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3+3:
GEORGIA AND THE
NEW REGIONAL
ARCHITECTURE:
A FALSE CHOICE?

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Introduction

Nothing seemed to suggest that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia would find itself at the center of public turmoil in October 2021, in the midst of a period of intense political and electoral activity in Georgia. The reason for this unexpected uproar was a statement made by Minister Davit Zalkaliani on the Georgian Public broadcaster on October 6. When questioned about the newly proposed regional cooperation format, 3 + 3, the Minister gave a surprisingly ambiguous answer. Zalkaliani's vague wording might not have provoked such a reaction under other circumstances, but in the context of the recent worrying episodes of drifting away from the West, such as the Georgian government's decision to halt the Anaklia deep-sea port project and the unilateral decision by the ruling Georgian Dream party to withdraw from the 6-point agreement brokered EU Council President Charles Michel, the Minister's answer took on a special meaning. In addition, the "softening" of the official position on the initiative designed to reduce Western influence in the region and supported by forces hostile to Georgian interests coincided with the Georgian government's decision to reject macroeconomic financial assistance offered by the EU, which was conditional on improvements in the area of democracy. The rejected assistance was immediately replaced by a loan from the Asian Development Bank exempt from any similar conditionalities.

3+3 – A Short History

Attempts to create new formats of regional cooperation in the conflict-rich South Caucasus have a long history. Over the past 30 years, several such initiatives of various nature and configuration have emerged. One of the earliest was the Peaceful Caucasus proposal presented by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze in February 1996. The premise of this project was to assert the inviolability of the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty in the region. The initiative aimed to create a solid basis for a stable environment in the region. In 2000, Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel proposed a multilateral agreement, the Caucasus Stability Pact. After the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, it was back to Turkey to take the initiative. This time, the idea of creating Caucasian Platform for Stability and Cooperation was advanced by Prime-Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In this format, in addition to Turkey and Russia, long-term stability and economic development of the South Caucasus was supposed to be achieved with the participation of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Naturally, all potential initiators and participants considered the implementation of such concepts according to their political interests and objectives. Despite the abundance of proposals, their implementation never went beyond the point of political declarations.

Talks on the 3+3 cooperation format began a year ago, right after the end of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. Arriving in Azerbaijan on December 11, 2020 to attend a parade marking Baku's victory in six-week war with Armenia, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan outlined¹ to the media the concept of a six-country platform for regional cooperation. This new venture of cooperation can be seen as a continuation of his 2008 offer, but this time with an additional partner, namely Iran. Moreover, the Turkish Prime Minister also stated that he had already presented his initiative to Moscow and received a positive feedback from Vladimir Putin.

This statement was quickly followed by a confirmation of Iran's interest in the initiative by Javad Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister, who arrived in Moscow as part of his regional tour in January 2021. Standing alongside Sergei Lavrov, Zarif said that Tehran strongly supports the idea of a six-nation regional union and that the priority of his regional tour was to share Tehran's position on the issue.² Arriving in Ankara from Moscow, Zarif once again stressed the importance of the 3+3 proposal, this time alongside Turkish officials, and called on all parties to take a favorable stance on the matter.

In contrast to 2008, when Azerbaijan, facing the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, reacted negatively to Ankara's proposal, Erdogan's initiative has gained much more favor in Baku. After the historic victory in Karabakh, in which

¹ 6-country regional cooperation platform win-win for actors in Caucasus, Erdoğan says <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/6-country-regional-cooperation-platform-win-win-for-actors-in-caucasus-erdogan-says>

² Zarif: Iran seeking to form six-party union in the Caucasus region <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/457391/Zarif-Iran-seeking-to-form-six-party-union-in-the-Caucasus-region>

Turkey's assistance and unconditional support for Azerbaijan played a major role, a similar offer made by the visiting Turkish Prime Minister in Baku met no opposition.³ Naturally, after the victory, Azerbaijan is now willing to discuss the development of infrastructure and new transit projects in the region. Especially considering that in the peace agreement of 2020, Armenia has committed to ensure the connection of Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan exclave through its own territory (Zangezur Corridor).

A different reaction to this initiative was expressed by Georgia. In March 2021, Georgia's Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani paid an official visit to Ankara. One of the main subjects discussed at the joint press conference that followed the meeting with his Turkish counterpart was the "3 + 3" platform.⁴ Contrary to October 2021, Minister Zalkaliani took an unequivocal position⁵ on the initiative, stating that in the light of the Russian occupation and violation of the country's sovereignty, Georgia had a "clear" position on participation in any formats in which Russia was considered. Georgia was making a formal refusal to consider the initiative.

It is worth noting how this contrasts with the comment made by the Minister on the same initiative a few months later, during an interview with a Georgian journalist.⁶ The timing of this rather ambiguous comment by the Georgian Foreign Minister is also of interest. Let's leave aside the relevance of making such statements in such a difficult period in Georgia's domestic political agenda, to say the least. Indeed, it is difficult to understand the rationale for presenting the public with the idea of participating in the new geopolitical formats between the first and second rounds of a highly polarized election marred by widespread irregularities. However, in this case, the international dynamic is probably more important.

Zalkaliani's commentary, dated October 7, follows a meeting dedicated to the 3 + 3 format between Iranian and Russian Foreign Ministers Sergei Lavrov and Hossein Amir Abdollahian on October 6 in Moscow. It should be noted that after the initial consultations between the parties in early 2021, the discussion on the 3 + 3 format, as in the case of previous similar initiatives, was limited to sporadic political statements. Further discussions on the creation of such a regional cooperation platform became even more difficult to conceive after the recent aggravation of relations between Azerbaijan and Iran. For its part, after the stance taken in Ankara, the Georgian Foreign Ministry did not find it necessary to reiterate its position on the issue. Thus, after almost a year of silence, the day after the Iranian and Russian foreign ministers resurfaced the issue, bringing this subject to the public and appearing with a "softened" position is a truly sobering dynamic. It is also worth noting the immediate reaction of the Russian government-controlled media to Minister Zalkaliani's statement.⁷

Expectations and Interests

According to official statements by the representatives of Russia, Turkey and Iran, the three countries share the view that the new initiative should help to maintain lasting peace in the region by promoting economic, transport and infrastructure projects. A strong emphasis is placed on the potential for the development of transport infrastructure, to which the initiators of the format give particular priority.

By proposing an updated 3+3 regional cooperation format, Russia and Turkey, on the one hand, seek to isolate the West as much as possible in the Black Sea and South Caucasus region, and on the other hand, want to consolidate the "new reality", which was formed after the occupation of Georgian territories in 2008 and the significant change in the balance of power after the second Karabakh war in 2020. Still under U.S. sanctions, Iran is particularly interested to open up new economic opportunities in the region and ensure a peaceful environment, which, according to former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, is "the best way to cooperate on transit and strengthen the east-west and north-south corridors."

However, it should be noted that Iran has certain clear advantages over Russia and Turkey when it comes to cooperation within the 3+3 framework. First of all, Iran is the only country that has maintained permanent diplomatic relations with all three of the South Caucasus nations. These relations have been severed since 1993 between Armenia and Turkey, and since 2008 in the case of Russia and Georgia. Under the 3 + 3 format, Iran will be able to take on the role of mediator,

³ Aliyev Backs Cooperation Between Russia, Iran, Turkey Amid Tensions <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/aliyev-backs-cooperation-between-russia-iran-turkey>

⁴ Joint Press Conference with Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani of Georgia <https://fb.watch/8LDVxsOr3P/>

⁵ Georgian Foreign Minister Visits Turkey <https://civil.ge/archives/403002>

⁶ Georgian Public Broadcaster <https://youtu.be/CMWjwB84jSc>

⁷ Грузия прокомментировала идею Лаврова создать переговорный формат «3+3» <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/10/08/georgia/>

and Tehran will become a logical choice for the high-level meetings between the representatives of the participating countries.

Moreover, Iran is the only country included in the new platform that simultaneously borders Armenia, Azerbaijan and its Nakhichevan exclave. For decades, the only direct way to connect Nakhichevan to the rest of Azerbaijan was through Iranian territory. Giving up such a powerful lever of influence over a neighboring country would be a heavy loss for Tehran, both geopolitically and economically. One way to compensate for the damage caused by the eventual opening of the transport corridors between Armenia and Azerbaijan (which, at the same time, would restore a direct transport link between Turkey and Azerbaijan) would be to participate in the new platform and take advantage of the new opportunities.

In 2021, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have gradually deteriorated. It is certainly no coincidence that the newly appointed Iranian Foreign Minister chooses Moscow to talk about the 3+3 format. Apparently, Tehran will not object to Russia playing a constructive role in its relations with Azerbaijan.

Thus, given the partial coincidence of the regional ambitions of Russia, Turkey and Iran, the 3+3 regional cooperation format is a way for them to strengthen their influence in the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions at the expense of Western interests. Of course, for Turkey, as a member of NATO, establishing a longer-term strategic partnership with Iran and Russia is unlikely to be the goal. It would be difficult to imagine Turkey considering such a fragile and historically unfounded “coalition” as a counterweight to NATO. Therefore, for Turkey, this platform is primarily of political importance. In the context of the current tensions between Ankara and leading Western countries, the initiative serves as a mechanism for more tactical and practical cooperation for Turkey in the region. Increasing its role by deepening regional cooperation is not an alternative to a strategic partnership with the West, but a way for Turkey to strengthen its positions within that partnership.

It is equally understandable why the idea of this format may be attractive to Azerbaijan, which on September 27 celebrated the one-year anniversary since the beginning of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war and, with the support of Turkey, has practically regained almost full control over regions lost for decades. The existence of a regional format in which Turkey will be an unconditional ally of Azerbaijan and a strong guarantor of its security will continue to ensure the preservation of Azerbaijan’s military gains and the stability of its ruling political class.

Despite Russia’s particular influence on Armenia and the change in the balance of power in the region a year ago, which was first reflected in Russia’s monopoly on peacekeeping forces in Azerbaijan and the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenian leadership already expressed certain skepticism about the proposed new cooperation and before taking a position, first of all, assert a need for clarification of details.⁸ It should also be noted that during the second Karabakh war, Turkey, which previously played the role of an economic actor, entered the region by military force. Therefore, Armenia’s national security, however its leadership may be frustrated by Russia’s actions, depends entirely on the latter’s goodwill. As Russia has already begun to work with Armenia on this matter, one can assume that it will be relatively easy for Moscow to overcome Armenia’s cautious resistance, especially if in the future Armenia is promised to receive significant economic benefits through regional infrastructure projects.⁹

It is in Russia’s interest, on the one hand, to restore the lost confidence of the Armenian people and political elites and, on the other, to try to minimize Georgia’s transit function. The use of Georgia’s long-established transit potential has been rather successful and it will be very difficult to replace it unilaterally, even for Russia. However, in a narrow regional context, the use of the Zangezur corridor for traffic between Azerbaijan and Turkey could also be beneficial for the 3+3 projects. It should also be noted that there is serious opposition in Armenia to connecting Azerbaijan’s territories through Armenia. Apart from public opinion, which is categorically opposed to the existence of such a “corridor” on the territory of Armenia, the interpretations of Article 9 of the ceasefire agreement between Yerevan and Baku do not coincide: the Azerbaijani side considers that the document gives them a right to establish a direct connection to the Nakhichevan exclave via the Armenian province of Syunik. This connection is often referred to as “Zangezur corridor”. The Armenian side believes that the term “corridor” mentioned in the document refers only to the one in the Lachin region. But given the fact that according to the same 9th clause of the agreement “The Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service shall be responsible for overseeing the transport connections” between the western regions of the Republic of

⁸ “Нужно рассмотреть все детали” – Пашинян о формате 3+3 на Южном Кавказе <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20211006/nuzhno-rassmotret-vse-detali--pashinyan-o-formate-33-260295314.html>

⁹ Russia suggests 3+3 format with Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia in Caucasus <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/russia-suggests-3-3-format-with-turkey-iran-azerbaijan-armenia-georgia-in-caucasus/2384679>

Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, the geographical location of the expected corridor is already practically determined.¹⁰ It is difficult to imagine collaboration on any other regional transport or infrastructure project between Armenia and Azerbaijan without an agreement on this crucial issue.

Considering that these countries are both historical and inherent rivals in the region, any “cooperation format” with their participation is bound to be limited in time and scale.

An Additional Risk Factor for Georgia: from 3 + 3 to 3 + 3 + 2?

One of the constant factors that Moscow stresses when talking about this format is Russia’s role as the main intermediary and mediator in regional conflicts. During a joint press conference with his Iranian counterpart, Lavrov did not fail to emphasize this issue and recalled that Russia played a decisive role in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Regardless of how the factual circumstances of the beginning or the ending of the conflict back up Lavrov’s statement, this declaration illustrates once again how important it is for Russia to maintain this position in the region, especially when the activity of such a powerful actor as Turkey is expanding into its area of “exclusive influence.”

Georgia’s participation in this new format will, of course, be an explicit recognition of Russia’s unique position, not only in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh, but in the South Caucasus in general. It is truly difficult to conceive how a State whose territory is occupied by a country that uncompromisingly asks it to recognize its crucial role in resolving conflicts can consider participating in such a format. No one is under the illusion that there will be a change in Moscow’s policy towards occupied Georgian territories or their recognition in near future. Therefore, it is highly likely that the de facto governments of the occupied territories will use Moscow’s backing and will push for participation in this format. Given the importance Russia and Armenia are attaching to the railway line that traverse occupied Abkhazia, one of the most likely consequences of Georgia’s participation in the new format will be a push to meet the demand for the opening of transport corridors that run through the territories currently occupied by Russia. Notably, Yerevan and Moscow resumed talks on the issue after the end of hostilities in Karabakh in late 2020. The pattern goes in full line with Lavrov’s statement that one of the main goals of 3 + 3 is to “unblock transportation routes and economic ties in the region.”¹¹

It is obvious that given the situation in the South Caucasus, the 3+3 initiative is actually a 3+3+2 format for Russia, where it regards, along with Georgia, the parts of Georgia it occupies as independent entities. Therefore, the very consideration of this initiative by Georgia is an indirect acceptance of Russia’s position, which implies a firm refusal to reexamine its stance towards the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia.

Conclusion – Potential Consequences for Georgia

The possibility for Georgia to participate in any new regional cooperation format, initiated, co-sponsored or even supported by the Russian Federation, before the latter liberates the occupied territories of Georgia, constitutes a serious threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, casts doubt on the very idea of European and Euro-Atlantic integration explicitly stated in the preamble of the Georgian constitution and supported by the absolute majority of Georgians, and seriously damages the standing of the country vis-à-vis our Western partners.

Georgia’s involvement in this process signifies a de jure change in its foreign policy objectives and a recognition that Georgia can no longer serve as a bedrock for Western interests and values in the region. In fact, Turkey is strengthening the line of strategic cooperation with Azerbaijan, while Armenia’s dependence on Russia is increasing. Meanwhile, Georgia is losing its main purpose - to balance these two power axes by maintaining the status of a strategic partner of the West and safeguard Western interests and values in the region.

¹⁰ According to the “Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia on the status of the Border Troops of the Russian Federation located on the territory of the Republic of Armenia and the conditions of their functioning” dated September 30th, 1992 the state border of Armenia with Turkey (345 km) and with Iran (45 km) is guarded by the Russian border troops (the Russian Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service – FSB). <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1900722>

¹¹ Лавров обсудил создание формата «3+3» с Турцией и странами Закавказья https://lenta.ru/news/2021/10/06/3_3/

If the premise and the main goal of Georgia's foreign policy is to preserve the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country and to ensure its integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures as soon as possible, any regional or international initiative that does not fully correspond to these objectives should not be subject to serious consideration.

Notably, after a significant pressure from Georgia's pro-Western media and civil society, the foreign ministry issues a statement denouncing any intentions of participating in 3+3 format.¹² Recent visit of the US secretary of defense to Tbilisi and his vocal criticism of Russia's initiative as inadequate in the conditions of ongoing occupation of Georgia's territories is a good indication that strategic partners do not expect Georgia to be part of any anti-Western regional coalitions.¹³

¹² Right of Response: MFA Reacts to Civil.ge News Piece <https://civil.ge/archives/447230>

¹³ US Secretary of Defense in Georgia: Russia must abide by the 2008 agreement <https://jam-news.net/us-secretary-of-defense-in-georgia-russia-must-abide-by-the-2008-agreement/>

