assume that either Russia or the West would be prepared/forced to accept a geopolitical compromise on Eastern Europe. This is unlikely under the current Putin and Biden administrations, which seem determined to continue their geopolitical fight over Eastern Europe. A collapse of Ukraine is also hardly foreseeable within the current circumstances. On a short term, the Western Decline scenario is also hardly foreseeable, while its odds might grow as we approached the next US presidential elections. This might also change in case “Black Swan” events might lead to a breakdown of Western unity.

Indeed, at present, there are not so many chances for Ukraine ending the war with Russia in a pre-2014 territorial configuration, while Western, Russian, and maybe Chinese decisions and actions might dramatically shift in-between the Eastern European futures in the wake of the ongoing Ukraine war.

## 2) Energy War in Europe: How Geopolitical Competition Is Reshaping Global Markets

Against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, a mutually damaging energy war has broken out between Russia and the West. According to many experts, this war should be manageable on a pragmatic basis. Otherwise, it would blindly hurt EU corporate and individual consumers interests for likely, but unclear, effects on the outcomes of the war in Ukraine.

The Western dominant narrative generally cites the money the EU pays to Russia for energy bills is used by the Kremlin to fund its war machine. However, there is also a reverse of that narrative. As Russia is pumping gas via the Ukrainian pipelines and paying Kyiv hundreds of millions of dollars a month in transit fees, both sides are in effect helping to fund the military effort of the other. That has been a triumph of globalization over geopolitics. However, the recent escalation of the energy war in Europe is most likely to reverse this geopolitical trend to the detriment of both Russia, the EU, and Ukraine. In effect, the latter would lose an important source of energy transit revenues and a critical role in the transit to the European energy markets. Those had been precisely the main arguments against the building and operationalization of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline linking Russia to Germany, which have apparently lost relevance as of today.

On April 27, Russian state-owned company Gazprom completely suspended natural gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria under long-term contracts that were valid through the end of 2022. Gazprom explained this move as the gas importers in both countries (PGNiG and Bulgargaz, respectively) had refused to pay for their latest purchases in Russian rubles, under the new financial terms imposed on European customers. The scheme proposed by the Russian side required the customers to open a rubles account at Gazprombank where Euros paid for the gas purchases would be converted to rubles and subsequently transferred to Gazprom’s accounts. The European Commission (E.C.) rejected the scheme as it would allegedly breach existing sanctions against Russia for its war in Ukraine. (https://jamestown.org)

One week later, the president of the E.C., Ursula von der Leyen, announced fresh sanctions against Russia's invasion of Ukraine including: an EU-wide embargo on Russian petroleum, with the embargo of crude oil imports entering force in six months and the embargo on petroleum products imports entering force by the end of 2022; a ban within one month on the transport, including ship-to-ship transfers, of Russia-origin crude oil and petroleum products by any EU-flagged, -owned, -chartered or -operated vessel to non-EU states; and a ban within one month on EU entities and persons providing any services related to the transport of Russia-origin crude oil and petroleum products, including technical assistance, brokering services, insurance, and financing or financial services: "*When the Leaders met in Versailles, they agreed to phase out our dependency on Russian energy. Now we are addressing our dependency on Russian oil. […] It will not be easy. Some Member States are strongly dependent on Russian oil. But we simply have to work on it.[…] We maximise pressure on Russia, while at the same time minimising collateral damage to us and our partners around the globe. Because to help Ukraine, our own economy has to remain strong.*" (https://ec.europa.eu) The EU had banned the import of coal from Russia as part of the previous package of sanctions in April. The new package of sanctions is expected to be approved by the member states during this May, under the reserve of exemptions granted to those most affected.

The oil ban is a dramatic shift for the EU, which in March had told the United States it couldn't join a Russian energy embargo. According to Ben Cahill, an energy scholar from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, fully replacing the EU market would be difficult for Russia, since "*Europe is Russia's critical export market*." And the new sanctions could also have ripple effects around the world: "*Sanctions on this scale are a much bigger step than anything done so far*," Cahill said. "*It does suggest higher prices for potentially a long time to come.*" (https://washingtonpost.com)

The US has already banned imports of Russian oil and the UK is slated to phase out the same imports by the end of this year. The entry of the EU in the Western energy war against Russia is a significant escalation that would cause lots of headaches in Moscow. "*The EU, UK and the US account for close to 55% of Russia's oil and petroleum product exports and more than 60% of natural gas exports, both in volume terms. […] We estimate that a total embargo by the three economies would lead to a loss of roughly $120bn in oil and petroleum product receipts and around $145bn in natural gas receipts*" said Hilgenstock and Ribakova, two energy experts. (https://www.intellinews.com)

Russian authorities have not been taken by surprise by the energy war in Europe. President V. Putin called on April 14 for his country "*to redirect our exports gradually to the rapidly growing markets of the South and the East.*" Most likely destinations envisaged were China, the world's largest energy market, and India, the world's third largest. However, shifting Russia's energy exports to Asia from Europe would face major obstacles. Russia would need to offer steep discounts to make its oil and coal exports worth the risk and cost to buyers, and, on the medium and longer term, would need to start building more ports and pipelines for natural gas exports. Nevertheless, global energy experts are betting that Russia can find a way to export at least its oil and coal, in large part because global demand remains high. (https://nytimes.com)

Neither for the E.U. would be easy to mitigate the collateral damages of this energy war. First, several European refineries will be trying to replace Russia's crude oil sent through the Druzhba pipeline with oil coming from other sources. This means that there will be more customers competing in a part of the global market that is already tight. Many of those other sources are the Middle Eastern countries, like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and the United Arab

Emirates, already facing higher demand from both Asia and Europe. That would result in soaring prices which in turn will feed into a rampant inflation with expected damaging socio-economic effects in European societies. As Noah Gordon concluded in a recent article published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace "*the EU's desire to both cut Russia revenues and minimize collateral damage to third countries is contradictory. Minimizing damage means avoiding a major increase in the global oil price, but that is possible only if most of the Russian oil makes it to global markets despite the EU embargo*." Due to OPEC+ resisting calls to increase production to help keep prices in check, collateral damage would be hardly avoidable. In addition, as the latest package of sanctions would include a ban on EU actors providing services related to the transport of Russian oil and petroleum products, while 95% of liability insurance for oil tankers is covered by European law, and more than 60% of Russian oil is carried on Greek tankers, these measures would cause major turmoil in the global oil trade. Gordon concluded: "*As Russia escalates its war, the costs escalate as well—for both the Putin regime itself and the people around the world who buy the goods Russia sells*". (https://carnegieendowment.org)

The downsides of the gas war in Europe will be twofold. On the one hand, the countries affected by cut-offs will face an economic blow, and securing alternative supplies will become harder and more expensive. On the other hand, it might significantly undermine the mutual trust within the EU and could notably weaken the signal that the coordinated Western sanctions were supposed to send to the Kremlin. "*Once again, European solidarity in the face of Russian divide-and-rule tactics will be critical*." (https://jamestown.org)

Furthermore, experts quoted by Intellinews thought that a short-term cut of Russian gas deliveries to Europe would cause chaos: "*Unable to source enough LNG, European countries would be forced to restart coal-fired power stations, which can immediately be fired up, reversing commitments to phase them out as part of the EU's Green Deal and "Fit for 55" plan to reduce carbon emissions and endangering the EU's plans to hit climate targets on time*". The resulting energy crisis would lead to ballooning energy bills and could result in rolling blackouts or brownouts, reducing economic output and putting both socio-economic and political pressure on the European governments. (https://www.intellinews.com)

Russia too would face major difficulties in preserving its pre-Ukraine war levels of energy revenues even as energy prices dramatically soared. According to International Institute for Finance energy experts, the main problem Russia faces is that the bulk of its oil and gas export infrastructure is pointed westwards, while there is very limited infrastructure connecting it to the East. In addition, Russia is also "*bottled up geographically*", as the access of its energy deliveries to the Eastern and South Asian ports could be relatively easily denied by secondary sanctions on tankers and marine insurance. To the South, Russia could send oil via the Central Asian pipelines. However, most of these pipelines flow in the opposite direction, while its potential pipeline exports to South-East Asian markets should cross Afghanistan where the Taliban have not yet agreed to build significant pipeline infrastructure. (https://www.intellinews.com)

In conclusion, the energy interdependence developed over the last 30+ years of globalization has created a situation in Europe where energy wars would hurt Europe as much as Russia. Short term alternative energy supplies are also limited. Therefore, the EU-Russia energy warfare is a "lose-lose" affair where both parties sacrificed vital socio-economic interests for sustaining a largely geopolitical war, whereas third parties (energy suppliers and consumers, or energy services providers) will be the true "winners".

From a geopolitical perspective, the current energy war in Europe, which runs in favour of de-globalization of energy markets, would make the New Cold War or Regional War scenarios in Eastern Europe[2] more likely, not least by strengthening the Russian prejudice that the EU is a competitive geopolitical instrument of the US. In addition, it would raise the EU's geopolitical interest for regional stability in the MENA, Central Asia, Caspian Sea/ South-Caucasus regions, as prerequisites to maintaining the vital energy lifelines of Europe. Over the short term, the impact of the energy war on Russian economy might be significant, though it might not decisively tip the balance of war in favour of Ukraine, since "Russian war machine" is not necessarily funded from the Euro/USD cash entries to Russian accounts. This war might actually target the socio-economic, and political stability and strength of the Putin regime. Over the medium and longer term though, the energy war in Europe will be a most effective mechanism for building up the "Iron Curtain" in the new Cold War.

Last, but not the least, the current energy war in Europe proved that in the EU there is no "one size fits all" for banning Russian oil and gas. On the short term, energy supply should balance members' survival needs and common geopolitical messaging and action. Over the medium and longer term, EU members should ascertain that European solidarity is not just a slogan, but it also entails practical cooperation in sharing scarce energy resources and missing supply capabilities.

**3) Geopolitical Suspicions and Status Uncertainties Might Bog Down Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace.**

Eighteen months after the 44 day Karabakh war, there is the feeling that the South Caucasus is barely moving towards peace and regional stability. The trilaterally signed Statement of November 10th, 2020 left open a wide range of key issues some of which have become bones of contention among the signatories and have made for "A Precarious Peace in Karabakh", and an uncertain future of the wider South Caucasus region.

At the geopolitical level, the OSCE Minsk Group was *de facto* sidelined on behalf of the Russian-Turkish strategic partnership over the South Caucasus, while the EU seemed interested to support demining, reconstruction and rehabilitation, as well as related peace building efforts. A Peace Agreement has still to be negotiated, while the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations has achieved meager progress.

In our Issue no 11/October-November 2020 we had warned that "*the largest geopolitical risk stemming from the new pattern of "balance of power" conflict management applied to Nagorno-Karabakh is that it might end up entangled with the ongoing Russia-West unmanaged geopolitical confrontation.*" Indeed, since then, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the ensuing Russia-West hybrid and economic wars: threatened the current geopolitical structure and arrangements in the South Caucasus possibly leading into unwanted geopolitical choices of the regional states; dimmmed the prospects for cohabitation of the European and the Eurasian integration processes; started to create geopolitical roadblocks to regional cooperation and infrastructure connectivity possibly ending up into a new «*Iron Curtain*» around, or cutting through, the South Caucasus region. Within this fluid geopolitical context, what are the prospects of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations?

On April 6, in Brussels, after hosting a meeting of president of Azerbaijan I. Aliyev and prime-minister of Armenia N. Pashinyan, the president of the European Council, C. Michel, announced that the two leaders had agreed "*to instruct their foreign ministers to start work on the preparation of a peace treaty*". That was a significant step forward in the normalization of the Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. The leaders also agreed to convene a Joint Border Commission by the end of April, and discussed the

[2] See previous item on "Thinking Beyond the War in Ukraine: What Likely Futures for Eastern Europe/ Inter-Marium?"

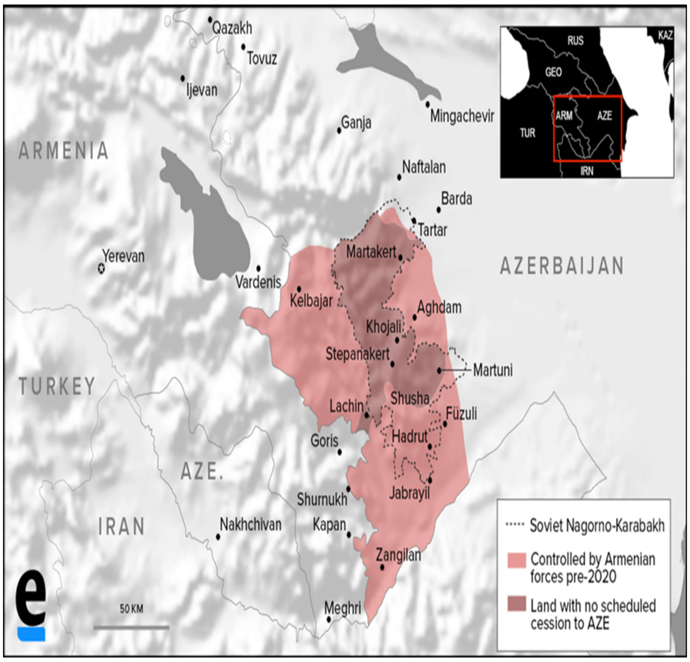
restoration of communication infrastructure between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular, and in the South Caucasus more broadly. President C. Michel expressed the readiness of the EU to support those peace efforts, including confidence-building, and humanitarian de-mining.

In a positive vein, before and after the April 6 meeting, president Aliyev and prime-minister Pashinyan spoke separately with Russian President V. Putin who emphasized the significance of peace and reiterated Russia's willingness to support Armenia and Azerbaijan. The US Secretary of State Blinken also confirmed the US readiness to facilitate the comprehensive settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. (https://commonspace.eu)

The same positive attitude towards the peaceful resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict had been displayed on March 26, when the Russian call upon Azerbaijan to withdraw its troops to their initial positions after they would have crossed into the area of responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Karabakh was echoed by the other co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, France and the United States, in a rare show of unity with Russia. (www.jamestown.org)

On April 13, prime-minister Pashinyan announced a shift in Armenian policy on Artsakh by stating in front of the Parliament that *"if in the past Armenia had placed the status of Karabakh as the basis, deriving security guarantees and rights from it, now Armenia placed security guarantees and rights as the basis, deriving status from it. He also mentioned that the international community wanted Armenia to decrease "the threshold regarding the status of Karabakh," promising more consolidation around Armenia if that happened."*(https://commonspace.eu) Armenian experts decoded the message of his speech as: "*Armenia should agree to see Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan with some level of autonomy*". (https://armenianweekly.com) However, the nature and content of the autonomy, and where exactly would it be applied must still be negotiated.

We recall that before the 2020 war, president Aliyev had been offering *"the highest possible level of autonomy within Azerbaijan"* to Karabakh's Armenians. However, once the war started, that offer has shrunk to "*Armenians could at most get "cultural autonomy", referring apparently to things like schools and media in the Armenian language. Political autonomy was no longer an option.*" (http://www.eurasianet.org) No wonder that, in such uncertain circumstances, many Armenians (in particular those living in Karabakh, but not only) are skeptical, if not fearful, of living under Azerbaijani rule. Therefore, as of May 1, regular street protests organized by the Armenian political opposition broke out aiming to hinder (or block) the negotiations on the peace treaty thereby Armenia would accept Azerbaijani sovereignty over Karabakh in exchange for an uncertain autonomy to be offered to the local Armenians.




In response to those concerns, on May 5, the secretary of the Armenian National Security Council, Armen Grigoryan, revealed the existence of a six-points proposal for negotiations with Azerbaijan. While he didn't enumerate those points, he suggested that they included a focus on the rights and security of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh and a mention of the status of the territory.

(https://eurasianet.org)
For now, Azerbaijani authorities generally keep quiet about the individual rights and security guarantees they might be prepared to grant to Armenians from Karabakh. This might be part of a negotiations strategy aiming to minimize their offer to strictly necessary. However, a more friendly, forward leaning Azerbaijani approach might help building confidence with the Armenians, who seem terrified by the prospects of changing citizenship. Here, EU/Council of Europe technical mediation might be useful.

However, the positive trends of last April moving Armenia and Azerbaijan towards the peaceful resolution of their conflict could be spoiled by the geopolitical fallout from the current Russia-West conflict over the war in Ukraine. A number of suspicions feeding this increasing risk have become apparent: Armenian experts assumed that the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh would be the primary motive for the West's efforts to facilitate the signing of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as this policy would align with the containment and deterrence of Russia. Futhermore, Moscow would believe that the West was pushing Azerbaijan to escalate the conflict against Armenia, hoping to trigger a military clash between Russia and Azerbaijan. Or, if Russia was too distracted with the war in Ukraine to effectively respond Azerbaijani incursions in the area of responsibility of its peace keeping forces in Karabakh, it might be portrayed by the West as being weak. According to the same source, the West would want to see the signature of the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace treaty no later than the end of 2022, whereas Russia was not in a hurry. Moscow would believe that the complicated conflict with a history of more than 100 years cannot be finally settled during several months of negotiations, while the West would prioritize other interests to the detriment of the status of Armenians from Karabakh . (https://armenianweekly.com)

Some of those suspicions might have been validated by Western experts. For example, L. Broers explained in a Chatham House paper why Russia's invasion of Ukraine created a window of opportunity for Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia: "*Russian distraction exposes the weaknesses of the peacekeeping mission in Karabakh. […] In the heat of battle, consensus on Ukrainian territorial integrity trumps historical rigour, care with causality, and justified concern over the human rights of any population locked behind a contested border*." This might result into an international ambivalence over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh related to rather dim prospects of there being alternative scenarios to more ethnic cleansing (of the Karabakh Armenian population) as a final 'resolution' of the conflict. (https://chathamhouse.org)

E. Zolotova also highlighted in a recent article "*Washington's opportunism*" in the South Caucasus. She thought that the West would care about this region for it offered an alternative route for Caspian energy deliveries to Europe, as well as because Russia cared so much about it, as both a part of a *cordon sanitaire* which insulated Russia from outsiders and for economic reasons. "*This would give Moscow a ton of influence there, but the flip side is that countries like the U.S. can use Russia's strategic needs against it.*" Turkey would have also used the Ukraine war to build its influence in Russia's periphery. (https://geopoliticalfutures.com)

In conclusion, as Armenia and Azerbaijan move towards stable peace and normalization of their bilateral relations they should not rush the negotiations, ignore the inherent political, socio-economic, administrative, security, and other obstacles ahead, and should strive to keep a prudent geopolitical balance in their deals with both Russian and EU mediators, while playing down ill-conceived suspicions about their aims and intentions. The international mediators should also avoid the trap of misconceiving similar solutions for the Russia-Ukraine and Armenia-Azerbaijan conflicts. They are not the same. Whereas the fresh Armenian proposals for individual and security rights aiming to shape the nature and establish the content of the status of Armenians in Karabakh cannot be implemented in a matter of months or even a few years, the proposal for a “transitional period” for Armenian-inhabited part of Karabakh to move under Azerbaijani authority, agreed upon peaceful co-habitation and mixed governance criteria, should be seriously considered.

However, the biggest risk for the South Caucasus region and states, ensuing from the possible outcome of the war in Ukraine, remains related to the possibility of being split by an “*Iron Curtain*” of the new Cold War. The success of the current negotiations on restoring Armenia-Azerbaijan relations while it would not guarantee immunity, it would surely mitigate that risk.

## 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.

## About the Author

Dr George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also a 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 and received his PhD degree in June 2021. 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). Dr 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.