KHAZAR UNIVERSITY

School: Graduate School of Science, Arts and Technology

Department: Political Science and Philosophy

Specialization: International Relations and Diplomacy

MASTER'S THESIS

Regionalism in the South Caucasus: Historical dynamics and challenges

Student: _____ Firuza Ismayilova Fazil

Supervisor: _____ Dr. Vasif Huseynov Maharram

Baku – 2025

XƏZƏR UNİVERSİTETİ

Fakültə: Təbiət Elmləri, Sənət və Texnologiya yüksək təhsil

Departament: Siyasi Elmlər və Fəlsəfə

İxtisas: Beynəlxalq Münasibətlər və Diplomatiya

MAGİSTR DİSSERTASIYA İŞİ

Cənubi Qafqazda regionalizm: Tarixi dinamikalar və çağırışlar

İddiaçı: _____ Firuzə İsmayılova Fazil qızı

Elmi rəhbər: _____ s.e.ü.f.d. Vasif Hüseynov Məhərrəm oğlu

Bakı – 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Relevance and degree of study of the topic

The issue of regionalism in the South Caucasus remains one of the most pressing, yet understudied, issues in the post-Soviet space. Since Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia gained independence thirty years ago, regional integration efforts have not yielded any effective results. Constant conflict, geopolitical competition, and divergent national priorities have led to fragmentation rather than unification. The region's geopolitical location connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, as well as its energy potential and transportation capabilities, make regional cooperation even more important in the post-2020 period. Although this issue has been addressed in various policy reports and national-level studies, there is still a dearth of serious comparative studies that address the domestic and external obstacles to regionalism in the three South Caucasus countries. This study aims to fill the gaps in the existing scientific literature by examining the historical evolution and obstacles to regional integration in this region.

Object and subject of research

The object of this research is the general process of regionalism in the South Caucasus, understood as the development of formal and informal mechanisms for cooperation among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The subject of the research is the historical, political, identity-related, and geopolitical factors that have prevented the formation of a cohesive regional system in the South Caucasus. This includes specific case studies of regional initiatives and the influence of external actors on the region's chances of integration.

Aim and objectives of the research

The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the key barriers to regionalism in the South Caucasus, with particular attention to the historical and geopolitical context of the post-Soviet period.

To achieve this aim, the research sets the following objectives:

- To review the existing literature on regionalism, focusing on both general theories and applications to the South Caucasus;

- To follow the major regional initiatives started in the region since the 1990s and evaluate their outcomes;
- To examine the internal political, identity-based, and institutional factors that undermine regional cooperation;
- To analyze the role of external actors such as Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the European Union in shaping the region's integration (or fragmentation);
- To evaluate the prospects for future regional cooperation in light of recent developments, including the Second Karabakh War.

Research methods

This study used a qualitative research methodology based on a combination of case studies, discourse analysis, and content analysis techniques. Case studies were used to examine the historical context of major regional initiatives and cooperation efforts. Discourse analysis was applied to political speeches, press releases, and policy documents to understand how regionalism was constructed by different actors. Content analysis was conducted on strategic and legal texts to identify recurring patterns and institutional gaps. Both primary (official statements, treaties, speeches) and secondary (books, articles, policy reports) data sources were analyzed, providing a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of regionalism in the South Caucasus.

Scientific novelty of the research

The comparative and integrative approach of this thesis to understanding regionalism in the South Caucasus makes it scientifically novel. Unlike studies that focus on bilateral relations or individual conflicts, this study examines the internal and international factors affecting the region as a whole and integration. It integrates the events after 2020, especially those that occurred as a result of the Second Karabakh War, into a broader historical narrative.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into four main chapters, all contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and challenges of regionalism in the South Caucasus. Chapter 1 contains the literature review, theoretical framework, and hypothesis. This critically reviews academic discussions on regionalism and applies realism to the South Caucasus context to clarify the potential of cooperation among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the study's methodology. It explains the qualitative research design and lays out the use of case study, discourse, and content analysis as a way of exploring how political, institutional, and identity-based dynamics shape the regional landscape. It also sketches out data sources and describes limitations that arise from basing analysis on secondary material primarily.

Chapter 3 examines the evolution of South Caucasus regional cooperation activities across different historical periods. The first subchapter (3.1) summarizes early regional initiatives in the 1990s, including multilateral and economic initiatives that developed after independence. The second subchapter (3.2) summarizes the period between 2000 and 2020, examining both governmental involvement in regional institutions and nonofficial tendencies in cooperation. The final subsection (3.3) examines post-2020 tendencies in the wake of the Second Karabakh War with particular emphasis on new concepts such as the 3+3 platform and the controversies surrounding transit corridors and economic reintegration.

Chapter 4 addresses the principal threats to regionalism in the South Caucasus by separating them into external and internal aspects. Section 4.1 looks at the internal barriers such as ethno-territorial disagreement, competing political affiliations, and an absence of integrated regional identity. Section 4.2 continues to external barriers and analyzes how regional actors' geopolitical interests like those of Russia, Türkiye, and Iran and the insufficiency of regional economic infrastructure influence to destabilize regional integration. Collectively, these chapters provide a detailed and multi-faceted account of why the South Caucasus remains divided despite its strategic imperatives for cooperation.

CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is regionalism poorly developed in the South Caucasus? It is important to study that question for a number of reasons. This region occupies an important strategic, geopolitical position, acts as a bridge between Europe and Asia, and is rich in natural resources, including oil and gas. Despite this, the region is characterized by conflicts and competition for influence from external forces. In this regard, understanding the obstacles to regionalism can contribute to the call for strong cooperation in the post-Soviet space and especially in conflict-prone areas. In addition, the solution to this question can have a positive effect not only on the South Caucasus, but also on the nearby regions by determining ways to strengthen stability, economic growth and regional cooperation.

Although the importance of regionalism in the South Caucasus has attracted scholarly attention, most of the existing literature tends to approach the issue from either a security-oriented or conflict-based perspective. Various studies have examined the political dynamics, economic fragmentation, and the impact of unresolved conflicts on regional cooperation. In addition, studies have addressed the role of external actors, including global powers and regional organizations, in shaping the trajectory of regionalism.

1.1. Review of Related Literatures

1.1.1. Realist and Security Approaches

One of the key scholarly contributions to the study of regionalism in the South Caucasus is Tracey German's Regional Cooperation in the South Caucasus: Good Neighbours or Distant Relatives? (2012). German challenges the claim that the South Caucasus functions as a region, arguing that this concept is largely externally constructed and the region lacks internal political, strategic, or cultural unity. Her central thesis claims that the lack of a strong regional identity, resulting from different historical experiences, geopolitical alliances, and conflicts such as Armenia-Azerbaijan, prevents meaningful cooperation between these states.

German's work offers a detailed empirical and policy-oriented analysis grounded in security studies. She illustrates how each state in the South Caucasus carries out different foreign policy trajectories: Armenia aligning with Russia, Georgia with Western institutions, and Azerbaijan taking a more balanced approach. Her emphasis on the dominance of bilateral

relations over regional frameworks, as well as the competing roles of external actors like Russia, the EU, and Türkiye, provides a foundation for analyzing the broader dynamics that prevent regional cooperation (German, 2012).

However, the book also presents some important limitations. While the author's focus on external influences is comprehensive, her relative neglect of domestic political agency and economic cooperation leaves a gap in understanding how domestic factors can still support regional integration. Furthermore, while she acknowledges the role of external powers, treats them primarily as destabilizing forces, a more nuanced approach might consider how forms of "soft regionalism" can be developed through trade, infrastructure, and civil society engagement as in the EU example.

German's work plays a crucial role in identifying the structural and strategic obstacles to regionalism in the South Caucasus. It helps to understand why post-Soviet regional initiatives have largely failed. This idea not only reinforces the relevance of studying regionalism through a realist lens, but also emphasizes the importance of further exploring the potential for cooperation.

Annie Jafalian's edited volume Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus: Regional Conflicts and Transformation (2011) presents one of the most comprehensive examinations of the region's security architecture and its implications for regionalism. A key strength of this work is its multi-actor approach, which includes the actions and strategies of major international players such as Russia, NATO, the European Union, Türkiye, and Iran. The analysis of crucial events, most notably the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, offers a powerful example of how conflict deepens mistrust and fragments regional security structures.

Jafalian's work highlights how different foreign policy directions, Georgia's Euro-Atlanticism, Armenia's reliance on Russia, and Azerbaijan's balanced policy, make collective action difficult. The book also draws attention to how external actors have shaped the trajectory of the region, with Russia portrayed as a dominant but destabilizing force, while the EU and NATO offer a normative engagement with limited security tools (Jafalian, 2011).

Despite the empirical richness of the work, there are certain analytical limitations. It adopts a largely top-down, state-centric perspective, with limited attention to domestic political systems and governance capacities in the South Caucasus states. As in German's case, internal

drivers of change, such as informal cooperation, cross-border trade, or community-led peace initiatives, remain underexplored. The framing of conflicts such as Armenia-Azerbaijan as persistent and immovable obstacles may also reduce the opportunities for transformation. Nevertheless, Jafalian's volume remains an important source for understanding the dominant security logics that prevent regional integration. Compared to Tracey German, who also adopts a realist lens, Jafalian offers a broader perspective that includes regional security organizations and global actors in the analysis. Both scholars emphasize the impact of unresolved conflicts and external power competition.

1.1.2. Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Kavus Abushov's article (Regionalism in the South Caucasus: Is the South Caucasus a Region?, 2011) offers a thorough theoretical examination of the regional potential of the South Caucasus, applying key concepts from the classical and contemporary regionalism literature. His contribution is notable for its positioning of the region within the frameworks of Nye (1968), Cantori and Spiegel (1970), and Hurrell (1995), which define the region within the criteria of geographic proximity, social cohesion, and economic interdependence. Unlike more policy-oriented studies, Abushov focuses on the assessment of the South Caucasus as a region and concludes that, despite geographical proximity and some shared cultural heritage, the region lacks the social, economic, and institutional coherence required to become a functional regional entity.

One of the main strengths of this article is its application of theory to a concrete case study. Abushov adopts a realist and constructivist mix, tests the indicators of regionalism, and emphasizes that even minimal criteria (such as limited economic cooperation) are insufficient in the context of the South Caucasus. His discussion of the subregional identity that developed during the Soviet era and later eroded due to nationalism and foreign policy differences adds historical depth to the analysis. Importantly, he also links the region's weak internal ties to its continued external dependence, particularly on Russia, thus strengthening the argument that the South Caucasus is more of a geopolitical space than a true region (Abusov, 2011).

Despite its analytical clarity, the article does not propose concrete mechanisms for overcoming the barriers to regionalism nor does it explore multilateral institution-building. There is also limited engagement with civil society or bottom-up integration dynamics. Unlike

Tracey German, who focuses on the role of external powers, especially Russia, as the main obstacle to cooperation, Abushov emphasizes the absence of internal foundations for regionalism. Similarly, while Annie Jafalian highlights functional cooperation in sectors like energy and sees initiatives such as GUAM as evidence of regional potential, Abushov remains skeptical that these isolated projects can translate into deeper integration.

Eldar Ismailov's article, New Regionalism in the Caucasus: A Conceptual Approach (2006), offers a valuable contribution to understanding why regionalism remains weak in the South Caucasus. Unlike more policy-driven or empirical studies, Ismailov approaches the issue through the lens of "new regionalism," framing the region's integration challenges in terms of both historical legacies and the absence of cooperation. His work provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing the internal fragmentation of the region beyond geopolitical explanations.

One of the main strengths of this article is its historical context. Ismailov links the region's fragmented identity to past experiences under imperial and Soviet rule, showing how previous integration models were imposed from the outside and lacked local ownership. This perspective suggests that the region's current fragmentation is not only geopolitical in nature but is also rooted in a longer history. Furthermore, by analyzing initiatives such as TRACECA and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the article demonstrates the dual nature of externally supported regional projects: they offer infrastructure and connectivity, but often bypass the development of institutional or political unity among the South Caucasus states. These insights enrich the general discourse on regionalism by connecting theory with examples of economic and transport cooperation (Ismailov, 2006).

However, the article is not without its limitations. While it provides a rich theoretical analysis, its application to the complex socio-political realities of the South Caucasus is sometimes limited. Reliance on broad models of regionalism can oversimplify the highly specific ethnic, institutional, and asymmetric power relations that shape regional interactions. Furthermore, while the article rightly emphasizes local agency, it does not fully explore how domestic actors (e.g., political elites or civil society) can play an active role in shaping integration from within.

While Tracey German focuses more on security dynamics and foreign policy divergence, Ismailov provides a deeper theoretical framing that highlights structural issues and the lack of

"bottom-up" agency. Abushov's arguments sharply contrast with the author's vision of "new regionalism" in the Caucasus, which advocates for the political and economic construction of regional identity despite conflicts. While Abushov questions whether the South Caucasus qualifies as a region at all, Ismailov treats regionalism as a process that can and should be actively built through cooperation and institutional design.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of regionalism is comprehensive, evolving from geographical and economic proximity to more complex concepts that include identity, governance, and institutional design. For the purposes of this study, regionalism refers to the process of engaging geographically close states in formal or informal cooperation based on shared interests, goals, or identity (Hurrell, 1995, pp. 331–358). Regions are typically defined by a combination of geographic proximity, cultural or historical ties, economic interdependence, and political will (Nye, 1968; Cantori & Spiegel, 1970). In this sense, a region is not simply a space, but a politically and socially constructed entity. However, the South Caucasus, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, struggles to meet even the basic criteria of a region. While it has geographical proximity and shared historical legacies, it lacks economic interdependence, institutional coordination, and above all, a common regional identity.

Realism provides a basic framework for understanding the fragmented landscape of the South Caucasus. This theory based on the principles of power politics and state interest, argues that states act primarily to ensure their own survival in an anarchic international system. Scholars such as Tracey German (2012) and Annie Jafalian (2011) emphasize that South Caucasus states have pursued foreign policy alignment not with each other but with competing external actors, including Russia, NATO, and the European Union. Thus regionalism is prevented by bilateralism, geopolitical competition, and conflicts such as the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. From this perspective, regional cooperation is unlikely to be possible when states perceive each other as strategic threats or prioritize alliances with global powers over local integration.

The Second Karabakh War of 2020, Russia's ongoing occupation of Georgian territories, and the fragile Armenia-Azerbaijan ceasefire are examples of how states are inclined to unilateral security rather than collective security. This dynamic is further complicated by the strategic entry of larger powers such as Russia and Türkiye, which practice bilateral or trilateral balancing with

certain states. This forces the South Caucasus to function less as a region and more as a geopolitical arena where each actor gets relative gain.

Realism, can explain why attempts at regional cooperation in the South Caucasus have consistently failed. The logic of power politics, competing alliances, and national security imperatives trump incentives for multilateral integration. It reveals that serious regionalism in the South Caucasus will be impossible until local issues are resolved and regional threat perceptions are transformed.

1.3. Hypothesis

Based on the literature and theoretical perspectives outlined above, regionalism is a process that includes not only geographical proximity and economic cooperation but also political alignment, institutional development, and identity formation. In theory, regions such as the South Caucasus — composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia — possess certain characteristics that could foster regionalism, like shared history and strategic interdependence. However, in practice, these states have struggled to develop meaningful regional cooperation, remaining fragmented along political, ideological, and strategic lines.

This thesis hypothesizes that the failure of regionalism in the South Caucasus is primarily driven by the national interest and security, where unresolved regional conflicts and competing alignments with global powers have prevented cooperation. In this context, states have prioritized sovereignty, military alliances over regional integration. The weakness of regional institutions such as TRACECA and GUAM further reflects the lack of collective political will, while deep-rooted identity fragmentation—manifested in ethno-political narratives and nationalism—prevents the emergence of a shared regional vision.

This study will examine how these theoretical assumptions manifest themselves in practice by analyzing concrete attempts at regional cooperation and assessing the internal and external challenges that continue to hinder integration. Through this approach, the dissertation seeks to uncover the structural foundations of regional fragmentation and assess whether there are real prospects for integration in the current context.

CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Qualitative Approaches to the Analysis of Regionalism in the South Caucasus

This study employed a qualitative research method based on mixed (both primary and secondary) data to analyze the historical, political, and institutional factors that prevented regionalism in the South Caucasus. The combination of case study, discourse, and content analysis provided a comprehensive approach to understanding how geopolitical conflicts, national policies, and external forces influenced regional cooperation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Case study analysis was used to examine key historical and political events that shaped regionalism in the South Caucasus (Yin, 2018). This included the impact of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict on regional stability, such as the First Karabakh War, the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Russia's geopolitical role in the region, its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following 2008 Russia-Georgia War. Additionally, the analysis considered the post-Soviet transitions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, focusing on Armenia's strategic dependence on Russia, Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy, and Georgia's pro-Western path. By focusing on these dynamics, the research aimed to uncover the structural causes of regional fragmentation and assess the challenges that hindered cooperation.

Discourse analysis focused on the rhetoric and narratives employed by political leaders, regional institutions, and international organizations. By analyzing political speeches and media statements, this method revealed how regionalism was constructed in both public and political spheres. It also examined the influence of nationalist and geopolitical ideologies on the prospects for cooperation among South Caucasus states (Wodak, 2009). In this thesis, special attention was paid to the official statements and media discourse that followed major events like the Second Karabakh War (2020), the launch of the 3+3 platform, and regional transport initiatives. The analysis included official government statements from Armenia and Azerbaijan concerning border demarcation, regional corridors, and bilateral tensions, which were cited in academic sources such as Broers (2019), De Waal (2010). For example, Azerbaijani rhetoric frequently emphasized the concept of territorial justice and reintegration, as reflected in President Aliyev's 2021 official statement on the Zangezur Corridor (Aliyev, 2021), while Armenian statements stressed security threats and geopolitical isolation, including the 2023 "Crossroads of Peace" strategic proposal by the Pashinyan government (Pashinyan Government, 2023). These

discourses, captured in academic literature and media commentaries, helped reveal how nationalist and geopolitical narratives constructed different regional visions.

Content analysis was applied to examine policy documents, treaties, and agreements in order to identify structural and institutional barriers to regionalism. This method enabled a detailed examination of regional cooperation strategies, highlighting political constraints and inconsistencies. By classifying key themes within official texts, the analysis provided insight into how regionalism had been conceptualized and implemented over time (Krippendorff, 2018). For instance, the thesis examined the TRACECA and GUAM initiatives to understand how economic infrastructure was developed largely through bilateral frameworks while excluding Armenia due to political tensions. Similarly, the analysis of the 3+3 platform proposal revealed how geopolitical divisions—particularly Georgia's refusal to participate due to Russian occupation—undermined its effectiveness as a regional forum. Documents related to Armenia's membership in the CSTO and EAEU, as well as Georgia's Association Agreement with the European Union, were also reviewed to highlight diverging institutional affiliations that have contributed to the fragmentation of the South Caucasus.

2.2. Data Collection Methods

The study relied primarily on secondary data, but also incorporated selected primary sources. Given the complexity of geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus, secondary research provided a structured base for analyzing existing knowledge, while primary sources offered direct insights into political narratives and state behavior.

Secondary data included government reports, treaties, policy documents, and cooperation agreements of regional organizations such as GUAM and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Reports from the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were also consulted to provide external perspectives on integration efforts. In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and historical studies accessed via JSTOR, and Google Scholar contributed theoretical and contextual information (Bryman, 2016).

Primary sources included political speeches, official statements, and media reports concerning regionalism. These documents helped reveal how regional integration was framed by policymakers and public figures in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Official statements by the

Azerbaijani government regarding the Zangezur Corridor emphasized regional connectivity through a strategic lens, while Armenian leaders frequently expressed concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity in response to these proposals. Georgia's refusal to join the 3+3 platform, reflected its alignment with Western institutions and rejection of Russia-led formats. To ensure credibility, all sources were evaluated based on publication date, institutional affiliation, and author background.

2.3. Limitations of the Methodology

This study faced several methodological limitations. First, the reliance on publicly accessible secondary sources may have introduced bias, as official narratives are often shaped by political interests. Second, the absence of fieldwork, such as interviews or surveys, limited the ability to capture grassroots or insider perspectives. Third, the interpretive nature of qualitative methods, including discourse and content analysis, carried a degree of subjectivity, despite efforts to maintain structured coding and analytical rigor (Silverman, 2020).

Access to official documents was also constrained due to the geopolitical sensitivity of the region, which restricted insight into confidential agreements or negotiations. Lastly, the regional specificity of the South Caucasus limited the generalizability of findings to broader post-Soviet or global regionalism. Future studies may overcome these limitations by adopting mixed methods and incorporating both quantitative data and stakeholder interviews.

CHAPTER 3. REGIONALISM INITIATIVES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

3.1. Attempts at Regional Cooperation in the 1990s

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to navigate the difficult process of transitioning from Soviet republics to independent states. Each state inherited weak institutions, unresolved border disputes, and deep socio-economic insecurity. This transition was not smooth, that was a period of state weakness, war, and a desperate search for legitimacy and survival (Lynch, 2003).

During the early 1990s, Georgia experienced internal disintegration. Civil wars, military coups, and separatist armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia considerably destabilized the state. The writ of the Tbilisi government did not extend beyond Tbilisi at the time, and central powers had no monopoly over the use of force. Georgia's territorial fragmentation and power struggles have made regional cooperation unattainable. Economic isolation and institutional problems have also limited Georgia's ability to communicate with its neighbors.

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, was confronted with the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which erupted in the final years of the Soviet Union and began after independence. This war, in addition to causing territorial losses and massive displacement, prevnted political stability and led to a series of unstable governments and military coups in 1992-1993. The war had a divisive effect on the Azerbaijani state and created deep scars that shaped its post-Soviet trajectory (Cornell, 2002).

Meanwhile, Armenia enjoyed a more integrated political environment in the early years of its independence. The war effort over Karabakh territory strengthened national solidarity and political control. But the closure of Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye effectively isolated it from regional markets and transportation systems. That physical isolation, combined with Armenia's growing strategic reliance on Russia, limited its willingness to pursue regional initiatives, favoring bilateral rather than multilateral foreign policy interests (Coppieters, 2001).

Regionalism was widely seen as a way of stabilizing the region, promoting trade, and reducing the influence of outside powers. But the region was "poor in dialogue," deeply divided by conflict, and driven by geopolitical competition rather than shared vision. Instead of

collaborating for shared goals, the three states sought alignment with external powers such as the West, Russia, or regional neighbors. Thus, early hopes for regional integration quickly gave way to suspicion and strategic divergence (Lynch, 2003).

3.1.1. Early Political Visions of Cooperation: The Transcaucasian Confederation Proposal (1992–1993)

In the earliest days of the Soviet collapse, political leaders in the South Caucasus saw regional cooperation as a means of stabilizing their newly independent countries. One of the earliest and most ambitious of these efforts was the Transcaucasian Confederation proposal put forward by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze in 1992–1993. This initiative intended the creation of a political and economic block between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (a modern-day reincarnation of the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation of 1918). The idea was based on pragmatic grounds: the need to ensure regional security, restore trade relations, and present a united face to external powers.

However, the confederation project failed almost immediately. By the early 1990s, the region was already wracked by sharp political and military differences that prevented cooperation. Particularly, the escalation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan war created deep suspicion between the two sides and made the creation of any formal union impossible. While Armenia and Azerbaijan were engaged in an existential war over territory, Georgia was torn by internal civil resistance and violent separatism in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Lynch, 2003).

Even Georgia, the initiator of the proposal, was in its own internal collapse during this period. Eduard Shevardnadze returned to power in a very unstable state with split power and civil war conditions. Blockaded Armenia was increasingly turning to Russia for security, while Azerbaijan was appealing to Türkiye and Western powers for strategic support. These rival foreign policy orientations threatened any chance for cohesion in the region. The proposal lacked institutional backing and was perceived by other South Caucasus leaders as a geopolitical maneuver rather than a genuine multilateral initiative (Coppieters, 2001).

The collapse of the Transcaucasian Confederation highlights a fundamental issue that will affect all future regional efforts: the lack of a shared identity and strategic vision. The region lacks the minimum level of mutual trust and political will necessary to build regional institutions. The first opportunity to put early integration mechanisms into action was stopped by nationalism,

war, and bilateral alliances. Instead of laying the groundwork for regional unity, this first attempt revealed the depth of fragmentation in the region—a pattern repeated in other cooperation efforts in the 1990s (Abushov, 2009, pp. 23–35).

3.1.2. Multilateral Economic Initiatives with Regional Involvement

In the absence of practical political cooperation in the 1990s, various multilateral and bilateral economic initiatives emerged in the South Caucasus. They aimed at fostering trade, infrastructure development, and integration into global markets, particularly through east–west corridors bypassing Russia. The most prominent among them were the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), and the TRACECA project of the European Union. Although there was some success in the areas of logistics and transit in these initiatives, they had limited potential to advance greater regional integration.

Established in 1992, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) was one of the first multilateral frameworks to include Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as equal partners following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initiated by Türkiye and supported by other Black Sea countries, BSEC was designed to facilitate economic integration, trade expansion, and regional stability. For the South Caucasus, BSEC represented a special opportunity to become part of a broader regional initiative extending beyond the post-Soviet space. However, the true impact of the organization within the Caucasus remained restricted. BSEC remained "symbolic rather than functional" within the region, offering a framework for dialogue but lacking institutional means or political will to address the underlying drivers of instability (Lynch, 2003).

The membership of all three South Caucasus states was important in the context of increasing tensions (especially the escalating war over Karabakh), but BSEC was unable to facilitate meaningful cooperation among them. While the organization was a diplomatic forum in which regional actors could engage with one another without confronting sensitive political issues, it lacked the degree of political commitment and regional ownership required for long-term integration. Azerbaijan and Armenia lacked any basis for shared trust or coordinated economic planning, and Georgia was preoccupied with internal secessionist pressures. Besides, BSEC's development and agenda were mainly shaped by foreign powers (Türkiye and the EU) more than those of the South Caucasus nations themselves (German, 2012).

Instead of creating a platform for regionalism, the BSEC has become a high-level platform with no local power. Its failure to address significant obstacles such as conflict resolution, institutional weakness, and identity fragmentation has turned the South Caucasus into a peripheral actor in a broader regional enterprise (Abushov, 2009, pp. 23–35).

Started in 1993 with the initiative of the European Union, the TRACECA aimed to establish a new East–West trade corridor connecting Europe and Central Asia through the South Caucasus. The initiative was directed at upgrading transportation infrastructure, modernizing customs arrangements, and building improved logistical ties along what became known as a "New Silk Road." TRACECA was an opportunity for the South Caucasus nations, notably Azerbaijan and Georgia, to diversify their economy away from Russia and toward European markets, having their national development plans synchronize with European-funded integration programs. The project successfully funded road, port, and railroad rehabilitation, particularly in Georgia's Black Sea ports and Azerbaijan's Caspian coast. Nevertheless, despite its technical success, TRACECA could not stimulate important regional integration nor serve as a forum for political rapprochement between the South Caucasus states.

TRACECA's greatest strength was its logistical and infrastructure-oriented direction, which positioned it as an effective vehicle. It lacked mechanisms for conflict resolution and mechanisms for establishing mutual trust among the participants. In addition, the initiative design de facto excluded Armenia, due to the blockade by Azerbaijan and Türkiye during the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. While Armenia was officially included in the TRACECA process, its geographic isolation and limited access to the corridor made its participation symbolic (D. Lynch, 2003). TRACECA was being used instrumentally by Azerbaijan and Georgia to pursue regional agendas of their own, strengthening economic ties with the West at the cost of Armenia. The project thus became a tool for selective cooperation, not one for inclusive regionalism (Abushov, 2009, pp. 23–35).

The failure of TRACECA to overcome political cleavages in the South Caucasus also illustrates the limitations of external integration. Because of the unresolved conflicts and a lack of regional networks of trust, the ability of such initiatives to develop into platforms for long-term cooperation was diminished. Rather than encouraging a common regional vision, TRACECA institutionalized fragmentation and provided tangible rewards to some states while excluding

others. At this level, this expressed a broader pattern of the 1990s: economic integration without political cohesion, regional engagement without regional cohesion (Cornell, 2002).

Alongside other multilateral initiatives, the 1990s saw pipeline diplomacy emerging as an significant form of Azerbaijan-Georgia bilateral economic engagement. The impetus was primarily strategic interests to ship Caspian energy resources to the West in order to bypass Russia and Iran. An early big-ticket project was the Baku–Supsa pipeline, which was completed in 1999, shipping Azerbaijani oil to the Black Sea coast of Georgia. It was complemented by the construction of the more ambitious BTC pipeline from Baku to Tbilisi and Ceyhan, which in turn came into operation in 2006. These projects benefited from the warm backing of Western governments and multinationals such as the United States, which viewed them as a means to diversify world energy supplies and reduce Russian monopoly in the area.

This growing Azerbaijan–Georgia energy corridor allowed for greater political and economic cooperation between the two states at the expense of Armenia due to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and political orientation towards Russia. Armenia's continued blockade by Türkiye and Azerbaijan left it physically and diplomatically disconnected from pipeline corridors and related infrastructure investment. These factors fostered a kind of selective regional connectivity which ensured a two-level regional order within which Armenia became increasingly distanced (Lynch, 2003). Energy diplomacy ensured the formation of a working corridor between Azerbaijan and Georgia but one of broader regional inclusion and integration. Rather than bridging differences, pipeline diplomacy in the 1990s reinforced them—showing how economic cooperation was possible, but only on bilateral and strategic, not regional and open-ended terms (Cornell, 2002).

3.1.3. Security-Oriented Alliances and Strategic Alignments

Alongside economic activity, security alignments emerged in the post-Soviet South Caucasus. Faced with unresolved border conflicts and weak state institutions, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia pursued different strategic paths, often aligning with powers outside the region rather than among themselves. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), founded in 1991, included all three countries, but over time it lost its credibility as an impartial platform, particularly as a result of Russia's dominant leadership. On the other hand, the creation of GUAM in 1997 – by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova – was a manifestation of a

shared desire to counter Russian influence and improve pro-Western security cooperation. However, GUAM's influence was limited by its structure and the absence of Armenia, whose strategic alliance with Russia excluded it from such efforts. These examples illustrate how regional security cooperation in the 1990s was shaped by outside influence rather than collective regionalism.

Founded in 1991, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created as an institutional framework to coordinate political, economic, and security relationships between the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia joined the CIS in the early stage of post-Soviet transition, hoping to achieve economic stability and diplomatic engagement. However, the institution found it difficult to deliver meaningful integration and was widely criticized as a symbolic substitute for Soviet centralism, rather than an efficient regional institution. CIS has been widely referred to as the classic case of "failed regionalism," institutionally divided and lacking political trust required to pursue common policies or reconcile differences among member states (Kubicek, 2009, pp. 237–256).

The CIS's shortcomings were particularly acute for the South Caucasus. While Armenia viewed the CIS as a means to maintain close ties with Russia, its main security guarantor, Azerbaijan and Georgia increasingly disengaged from the organization's internal politics. Georgia, in particular, denounced Russia's use of CIS institutions to maintain its dominance over separatist territories such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The asymmetry of power in the CIS created a model of Moscow-centric and bilateral integration rather than a collective region. Georgia's formal withdrawal from the CIS in 2008 was the culmination of a broader process of withdrawal that had begun in the 1990s (Czerewacz-Filipowicz and Konopelko, 2017, pp. 105–126).

Thus, the CIS failed to create a unifying platform for the South Caucasus. Its lack of implementation mechanisms, low member participation, and inability to effectively resolve regional conflicts made it politically ineffective. The CIS failed to create the conditions for deep cooperation, especially in unstable regions such as the Caucasus, where national sovereignty, identity politics, and competing security agendas prevail (Kubicek, 2009, pp. 237–256).

Founded in 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, the GUAM Organization was established in an effort to provide economic cooperation, democratic development, and energy transit in the post-Soviet area. Often seen as a political response to the

perceived Russian hegemony over the CIS, GUAM's founding members aimed to align themselves closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions and to encourage East–W6est integration through initiatives such as TRACECA. GUAM was an adaptive form of post-Soviet regionalism for strategic coordination as opposed to institutionalization, particularly in transport and trade infrastructure (Sergey et al., 2021, pp. 93–104).

Despite this aim, GUAM remained a split and limited format, with shallow institutional arrangements and consolidated internal leadership. Armenia did not join the block due to its strategic alignment with Russia and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, further diminishing the regional profile of GUAM in the South Caucasus. Armenia's exclusion served to highlight the block's geopolitical nature and the inability of GUAM to pursue broader regional talks. Moreover, inconsistencies in political priority and foreign policy orientation among member states weakened the possibility for GUAM to serve as a shared voice. Instead it operated as a symbolical instrument for Georgia and the other members to publicly declare their Western orientation, but not as a vehicle for real policy coordination (Sabanadze, 2010).

While GUAM presented the possibility of transport and energy cooperation, it actually involved a form of selective regionalism driven by Russian pushback, rather than full-scale regional integration. GUAM's loose nature and lack of enforcement powers limited its development as an effective regional group (Sergey et al., 2021, pp. 93–104). It remains a venue more dominated by political messaging than actual work in promoting South Caucasus cooperation.

3.2. Steps Taken in the Field of Regionalism Since the 2000s

After the devastation and conflicts of the 1990s, the post-2000 landscape in the South Caucasus was a more stable but still fragmented one for regional cooperation. Even as the war gave way to a largely frozen conflict, the political rivalries between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia remained unresolved, preventing regional building. However, this period witnessed a range of efforts and cooperation frameworks, ranging from re-engagement in old frameworks such as BSEC and TRACECA to new multilateral efforts like the European Union's Eastern Partnership. At the same time, various bilateral and trilateral frameworks (mainly between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye) intensified, often with a focus on strategic energy and transport cooperation.

3.2.1. Continued Participation in External Regional Platforms

Despite the political fragmentation of the South Caucasus, all three countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – were members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) in the 2000s. The organization provided a multilateral forum for the development of economic cooperation, focusing on trade facilitation, transport connectivity and energy dialogue. However, membership did not foster deep integration. Limited political will, unresolved disputes and unstable participation of member states meant that the BSEC's role in the South Caucasus was limited to low-level technical cooperation and diplomatic networking (Czerewacz-Filipowicz & Konopelko, 2016).

At the same time, the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) initiative remained the main economic link between the European Union and the South Caucasus, primarily in the form of modernizing infrastructure projects in Georgia and Azerbaijan. These included the rehabilitation of the ports of Batumi and Poti, the improvement of customs and border facilities, and the improvement of rail and road corridors connecting the region with Europe and Central Asia. Armenia was excluded from these efforts due to the ongoing blockade by Azerbaijan and Türkiye over the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Although Armenia had nominal membership in TRACECA, its participation was weak and it was disconnected from most of the main infrastructure corridors. The TRACECA Intergovernmental Commission, supported by the EU, played a major role in coordinating such projects and promoting coordinated transport policies among members, but its impact on the development of broader regional integration was limited (Simao, 2011, pp. 109–123).

In the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), both Azerbaijan and Armenia remained participants during the period 2000–2020, while Georgia formally left after a war with Russia in 2008. The CIS was a largely Russian-dominated organization focused on economic cooperation and soft security issues, although its influence in the South Caucasus has declined over time. For Armenia, the CIS was a means of diplomatic and economic engagement to maintain strategic ties with Russia and gain access to integration initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union. Overall, the platform's shallow institutional depth and association with Russian dominance have weakened its relevance as a vehicle for inclusive regionalism in the Caucasus (Kubicek, 2009, pp. 237–256).

For Democracy and Economic Development, GUAM has remained a mechanism for regional cooperation between Georgia, Azerbaijan, and their partners Ukraine and Moldova over the years. GUAM has served as a space for countries seeking to reduce their dependence on Russia-dominated models in trade, energy transit, and political cooperation with Western organizations. Armenia has never joined GUAM, primarily because of its strategic alliance with Russia and its long-standing conflict with Azerbaijan, which fundamentally undermines GUAM's emphasis on territorial integrity as well as Euro-Atlantic integration. Overall, the impact of this platform has also been limited as a geopolitical marker for substantive regional integration (Sergey et al., 2021, pp. 93–104).

The Eastern Partnership (EaP), part of the European Union's broader European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), was launched in 2009 and sought to strengthen political and economic relations with six post-Soviet countries, including Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The initiative aimed to promote governance reforms, economic modernisation and the alignment of laws with EU standards without the promise of membership. While all three South Caucasus countries participated in the EaP, their levels of participation varied widely. Georgia was the most active country, signing an Association Agreement and gaining visa-free travel to the EU. Armenia withdrew from initial negotiations on an Association Agreement in 2013 under Russian pressure, but returned in 2017 and signed a less ambitious Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Azerbaijan has adopted a pragmatic approach, with cross-sectoral cooperation but without closer political integration (Delcour, 2011, pp. 105–123).

Despite offering institutional and economic incentives, the EaP failed to foster intra-regional cooperation among the South Caucasus countries. Its structure was largely bilateral, advocating national reform agendas rather than regional integration or coordination. As a result, the initiative favored one-size-fits-all approaches to adaptation over a comprehensive vision for the region. While EU involvement was crucial for institutional building and modernization, it was limited in its ability to bridge structural political divisions as well as conflicts among participating states (Gawrich, Melnykovska, & Schweickert, 2010, pp. 139–157).

3.2.2. South Caucasus Regional Forums and Dialogues

In the absence of strong governmental cooperation, several non-governmental and Track II initiatives emerged in the 2000s and 2010s in an attempt to promote dialogue and build trust among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. These efforts were largely funded by international organizations and donor agencies and reflected the international community's desire to stabilize the South Caucasus through soft power, institutional dialogue, and civil society building. The most ambitious project here was the South Caucasus Parliamentary Initiative (2003-2006), which sought to build on the existing inter-parliamentary communication platform between the three states. Funded by European and international sponsors, the project sought to develop cooperation on common concerns such as environmental protection, regional trade, and democratic reforms. It was also a symbolic attempt to institutionalize dialogue outside the framework of conflict settlement negotiations. However, the initiative failed due to political mistrust and unresolved territorial disputes, particularly tensions surrounding the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict (OSCE, 2006).

In addition to parliamentary activities, the region has experienced a number of civil society-based initiatives mediated by UNDP, OSCE and other international NGOs. They have aimed to build trust and cooperation in areas ranging from natural resource management to youth leadership, media cooperation and cultural dialogue. Some of the more visible outcomes of these efforts have been cross-border summer schools, joint environmental monitoring projects and women-led peacebuilding workshops. While these programmes have occasionally succeeded in building interpersonal trust and professional networks across borders, they have largely remained within the non-governmental sector. Governments have remained distant or uninterested in such dialogues, and none of these initiatives have developed into sustainable regional arrangements. Therefore, while they have supported the maintenance of lines of communication at the community level, their impact on policy and elite-level regionalism has been limited (UNDP, 2012; OSCE, 2014).

Again, these Track II efforts demonstrate a bottom-up approach to regional cooperation that is different from the more strategic and state-driven types of integration embodied in formal forums such as TRACECA or the Eastern Partnership. While they do not create permanent regional institutions, they have demonstrated the potential for building trust across borders in a context where formal diplomatic contacts are often impossible. In doing so, they have played an

important role in the regional context by keeping the idea of South Caucasus cooperation in the public eye, even in the absence of political consensus.

3.2.3. Bilateral and Minilateral Cooperation Efforts

Due to long-standing disputes, different foreign policy philosophies, and a lack of institutional trust between the three states, attempts to create a unified and effective model of regionalism in the South Caucasus have often failed. The main reason that makes any framework for trilateral cooperation unviable is the ongoing hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this situation, regionalism has not developed as a joint effort between Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Rather, it has fragmented into ad hoc alliances, with bilateral and minilateral alliances, especially between Georgia and Azerbaijan, proving to be the most practical and long-term forms of cooperation. These agreements, to which Armenia is not a party, are based on common strategic perspectives and have yielded good results in the areas of trade, energy, logistics, and diplomatic coordination (Huseynov, 2020, pp. 127-138).

Since the early 2000s, bilateral relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan have evolved into a strategic alliance based on complementary economic interests and compatible foreign policy objectives. Large-scale energy and transport infrastructure, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline (completed in 2006), the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) (2007), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway (2017), have turned both states into important transit routes for transportation to global oil markets across the Caspian Sea and European countries and to Türkiye and Europe (Guliyev, 2019, pp. 265–270). Supported by Western governments and financial institutions, these projects were political instruments, not business ventures, that would help both nations reduce their dependence on Russian and Iranian routes and assert their sovereignty on the regional energy scene (Sabanadze, 2010). In parallel, diplomatic cooperation has deepened as Georgia and Azerbaijan have consistently supported each other in international forums, particularly on issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty. Georgia has refrained from officially recognizing the claims of Karabakh, while Azerbaijan does not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent entities - reciprocal gestures that signal diplomatic solidarity.

When Türkiye formally joined the platform in 2012, this bilateral axis evolved into a more regular framework for trilateral cooperation. Since then, the Georgia-Azerbaijan-Türkiye trilateral structure, organized through frequent meetings between foreign ministers, defense

ministers, and economic delegations, has become the main vehicle for regional coordination. One of its most notable features has been the extension of the Southern Gas Corridor, including the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which will transport Azerbaijani gas to European markets through Georgia and Türkiye, bypassing Armenia entirely. In addition to energy cooperation, the trilateral platform has developed joint military exercises, defense training programs, and regional security dialogues, thus strengthening strategic trust among the three states (Kavalski, 2016). Common infrastructure, consistent foreign policy orientations, and mutual support for these alignments help to consolidate them.

Again, this tripartite bloc should also be seen in the broader context of regional fragmentation and exclusion. Armenia's non-participation in these initiatives is not accidental, but reflects structural divisions that still affect South Caucasus politics. Armenia has been essentially cut off from these regional channels of communication due to its alliance with Russia, membership in the CSTO, and the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabakh. During this period, Armenia, unlike Georgia and Azerbaijan, which sided with Western-backed projects, has become deeply entrenched in Russian-led regional institutions, thus widening the geopolitical divide (Delcour, 2011, pp. 105–123).

Due to its geographical constraints and political isolation, Armenia's regional strategy since the 2000s has been largely based on bilateral relations with Russia and Iran. Blockaded by Azerbaijan and Türkiye over the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, Armenia relies on Iran as an important energy and economic partner, establishing practical cooperation in areas such as electricity exchange, natural gas supply, and alternative trade routes (International Crisis Group, 2020). Although the volumes are still small compared to Russian energy flows, the completion of the Iran-Armenia Gas Pipeline in 2007 was a significant milestone that allowed Armenia to diversify its energy imports away from Russian supplies (Kaleji, 2021).

In addition to energy, Armenia and Iran have also discussed the North-South Transport Corridor, an infrastructure project that would use Armenian territory to connect Iran with Russia and Europe. While this initiative has potential for regional connectivity, financial constraints, geopolitical tensions, and competing transit projects that bypass Armenia altogether have slowed progress.

In parallel, Armenia and Russia have maintained close political, military, and economic ties during this period. As a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia has maintained a close strategic partnership with Moscow, relying on Russia for economic support, border security, and military assistance (Delcour, 2011, pp. 105–123). Russian bases on Armenian territory and Armenia's membership in Russian-led regional organizations have provided a certain level of security, but at the expense of Yerevan's flexibility in foreign policy.

Armenia's bilateral relations with Russia and Iran, while vital to the country, have not contributed to the integrity of the South Caucasus region. Armenia's geopolitical isolation from key regional energy and transport corridors controlled by Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye has been reinforced by these alliances. The South Caucasus is still a region where external and bilateral alliances are more important than collective regionalism, and Armenia's foreign policy path is a clear example of this fragmentation (Huseynov & Shafiyev, 2020, pp. 99-111).

3.3. Regionalism Efforts After the Second Karabakh War (2020–Present)

The Second Karabakh War (September–November 2020), a major turning point for the South Caucasus, had a crucial impact on the political and economic situation of the region. Significant parts of Karabakh and seven adjacent districts, which had been under Armenian occupation since the early 1990s, were returned to Azerbaijani control (International Crisis Group, 2020). By deploying Russian peacekeeping forces in the Karabakh territories, the conflict also strengthened Russia's hegemonic influence in regional security and reduced the role of Western actors in the mediation process. The ceasefire agreement, signed on November 9, 2020, brokered by Russia, included formal provisions for the restoration of economic ties, the opening of trade routes, and the creation of new transport corridors throughout the South Caucasus, in addition to ending active military operations (International Crisis Group, 2020).

While the agreement created a framework for a new regional relationship, its actual implementation was prevented by political disputes, mistrust, and conflicting interpretations, particularly regarding the "Zangezur Corridor" (Delcour, 2022). With Azerbaijan having a more dominant regional role and Armenia facing serious domestic political crises, the post-war context created opportunities for discussions on regional integration, but also created new divisions. In addition, regionalism was complicated by the efforts of external actors such as Russia, Türkiye, and Iran to reposition themselves in the changing South Caucasus environment (Huseynov, 2023).

3.3.1. The Ceasefire Agreement and the Challenge of Reintegrating Regional Connectivity

A commitment to unblock all regional transport and economic links that had been closed since the early 1990s was a key component of the ceasefire agreement signed on 9 November 2020. The unification of Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan, passing through Armenian territory, was one of the main goals (International Crisis Group, 2020). It also included the reopening of highways and railways between Armenia and Azerbaijan, along with broader economic integration through infrastructure development. These policies could theoretically revolutionize the South Caucasus by restoring long-lost trade routes and promoting economic interdependence.

However, there have been many practical and political obstacles to the actual implementation of the transport provisions. Azerbaijan has promoted the idea of a "Zangezur corridor" and interpreted the ceasefire terms as giving it a unique land connection from Armenia's Syunik province. However, this framework has been rejected by Armenia, which claims that any new transit routes should operate under full Armenian sovereignty, border control, and customs supervision (Delcour, 2022). Negotiations have broken down due to disagreements over the legal status of the proposed routes, security measures, and regulatory structure. Despite the establishment of technical commissions to discuss the reopening of the infrastructure, no operational land corridor between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan had been established by early 2024 (OSCE, 2023).

In addition to political differences, security concerns and distrust between the parties have complicated efforts to restore ties. Azerbaijan views access to transport as a matter of post-war rights and national sovereignty, while Armenia remains wary of possible security risks on reopened routes. While Russia, as the guarantor of the ceasefire terms, has sought to facilitate negotiations, it has not implemented legally binding solutions. Despite some progress in restoring parts of the Soviet-era railway network, particularly in negotiations on links between Armenia and Russia via Azerbaijan, full-scale regional economic reintegration remains stalled (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Overall, political mistrust, differing legal interpretations, and nationalist sensitivities have prevented the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, although it has created a framework for the reopening of South Caucasus transport corridors. The post-2020 period has shown that it

remains difficult to translate peace agreements into meaningful integration in a politically fragmented environment.

3.3.2. The 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform

A new regional format, the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform, was proposed by Russia and Türkiye to change the diplomatic landscape in the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War. This initiative aimed to bring together the three South Caucasus states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as Russia, Türkiye and Iran – to develop regional communications, infrastructure development, trade integration and security cooperation without direct involvement from Western actors (Huseynov & Mahammadi, 2022). The rationale for the proposal was based on the idea that in the new, post-conflict context, regional actors themselves could take on greater responsibility for border management, dispute resolution and the promotion of economic cooperation.

However, the 3+3 platform soon faced serious political problems that reduced its usefulness. Georgia immediately withdrew from participation, arguing that engagement with Russia under the current circumstances would compromise its sovereignty claims and pointing to Russia's occupation of approximately 20% of Georgian territory, particularly Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Delcour, 2022). The platform's initial goal of comprehensive South Caucasus cooperation was diminished when Georgia withdrew and transformed it into a 3+2 format. No significant cooperation projects or legally binding agreements emerged from the initial meetings at the level of deputy foreign ministers between Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Furthermore, the platform's potential was limited by the strategic objectives of larger external powers. At a time when Western influence was clearly declining after the 2020 war, Russia saw the 3+3 as a chance to consolidate its position in the South Caucasus. Türkiye viewed the format as a way to increase its political and economic influence in the east and strengthen its strategic alliance with Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Iran was cautious about the 3+3, as it was concerned that new transit routes, especially the proposed Zangezur corridor, could negatively affect Iran's traditional North-South connectivity routes and negatively affect regional power dynamics (Huseynov & Mahammadi, 2022). These conflicting geopolitical objectives between

Iran, Türkiye, and Russia led to a divergence of priorities and hindered the development of a unified vision of cooperation.

Armenia viewed joining the 3+3 platform as a diplomatic demand rather than a rational decision. Yerevan participated cautiously in the negotiations, but remained extremely skeptical of Azerbaijan's aspirations and Türkiye's strengthening due to post-war vulnerabilities and the need to normalize relations with its neighbors (International Crisis Group, 2022). The chances of meaningful discussions within the 3+3 framework are further prevented by the deep mistrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as continuing disagreements over border demarcation and transit routes. While the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform was presented as a new approach to regional cooperation, it actually exposed long-standing conflicts, security issues, and external rivalries that shaped the South Caucasus (Huseynov, 2024).

Formally, the 3+3 format provided a unique multilateral framework included both the South Caucasus and neighboring states, but it also exposed the region's deep structural imbalances. Participants viewed the platform more through the prism of national interests than genuine regional cooperation, given the fundamental mistrust among the South Caucasus states and the spheres of influence of Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. Additionally, the platform's credibility was limited by the lack of a mechanism for resolving any significant disputes within the 3+3 negotiations, especially over the status of "Nagorno-Karabakh", border demarcation, or the rights of displaced populations.

3.3.3. Azerbaijan's Regional Diplomacy: Connectivity and New Corridors

After Azerbaijan achieved military and diplomatic victory in the Second Karabakh War, it turned its attention to consolidating its achievements through regional projects and infrastructure diplomacy. Realizing that control over transport routes could be a crucial tool in shaping the post-war regional order, Azerbaijan has put forward a number of proposals to restore historical trade networks and create new corridors that would improve its geopolitical position. Here, connectivity is presented as an economic priority, as well as a continuation of Azerbaijan's strategic goals in the South Caucasus (Aliyev, 2021).

The "Zangezur Corridor" proposal, which aims to establish a direct land link between mainland Azerbaijan and its autonomous republic of Nakhchivan, via Armenia's Syunik province, has been a key component of Azerbaijan's post-war regional vision. The corridor is

seen by Azerbaijan as a legitimate restoration of historical ties and as a vital channel for trade, travel, and economic integration with Türkiye and other countries (I. Aliyev, 2021). Although the ceasefire agreement of 9 November 2020 refers to the deblocking of all regional transport routes without using the term "Zangezur" in a broader sense, Azerbaijani officials have emphasized that the opening of this corridor is supported by the agreement (International Crisis Group, 2022).

However, the plan has been highly controversial and politically sensitive. The presentation of Azerbaijan's Zangezur corridor as a sovereign transit route has raised concerns in Armenia, where government officials have rejected any agreement that would undermine Armenia's sovereignty over its southern territories. According to Armenian law, customs and border control must be regulated by Armenian law, and Armenian authorities insist that any transit corridors must operate under Armenian jurisdiction (Government of Armenia, 2022). The dispute goes beyond simple logistics and includes issues of territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and other symbolic values. Azerbaijani rhetoric, which portrays the corridor as the restoration of "historic lands", has particularly affected Armenian society, fueling territorial claims and fears of further aggression (International Crisis Group, 2022).

In addition to its bilateral aspect, the Zangezur corridor also has regional and global implications. Iran has strongly opposed the project, as it sees corridor as a threat to its long-standing North-South trade routes and fears that it will deprive Iran of a vital regional link between Eurasia and the South Caucasus (Huseynov & Mahammadi, 2022). Iranian officials have repeatedly made it clear that they will not tolerate any geopolitical changes to its border with Armenia, which historically gave Tehran strategic access to the Black Sea region. The implementation of the Zangezur corridor is further complicated by this broad geopolitical opposition, which highlights how closely Azerbaijan's corridor diplomacy is linked to the concerns and interests of neighboring nations.

Azerbaijan has made concerted efforts to improve its position in larger Eurasian transport projects, particularly the Zangezur Corridor dispute, in the Middle Corridor (the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route). This project aims to create an East-West connectivity network connecting China to Europe via Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, bypassing both Russia and Iran. The Middle Corridor has gained strategic importance following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and provides a faster and more politically stable route than the northern routes, which have historically been dominated by Russian infrastructure (World Bank,

2022). By investing in the modernization of ports (such as the Port of Alat), railways (such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars line), and logistics hubs, Azerbaijan has established itself as an important link in the developing Eurasian transport network.

The successful promotion of the Central Corridor shows Azerbaijan's post-war strategy to increase its strategic relevance and soft power. Azerbaijan aims to establish itself as a key player in regional and intercontinental supply chains by linking to international trade initiatives and strengthening ties with Türkiye, Georgia, and Central Asian states (V. Huseynov, 2022). Azerbaijan's active diplomacy within organizations such as the Organization of Turkic States complements this approach and strengthens Baku's cultural and economic ties with Türkiye and Central Asia.

But the growth of these corridors has also reinforced patterns of selective regionalism. Armenia remains largely excluded from the Middle Corridor initiatives due to its geopolitical alignment with Russia and ongoing disputes with Azerbaijan. Armenia's ambiguous position has prevented it from fully participating in East-West connectivity projects. As a result, post-war transport diplomacy, rather than promoting inclusive regional integration, has deepened existing divisions in the South Caucasus, with new networks reinforcing some alignments while marginalizing others.

Finally, Azerbaijan's regional diplomacy strategy since the Second Karabakh War marks a shift from military conflict to an infrastructure and economy-based policy. Connectivity projects are intertwined with unresolved political conflicts, sovereignty issues, and competition between external powers, exposing the continuing fragility of South Caucasus regionalism, even as corridor diplomacy creates new opportunities for trade and geopolitical influence. Despite the controversial nature of projects such as the Zangezur Corridor and the new economic opportunities that the selective inclusiveness of the Middle Corridor has demonstrated, comprehensive and stable regional integration in the South Caucasus remains impossible.

3.3.4. Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" Proposal

In 2023, the Armenian government, in response to both domestic political demands and external pressures, launched a comprehensive initiative called "Crossroads of Peace." Introduced by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the plan aims to use Armenia as a transit hub at the intersection of East-West and North-South trade routes, connecting Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Iran

with Georgia and Russia through Armenian territory. The proposal emerged from discussions on regional connectivity, particularly over the controversial "Zangezur Corridor" idea put forward by Azerbaijan. Rather than being a passive recipient of Azerbaijani-led projects, Armenia aims to gain control over the regional agenda.

According to the plan, all transport routes through Armenian territory will be controlled by Armenia, with border control, security services, and Armenian customs controlling the movement of people and goods (Pashinyan Government, 2023). This stands in contrast to Azerbaijan's creation of the Zangezur corridor, which some Armenian politicians and analysts believe is an attempt to create a de facto Azerbaijani-controlled route from southern Armenia. By presenting a different framework, Yerevan has tried to reinterpret regional transit not as a zero-sum geopolitical initiative, but as a mutual economic opportunity governed by bilateral agreements and international standards.

The "Crossroads of Peace" represents a more comprehensive strategic approach to Armenia's foreign policy since the Second Karabakh War, going beyond a simple response to Azerbaijani initiatives. Recognizing its vulnerability in the new regional order, Armenia has worked harder to diversify its international alliances and reduce its dependence on Russia, whose security guarantor status has been called into question after the 2020 war and has been further undermined after Russia's aggression in Ukraine. By presenting Armenia as a positive and reliable partner for regional development, the "Crossroads of Peace" proposal aims to attract the European Union, the United States, and international financial institutions (International Crisis Group, 2023). Through this initiative, Yerevan has aimed to demonstrate its commitment to regional stability, economic modernization, and peaceful cooperation.

However, there are significant internal and external obstacles to the implementation of the "Crossroads of Peace". The Armenian government must overcome strong political opposition at home. Some members of the Armenian opposition and larger public groups affected by the consequences of the 2020 war are extremely skeptical of any transit agreements with Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Opponents worry that allowing transit from Türkiye or Azerbaijan to Armenian territory could leave the people vulnerable to future territorial claims, economic dependence, and security threats. Balancing these concerns with a bold regional agenda remains a challenge for Prime Minister Pashinyan's administration (Delcour, 2022).

Armenia must also contend with a complex geopolitical landscape abroad. While Iran opposes the idea of an Azerbaijani-controlled Zangezur corridor and supports Armenian sovereignty over Syunik, it is unclear to what extent Tehran will actively support Armenia's alternative infrastructure initiatives. Similarly, given Moscow's broader concerns elsewhere and Russia's uncertain stance on Armenian sovereignty, Yerevan cannot rely entirely on Russian support. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's growing claims and Türkiye's strong regional ambitions make it difficult for any Armenian-led regional proposal to gain widespread acceptance without parallel progress in political normalization (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Despite these obstacles, Armenia's regional strategy has experienced important changes with the "Crossroads of Peace" initiative. Armenia now aims to change the terms of engagement, rather than completely reject engagement, by providing a model of regional integration based on respect for sovereignty and mutual benefit. The project represents Armenia's attempt to rebuild its diplomatic establishment and combat marginalization in the post-war regional architecture, although it is unclear whether it will be successful. "Crossroads of Peace" is an example of the increasing use of economic diplomacy and infrastructure projects as tools to affirm political narratives and reshape geopolitical realities in a still-fragmented region, as seen in the broader context of South Caucasus regionalism.

CHAPTER 4. CHALLENGES TO REGIONALISM IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

4.1. Internal Barriers to Regional Cooperation

The main reason for the South Caucasus' failure to develop successful regionalism is the deep internal barriers that have existed since the post-Soviet era. Despite their geographical proximity and shared interests in regional stability and economic development, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have struggled to overcome their historical, political, and social differences. The persistent distrust and competition between the three states is often fueled by nationalist narratives and differing historical interpretations (Abushov, 2011).

Interstate relations have been further damaged by conflicts such as the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh territory and the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. These conflicts have undermined the environment for communication and compromise, and have strengthened nationalist sentiments (Cornell, 2002). In general, regional cooperation is unlikely to be realistic in the absence of conflict resolution and reconciliation processes. In addition to conflicts, the three states' development paths in the post-Soviet period have also been very different – Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration drive, Armenia's close ties with Russia, and Azerbaijan's balance of power policy have led to the absence of a unified regional vision (Delcour, 2022). Conflicting alliances, mutual distrust, and radically different foreign policy priorities often sabotage opportunities for cooperation.

These internal barriers are further reinforced by the weakness of institutional frameworks and regional identity. Unlike regions such as the Baltics or Central Europe, where historical experiences and cultural affinities have driven regional groupings, the South Caucasus lacks a strong sense of shared community (Makarychev, 2018, pp. 156–168). Attempts to develop social ties and economic interdependence have not been permanent and often overshadowed by political conflicts. Geographical proximity alone has not been sufficient to overcome the region's dominant nationalism, political divisions, and security dilemmas (Abushov, 2011).

4.1.1. Ethno-Territorial Conflicts and Nationalism

The unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts that erupted in the last years of the Soviet Union and intensified in the post-independence period have had a significant impact on the geopolitical situation of the South Caucasus. In addition to creating prolonged violence and humanitarian

crises, these conflicts have also reinforced political rivalry, mistrust, and nationalism among Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (De Waal, 2010). As a result, security and sovereignty perspectives have dominated the political landscape of the region, severely reducing the opportunities for regional cooperation.

The dispute over Karabakh, has been the most destabilizing conflict in the South Caucasus. Hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated into violence between 1988 and 1994, resulting in the occupation of Karabakh and seven neighboring regions of Azerbaijan by Armenian armed forces. The conflict displaced an estimated 30,000 Armenians and 600,000 Azerbaijanis, and has led to long-term political and humanitarian crises (Cheterian, 2012). Despite intermittent ceasefires and negotiations through the OSCE Minsk Group in 2020, no peace agreement was signed during these years (Broers, 2019). The conflict deepened political animosity between the two peoples, resulting in decades of complete disruption of bilateral trade, diplomacy, and communication. It is clear that these conflicts have destroyed the conditions required for regionalism by creating a political climate in which states value unilateral security over any regional intervention.

Georgia, on the other hand, has had to deal with its own destructive territorial disputes with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Separatist movements, aided by external powers such as Russia, culminated in conflicts in the early 1990s, and the collapse of Soviet rule led to the de facto independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgian rule (Lynch, 2004). Georgia's internal political stability has been further complicated by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians and the establishment of new regimes in the breakaway regions. Rather than investing in regional frameworks dominated by local actors, Georgia's experience reinforced its view of the South Caucasus as a dangerous and unstable region, leading to a shift towards Euro-Atlantic institutions (De Waal, 2010). Georgia's strategy of distancing itself from Russian-dominated initiatives was further reinforced by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which manifested itself, for example, in its refusal to participate in regional organizations dominated by Russia.

A key feature of these conflicts has been their transformation into "frozen conflicts," where active fighting has ceased but a political solution has not yet been reached. These unresolved disputes create a paradoxical regional order in which political elites use them to increase their power and to exclude political rivals. As long as regional competition persists in

frozen conflicts, there will be little room for the compromise and trust necessary for regional cooperation. These unresolved conflicts led to the organization of nationalist movements in the region. In Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, nationalist narratives were crucial for establishing national identity and political legitimacy. Any compromise could be politically costly, as political elites viewed their claims to disputed territories as essential to historical justice and national survival (Cheterian, 2012). Public campaigns such as "Justice for Khojaly" symbolized the narratives of territorial losses and displacement from the Karabakh region embedded in Azerbaijani state discourse and public consciousness. Armenian political discourse emphasized the preservation of ancient Armenian territories and the right of Karabakh Armenians to self-determination. In Georgia, the memory of the wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia reinforced narratives of the country's suffering and resistance to foreign rule, especially Russia (Cornell, 2002).

The rise and consolidation of these nationalist narratives have had a crucial impact on regional relations. In the South Caucasus, nationalism has typically taken a defensive stance, emphasizing territorial integrity and the protection of ethnic identity against alleged external threats. In contrast, more integrative forms of nationalism have occasionally emerged in other post-Soviet spaces, such as the Baltic states, where regional cooperation has been underpinned by shared democratic and security goals (Makarychev, 2018, pp. 156–168). In the South Caucasus, nationalism has tended to be divisive, reinforcing pre-existing boundaries rather than promoting cooperation.

Nationalism, while hindering political reconciliation, has a direct impact on economic integration. States are hesitant to engage in cross-border trade or infrastructure development in situations where ethnic tensions are still high. Political divisions are further entrenched by this economic isolation, resulting in a cycle in which political hostility is reinforced by economic fragmentation (Broers, 2019). Regional initiatives such as GUAM and TRACECA, which in theory offered a real chance for cooperation, have failed because these conflicts and nationalist sentiments have rendered confidence-building strategies ineffective.

Peace negotiations have often been externally mediated and episodic. In a context dominated by nationalist rhetoric in public discourse, civil society initiatives aimed at promoting cross-border dialogue and people-to-people contacts have struggled to gain traction (De Waal, 2010). Deep-seated public discontent remains a major obstacle to lasting peace, and diplomatic

normalization efforts have been hesitant and highly contingent, even after significant escalations such as the Second Karabakh War in 2020. As a result of these conflicts and nationalist dynamics, regional cooperation has become politically toxic. National governments have come to view the political value of engaging with former enemies as low, especially in a context where domestic political opposition can easily fuel nationalist sentiment. As a result, national security concerns and old grievances have consistently trumped attempts to create regional economic or political initiatives.

In conclusion, the unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts in the South Caucasus and the emergence of nationalism have seriously weakened the potential of regionalism. They have created a regional order in which the main organizing principle of interstate relations is conflict rather than cooperation. Unless important steps are taken towards conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the elimination of nationalist hostilities, regionalism in the South Caucasus will continue to be fragmented.

4.1.2. Divergent Political Paths and Foreign Policy Orientations

One of the biggest internal obstacles to the growth of regionalism in the South Caucasus has been the divergence in the foreign policy lines of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, which has hindered the implementation of a unified South Caucasus policy. Each state has gone its own way since the collapse of the Soviet Union, influenced by domestic political pressures, historical lessons, security concerns, and economic aspirations. The political distances between the three countries have grown as they have become increasingly close to various global powers and integration initiatives. For example, after Armenia gained independence, it has shown greater interest in Russia and Russian-led institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Due to its painful history with Russia, Georgia has moved closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions, aiming for membership in the European Union and NATO. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, has demonstrated a balanced policy, maintaining strategic alliances with Türkiye and the West, while interacting with Russia when necessary. The strategic contradictions created by these divergent views have weakened regional political discourse and hindered coordination (Delcour, 2015).

After gaining independence in 1991, Armenia's foreign policy trajectory was heavily oriented toward Russia, a decision influenced by both security concerns and long-term strategic

planning. In the early post-Soviet period, Armenia was extremely vulnerable due to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict with Azerbaijan and the perceived threat from Türkiye. After gaining independence, Russia became Armenia's main ally, positioning itself as a guarantor of regional stability during Armenia's early conflicts and providing financial, political, and military support (Iskandaryan, 2021).

Armenia's accession to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 1994 formalized its dependence on Russia for its security. The agreement to maintain Russia's 102nd Military Base in Gyumri offered concrete security guarantees against threats from both Azerbaijan and Türkiye. In addition, Russia emerged as Armenia's most important economic partner, gaining control of vital industries such as communications, transport, and energy (Giragosian, 2013). During Armenia's difficult economic transition in the 1990s, the Russian state or state-affiliated companies seized control of strategic fields such as railway infrastructure and electricity grids.

But Armenia-Russia relations have never been in total harmony. Despite Russia's security guarantees, Armenian politicians and analysts have often expressed concerns about the asymmetry of the relationship, particularly Moscow's geopolitical moves that conflict with Yerevan's national interests. Despite being Armenia's security partner, Russia's arms sales to Azerbaijan have not been welcomed by the Armenian political elite and society. Critics argue that Moscow sees Armenia not as an equal ally, but rather as a client state whose strategic importance stems from its geographical location (Giragosian, 2013).

Armenia's foreign policy approach was also demonstrated by its decision to abandon negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union in 2013, under strong pressure from Moscow. Rather than sign an agreement with the EU, Armenia agreed to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), formally establishing deep economic integration with the Russian-led bloc (Delcour, 2015). This choice was met with discontent among segments of Armenian society that favored more reform-oriented modernization and closer ties with Europe.

Despite this strong inclination towards Russia, Armenia has also tried to maintain cautious engagement with the West. Following Armenia's accession to the EEU, Yerevan signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in 2017, which expressed its desire to counterbalance Russian influence. CEPA offered a framework for

cooperation in areas such as governance reforms, the rule of law, environmental policy, and education (Delcour, 2015). According to analysts, this is a type of "soft balancing" that allows Armenia to develop other relations and gradually expand its foreign alliances (International Crisis Group, 2022).

The consequences of Armenia's reliance on Russia for security were exposed in 2020 during the Second Karabakh War, when Azerbaijan regained control of part of the region. Although Moscow ultimately brokered a ceasefire agreement and sent peacekeepers to Karabakh, Russia did not use force to defend Armenia's positions during the active phase of the conflict. This alleged Russian action has fueled debates about the alliance's credibility and reassessment of its foreign policy direction (Iskandaryan, 2021). The ongoing blockade by Azerbaijan and Türkiye, as well as Armenia's reliance on Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, have prevented the country from significantly changing its strategic position, despite growing resentment of Russia after 2020.

Armenia has demonstrated its desire to strengthen relations with Western countries, especially the US and the EU, since 2020. Armenia's diplomatic intentions are expressed in initiatives such as expanding cooperation with NATO within the framework of the Partnership for Peace and improving security dialogue with the EU (Giragosian, 2013). However, given Armenia's dependence on Russian military and economic assistance, as well as Moscow's influence on regional security through the CSTO and bilateral security agreements, these initiatives are still largely symbolic, rather than revolutionary.

As a result, Armenia's foreign policy approach can be understood as a strategic duality: interaction with Western institutions for political and economic modernization, while relying on Russia for concrete security guarantees. This duality is structurally dangerous, as the geopolitical realities surrounding Armenia, in particular the continued influence of Russia, the Karabakh issue, and the lack of normalized relations with two of its four neighbors (Türkiye and Azerbaijan), limit Armenia's sovereignty. Therefore, Armenia's geopolitical orientation not only limits its flexibility, but also reinforces various foreign policy trajectories that prevent regional cooperation and further fragment the South Caucasus.

Armenia is one of the countries that best illustrates the challenges faced by small states operating in contested regional contexts. A foreign policy that is limited rather than proactive and integrative is the result of a combination of strategic weakness, external dependence, and

domestic political pressures. Barring significant changes in the regional security environment or Armenia's domestic politics, Yerevan's geopolitical path will continue to maintain this delicate balance between confidence and caution.

Unlike Armenia and Georgia, Azerbaijan has navigated between competing global powers, pursuing a foreign policy based on pragmatism and balance, without fully committing to any bloc. Since gaining independence, Baku has avoided joining military alliances such as the CSTO or NATO, preferring instead national sovereignty, regime stability, and energy diplomacy. Baku also has positive relations with Russia, Türkiye, the West, and regional organizations. Thanks to this balancing approach, Azerbaijan has been able to maximize its economic and security advantages while maintaining its independence in foreign policy (Cornell, 2017, pp. 129–142).

A longer-term view of Azerbaijan's foreign policy reveals how its balancing approach has changed over time. In the 1990s, during a period of internal unrest and external threats, Heydar Aliyev led Azerbaijan to adopt a pragmatic strategy to consolidate the regime and protect its territorial integrity. The early 2000s witnessed a shift towards energy diplomacy, with the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which brought Azerbaijan closer to the economic interests of the West, particularly the US and the EU. These early achievements demonstrated how Baku could use its resource and geographical advantages to attract investment, create beneficial alliances, and enhance its international standing.

Azerbaijan's strong bilateral alliance with Türkiye, based on shared ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties, has been a key feature of its foreign policy. This partnership has grown significantly over the past 20 years, especially in the energy and defense industries. Azerbaijan's position on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has been consistently supported by Türkiye, which has provided it with political support, military training, and arms transfers. Azerbaijan's military victory during the Second Karabakh War in 2020 is partly attributed to Türkiye's active support. The signing of the 2021 Shusha Declaration, which elevated bilateral relations to the level of a strategic alliance, was a step that further increased cooperation in the defense sector (R. Mammadov, 2020).

But Azerbaijan has always resisted encirclement by a single ally. As it moves closer to Türkiye, Baku has also had pragmatic and relatively stable relations with Russia, although its relations have been punctuated by periodic tensions. Russia is seen both as a mediator and as a

power whose regional influence must be balanced. Baku has not joined the CSTO or the EAEU but has instead kept itself at arm's length from Moscow-dominated institutions. However, it is involved in regional talks and security forums in which Russia takes a central position, such as the 3+3 format and post-conflict discussions on the regional architecture (Guliyev, 2022). Azerbaijan's cooperation with Russia is based on avoiding conflict and, at the same time, not allowing Moscow to dominate regional security mechanisms.

Azerbaijan's cooperation with the West is also pragmatist in nature. Having not sought the kind of membership in NATO, like Georgia has, Azerbaijan has built strong economic links with the West, especially in the field of oil and gas. The Southern Gas Corridor, linking Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field with the markets in Europe, has helped importantly elevate Baku's importance to the European Union. These energy ties provide Azerbaijan with leverage and visibility in the global context, but the political dimension of these relations remains limited. Western allies have not often imposed hard conditionality on democratic reforms, at least in part due to Azerbaijan's strategic utility as an energy provider and a stable actor in a volatile region (Cornell, 2017, pp. 129–142).

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is not only reactive but consciously designed as a "multi-vector" strategy to insulate the country from geopolitical dependence (Huseynov, 2020, pp. 127-138). This details playing an active role in neutral or flexible international platforms, such as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), where Azerbaijan was chair from 2019 to 2022. These platforms have allowed Baku to strengthen its global standing without joining rigid security blocs.

In more contemporary periods, Azerbaijan's openness to become a member of BRICS, serves as proof that it wants to diversify more alliances in a multipolar world. Connectivity diplomacy (i.e., leadership in the Middle Corridor) is also utilized by Azerbaijan to build on its middle position between Asia and Europe. This policy reflects Baku's belief that geography and energy potential are not economic assets, but basic tools of foreign policy that can be used to exercise influence and ensure strategic flexibility.

Yet, Azerbaijan's balancing act is not straightforward. Increased closeness to Israel and Türkiye has caused diplomatic tensions with Iran. Russia, despite its current cooperation with Baku, is wary of Türkiye's growing influence in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan's modest political liberalization and human rights record occasionally put a strain on its image in Western

capitals, although these tensions have not yet produced significant diplomatic rifts (International Crisis Group, 2022). Azerbaijan's foreign policy has shown great flexibility. Its strategic alignment with Russia, Türkiye, the West, and the South has reduced the interest in regional unity, as in Armenia and Georgia. At the same time, this confirms the fractality of South Caucasus regionalism, with less room for genuine multilateralism as each state has its own external partners.

Azerbaijan's government has also used multilateral platforms to maintain its independent and neutral reputation. In particular, Azerbaijan chaired the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) between 2019 and 2022, a position that increased its visibility on the global scene. During its chairmanship, Baku promoted multilateralism, sovereignty, and respect for international law. Azerbaijan's NAM leadership illustrates its "principled commitment to non-bloc diplomacy" in order to exercise soft power without being drawn into great power rivalries (Huseynov, 2020, pp. 127-138). Azerbaijan's chairmanship of NAM also enabled it to advance its model of development and foreign policy priorities beyond the near abroad.

Another feature of Azerbaijan's foreign policy is its role within the Islamic world and its diplomacy as a connecting element between different regions. Azerbaijan has been an active participant within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and has continuously appealed to OIC assistance regarding issues such as the Khojaly tragedy and the Karabakh conflict. At the same time, Baku has maintained good relations with secular and Western powers, even Israel. Working in separate alliances, without falling into ideological or faith conflicts, has allowed Azerbaijan to present itself geopolitically on various platforms.

Azerbaijan has been more active in reshaping the regional order after the Second Karabakh War in 2020. Since regaining control of the region, Baku has pushed forward important connectivity initiatives, such as the Zangezur Corridor, which would connect mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan via Armenia. Azerbaijan has also established itself as a pioneer in the development of the Middle Corridor, a trade route spanning the South Caucasus and connecting China and Central Asia with Europe. These moves mark a shift from a defensive stance to setting a regional agenda. This increased assertiveness suggests that Azerbaijan's foreign policy has entered a new phase, one that is both regionally shaping and balancing.

Since Georgia gained independence in 1991, it has pursued a Western-oriented foreign policy trajectory, unlike its neighbors in the South Caucasus. Georgia has continued to align strategically with the Euro-Atlantic community, despite historical grievances, particularly those of the Russian Empire and Soviet rule. The key event here was the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought about the reformist and openly Western-oriented government of Mikhail Saakashvili. Rapid modernization, rule of law reforms, and closer ties with NATO and the EU, as top priorities for the new leadership, have transformed Georgia into the most openly Euro-Atlantic state in the South Caucasus.

Georgia's participation in the Partnership for Peace program and the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) formalized its desire to join NATO. Although Georgia was not given a formal Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO membership was promised. However, this declaration further increased tensions with Russia, leading to the war between the two nations in August 2008. The war resulted in Georgia losing control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia intervening militarily, and Moscow later recognizing the independence of the breakaway regions. This led to Georgia's greater integration into the West and reinforced its view of Russia as a vital threat.

Georgia and the European Union signed an Association Agreement in 2014, which includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The agreement formalizes Georgia's economic and legal alignment with EU standards and norms. Georgia has also strengthened its ties with NATO by providing military forces for operations abroad. Although formal membership remains elusive, Georgia is generally considered one of the most integrated NATO partner states in the post-Soviet era. However, political polarization, elite competition, and concerns about democracy, especially under the ruling Georgian Dream party since 2012, have made Georgia's pro-Western stance controversial within the country. However, Georgia's foreign policy has retained its fundamental strategic orientation, and the desire to join the EU remains a widely accepted national goal, even supported by strong public opinion and official documents.

Georgia's divergence from its neighbors is the clearest in the security arena. It is the only South Caucasus state to openly view Russia as a long-term strategic threat and to view Western institutions not just as economic partners but as essential security providers. This orientation limits the possibilities for region-wide cooperation forums that involve Russia. Georgia's refusal

to participate in the 3+3 Regional Cooperation Platform (on the grounds that it would legitimize the Russian occupation of 20% of Georgian territory) illustrates the scale of this strategic alignment.

In the meantime, Georgia also remains a key player in pragmatic regional connectivity. Its territory still remains important for East–West transit corridors such as the Southern Gas Corridor and the Middle Corridor, connecting Central Asia and China with Europe. Georgia also cooperates with Azerbaijan and Türkiye on joint infrastructure projects, including railways and pipelines. Most recently, the EU-supported Black Sea Submarine Electricity Cable project has added another dimension to Georgia's role as a regional energy transit hub (Delcour, 2022).

Despite this functional cooperation, Georgia's overall geopolitical orientation remains incompatible with the idea of a unified South Caucasus regional identity. Rather than engaging in South Caucasus regionalism, Georgia would rather act as a bridge between larger geopolitical blocs. This strategic divergence is at the heart of regional fragmentation, as the three states lack a common foreign policy agenda or institutional anchor (Broers, 2019). In short, Georgia's foreign policy orientation toward Euro-Atlantic integration, while strengthening its global partnerships and securing its democratic credentials, continues to undermine regional cooperation with its neighbors. As long as there are unresolved territorial conflicts and Russian occupation, Georgia will not return to multilateral formats with Russia – at the same time making it a crucial partner for the West and a structurally distinct actor in the region to which it geographically belongs.

4.1.3. Weak Regional Identity and Societal Divides

Unlike some other post-Soviet territories, the South Caucasus has failed to forge a unified regional identity that could facilitate political or social integration. Despite their geographical proximity and shared Soviet heritage, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia do not share a common story or "we-feeling" that transcends national borders. Rather than fostering solidarity, long-standing disparities in religion, language, historical memory, and foreign policy orientation have reinforced mutual alienation. The South Caucasus lacks even the simplest sense of collective belonging required to sustain regional initiatives. In addition to being cultural, this weak regional identity is structural, as evidenced by the lack of shared institutions, frayed social ties, and persistent nationalist narratives that portray neighboring states as enemies rather than partners.

Whereas many regional communities — such as the Baltic states or Nordic countries — have been able to build systems of cooperation upon shared values, institutions, and memory, the South Caucasus never developed the same basis. Although they are close neighbors with comparable experiences under Soviet domination, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia lack a unifying regional narrative. Instead, their political and cultural developments have been shaped by different imperial heritages and structures of identity, which continue to play significant roles in inter-state dynamics throughout the post-Soviet period.

Previously, the region had been carved up and contested between three competing empires: Ottoman, Russian (Tsarist and Soviet), and Persian. These imperial areas of influence did not form unity but rather divided loyalty into pieces, creating artificial boundaries. Georgia was largely incorporated into the Russian Empire during the early 19th century, Armenia was split between Russian and Persian rule, and Azerbaijan was subject to alternating occupation by Persian and Russian powers. These fragmented histories produced differing political cultures, alignments, and institutional legacies that have been continued into the post-independence period (Makarychev, 2018, pp. 156–168).

During the Soviet era, efforts at building a supranational Soviet identity coexisted with policies favoring ethnic differences. The Soviet policy of korenizatsiya (indigenization) was intended to help facilitate the promotion of local cultures and languages as part of the socialist project. This policy formalized ethnic difference by tracing administrative boundaries on ethnic lines, creating union republics and autonomous regions. Such formations had a propensity to sow seeds of future dispute by solidifying ethnic identities in political institutions (Cornell, 2002).

Also, the Soviet government embarked on population deportations and transfers that impacted the population balances in various regions. The Talysh, for instance, were the victims of deportations in the late 1930s as part of the broader Soviet strategy of ethnic population manipulation to enhance control (Minority Rights Group, 2024). The actions made interethnic relations even more challenging and ruled out hope for regional solidarity.

In the post-Soviet period, attempts at regional cooperation have been fairly top-down attempts, often sponsored by outside entities such as the European Union, UNDP, and OSCE. These have struggled to gain momentum because they have lacked backing from grassroots

powers and also due to the absence of a regional identity. South Caucasus lacks the "normative glue" necessary to bind its states together into successful cooperation (German, 2012). In essence, the fractured historical experience of the region, capped by Soviet policy and post-independence plans for nation-state development, has left the South Caucasus with a common identity concept that remains elusive to it. This has been a continued challenge to regional integration and cooperation.

The South Caucasus represents one of the most diverse areas in the post-Soviet context, characterized by significant ethnic, religious, and linguistic variation. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia each exhibit different cultural identities that have been molded by their historical narratives, civilizational impacts, and geopolitical partnerships. Though diversity itself is not the problem, in the South Caucasus, identity markers such as religion, language, and ethnicity have too frequently been politicized and weaponized, exacerbating mutual distrust, and complicating efforts at regional integration.

Religiously, the region is divided along main lines of civilizations. Armenia claims to be the oldest Christian nation in the world and adopts the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Orthodox Church (Gregoryan Church). Georgia is Eastern Orthodox in adherence and has close historical and religious links to the Georgian Orthodox Church. In contrast, Azerbaijan is a Shia Muslim-dominated secular republic influenced by Turkic heritage and aided by a strong cultural-political relationship with Türkiye. The religious orientations mentioned above are not simply theological differences, they are markers of civilizational boundaries, with each state belonging to various religious and cultural spheres — Christianity for Georgia and Armenia, and Turkic-Islamic civilization for Azerbaijan (Cornell, 2017; Iskandaryan, 2020).

Language is a significant identity marker in the area. Armenian is an Indo-European language with a distinct alphabet and writing system that has been in use since the 5th century. However, Georgian belongs to the Kartvelian language family and is not affiliated with any other major language family. Azerbaijani, a Turkic language, uses an adapted Latin script and is linguistically close to Turkish and other Central Asian Turkic languages. These differences have profound cultural significance: each writing and linguistic tradition is not only a means of communication, but also a symbol of national continuity and sovereignty (Makarychev, 2018, pp. 156–168). Unlike areas with a shared linguistic or cultural heritage — the Baltics or Visegrad

Group are a case in point — the South Caucasus does not have a common linguistic or educational framework capable of guaranteeing mutual understanding or regional literacy.

Politicization of religious and linguistic differences is also exacerbated by the versions of history provided by national elites. Identity is usually defined in contrast to the neighboring states in every nation. For example, Armenian sources emphasize the narrative of resilience against Turkish and Azerbaijani aggression, often connecting modern security concerns with the memory of the Armenian Genocide. In Azerbaijan, official discourses revolve around notions of occupation and the struggle for justice in relation to Karabakh, depicting Armenia as a hostile power. In Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are viewed as strategic ambiguity neighbors, while Russia is understood as an occupying power—this builds a narrative that highlights Georgian uniqueness and shared European values (De Waal, 2010).

Cultural and religious markers are thus not merely symbols of heritage, they are used in national mythography and border-making. Political elites and media use religious and civilizational terminology to define in-groups and out-groups. Appeals to "Christian solidarity" between Georgia and Armenia are made from time to time, as opposed to Azerbaijan's Muslim identity, whereas Azerbaijan and Türkiye emphasize their commitment to pan-Turkic and Islamic solidarity. These sorts of rhetorical alignments make the formation of trust or collaboration between the three states impossible, particularly when combined with existing territorial disagreements and historical grievances (Cheterian, 2012).

In addition, cross-border social contacts are extremely few. There are few multilingual media or school curricula that promote regional comprehension. Civil society organizations are mainly still nationally oriented, with little capacity to bridge linguistic or religious divides. Initiatives aimed at the promotion of intercultural dialogue, such as Track II diplomacy or youth exchange programs have faced budget limitations and political resistance, particularly at times of heightened conflict (T. German, 2012). As a result, societal integration at the communal level is still underdeveloped, and stereotypes of neighboring cultures persist without scrutiny. In total, South Caucasus is a paradox: its very diversity could provide the basis for complete regional collaboration; more frequently, it has caused fragmentation. Far from embracing pluralism, political institutions have worked to exploit religious and linguistic disparities in order to enhance national identity to the detriment of regional cohesion. The result shows a trend where political

divisions are complemented by cultural boundaries, and thus the notion of a common South Caucasian space becomes increasingly far-fetched.

Within the South Caucasus, both media and elite rhetoric have been significant in influencing perceptions of neighboring states. Against the context of historical conflict and border disputes across the region, domestic media arenas have not been where reconciliation or inter-state communication occurs. Rather, they have been fundamental spaces where different national discourses are reaffirmed that present the region as fragmented, and endlessly unstable. It is in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia that the national media have repeatedly portrayed the neighboring states as framed by historical grievances and imagined territorial threats. Azerbaijani media, for instance, identifies Armenia with occupation and injustice narratives, using the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict as a staple of political communication since decades. In turn, Armenian media constructs Azerbaijan through frames of aggression reporting, tracing contemporary conflict to recollections of war and displacement. Georgia's media, which are more Western-leaning than those of Armenia and Azerbaijan, paint both of these countries as unstable neighbors, placing Russia as the principal existential danger given its military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Broers, 2019; De Waal, 2010).

The national narratives under discussion are more than mere media representations; they are strongly reinforced by political elites, school curricula, and public rituals. Identity, in this sense, is a matter of security: each state delineates its sovereignty from/against its neighbors, presenting cooperation as a compromise instead of a mutual opportunity (Abushov, 2011). This approach to framing is difficult in terms of developing political motivation or public interest for regional activities. In addition, there is almost a complete lack of independent or transnational media outlets in the South Caucasus that might counter these narratives. The lack of so-called "discursive infrastructure" across the region has created an echo chamber effect, in which populations within each country rarely are exposed to alternative viewpoints or narratives with the potential to make the "other" more human (Broers, 2019).

The weakness of civil society escalates this issue. Usually, such non-state actors that advocate for cross-border engagement are questioned or branded unpatriotic, especially during moments of high tensions. Peacebuilding practitioners and independent journalists routinely face harassment or popular criticism for engaging in dialogue initiatives, considering that their

activities are perceived to present a threat to national integration. Although opportunities for dialogue may arise, they are often soon shut down by political crises or fresh outbreaks of violence (De Waal, 2010).

The result is an environment in which nationalist rhetoric is deeply entrenched and reinforced. The media portrayal of neighboring nations as enemies not only reflects popular sentiment but also contributes to its formation. Such sentiment limits the political space that is conducive to regional cooperation, as politicians are bound by nationalist pressures. This dynamic contributes to a "structural fragmentation of identity," in which citizens of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia perceive their states as incompatible in values, goals, and alliances (Abushov, 2011).

4.2. External Obstacles and Economic Fragmentation

Though much scholarly focus has been directed at the internal issues that constrain regional cooperation within the South Caucasus, there have also been external forces contributing to the fragmentation of the region. Situated at the geopolitical intersection of Eurasia, the South Caucasus has historically been exposed to competition among hegemonic neighboring great powers like Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, each seeking to establish its strategic, economic, and ideological domination over Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Not only have these powers cultivated bilateral relations with specific South Caucasus states, but they have also worked at cross-purposes, preventing any coherent regional cooperation. Rather than promoting integration, the presence of several, rival external actors has implanted geopolitical cleavages in the foundations of regional relations (Delcour, 2022).

Russia's continued military pressure, peacekeeping activities, and peacekeeping role in regional conflicts have allowed it to act as the main gatekeeper, blocking pro-Western regional initiatives. Türkiye has been taking a more ambitious and economically led approach, evident in its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, in which East–West connectivity is advanced often at the expense of Armenia. Iran, by contrast, has taken a more conservative posture in trying to sustain its position by, for instance, opposing corridors like the Zangezur corridor that compromise its established transit corridors and geopolitical position (Broers, 2019). These rival and sometimes opposing agendas have created a framework of external dependencies in which

each of the South Caucasus states is paired with varying external powers, making regional consensus impossible.

Apart from political fragmentation, these rivalries have also expressed themselves as economic disunity, wherein proposals for regional connectivity and trade routes are more driven by geopolitical agendas than by shared regional interests. Multilateral economic initiatives, including the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA), and the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, were established as forums for regional dialogue and integration. Yet they have been mostly unsuccessful in realizing their objectives because of insufficient institutional capacity, selective engagement, and the states' priority to develop bilateral ties with external powers rather than multilateral regional collaboration (German, 2012).

4.2.1. Geopolitical Rivalries and External Dependence

Russia has traditionally played the most influential role in the South Caucasus as an external power. Throughout the post-Soviet period, Moscow has sought to preserve the region as part of its near abroad by using unresolved conflicts, integrating Armenia and, partly Azerbaijan and Georgia into Russia-centric structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Blank, 2022).

Armenia has historically been Russia's closest ally in the region. Moscow operates a large military base in Gyumri, controls key border installations, and supplies Armenia with energy and arms. This security issue has bound Armenia's foreign policy to Russia, particularly as Yerevan became a member of both the CSTO and the EAEU (Markarian, 2021). However, Russia's limited response during the 2020 Second Karabakh War, where it refrained from intervening on behalf of Armenia, deeply undermined this alliance. Despite deploying approximately 2,000 peacekeepers to Karabakh after the war, Russia was seen in Armenia as an unreliable guarantor of security (Abrahamyan, 2021).

In Georgia, Russia's influence has been exerted through military force and support for separatist regions. Following the 2008 war, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and stationed troops in both territories (Delcour, 2022). This occupation has served

not only to weaken Georgia's sovereignty but also to limit the possibility of trilateral regional frameworks that include Tbilisi.

Russia's relationship with Azerbaijan has been more transactional. Although not formally allied, the two countries maintain strong economic ties, especially in the energy and arms sectors. Moscow has armed both Armenia and Azerbaijan, positioning itself as a mediator in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict (Kucera, 2022). However, Azerbaijan's assertiveness in the post-war period, including its 2023 military operation to retake control of Karabakh, challenged Russia's authority. Moscow's non-intervention was widely interpreted as a sign of declining commitment or capacity, particularly as Russian peacekeepers began withdrawing in early 2024 (Reuters, 2024).

Russia's declining role has been exacerbated by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which redirected military resources, weakened its global standing, and gave regional actors a chance to seek alternative partnerships. Armenia suspended its participation in CSTO activities and initiated closer cooperation with Western actors, including the European Union and NATO (Business Insider, 2024). Azerbaijan continues to diversify its energy exports to Europe, while Georgia maintains its course toward EU and NATO membership despite domestic political challenges (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2023).

To regain lost influence, Russia has proposed new regional mechanisms such as the 3+3 platform, which would bring together Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, excluding Western powers. However, Georgia's refusal to participate due to Russia's occupation of its territory has limited the format's effectiveness. Analysts suggest that while Russia remains a powerful actor, its position is no longer hegemonic. Instead, it must now compete with Türkiye, Iran, and Western institutions for influence (Kortunov, 2023).

Türkiye has emerged as a decisive external actor in the South Caucasus, in particular following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. Unlike Russia's legacy-based presence, Türkiye's influence has been projected through a combination of military support, and strategic alignment, especially with Azerbaijan. This engagement has elevated Ankara's status as a regional power, but it has also reinforced the region's fragmentation by deepening strategic.

The cornerstone of Türkiye's regional policy is its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, which was importantly strengthened during the 2020 war. Turkish support, especially through the provision of Bayraktar drones, military training, and diplomatic backing, played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's military success (Oğuzlu, 2021, pp. 22–31). The post-war Shusha Declaration, signed in 2021, formalized this alliance by adding joint defense commitments and closer political cooperation. The declaration not only deepened bilateral ties but also sent a strong message to Armenia and Iran, reinforcing the perception of an emerging Turkish-Azerbaijani geopolitical bloc (Meister, 2022).

Türkiye's economic and infrastructural ambitions in the region are similarly strategic. Ankara has long championed East–West transport corridors, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the proposed Zangezur corridor that would connect Türkiye to Central Asia via Azerbaijan. These routes are part of Ankara's broader "Middle Corridor" vision, which aligns with its aspirations to become a logistics hub between Europe and Asia (Türkmen, 2023). However, the emphasis on bilateral or trilateral formats (Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Georgia) has largely excluded Armenia, reinforcing regional fragmentation (Wolczuk & Delcour, 2022, pp. 77-94).

Ankara's role has also impacted Georgia. Türkiye is Georgia's second-largest trading partner and a key supporter of its Euro-Atlantic orientation. Infrastructure investments and defense cooperation have strengthened Ankara's presence in Georgia, positioning Türkiye as a counterbalance to Russian influence (Kapanadze, 2021). However, this alignment has further entrenched the geopolitical divergence between Georgia and Armenia, with Georgia increasingly tied to Türkiye and the West, while Armenia remains isolated from key regional transit networks.

Armenia, for its part, views Türkiye with deep skepticism. Although recent normalization talks were initiated in 2022, no diplomatic breakthrough has been achieved due to unresolved issues related to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the legacy of the 1915 genocide (Ter-Matevosyan & Sanamyan, 2023). Türkiye's refusal to reopen its land border and its continued military cooperation with Azerbaijan reinforce Armenia's sense of insecurity. As a result, Türkiye's actions contribute to a region defined by selective partnerships rather than inclusive cooperation frameworks.

Iran's involvement in the South Caucasus has historically been shaped by geography, historical ties, and its desire to counterbalance the rising influence of Türkiye, Russia, and Western-aligned actors. Sharing borders with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran sees stability in the region as critical to its national security. However, Tehran's role has often been characterized by caution and defensive pragmatism, rather than ambitious regional integration efforts. Especially since the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Iran has grown concerned about changes in regional connectivity and power alignments that could marginalize its influence (Borshchevskaya & Kagan, 2022).

One of Iran's core concerns is the proposed "Zangezur Corridor" — a transport link that would connect Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenia's Syunik province. Backed by Türkiye and Azerbaijan, this corridor is part of a larger strategy to establish East–West connectivity and deepen pan-Turkic linkages. Tehran opposes this initiative strongly, fearing that it would cut Iran off from Armenia, thereby weakening Tehran's only stable overland route to the South Caucasus and the Black Sea (Orujyan & Abrahamyan, 2022). Iranian leaders have referred to any alteration of the Iran–Armenia border as a "red line," and have warned that they will not tolerate any changes to regional borders or transit structures (Shariatinia, 2023, pp. 17-41).

Tehran has backed up these warnings with military signaling, conducting large-scale exercises along its northern border in 2021 and 2022. These drills, held near the Aras River and Nakhchivan, included some crossings, drone operations, and bridge construction — sending a message to both Azerbaijan and Türkiye that Iran is prepared to act if regional corridors threaten its interests (Alfoneh, 2022). Iranian officials have also accused Baku of harboring Israeli intelligence infrastructure near its borders, contributing to growing strategic mistrust between the two countries (Kozhanov, 2021).

Despite this tension, Iran has simultaneously sought to maintain and expand its partnership with Armenia. Given Yerevan's isolation due to closed borders with Türkiye and Azerbaijan, Iran has served as a critical trade partner and energy transit point. Tehran has promoted its own transit vision — including the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) — that would link Iran with Russia and Europe via Armenia and Georgia. By reinforcing these routes, Iran hopes to present itself as a viable alternative to Turkish and Azerbaijani-dominated East–West infrastructure plans (Sadjadpour, 2022). In 2023, Iran and

Armenia signed new agreements to improve road and rail links and increase electricity exports, further strengthening this alignment (Shariatinia, 2023, pp. 17-41).

However, Iran's strategy is not without contradictions. While opposing Turkish expansionism, Tehran has also worked with both Moscow and Baku in other regional frameworks, including trilateral summits and infrastructure diplomacy. Iran has shown willingness to recalibrate relations with Azerbaijan after moments of crisis, such as joint border security talks and limited military cooperation in 2023 (Haghirian, 2023, pp. 120–132). This balancing reflects Iran's attempt to manage competing interests — opposing geopolitical isolation while avoiding direct confrontation with militarily superior coalitions.

4.2.2. Economic Fragmentation and the Failure of Regional Initiatives

Despite numerous attempts at cooperation, the South Caucasus is still lacking an integrated economic space. Instead of a regional integration, the post-Soviet South Caucasus has evolved into segmented markets and infrastructure networks, driven by geopolitical alliances and rivalries. Political differences, border disputes, and rival external alliances have stood in the way of the development of one regional market and have harmed multilateral activities (Fawcett, 2013, pp. 25–42).

Trade relations between the three nations—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—remain politically restricted. Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's blockade of Armenia since the early 1990s has isolated the country from regional East–West links and made it dependent on Iran and Georgia for access to international markets. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and Georgia have established tight bilateral economic ties centered on energy transit and infrastructure. As a result, there is no common economic institutions that can plan development across the three states (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2022, pp. 77-94). While Georgia's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU has increased its exports to Europe, this alignment has further reduced the prospects of common market rules or tariff harmonization with its neighbors (Freire, 2020, pp. 45–60).

Several multilateral initiatives aimed at fostering integration have yet to get off the ground. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which includes all three South Caucasus states and was formed in 1992, was meant to improve cross-border trade and sectoral cooperation. Nonetheless, BSEC's impact has remained marginal. Scholars have

criticized it as a low-profile forum lacking implementation capacity or any meaningful enforcement mechanisms (Manoli, 2012, pp. 339–356). Most member states have used the organization more as a political visibility forum than as economic collaboration, and South Caucasus countries in particular have placed its agenda second to bilateral or donor-driven relations (Petrov, 2015, pp. 313–329).

The GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, founded in 1997, had once showed potential for collaboration among post-Soviet countries seeking alternatives to Russia-led initiatives. However, GUAM has not evolved into an influential economic union. Armenia's non-membership, driven by its security relationship with Russia and conflictual relations with Azerbaijan, has undermined inclusivity. Moreover, conflicting political agendas, insufficient institutionalization, and limited financing have constrained GUAM from implementing major economic projects (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2012). As a result, GUAM remains more of a rhetorical coalition than a force for trade or infrastructure integration.

The EU-sponsored Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA) in the 1990s was more ambitious in scope. It envisioned the restoration of the ancient Silk Road and the connection of European and Asian markets through the South Caucasus. TRACECA put money into customs modernization, road rehabilitation, and port facilities, particularly in Poti and Baku. In practice, though, TRACECA was more a set of technical assistance programs than an integrated corridor policy. One of the main shortcomings of TRACECA has been the failure to involve Armenia constructively, due mainly to geopolitical competition and border closure. This exclusion has prevented regional cooperation and exacerbated the political fragmentation of transportation systems.

Among the underlying challenges shared by these initiatives is the fact that they were often externally designed and propelled, with little either local ownership or institutional follow-through. Regardless of whether they are EU, OSCE, or multilateral donor-funded, most projects have been top-down in nature, perceiving the South Caucasus more as a transit region than a space with inherent integration potential. There has been little "regionalism from below," and there has been minimal civil society or private sector involvement in the development of integration agendas. This lack of grassroots engagement has undermined sustainability and buy-in among local political elites.

Economic fragmentation has also been deepened by the proliferation of selective bilateral and trilateral infrastructure projects, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus Pipeline, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway. While successful in connecting Azerbaijan and Georgia to Türkiye and European markets, these projects have systematically bypassed Armenia, consolidating its economic isolation. Far from promoting integration, these corridors have cemented geopolitical blocs and created logistical routes that adhere to political alliances rather than market efficiencies (Shiriyev, 2020). Armenia's own initiatives, such as its involvement in the North-South corridor with Iran have been limited in scope and poorly integrated into broader regional architectures.

Intra-regional investment is also limited by institutional asymmetry and weak economic complementarity. Azerbaijan's economy remains hydrocarbon-dominated, Armenia's by diaspora remittances and services, and Georgia's by trade and tourism. The absence of industrial synergy or shared value chains reduces the incentive for deeper integration. Moreover, corruption, distrust, and insufficient harmonization of standards or customs procedures have made cross-border trade both costly and politically sensitive (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2022, pp. 77-94).

Overall, the South Caucasus has experienced a selective, fragmented, and externally driven form of economic cooperation that has failed to advance meaningful regional integration. While infrastructure has been improved in bilateral contexts, and some technical assistance has enhanced trade capacity, the political divisions between states, and their alignment with rival external powers have made inclusive economic regionalism impossible. Additional progress will require even more inclusive frameworks, locally owned programs, and the political will to transcend nationalist interests in favor of mutual economic benefits.

FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

This thesis investigated the question of why regionalism remains underdeveloped in the South Caucasus, despite decades of independence, geographical proximity, and shared post-Soviet experience. The study sought to understand the domestic and external dynamics that have prevented Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia from evolving into a stable and cooperative regional system. Drawing on qualitative research methods and and realism as a main theoretical approach, the research offered an analysis of key barriers to integration.

The findings of the research indicated that regionalism in the South Caucasus is prevented by a combination of unsettled history, different strategic orientations, weak institutions, and geopolitical competition. Internally, the persistence of ethno-territorial conflicts, particularly over Karabakh territory, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, has promoted to the security concerns. Nationalist narratives in the three states have created reciprocal hostility rather than building consensus. Far from a collective regional identity, state-building through contrast with neighbors has occurred in each state. For instance, Armenia's political narrative has been about victimhood and survival, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been centered on territorial reintegration and energy independence, and Georgia has allied itself with Western institutions in response to Russian occupation.

Externally, the South Caucasus has become a geopolitical competition for influence among Russia, Türkiye, Iran, the European Union. Rather than fostering cooperative dynamics, the involvement of these powers has entrenched fragmentation. Russia's security role has been especially dominant, following its peacekeeping mission in Karabakh after the 2020 war. Türkiye has deepened its strategic alliance with Azerbaijan through joint military exercises and transport projects like the Zangezur corridor perspective. Iran, while historically engaged in the region, has retained a cautious and at times resistant attitude towards new East–West transport links bypassing its territory. These competing interests have produced selective bilateral or trilateral alignments, rather than far-reaching regional mechanisms.

In spite of the launch of various regional initiatives, including TRACECA, BSEC, GUAM, and most recently the 3+3 platform, none have succeeded in creating durable regional institutions. Most of these initiatives were externally driven or too focused on technical cooperation, lacking the political confidence and shared vision necessary for integration. Even in

the post-2020 context, when the ceasefire agreement opened up new possibilities for economic corridors and cooperation, attempts have continued to be stalled due to disagreements over sovereignty, border demarcation, and rival geopolitical calculations.

Despite the richness of research, there are some limitations. The research relied primarily on secondary sources, such as academic literature, policy documents, and political rhetoric. Although these are informative, the absence of interviews with local stakeholders, civil society, or regional policymakers limits the study's engagement with bottom-up perspectives. Furthermore, the focus was confined to the South Caucasus without comparative examination of more successful examples of regionalism, i.e., in the Baltic or Central Asian regions. These gaps indicate the need for further research incorporating fieldwork, opinion surveys, and cross-regional comparison.

For follow-on studies, several directions can be indicated. First, interviews with diplomats, area experts, and civil society organizations would enable the documentation of contemporary attitudes toward conflict and cooperation. Second, comparative studies could illuminate why other post-Soviet or post-empire regions — Central Asia or Eastern Europe, for example — have seen more institutionalization despite similar issues. Third, further exploration of how international trends (Russia's conflict in Ukraine, changing EU priorities, and China's Belt and Road Initiative) are recalculating the strategic situations of South Caucasus countries would enrich the debate.

As a result, regionalism in the South Caucasus remains a difficult and fragmented goal. Competing national agendas, a lack of regional identity, and external competition still characterize the region. While current developments offer limited opportunities, any meaningful integration will depend on resolving conflicts, building trust, and moving from the geopolitics of countries to regional inclusiveness.

REFERENCES

1. Abrahamyan, E. (2021). Armenia's fragile statehood and geopolitical dependencies. Eurasia Daily Monitor, 18(139).

2. Abushov, K. (2011). Regionalism in the South Caucasus from a theoretical perspective: Is the South Caucasus a region? Caucasus International, 1(2), 167–177.

3. Abushov, K. (2009). Polities and foreign policies in the South Caucasus: Regionalism and integration. Caucasus Review of International Affairs, 3(1), 23–35.

4. Alfoneh, A. (2022). Iran's strategic posture in the South Caucasus. Middle East Institute.

5. Aliyev, I. (2021). Official statement on regional transit and Zangezur Corridor. Retrieved from. https://president.az

6. Blank, S. (2022). Russia's strategy in the Caucasus: Military assertiveness and political manipulation. Eurasia Review.

7. Borshchevskaya, A., & Kagan, F. (2022). Russian influence in the South Caucasus: Continuity and change. Institute for the Study of War.

8. Broers, L. (2019). Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a rivalry. Edinburgh University Press.

9. Bryman, A. (2016). Social research methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

10. Business Insider. (2024). Russia's arms exports remain high despite war. https://www.businessinsider.com

11. Cantori, L. J., & Spiegel, S. L. (1970). The international politics of regions: A comparative approach. Prentice-Hall.

12. Czerewacz-Filipowicz, K., & Konopelko, A. (2016). Regional integration processes in the Commonwealth of Independent States: Economic and political perspectives. Springer.

13. Czerewacz-Filipowicz, K., & Konopelko, A. (2017). The Commonwealth of Independent States: Between disintegration and reintegration. Eastern Journal of European Studies, 8(1), 105–126.

14. Cheterian, V. (2012). War and peace in the Caucasus: Russia's troubled frontier. Columbia University Press.

15. Coppieters, B. (2001). Federalism and conflict in the Caucasus. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

16. Cornell, S. E. (2002). Autonomy and conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and separatism in the South Caucasus – Cases in Georgia. Uppsala University.

17. Cornell, S. E. (2017). The geopolitics of Eurasia: Regional fragmentation and power rivalries. Journal of International Affairs, 70(2), 129–142.

18. De Waal, T. (2010). The Caucasus: An introduction. Oxford University Press.

19. Delcour, L. (2015). The EU and Russia in the shared neighbourhood: Integrating or competing? Routledge.

20. Delcour, L. (2011). Shaping the post-Soviet space? EU policies and approaches to region-building in the Eastern Partnership. In H. Haukkala et al. (Eds.), The EU's Eastern Partnership: Common Framework or Wider Europe? (pp. 105–123). Routledge.

21. Delcour, L., & Wolczuk, K. (2022). Beyond influence: European and Eurasian connectivity strategies in the South Caucasus. Journal of Common Market Studies, 60(4), 929–946.

22. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

23. Dragneva, R., & Wolczuk, K. (2012). Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, stagnation or rivalry? Chatham House Briefing Paper.

24. Fawcett, L. (2013). Regionalism from an historical perspective. In M. Telò (Ed.), European Union and new regionalism (2nd ed., pp. 25–42). Ashgate.

25. Freire, M. R. (2020). Russian foreign policy in the Caucasus: Managing power and influence. In M. R. Freire & L. Simão (Eds.), Geopolitics of Eurasia (pp. 45–60). Routledge.

26. Gadimova-Akbulut, N. (2020). The political economy of regionalism in the South Caucasus: Comparative perspectives. Caucasus Edition: Journal of Conflict Transformation.

27. Gawrich, A., Melnykovska, I., & Schweickert, R. (2010). More than a suitcase: Regional cooperation in the Black Sea and the EU's role. Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 10(2), 139–157.

28. Government of Armenia. (2022). "Crossroads of Peace" Strategic Framework Proposal. Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure.

29. German, T. (2012). Regional cooperation in the South Caucasus: Good neighbours or distant relatives? Caucasian Review of International Affairs, 2(2), 10–23.

30. Giragosian, R. (2013). Armenia's strategic dilemma. European Council on Foreign Relations.

31. Guliyev, F. (2019). Azerbaijan's missed opportunities. Current History, 118(810), 265–270. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614466

32. Guliyev, F. (2022). The new global energy order: Shifting players, policies, and power dynamics. In H. Boudet & S. Hazboun (Eds.), Public responses to fossil fuel export: Exporting energy and emissions in a time of transition (pp. 25–44). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-824046-5.00004-7

33. Haghirian, H. (2023). Iran's South Caucasus Policy: Continuity and recalibration. Middle East Policy, 30(1), 120–132.

34. Hurrell, A. (1995). Explaining the resurgence of regionalism in world politics. Review of International Studies, 21(4), 331–358. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500117954

35. International Crisis Group. (2020). Improving prospects for peace after the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Europe Report No. 264.

36. International Crisis Group. (2021). Nagorno-Karabakh: Seeking a path to peace in the South Caucasus. Europe Report No. 265.

37. International Crisis Group. (2022). Post-war prospects for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Europe Report No. 266.

38. International Crisis Group. (2023). Armenia and the South Caucasus: Managing new opportunities and risks. Europe Report No. 268.

39. Ismailov, E., & Papava, V. (2006). The South Caucasus: A region in transition. The Silk Road Paper Series, Central Asia–Caucasus Institute.

40. Iskandaryan, A. (2021). Post-war Armenia: Domestic fragility and external pressures. Caucasus Analytical Digest.

41. Jafalian, A. (2011). Reassessing security in the South Caucasus. Ashgate Publishing.

42. Kakachia, K., & Lebanidze, B. (2023). Georgia between resilience and reversal: Democracy and foreign policy in flux. Caucasus Analytical Digest.

43. Kaleji, V. (2021). Iran's concerns about the Zangezur corridor and regional transit shifts. Iran Review.

44. Kapanadze, S. (2021). Georgia's foreign policy between the West and Russia. Carnegie Europe.

45. Kavalski, E. (2016). The complexity of geopolitics: Resilience and the EU's Eastern Partnership. Routledge.

46. Kortunov, A. (2023). Russia's new Eurasian doctrine: Limits of regional leadership. Russian International Affairs Council.

47. Kozhanov, N. (2021). Iran's strategic concerns in the South Caucasus. Chatham House.

48. Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

49. Kubicek, P. (2009). The Commonwealth of Independent States: An example of failed regionalism? Review of International Studies, 35(S1), 237–256.

50. Kucera, J. (2022). Azerbaijan's balancing act: The limits of neutrality. Eurasianet.

51. Lynch, D. (2004). Engaging Eurasia's separatist states: Unresolved conflicts and de facto states. United States Institute of Peace Press.

52. Makarychev, A. (2018). Russia and the EU in a multipolar world: Discursive shifts in the South Caucasus. Problems of Post-Communism, 65(3), 156–168.

53. Manoli, P. (2012). The Black Sea region: Cooperation and power asymmetries. Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 12(3), 339–356.

54. Markarian, T. (2021). Armenia and the Eurasian Economic Union: Institutional alignment and strategic discontent. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 121, 6–9.

55. Meister, S. (2022). The limits of German and EU policy in the South Caucasus. DGAP Policy Brief.

56. Minority Rights Group. (2024). Minority groups in the South Caucasus. https://minorityrights.org

57. Nye, J. S. (1968). Comparative regional integration: Concept and measurement. International Organization, 22(4), 855–880. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300025467

58. Oğuzlu, T. (2021). Türkiye's re-engagement in the South Caucasus: A new regionalism? Turkish Policy Quarterly, 19(4), 22–31.

59. Orujyan, E., & Abrahamyan, E. (2022). Civil society and identity in the South Caucasus: Challenges to regionalism. Heinrich Böll Stiftung South Caucasus.

60. OSCE. (2006). Parliamentary cooperation in the South Caucasus: Final assessment report. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

61. OSCE. (2023). Status of civil society dialogue in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Vienna: OSCE Reports Archive.

62. Pashinyan Government. (2023). Crossroads of Peace: A strategic proposal for regional connectivity. Republic of Armenia Official Site.

63. Petrov, R. (2015). Legal approximation and sovereignty: The case of Georgia and Ukraine. In A. Łazowski & R. Wessel (Eds.), EU external relations law (pp. 313–329). Brill.

64. R. Mammadov. (2020). Azerbaijan's multivector diplomacy: Strategic autonomy and pragmatic balancing. Caucasus International, 10(2), 43–58.

65. Reuters. (2024). Iran opposes Zangezur corridor over regional concerns. https://www.reuters.com

66. Sabanadze, N. (2010). Globalization and nationalism: The cases of Georgia and the Basque Country. Central European University Press.

67. Sadjadpour, K. (2022). Iran's neighborhood policy and the South Caucasus. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

68. Sergey, T., et al. (2021). The GUAM phenomenon: Its experience as a regional cooperation structure and its prospects as an international organization. Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, 1(1), 93–104.

69. Shariatinia, M. (2023). Iran and the shifting geopolitics of the South Caucasus. Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, 14(1), 17–41.

70. Shiriyev, Z. (2020). Azerbaijan's foreign policy: Between regionalism and globalism. Carnegie Moscow Center.

71. Silverman, D. (2020). Interpreting qualitative data (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

72. Simão, L. (2011). The EU's neighbourhood policy and the South Caucasus: Unfolding regionalism. Caucasian Review of International Affairs, 5(2), 109–123.

73. Ter-Matevosyan, V., & Sanamyan, E. (2023). Armenia's strategic reorientation: Internal and external constraints. Eurasia Daily Monitor, 20(36).

74. Türkmen, T. (2023). Türkiye's strategic depth in the South Caucasus post-2020. SETA Foundation Policy Brief, 56.

75. UNDP (2012). Building bridges: Civil society dialogue in the South Caucasus. United Nations Development Programme.

76. V. Huseynov (2020). Vicious Circle of the South Caucasus: Intra-Regional Conflicts and Geopolitical Heterogeneity. Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, 127-138.

77. V. Huseynov & F. Shafiyev (2020). Peace Negotiations Cannot Be Held Forever. Insight Turkey, Vol. 22, No. 4 (FALL 2020), pp. 99-111 (13 pages).

78. V. Huseynov & M. Mahammadi (2022). Iran's Policies Toward the Karabakh Conflict. The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Routledge.

79. V. Huseynov (2023). Geopolitics of the South Caucasus in Flux; Towards a New Security Order. Caucasus Strategic Perspectives, Vol. 4, Issue 2.

80. V. Huseynov (2024). Revitalizing the 3+ 3 Platform. A Formula for a New Regional Security Order? Baku Dialogues, Policy perspectives on the Silk Road region, Vol. 7, No. 2.

81. Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual. Palgrave Macmillan.

82. Wolczuk, K., & Delcour, L. (2022). Contested connectivity: Eurasian integration and the European Union's Eastern Partnership. European Politics and Society, 23(1), 77–94.

83. World Bank. (2022). Middle Corridor: Potential, challenges and pathways. Transport Global Practice. https://documents.worldbank.org

84. Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.