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THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: AN OVERVIEW January-July 2022



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THE SOUTH CAUCASUS BETWEEN TWO WATERS...

The South Caucasus, a mountainous buffer zone between Europe and Asia, has always been subject to the maneuvers of the Empires that surround it, weakened by numerous internal dissensions and marked by variable geometry geopolitical alliances preventing it from plan for the long term in a common future. The war in Ukraine launched in February by Russia is not without consequences for this complex political and ethno-linguistic mosaic. The suspension of international discussions in Geneva and the Minsk Group are examples of more or less effective "Russian-Western" cooperation challenged by the ongoing conflict at the gates of Europe. The question of Georgia's membership of the European Union and NATO deserves an in-depth examination of the underlying reasons for the blockage that we are witnessing and of its implications in the international context that is currently taking shape. It is a question of seeing how the conflict in Donbass and Crimea echoes those taking place nearby concerning other disputed entities such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Nagorno-Karabakh. But also to see for each of the three South Caucasian countries, what are the cards they have in hand and what are their positions vis-à-vis this conflict which places them all in more or less important conflicts of loyalty. The situation of these three countries calls for decoding

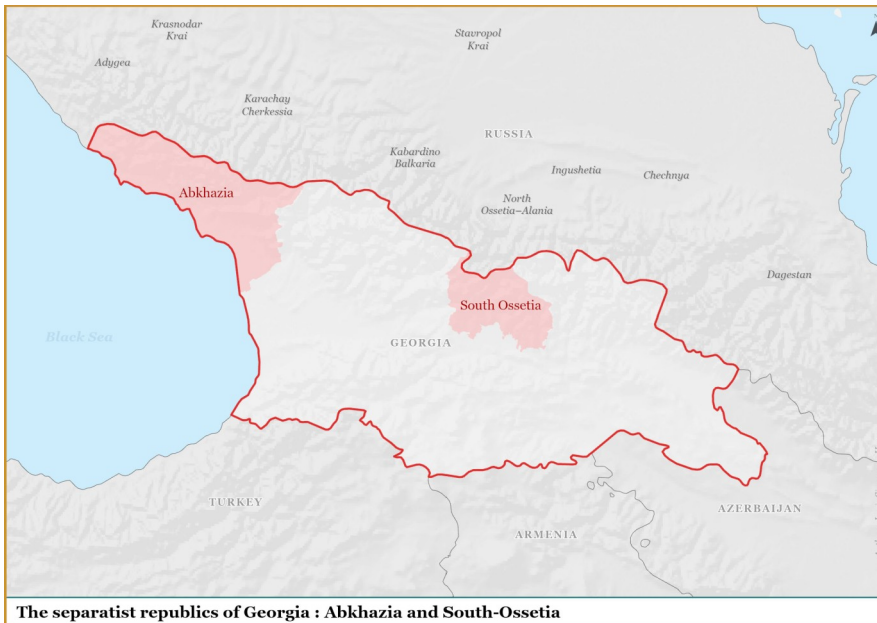
in order to identify the complex trends at work six months after the outbreak of the invasion of Ukraine.

The ambivalent relations between the self-proclaimed republics of South Caucasus and Russia

While the outbreak of war in Ukraine logically interrupted the Geneva International Discussions, to which the South Ossetian and Abkhazian authorities remain strongly attached, as the main tool for dialogue and violence prevention with Georgia, **Switzerland's positions such as UN resolution A/76/L.62 have led to a further hardening of the position of Russia**, their main ally, now determined to consent to the resumption of the process only on the condition of a displacement of the place of negotiations. **Only the meetings of the Mechanism for Prevention and Response to Incidents (MPRI) of the European Union and the OSCE have borne fruit on the demarcation line between Georgia and South Ossetia in recent months**, through occasional openings of the demarcation line for the Easter and Lomisoba holidays, an approach facilitated by the approach of the new South Ossetian president Alan Gagloev of the "Nykhas" party elected on May 8 with 54.2% of the votes and a 73.93% turnout against incumbent Anatoli Bibilov.

As a reminder, Anatoly Bibilov had been the subject of attacks by the "Nykhas" party in the South Ossetian "Parliament" following an accusation against him of ceding 2000 km² of territory to Georgia. On January 12, 14 South Ossetian deputies sent a letter to the Speaker of Parliament, Alan Tadtaev, informing him of their intention to launch a **procedure for the impeachment of *de facto* President Anatoli Bibilov** for his inaction since the resolution of the Parliament of May 7 2019 approving the final report of a parliamentary commission created on June 20, 2018 regarding the delimitation and demarcation of the "State border". This impeachment attempt had failed on January 19.

A fairly natural rapprochement obviously took place between the self-proclaimed republics of Donbass, those of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, with Russia, marked by the establishment of **diplomatic ties** (between the Abkhazia and the self-proclaimed republic of Donetsk on March 9 then with that of Luhansk on March 10), **official recognition** (Abkhazian recognition decree of the self-proclaimed republics of Donbass on February 22, approval of Anatoli Bibilov and Arayik Haroutiounian, "President of Nagorno-Karabakh"), **bilateral visits** (March 10 between the Abkhazian and South Ossetian "MFA", visit of Anatoli Bibilov on April 2 to Donetsk and Mariupol, visit of the Abkhaz "President" to the Republic of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan between July 10 and 15), **military support** (state of alert, mobilization of counter-intelligence activities and reinforced border surveillance from February 24 in South Ossetia, tactical military exercises by the February 8 in Abkhazia bringing together the entities of the Southern Military District and then extraordinary command and staff mobilization training exercise on February 26) despite the March 1 message from the Georgian Foreign Ministry that the Georgian authorities did not represent no threat to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and **humanitarian support** (reception of 17 Donbass refugees bringing their number to 115 in Abkhazia on March 1, dispatch of 15 rescuers and 10 tonnes of humanitarian cargo for the third Abkhazian convoy June 13), **forms of economic cooperation** (inauguration of a factory for the production of fishmeal and fish oil set up with the participation of Abkhazian investors on June 10 in Crimea).



The statements reflect a perfect rhetorical alignment with Russian power discourse in the case of the breakaway Georgian republics, and the speeches of support for the launch of military operations in Ukraine from political leaders of the three entities have been unequivocal. Aslan Bzhania, Abkhaz "president" thus hailed on February 22 a *"just decision based on an adequate assessment of geopolitical realities in coherence with modern challenges and threats"* by denouncing *"the aggression of Ukraine [which] had took place and continues to take place with the direct encouragement of the so-called Western Collective"*, Anatoly Bibilov, "South Ossetian President" declaring that *"the kyiv regime [had] terminated the territorial integrity of Ukraine in unleashing cruel terror against the people of Donbass"* and Arayik Haroutiounian, emphasizing that *"the right of every people to self-determination and building their own state [was] a fundamental principle of international law"*.

It should be noted that **Minsk considered in 2009 to recognize the two secessionist republics** following Russia after the 2008 war before changing its mind, which was explained by Russia's refusal to share the negative consequences of this gesture in terms of international sanctions. On February 9, Mikheil Saakashvili spoke about this during a hearing at the Tbilisi City Court, explaining that the lack of recognition of the independence of the two *de facto* republics by Belarus was the result of a *"secret diplomacy"* that he would have carried out through several meetings with his Belarusian counterpart in London.

But the link is above all ensured by constant support from Russia in terms of energy supply and securing public service salaries. In early April, the Abkhazian opposition fearing a transfer of Abkhazian energy facilities to Russia failed to oppose in Parliament their "denationalization" made necessary, according to the power in place, to solve the energy crisis in the region, largely due to growing cryptocurrency mining activity. On June 22, the reimbursement of a loan of 1.2 billion roubles from Russia to Abkhazia intended to finance the restoration of railway installations was extended until 2034. Following the meeting between the Russian Deputy Minister of Economic development Dmitry Volvash, and Abkhaz "Prime Minister" Alexander Ankvab on June 29, a Russian-Abkhaz economic commission was held on July 1 in Sokhumi to reach an agreement on the 2022-2025 plan for the economic development of the country. In addition, on June 30, an agreement was signed extending the Russian-Abkhaz agreement on the co-financing of civil servants' salaries until 2025. The "Deputy Prime Minister of Economy" of Abkhazia Kristina Ozgan was also going to the 25th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum from June 15 to 18, where a South Ossetian delegation headed by "Acting Prime Minister" Gennady Bekoev was also present. We will also have noted the first Abkhaz Investment Forum on April 2 in Sochi.

All these elements were accompanied on the side of Abkhazia by a **reinforced cooperation in the media and educational field under the leadership in particular of Margarita**

Simonian, editor of Sputnik and RT: opening of a media centre of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs inaugurated on March 29, establishment of the "Future of Abkhazia" youth centre in Moscow, announced on April 29 "*special software*" to analyse publications about Abkhazia in foreign media to respond to a "*Georgia's hybrid warfare*". But also a **hardening of official positions vis-à-vis supporters and civil society actors involved in the rapprochement with Georgia**: ban on the actions of certain NGOs intervening in the field of informal dialogue between Georgians and Abkhazians, cancellation on 22 March of the series of amendments to article 47 of the "Civil Code" and to the "law on civil status documents" which was also to allow the 30,000 Georgian inhabitants of the district of Gali¹ automatic access to Abkhaz citizenship in case of choice of Abkhaz ethnicity, first conviction in absentia of a tiktoker accused of treason for having promoted an autonomous Abkhazia within Georgia...

Sustained political ties were also noted: Russian support for Abkhaz's accession to the UN (request transmitted on March 1 to Antonio Gutierrez by the Russian side), joint Russian and South Ossetian denunciation of biological laboratories presumed to be dangerous in Georgia, **simplification of procedures for crossing the Russian-Abkhazian border** (Psou, Adler), **coordination of Russian-Abkhazian foreign policy and diversification of ties taken**

1 They were stripped of their citizenship in 2014 and 2017 under the previous administration of Raul Khajimba.

abroad (Palestine, Syria, Haiti, China, Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina, Belarus, Yemen), **ratification by the Duma on May 19 of the agreement on dual nationality between South Ossetia and Russia**, Russian support in the context of the filing by the International Criminal Court (ICC) of a warrant of arrest for 3 South Ossetian officials for their criminal responsibility in war crimes committed between 7 and 28 August 2008.

However, if there is one misunderstood constant that the war in Ukraine would tend to hide even more, but which is nevertheless tenacious, it is the still ambiguous relationship between these self-proclaimed "republics" and the tutelary figure of Russia, alone in having recognized their independence with its allies (Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru). The populations of these South Caucasian "republics" do not find themselves unanimously in quasi-feudal submission to the government of Vladimir Putin.

On the side of South Ossetia, it should be noted the **criticisms of former President Edouard Kokoïty with regard to the conditions of the military involvement of South Ossetians in Ukraine**, including 300 of the 1,200 soldiers, soldiers and volunteers, serving in the 4th military base under the Russian command and deployed in Ukraine since March 20 returned by their own means, from March 30, by hitch-hiking, taking the Roki tunnel from North Ossetia, thinking "*to have been left for died during a special operation in Ukraine*". On May 3, the South

Ossetian "Minister of Defence", Vladimir Pukhaev, went to the Donbass in particular to have the status of the South Ossetian volunteer fighters taking part in the war in Ukraine recognized. **At the end of June, the official death toll of South Ossetian volunteers on the Ukrainian front was 15 people.**

But above all, we will note the distancing of both Russians and South Ossetians on the question of the referendum on unification, which deserves decoding. Indeed, although Anatoli Bibilov of the "United Ossetia" party campaigned extensively on this issue with the broad support of the "United Russia" party, as shown by the visit of its secretary general Andrei Turchak to Tskhinvali on February 8 alongside the head of the Republic of North Ossetia, Sergei Menyailo, and the presidents of the "People's Republic of Donetsk" and the "People's Republic of Luhansk", Denis Pushilin and Denis Kolesnikov as the meeting at the theatre also attended by Russian Senator Alexander Karelin, the head of North Ossetia Sergey Menyailo, the head of Kabardino-Balkaria Kazbek Kokov, the governor of Stavropol Vladimir Vladimirov, the speaker of the Parliament of Karachayevo-Cherkessia Alexander Ivanov and the member of the Russian Federal Assembly, Taimuraz Mamsurov. **An "initiative group" was created at the beginning of April to organize a referendum on joining the Russian Federation and the question proposed for submission was: "Do you support the unification of the Republic of South Ossetia and the**

Russia?". The "Central Electoral Commission" approving on May 13 the package of documents submitted by "*the initiative group supporting the referendum*" as being "*in conformity [...] with the requirements of constitutional law*" and Anatoly Bibilov still in office signing a decree on a referendum to be held on July 17. **However, Alan Gagloev, the new "President of the Republic of South Ossetia" suspended the referendum on reunification with Russia by signing on May 30 decree no.315 on "modalities for further integration of the Republic of South Ossetia and the Russian Federation",** following the distancing of Russia and the new South Ossetian leadership which underlined a precipitation without Russian consultation, the lack of consideration of the geopolitical situation and especially legal inaccuracies on the nature of the unification, the wording of **the question submitted to the referendum not clearly indicating a status of subject of the "republic" within the Russian Federation.** Consultations therefore began on June 14 on this issue. It should be noted that the commitment of former "president" Anatoli Bibilov in favour of unification with Russia had also been the subject of criticism from his predecessor Edouard Kokoity who declared: "*Only people who are weak in politics can say that South Ossetia should be part of Russia. Ossetia has made its choice and Russia has recognized its statehood.*"

Abkhazia's position vis-à-vis this South Ossetian referendum shows a real desire to preserve its own

independence from both Moscow and Tbilisi. On March 31, the "President of the Republic of Abkhazia", Aslan Bzhania, declared: *"Sovereign independent Abkhazia is building and will continue to build relations with brotherly ally Russia in strict compliance with the Treaty of November 24, 2014"* and Sergei Shamba, head of Abkhazia's security council, declared that Abkhazia remained in favour of independence, saying: *"There are no such feelings in society. We paid a high price for independence... I don't know of any political force in Abkhazia, any party or social movement that would proceed from such a possibility of giving up independence"*. A way to protect itself from the kind of threats of which it was the target on May 25 from the Russian deputy Leonid Kalashnikov, chairman of the State Duma committee on CIS affairs, Eurasian integration and relations with the compatriots expressing his concern about the obligation of the mastery of the Abkhaz language for the deputies of the "republic" which according to him *"could lead to interethnic tensions given the status of the Russian language, which is de facto the means of inter-ethnic relations"*.

Moreover, the democratic debate in Abkhazia is illustrated by the signature on January 28 of a petition by more than 350 Abkhaz activists and citizens against the law on foreign agents supported by Moscow, denouncing "a repressive tool" reviving the "ideological patterns of the Soviet-era totalitarian past" that would "inevitably lead to the liquidation of the non-governmental sector". We can also mention the **report on human rights by the Abkhaz**

ombudsman Asida Shakryl to the "Parliament" of Abkhazia on June 8, making numerous recommendations on abortion, the death penalty, places of detention, domestic violence, use of firearms, education, recommendations that also came with messages to international organizations to *"de-isolate Abkhazia"* while acknowledging *"growing tendencies towards self-isolation of Abkhazia."* Or the **request of the "Aruaa" party to put in place a "large-scale political reform to replace the obsolete super-presidential system of power with a form of parliamentary or mixed parliamentary-presidential power with the redistribution of the powers concerned between the branches of government, the strengthening of the party system and the acquisition of real independence by the judiciary" during its 10th Congress organized on June 14 in Sokhumi. The opposition is also regularly mobilized on the issue of the lack of transparency in the supply of electricity and its cost by Russia, and in mid-July **a scandal linked to the project to transfer ownership of the Pitsunda dacha to the Russian Federation** that belonged to Khrushchev broke out in Abkhazia.**

Thus, we will have noticed that beyond appearances and the block effect that the rapprochement of interests between the self-proclaimed South Caucasian republics and Russia can induce, the democratic game is not completely absent from internal politics. of these entities and of the variable-geometry international interactions in this traditionally Russian zone of influence. And we obviously detect very variable configurations and positioning of the different South Caucasian secessionist "republics" according to different factors such as geographical location, economic potential, historical legitimacy for secession, ethnic composition and relationship to society. Russian language, the level of existential threats, the diversity of diasporic and international support, etc.

A "Russian-Western" rivalry that extends to the process of resolving the Karabakh conflict?

The main effect of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was to suspend the work of the OSCE Minsk Group on the resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the responsibility for which was rejected by the Russian side on the French and American partners, Sergei Lavrov declaring on April 8: *"Western attempts to withdraw Russia from the Minsk Group of the OSCE are irresponsible. The United States and France are ready to sacrifice the interests of the settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh and Transcaucasia [...] These countries are forcing everyone to stop cooperating on all fronts just to prove their ability to dictate their unilateral will"*. Thus, on April 14, Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian MFA announced that **the Russian co-president of the Minsk group, Igor Khova, would continue his work as the new "special representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan"**.

The breakdown of contacts within the Minsk group

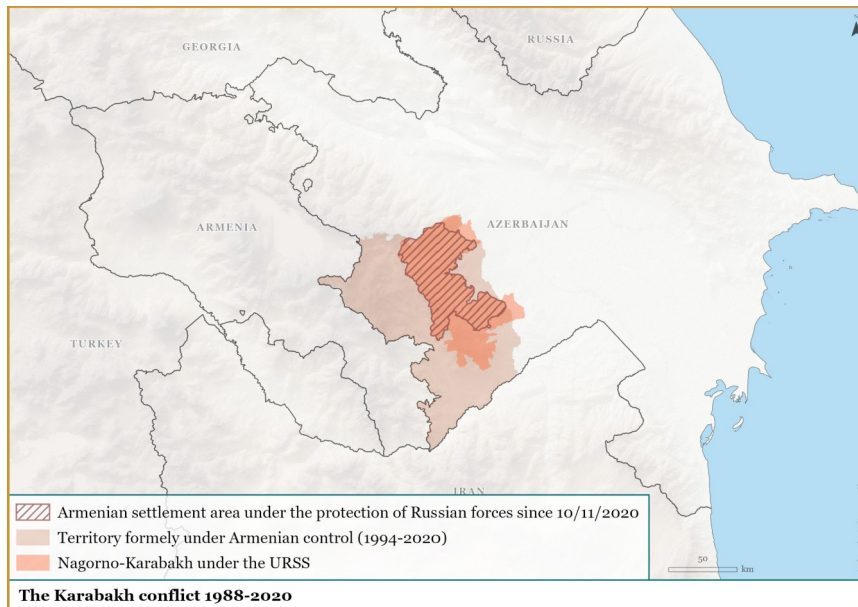
If a certain complementarity of the discussions held with the European Union and those held with Russia was displayed until fairly recently, the latter has, because of the evolution of the war in Ukraine, transformed into a sort of competition. Thus, on June 3, the visit of Toivo Klaar, special representative of the European Union for the South Caucasus, to Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian, Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan, Secretary of the Security Council Armen Grigorian, and the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly and special envoy for the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations, Ruben Rubinyan, took place on the same day as the meeting of the three Deputy Prime Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia, Shahin Moustafayev, Mher Grigorian and Alexei Overchuk in Moscow for the 10th meeting of the tripartite working group on the unblocking of communication and transport links within the framework of the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. Despite the reassuring remarks made by Toivo Klaar on June 4, the day after his visit to Armenia aimed at dispelling the idea of a competition between Russians and "Westerners" in these terms: *"The European Union is not engaged in no kind of competition here. We are only interested in trying to move a process forward,"* Rashid Nurgaliev, deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, said in an interview published on June 6: *"This conflict has been brewing for a long time, since Soviet times. And that*

suited Washington just fine. Nobody, except Russia, had made efforts for the peaceful settlement of this problem" and on June 13, the Russian ambassador to Azerbaijan, Mikhail Bocharnikov, declared that *"on the part of the EU, there [was] a willingness to seize the lead from Russia and take credit for progress in all of these areas."*

US Under Secretary of State Karen Donfried's statement that the United States was ready to work with Russia as part of the Minsk Group on June 18 during her visit to Armenia, did not ease tensions with Russia, which responded through the voice of Maria Zakharova on June 22: *"Allow me to have doubts about the sincerity of Karen Donfried's statement. [...] I think they, as always, bet on the fact that we would sink into isolation. But, again, they miscalculated, they failed again, and with this concept they isolated themselves from us, and the outside world is not just confined to the Euro-Atlantic space"* and by that of Sergei Lavrov on June 24: *"The issue of the Minsk Group was not discussed with the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister because it ceased its activities on the initiative of the United States and France [...] The events on the ground of September-October 2020 left behind all the documents that had been discussed for many years without visible results. [...] It's just an objective reality".*

Decisive European advances in the peace process

The Europeans have, in fact, made some decisive breakthroughs in the progress of the negotiation process, even if the rhetorical opposition between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, revealing a desire on both sides to play only by being sure of winning, persists to this day. As early as January 19, the opening of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation in Vienna, chaired by Azerbaijan, brought to light the Armenian-Azerbaijani differences regarding the delimitation and demarcation of borders. In February, Azerbaijan made a 5-point proposal to Armenia and on March 23, Ararat Mirzoyan, the Armenian MFA, replied on this subject: *"there is nothing unacceptable for Armenia in the proposals of Azerbaijan but they are not complete"*.



On April 6, the 4-hour trilateral meeting in Brussels between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian and European Council President Charles Michel, described by the latter as *"excellent and very productive"* led to a joint decision to *"launch a concrete process of peace talks, in order to prepare a possible peace treaty"* and the establishment of a *"working group, a joint commission, to address the issues of delimitation, which are sensitive"*. It was agreed in particular to *"instruct the Ministers of Foreign Affairs to work on the preparation of a future peace treaty"*, a document which would not mention, to the great satisfaction of Azerbaijan, nor the territorial and administrative entity "Nagorno-Karabakh" or that of the "Minsk group".

On April 13 Nikol Pashinyan's speech before the Parliament reiterated his MFA's remarks by also declaring: *"Today the international community is telling us to lower the bar on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh"*, which provoked ire of the opposition and a large part of the Armenian population and marked the beginning of mass demonstrations throughout the country. On May 5, the Secretary of the Armenian Security Council, Armen Grigorian, announced that he had sent a 6-point proposal to Azerbaijan in response to its 5-point package and that Armenia proposed to combine the two 5+6-point packages in order to start negotiations for a peace treaty.

On May 23, Charles Michel, President of the European Council again met the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev, for a third trilateral meeting in Brussels which he described as "*frank and constructive*", and following which he announced a first joint meeting of the border commissions. **The next day the two leaders signed a decree on the creation of commissions for the delimitation of the State border, chaired respectively by Deputy Prime Ministers Shahin Moustafayev and Mher Grigorian, an initiative nevertheless promoted by Russia from the meeting in Sochi on November 26, 2021. It was moreover Charles Michel who had enabled the first face-to-face meeting between the two Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in Brussels, after a discussion with himself which had lasted almost 5 hours on December 14, 2021 and which enabled the establishment of a direct line of communication between the two Ministries of Defence, functioning as an incident prevention mechanism. On May 24, the Armenian and Azerbaijani Foreign Ministries announced that the first meeting of the border delimitation commissions would be held on the border between the two states the same day.**

The different points of disagreement in the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations

- **For Armenia, the whole process should be done under the auspices of the Minsk Group while for Azerbaijan, the Minsk Group is obsolete** and its position can be summarized by the statement of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at the 5th World Congress of Azerbaijanis in Shusha explaining that the Minsk group "[was] *created not to solve the problem, but to perpetuate the fact of the occupation*".

- **For Armenia, the use of the term "Nagorno-Karabakh" is completely legitimate.** Ararat Mirzoyan declared on May 28, "*We can present a valid document signed by the President of Azerbaijan, which declares that Nagorno-Karabakh exists. This is the trilateral declaration of November 9, 2020. By signing this document, the Azerbaijani President recognized the existence of Nagorno-Karabakh and this is an irreversible fact*". **It therefore challenges the opposing party on a recurring basis on the issue of "final status of Nagorno-Karabakh".** And this, in a paradoxical way since it also ensures that it has no territorial claim vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. **For Azerbaijan, the position can here also be summed up by these comments made by Ilham Aliyev on June 16: "Nagorno-Karabakh does not exist. There is no such administrative unit in our territory, and therefore any mention of 'status' will lead to a new clash".** However, here too, paradoxically, he claims the creation of a

"Zangezur corridor" crossing Armenian territory to connect the country to its exclave of Nakhichevan, in exchange for the right of passage granted to Armenians via the Lachin corridor between Armenia and the Armenian-populated Karabakh region under surveillance by Russian peacekeeping forces. In response to Armenian demands for a "final status of Nagorno-Karabakh", Ilham Aliyev replied on June 16: *"If Armenia questions the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, then Azerbaijan will have no choice but to question the territorial integrity of Armenia"*. **Also, for the Azerbaijani side, the future status of Karabakh Armenians is clear: "Azerbaijan is a multinational country and Armenians are not the largest ethnic minority. Representatives of all peoples of Azerbaijan are equal, including Armenians living in the country"**.

- The unacceptability of the "Zangezur Corridor" project has been repeatedly expressed by the Armenian side. Nikol Pashinian declared on March 31: *"The comparison of the Lachin Corridor with the road to be opened through the territory of Armenia is unacceptable"* and Arman Yeghoyan, deputy and chairman of the Standing Committee for European Integration declared: *"The road connecting Azerbaijan with its autonomous region of Nakhichevan through the territory of Armenia will operate in accordance with all international standards. [...] There will be no extraterritorial routes in Armenia"*. Moreover, concerning the resumption of transport communications which are rather debated with Russia, Nikol

Pashinian had announced on January 24 a minimal cost for the construction of the "Yerashk - Joufa - Meghri - Horadiz" railway, provided by the South Caucasus Railways Company, subsidiary of Russian Railways.

- Armenia demands the release of the prisoners of war still detained in Azerbaijan (38 in number in July according to the Azerbaijani authorities) by criticizing the Azerbaijani bad will. **Azerbaijan demands the Karabakh mine maps** in exchange for the release of the prisoners of war, which considers a large part of them as *"saboteurs"*, criticizing there too the Armenian bad will concerning the issuance of Karabakh mine maps, **denouncing the presence of "sabotage groups" and "illegal armed groups"** or regarding the delay in the reopening of transport routes in the South Caucasus.

- Armenia calls for a military withdrawal from the border and the deployment of an observation mission, before starting the process of border demarcation, while the **Azerbaijani side seeks to capitalize to the maximum on the victory of the "war of 44 days" and to make Armenia accept the new balance of power in the region**, to best advance its interests, even if it means adopting a sometimes very violent discourse, damaging its image in Europe.

- For Armenia, the problems of border delimitation and demarcation are not related to the settlement of the **Karabakh problem** as the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, has expressed on several occasions and what he reiterated on June 13, when during a trip to Qatar: *"We have different dimensions of communication with Azerbaijan, including the demarcation. [...] The second dimension is the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. There is another dimension which concerns the opening of regional communications. [...] But, of course, the most pressing issue between Armenia and Azerbaijan and for regional peace is the Nagorno-Karabakh issue."* **What is quite new is the new Armenian political line expressed repeatedly since mid-March in these terms: "For us, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not a territorial question, but a question of rights".** On June 2, Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigorian said, *"We continue to focus on the security of our compatriots living in Artsakh and their rights, from which status should derive."* On June 15, Nikol Pashinian reaffirmed to the National Assembly: *"If in the past the Armenian concept of the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was based on the status of Karabakh, deriving from guarantees and security rights, we base maintaining the security guarantees and rights over the resulting status. In other words, we record that the status quo is not an end in itself, but a means to ensure the security, rights and freedoms of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians".*

What about the positions of the authorities of the "Republic of Artsakh"?

The ambivalent relations between Armenia and the "Republic of Artsakh" are illustrated by privileged links and guarantees provided by Armenia as to the association of the entity in decisions relating to a "future status of Nagorno-Karabakh » and by regular pressure from this same entity with regard to Armenia if it feels the slightest risk to lose the realization of its own agenda which does not offer any concessions. On May 23, the same day as the meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders with Charles Michel in Brussels, the spokesperson for the "president of Nagorno-Karabakh", Lusine Avanesian, recalled the provisions published by Arayik Haroutiounian last December: **"1 Full recognition of the right of Artsakh Armenians to self-determination is not subject to any limitations or concessions. 2. International recognition of the independence of the Republic of Artsakh continues to be the guideline of the authorities. Any status within Azerbaijan is unacceptable. 3. Going backwards, not only in terms of status, but also in terms of demographics, is unacceptable. The Republic of Artsakh has the task of restoring its territorial integrity"**. The next day, May 24, it was the "National Assembly of Nagorno-Karabakh" which expressed its "perplexity" at Charles Michel's remarks by denouncing the fact that *"for the first time in the negotiation*

discourse, an attempt [was] made to abandon the political and geographical notion of "Nagorno-Karabakh".

The pressure exerted by the entity on Armenia regularly consists of proposing a rapprochement with Russia. As early as April 14, following Nikol Pashinian's speech to the Armenian Parliament, Arayik Haroutounian went to his "Ministry of Defence" where he announced that *"all defence programs [should] one day be combined with the functions of the Russian peacekeeping force stationed in Artsakh"*. Similarly, on May 1, Gegham Stapanian, "mediator of the Republic of Artsakh", declared *"in the context of the discussions held with the Russian mediation, we see the term 'Nagorno-Karabakh', which we do not see in the discussions on European platforms"*. On June 3, it was Artak Beglarian, "Minister of State of Nagorno-Karabakh" who declared *" taking into account the relevance of the format of the co-chairs of the Minsk group and the role of the Russian peacekeeping mission, we believe that the question of the settlement of the Karabakh conflict should not be the subject of negotiations with the European Union"* and that the dialogue should not *"be part of the currently complicated relations between Russia and the West"* while considering that the peacekeeping mission should *"stay here for an unlimited period, because the conflict is not settled"*. **This game is exercised despite the fact that on April 25, Arayik Haroutiounian, the "president of the Republic of Artsakh" convened an extended government meeting during which he stressed that no document on the "status of Artsakh"**

was being discussed, with his press service stating, "There is a clear agreement with the Prime Minister of Armenia." Nikol Pashinyan expressed his support for the "Republic of Artsakh" during his speech to the Armenian National Assembly on June 15 after highlighting the **increase in the budget of "Artsakh" (174 billion drams of which 128 paid by the Republic of Armenia) setting a record since the 1990s.**

This aid is also the result of the pressure that the Armenian government is still under, endangered by a political opposition that is quick to seek the support of the separatist authorities, as shown by the recent visit of the Vice-President of the National Assembly Armenian, representative of the opposition "Armenian Revolutionary Federation" and member of the "Resistance" movement, Ishkhan Saghatelian, with other members of the movement, in "Nagorno-Karabakh" between June 21 and 23.

The security and humanitarian situation in Karabakh

It is worth noting that reciprocal accusations of violation of the ceasefire have been very regular and almost weekly for several months but systematically and rigorously denied by both parties. The figures put forward by the two parties between January and the beginning of July make it possible to decide on an **approximate toll of 7 dead, 10 wounded and 1**

prisoner on the Armenian side and 1 dead, 2 wounded and 2 missing on the Azerbaijani side. The “National Security Service of the Republic of Artsakh” denounced at the end of February the use of “*Azerbaijan psychological attack tools*” in the village of Khramort and in other localities of the province of Askeran. **Damage caused to a gas pipeline supplying the territory of "Nagorno-Karabakh" took place in the territory controlled by Azerbaijani forces on March 8,** depriving the population of heating. Repair work requiring mine clearance operations was the subject of negotiations between Azerbaijani authorities and Russian peacekeeping forces. The Armenian authorities pointed to the responsibility of Azerbaijan by evoking the Azerbaijani installation of a valve making it possible to close the flow of gas while the Azerbaijani MFA and the company Azerigaz explained on March 25 the rupture of gas supply by the meteorological conditions difficult and the lack of maintenance of the equipment. **While the Armenian side denounced the increase in provocations and threats due to "*Russia's concern for the situation in Ukraine*", the Azerbaijani side denounced cooperation of the Russian peacekeeping forces with the forces Armenian armies.** On March 31, Nikol Pashinian reported "*disinformation*" from the Azerbaijani side deemed "*scandalous*", particularly concerning the sending of four Armenian SU-30 SM combat planes to Russia to serve in Ukraine or the transit of foreign fighters via the 'Armenia. **The**

Russian peacekeeping forces had to oppose Azerbaijan concerning the occupation of the village of Farrukh denouncing the entry of the Azerbaijani armed forces between March 24 and 25 "*into the area of responsibility of the Russian contingent of peacekeeping forces in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh*". **The Russian peacekeeping forces also had to oppose Armenia concerning the arrival of opponents of Nikol Pashinyan** who wanted to go to mid-April in the border regions with Azerbaijan as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh. Additional tensions surfaced in mid-July, with Azerbaijani media denouncing Russian protection of illegal Armenian construction in Karabakh and reporting on the arrest of a convoy of Russian peacekeepers illegally carrying weapons. On May 5, the Azerbaijani Cabinet of Ministers issued amendments to add **four additional Azerbaijani customs checkpoints to Karabakh.**

On February 7, 8 Armenian prisoners of war were released by the Azerbaijani side², including the 6 prisoners remaining in captivity since November 16, 2021, and repatriated on board a French plane, without the counterpart requested by President Ilham Aliyev concerning the fate of the 3,890 Azerbaijani citizens who went missing during the first war. **The dispute over the Christian heritage**

2 The previous releases of prisoners had been facilitated by Georgia on June 12, 2021 (15 prisoners), by Russia on September 7 (2 prisoners) and December 4, 2021 (10 prisoners), then by the EU on December 19 (10 prisoners) and finally by Hungary on December 29 (5 prisoners).

of Karabakh³ was reignited on February 3, following the announcement made by the Azerbaijani Minister of Culture, Anar Karimov, of the constitution of a working group which would have been described as in charge of "*removing the fictitious traces written by the Armenians on the Albanian religious temples*". The two countries accuse each other of "*cultural genocide*". These last months have also been marked by several commemorations of victims such as that of the massacre of Khojaly by the Armenian forces on February 26, 1992, or that of the 107th anniversary of the Armenian genocide on April 24, 1915. **The assessment of the victims of the mines left by Armenia in the territories reconquered by Azerbaijan amounted to 225 people at the end of June, that is to say 39 dead and 186 injured.**

Nikol Pashinian under public pressure

Finally, the pressure of public opinion exerted on the Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian reflects the permanent blockages to which the process of resolving this conflict is subject.

On January 23, Armenian President Armen Sarkissian, announced his resignation (effective January 31) explaining that "*the president [did not] have the necessary tools to*

³ To go further : <https://eurasiapeace.org/azerbaijan-armenia-religious-heritage-churches-conflict-islam-unesco>

influence important foreign and domestic policy processes in difficult times for the people and the country". The candidate of the ruling "Civil Contract" party, Vahagn Kachaturian, was sworn in on March 13. **The Armenian opposition began to gather on April 5, in Freedom Square in Yerevan, on the initiative of several Armenian opposition movements, including "I have the honor" ("Pativ Unem") d 'Arthur Vanetsian and Serzh Sarksian and Robert Kocharian's "Armenian Alliance" ("Hayastan Dashink"), during a demonstration attended by around 11,200 people**, the day before the April 6 meeting in Brussels to call "*not to sign any agreement with Azerbaijan which could interfere with the full realization of the right of the people of Artsakh to self-determination*", and to "*exclude any status of Artsakh within Azerbaijan*". On April 12, following a first Armenian-Azerbaijani rapprochement marked by the telephone conversation the day before between the Azerbaijani and Armenian Foreign Ministers, Djeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan in order to discuss the work of preparing a future peace treaty and the establishment of a joint boundary commission, as well as to address certain humanitarian issues, **the opposition blocs "Alliance" and "I have the honor" announced their boycott of the sessions of Parliament for a week and left the hemicycle**. On April 17, a new sit-in demonstration on Freedom Square of Yerevan took place on the initiative of the member of the opposition coalition "I have the Honor" and leader of the party "Motherland », Arthur Vanetsyan. **On April 22, Nikol Pashinian attempted to ease tensions during the government session** by stressing that

"assessments on the dissolution of the Minsk group [were] unfounded", that "no project or plan for settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [was] on the table or [had] been circulated" and that Armenia's task was to provide such a solution to the Artsakh settlement that "the people of Artsakh [lives] in Artsakh and [lives] in such a way that he feels and sees himself as Artsakh Armenians". **However, from April 25, the "Alliance" formation launched a series of "awareness march" in the streets of Yerevan under the slogan "Get up, Armenia!", "Get up, Artsakh!" while the other opposition formation "I have the honour" and its leader Arthur Vanetsian continued its sit-in on Place de la Liberté.** On April 25, a group of opponents also embarked on a march towards Yerevan from the town of Ijevan in the Tavoush region while another group embarked on a similar action the following day from the village of Tigranashen in the Ararat district. **On April 26, the organizers of the march organized by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation "Dashnaktsoutioun" in Yerevan claimed the mobilization of 3000 people against 1000 according to the police. From May 1, 10,000 demonstrators gathered in the streets of the Armenian capital, in particular on the Place de France, to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian. to denounce a policy of cession of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan and by mobilizing in a logic of civil disobedience while considering a general strike recreating the conditions under which the current Prime Minister himself came to power.** They were joined the same evening by the two former Armenian presidents, Serge Sarkissian and

Robert Kotcharian. **On 4 May, opposition parliamentarians returned to their posts, while Parliament was placed under heavy police protection,** to demand the Prime Minister's resignation and read a collective text of various accusations relating to the failure of negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh, the military defeat and the issue of prisoners of war still detained in Azerbaijan, before leaving the Chamber again. **In the week of May 16-20, around 400 protesters opposing Nikol Pashinian's government were reportedly arrested in the streets of Yerevan.** Anti-government protests continued in the first week of June led by the 'Resistance' movement backed by former Armenian presidents Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan, drawing **criticism from 'human rights defender' Kristine Grigorian over "disproportionate" police actions** during the May 30 demonstration during which opponents attempted to enter a government administrative building and which resulted in the detention of more than a hundred people and 4 injuries. **On June 15, Nikol Pashinyan responded to his opposition on these issues by reporting on the record of previous Armenian leaders:** "*On November 25, 1998, the then Armenian government, headed by Robert Kocharyan, agreed to accept as a basis for negotiation of the so-called "common state" proposal [...] But today, I want to emphasize that with this negotiation package, the then Armenian leaders recognized Artsakh as part of Azerbaijan. [...] These realities were further reinforced in the discussion of the Madrid Principles. [...] the Armenian side accepted them as the basis for negotiations. When this happened, Robert Kocharyan was leading the country, Serzh*

Sargsyan was the Prime Minister, and the ARF was part of the government and was a member and supporter of the ruling team. [...] Armenia recognized the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, as I have repeatedly said, in the 1992 Agreement on the Establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which was ratified by the Supreme Council of Armenia in 1992. At that time, by the way, Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sargsyan were deputies of the Supreme Council of Armenia". **In the week of June 13-17, anti-government protests subsided. The organizers of the protests, however, warned that the protests would continue and that it was a "change in tactics". Opposition leaders have announced that they are working on impeachment proceedings against the Prime Minister,** which would require the support of MPs from the ruling Civil Contract party, which in turn is seeking the removal of 14 opposition MPs who boycotted parliamentary sessions, a move that would need the approval of the Constitutional Court. These demonstrations have of course been the subject of comments from the Azerbaijani authorities such as those of May 10 through the voice of its MFA: *"Those who organize demonstrations in Armenia [...] are known to Armenian society, [...] this are the people who made false promises to the Armenian people for many years, almost 30 years, living in illusions, they are the ones who have brought Armenia into the abyss today".*

The suspension of the work of the Minsk group in favour of the war in Ukraine and the rhetoric of competition that

has developed between the Russian co-presidency and the US and French co-presidencies within the framework of the process of resolving the Karabakh conflict, in no way modify the configuration of this conflict, the tenor of the discourse, the positions, the stakes, or the international alliances which surround it and which will be developed below. At most, the war in Ukraine makes them more visible and clearer, but the new situation should above all make it possible to see the reality of the ineffectiveness of the Minsk group responsible for playing the "status quo" for thirty years, thus satisfying the Empires. Indeed, the real progress in the resolution of this conflict has taken place all the more since its gradual deactivation, a logical continuation of the "44-day war" which marked an unfortunately military rather than political and diplomatic unblocking of the conflict. Negotiations are now being played out in various complementary places, whether it is border demarcation, the resumption of economic exchanges in the region and the development of transport routes, or the signing of a peace treaty. We will thus have noted the first bilateral meeting between the two foreign ministers in Tbilisi on July 16. This loosening of ties between the co-presidents of the Minsk group, accelerated by the war in Ukraine, may announce the release of a space for Armenia and Azerbaijan to regain control of their ability to act on their common relationship and their destiny. This process now depends on the ability of these two countries to lose a little to gain a lot and to jointly defuse the grip of the powers that surround it.

The process of Georgia's accession to the EU and NATO compromised on the background of the conflict with the Ukrainian government

As tens of thousands of Georgians gathered on June 20 in the centre of Tbilisi, EU leaders decided to follow the recommendations of the European Commission on June 23 by granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. Regarding Georgia, the European Council expressed its readiness to *"grant candidate country status to Georgia once the priorities set out in the Commission's opinion on Georgia's membership application have been taken into account"* while recognizing the European perspective of the three countries of the "Associated Trio". Georgia submitted its membership application on March 3 at the same time as the Republic of Moldova. As early as June 17, the European Commission recognized a *"basis in place to achieve the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the respect and protection of minorities"* while moderating *"even whether recent developments have undermined the country's progress"* and made 12 recommendations.

The chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, blamed them on the country's geography while Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili called

the decision *"unfair"*. A joint letter from Georgian opposition parties was sent to the European Union leadership on 25 May to silence critics of the ruling Georgian Dream party, denouncing a campaign in Brussels by *"specific politicians from the radical opposition"* against obtaining candidate status for Georgia. On June 14, Georgian President Salomé Zourabishvili called on Georgians to gather on June 16 in Europe Square to publicly demonstrate their European aspirations while attacking both the ruling party and the opposition during a long speech referring to *"a wasted job of Georgia in Brussels"*. Irakli Kobakhidze, meanwhile, declared in early June that it would be *"illogical"* for the EU to refuse Georgia's candidacy.

Ambivalent relations with Russia are unraveling ties between Ukraine and Georgia, a member of the "Associated Trio"

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared with thinly disguised threats on January 21 that he *"[hoped] that Georgia [would] learn from the lessons of the past and [pursue] a more balanced policy towards Russia"*, on January 24, when the telephone discussion between the Georgian and Ukrainian MFAs, Davit Zalkaliani and Dmitro Kuleba, reflected a strong solidarity between the two countries linked by their common membership in the "Associated Trio" that they form with the Moldova since May 17, 2021, as well as

in GUAM. Similarly, on February 16, the Duma's vote of February 15 in favour of recognizing the independence of the "Republics of Donbass" was the subject of strong criticism from the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Davit Zalkaliani, On February 26, the Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, denounced the Russian invasion while announcing **aid of 100 tonnes of humanitarian freight passing through Poland.**

However, as early as January 26, significant parliamentary disagreements arose in Georgia concerning the draft joint resolution in favour of Ukraine. The resolution was adopted on February 1 without express mention of Russia and evoking a *"deep concern of the Georgian Parliament in the face of a possible military escalation in Ukraine"*. Moreover, suspicions of collusion of the ruling party with the Russian side, maintained by the opposition, were reinforced at the beginning of February with the banning of the Russian opponent and former Duma deputy, Dmitri Gudkov, to enter Georgian territory suffering the same fate as Alexei Navalny's ally, Liubov Sobol last August. Another Russian opposition politician, Andrei Davidov, claimed on February 15 that he had also been barred from entering Georgian territory *"without explanation"*. At the beginning of March, several opposition journalists from Russian media were prevented from entering Georgian territory, such as Mikhail Fishman of the Dozhd newspaper on March 5 or Dave Frenkel of the online media Meduza on March 11.

Moreover, **on February 25**, thousands of demonstrators had taken to the streets from February 24 to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, **the moment chosen by the Georgian Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, to announce that Georgia would not would not join the economic and financial sanctions against Russia.** Georgia was not on the list of countries hostile to Russia published at that time, nor was it on the one published by Belarus on April 8, a country with which Georgia signed a cooperation agreement between their services security which entered into force on July 14, 2021.

On March 1, Volodymyr Zelenski, the Ukrainian President thus announced the recall of his ambassador to Georgia, Igor Dolgov, The same day, the thousands of demonstrators gathered every day in front of the Parliament since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine began to demand the resignation of the government.

On April 4, the Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence denounced the establishment by *"Russian agents" of "smuggling networks that pass through Georgia in particular"* in order to *"bypass the sanctions"*, the statement even ensuring that *"At the same time, representatives of Georgian special services [had] been instructed by political leaders not to interfere with the activities of smugglers."* In response, the very next day, the Georgian State Security Service asked Ukraine to *"immediately provide*

evidence of this information in order to ensure a legal response" assuring that the Georgian government would be *"intransigent with regard to of any possible crime of this type"*. **And on April 6, Mamuka Mdinardze accused Ukraine of waging a "hybrid war" against Georgia. On April 8, Shalva Papuashvili, the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, refused the invitation of his Ukrainian counterpart, Ruslan Stefanchuk, to go to Ukraine.**

On April 11, the chairman of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, announced several conditions for an official visit to Ukraine to the sites of alleged Russian war crimes in Butcha and Irpin. The open secret at the heart of the conflict between the two governments was thus revealed, Irakli Kobakhidze pointing to the continuation in his official functions of chairman of the executive committee of the Ukrainian National Council for the reform of the former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, currently imprisoned in Georgia, as well as the presence of many of his relatives in high official positions in Ukraine.

On April 14, the ruling "Georgian Dream" party and the opposition parties finally agreed on a joint trip to Ukraine, with the exception of the "United National Movement" party or the "Droa" party. A delegation left on April 15, for a stay considered a turning point in relations between the two countries by all the participants. But on April 23, Volodymyr

Zelenski, declared again about his country's relations with Georgia: *"I don't understand why sanctions are not imposed. I heard the message "we must protect our economy". What economy? [The Russians] have already taken part of Georgian territory, almost reached Tbilisi"*.

Moreover, on April 27, a report by Transparency International on the *"Russian businesses of Bidzina Ivanishvili and those close to him"* claimed that the billionaire, former Prime Minister of Georgia and founder of the ruling "Georgian Dream" party continued to *"hold at least 10 Russian companies through offshore entities in 2012-2019"*. And on April 28, the Ukrainian presidential adviser Mikhaïlo Podoliak reacted by declaring that this report *"[had] shown why the [Georgian] government [had] refused to consider sanctions against [Russia]"*. On May 10, the reported delays in the payment of damages amounting to 600 million dollars by Swiss Credit to the billionaire were described by the current president of this party as *"the result of the coordination of certain forces, which want that Georgia gets involved in the war"* while some Georgian figures supporting the ruling party referred more directly to the United States.



Mikheil Saakashvili

President of Georgia 2004 - 2013

Born on December 21, 1967 in Tbilisi from a **Georgian intelligentsia family**, Mikheil Saakashvili **studied in Russian language in Ukraine** and graduated in 1992 in International Relations. With the help of a **scholarship from the United States Department of State**, he obtained a Doctor of Law degree from George Washington University and began his career in a law firm in New York before being contacted by a friend working for President Shevardnadze. They are both elected to the Parliament of Georgia under the presidential party: the Union of Citizens of Georgia. Then he became **chairman of the parliamentary committee** responsible for setting up a new electoral system, an independent judiciary and an apolitical police force. He quickly became popular and became **vice-president of PACE**. In October 2000, he became **Minister of Justice**.

He resigned on September 5, 2001 to found the United National Movement, a nationalist Centre Right party affiliated with the European People's Party. In June 2002, he was elected **President of the Tbilisi Assembly (Sakrebulo)** following an MNU-Labour Party agreement. Saakashvili calls for **non-violent civil disobedience against the authorities following the rigged elections of November 2003**. Eduard Shevardnadze is forced to resign in the face of popular pressure: "**Revolution of the Roses**". On January 4, 2004, he won the presidential election with more than 96% of the votes cast. During his first mandate in 2004 and 2008, he will endeavour to defend economic liberalism, to drastically reduce corruption, to get closer to the United States and to move the country towards EU membership to facilitate NATO membership. He was the victim of an assassination attempt in 2005 at the same time as George Bush during a speech in Freedom Park in Tbilisi. He was **re-elected in January 2008 with 52.8% of the vote following a political crisis** that led to early elections and when the vote was contested by OSCE observers.

On the night of October 7 to 8, 2008, an assault by Georgian troops in South Ossetia provoked Russia's reaction and a counter-attack plan that led to a

ceasefire on August 16. On August 26, Russian President Medvedev recognizes Abkhazia and Ossetia as independent states. **The 2012 elections saw the victory of Bidzina Ivanishvili and the beginning of political cohabitation**. In February 2013, a petition collected more than a million signatures to demand his departure. Saakashvili leaves power and Georgia to escape legal proceedings and takes refuge in the **United States**. He is accused, among other things, of "*abuse of power*" and "*embezzlement of public funds*".

He supports the 2013 pro-European protests in Ukraine. In 2015, **Ukraine refused to extradite Saakashvili, who announced that he had renounced Georgian nationality 3 days before in order to avoid life imprisonment**. On January 4, 2018, he was sentenced in absentia to 3 years in prison in Georgia for abuse of power in the case of the banker's murder. In the meantime, he made a career in Ukraine: **Governor of Odessa Oblast, he received Ukrainian nationality on May 29**, before resigning accusing the government of corruption, and he founded the "New Forces Movement" party in 2017. In July, President Poroshenko revokes his Ukrainian nationality. He **returned to exile in New York** and returned to Ukraine on September 10, 2017. He set up a paramilitary camp opposite the Rada. Following two arrests, a hunger strike, placement under house arrest and deportation to Poland with a ban on residence until 2021, he went into exile in the Netherlands. **In May 2019, the new President Volodymyr Zelensky gave him back his Ukrainian nationality and in May 2020 he was appointed Minister of Reform**.

On September 29, 2021, he returned to Georgia, in the troubled context of the Georgian local elections on October 2 before being **arrested by the Georgian authorities on October 1 and being placed in detention where he began a hunger strike**. He is also accused of "*illegal crossing of the border*" following his activism and his calls for demonstrations. The status of victim requested by his lawyers because of "*degrading and inhuman*" treatment during his forced transfer from Rustavi prison to Gldani prison hospital on November 8, was refused on January 20 by the prosecutor's office in Georgia, despite medical experts saying his psychotherapeutic and physical rehabilitation following his 50-day hunger strike that ended in November remained a "*substantial*" problem. He is **currently still on trial for the various charges brought against him**

On May 1, the main intelligence directorate of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine denounced aid from the three South Caucasian countries provided to Russia to escape sanctions, accusations denied by the Georgian Minister of Finance, Lasha Khutsishvili, qualifying them "*completely incomprehensible*" and by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili calling them "*absurd*" and "*slandorous*" **explaining: "Ukraine still maintains trade relations with Russia around gas supply. It is a country at war. In such a situation, it is easier to understand why we maintain our commercial relations with Russia."** Critics renewed on May 20 by Andreï Yermak, the chief of staff of the Ukrainian president.

These Ukrainian criticisms come in a context of strong popular solidarity in Georgia vis-à-vis the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion marked by regular large-scale demonstrations also carried by the political opposition to the power in place, like the former Georgian Defence Minister, Irakli Okruashvili left to fight in Ukraine at the beginning of March like other Georgian citizens. **On June 18, another soldier was killed in Ukraine, bringing the total number of Georgian volunteers killed in this war since February 24 to 16 dead.**

A democratic retreat, target of European and American criticism...

Many "Western" criticisms echoed those of Ukraine since the summer of 2021. On August 1, 2021, an agreement signed in 2016 between the Georgian security services and the Belarusian KGB entered into force. On August 31, 2021, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced, under the pretext of reducing the foreign debt, the refusal of the second tranche of 75 million euros of the EU loan conditional on the reform of the courts and the maintenance of the April 19 agreement, provoking both the incomprehension of President Salomé Zurbishvili and the widely awaited commitment of the "United National Movement" to finally join this April 19 agreement, which it had refused until then because of the amnesties it contained concerning the violence exercised by the authorities during the dispersal of the demonstrations of June 20-21, 2019. Then on September 7, the United States Embassy as well as the EU delegation in Georgia denounced the failure of the Georgian Parliament to approve constitutional amendments regarding the selection of the Attorney General, a 3/5th majority vote recommended by the Venice Commission and which is an integral part of the April 19 agreement negotiated by the EU.

Relations with the EU were further strained when the **Georgian Parliament**, a few days after the 10th EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee, **terminated the**

mandates of three opposition MPs on February 15. On March 14, Salome Zurbashvili's speech in parliament called for unity by dismissing back to back the government, which she accused of "*sinning against her country*", and the opposition by declaring: "*The [parliamentary] majority, instead of seeking consensus, portrays anyone who disagrees with it as a traitor or as the war party [...]* *The opposition, instead of seeking consensus, categorizes any statement or decision without appeal of the pro-Russian government*", while calling on Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian President, to send his ambassador back to Tbilisi, and stressing that "*any disagreement between Georgia and Ukraine [was] beneficial for Russia and Russia alone*". She also confirmed the information circulating about the Georgian government's refusal of her working visits abroad, and in particular those recent to Paris, Berlin, Brussels and Warsaw. His statements on March 24 in the context of the NATO-Georgia meetings, followed by his video address to the Ukrainian people, reflected an increasingly serious situation at odds with the government.

The human rights situation in the country was highlighted on April 4 by a statement by the Public Defender, Nino Lomjaria, who pointed out several dysfunctions starting with the abolition of the State Inspector's service, the legislative changes reducing the degree of independence of judges and the interference and threats against them, while returning to the "case of the cartographers", the

tendency to restrict freedom of expression in the country, the cases of secret surveillance, or the problematic situation in orphanages and psychiatric institutions. The evaluation prepared by the Evaluation Unit of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) confirmed these elements the next day. **The imprisonment of the director of the opposition channel Mtavari Arkhi TV, Nika Gvaramia,** and his sentence to three and a half years in prison, for abuse of power over management decisions and for embezzlement, on May 16, contributed the uprising of civil society opposition to the Georgian government. 42 civil society organizations said in a joint statement on May 17 that the sentence was "*a warning and a threat to other independent media to stop critical coverage of government performance, cease monitoring and refrain from disclosing facts undesirable to the government*". In the continuity of this event, **on June 9, the resolution of the European Parliament on the "violation of the freedom of the media and the safety of journalists" adopted by 308 votes for and 218 against declared itself in favour of sanctions against former Georgian President Bidzina Ivanishvili.**

The publication on July 1 of the government's plan to meet the EU's requirements for its application for candidate status did not appease the discontent of the Georgian population. On the same day, the deadline that the "Shame" movement had given for the resignation of the government, a **third mass demonstration took place, after those of June**

20 and 24 which brought together 100,000 people in the streets of the capital, the most gatherings since 2012. On July 1, Georgia's Ambassador to France, Tea Katukia, resigned from her post, complaining of *"constant abuse, slander, pressure, harassment and threats, which originated in the system's deep-rooted clannish and patronage practices that contradict the values and aspirations [it has] for Georgia."*

On July 7, the leader of the ruling party announced that the government would vote for a fully proportional system with the establishment of an electoral threshold of 2% in accordance with the agreement of April 19 under the aegis of the EU abandoned by the ruling party in July 2021, only within a month of the EU accepting his candidate status. This declaration was the subject of criticism from the opposition denouncing this *"ultimatum"*, in particular several members of the party "MNU", "Droa", "Aghmashenebeli Strategy", and "European Georgia".

...Which does not prevent a continued rapprochement on security issues "threatening" Russia

During the January 14 telephone discussion between US Under Secretary of State for Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried and Georgian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, the interlocutors agreed on the

"unacceptability of Russia's attempts to divide Europe and legitimize its spheres of influence."

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani was in Brussels on January 17-18 to meet NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and representatives of allied states. On this occasion, he also **condemned the cyberattacks against Ukraine** while reaffirming his solidarity with this country. On January 18, a meeting between the Head of the Georgian Defence Forces, Major General Giorgi Matiashvili, and his Polish counterpart Rajminda Andrzejczak, also took place, during which **Poland's support in the implementation of the substantial NATO package -Georgia and Georgian capacity building in military police and special forces, cyber security and air defence had been reiterated.** On February 1, the visit of a NATO delegation, in preparation for the 3rd NATO-Georgia exercise from March 22 to 24, had given rise, the day before, to a declaration by the Georgian government announcing that it was preparing to **purchase additional Javelin FGM-148 anti-tank missiles from the United States** for a value of more than 26 million dollars, sum covered by an amount allocated by the United States itself⁴. In addition, some information relayed Georgia's desire to create a new GE-31 Bora military aircraft (former SU-25 without Russian components) likely to attract Azerbaijani but also Israeli and Ukrainian funding.

⁴ A request had already been made in August 2021 for 82 missiles of this type and 46 command launch units associated with training and technical assistance.

In Kyiv, several opposition parties (Lelo, MNU and Droa) called on Georgia to join the alliance formed by Great Britain, Poland and Ukraine, while the Polish President, Andrzej Duda, proposed on February 7 for Georgia to join the NATO summit in Madrid in June. The next day, support from the European Court of Human Rights was provided with the start of the examination of individual complaints by Georgians against Russia following the 2008 war (59 complaints concerning more than 350 victims of forced displacement and relating to violations of rights relating to the protection of private and family life, property rights, freedom of movement and the prohibition of discrimination)⁵. Georgian Defence Minister Juansher Burchuladze participated in the NATO meeting in Brussels on February 16 and 17, to which he was invited like his Ukrainian counterpart. With his American counterpart, Lloyd Austin, he underlined the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Georgia Defence and Deterrence Enhancement (GDDE) initiative signed on February 14 as a continuation of the Georgia Defence Readiness Program (GDRP). He also signed a 2022 cooperation plan with his Czech counterpart, Jana Cernochova, as well as a 2022 cooperation plan with his Lithuanian counterpart, accompanied by a cooperation memorandum with the

5 A separate verdict had been rendered by the ECHR in 2021, concerning a case between the two States, resulting in Russia's request for payment of 10 million euros from its adversary for the moral damage suffered by 1,500 Georgian nationals as a result of the violation of 6 different articles of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Kaunas Cyber Defence Centre also including Ukraine and the United States.

On February 17, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the **implementation of the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP)** calling on the EU and its Member States to recognize the European perspective of Georgia and Ukraine. On April 27, the United States House of Representatives adopted the **Georgia Support Act** by 406 votes in favour and 20 against, a bipartisan bill that provides for the imposition of entry and property blocking sanctions on foreigners responsible for complicit in serious human rights violations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the preparation of reports to Congress on US aid to Georgia, on the assessment of threats to its independence, on cooperation in cybersecurity as well as a strategy to help the country expand its capabilities to "*counter Russian disinformation and propaganda*." On 4 May, the Council of Europe's 25th report on the conflict in Georgia for the period October 2021 to March 2022 continued to support the territorial integrity of the country and noted continuing concerns about the situation of human rights in the occupied areas, including the rights to life, freedom of movement, property and education in the mother tongue.

Between May 3 and May 14, Georgia participated, for the second consecutive year, in the **joint military exercises "Trojan Footprint"** with the United States Special Operations

Command Europe (SOCEUR). On May 17 and 18, several high-level meetings took place in Brussels between Georgian leaders and officials from the European Union and NATO. **Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili travelled to Madrid between June 28 and 30**, accompanied by Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili and Defence Minister Juansher Burchuladze, to attend the **NATO summit** which discussed the war in Ukraine, the challenges posed by the rise of China, and the definition of the organization's strategic orientation for the next decade. He thus met on June 29, President of the European Council Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister **Boris Johnson, who announced 5 million pounds (\$6 million) in aid to Georgia** for the fight against Russian cyber threats, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, as well as a delegation of senators and members of the United States Congress. **NATO's Strategy Document 2022**, which Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called "*the Alliance's model in a more dangerous and competitive world*," **pledged to further develop its partnership with Georgia and reaffirmed its 2008 Bucharest Summit decision** that the country would eventually become a member of the Alliance. At the same time, a **delegation from the Defence and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) headed by Ethan Corbin was travelling to Tbilisi** to discuss Georgia's integration into the organization. On June 30, the Georgian Foreign Ministry hailed NATO's decisions by declaring that it welcomed "*the adoption of a Document of Measures Tailored to Georgia*", describing the continuation of the policy as

"encouraging" the pursuit of the "open door" policy and considering that NATO's new strategic concept "adequately reflected the evolving geopolitical environment and the Alliance's long-term response to emerging threats".

If the decision of the European Union to postpone the granting of candidate status to Georgia is not a surprise in view of the domestic political orientation taken by the "Georgian Dream" since the summer of 2021 and the abandonment of the April 19 agreement negotiated by Charles Michel, this position is also explained by the context of the war in Ukraine which led to the conjunction of two factors. First, the conflict between the two Ukrainian and Georgian governments, despite their alliance of circumstance within the "Trio associated" that they form with Moldova, behind which lies the personality of Mikheil Saakashvili and his networks of influence, including the power currently in place in Georgia seeks to protect itself, and then the choices of the European Union, which in no way compromises on the economic foreign policy of Georgia, which is still largely dependent on the Russian partner or on the need for it to establish links with diverse interest with its immediate neighbours. Georgia's asset, which lies in a certain way in its geographical position bordering Russia, thus explains a certain regularity in the deepening of its ties with NATO, which it ultimately needs more than Europe. to establish

its independence and security. But it was also the cause of its failure in June 2022 for having haggled over it too much for a year by neglecting the European reaction to the democratic backsliding which it continues to show today. Georgia may have made a strategic error of judgment on the ties that govern the relationship between the EU and NATO, two organizations which, fortunately still, cannot completely overlap. The effect of the Russian threat and the significant trauma of the 2008 war that that of Ukraine came to awaken can explain this lack of foresight or self control. But it is probably time for the Georgian government to make a real outstretched hand towards its opposition.

Armenia in search of international support: another conflict of loyalties?

Armenia is the only Council of Europe country to have joined the Russian delegation in voting against the decision to suspend Russia from the organisation, a decision adopted on February 25 by the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe and which led to the loss of Russia's seat in this same committee and in PACE. This country is also part of the CSTO, unlike its two South Caucasian neighbours: Georgia and Azerbaijan. But it did not take part (like Azerbaijan for that matter) in the UN vote concerning the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, unlike Georgia which voted in favour, while the others EAEU members (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus) voted against. And she abstained from voting to condemn the Russian invasion at the UN.

Privileged, indispensable and even existential ties with Russia

Armenia is among the South Caucasian countries, the one that maintains the most privileged ties with Russia. On June 13, **Nikol Pashinyan**, the Prime Minister of Armenia, travelling to Qatar, made several statements during an Al Jazeera television program, and in particular **about Ukraine, he essentially expressed a form of economic optimism**

because of its proximity to Russia: *"Of course, the situation is not pleasant for us in terms of economy. [...] After the events in Ukraine, many people and companies left Russia for Armenia because we have a neutral economic zone and Armenia and Russia are members of the Eurasian Economic Union. In this situation, we hope, I think, that we can manage this economic situation.[...] But at the moment Armenia's economic indicators are quite positive".*

From the beginning of January, the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinian, then Chairman of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO had mobilized on the crisis in Kazakhstan, at the request of the Kazakh President Kassym Jomart Tokaev, by **signing on January 6 the decision of the Armenian government to participate in the CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan**, i.e. a hundred soldiers, dedicated to the protection of strategic sites, out of the 2,500 planned in total for this deployment (the CSTO includes 3,600 total peacekeepers). **This mobilization had been the subject of strong criticism from the opposition parties "National Democratic Party" and "Citizen's Decision", as well as from Armenian civil society** whose organizations had denounced *"short-sighted behaviour", "harmful to Armenia's reputation"* and harmful to the Armenians of Kazakhstan. **During Sergei Lavrov's visit to Yerevan between June 8 and 10 for the CSTO foreign ministers' meeting, his Armenian counterpart, Ararat Mirzoyan, said: "Armenia continues to believe that Russia is able to restore the status quo**

established by the tripartite declaration of November 9, 2020, which was violated by the invasion by the Azerbaijani armed forces of the village of Parukh in Nagorno-Karabakh on March 24, 2022", proof once again of the indispensable nature of the alliance with Russia in the context of the conflict with its Azerbaijani neighbour. However, Nikol Pashinian had later criticized the functioning of the CSTO but to somehow demand "more CSTO". As early as January 10, during the videoconference meeting of the CSTO Security Council over which he chaired, bringing together all the Heads of State, including Secretary General Stanislav Zas, Nikol Pashinian, **drew a parallel between the "aggression of the international terrorism" in Kazakhstan, to use the words of Vladimir Putin, and the accusations of intervention by Syrian mercenaries alongside Azerbaijan during the last Karabakh war, then on May 16, during the CSTO Summit, on the occasion of 30 years since the signing of the Collective Security Treaty and 20 years since the establishment of the organization, he said: "As you know, last year, these days, Azerbaijani troops invaded the sovereign territory of Armenia to initiate the mechanisms foreseen by the provision on the Response of the CSTO to the situations. This document was approved by the Collective Security Council, but, unfortunately, we cannot say that the organization reacted as the Republic of Armenia expected. For a long time, we have been raising the issue of arms sales by CSTO member states to countries not friendly to Armenia".** Finally, on June 17, at the Committee of Secretaries of the CSTO Security Council in Yerevan, he repeated his criticisms in these terms: **"You know**

that the Azerbaijani armed forces invaded our territory in May of last year, and we applied to the CSTO. I have spoken about this many times and, as president, I want to emphasize that this issue must be debated properly. Why? Because we see that Azerbaijan's aggressive statements continue, we should discuss this issue, especially since Armenia has filed an application with the CSTO, because this is a very fundamental issue for us and for the Organization".

On April 19, Russia and Armenia signed a 30-point joint declaration recalling the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries from April 3, 1992 and affirming the desire to deepen relations between the two countries in accordance with the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia of August 29, 1997 and the Declaration on Allied Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia of September 26, 2000. Although a similar step was taken by Russia vis-à-vis Azerbaijan on February 22, this joint Armenian-Russian statement was more in-depth and also corresponded to clear issues related to the war in Ukraine. The declaration thus advocates: “the creation of an internal market without restrictions, barriers and exemptions, and an increase in the share of settlements in national currencies. [...] the fight against the revision of the results of the Second World War. [...] intensify efforts to combat any manifestation of racism, xenophobia, neo-Nazism” and it

lays down the principle that “**no State, union or coalition can or should ensure its security at the expense of the security of other States**” and notes “the inadmissibility of actions aimed at destroying the arms control architecture and obtaining unilateral military advantages at the expense of the security of others”.

This Armenian-Russian collusion is also particularly strong in business circles, as shown by the planned sale of Rostelecom by the Armenian state in January, and it will have been noted that the operator of the Yerashk – Julfa – Meghri – Horadiz” was the South Caucasus Railway Company, a subsidiary of Russian Railways. **Similarly, Nikol Pashinyan visited Kazakhstan on February 24-25 to participate in several meetings within the framework of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council and there he said: “The sanctions will have a clear impact on the economic climate in the Eurasian region. [...] we need to discuss the type of operational decisions we should take to minimize these negative consequences and, if possible, circumvent them by taking the appropriate measures”.** Nikol Pashinian was thus on June 20 and 21, in Belarus for the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, where the Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishutin specified that the turnover of bilateral trade between the two countries had increased by 30% between January and April reaching 890 million dollars, and he underlined the presence of many Russian companies in Armenia, particularly in the oil and gas, transport and digital

technology sectors. In May, remittances to Armenia had increased 2.3 times, mostly from Russia, setting a record for the country at \$412 million.

And that relationship was not tainted by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's February 7 remarks that there needed to be an extension of the Union State between Russia and Belarus to all of the former republics. Soviet socialists and referring to Armenia in these terms: "*Armenia has nowhere to go...what? do you think someone needs them? They have already seen it, Nikol Voyevich [Pachinian] has already seen it*". **On July 4, the Attorney General of Armenia issued a letter to the government calling on the legal regulation and control of information security on online platforms, taking as an example "the Russian Law "On Information, Information Technology and Information Protection". On April 19, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of information security.**

Thus the relationship between Armenia and Russia was very well expressed by the new Armenian President sworn in on March 13, Vahagn Kachaturian: "*There is no need to think that this situation will change, that the sanctions will stop or end in the near future. [...] The fraternal attitude means the fraternal attitude. Basically, in philosophy, that means everything: trust, sincerity, and common programs, common actions that must continue. Besides, it was not me*

who decided it: it was done 200 years ago or more by our ancestors, who decided that we should live together, use our common efforts to simply develop ourselves".

Inconclusive attempts to diversify international partnerships.....

Despite these very privileged links with Russia, Armenia, which has been a member of the Council of Europe since January 25, 2001 like Azerbaijan (Georgia joined on April 27, 1999), has been diversifying its international partnerships for a long time. One axis of these attempts at diversification is based on privileged relations with the United States and France, which are countries where the Armenian diaspora has traditionally settled, and with which Armenia plays on the sensitive chord of the "Armenian genocide", of its measured progress in terms of respect for human rights, and of the electoral weight of its diaspora.

Armenia left the EU's preferential trade regime on January 1, which had allowed it to set an export record to the EU of €197 million in 2019. Although it started trading with the EU on the basis of the "comprehensive and reinforced partnership agreement" since March 1, a 20% drop in its exports to the EU is expected in 2022. *But this country's relations with France were maintained, in particular through the meeting between*

Nikol Pashinian and Emmanuel Macron, rotating President of the Council of the EU, on the occasion of the conference "Ambitions: Armenia France" on March 9 in Paris which made it possible to address the development of bilateral relations, an opportunity for the French President to allude to the war in Ukraine and that of Karabakh, in these terms: *"We are also going to initiate a major program of training, preservation, enhancement of cultural heritage and Armenian cleric. [...] Many communities wanted, as we know, to be able to bring projects to Armenia, to Nagorno-Karabakh too. It was completely legitimate [...] With this support fund, we are going to provide a stable framework, identified with, I would say, the full and complete support of the State, French diplomacy [...] We are also seeing the links that exist between these situations when we begin to speak lightly again of genocide and when we begin to install political discourses based on historical revisionisms. And Armenia knows that one cannot talk lightly about these subjects".* **This speech highlighted the desire to regulate at the level of the French State, which previously fell under illegal forms of decentralized cooperation with "Nagorno-Karabakh" since it is under Azerbaijani sovereignty.** On June 13, the Speaker of the Armenian Parliament, Artur Tovmasian, was visiting Paris to meet with the "Permanent Representative of the Republic of Artsakh", Hovhannes Gevorgian to discuss precisely the *"assistance provided to Artsakh by French politicians and local communities during the 44-day war of 2020, and the need to perpetuate it",* the communiqué of the "Parliament of Artsakh" specifying *"the meetings of the President of the AN will continue with French*

political circles and representatives of the Franco-Armenian community". 3 days later, the cultural centre of the Embassy of Azerbaijan in France was attacked by a group of young men from an Armenian Dashnak organization called Fra Nor Seround on the occasion of the screening of a movie. **The undisguised French stance in favour of Armenia in the context of the Karabakh Christian heritage dispute went hand in hand with European Parliament resolution 2022/2582 (RSP) of March 9 against Azerbaijan,** adopted by 632 votes for, 2 against and 42 abstentions which strongly condemned a *"continued policy of Azerbaijan to erase and deny Armenian cultural heritage in and around Karabakh"* while recognizing *"that the erasure of cultural heritage Armenian is part of a broader framework of a systematic state policy of Armenophobia, historical revisionism and hatred towards Armenians promoted by the Azerbaijani authorities"*. **We will also have noted the resolution of the French Senate of November 25, 2020 requesting the recognition of the independence of "Haut-Karabakh" followed by that of the National Assembly and the parade of visits by French political figures to Armenia or Karabakh in the context of the French presidential election campaign which somewhat upset the Azerbaijani state,** in particular the visit of Valérie Pécresse on December 22, 2021, that of Eric Zemmour, on December 13 and 14, or that of the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, in Yerevan and in the province of Siounik, at the end of May, and his meeting with the "president of Nagorno-Karabakh" Arayik Haroutiounian. A visit by Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan to Madrid on July 6 allowed

him to welcome the launch of the first Armenian satellite, the result of cooperation between the Armenian company "Geocosmos" and the Spanish company "Satlantis".

On February 26, Ararat Mirzoyan took part in the 49th ordinary session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, an opportunity to assert his interests on the humanitarian issues that oppose him to his neighbour and on May 2, **the latter was in visit to the United States to relaunch the Strategic Dialogue between the two countries. A memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation, "paving the way for increased cooperation on civil nuclear issues" was signed.** In addition, a resolution was adopted on February 10 by the Senate of the State of California establishing cooperative relations between this State and the region of Siunik in Armenia. **However, on June 3 Armenia was forced to break off its cooperation with the United States in terms of biosafety following complaints from Russia,** the government announcing the modification of a 2010 agreement, thus releasing it from any obligation to provide the United States with samples of pathogens. **In addition, on July 12 the director general of ROSATOM, the Russian state company for nuclear energy, Alexei Likhachev, went to Armenia to discuss the continuation of the exploitation of the second power unit Armenia's Metsamor nuclear power plant as well as "the possibilities of building a new nuclear power plant in Armenia, the development of nuclear energy, as well as cooperation in the**

field of renewable energy". Similarly, **the June 29 remarks by Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly, describing the opening of the new embassy in Yerevan as helping to "counter the destabilizing activities of Russia" and as a decision taken following "Russia's illegal and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine" were the subject of an immediate response from the Russian Embassy in Yerevan** denouncing an "obviously arrogant" and "dismissive" statement towards Armenia, adding *"One can only wonder how such a line will affect the welfare and security of the Armenian people."*

Armenian foreign policy is also embodied in part by a "mirror game" with that of its neighbour Azerbaijan: **the alliance with India against that of Azerbaijan with Pakistan thus echoes the coincidence on February 2 and 3. last between the 8th meeting of the joint commission Hungary - Azerbaijan and the Business Forum Austria - Armenia.** Thus on July 4, the Armenian Foreign Minister, Ararat Mirzoyan, met the Secretary of the Western Department of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sanjay Verma, with whom he attended the opening ceremony of the 8th session of the Armenian-Indian Intergovernmental Commission on cooperation in the fields of trade, economy, technology, science, education and culture. This meeting took place 5 days after that of the Azerbaijani President with the President of the Senate of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani,

In its immediate vicinity, cooperation with Iran, Armenia's traditional ally in the Karabakh conflict, and which also takes a very dim view of the "Zangezur Corridor" project, was illustrated on January 1 by the launch of a new airline Tehran-Yerevan with the AirTour company operating twice a week. Armenia is also promoting the Persian Gulf – Black Sea transport road project with the involvement of Iran and India, but also the hope of being able, through this, to extend its bilateral relations with Qatar as Nikol Pashinian expressed it on June 13 in Doha. Also, during the last visit of a delegation led by the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, on July 7, in order to address several issues on the agenda of the bilateral cooperation, reaffirmed that it considers *"unacceptable any attempt to change the geopolitical situation in the region"* and that Iran supports the unblocking of communication channels in the region within the framework of maintaining territorial integrity and state sovereignty. **It was thus agreed to maintain the dialogue concerning cooperation within the framework of the free economic zone on the Armenian-Iranian border, the construction of the North/South highway, and the importance of the Iranian port of Chabahar in the context of development. from the southern region of Siunik in Armenia.**

As a reminder, on September 12, 2021, Azerbaijan blocked Iranian fuel delivery trucks bound for the Armenian enclave of Karabakh on the Goris-Kapan axis, fined them and imprisoned two of them. In early October, Iran banned the use of its airspace by the Azerbaijani military fleet and accused its neighbour of hosting Israeli bases on its border, while Azerbaijan denounced the presence of Iranian *"destabilizing agents"* on its territory led by Nejat Ojag, representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader in Azerbaijan whose office was closed, and large-scale drug trafficking between Iran and Europe using Armenian territory and Karabakh as well. This was followed by **movements of Iranian troops on the border** and the repression of several members of the Shiite clergy in Azerbaijan. Until the signing on November 28, 2021 of the gas agreement between Iran, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan as part of the 15th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization which had eased tensions.

The rapprochement with Turkey brought about by the resumption of a dialogue on the normalization of relations between the two countries since the first meeting in Moscow between their special representatives, Serdar Kilic, former Turkish ambassador to Armenia, and Ruben Rubinian, speaker of Parliament Armenian on January 14, shortly followed the end of the embargo on Turkish imports to Armenia on December 30, due to inflation and the difficulties of Armenian companies, the COVID-19

pandemic having not allowed Armenia to turn to China due to logistical hurdles, and **permission from Armenian airline "FlyOne Armenia" to operate Yerevan-Istanbul flights** in December, later discontinued between May 5 and June 10. These meetings continued regularly on February 24, May 3 and then July 1 in Vienna, during which **the two parties systematically reiterated their desire to "continue the process without preconditions"**. During this last meeting, **the two parties discussed the possibility of crossing the Armenian-Turkish land border as soon as possible as well as the resumption of direct air cargo between the two countries**. In addition, the foreign ministers of the two countries, Ararat Mirzoyan and Mevlut Cavusoglu, met on March 12 on the sidelines of the Diplomatic Forum in Antalya. However, Nikol Pashinian expressed his doubts about this process on June 13 during an interview with Al Jazeera TV channel, while he was in Qatar, saying: *"I can't say that we haven't registered any results yet, because after the start of the dialogue we started direct flights between Armenia and Turkey, but this is something we had before. I hope we can establish diplomatic relations, open the border between Armenia and Turkey, which has been closed for 30 years."* Similarly, he alluded on June 27 to statements coming from Turkey that had a negative impact on the negotiations such as the one using the expression **"Zangezur corridor"**. In addition, the Armenian MFA, Ararat Mirzoyan, declared on June 9 regarding the visit of his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov to Yerevan on June 9 that *"irrespective of the declarations on the desire to*

improve relations without preconditions, we periodically see a connection between the settlement of Armenia-Turkey relations and the settlement of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. We believe this is an unconstructive approach". This Armenian criticism finds an echo in the fact that on July 1 Azerbaijan closed its 13km border with Turkey, following the Turkish-Armenian announcement to reopen a portion of the land border of the two countries, during the meeting from Vienna on the same day. So too do the words of Mevlut Cavusoglu, the Turkish Foreign Minister on May 19 who asserted: *"We always declare that Armenia must now respond to these well-meaning approaches and we encourage them"*.

Regarding relations with its Georgian neighbour, several high-level meetings will have been noted, particularly between April 29 and May 5, in order to discuss the various areas of their bilateral cooperation and in the field of peace and security in the South Caucasus. In particular, it was agreed to work on new mechanisms to further promote tourist flows between the two countries and **an emphasis was placed on the establishment of the Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor**. A Legal Forum between the two countries also took place on May 2. On May 4 and 5, the Armenian Defence Minister, Suren Papikyan, also travelled to Tbilisi to meet the Georgian Prime Minister and his counterpart Juansher Burchuladze with whom they discussed **bilateral defence cooperation, as well as the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on the**

security architecture in the South Caucasus, a subject on which a 2022 cooperation plan has been signed.

Despite attempts to diversify its international partnerships, Armenia remains Russia's great ally in the South Caucasus to which it is linked by common membership of the CSTO, or the EAEU for example, a collusion of business circles and quasi-existent historical ties for Armenia. Furthermore, Russia helped halt Azerbaijani military advances in Karabakh and put an end to the "44-day war" while imposing a military presence that Azerbaijan had managed to secure since its independence. The war in Ukraine reinforces this partnership. If Armenia was absent like its Azerbaijani neighbour in the UN vote on the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, it is the only country of the Council of Europe to have joined the delegation Russian to vote against the decision to suspend Russia from the organization. It has also moved closer to Russia with statements openly expressing its desire to "*bypass the sanctions*" it currently faces. The signing of a memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation on May 2 in the United States during a visit aimed at reviving the Strategic Dialogue was followed a month later by the breakdown of its cooperation on biosafety following the complaints from Russia and by new agreements in July with the director of ROSATOM on July

12, as well as by the signing of an agreement on cooperation in the field of information security on April 19. Its foreign policy is also largely marked by a "mirror game" with that of its neighbour Azerbaijan. Its projects for the development of a Persian Gulf – Black Sea road associating India, Iran and Georgia, competing with its neighbour's East-West road project, are not yet conclusive, especially since its Iranian neighbour remains burdened by substantial international sanctions. And its rapprochement with Turkey is the subject of emerging criticism from the Armenian side because it is closely dependent on the Turkish-Azerbaijani relationship. The war in Ukraine reinforced several characteristics of Armenian foreign policy: a strong dependence on Russia, persistent conflicts with its immediate neighbours, and allies in countries with strong diaspora reception (France, United States) which nevertheless do not allow it to decompartmentalize its economy in a sustainable way.

Azerbaijan courted by Western countries for the diversification of its gas supplies.

From January 14, before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev was travelling to Kyiv to meet Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelensky, with whom he signed a joint declaration strengthening the strategic partnership, devoting , according to the latter, *"the desire to support each other for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our States within our internationally recognized borders, the joint fight against hybrid threats, the desire to ensure peace in the region of the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and beyond"* and considering *"further strengthening cooperation in the field of defence"*. And on February 6, the two countries, both members of GUAM celebrated the 30th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations. On February 26, Ilham Aliyev spoke by telephone with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayip Erdogan, and with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, who thanked him for *"his efforts to reach a ceasefire"*, the free supply of SOCAR stations with fuel for ambulances and for the State emergency services, as well as the sending of a shipment of medicines by plane. He was also present on March 10 at the **Diplomatic Forum in Antalya** during which, while on March 6, Volodymyr Zelensky

said he was ready, during a telephone conversation with Recep Tayip Erdogan, to come to Istanbul or Ankara in order to have a meeting there with Vladimir Putin, a meeting between the Russian, Ukrainian and Turkish Foreign Ministers, Sergei Lavrov, Dmytro Kuleba and Mevlut Cavusoglu, took place on March 10 on the sidelines of the forum. On this occasion, **the Azerbaijani President underlined with his counterpart Turkish Recep Tayyip Erdogan the importance of the "Zangezur Corridor" and the successful exploitation of the Southern Gas Corridor (CGS)**, as well as they discussed the construction of the Igdir-Nakhitchevan gas pipeline and the supply of Europe via Turkey as well as the continuation of military cooperation between the two countries, **five days after the meeting between the Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, Djeyhun Bayramov, and the Turkish Prime Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu** emphasizing the importance of Shusha's declaration, reaffirming their will to pursue a coordinated foreign policy, and **expressing their opposition to the war in Ukraine** and their support for the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. **On July 5, Azerbaijan sent another 50 tons of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, which, according to the Ukrainian ambassador in the country, brought the total amount of humanitarian aid to 1,500 tons (worth 20 million dollars) provided by the country since the start of the Russian invasion.**

Azerbaijan's support for Ukraine, a factor of tension with Russia.

Despite the fact that Ilham Aliyev already declared on February 23 the day after the signing of the Declaration on Allied Interaction with Russia: *"It is probably no secret that a de facto and trilateral cooperation format [between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia] is already forming. [...] It is formed on the basis of common interests, pragmatism and similarities"*, this support for Ukraine is not without creating tensions with Russia. Azerbaijan and Russia actually signed in Moscow on February 22 the 43 paragraphs of the Declaration on "Allied Interaction" on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries (February 23, 1992). The Russian president had justified the recognition of the self-proclaimed republics of Donbass while welcoming the recent intervention in Kazakhstan, **while Ilham Aliyev, meanwhile, ignored the evocation of the situation Ukraine, emphasizing the level of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. And this declaration was only in line with the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Security of July 3, 1997, the Declaration of Friendship and Strategic Partnership of July 3, 2008 and the Joint Agreement of September 1, 2018.** In the same perspective, Belarus had thanked Azerbaijan for not having supported paragraph 11 of the declaration concerning the internal political situation in Belarus at the 6th Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on

December 15, and for have reservations regarding the technical annex on EU support to organizations operating in conflict-affected areas.

But several events have shown a deterioration in relations between Azerbaijan and Russia in recent months. Even if Azerbaijan did not clearly come out against the invasion of Ukraine, being absent during the vote on the UN resolution on March 2 (like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), the country was already divided on the question of the intervention of the CSTO in Kazakhstan, he who saw the arrival of the Russian military presence on his sovereign territory following the "44 days war", which was not happened since the fall of the Soviet bloc.

Thus, on January 11, an extraordinary meeting by videoconference of the foreign ministers of the participating States (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) and observers (Hungary, Turkmenistan) **of the Organization of Turkish States** met at the proposal of the Turkey, January 11. The organization supported the government's fight against terrorism, as a message for each of the leaders to their internal opposition forces, and reiterated the availability of the organization to *"provide the necessary support to the government and people of Kazakhstan to overcoming the current crisis"*. **Djeyhun Bayramov, Azerbaijani Minister of Foreign Affairs declared, on this occasion: "We believe that the situation will be overcome and that common sense will prevail without jeopardizing**

the remarkable achievements that Kazakhstan has made since regaining its independence", barely concealed allusion against the Russian intervention in the country, moreover carried out with the assistance, albeit slight, of Armenia.

On February 23, the Azerbaijani reaction was not long in coming when Sergei Lavrov, declared, on the occasion of the 194th anniversary of the Treaty of Turkmentchai between Iran and Russia and fixing the border between the two empires: "the khanates of Yerevan and Nakhichevan (Eastern Armenia) were transferred to the Russian Empire", the Azerbaijani MFA recalling: "it is surprising and regrettable that the official [facebook] page of the MFA of the Russian Federation publishes distorted information on the Treaty of Turkmentchai of 1828 on the very day of the signing of the Declaration on Allied Interaction [...]. It should be pointed out that the phrase "Eastern Armenia" was never mentioned in any way in the text". On March 7, the Prosecutor General of Azerbaijan initiated criminal proceedings against a member of the Duma, following comments by Mikhail Delyagin, deputy chairman of the Duma's Economic Policy Committee, on March 27 who had called Azerbaijan of "Americans' satellite" and "Turkish proxy" stating "If we don't directly and severely punish Azerbaijan for this, why do we need the Azerbaijani oil and gas industry? We don't need it. If people don't understand the words, then maybe we need to act" after which he had published a poll

via his Telegram account asking if it would be justified to **"destroy the Azerbaijani oil industry with a nuclear weapon"**. Also condemned by the Russian authorities, in particular Dimitri Peskov, spokesperson for the Kremlin or Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the MFA, this approach had thus been the subject of the launch of criminal proceedings on March 30 for *"open calls to start a war of aggression"* by the office of the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General who had declared that this deputy of the formation "A just Russia – Patriots – For the truth" had been placed on the international list of wanted persons of Interpol. **On March 26, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence denied the first Armenian-Russian denunciations since the end of hostilities, relating to an Azerbaijani encroachment on the area of responsibility of the peacekeeping forces in Karabakh.** Indeed, following the incidents that occurred at the end of the previous week in the districts of Farrukh and Khramort in Karabakh. On the same day, the Azerbaijani MFA responded by expressing its *"regrets regarding the unilateral statement of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation [...], which [according to it] did not [reflect] the reality"*, demanding the completion of the withdrawal of the *"remains of the Armenian army and illegal Armenian armed detachments from the territory of Azerbaijan"* and recalling that *"there [was] no administrative and territorial unit called "Nagorno-Karabakh on the territory of Azerbaijan"* and stating that *"the name of the village mentioned in the declaration [was] not Furukh, but Farrukh"*. **On April 29, the day after the seventh batch of humanitarian cargo, consisting of 170 tons of medicine and foodstuffs worth \$2**

million, was sent to Ukraine from Azerbaijan, an oil mill of the Azersun company which produces the majority of the foodstuffs sent to Ukraine, with an area of 5000 m², and located near Sumgait, was destroyed by fire and a criminal investigation was launched by the General Prosecutor of Azerbaijan. This event took place **the day after the denunciations made by Ekin Gadirli, member of the Azerbaijani party "Republican Alternative" to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, vis-à-vis the "impunity" of Russia in Ukraine** and the "crimes of wars" committed in this country while insisting particularly on cases of rape. **On May 7, Azerbaijan was to deny Russian accusations of the presence of biological weapons research laboratories on its territory.** On June 4, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Digital Development and Transport **blocked access to the website of the Russian state news agency Ria Novosti**, following two recent interviews with a deputy of the self-proclaimed Republic of "Nagorno-Karabakh". and then with "Minister of State of Nagorno Karabakh" Artak Beglaryan, deeming them contrary to the Declaration on "Allied Interaction". On June 10, the editor-in-chief of Sputnik Azerbaijan was refused an extension of her residence permit in the country.

Despite this, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signed with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Djeyhun Bayramov, an agreement on cooperation in the field of international information security on June 24, while

explaining that *"this agreement on international information security [was] not about media activities, but about problems created in cyberspace as a result of attempts to use cyberspace for military purposes"*. **While the Azerbaijani President wanted to appease the Russian MFA** saying: *"The signing of the Declaration on Allied Interaction in Moscow earlier this year gave our relations a good start in 2022, a new milestone in our relationships, positive harmony and dynamics. [...] I would like once again to express my satisfaction with the development of our political relations, constant dialogue at the highest level, trade and economic relations which have shown good momentum this year, cooperation in the fields of transport, energy and, of course, the humanitarian sphere"*.

A great opportunity to supply gas to Europe...

On January 30, Josep Borell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy confirmed that he was in talks with Azerbaijan for an increase in the supply of gas in the event of a stoppage of the Russian supply in the context of the Ukrainian crisis.

On January 28, the Greek company Gastrade announced that it had taken a final investment decision to build a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in the Greek port of Alexandroupolis, **a project supported by the European**

Commission to the tune of 166.7 million euros (for a total cost of 363 million euros) and including the construction by the end of 2023 of a floating storage and regasification unit with a capacity of 153,500 cubic meters of liquefied gas, **a 28 km pipeline that would connect this unit to the Greek gas transmission network, going further to the Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline (TAP – European part of the Southern Gas Corridor) and the Greece-Bulgaria Interconnector (GBI)**, whose consortium has announced plans to launch this new gas pipeline with an annual capacity of 3 billion cubic meters in July 2022. This project represents the possibility for TAP to reach the threshold of 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year, which could be doubled installed laying a gas compressor station on one of the TAP sections. In Bulgaria, the EU has also invested €78 million in the Chiren underground gas storage capacity expansion project to 2 billion cubic meters to ensure regional security of supply supply of gas from south-eastern Europe, to reduce gas supply costs and to contribute to the phase-out of coal in the Balkan region. **On February 3, it was Kadri Simson, European Commissioner for Energy, who travelled to Azerbaijan to attend the 8th Ministerial Meeting of the SGC Advisory Board in Baku the next day, who saw the first participation of Moldova**, which had expressed its desire to develop its gas supply through the CGS, like Romania or Hungary. Fatih Birol, director of the International Energy Agency (IEA) had already said in January that Russia was already limiting its gas deliveries, citing a 25% drop year-on-year in the last three months of 2021, its agency

estimating that Russia was withholding at least a third of the gas it could export to the EU.

As a reminder, the 878km **TAP trans-Adriatic gas pipeline** starting from Azerbaijan and ending in Italy while passing through Greece and Albania was commissioned at the end of 2020 and has a capacity of 10 billion cubic meters per year and it exports already 8.1 billion including 1.2 billion for Bulgaria and Greece, while having a capacity to expand to 20 billion cubic meters per year. Its contribution could therefore not equal the 158.5 billion cubic meters exported in 2020 by Russia to Europe, i.e. 40% of European supply. Azerbaijan has agreed to export 4 million cubic meters per day to Turkey for the month of February, an agreement facilitated by that signed between Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran on November 28. The SGC, which became operational on December 31, 2020, includes Shah Deniz 2, extension of the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline, the Trans Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and the Trans Adriatic Gas Pipeline (TAP).

On February 8, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova, Nicu Popescu arrived in Baku for a two-day visit at the invitation of his Azerbaijani counterpart Djeihun Bayramov, with the aim of "*strengthening the cooperation between the two countries in the areas of trade, economy, investment and energy in the context of the strategic importance of the Southern Gas Corridor*". **On 21 February, while Toivo Klaar, EU Special**

Representative for the South Caucasus, was in Azerbaijan, were welcomed both the presence of EU Commissioners at the Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council (SGC) and the granting of a credit line of 2 billion euros announced by the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi. Between June 1 and 3, the 27th Caspian International Oil and Gas Exhibition took place in the Azerbaijani capital, after the Teknofest Aerospace and Technology Festival held on May 28. On this occasion, Ilham Aliyev gave a speech during which he underlined *"the importance of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) project"*, playing *"a major role in guaranteeing Europe's energy security"* by announcing the existence of *"great possibilities for the future expansion of this energy corridor"*. The Baku Energy Forum, bringing together 400 participants from 20 countries with the support of the Ministry of Energy and SOCAR, started on June 2, addressing global energy prospects, financing the transition to green energy, the gas supply, exploration and production opportunities in the Caspian region. On this occasion, BP Petroleum's Executive Vice President for Production and Operations, Gordon Birrell, pointed out that the stability of investments in the Azerbaijani economy is due to the development of the country's energy infrastructure. Régis Agut, Managing Director of TotalEnergies EP Absheron, meanwhile, simply stated: *"This forum is becoming increasingly important to unite our forces in favour of a sustainable energy supply. We remain attached to the Caspian region"*. US President Joe Biden sent a letter to the President of

Azerbaijan on this occasion stating, *"We have become strong partners in countering transnational threats, promoting energy security, and promoting bilateral trade and investment [...]. Around the world, we are at an important turning point in ensuring our energy security. [...] Azerbaijan is also key to realizing the immense potential of Trans-Caspian cooperation to help stabilize markets in the region and globally. And Azerbaijan plays a vital role in helping to stabilize European energy security, including through the Southern Gas Corridor and providing critical fuel supplies to Ukraine."* President Ilham Aliyev also met on this occasion with the Serbian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mines and Energy, Zorana Mihajlovic, and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development of the Republic of Moldova, Andrei Spinu. It should be noted that these meetings took place when Azerbaijan expressed on May 23 through the voice of its Minister of Economy at the last World Economic Forum in Davos its need for greater international investment in the sector of energy to accelerate production and exports. He said: *"Over the past few years, the [gas] sector has been seriously underinvested."* In addition, Georgia and Azerbaijan are currently subject to growing demand for freight transit from China to Europe in order to avoid Russia, despite the underdevelopment of its infrastructure.

Karen Donfried, the US Under Secretary of State for European and Asian Affairs, came to Baku on June 15-16 to meet with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to discuss the bilateral relations agenda "*covering energy cooperation*". **On July 8, Azerbaijani Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov was present at the inauguration of the opening of the Greece-Bulgaria pipeline.**

On July 14, the European Commission offered EU countries an agreement with Azerbaijan to increase imports of natural gas and support the expansion of a gas pipeline for this purpose. On July 18, Ursula von der Leyen and Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson were visiting Azerbaijan and a new Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Energy Partnership was signed including "*a commitment to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor to deliver at least 20 billion cubic meters per year to the EU by 2027*", the President of the European Commission declaring: "*Let us strengthen our economic relations and bring our peoples closer together. Connectivity will be crucial here. The EU wants to work with Azerbaijan and establish links with Central Asia and beyond*".

...satisfying the Azerbaijani desire to position itself on a new axis of East-West trade between Central Asia and Europe...

The April 29 statements by the President of Azerbaijan shed light on the country's vision of the direction of its foreign policy. He had thus declared during a press conference, concerning the prospects of entry into the EU "*The members of the Eastern Partnership project are trying to do so, but in the case of Azerbaijan, it is a very improbable*" and he also declared to recognize once again the territorial integrity of Ukraine while noting that the sanctions against Russia did not affect trade between Russia and Azerbaijan.

The quadrilateral declaration on the East-West Trans-Caspian Corridor between Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkey signed on March 31 already underlined the important role of strengthening the development of transport corridors and the transit potential of the four states, the strengthening of cooperation and the integration of the "*East-West Trans-Caspian Corridor into the international transport system*" while highlighting the role of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line in promoting a competitive transport between Europe and Asia. On March 29, the Government of Kazakhstan announced that work was already underway to redirect freight traffic through the Trans-

Caspian International Transport Route and the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor, which pass through Azerbaijan and Georgia, bypassing Russia. **On April 20, Azerbaijan signed in Baku the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership with Kyrgyzstan**, as well as several memorandums of understanding and cooperation in very diverse sectors. Kyrgyz President Sadir Japarov said after recalling the presence of the two countries in various international bodies (UN, OSCE, Organization of Turkic States, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, IEC and Non-Aligned Movement): *"the profound changes that operate in the world today offer us a historic chance to build a new kind of relationship. The basis of these relations are ancient Turkish values such as dignity and honour"*. **On May 17, the 3rd General Conference of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) took place in Baku**, bringing together several parliamentary delegations. **Azerbaijan is thus consolidating its ties with the countries of Central Asia by playing on the fiber of the cultural and religious ties that unite them**, like the speech delivered by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev during the **Azerbaijani President's trip to Uzbekistan on June 21 and 22**. This visit took place after the signing of numerous bilateral cooperation agreements in the fields of industry, agriculture, transport, energy, science, innovation and tourism, particularly during the Tashkent Business Forum. of June 20. On June 29, Ilham Aliyev said on the occasion of **the 6th Caspian Summit in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan**: *"The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea signed in Aktau in 2018 is of*

historic significance. [...] Azerbaijan today is one of the main transport and logistics centres of Eurasia. Our country plays an important role in the development of East-West and North-South international transport corridors. We strive to make efficient use of the Trans-Caspian international transport route. [...] Volumes of transit cargo passing through the new international trade seaport of Alat are increasing.[...] This year, Azerbaijan also plans to hold the 8th meeting of the International North South Transport Corridor Coordination Council. After the victory in the Patriotic War and the resolution of the conflict with Armenia, Azerbaijan began to carry out large-scale works on the reconstruction and restoration of Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur, including the development of transport links international. The Zangezur Corridor is already becoming a reality."

Bypassing Russia to become an indispensable cog in the East-West trade through its territory and Turkey, this is the meaning of the positions assumed by Azerbaijan in the development of transport routes in the South Caucasus, to which the closure by BP of its Baku-Tbilisi-Soupsa oil pipeline on the Black Sea in June for security reasons linked to the disruption of waterways in the Black Sea (following a closure between March 15 and the end of April) seems to be correct, the crude oil exports being re-routed over these periods via the BTC pipeline (Baku-Tblissi-Ceyhan) passing through Turkey. On June 2, the Turkish vice-president, Fuat Oktay, declared, at the Turkish embassy in Ashgabat following the

Caspian summit, that three alternatives for transporting Turkmen gas to Europe through Azerbaijan and Turkey, using the TANAP gas pipeline, were being developed.

Similarly, the visit of the Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister, Shahin Mustafayev, to Iran on May 18-19 enabled the study of the connections of the Astara River Bridge, the Astara Railway and the Nakhchivan Highway, and the Parsabad-Imishli Railway. An agreement has reportedly been reached regarding the construction and commissioning of *“new road bridges between the Eastern Zangezur Economic Region of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan across Iran within one year”* . This allows Azerbaijan to compete with Armenia and its Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor project, and to push ever harder for the opening of a *“Zangezour corridor”* to connect Central Asia to the Turkey via Azerbaijani and incidentally Armenian territory. A rapprochement with Iran had already been initiated on November 28 with the signing of a **gas agreement between Iran, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan within the framework of the 15th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization**, consisting in transiting each year 1.5 to 2 billion cubic meters of gas from Turkmenistan to Iran providing in exchange an equivalent quantity to Azerbaijan, in particular to Nakhichevan. These transport projects via Iran are also of interest to Russia, as shown by the statements made by

Vladimir Putin on July 19 on the sidelines of the trilateral meeting in Tehran with his Turkish and Iranian counterparts.

...despite a worrying human rights situation and poor Franco-Azerbaijani relations.

Despite long-standing business ties between France and Azerbaijan, relations between the two countries are very bad because of the French positions on the Karabakh war and the electoral ties existing between the French political class and the Armenian diaspora, which has made France escape all business opportunities around the reconstruction of Karabakh and in particular the development of "smart cities" whose contracts have mainly been won by British, Italian or Israeli companies.

Thus on January 17, the Chairman and CEO of Axens, Jean Sentenac, signed a contract for the supply of a catalytic cracking unit aimed at modernizing the Heydar Aliiev refinery in Baku, one of the largest in the South Caucasus, with the President of SOCAR, Rovnag Abdullayev. On September 7, 2018, an Ariane 5 heavy launcher launched the second Azerbaijani geostationary telecommunications satellite, Azerspace 2, into orbit from the French base in Kourou. **But Franco-Azerbaijani business relations have been tainted by several events and in particular the French Senate of**

November 25, 2020 requesting the recognition of the independence of "Nagorno-Karabakh". Similarly, the parade of visits by French political figures to Armenia or Karabakh as part of the French presidential election campaign has somewhat upset the Azerbaijani state. We can mention the visit of Valérie Pécresse on December 22, 2021 in the company of the former European Commissioner and former French Minister for Foreign Affairs Michel Barnier as well as Bruno Retailleau, president of the "Les Républicains" group in the Senate, following which a note of protest had been delivered to the French ambassador to Azerbaijan, Zacharie Gross, and Valérie Pécresse had been declared *persona non grata* in the country. This visit had shortly followed that of Eric Zemmour, on December 13 and 14, in the company of Philippe de Villiers. Likewise, on May 28, the French ambassador was again summoned by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, following the visit of the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, to Yerevan and the province of Siounik, and her meeting with the "President of Nagorno-Karabakh" Arayik Haroutiounian. The positions of French President Emmanuel Macron, on the occasion of the conference "Ambitions: Armenia France" on March 9 in Paris concerning the dispute over the heritage of Karabakh in these terms: *"We also see the links that exist between these situations when we begin to speak lightly again of genocide and when we begin to install political discourses based on historical revisionisms. And Armenia knows that we cannot talk lightly about these subjects,"* also widened the gap between the two countries.

Furthermore, the extremely degraded human rights situation in Azerbaijan does not help Franco-Azerbaijani relations with the countries of the European Union in general, with the possible exception of Hungary, which is also a member of the Organization of Turkish States. We will have noticed the very critical speech of Ilham Aliiev to the delegation of the European Parliament visiting Azerbaijan on July 19. Thus, the publication of the **Democracy Index 2021 published on February 10 by the Economist Intelligence Unit reported a ranking of Azerbaijan as an "authoritarian regime" in 141st place out of 167 countries** (and a ranking of Armenia and Georgia as a "hybrid regime" in 89th and 91st place respectively). **On February 8, the ratification of the new law "On the media" in Azerbaijan raised criticism from civil society and international organizations. Azerbaijan is ranked 167th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom, according to Reporters Without Borders. Despite the signing of a clemency order for 213 people sentenced by President Ilham Aliyev on May 27, according to the "Line of Defence" organization, there remain around 100 political prisoners in Azerbaijani jails.** The last few months have been marked by several controversial facts, of which it would be tedious to draw up an exhaustive list here.

Azerbaijan has to deal with Russia, a power which maintains a strong hold over the whole South Caucasus, but this country does not maintain such privileged ties as those of its Armenian neighbour and it may feel less in danger than Georgia, although Azerbaijan has seen the return of Russian military forces to its territory following the "44-day war", which has not happened since the country's independence in the early 1990s. Currently President of the Movement non-aligned countries, function unanimously renewed until 2023, Azerbaijan signed a strategic partnership with Ukraine before the outbreak of the war and continues to provide substantial humanitarian aid to this country, while having signed the Declaration on Allied Interaction with Russia on February 22, a document which, however, is only in line with the previous treaties. The past few months have rather highlighted several tense diplomatic episodes between Russia and Azerbaijan.

The conflict in Ukraine gives even more visibility to Azerbaijan's desire to extricate itself from Russian tutelage by relying on its cultural, historical and religious ties with Central Asia and Turkey, to strengthen economic ties aimed at propose new East-West transport routes between China and Europe within the framework of the international sanctions imposed on Russia. It must be recognized that this country has a major advantage with its numerous gas and oil resources, which make it a

partner of choice for Europe, which is anxious to diversify its energy supplies and which is in the process of concluding several important agreements to contribution of the Southern Gas Corridor and its potential to supply southern European countries, despite a very poor human rights situation in the country and very poor relations with France due to its position in the Karabakh conflict.

AS A CONCLUSION

The war in Ukraine, far from calling into question or profoundly modifying geopolitical alliances and the configuration of conflicts in the South Caucasus, only makes them appear more clearly. The historical, economic, military and above all existential ties between Armenia and Russia do not allow it to extricate itself from Russian tutelage, if indeed it really intends to do so, nor to develop an effective "multi-vector policy" and it is confirmed the obligation to reconcile with its immediate neighbours to decompartmentalize its economy, an approach to which a significant part of the population remains however reluctant. Azerbaijan, which adopts a policy of "non-alignment", can use its gas resources to strengthen its ties with Europe, despite a very worrying human rights situation, and with Turkey and Asian countries in order to position itself as an indispensable player on the new East-West routes bypassing Russia, with which it has multiplied diplomatic incidents in recent months, because of its support for Ukraine, while also seeking to spare it by signature of agreements which do not commit it very much. Finally, Georgia is seeking membership of the European Union, which it essentially seems to regard as an essential step towards membership of NATO, which is more important to it in order to ensure its security vis-à-vis Russia, with which it nevertheless continues to maintain important commercial links, and

with regard to which it adopts an attitude which for several months has cast doubt on the fact that it is a simple search for appeasement. Which is a source of great misunderstanding given his status as a favourite within the "Associated Trio" over a year ago regarding his institutional reform process as part of his application for EU membership. This posture questions in any case the human factor of international relations and authorizes the hypothesis of the trauma left by the 2008 war that that with Ukraine came to revive.

But if these sometimes misunderstood trends concerning the South Caucasus are clearer with the war in Ukraine, the latter does not make them less complex. Beyond the block effect induced by this brutal Russian invasion, the relations of all the entities of this region with Russia remain very ambivalent, especially if we consider those maintained by the "republics" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as long as we take a close interest in their internal politics in order to be able to detect the democratic debates in progress and which are far from accrediting the thesis of a total and unreserved adherence to the Putinian project.

It is still too early to know the outcome of the war in Ukraine and its longevity. But it is nevertheless important to underline that this allows a clarification of the foreign policies of the three South Caucasian countries by obliging

them to position themselves even in a nuanced way. Among them, Azerbaijan seems for the moment to be doing best in terms of empowerment, despite the renewed presence of the Russian army on its soil since the end of the "44-day war".

