

Gvantsa Davitashvili, Thomas Kruessmann, and
Ivanna Machitidze (eds.)

The 'New' Geopolitics in the Caucasus

What Role for the EU?

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Foreword

Dear reader!

The volume at hand is the final deliverable of the Jean Monnet Support to Associations grant which AESC held until mid-2022. And again, this work of collaborative writing has had a complicated history. Originally planned to be an outcome of the 2022 Convention in Baku, the event was cancelled in a move that precipitated the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. It also served as a signal that European Studies, especially with a focus on the “new” geopolitics in the region, were not currently welcome in Azerbaijan. Thankfully, many committed scholars stayed the course and prepared manuscripts. A year later, however, when the next Convention was scheduled for Yerevan, the ethnic Armenian population had just fled Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper, including scholars and universities, were grappling with the consequences. So, unfortunately, the 2023 Convention had to be cancelled as well.

Another reason for regret is that for several years now the EU, under the Erasmus+ Programme, has stopped to offer Jean Monnet funding to associations. Available funding flows directly to universities and higher education ministries for structural change. But the problem is that Ph.D. students are often left alone in how to bridge the gap between elaborating a Ph.D. thesis and establishing an internationally visible publication record. It is here where AESC remains to have its ongoing mission, however, in an increasingly difficult environment.

Maneuvering all these difficulties and producing not only a hard-copy, but also an open access version of the book is in no small part the achievement of ibidem Press. I would like to use this opportunity to thank Mr. Christian Schön and his dedicated team of professionals for their patience and unwavering support. Let us hope that the result will reach a large audience of interested readers in the Caucasus and beyond. As we devote much attention to young scholars, this volume

is also meant to be a practical encouragement to continue with publishing and to strive towards peer-reviewed international journals.

Per aspera ad astra!

Thomas Kruessmann,
Series Editor,
AESC President

Introduction

Gvantsa Davitashvili, Thomas Kruessmann, and Ivanna Machitidze

Ever since the demise of the USSR, small states in the South Caucasus have been experiencing vulnerability due to a variety of domestic and external factors. Recent hopes to leave the shadow of great power competition and embrace multipolarity have been shattered when Russia engaged in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In general, small states have fewer options to pursue when it comes to promoting their vital national interests. A series of recent studies discusses strategies for small states to adapt to “multipolarity without multilateralism” and disillusionment with the normative and rules-based arrangements guaranteeing their security (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023; Mihalski et al. 2024, Dobrescu 2023).

Neo-realist paradigm argues that bandwagoning or sheltering is the most likely option for a small state to undertake. This strategy emphasizes the need for a security umbrella of a stronger state which nevertheless may compromise the autonomy of foreign policy decision-making (Gvalia et al. 2013; Vaicekauskaite 2017). Another option is hedging, distancing from long-term obligations in the framework of the regional cooperation arrangements to maneuver between large regional powers or alliances (Kuik 2021). Neutrality, unlike hedging, avoids membership in regional political-military blocs, but with the same goal of preserving autonomous decision-making in a crucial security realm. This approach, until the eventual joining of NATO, was pursued by Sweden and Finland (Michalski 2024).

While the “labels” for each state in the South Caucasus have seemed unchangeable over time, the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine provoked geopolitical shifts of a scale unseen before. Whereas Georgia, previously addressed as the poster child of democratic transformation, has been experiencing the erosion of fragile democratic institutions and its government embarking on Eurosceptic rhetoric, Armenia openly criticized its long-term security provider Russia, a development hard to imagine a decade ago. With no support to prevent its territorial losses

to Azerbaijan, Armenia has been eager to invest in cooperation with the EU, but is still a long way from obtaining candidate status (Çakmak, Özşahin 2023; Atanesyan et al. 2023). Azerbaijan has been the most consistent in its long-term foreign policy strategy so far, maneuvering the West and Russia to achieve its key security goals, namely the restoration of its territorial integrity and retaking Nagorno Karabakh under its de facto control (Valiyev and Mamishova 2019). Apart from the role of Türkiye which is openly supporting Azerbaijan, it is “the Russian factor” which is behind most developments.

Whereas two decades ago the EU had been perceived as an outsider, its role in the South Caucasus evolved from enhancing good governance and democratic institutions building alongside the US to contributing to crisis mediation efforts (Börzel et al. 2009). There is now increased geopolitical ambition to play “the-acceptable-party-for-all” card in bringing lasting peace to the region, thereby potentially challenging the dominant role of Russia and Türkiye. Through different frameworks of cooperation, the EU approaches its neighborhood and provides external governance as a projection of its internal policies (Lavenex 2004). Expanding the EU market and guaranteeing security and peace throughout the continent serve as a strong incentive and anchor for unstable regimes (Mény 2023). While geopolitical influences compel the EU to hasten the accession of candidate countries, which is crucial to uphold the credibility of the membership perspective as a driver of domestic reforms, candidates, both present and future, have yet to attain the EU's standards of rule of law (Börzel 2023). As far as the external dimension of Europeanization through policy transfer (Howell 2002) is concerned, Schimmelfennig argues that even non-candidate countries could be analyzed in the context of Europeanization (Schimmelfennig, 2015).

The repertoire of theories responding to these developments has become ever more sophisticated. It is now commonly accepted that Europeanization is not a straightforward and linear process, but a multidirectional, conflictive and ambivalent development that includes ruptures, backlashes and even Eurosceptic reactions (Worschech 2018). Nevertheless, this approach falls short from occupying a dominant position among theoretical viewpoints aiming to grasp the

regional shifts in the South Caucasus. Its countries are still commonly seen as the “in-betweens”,—the ones in the European “rimland” (Spykman) caught between two conflicting geopolitical views, the one of the West and Russia. There recently has been a tendency to go beyond the approaches as a “traditional zone of privileged interest” (German 2022) when discussing challenge of Russia’s hegemony stemming from China, being “in the shadow” of Russia (Skalamera 2022), through “Russian world” (*russkii mir*) concept (Suslov 2018; Pieper 2020), biopolitics (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017) and the use of hybrid strategies, especially disinformation campaigns and the whipping-up of identity conflicts. There are now “outside-in” (Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk 2016; Bouris and Papadimitriou 2020; Delcour and Wolczuk 2021) and “inside-out” perspectives (Dembińska and Smith 2021) that dig into the sub-state level and try to paint a more nuanced picture of the views held by political elites, business interests and civil society. Even classical geopolitics is now subscribing to a ‘bottom-up’ approach which views geopolitics as “not a sole preserve of states and governments” (Dodds 2019, 5) but involving local communities and ordinary citizens. For instance, Gerard Toal defines the region as a “geopolitical field” comprising “both the sociospatial context of statecraft and the social players, rules, and spatial dynamics constituting the arena” (Toal 2017, 9).

Geopolitics “from below” has become an important research paradigm (Zhurzhenko 2024), extending even to popular geopolitics in cultural studies. Critical geopolitics attempts to deconstruct the clash between territorial power and ideas of spatiality “structured around economic hub and flow imaginaries” (Moisio 2018). While classical geopolitics emphasizes the rootedness of foreign policy decisions in a country’s geographic location, critical geography follows a postmodernist approach by highlighting the representation and discourses of geography by various actors such as states, political elites, civil society, public opinion etc. All in all, over the past 30 years critical geopolitics has developed into a broad stream of critical perspectives interested in the spatiality of world affairs, the making of identities and the use of borders (Kuus 2017). The most recent approach, anthropocene geopolitics, goes even further by challenging the set-in-stone character of geographic location by shedding light on how the ecosystems

have been challenged due to climate change (Proedrou 2020). This view further stresses the EU's role in leading its member-states to initiate a common approach to security and foreign policy decisions taking into account climate change as key and permanent security challenge.

The variety of theoretical approaches, their interaction, combination and interplay are of critical importance for grasping the multifaceted character of the "EU's geopolitical awakening" and its geopolitical actorness in the South Caucasus and beyond (Raik et al. 2024). Both are visible through the EU's determination to resolving political deadlock and polarization in Georgia, the intensified relations with struggling Armenia, a hybrid regime, and authoritarian Azerbaijan. In this manner, the EU goes beyond the "value dimension only approach" and turns pragmatic, as in the case of keeping the dialogue with Baku in light of its importance for the connectivity strategy and despite the systematic character of human rights violations. In contrast to lumping together post-Soviet countries under the caption of "in-betweens", Sami Moisiu argues in favor of a small states perspective peculiar to the South Caucasus (Moisiu 2022). His plea to take small states seriously does not only contradict the perspective that the territorial sovereignty of small states "is nothing but a constantly negotiated and contested phenomenon as great powers dominate the international system and engage in security competition with each other" (Moisiu 2022), but also a call "towards providing fresh and badly needed perspectives to the violent geopolitical condition as it unfolds today" (Moisiu 2022).

Hence, giving voice to both young researchers and seasoned academics from the region is a reflection of the process of self-assertion, of making sense of the often tumultuous and unpredictable events and developing agency in contributing to the future of their countries. Unlike a special issue which would be more tightly woven around a central theme, the chapters provided in this book were suggested by the authors themselves in response to the book's main title. They show a strong desire to take stock of the events and to develop comparative perspectives, primarily between Georgia and Armenia. Needless to say, even after editorial efforts the opinions expressed are exclusively those of the authors.

In the first chapter, *Beridze* takes up the biopolitics paradigm. He offers a critical look at how the debates about the foreign policy priorities of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are couched in biopolitical discourses about survival and security. He shows how the use of biopolitical discourse has become a means for local leaders to consolidate their power. The next chapter by *Galoyan and Hayrapetyan* is even more strongly theory-driven. The authors use the case of EU-Armenia relations to identify the inherent limitations in the major theories on international relations (IR), to develop an “interparadigm dialogue” by comparing and contrasting the relevant IR theories, and finally to reflect on EU external action policies through the application of the relevant IR theories. Their conclusion is that for the given case study liberal intergovernmentalism in combination with the EU external governance theory offer the best understanding. The following chapter is a discussion of the terms “color revolution” vs. “velvet revolution” as shorthands for the transformations that occurred in Georgia and Armenia. In doing so, *Elamiryan and Sikharulidze* develop a more conceptual framework on what distinguishes the two types of events. They show that, despite being located in the same region and facing the consequences of ethno-political conflicts, Georgia and Armenia took rather different paths in their foreign and security policy making. In the next chapter, *Babayan* continues the comparison on Armenia and Georgia, but using an “outside-in” perspective on how the EU responds to the challenges posed by both countries. Her main finding is that despite the EU’s efforts to play an active role in the region, better public participation, awareness-raising, comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the EU in Armenia and Georgia, particularly among civil society organizations, are needed for reaching a success. Embarking on the case of Armenia, *Aleksanyan* shows how the national elites are facing significant domestic opposition in making crucial U-turn decisions on the country’s foreign policy course in response to the regional blocks and institutional arrangements that fail to serve the country’s key national interests as protection of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The author traces the path Armenia underwent from the Velvet Revolution till the present, turning from one of Russia’s most loyal allies to challenging the viability of Russia-led regional integration blocks such as the Eurasian Economic Union

and Collective Security Treaty Organization. The last chapter is devoted to the EU's role in Nagorno-Karabakh. Using critical discourse theory, *Jibuti* examines the statements issued by the EU's respective institutions since 2020, in particular the use of language. Her main question is how and in which regard has the OSCE Minsk Group been ineffective in terms of mediating and reaching sustainable peace since the Second Karabakh war and leading up to the dissolution of the enclave. By scrutinizing the EU-led discourse and its increasingly robust and assertive engagement in the region since the Second Karabakh War, she asks whether deploying unarmed civilian observers to Armenia might imply that the EU is replacing Russia as a mediator in the conflict.

At the time of preparing this volume for publication, geopolitical uncertainty in the region and beyond has been persisting. Due to the events unfolding at an unprecedented pace in the South Caucasus and its neighborhood, the key challenge for scholars is to avoid the role of mere observers catching up with the past. "Outside-in" or "inside-out", "bottom-up" or "top-down", cross-border or international, there is not a single approach to uncover the patterns of behavior, both in terms of regional, state, or sub-state perspectives, where local actors strive to assert agency amid broader power struggles. As each of the chapters above shows, by engaging in dialogue, applying and respecting multi-, inter-, transdisciplinary approaches, and embracing diverse perspectives, all stakeholders can work towards building a more secure and prosperous future for the region.

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