2020: a year of uncertainty for South Caucasus states

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Abstract

The South Caucasus region has a strategic geopolitical significance due to its importance for energy transports to Europe, but the conflicts, the pandemic and the instability affect people's safety. Moreover, these conflicts are an obstacle to the economic and social development of these countries, and the bilateral and multilateral relations with the West are affected due to influence that Russia has in these countries. In 2020, Azerbaijan seeks new ways for developing economic and commercial linkages with the West and identifies new opportunities for investment, as well as extend cooperation at international level. For Armenia, one of the main goals for 2020 was to identify the best solution for the Nagorny-Karabakh resolution conflict, but things have changed rapidly at the end of September 2020 when the latest Nagorny-Karabakh conflict broke out. Georgia had a lot of protests and social unrest starting with 2019; changing the electoral system was one of the most important requirements for the citizens and after a long period, the Government decide to change the law of electoral system in June 2020. All of these events from South Caucasus and the pandemic also have an important impact on the countries development in the process of establishing new relations with different actors and improving their linkages with the European Union.

Keywords: Black Sea Region, South Caucasus, Eastern Partnership, European Neighbourhood Policy, frozen conflicts

Introduction

South Caucasus occupies a small area on the world map, but the region is very important for the actors which have interests in this region. The collapse of the Soviet Union changed dramatically and fundamentally the geopolitical dynamics all over the world and mostly in the post-soviet countries.

The wider Black Sea is located at the intersection of Europe, Central Asia and Middle East and this region is important from a geographical and geopolitical perspective because during the time this

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area become the linkage between the Euro-Atlantic community and the strategic part of the Middle East - Caspian Sea and Central Asia (Triantaphyllou, 2009, p. 228).

The wider Black Sea area is geographically defined as the shore and seascape between the Balkans and the Caucasus, and as a Russian and Ukrainian steppe, the region stretches to Anatolia (King, p. 1 *apud*. Hamilton, Mangott, 2008). In the South and West part are located Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey (member states of the North Atlantic Organization) and in the East and North part are the member states of Commonwealth of Independent States (Asmus, 2004, p. 19).

At international level is hard to have only one definition of what region term means, because the definition is linkages with different point of view of different researchers and authors (economical, politics, cultural, security etc).

Due to Alexander Goncharenko, the wider Black Sea region is "the testament of geopolitical modernization" (Triantaphyllou, 2009, p. 227). He defined the region: "From a geopolitical classical perspective, the wider Black Sea is one of the most important cornerstones of Euro-Asiatic security and stability (Goncharenko 2005, p. 23 *apud*. Triantaphyllou, 2009, p. 227).

10 years after the break-up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), European Union started the East enlargement and EU become more and more active and present in its neighbourhood.

In 2003, EU launched the **European Neighbourhood Policy** with the aim to consolidate the security, the stability and prosperity of the countries from EU neighbourhood (Pop, 2016, p. 198). Initially, the European Neighbourhood Policy have addressed only to the states located in the Eastern European area, but later this initiative was extended to the states located in the southern and eastern part of the Mediterranean area and in the South Caucasus. The long perspective of this initiative were established in order to help the countries from the East and South Caucasus region in their transition to democracy and market economy. Thus, the aim of EU was to be surrounded by "a ring of friends", as Romano Prodi said in December, 2001, when discussed about the basis of the future of European Neighbourhood Policy (Pop, 2016, p. 198).

Erik Grossman, in the chapter *Russia's Frozen Conflicts and the Donbas,* made five arguments that highlighted the situation in the South Caucasus region (Grossman 2018, pp. 52-63).

First, the Russian Federation created so-called buffer zones through which it outlined its identity and strategy in the former Soviet region in order to expand its power and impose a barrier on its borders (Grossman 2018, pp. 52-63).

Secondly, although the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance have promoted an open-door policy towards accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures of the South Caucasus states,

frozen conflicts in the region and relations with the Russian Federation are an impediment for achieving the Euro-Atlantic integration process (Grossman 2018, pp. 52-63).

Thirdly, the existence and especially the perpetuation of the phenomenon of corruption in the region is a practice often used especially at government level, and the Kremlin administration exercises control over energy resources and channels, Russian investments being indispensable in this area (Grossman 2018, pp. 52-63).

Fourth, frozen conflicts are an additional reason why the Russian Federation justifies the presence of Russian military troops in regions such as South Ossetia or Nagorny-Karabakh (Grossman 2018, pp. 52-63).

Fifth, the renewal of Vladimir Putin's term as president is expected to lead to the initiation of new directions of action by the Russian Federation in its relations with the states of the South Caucasus (Grossman 2018, pp. 52-63).

The aim of this article is to highlight the main important events which took place in the South Caucasus region in 2020. Coronavirus pandemic challenges and the changes of security and stability after the latest conflict in Nagorny-Karabakh are the most important things that happened in this region during the last year and the consequences will be present over the 2021 and even more.

This analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can the South Caucasus maintain peace and security after the latest conflict in Nagorny-Kaabakh?

2. What are the main important actors than have interests in South Caucasus?

3. How the 2020 influence the region and the evolution in the future?

The methodological framework of the paper is represented by qualitative and historical research. In this regard, I have started with the descriptive approach, so I presented the main events relevant to highlight the evolution of the South Caucasus countries during the 2020.

Secondary data analysis is the research method I have chosen for carrying out this work. In this regard, I analysed the main scientific papers, articles, publications, etc. that have an impact on the chosen field of study and that have been published by reputable scholars and experts. I have also analysed social documents and used historical analysis. In order to create this article, I have processed, analysed and interpreted quality materials to achieve the best results. Based on these documents that I used, I took notes, data, and observations. Finally, this research focuses on the interdependence between the textual elements.

1. Theoretical framework

Barry Buzan and **Ole Waever** in their book **"Regions and Power: The Structure of International Security"** present a vision of the world order and exemplify a method that can be used for studying the regions by applying the ***Theory of the Regional Security Concept*** at the level of the international system. Starting with Huntington's thesis "The Clash of Civilizations", Barry Buzan and Ole Waever create their own vision of the regions and imagine its contemporary structure of international security. In their theory, Buzan and Waever consider that the regional security is composed of many little systems and between these little systems there are interactions of security. Also, in this situation, countries formed alliances with regional actors in order to protect themselves from their neighbors seen as enemies" (Buzan, Waever 2003, pp. 40-41).

Security complexes are dynamic: there are a number of factors that can produce effects on their evolution. They can be mainly two types: external and internal factors. External factors can influence the evolution of a security complex through two ways: on the one hand, they can join the security complex; and on the other, they can align. Joining involves redefining the security complex. Also, other factors may produce changes in the evolution of security complexes in the sense that the different ways in which the actors in a system progress determines the change existing relations between states (Buzan 2014 [1991], pp. 217-219).

In 1983, Barry Buzan formulated the first definition of the security complex, as follows: "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together closely enough that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, Waever 2003, p. 44).

The definition was reformulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in 1998 in order to eliminate the emphasis on the state-centric character and the politico-military dimension, but also to reformulate the concept of the existence of more actors and more levels of security. Thus, the concept of regional security complex in Buzan and Waever work is defined as: "…a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan, Waever 2003, p. 44). Important parts of the regional groups highlight securitization and desecuritization processes, encountered at the level of the international system. These groups are different from the existing securitization processes globally (Buzan, Waever 2003, p. 44).

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever formulated three reasons why they consider useful the theory of the regional security complex. First, this theory provides the closest level of analysis in the field of

security studies. Secondly, empirical studies are possible; and thirdly, the theory is based on scenarios that are formulated taking into account all possible forms and alternatives (Buzan, Waever 2003, p. 45).

Starting from the **theory of the regional security complex** formulated by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, in the post-Soviet space, the new independent states formed local interstate systems that took the form of regional security sub-complexes. Thus, in Europe the sub-complex was formed by Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. In the South Caucasus, the regional security sub-complex consists of the three states in the area: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, while the Central Asian sub-complex consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan (Eyvazov, 2014, pp. 8). In some of his analyses, Jannatkhan Eyvazov uses the concept of the Post-Soviet Security Macrocomplex (PSM) (Eyvazov, 2013, p. 38) to highlight the structural changes that have taken place in this area in the 2000s.

According to Eyvazov, the Russian Federation is the only actor whose influence increased in the post-Cold War period, thus becoming a key player in ensuring the security of the new independent states, grouped into subsystems (Eyvazov, 2013, p. 38). Thus, the development of local security complexes, the dynamics of security between regional actors, as well as the links of these new independent states established with other external actors were determined by the actions taken by the Russian Federation. Actors such as the European Union, the USA, Turkey, Iran and China have formed a platform for the political environment specific to this post-Soviet macro-security complex (Eyvazov, 2013, p. 38).

Following the accession of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the European Union, this macro-complex has undergone several changes, and currently its structure is as follows: the Central European sub-complex consists of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine; the Central Caucasian sub-complex consists of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan make up the Central Asian sub-complex (Eyvazov, 2013, p. 56).

After the disintegration of the USSR and the enlargement of the EU to Eastern Europe, two types of guidelines on the construction of Russia's identity were discussed, namely pro-European or pro-Eurasian (Eyvazov, 2013, p. 398). According to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, today's attempts by Russia to maximize its position and influence outside its region and to legitimize its regional empire in the new global arena are far more important actions than Europe (Eyvazov, 2013, p. 398).

Regarding the Caucasus region, some authors consider this region as an independent regional security complex (Mammadov, Garibov, 2018, p. 112), while others perceive it as a two-part sub-complex: South Caucasus and North Caucasus. In the South Caucasus, relations between states are conflicting, as all three republics face a series of frozen conflicts that have erupted since the early 1990s and tend to thaw lately. In the book "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International

Security", Buzan and Waever characterize the South Caucasus area as a "separate security sub-complex" (Buzan, Waever 2003, p. 4), so the three states in this region form a "A group of states whose main security concerns are closely linked, so that their national values cannot be analyzed separately" (Buzan 1983, p. 106).

2. Challenges, opportunities and evolution of South Caucasus countries

2.1. South Caucasus Frozen conflicts

After the end of the Cold War, the frozen conflicts become more important and they are characteristic to modern societies. More than that, the frozen conflicts that emerged in the post-Soviet region have received new attention after 1990.

But, the phenomenon of frozen conflicts had existed before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nowadays this term is associated with unresolved conflicts. But what is a frozen conflict? This type of conflict even if it is ended through a ceasefire agreement, it is not ended through a peace/treaty agreement.

In the post-Soviet area there are many frozen conflicts that have arisen due to intervention of the Russian Federation and that have led to the creation of separatist areas near the Russian periphery (Grossman 2018, pp. 51-52).

In countries that are facing with frozen conflicts, the political order is unstable and the potential of violence is very huge. In the latest Nagorny-Karakah conflict, more than 6000 soldiers and 200 civil people deaths during the conflict. Regarding the conflict between Abkhazia and South Ossetia, after the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, Georgia`s Euro-Atlantic integration remained become almost impossible to achieve. After the Russo-Georgian war, Kremlin recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states (de Waal, von Twickel 2020, p. 18).

2.2. South Caucasus between Russia and European Union

At the becoming of 1990, the relations between Russia and West were good after the Cold War, but under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the foreign policy of Russia become more and more aggressive (de Waal, von Twickel 2020, p. 18).

Even if the Cold War was ended, Russia tried to maintain its influence in the post-Soviet space and to grow its power more and more. In 1990, Russia Federation started the project of Commonwealth

of Independent States (CIS). This project was created with the aim of growing the cooperation between the Russia and the CIS member states. The main important goal of Russia after the end of the Cold War was to defend the states that had been part of the Soviet Union. As far as the South Caucasus states, this region is considered by Russia a buffer zone and the frozen conflicts represent an important element for maintaining the Russia influence in the region (Kakachia 2010, p. 88).

So, after the Cold War, the policy adopted by Russia was "divide and conquer" (Kakachia 2010, p. 89). After the end of the Cold War, the Russian Federation was recognized as the legal heir of the Soviet Socialist Republic by the United Nations. The 14 former socialist states that have entered the world political scene since the last decade of the last century are known to form Russia's close neighbourhood. This concept was first used by the Russian actor and is addressed exclusively to the new independent states created in the context of USSR disintegration. The Russian Federation expected the Member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States to form an economic sphere in which to act jointly, free of borders and barriers and in which there would be a single currency, as well as a uniform system of debt settlement between companies. acting within this common union (Shevel, 2014, pp. 1-15). After that, in 1992, Russia used for the first time the "Near Abroad" term in relation with the countries situated near the Russia (de Waal, von Twickel, 2020, p. 18).

However, there were two factors that destabilized the creation of a common economic union between the CIS Member States and Russia. First, the Russian Federation has used its position of dominant economic power in the immediate vicinity as an instrument of political leverage against the states in the region. For example, Georgia has been threatened with economic sanctions if it does not agree to a ceasefire and an end to the civil war with Abkhazia. In the case of Ukraine, Russian pressure was exerted as a result of the energy debts that the Ukrainian actor had. As a result, in exchange for paying these debts, Ukraine relinquished its rights over the Black Sea Fleet, rights granted to the Russian Federation (Shevel, 2014, pp. 1-15). Second, a number of barriers to trade emerged as the leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States sought various means to protect their own economic interests (Shevel, 2014, pp. 1-15).

The geopolitical expansion of Russian Federation achieved its high point at the beginning of 2007. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia showed Moscow's vulnerability to Euro-Atlantic expansion to the east. Moreover, the credibility of the Russian state was undermined with the opening of the former Soviet republics to the West. The development of the Georgian state economically and politically thus became a challenge and a threat to the Russian Federation, as the takeover of the Georgian model by the other republics in the region would have led to the loss of Russian influence and an increase in Western influence (Kushnir, 2017, p. 89).

With the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian war, the Russian Federation launched all operations by which military bases were stationed on the territory of the Georgian state, showing its dissatisfaction with its pro-Western aspirations (desire to join NATO and the participation of Georgian military forces in the exercises). made as a result of the United States military cooperation with Georgia) (Kushnir, 2017, p. 89).

In 2009, the Russian Federation increased its military presence on Georgian territory. By this action, Russia violated the ceasefire agreement signed with the European Union, and later the Kremlin administration started the measures that laid the foundations of a legislative project that allowed Russia to deploy military troops in the region of Georgia in order to defend Russian citizens in the area, but also to prevent the aggression of another state against Russian values and citizens (Kakachia, 2010, p. 91).

The destabilization of the Russian Federation's neighbouring countries through secessionist conflicts had become the goal that characterizes Russia's foreign policy following the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the war in Donbass. After the events that took place in Ukraine in 2014, Russian Federation president spoke about the reintegration of the "New Russia" (Novorossiya). This suggested that the territorial expansion of Russian power in the region is supported by the principles of nationalism (Fischer. 2016, p. 9).

The Russian Federation has adopted a revisionist policy towards its neighbours. The post-Soviet area is characterized by ethnic and political conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny-Karabakh. Due to these frozen conflicts, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the republics of Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan are affected. The involvement of the Russian Federation in the region is multiple. On the one hand, Russia has an important role as a mediator, being actively involved in peace processes. On the other hand, the Russian state is active in the region through its military presence and political interventions. Conflicts in the Wider Black Sea Region escalated in the early 1990s, and with their emergence, the Russian Federation used them to exert its influence on affected states both domestically and internationally (Fischer, 2016, p. 9).

With regard to the **European Union's presence in its Eastern Neighbourhood**, the EU has begun an extensive process in this regard since 2003, when the European Neighbourhood Policy was set up, an initiative that has grown in the context of the accession of ten East European countries to the European Union.

The aim of this initiative was to help strengthen security, stability and prosperity in the European Union's common neighbourhood, as the large-scale effect of EU enlargement could easily lead to an increased risk of instability (Pop, 2016, p. 198). Initially, the European Neighbourhood

Policy addressed only the states located in the Eastern European area, but later this initiative was extended to the states located in the southern and eastern part of the Mediterranean area and in the South Caucasus. The long-term perspectives of this initiative have been set so that these states in the common neighbourhood of the European Union are supported in their process of transition to a democratic regime, a market economy and respect for the rule of law. Thus, the states in this region, with well-established regimes and good relations with the EU, would have surrounded the borders of the Union "as a ring of friends", as Romano Prodi declared in December 2002, when the foundations of the European neighbourhood (Pop, 2016, p. 198).

The idealistic vision of the EU to surround itself with prosperous and stable states has not been successfully implemented due to the particular contexts that took place within 10 years from the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy initiative (Pop, 2016, pp. 198-199).

The European Neighbourhood Policy has been critical, as it has not been built in a complex way that can meet the needs of all 16 states targeted by this initiative. Thus, the only common point of these states was their geographical position, but the existing situations at national level were far too different for the same mechanism to be applied. The European Union has also been criticized for its naive behaviour in approaching the Russian Federation (Pop, 2016, p. 199).

Building on previous experience in strengthening cooperative relations with its Eastern Neighbourhood States, the European Union laid the foundations of the Eastern Partnership, an initiative launched on 7 May 2009 and addressed to six former Member States: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The aim of this initiative was to accelerate the process of political association and European integration between the European Union and the six partners in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership represents the image of an ambitious partnership that the European Union wanted to implement in its common neighbourhood (Korosteleva. 2011, p. 2).

In the last decade, the European Union has invested billions of euros in aid or loans in its neighbourhood. Over time, the EU has strengthened its diplomatic presence, implemented and promoted a number of initiatives to establish free trade areas, EU has improved energy security and liberalized travel and visa regimes in the neighbourhood.

Although many achievements have been made, all of these can be affected by eroded security. In the EU's neighbourhood, propaganda, corruption, illegal financing of political parties, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, information subversion, but also open military aggression are actions often used and encountered in Eastern Europe. The transformation of the Union into a geopolitical power is an important and necessary step in order to be able to face all the challenges posed by the new world order.

Based on the above information, we note that both the European Union and the Russian Federation use a holistic approach to the six states located in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (Lebanidze, 2013, p. 199).

From a geopolitical point of view, the wider Black Sea region is important because it is a bridge between Euro-Atlantic actors and the strategic area of the Middle East. Specific to the extended Black Sea region is the fact that new realities and old tensions coexist (Nuriyev, 2002, pp. 1-2 *apud*. Triantaphyllou, 2009, p. 228). Characteristic of this area are the conflicts that have erupted over time, as well as the frozen conflicts that have been triggered and can become hot conflicts at any time. These tensions and violence have led to a deep division of the region. The region has evolved in the absence of an institutional framework, where there have been various separatist movements that have been a major factor in the democratization process of the states in the area (Gnesotto, Grevi 2006, pp. 7–8 *apud*. Triantaphyllou, 2009, p. 228).

3. South Caucasus and its frozen conflicts

3.1. Nagorny-Karabakh conflict

Nagorny-Karabakh is a region geographically located in the South Caucasus Mountains, on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and has been a tense area since its formation. This region is home to a mixed community of ethnic Armenians and Azeris and is perceived by both nations as having important significance in the history and creation of the national identities of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

After three decades of war, Armenia and Azerbaijan are in a position to move from an era of frozen conflict to an era of short-lived wars. The purpose of these wars is to lead to diplomatic concessions or to obtain territories side by side from the adversary. The Nagorny-Karabakh region has been a centre of tension from the beginning, as the mountainous region had hosted a mixed community of Armenians and Azeris and had been seen by both nations as a central point that has played a major role in creating history and national identities specific to each culture.

In the last six years, the frequency of conflicts and the number of deaths resulting from clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a result of escalating conflicts in the Nagorny-Karabakh region have increased exponentially. One of these clashes also took place in 2016 (Broers, 2016, p. 3) and lately it seems that these clashes turn into wars that last several days and that cause damage to the two

territories that are in conflict. One of the most worrying aspects of the mini-wars is that they signal a slow but irresistible shift towards a new era of hostile relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Recently, especially after the 2000s, due to the increase in oil revenues, Azerbaijan has initiated new actions regarding the trading of heavy weapons. Their strategy was to change the balance of power by any means and to destroy the status quo. Azerbaijan has openly stated that it reserves the right to regain its territories by military means if negotiations fail. And the talks have failed for more than two decades. However, Azerbaijan's strategy is not to launch a major war whose outcome could be uncertain. The Azerbaijani side does not want to start a large-scale conflict, as such a situation would condemn the Azerbaijani family that holds power today to the loss of power and thus the country's leadership, which is a situation that is not intended to happen. That is why the strategy of the Azerbaijani side is to start short-term conflicts, lasting a few days and after which it will succeed in conquering new territories under Armenian administration.

Azerbaijan's goal is to trigger a series of more frequent and intense outbreaks in conflicts that seem inevitable. One of the main objectives of these wars is to reclaim at least one territory. The Azerbaijani leadership believes that this is something that needs to be shown and presented to the Azerbaijani people, showing them that their lives matter to those in leadership positions.

The second goal is to increase pressure on Armenia — even if the recapture operations fail — making the situation uncomfortable for Armenian leaders and, thus, drawing concessions to the negotiating table.

In theory, the role of the international community is to mediate the conflict, to control the situation, and to avoid any escalation that could endanger people's lives.

In practice, the international community cannot initiate too many actions in this regard. What it can do is move from mediation offers considered fair and advantageous for both sides to more aggressive actions to force a compromise between the two parties to the conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The chronology of the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict

Located on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nagorny-Karabakh is a region located in the South Caucasus Mountains, which until 1991 was part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, but with a fairly high degree of autonomy (Klever, 2013, p. 4).

In the early 1980s, the population in this region was 70% Armenian (Zartman *apud*. Hopmann, Zartman, 2013, pp. 1-2). Following the adoption of the Glasnost policy supported by then-Prime Minister Gorbachev, the majority of the population expressed its desire to proclaim its right to self-determination in 1988 (Migdalovitz, 2003, p. 1).

The conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan begin this year following the refusal of the Soviet authorities to approve the request made by the Soviet of the Nagorny-Karabakh Autonomous Region demanding the separation of this region from Azerbaijan to create the premises for union with the Republic of Armenia (Karabakh, 1988 *apud*. de Waal, 2003, p. 10). The armed forces of the Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan intervened in Nagorny-Karabakh to discourage other similar actions (Zartman *apud*. Hopmann, Zartman, 2013 p. 2). Following a referendum, the Nagorny-Karabakh region declared independence in 1992. As a result, Armenian forces intervened against the Republic of Azerbaijan and managed to occupy Nagorny-Karabakh, as well as a number of regions in the geographical proximity of this area.

Subsequently, a ceasefire agreement was concluded in 1994 between the Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to this document, a new border would be drawn, being known as the "line of contact" between the territories occupied by the two states involved in the conflict (Klever 2013, p. 4). In the Nagorny-Karabakh region, under the presence of the Armenian armed forces, a de facto republic would be established, which would not benefit from international recognition.

The Nagorny-Karabakh region was described by Thomas de Waal as "a province of Armenia" (de Waal 2010 *apud*. Klever, 2013, p. 4). Following the signing of the peace agreement, the OSCE Minsk Group was established with the aim of establishing cooperation and dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, this group did not work according to the objectives initially set (Klever, 2013, p. 4).

The ceasefire agreement signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan has been violated several times since its signing and, so far, so we can characterize the situation in the Nagorny-Karabakh region as "neither peace nor war" (Klever, 2013, p. 4).

In 2016, tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to an escalating conflict, known as the "Four-Day War" (Broers 2016, p. 3), which took place between April 2 and 5. The armed forces of the Republic of Azerbaijan have managed to occupy areas that Armenia controlled prior to the outbreak of this dispute. Although, on April 3, 2016, the Minister of Défense of Azerbaijan unilaterally announced the ceasefire, the fighting between the two parties involved in the conflict continued. However, on April 5, both the Armenian armed forces and those belonging to the Azerbaijani state agreed to an end to the violence. Russia has obtained the role of mediator of this conflict (Broers, 2016, p. 3).

Following the four-day war, rapprochement with Russia was one of Armenia's top priorities. As for the Nagorny-Karabakh region, Armenian interest has intensified. Although from 2018 until now, the conflict between the two parties involved has gone through the longest non-conflicting

period in the approximately 30 years since its inception, we are facing a situation that is likely to turn into a real war. In 2018, after the Armenian Velvet Revolution took place, which led to the change of government and the appointment of Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister, both Armenia and Azerbaijan went through a period of silence, the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict is almost forgotten.

In 2019, for the first time in the approximately 30 years since the outbreak of the conflict, we witnessed the most peaceful year. This is highlighted by official data. Thus, while in 2017, 39 soldiers were killed, in 2019 eight soldiers and one civilian were killed.

This happened amid secret negotiations initiated and conducted between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to recently unclassified information, the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, indirectly expressed his desire to resolve the conflict through negotiations that took place in secret in an unspecified European country. It later became clear, however, that Pashinyan could have aimed for some stability on the front lines while busy with internal power struggles. It soon quickly abandoned its peace-building initiatives and demonstrated a more radical nationalist position on the conflict. However, things have not evolved in the desired direction.

This summer, we witnessed a clear erosion of the negotiation process. Thus, on July 6, 2020, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev criticized the international mediators dealing with the negotiations on the settlement of the Nagorny-Karabakh conflict that the peace process has "become meaningless".

On September 19, the Azerbaijani president warned that Armenia was preparing for a new war, concentrating its forces near the Nagorny-Karabakh contact line. In response to these actions initiated by Armenia, Azerbaijan replied that it would initiate all necessary actions to be able to defend itself against a possible conflict.

Less than ten days after this statement, the contact line was attacked by the Armenian armed forces on the morning of 27 September. Both the homes of civilians living in the conflict zone and the military settlements are in danger of escalating this conflict.

Although most states and international organizations have called on the parties to cease fire immediately, a ceasefire is not expected or it is not clear how this cessation of the conflict could be achieved in the current conditions. Both sides have imposed martial law and declared general or partial mobilization as they prepare for longer and larger military operations.

On the morning of September 27, at six o'clock in the morning, the Armenian armed forces fired on the Azerbaijani armed forces using large-calibre weapons, as well as artillery of various calibres. The areas targeted by the Armenian armed forces were the front area, as well as the surrounding civilian settlements. As a result of this situation, in order to prevent any activity carried out by the Armenian

army, but also not to endanger the life of civil society, the command of the Azerbaijani armed forces decided to launch a counter-offensive operation of troops along the entire front.

Azerbaijan mobilized personnel, tank units, as well as missiles and artillery, special aviation used on the front and unmanned aerial vehicles to deal with the situation. On the afternoon of September 29, Armenia said it would use equipment and ammunition designed to attack a large area, intended for large and non-discriminatory destruction of the workforce, as well as static and mobile properties alike. Minutes after the statement, Azerbaijan's defence ministry warned that Yerevan was preparing to transfer S-300 missile defence systems from Armenia to Karabakh, adding that Azerbaijan would destroy them as soon as they crossed Azerbaijan's borders.

From this particular moment, the conflict is doomed to escalate, unless Armenia decides to comply with the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council and to withdraw its military forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan warns that Nagorny-Karabakh and the surrounding territories currently under Armenian occupation are not contested territories, as described by some quasi-neutral third parties, but are an integral part of its internationally recognized territories and is determined to liberate those territories.

As long as these periodic clashes remained unobtrusive, even as fighting continued, the outside world paid little attention to other issues and conflicts whose impact was stronger on the regions and civil society.

However, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been preparing for a military confrontation for years. Armenia has maintained and maintained large arsenals of heavy weapons from the Soviet era: tanks, cannons, armoured personnel carriers (APC), multi-launch missile systems (MLRS), tactical ballistics R-17 (SCUD-B) missiles, anti-aircraft batteries, and so on. Armenia has done so because it does not have the necessary and sufficient financial capacity to purchase new weapons.

At the opposite pole is Azerbaijan, which is rich in hydrocarbons and whose annual defence spending has exceeded Armenia's entire state budget, which has given the Azerbaijani state the opportunity to purchase large quantities of weapons from Russia (which simultaneously sold weapons and arsenals). Armenia), Israel, South Korea and Turkey.

3.2. Abhazia and South Ossetia conflict

Georgia's domestic and international stability is hampered by the situation in the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia which are under the Moscow's protection following the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

Tensions between Georgia and the separatist republics have recently risen along the line. A relevant example in this regard is the Akhalgori crossing point, located in the Cskhinvali region, which has been closed since September 2019.

In addition to these issues, there is also the issue of "border" policy (Kakachia, 2018, pp. 1-8). Moscow is also pursuing increased militarization through its actions in the region.

Following agreements between Russia and local representatives in the region, the Kremlin administration has set up several military bases in the area to ensure "peace and security." A number of civil rights and freedoms are violated.

The former KGB structure, which functioned before 1990 and was created by the USSR, is the one that acts to restrict civil rights and freedoms and imposes the measures taken by the Kremlin administration in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Thus, the right to property of citizens is limited without being offered good reasons in this regard. Another practice used by Russian military forces is the arrest of those who cross the border "illegally". After they are arrested because they do not follow the rules, their families are forced to pay a "fine" for "illegal crossing of the state border." Using this type of behaviour, the Kremlin shows Georgian citizens than Western partners do not have the power to oppose its aggressive policies. Finally, those who suffer are Georgian citizens living in the conflict region.

The Kremlin continues to work to change the borders of the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia every time elections are held in Georgia. The actions taken by Russian forces to change borders are intimidating for citizens and, in addition, cause panic among citizens. Russia uses a number of hybrid tactics in this regard, such as: propaganda, funding of certain non-governmental organizations and funding of certain television stations that broadcast programs and news in Russian. The purpose of all these actions is to promote a pro-Russian policy among the citizens.

The Georgian government is aware of the disinformation actions initiated by the Kremlin on the territory of the country it governs, but efforts to counter the false news and information have been minimal. Over time, the Russian-funded media has taken advantage of every situation to influence to some extent the pro-Western course of the country and the trend towards liberalization and democracy. Thus, misinformation and the spread of conspiracy theories have contributed to the division of society in terms of both domestic and foreign policy. Moreover, public confidence in democratic institutions, civil society organizations and liberal values has been undermined.

However, there is a growing presence of civil society organizations in Georgia. Thus, they initiated and promoted a series of measures that placed them at the forefront of the fight against the misinformation actions initiated.

4. Scenarios

Nagorny-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is one of the oldest frozen conflict from post-Soviet area. After the latest conflict between these two actors, the Russian Federation become an important actor due to its implications in the mediating the ceasefire agreement.

The Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflict become more acrimonious after the russo-georgian war in 2008 and Kremlin recognized these two territories as independent states (de Waal, von Twickel 2020, p. 4).

The main reason than the frozen conflicts are not resolved until now is due to Russian obstinacy. In order to maintain deep leverage with the South Caucasus states, Russia prefers to keep the conflicts frozen (de Waal, von Twickel, 2020, p. 7).

Russia presence in the wider Black Sea region is obvious and Moscow uses hard power for achieving his interests. Thus, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are present more than 7000 troops that have the role to maintain peace and security. In Nagorny-Karabakh, Russia is more present through the diplomatic linkage because Kremlin has an important role in the OSCE mediation process and works alongside with the Western partners. This aspect was better highlighted during the latest conflict in the region when Russia become the mediator and now there are also troops in Nagorny-Karabakh region (de Waal, von Twickel, 2020, p. 7).

What can Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia do to become more democratic and independent of Russia and to strengthen their domestic policy and also their relations with the West?

Armenia and Azerbaijan: first of all, these countries need peace, security and stability. The EU could become an important actor for assisting a future Karabakh peace process, but Armenia and Azerbaijan need to request this help. Second, the projects for supporting civil societies development it is also an important point that Baku and Everan could develop in the near future.

Following the elections of February 9, 2020, the ruling party, the New Azerbaijan Party (NAP), won the new legislature by a majority — obtaining after the elections 70 of the 125 seats available in the Parliament (Bayramli, 2020). The elections on February 9 were due in November 2020. However, on December 5, 2019, the Azerbaijani Parliament was dissolved following the opinion of the Constitutional Court. Thus, the new date for the elections was set to be on February 9, 2020 (Kucera, 2019).

There are not many expectations regarding the work of the new parliament. Activists remain sceptical of the measures the regime claims it will take in the coming period. Azerbaijan's ties with the European Union have recently been strengthened, although the European Parliament has harshly criticized human rights violations, abuses and the poor organization of elections held under Aliyev's

regime. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Azerbaijan and the EU is the legal framework governing bilateral cooperation between the Azerbaijani state and the European Union. The European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, represented the initiatives supported by the EU in order to strengthen cooperation relations with the states in the vicinity of the Union's borders.

In the near future, the Baku administration needs to facing the economic problems (Bentzen, Guzzini, 2020). Also, the political changes in Armenia have worried the Baku authorities over the conflict between the two states. The Baku authorities view this conflict from the perspective of one between a democracy and a dictatorship; and in the event of escalation, the international community would tip the balance toward a democratic regime.

Regarding **Armenia**, at the beginning of 2020, the main important problem for Armenia was the rising gas prices due to official discussion led by Vladimir Putin and Nikol Pashinyan who visited Moscow in December 2019.

The Armenian state is dependent on energy imports because the state does not have its own fossil fuel resources and is not a transit country for oil or gas. The most important resources that Armenia imports from the Russian Federation are: natural gas, nuclear fuels, petroleum products, and limited amounts of coal. As a result of efforts to diversify energy supplies, in 2016 the Armenian government signed an agreement with Iran to regulate natural gas imports and electricity exports. In addition to Iran, Armenia exports electricity to Georgia and the Nagorny-Karabakh region. But the power plants that supply electricity to Armenia are old, being put into operation about 40 years ago: their modernization is necessary so that Armenia can continue to export electricity to the states with which it has concluded cooperation ties in this regard (Mgdesyan, 2020).

The concept of energy security adopted on October 23, 2013 and the Energy Sector Strategy of Armenia for 2025 are the key elements that will lead to strengthening the country's energy security. The following objectives have been set: diversification of primary energy sources and supply routes, regional integration of the energy system, development of nuclear energy and greater use of geothermal, solar and other renewable sources (Energy Community Secretariat, 2017, pp. 1-30).

However, the new Covid-19 and the new clashes with Azerbaijan are the most important factors which contribute to destabilizing the political and the economic systems.

Georgia: first of all, need to work more in what concern the non-recognition policy on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two separatist republics. Second, a good relation with European Union is needed because through the European Union Monitoring Mission, Georgia has the help to continue to work for ensuring the stability and the peace in the region. Georgia has a lot of internal problems due to political instability that has hindered the country's development in many important areas.

Even though the parliamentary elections took place in October 2020, and the citizens expected an improvement in the situation, the internal situation is currently characterized by instability both politically and especially economically, the crisis caused by the new coronavirus applying this situation. The level of dissatisfaction is very high among citizens. The election results showed that the Georgian Dream Party does not want to diminish its influence and is working to maintain its power.

The change in the electoral system was perceived as an opportunity for state democracy and had all the preconditions for building a government collaboration and a coalition, but the reality looks more different.

30 years after independence, Georgia has taken a number of steps in the transition to democracy and a market economy. According to statistics, Georgian citizens have high expectations for the democratic process, but internally there are a number of concerns about the integrity of the electoral process. Thus, citizens' confidence in the election results is reduced due to the various situations that have existed in the country in the past.

It is noteworthy that in the face of the political crisis that Georgia has been going through since last year, following protests initiated by civil society and the opposition, the Kremlin administration has decided to suspend flights to and from Georgia in the Federation. Russia and even threatened to stagnate imports of products. Moreover, other less obvious actions aimed at instigating the already tense atmosphere (such as when Vladimir Putin falsely accused Georgians of genocide of the Ossetians or when Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian politician, spoke in Russian during his visit) to the Georgian Parliament).

Conclusions

Regarding the role of European Union in this conflict region, it is hard to decide. European Union has struggled to establish a hard and important role in this area. The three countries from South Caucasus region are facing frozen conflicts on their territories and these conflicts are closely monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These conflicts are factors that can destabilize and endanger the security of the wider Black Sea Region (Nichol, 2012, p. 2).

The economies and the democratic regimes of the South Caucasus countries are in course of developing, and the European Union is an asset in continuing this process that began 30 years ago. Also, NATO is involved in this process. During these times, the Alliance repeatedly claimed the possibility of accession of the three states. However, things are not so simple. The presence of actors such as the Russian Federation, China and Turkey, all of whom have diverse interests, complicates

the trajectory of these countries. Their domestic and foreign policy decisions being, of course, influenced by the three actors present in the region.

In the South Caucasus region, the main geopolitical player is the Russian Federation. Since 2012, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, has accelerated the country's transformation process in order to consolidate its position of superpower as it existed during the Cold War. Thus, we can see that the actions taken by the EU and NATO in the Eastern neighbourhood, as well as the Colourful Revolutions that took place in the region after the 2000s, led Vladimir Putin to adopt an assertive and proactive foreign policy toward "western hostility" (Tuncel, 2018, p. 17).

The United States and the European Union are secondary players, but they are of increasing importance. States in the geographical proximity of the region, such as Turkey and Iran, have strategic interests in the area. China is a new player that has started to be more and more present in the region.

In the short term, peace and stability are ensured by the Russian Federation and Turkey in Nagorny-Karabakh, but it is difficult to say that there will be lasting peace. As for Georgia, the political crisis is deepening and in the near future there may be a new government and new opportunities for this country. We will have to turn our attention to the events here in the near future to observe how things will evolve politically and economically, especially after the pandemic caused by Covid-19.

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