



POLICY BRIEF

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3+3 Minus One: Georgia's South Caucasian Challenges and Prospects

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Summary

The geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus has significantly changed in the wake of the second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. The trilateral agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia brokered by Russia has seen Russian and Turkish influence grow, while Iran has started looking for its new role in the region. Accordingly, Georgia's security environment has experienced some changes as well. The most notable issue is the "3+3"² format initiated by Turkey, according to which challenges in the post-conflict environment in the South Caucasus region would be addressed through the mutual cooperation between the three small South Caucasian states - Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia - and the three large regional powers - Iran, Russia and Turkey. Georgia refused to participate in the initiative and the remaining five countries held a "3+2" format meeting instead of the "3+3" one in Moscow. The Georgian flag, however, was still displayed at the meeting. This could be an indication that the interested states are still hoping that Georgia will change its stance toward participating in the format despite signs to the contrary.

The initiative comes with multiple contradictory factors for Georgia. There is a risk that if implemented, the initiative could see Georgia ending up in a sort of isolation against the backdrop of an order imposed by illiberal actors and reduced engagement of the West. Moreover, Russia will be given an additional opportunity to further consolidate its hegemony in the South Caucasus and to increase the region's dependence on Russia, including that of

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² The cooperation was initiated as "3+3" format in January 2021, but after Georgia's refusal to participate in it, the cooperation started to be implemented with "3+2" format in December 2021. In the present Policy Brief "3+3" as the name of the format is applied when the idea or initiative is referred; "3+2" is used when the implementation stage is referred.

Georgia. Thus, it is important for Tbilisi and Western actors to develop their own vision in order to minimize the risks brought about by the initiative. In response to all risks related to the “3+2” platform, Tbilisi needs to develop a relevant systemic mechanism by considering its own national interests and its role in the region to avoid joining similar unions. At the same time, it is necessary for Georgia’s Western partners to revise their strategy in the South Caucasus region to prevent Tbilisi from having to deal with regional challenges, and, with more engagement with Georgia, to minimize the risks that threaten Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Keywords: Georgia; The West; The South Caucasus; Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict; 3+2 Initiative; Illiberal actors.

Introduction

An active discussion about various prospects for stability and development in the region has been ongoing since the second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. Over the course of this one-year period, the role of regional players – Iran, Russia and Turkey – becoming more prevalent in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus deserves special attention. In this process, one of the important issues is the idea of creating the “3+3 Format” proposed by Turkey for the purposes of mutual cooperation between the three influential actors – Iran, Russia and Turkey – and the three small South Caucasian states – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia (Hurriyetsdailynews 2021). In December 2021, Russia hosted a “3+2” format meeting of five states within the scope of the aforementioned initiative. Georgia, however, did not participate in it. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the regional players still refer to the initiative as “3+3” and the Georgian flag was also displayed in Moscow next to the flags of the participating states, which Georgia condemned (MFA StratCom 2021).

This policy brief analyzes the risks Georgia faces due to the initiative launched in the “3+2” format. What does this mean in terms of the West’s strategic presence in the South Caucasian region and what can be done by both Tbilisi and the collective West? The paper provides recommendations that aim to assist Georgia in the mitigation and prevention of the current security risks as much as possible with the active engagement of the country’s Western strategic partners.

The “3+2” Initiative and Its Prospect(lessness)?

In November 2020, after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War had come to an end, the process by which peacekeeping, logistical and humanitarian issues would proceed in the South Caucasian region was at the center of attention. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once again put forward a proposal to launch a new format in the region that envisages implementation of post-conflict rebuilding projects with the engagement of the three South Caucasian states (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) and the three large regional powers (Turkey, Iran and Russia) (Hurriyetsdailynews 2021). Both Russia and Iran positively responded to this proposal. This was confirmed, on the one hand, by a series of visits by Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif in early 2021 to every proposed member state of the format (Kucera 2021a), making Iran’s pronounced interest toward the region and its ambition of seeking a new role in the South Caucasus evident. On the other hand, Russia’s interest to set this initiative in motion in order to further increase its influence in the South Caucasus is becoming increasingly prominent (mid.ru 2021).

However, unstable relations between the proposed member states of the format raise a number of questions over the prospects of successful cooperation. Moscow’s ambitions are frequently in conflict with those of Turkey, a NATO member, whose interests in both the South Caucasus and in the broader Black Sea region are mutually contradictory at times (as in the case of

Ukraine) (Kuzio 2021). Turkey is Azerbaijan's unequivocal supporter both military-wise and politically, which further deepens Armenia's traditional mistrust towards Turkey, including, potentially within the "3+2" format as well (RFE/RL 2021; Kachatryan 2021). On its part, Iran has troubled relations with Azerbaijan, which manifested in tensions developed along the border between the two countries in early November 2021 (Mamedov 2021). As for Russia, already linked with Armenia with the bilateral defense agreement and strategic cooperation (Tamrazian 1997), it is trying to enhance its levers of influence over Azerbaijan, which, as some argue, it managed to accomplish after the agreement of November 2020 (Popescu 2020). Therefore, it can be said that all three regional players suffer from a lack of trust from the two small countries participating in the conflict. However, new post-war opportunities for cooperation are crucial for the direct participants of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Azerbaijan and Armenia) which will help them to guide the reconstruction processes according to their interests. Baku and Yerevan's participation in the meeting, along with the regional players they find less trustworthy in Moscow in December 2021, could be deemed as the confirmation of the aforesaid (Dailysabah 2021; news.am 2021).

The "3+2 Initiative" and Georgia

The initiative is problematic for Georgia in multiple regards. The first risk is related to the fact that this format envisages entering into regional cooperation with Russia, which occupies over 20% of Georgia's internationally recognized territory. De-occupation is the paramount foreign political priority for Georgia (MFA of Georgia 2020) and, therefore, this initiative is in conflict with its critical national interests and official foreign political course. The "creeping occupation", the abduction and imprisonment of Georgian citizens on territory not controlled by the central government, humanitarian difficulties Georgian citizens face in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are all still unresolved problems for Georgia (Kakachia, et al. 2017). Making matters worse is the fact that Russia recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region) and has been maintaining active relations with both territorial units (Civil.ge 2021). Hence, Georgia's potential participation in a regional format dominated by Russia threatens the security of the country and its national goals - the de-occupation of the occupied territories (MFA of Georgia 2020; Coffey 2021).

Furthermore, the Kremlin gaining more geopolitical power in the South Caucasus is an additional risk for Georgia's security environment. The implementation of the "3+2" format could facilitate the growth of Russia's influence as the leading regional player, which is problematic for Georgia since of the three South Caucasian states, it is making the greatest efforts to break free from Moscow's sphere of influence. Making the situation even more difficult is the fact that during the renewed armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2021, the latter official requested assistance from Russia based on the defense treaty between the two countries. Ultimately, with the efforts of President Vladimir Putin, the world saw the Kremlin in the role of "neutral peacemaker" (Kucera 2021c). However, the actions of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan after the armed conflict show that Yerevan is expecting Russia's active engagement to protect its interests. On its part, Azerbaijan demonstrated that should the necessity arise, it is ready and willing to enter into a renewed armed conflict (Kucera 2021b). These circumstances provide fertile ground for enhancing Russia's strategic

engagement in the South Caucasus which was symbolically confirmed by the holding of the first meeting in the “3+2” format in Moscow (Reuters 2021). Thus, if Georgia supports this process in the capacity of a participant of a similar regional union, it will significantly undermine the national goals and security environment of the state.

The third and the most important challenge is that for illiberal regional players, especially for Russia, the “3+2” format is an additional tool to “banish” Western actors from the South Caucasus, in an effort to create a geopolitical reality in which Georgia is isolated and its commitment to its Western course wanes. In developing the security policy and building state institutions, Tbilisi predominantly modeled its steps after the West, specifically, the United States and the European Union. Should the initiative be implemented as a “3+3” format with the participation of Georgia, the West’s soft power in the South Caucasus is likely to diminish, which threatens not only the achievements of decades of independent Georgian statehood but raises legitimate questions regarding to what extent Georgia’s further democratization and Europeanization is possible in light of such a situation (Meister 2021). This issue becomes even more alarming after considering the Kremlin’s increasingly explicit objections toward the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance (Herszernhorn 2021) and its requests addressed to the leading NATO actors to provide some guarantees that the alliance will not expand eastward.

Another risk factor for Tbilisi derived from the potential implementation of the “3+3” format is that Georgia is the only South Caucasian state that does not have an ally in the immediate region who would be ready to make a significant contribution to ensuring the security of the country – unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan. Regardless of the fact that Tbilisi has strategic cooperation with Ankara and does not have any significant problems in relations with Tehran as well, neither of them hold an important place in Georgia’s national security strategy. Meanwhile, based on the trilateral agreement, Russia has key regional security mechanisms at its disposal, using them according to its own geopolitical interests. It is also important that in parallel to the recently amped up imperialistic aspirations, Moscow is the regional player that has the highest potential and most political resources to dominate the “3+2” format, since it already enjoys leverage over both actors involved in the conflict. Thus, Georgia will remain an unprotected player within the initiative. Considering the challenges Tbilisi is currently facing, this is a substantial risk factor for the country.

The fifth danger is that Georgia’s association with an “Illiberal International” will move the country away from the Western standard of democratization and democratic institution building. The initiative could turn into a platform for domination in the South Caucasus region for influential illiberal actors (Gegelia 2021). Democracy indicators of the regional players interested in the format – Russia, Turkey and Iran – fall behind the standards of mature democracy so much that joining the initiative could pull Georgia over to the illiberal vector and finally cause the country to lose its main foreign policy orientation.

On top of that, radical far-right pro-Russia groups operating in Georgia use their mass media resources to reinforce the discourse which alleges that the “3+3” format is some kind of a “geographical cross” in the region (formed by geographical disposition of Russia-Armenia and Turkey-Iran-Azerbaijan in the region, – NS), with Georgia in its heart” (Alt Info 2021). With this allusion of the cross – the symbol of Orthodox Christianity – the aforementioned forces are attempting to underline Georgia’s “messianic” role in the region and influence some part of the public in such a manner. Similar media outlets promote anti-Western pathos suggesting that Georgia’s ‘obedience to America’ should not lead the country to reject cooperation with regional powers.

(Alt Info 2021). It is worth mentioning that these forces recently came together to form a political party (Civil.ge 2021b). These developments ensure the existence of a narrative favorable to Moscow in the Georgian media.

Given these metrics, an ambiguous or ambivalent position may serve as grounds for harmful interpretation of Georgia's will to participate in the 3+3 initiative for the illiberal regional players having strategic interest in the format. This happened after the television interview of Davit Zalkaliani, the Minister of Foreign affairs of Georgia. In the interview, Minister Zalkaliani discussed the necessity of participating in similar initiatives (GPB 2021a), which was shortly followed by Russia's attempt to portray Tbilisi as considering participation in the "3+3" format (Lenta.ru 2021; MID.ru 2021; Civil.ge 2021c). Afterwards, at first, StratCom of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia (MFA Stratcom 2021) was forced to disseminate an additional statement; then Zurab Abashidze, Georgia's special representative for relations with Russia, had to do the same (GPB 2021b).

According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, *"joining the so-called 3+3 platform would not oblige Tbilisi to change its political positions"* (Civil.ge 2022). Though, considering the risks presented above, the idea of the "3+3" initiative and its implementation in the form of "3+2" significantly change Georgia's security environment in the geopolitical sense and give rise to various obstacles to internal democratic processes in Georgia that have been weakened anyway. This further undermines the rapprochement with the West and, in the long run, the ambitions of institutional integration.

Where is the West?

Keeping these developments in mind, it is important to underscore that an outright refusal to participate in regional cooperation projects cannot be in Georgia's interests. On the contrary, Tbilisi is willing and has the ambition to preserve and consolidate its regional role in the South Caucasus (MFA of Georgia 2021). In his address to the UN General Assembly, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili announced a 'Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative' (United Nations 2021), although whether or not this pronouncement will manifest into anything more substantial is still unclear. In order for Tbilisi to manage becoming more active in the region and to successfully deal with the risks related to the "3+2" format, it is important to stimulate collaboration with Western actors to enhance their presence in the region.

At a glance, the South Caucasus is not considered a priority in the strategic perspective of the United States and the European Union (Strontski 2021). The EU has not yet attempted to actively intervene in the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which led many to believe that Brussels has significantly lost its position in the region (Strontski 2021; Machitidze 2021). Moreover, the West's major concern at the moment lies far from the South Caucasus – the conflict with immigrants which has emerged on the Belarus-Poland border and Russia amassing troops on Ukraine's eastern border are more pressing challenges for Brussels now (Goncharenko 2021; Fried 2021). The West's mobilization with the aim of thwarting Russia is especially noticeable since, this time, the threat of Russia invading Europe's neighborhood is perceived rather seriously in Washington and Brussels (ft 2021). At the same time, the EU needs

to have a more large-scale strategy on containment of Russia, hence Brussels and Washington should not view the geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus as detached from these crises.

Increasing the role of Western actors in the region instead of diminishing is crucial for Georgia. On the initiative of President of the European Council Charles Michel, a trilateral meeting was held with Azerbaijan and Armenia just a few days after the “3+2” format meeting (European Council 2021). Michel expressed his interest in engaging in the rebuilding of infrastructure and the processes of border delimitation and demarcation. In addition, the matter of a platform for direct communication on the level of defense ministers is being actively discussed (European Council 2021). In the official EU statement, enhancing “an atmosphere of trust” is named as one of the reasons. In this regard, Tbilisi has significant resources in the form of political trust and good-neighborly relations with the two states in conflict with each other (Civil.ge 2021a). Georgia also has experience mediating between Azerbaijan and Armenia along with the United States (Civil.ge 2021b), and Brussels could utilize this experience for mutual cooperation in the course of post-conflict processes. If the EU tries and more actively engages in mediation through Georgia, it will help Brussels revive and strengthen its soft power in the South Caucasus, especially in its relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, who have lost confidence in the West to some extent (Machitidze 2021). The increased presence of the West in the post-conflict South Caucasus is important for Georgia to neutralize the harmful effects of the illiberal players.

Washington should become more active in the South Caucasus, especially in Georgia given that the political resources for Russia’s containment in Central Asia and the South Caucasus regions were diminished as a result of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, indifference toward the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and in light of Russia’s resurgence in Ukraine (Popkhadze 2021; Coffey 2021). Together with the EU, Washington is facing the fact that Russia, along with Turkey, has acquired more substantial leverage of influence over the South Caucasus region than it enjoyed before 2020. Iran too, which is among the states sanctioned by the United States, has become more active within the scope of the “3+2” initiative. Accordingly, the engagement of Washington and Brussels in the South Caucasus in terms of the increasing roles of illiberal states is important for Georgia. Georgia could break out of this illiberal circle if Tbilisi manages to move over to the next stage of military or economic cooperation with Washington and promote the increased presence of the United States in the South Caucasus region by doing so.

Thus, increasing the presence of Western actors as major strategic partners of Georgia is vital to successfully overcoming the harmful factors of the “3+2” format. With no influential ally in the region, and illiberal players activating in the South Caucasus, Tbilisi can join initiatives similar to “3+2” only if Western actors can be brought in the format as counterbalance. Georgia can actively put forward the question of proceeding with the said cooperation in the “3+3+2” format, which will ensure Tbilisi’s national interests as much as possible, even within the scope of regional cooperation led by Russia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The “3+2” format gives rise to numerous obstacles and threats to the security environment and the dynamics of the internal democratic development of Georgia. Entering into official regional cooperation with the Kremlin while over 20% of the country is occupied poses risks to the main objectives of Georgia’s national interests and security. Moreover, the “3+3” concept would foster the impression that Georgia is associated with a union of illiberal countries, which is an additional factor hindering the internal democratic progress of the country. This risk is especially dangerous when considering the fact that the “3+2” format is an additional instrument for regional players with interests in the South Caucasus region to “expel” the West from the region. Hence, Georgia, – which, unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, does not have a close ally in the South Caucasus region, – becomes increasingly vulnerable to the Russian threat. In order to minimize these risks, it is important for Tbilisi to consider strengthening the West’s influence in the South Caucasus and, at the same time, become more active itself with the aim of emphasizing its role in the EU’s strategy for neighborhood security. To this end, Georgia and the collective West should consider several recommendations. In this regard, it is important

For the government of Georgia

- To make sure **Georgia’s official position** is that Tbilisi cannot participate in the “3+2” format under such circumstances due to its national interests, and that this is clearly and proactively communicated to international actors.
- To start working on a proposal in which cooperation with the “3+2” format with **the key strategic partners of Georgia – Brussels and Washington** – will become acceptable.
- To take advantage of **already existing bilateral or multilateral platforms and the experience of strategic cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan** with the aim of causing Western actors to take an interest in becoming involved in the region.
- To revitalize the initiative **voiced by Georgia during the UN General Assembly regarding a new platform in the South Caucasus region** and make efforts towards the increased engagement of Western actors in peacekeeping processes through the said initiative.
- To offer Azerbaijan and Armenian **additional stages of joint mediation** with the US or the EU **with respect to ongoing disagreements**, especially, regarding the control of the transport corridor(s).
- **To stimulate collaboration with Brussels and Washington in terms of mediation and engagement in the regional reconstruction processes**, to offer them Tbilisi’s geographical advantage, political neutrality and its resource of reciprocal trust both with Armenia and Azerbaijan, in order to increase the West’s representation in the region.

- **To enhance proactive communication with both the local and international society about Georgia's pro-Western policy**, for the purposes of counterbalancing narratives of Georgia-based illiberal groups that are in line with the Russian narrative.

For western allies (the US and the EU):

- **For Brussels - to consider the increase of the Russian influence an extension of the tensions along the borders of both the European Union and Ukraine**, where containing Russia is as important to the EU as in its immediate neighborhood .
- For the EU - when working with the parties of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, **to take into account Tbilisi's resources in the region as a pro-Western player** and utilize it as much as possible in course of strategic and peacekeeping actions in the South Caucasus, especially, with the aim of accomplishing the task of restoring and rebuilding trust in the region.
- When contemplating Georgia's role **in course of planning and implementing the Black Sea Security Strategy**, the US and the EU should take into account the challenges Tbilisi is facing in the context of the South Caucasus region, including the vulnerability to hybrid threats from Russia and deviation from the western course of development.
- The collective West should **activate its soft power in a coordinated manner to consolidate the western focus of Georgia's internal democratic processes**, in order to reduce the risks of ending up in 'illiberal isolation' and to reinforce Georgia's commitment to western standards.
- **Should an opportunity present itself, to show an interest in taking part in the "3+2" format**, in order to ensure an additional platform in the South Caucasus to balance the ambition of the illiberal actors.

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