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Topic: Regional Cooperation Initiatives in the South Caucasus after the
Second Karabakh War

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Abstract: The South Caucasus is presented as a “broken” region especially in the western literature due to several reasons. On one hand, the external actors has had incompatible interests over the territory because of its significant geopolitical and geostrategic location and rich energy resources. On the other hand, the South Caucasus has been scene to numerous long-standing disputes and destructive military confrontations. At the result, the security and peace of the region were jeopardized. Even if different regional partnership initiatives were proposed by the leaders of regional states since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, none of them have been implemented. The outbreak of the Second Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia did not only change the status quo between these two countries, it transformed the geopolitical realities of the South Caucasus and was a “wake-up” call for the countries to understand the necessity of peace and stability for the region. One of the first initiatives put forward to this end is the so-called 3+3 regional cooperation platform which includes the three South Caucasian republics plus Turkey, Russia, and Iran. The initiative was proposed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan following the war.

This master thesis discusses the impacts of 44 days war on the possibility of realization of the 3+3 cooperation format. It evaluates the benefits the interested parties could derive from this partnership and its role for developing conditions conducive for peace, security and prosperity in the South Caucasus. The research methodology is based on the case study method which helps the author to investigate the six-country regional cooperation from different analytical perspectives.

The findings shows that even if there are opportunities for the integration of the region more than ever, there are still challenges for stability and the security of this territory which hinders the materialization of six-party cooperation. In order to end the hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2020. However, it is not enough, and a peace agreement is needed to refrain parties from any military attack and support the reconciliation process. Other requirements for the peaceful and prosperous future of the South Caucasus are the harmonization of the interest of the external parties and the creation of security framework.

Keywords: *cooperation initiative, 3+3 platform, South Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Second Karabakh War, new geopolitical order*

İkinci Qarabağ Müharibəsindən Sonrakı Dövrə Cənubi Qafqazda Regional Əməkdaşlıq Təşəbbüsləri

Fidan Vəliyeva

Referat: Xüsusilə Qərb ədəbiyyatında Cənubi Qafqaz bir sıra səbəblərə görə “sınıq” region kimi təqdim olunur. Bir tərəfdən, əhəmiyyətli geosiyasi və geostrateji mövqeyinə və zəngin enerji ehtiyatlarına görə xarici aktorların ərazi üzrə bir-birinə zidd maraqları vardır. Digər tərəfdən, Cənubi Qafqaz uzun müddətdir davam edən çoxsaylı münaqişələrə və dağıdıcı hərbi qarşıdurmalara səhnə olub. Nəticədə regionun təhlükəsizliyi və əmin-amanlığı təhlükə altına düşüb. Sovet İttifaqının dağılmasından sonra region dövlətlərinin rəhbərləri tərəfindən müxtəlif regional tərəfdaşlıq təşəbbüsləri irəli sürülsə də, onların heç biri həyata keçirilməyib. Azərbaycan və Ermənistan arasında İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsinin başlanması təkcə bu iki ölkə arasında status-kvonu dəyişmədi, o, Cənubi Qafqazın geosiyasi reallıqlarını dəyişdirdi və regionda sülhün və sabitliyin labüdlüyünü anlamaq üçün ölkələrə “oyanış” çağırışı oldu. Bu məqsədlə irəli sürülən ilk təşəbbüslərdən biri üç Cənubi Qafqaz respublikası və Türkiyə, Rusiya və İranın daxil olduğu 3+3 regional əməkdaşlıq platformasıdır. Bu təşəbbüs müharibədən sonra Türkiyə prezidenti Rəcəb Tayyib Ərdoğan tərəfindən irəli sürülüb.

Bu magistr dissertasiya işində 44 günlük müharibənin 3+3 əməkdaşlıq formatının reallaşmasına təsirləri müzakirə olunur. Burada maraqlı tərəflərin bu tərəfdaşlıqdan əldə edə biləcəyi faydalar və onun Cənubi Qafqazda sülh, təhlükəsizlik və rifah üçün əlverişli şəraitin yaradılmasındakı rolu qiymətləndirilir. Tədqiqat metodologiyası müəllifə altıtərəfli regional əməkdaşlığı müxtəlif analitik nöqteyi-nəzərdən tədqiq etməyə kömək edən keys üsulu metoduna əsaslanır.

Nəticələr göstərir ki, regionun inteqrasiyası üçün hər zamankindən daha çox imkanlar olsa belə, altıtərəfli əməkdaşlığın reallaşmasına mane olan regionun sabitlik və təhlükəsizliyi üçün təhdidlər hələ də qalmaqdadır. Azərbaycan və Ermənistan arasında hərbi əməliyyatlara son qoymaq üçün 2020-ci ilin noyabrında atəşkəs sazişi imzalanıb. Lakin bu, kifayət deyil və tərəflərin hər hansı hərbi hücumdan çəkinməsi və barışıq prosesinə dəstək üçün sülh sazişinə ehtiyacı var. Cənubi Qafqazın dinc və firavan gələcəyi üçün digər tələblər xarici aktorların maraqlarının uyğunlaşdırılması və təhlükəsizlik strukturunun yaradılmasıdır.

Açar sözlər: *əməkdaşlıq təşəbbüsü, 3+3 platforması, Cənubi Qafqaz, Dağlıq Qarabağ, İkinci Qarabağ müharibəsi, yeni geosiyasi nizam*

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline
BTE	Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline
BTK	Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSCP	Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross domestic product
IDP	Internally displaced person
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan
MOD	Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Azerbaijan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
TDFR	Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic
TSFS	Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society
ZSFSR	Zakavkazskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the South Caucasus has been known as a strategically significant region with its pivotal geographical location. Its geopolitical and geostrategic importance derives from its rich natural (especially energy) resources and unique position as a corridor between East and West. The South Caucasus is also known for its troubled history of conflicts and hostilities. Thereby, it is not a coincidence that the South Caucasus is sometimes referred as “broken region”, especially by the western scholars (De Waal, 2012; Boonstra & Delcour, 2015). Albeit the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a peaceful process itself, the emergence of newly independent states in the South Caucasus back in 1990s was accompanied by ethno-territorial disputes which remained unsolved for decades. Since any resort to violence by opposing parties has a potential to destabilize the whole region, the cooperation with regional partners has become a necessity for providing peace and security. Unfortunately, the history of regional partnership attempts demonstrates that even if many projects have been proposed to foster cooperation in South Caucasus region since the beginning of twentieth century, none of them has been successful so far.

In the first half of twenties century, there have been two major attempts to achieve regional coalescence, the first initiative was The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic that was formed after the collapse of the Russian Empire and lasted only for a month until Georgia, later Azerbaijan and Armenia declared independence. This endeavor was followed by The Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic which comprised Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and existed from 1922 to 1936 as it was dismantled into three separate republics. After the disintegration of the USSR, the earliest post-independence proposal for regional cooperation was offered by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze in February 1996 which was called "Peaceful Caucasus Initiative". This idea was followed by “The Pact on Security and Cooperation in the South Caucasus” which was first put forward by the President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev at the Istanbul Summit of OSCE in November 1999 and was favored by the President of Turkey Suleyman Demirel. For the purpose of restoring peace and stability in the region, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan proposed “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” in August 2008 during the Russian-Georgian conflict. Another project of collaboration, namely “United Caucasus” was advanced by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili during his speech at the UN in September 2010.

The scrutiny of regional cooperation initiatives indicates that the decades-long and unlawful occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan by Armenia has been one of the main stumbling blocks preventing the success of these projects, because the conflicting parties opposed to be a member of same regional cooperation initiative (Frappi & Valigi, 2015). Accordingly, the resolution of Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict between the countries of same region was considered a step toward peace, security and cooperation in the aforementioned area.

At the joint press conference on 10 December 2020, after first victory parade of Azerbaijan marking its triumph over Armenia since its independence, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey, respectively Ilham Aliyev and Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed their thoughts concerning the post-conflict era of the region. While criticizing the Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States, due to its ineffectiveness for failing to come up with a settlement or a solution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Erdogan specified the necessity of creating a new platform for building constructive relationships in the region. For instance, one of the first regional cooperation initiatives proposed to this end is 3+3 format which encompass the three states of the South Caucasus, id est Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, and the neighboring states surrounding the region, Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Even though Georgia and Armenia showed reluctance, other countries have expressed their support for abovementioned cooperation format which offers a win-win situation for all participating sides by providing a platform for political and economic collaboration. The disinclination of Armenia stems from the disadvantageous consequences of 44 days war for the country, therewithal Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan acknowledged the benefits of cooperation and the restoration of diplomatic relations with Turkey. Armenian economy severely suffered from long-time isolation and marginalization, therefore gaining an access to the regional infrastructure, communication and transport initiatives could reverse this unfavorable condition. Meanwhile, “if positive steps are taken on this issue, then we will open the doors as well”, Erdogan stated to point out the possibility and willingness of Turkey to re-open the borders with Armenia which were closed since 1993 as an objection to the violation of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. One of the other main challenges in front of the materialization of this initiative is the ongoing political tension between Georgia and Russia from the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 onward. Participation in the same regional platform with a conflicting party seems implausible and arduous for Georgia. However, Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani noted the significance of involving in

regional initiatives while protecting national interest in order to not “lag behind the processes developing in the region” which could cause Georgia “to lose its role and function” (Civil Georgia, 2021).

Today, there are existing cooperation formats which includes several states of the South Caucasus and wider region, namely Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran, Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia and Turkey-Russia-Iran, however the target of new cooperation initiatives should be gathering all these countries under the single platform. This kind of partnership could be watershed for the South Caucasus by reducing the possibility of dispute and therefore contributing to future peace and security. And now this type of regional collaboration seems more feasible after the so-called end of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute which was accompanied by the alteration of attitudes and discourses of the conflicting parties in a positive way. As the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev said in one of his speeches: “The war is over and now is a time for the new vision for South Caucasus with the focus on development and cooperation” (Aliyev, 2021a).

The purpose of thesis. The aim of this research is to address how new geopolitical configuration brought by the Second Karabakh War influence the possibility of materialization and the utility of regional cooperation initiatives in South Caucasus, especially 3+3 format. None of these collaboration attempts have given foreseen results so far considering this “broken” region has been subject to numerous unsolved and long-standing disputes, namely Armenian-Azerbaijani, Russia-Georgian conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Among them, inter-state conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh has been viewed as the main hindrance to this process. Two regional states refused to work within the same framework of cooperation which undermined the regional stability and security and prevented the creation of the trans-regional partnership among the three South Caucasian states. In this regard, the outbreak of the Second Karabakh War in 2020 which ended with the resolution of Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict created a unique condition to overcome conflict-rich history of the South Caucasus region, paved the way for success of new regional cooperation initiatives and more peaceful relations amongst the countries of the region. The target of this master thesis is the exploration of the chances and the challenges for the realization of a new six-party platform for regional cooperation in the wake of current developments in the region and the possible contributions of this initiative to the peace efforts, security, and prosperity of the South Caucasus.

Research Questions. The ceasefire deal signed on 9 November which resulted with the end of the Second Karabakh War and liberation of occupied territories of Azerbaijan signified the beginning of a contemporary order in the South Caucasus region. Even though the recent developments of conflict resolution created remarkable condition for leaving detrimental history of war behind and move forward toward peaceful co-existence, the challenges for regional cooperation remain in the post-conflict stage.

For this purpose, this thesis aims to answer the following research question: To what extent the interests of the three surrounding big powers (Turkey, Russia, Iran) match the interests of regional countries in the establishment of the 3+3 cooperation platform?

Throughout the research, these secondary questions are addressed, as well: What can the interested parties do to bring the initiative into tangible political process? Why does the initiative have little chance for success as long as the interests of all parties do not harmonize? Does the South Caucasus need this kind of projects to become more peaceful and prosperous?

Theoretical framework. Grounding research on the theory is essential for systematic investigation, therefore, post-structuralism is applied to this master thesis which I assume to be the most adequate theory. Instead of explaining the realm of politics through the lenses of grand theories, poststructuralism challenges their assumptions about the preexisted nature of facts that have been accepted as unquestionable truth for political motives. In doing so, post-structuralists place special emphasis upon the political power of language which is essential tool for constructing identity and foreign policy. They analyze how the interpretations and representation of reality by virtue of dominant discourse influence the way people think in certain historical periods. According to this theory, there is a two-way relationship between identities and foreign policies: the discursive representation of identities, namely “self” - the state that undertakes certain policies – and the “the other” – the state that is subject of them – is the main determinant of the foreign politics and the foreign policy of certain country shapes its identity. On the other hand, considering the poststructuralist argument that the reality is not stable, but under constant linguistic construction, it is unfeasible to have fixed identities for the states, as well. Thus, the (re)production of the identities depending on the altered reality permits particular shifts to happen in foreign policies (Hansen, 2012). Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan are among the leading scholars of poststructuralism. This theory has been also influenced by the works of scholars such

as Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jean Francois Lyotard (Garba & Usman, 2019).

Some scholars believe that there is an evident connection between conflict/cooperation and language (Galtung, 1987). For instance, while pro-war rhetoric increases the resentment and enmity between warring parties, pro-peace discourses may push conflicting sides toward reconciliation by building trust and confidence. Hence, the issue of discourse could play an essential role in conflict initiation and conflict resolution.

The application of poststructuralism to the case of Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict prevails that the military confrontations left horrible memories of atrocities, destructions and devastations on both societies which led to the development of the opposing “self” and “other” identities. This kind of distinction that contains deep mistrust and animosity turned into a stalemate in front of possible peacebuilding process, because any reconciliation attempts by the governments, which foresees compromise related to the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has been viewed as treason by their populations. This challenging situation, in its turn, intercepted politicians to adapt constructive and moderate manner and solve the conflict by the aid of negotiation.

From poststructuralist stand, the success of any rapprochement initiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia which is key for regional collaboration in the South Caucasus highly depends on change of political discourse. Parties to conflict should refrain from pernicious rhetoric and alter their previous pro-war language with constructive one. The tendency toward more pro-peace speeches of both parties has been observed after 44 days war. For instance, Azerbaijani side made it clear that neither the genocide and war crimes committed by Armenian army, nor the innocent victims of these tragedies will be forgotten, however it has no intention to hold grudge against Armenia and ready to look forward for the better future and enduring peace. Similar kind of promising statements are coming from Armenian side like Nikol Pashinyan’s speech regarding the readiness and the need to sign peace treaty with Azerbaijan.

In conclusion, poststructuralism is the theory that best serves the purpose of this thesis by providing the appropriate and logical standpoint to research the effect of the Second Karabakh war on the change of discourses and the possible consequences this alteration could bring for the successful regional cooperation.

Methodology. The qualitative research method is used for gathering data and information as it better equipped to study the core focus of the master thesis. This approach enables to explain political phenomena I investigate, to gain deeper understanding of the research problem, and fill a gap in political inquiry in this respect by focusing on non-numerical data for analysis.

Case study research method is commonly employed by political researcher to provide in-depth insights about a single subject like person, group, event or phenomenon and to explore the specific case within the historical, political and social context it happens (Schoch, 2019). As this thesis aims to investigate the six-country regional cooperation from different analytical perspectives, a case study research design is compatible for the purposes of this research. The unsolved conflicts have negatively affected the realization of regional partnership attempts, and this is not case only for the South Caucasus region, therefore the thesis is based on the instrumental type of case study. This case study targets to examine the possible impacts of the implementation of 3+3 format in creating better condition for peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus region as the result of the six weeks war. The study focuses on the opportunities offered by this regional cooperation initiative and challenges it confronts about its realization. The key issue is to understand the importance of compatibility of the interest of the respective countries in order to enhance the chance for successful collaboration.

The qualitative data collection methods for the case study research include documentations, observations, interviews, questionnaires, archival records. Secondary sources are used to collect qualitative data and information for the purposes of the thesis.

I find qualitative content analysis method to be the viable approach for the general objective of the research. This approach is designed to identify the presence of certain words, themes, subjects, phrases, or concepts within texts or sets of texts and examines their meanings, frequency, and correlation in order to draw useful conclusions (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017). Two types of content analysis are classified: conceptual and relational analysis. While conceptual analysis is concerned with the frequency of occurrence of the selected words in the qualitative data, relational analysis investigates the relationship among them. Relational analysis is used to examine the correlation among the concepts such as regional cooperation, conflict resolution, peace, and the change of discourse.

Another qualitative analysis technique that is employed for the purposes of this master thesis is discourse analysis. The term of “discourse analysis” was coined by Zellig Harris when he wrote his article, namely “Discourse Analysis” in 1952 (Harris, 1952). It could basically be understood as an examination of rhetoric, but to give more precise definition of this notion, one needs to figure out what the discourse is in the first place. To put it simply, the discourse is both spoken and written language with adduced meaning that is above the sentence (Cameron, 2001). People do not access to the world as it is, they interpret what they perceive and reflects the “reality” though their own perspectives with the help of language. From this point of view, discourse analysis is “an interpretation of an interpretation” (Gee, 2011). It is employed to understand the underlying meanings of the language in relation to its social context (Hansen, 2012). With the arrival of constructivism and post-structuralism, this method became commonly used tool in political science and international relations. During the time when these theories emerged, there were evident rivalry between the Eastern and Western Bloc (namely, USSR versus USA and their allies), thus the construction of opposite identities has become the main component of discourse analysis in policy studies. Because language is used not only for allowing people “to inform others about things” but also “to be things” by creating and influencing the identities. This conflicting “self” and “other” dynamics, in its turn, has an implication on the conflict initiation and conflict resolution. In this respect, some studies suggest that there is a connection between conflict/cooperation and language (Galtung, 1987). Because, while war rhetoric could be employed to increase the tensions between the states and cause further escalation of the conflict, the dispute resolution became more possible by adopting more pro-peace language (Carpentier & Kejanlıoğlu, 2020).

In practice, politicians resort to the power of the language to impact others and to achieve a particular objective such as to earn trust, to cause suspicion, to evoke fear, to escalate the conflict or to manage dispute. On the other hand, political discourse is employed for mobilizing the societies, to use the discourse in a way to whether grow the enmities and fragmentation between nations, or cause cohesion by creating condition for empathy and mutual understanding. Evidently, there is a link between discourse and the effectiveness of cooperation as well. The utilization of discursive resources plays a role to create collective identity for the participants of collaboration which leads to collective action and increase the chances of partnership among diverse stakeholders (Hardy et al., 2005).

As already mentioned, the aim of this master thesis is to identify the possible role of the resolution of conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the realization of regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. In this respect, the main subjects of the discourse analysis should be these two regional states. However, there are limitations to access to most of Armenian websites (especially government websites) with Azerbaijani IP Address which makes it difficult to conduct proper discourse analysis on Armenian leaders' speeches, therefore, only Azerbaijani side is chosen for the study.

The speeches, addresses, interviews, statements, and social media posts of the President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan is systematically analyzed to detect the change of discourse and its effect on the normalizations of relations since the alteration of rhetoric is one of the key determinants for the success of regional collaboration initiatives, prosperity, and peace in the South Caucasus. Three time intervals between 2003-2018, 2018-2020 and 2020-2022 are compared to detect the change on the use of language and the change in the position. These periods are specifically chosen, because in 2018 Armenia experienced both the change in leadership and political system and in 2020 the Second Karabakh War occurred. The suitable materials to analyze Ilham Aliyev's discourse is collected from "president.az" and "preslib.az", the official website of the President and the Presidential Library respectively, where his oral discourses are collected in text formats. To find relative content, the key words such as "Armenia", "Nagorno-Karabakh", "regional partnership" and "regional projects" are used. The official twitter account of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (@presidentaz/Twitter) is utilized to access Aliyev's written discourse, especially during the phases of conflict escalation in 2020.

By applying discourse analysis, the author tries to interpret how the president constructed arguments during particular time phrases depending on the conflict dynamics and how these arguments had wider political and social implementations. It is done by examining language elements like words, sentences and paragraphs in the materials and relating them to the key words relevant to the research purpose.

Discourse analysis has its own shortcomings as qualitative approach because the validity and reliability of this type of study could not be assured as it is case with research that is based on quantitative methods (Düzgit & Rumelili, 2018). For instance, this analysis is applied to samples that covers certain events depending on the aims of the research which might overshadow other developments regarding the issue in general. Another disadvantage of the discourse analysis is that

it is interpretative method of analysis, thus it is often criticized for not being objective and bias-free. Moreover, the political figure of the country gives a speech not only expresses his or her idea about a certain situation, he or she also paves a way for certain political and social changes. However, no amount of discourse analysis can provide adequate evidence on what goes on in people's heads, thus even if the language is the main element of the communication between public and authority, it does not always cover the whole story.

Contribution. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was among the main reasons for the persistent failure of the regional cooperation initiatives. The primary aim of this master thesis is to evaluate the opportunities and challenges for the realization of 3+3 cooperation platform from different perspectives in the wake of the Second Karabakh War. The author found out detrimental effects of the ongoing tensions among regional states and their neighbors, the lack of security framework and the clashing interests of external actors on the peace and stability of the South Caucasus. The author has not found any other scholarly work that addresses the regional cooperation initiatives in the South Caucasus from the perspective of discourse theory and applying the analytical tools of this theory to explain the challenges and opportunities for regional peace prospects. In this regard, the main contribution of this thesis is to address the existing gap related to the role of war and peace discourse on the conflict initiation/resolution and regional cooperation within the framework of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

All the sources that are used to write the master thesis were cited in the references. This section covers the basis literature concerning the subject of investigation.

The topic of the regional partnership initiatives in the South Caucasus attracted the attention of the scholars from not only regional but also from international area. Most of them covers the period prior to the Second Karabakh war when the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict hindered any prospects for collaboration and peace in the region. The outbreak of 44 days war and the resolution of this protracted and painful dispute brought a new perspective to this issue and provoked academic debates about the possibility of successful regional cooperation in this regard. The establishment of this kind of partnership could be the main provider of the peace, prospect, and the security for the region.

In order to investigate the prospects for collaboration, it is significant to pay attention to the determinants that account for the continuous failure of the regional cooperation initiatives in the South Caucasus. While investigating the reasons behind this failure, Thomas de Waal, one of the observers analyzes the processes happening in and around Nagorno Karabakh, identified several factors. The first factor is that the countries of the region put their political agendas above economic interests. For instance, it was economically beneficial for Azerbaijan to have a direct link with Nakhchivan, however due to conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, it cut railway links off to Armenia and lost its connection to its exclave at the result. The second reason for unsuccess is the geographical locations of the states which is highly impactful to the political choices they make. Armenia is regarded as the less geographically blessed state of the region as it should rely on Georgia for gaining access to the Europe and any instability in the Georgia directly hits this country. Azerbaijan is situated in the middle position as it also depends on Georgia for reaching the west, but it is in better condition than Armenia. In comparison, Georgia is in the most advantageous geographical position which explains the reluctance of this country toward regional partnership initiatives. Georgia prefers to avoid the risk and the losses that this kind of partnership could cause even if it simultaneously offers beneficial consequences. The other problem stems from the distinct policy orientations these states chose for achieving political, economic and social development after becoming independent. The selected paths induced them to deal with their own safety concerns instead of focusing on regional security challenges. The author indicates the significance of addressing security concerns in the first instance before attempting any cooperation initiative. Because even if working together with their immediate and larger neighbors would benefit them, there is a need for overcome political differences and understanding overlapping interests (De Waal, 2012).

The scrutiny of regional cooperation initiatives indicates that the decades-long and unlawful occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan by Armenia has been one of the major obstacle preventing the success of these projects (Frappi & Valigi, 2015). Because the parties to the regional partnership projects was aware that any escalation of this smoldering conflict into full-scale war could erase all the progress they made. From this perspective the Second Karabakh War which ended with the liberation of internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan was an important improvement. Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement of 9 (10) November signified the beginning of a new geopolitical order in the Southern Caucasus. The recent developments of

dispute settlement created remarkable condition for leaving detrimental history of war behind and move forward toward peaceful co-existence (ICG, 2020).

However, the resolution of Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict itself is not remedy for the other challenges that regional cooperation confronts in the post-conflict stage. There are remaining issues in the process of reconciliation between conflicting parties that need to be addressed first before focusing on integration at the regional level. One study point out two obstacles in this regard: illegal territorial claims of Armenia toward Azerbaijan and reluctance of both societies to demonstrate readiness for the rapprochement. Even if Azerbaijan officially declared that the conflict has ended, the revanchist forces in Armenia do not accept ignoble defeat and call for rearmament in order to launch a new war against Azerbaijan. Dropping unlawful territorial demands is in the best interest of Armenia, because its economic and social life severely suffered from long-time isolation and seclusion from the South Caucasus and the restoration of relations with Azerbaijan offers an access to the regional infrastructure, communication and transport initiatives. Second hurdle is that both societies are unready to demonstrate willingness to conciliate. Azerbaijani government made it clear that the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh are granted to live here as Azerbaijani citizens and their rights and freedoms will be preserved. In addition, internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan will be given a chance to voluntarily return to their homeland after 30 years of longing. These facts alone make it necessity for both parties to develop constructive approach toward each other for being able to live together peacefully. However, it is easier said than done because the military confrontations left horrible memories of atrocities, destructions and devastations on both communities which make it hard for them to accept the other side (Hammond & Bashirova, 2021). Moreover, the ceasefire agreement of 9-10 November 2020 brokered by Russia is not sufficient to consolidate peace, because truce serves as a mean to terminate the hostilities and fighting only on a temporary basis. Huseynov rightfully examined the necessity of the peace agreement between conflicting parties in the name of security and stability in the Southern Caucasus. Azerbaijan and Armenia need to sign peace treaty which will create legal obligation to officially end the state of war and to recognize each other's territorial integrity under international law. Even if the signing of a peace agreement does not assure the lack of the armed confrontations, the absence of such an agreement put the prospects for reconciliation at significant risk (Huseynov, 2021). As the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev mentioned in his meeting with the delegation of European Union on 25th June 2021, “if we don’t have a peace agreement with Armenia that means we don’t have peace not only between the two countries but also in the South

Caucasus” (Aliyev, 2021b). Considering the recency of the resolution of Azerbaijan-Armenian conflicts, the participation of the parties in the same regional partnership initiative might seem unfeasible, but it was a case for Europe once. The long-standing enmity between European countries revised into the partnership of the most integrated and peaceful region thanks to the idea of European Union (Hammond & Bashirova, 2021).

The normalization of relationship between Turkey and Armenia is another essential step for enhancing the chances for materialization of regional cooperation initiatives and for the stability of the South Caucasus. Several reasons have been observed that brought about the lack of diplomatic relations for almost a century: the use of the phrase “Western Armenia” in reference to Eastern Anatolia which has been interpreted as a territorial claim of Armenia by Turkish people, the endeavor for the international recognition of the 1915 events as a genocide with the help of Armenians lobbies around the world. These components have found their expressions on the 11th point of Declaration on Independence of Armenia. However, the very reason for the sealing of the borders was the illegal occupation of territories of Azerbaijan. After the invasion of Kalbajar in April 1993, Turkey showed solidarity with Azerbaijan and closed the border with Armenia. (Valiyev, 2021). Aydintasbas and Giragosian explored how the recent war that resulted with the victory of Azerbaijan provided an unexpected window of opportunity for the restoration of the formal ties between Turkey and Armenia. “If positive steps are taken on this issue, then we will open the doors as well”, Erdogan stated to point out the possibility and readiness of Turkey to re-open the borders with Armenia when he was elaborating on six-party platform during the press statement he made with President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev on December 10, 2020. As a response to these positive signals Nikol Pashinyan, the Prime Minister of Armenia expressed his willingness to restore the diplomatic ties with Turkey, as well. This process could not be easy as one thinks as it is the third try for reconciliation since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Aydintasbas & Giragosian, 2022).

During their exploration, the researchers also paid attention to the difficulties associated with the successful implementation of the regional cooperation ventures in the wake of the new political order in South Caucasus and the reluctance of Georgia is one and the major hindrance in this respect. According to Gigiadze, Ghvineria and Shengelia, this lack of interest is derived from two elements that have been inscribed as priorities for Georgia’s policy on the constitution: the territorial integrity and the inviolability of the state border of Georgia, and the full integration of

the country into Western institutions. The dispute Georgia has with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been threatening the territorial integrity of this country and stability of the South Caucasus for years. According to the government of Georgia, Russia invaded 20 percent of its internationally recognized territory as the result of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. No wonder, it provoked counter reaction in the country when Georgian former Foreign Minister and former Deputy Prime Minister Davit Zalkaliani mentioned about the necessity to participate in 3+3 cooperation initiative while being interviewed by Georgian journalist. His main concern was falling behind the processes developing in the region around the partnership ventures which could hurt Georgia's interest in economic term. Because the opening of the Zangezur corridor have given a rise to two opposite ideas: some evaluates the role of this corridor to be complementary to already existing routes while others are worried it will undermine Georgia's position as a transit country. Some analysts consider 3+3 platform as an effective platform to discuss and solve regional issues including the conflict between Russia and Georgia. Despite of these factors, the official position of Georgia to reject participation in this initiative has not changed. Considering the fact that Russian Federation officially recognized the independence of these autonomous oblasts, for them it is 3+3+2 format rather than 3+3. Therefore, the national interests of Georgia require the evasion of participation in any regional cooperation platform that envisages Russia as a member. Moreover, six-party cooperation will not only enhance the influence and engagement of Russia, but it also aims prevent western presence in the region, authors argue (Gigiadze et al., 2021). Recently, the determination of the Georgia to become a part of Western society has been restated by President Salome Zurbishvili in her interview with France 24: "The Euro-Atlantic integration is inscribed in our constitution, but it's also inscribed in the hearts of people which feel in a way they are more Europeans than Europeans sometimes". Today the official position of Georgia is refusal to become a stakeholder in regional platform where Russia holds dominant position until Russia fulfills the legal obligations of the six-point ceasefire of 2008 and ends the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The unfavorable outcomes of the Second Karabakh War provoked serious concerns and skepticism about new proposed cooperation platform in Armenia, as well. There were and still are the political forces who find it difficult to accept the consequences of the last battle and incite to rearm and launch a war of revenge against Azerbaijan. However, while being hesitant, the officials of Armenia never excluded the participation in 3+3 cooperation format and unlike Georgia, Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, Vahe Gevorgyan attended to the first meeting of this initiative held

in Moscow on December 10, 2021. Armenia's affirmative position despite all the existing problematic issues is explained with the significance of Russia as an ally for this country and the economic benefits promised by this platform. In this regard, here are two policy options for Armenia, whether to agree with the terms and join the six-party cooperation platform which will positively impact their economic prosperity, or to stick to revanchist ideas and to face with the results of the isolation from the regional projects (Huseynov, 2022a).

The exploration of the existing literature suggests that the Southern Caucasus is a broken region where all the cooperation initiatives came to naught, and most of the researchers also draw pessimistic pictures about the possibility of the successful cooperation in the future. However, there are also some optimistic nuances that worth to be noted. For instance, while analyzing the current regional architecture in the region, the economic situation seems more promising compared to the political one. Today, fostering economic development is regarded as one of the goals of the governments, thus the significance of the economic sphere could be used as a tool to encourage peace and security which could also have spillover effect toward political reconciliation. If realized, 3+3 cooperation format can be a new opportunity for win-win cooperation for the stakeholders which would benefit all parties in economic terms. In his article, Hajiyev states that initial steps like unblocking the transportation and communication links will call forth the economic integration which in turn will create condition for peace process in the region for the first time for decades. He gave the example of European Union which began as cooperation over coal and steel and turned into economic integration of a peaceful continent (Hajiyev, 2021).

As mentioned above, the South Caucasus is described as a "broken", "fragile" or "fragmented" region owing to the lack of cooperation and peace in a generation. Some argue that the disrupted situation got even worse with the destructive intervention of the bigger neighboring powers in pursuit of their opposed national interests. However, the emergence of new geopolitical order brought about another promising development: even if the monopoly of Russia on the region has been challenged by Turkey after the Second Karabakh War, the interests of Moscow and Ankara seems to overlap in several policy areas, the main one being the exclusion of western influence on the regional matters. President Putin does not feel threatened by the increasing impact of Turkey in Russia's sphere of influence as he already managed to deploy its peacekeepers in accordance with the 2020 ceasefire agreement. Turkey, on the other hand, enjoys the assertive role it gained and eager to work with Russia in managing and resolving the conflict within 3+3 cooperation

platform and to strengthen its positions in the Black Sea. For several reasons, Iran is regarded as a biggest loser of the Nagorno Karabakh war, therefore it is not a coincidence, Iran is the main supporter of regional partnership initiative as this kind of cooperation would benefit this country to great extent. Considering all abovementioned factors, the neighboring countries is expected to undertake more constructive role in their policy toward the Southern Caucasus which consequently will create condition for peace and prosperity (Huseynov, 2022a).

In sum, it is true that the process of establishing sustainable regional cooperation platform has its own challenges, however the new regional architecture in the wake of the 44 Days War increased the likelihood of materialization of the 3+3 cooperation platform.

CHAPTER 1. THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AS A “BROKEN REGION”

§ 1.1. Conceptualization of the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus, comprised of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, encompasses relatively small but crucial geostrategic territory between the Caspian and Black Sea, on the south of the Greater Caucasus Mountain range, neighboring the Middle East to the south, Central Asia to the east and Eastern Europe to the west. Being situated at the intersection of east and west, north and south, connecting the Central Asian and European countries, the Russian Federation and Greater Middle East respectively gave this place geopolitical advantage. Ancient trade route, Silk Road passed across this territory and nowadays this region is subject to the new economic development and investment strategy of China, namely the Belt and Road Initiative. From geo-economic perspective, the role of Azerbaijan is highlighted since it is the only country of the South Caucasus with natural energy resources. This country holds 7 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves and 1.69 trillion cubic meter of proved natural gas reserves as of January 2021 according to the Oil & Gas Journal (OGJ, 2020). Thus, the South Caucasus provides the European market with easy, fast and secure source for hydrocarbon wealth (Bekiarova, 2019).

One of the controversial issues about the South Caucasus is to determine whether this territory constitutes a region or not. While some believe this area to be a region with its evident features, the others argue that it is just an artificial construct imposed by external actor as it is easier to formulate policy and carry them out in relation to single region rather than different countries. For some researchers, “the South Caucasus” is just an outlived term that carries post-colonial memories. Besides having theoretical implementations, we need to define the South Caucasus in order to be able to formulate right strategy to deal with its problems. However, the conceptualization of the region was hindered by the lack of general-accepted definition. For instance, American political scientist Joseph Nye describes the region as “a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence” (Nye, 1971). Another American professor, Richard Hartshorne presented similar definition saying, “a region is an area of specific location which in some way very distinctive from other areas and which extends as far as the distinction extends” (Hartshorne, 1959). Both notions are based on the geographical proximity which is the main factor to call a territory a region. Another component of the region is the homogeneity of the cultural and social values (Russett, 1967). These two determinants (geographical contiguity and shared cultural values) are defined as constant ones,

while there are also varying factors such as “level of economic development, nature of political systems, degree of interdependence” (Lake & Morgan, 1997). The economic independence that is created through trade and transactions also contributes to the establishment of the regions. There are totally different constructivist approaches to the definition of the region arguing that “there are no ‘natural’ or ‘given’ regions, but these are created and recreated in the process of global transformation” (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). It means that the regions condition and are conditioned by politics, culture, economics, governance, and power relations (Paasi, 2010).

As mentioned above, the “regionness” of the South Caucasus is not commonly shared opinion. Until the establishment of Russian dominance over this territory in the nineteenth century, there have not existed such a term as South Caucasus or as Russians put it “Transcaucasia (Закавказье)”. For some observers, this concept is Russian colonial construction which has historical legacies, thus there is also a tendency to include the three countries of the area into wider Black Sea region (De Waal, 2010a). Following the independence of the regional states, namely Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia in 1991, the South Caucasus notion was emerged and widely used by foreign actors especially the western countries. Single regional approach is useful for outsiders as it simplifies the affairs, for instance today, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is represented by a single envoy in the South Caucasus. Framing Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia as South Caucasus countries is also associated with their small area and evaluated as an effort to increase their political influence in international relations (Asatiani, 2007). On the other side, referring to the territory as a region requires the certain level of commonalities and interaction among the states, but unfortunately, Transcaucasia contains more elements for division rather than integrity. Thus, it is more efficient to address to the issues of these three countries separately instead of putting them into the same basket. However, Coppetiers argues that the communications among the countries do not necessarily need to be positive. The South Caucasus could be viewed as “negative region”, where the relations that bounds the countries together are not friendly but based on enmity and hostility. For instance, the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh created a security interdependence between Azerbaijan and Armenia which lasted until the dispute was resolved (Coppetiers, 2003).

Thomas de Waal, British journalist who is known with his writings about political processes on the South Caucasus, claims that it is beneficial to treat the South Caucasus from holistic perspective.

He identifies three major elements why this territory should be treated as a region: geography, a shared culture and economic features (De Waal, 2012).

From geographic perspective, the territory of the South Caucasus is defined by the natural boundaries: Great Caucasus Mountains to the north, Aras River to the south, the Black Sea to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east. Great Caucasus range which divides the South Caucasus and the North Caucasus created huge differences between two parts of the wider region as well. It was easy for Russia to gain total control of the north part as the only hindrances in front of Russian troops were the thick forests and passages. The physical obstacles to conquer the south part was impassable as it required to deploy plenty of military resources, thus Russia was not able to impose its imperial rule to the Southern Caucasus as it did to the Northern part. The independence of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia while seven Northern Caucasus republics being under the Russian governance proves this analysis. The other two natural borders to east and the west, the Caspian and the Black Sea respectively made this territory suitable for trade throughout the history. The only time that the South Caucasus lost its status as a transit region was during the period of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as the commercial ties with the east and the west was replaced by the north route, i.e., Russia. The fourth border is defined by the politics thus could be viewed as a political line as well. Aras River was set as a boundary with the signing of Turkmenchay Treaty in 1828 between Russia and Iran (De Waal, 2019).

Most of the observers are convinced that there are several cultural and social elements that prevent the unity among the Southern Caucasus states. For example, the population of these countries practices different religions: Azerbaijan is a Muslim majority country, while Georgia and Armenia belong to different branches of Christianity. Furthermore, the South Caucasus states do not share the same language: most population of Azerbaijan use Azerbaijani which belongs to the Turkic family, Armenian to the Indo-European family and Georgian language to the Kartvelian family (Comrie, 2008). There are also diversities among the national and ethnic backgrounds of Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians.

Despite these splitting factors, de Waal argues that these people share same cultural traits that bring and bind them together which is the second element that makes South Caucasus a region (De Waal, 2012). These affinities is expressed in their cuisines, music, family traditions, social behaviors, responsibilities and obligations, rituals like weddings and funerals. Remaining under Soviet rule for 70 years also contributed to the formation of similar “Caucasian” identity: the population of

three republics all felt as a “southerners” and Russian was a *lingua franca*. This proximity has political implementation as well, Azerbaijanis and Armenians do not hold ancient grudges and hatred toward one another as one could believe, their current attitudes is formed by the conflict and military confrontations they had and if solved they could live, work and interact peacefully.

According to de Waal, the third element derives from the position of the region as a connecting bridge between east-west and north-south. The level of trade and economic interactions bounds this region together (De Waal, 2019). For the purposes of this master thesis, the South Caucasus will be regarded as a region.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union accompanied with the conflicts and bloody wars between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia and Abkhazia/South Ossetia which prevented successful regional cooperation and prospects for peaceful co-existence. While the other regions of the world joined the trend of regionalization and ensure better access to the world economy, the South Caucasus drowned in its problems even though it had real potential to become prosperous and economically developed area. At the result, this war-weary region was characterized as a “broken”, “fragile” or “fragmented” especially in the western literatures (De Waal, 2012; Boonstra & Delcour, 2015).

Due to the geopolitical importance of its location, the South Caucasus has been a place where the interest of the powerful outside actors such as the Ottoman, Russia, Persian and British Empire clashed for centuries. The situation did not change in modern era, the competition for influence in the region is continued by their successors and new players including the EU, the United States of America (USA) and the NATO.

Historically, Russia attached particular importance to the South Caucasus and strived to expand its influence over the countries of this territory (Nation, 2015). This geopolitical preeminence of the region for Russia derives from several factors. Firstly, the South Caucasus is considered to be a part of larger Caucasus region along with the North Caucasus which belongs to the Russian Federation. For this reason, this state is inclined to approach the Caucasus as a whole. Any political or social turbulence and instability has a potential to grow toward the North Caucasus, thus Russia gave weight to Transcaucasia in order to provide its national security on southern borders.

Moreover, the attention to the South Caucasus is related with greater ambitions, such as regaining its traditional dominant power status. Russia needs to preserve its position as a regional hegemonic

state in order to realize its geostrategic objectives. Raging aggressive wars against Georgia and Ukraine (the countries which adopted more western-oriented policy) once again demonstrated how essential it is for Russia to have total control over its “backyard” and the capacity it has to pursue its national policies and strategies. The South Caucasus is a gateway for Russia to intervene and impact the political processes of Middle East and Central Asia, as well. Commitments to these targets were intensified especially after Vladimir Putin become the president of Russia in 2000.

The US policy toward the South Caucasus with its main ally with whom it shares identical goals and objectives, i.e., the EU was to strength democratic institutions, to encourage social development and market economies of the countries for the purpose of creating allies and building political support in this region. These steps also aimed to prevent the hostile powers, namely Russia and Iran to establish their historical dominance on the region again and to minimize their impact. Westerns actors are also interested in playing a role in the political matters of the Middle East, from this perspective, the key location of the South Caucasus gave the region a new significance for Europe and the US in this respect.

Moreover, the Western actors are in constant search for alternative energy sources in order to strengthen energy security by diversification. Because there is uncertainty about the reliability of other resources and Russia could use its “energy card” as a political tool for influence (Russia is the main supplier of energy to the EU with 40% of gas and 27% of oil imports (European Commission, 2022)). Hence the South Caucasus attracted the attention of Western world as a new energy partner with its considerable hydrocarbon reserves such as oil and gas. This interest was consolidated with the signing of “the contract of the century” through which the USA and the Europe gained an access to the energy-rich region and become important stakeholders in the oil project. On 20 September 1994, Azerbaijan opened its petroleum industry to Western oil firms for the extraction of the crude oil and gas and thus find a way to western markets. During the Soviet period, Russia enjoyed the monopoly over abovementioned resources, therefore the involvement of the EU and the USA turned into another component for contest and rivalry among great powers.

Another important factor contributing to the importance of the region for the USA emerged following the 9/11 events and the launch of “war on terror” policy. the Southern Caucasus counties were among the first states to offer assistance to the US and to open their air space for this country. The United States benefited from this territory as a transit corridor to send aircraft to conduct military campaign, namely Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Additionally, the region

played an essential role for transporting non-military goods to Afghanistan within the framework of so-called “North Distribution Network” (Yalowitz & Cornell, 2004).

All abovementioned factor lets us to say the Cold War continues in its modern form between the Western bloc and the Russia Federation. The later views the western intervention to the South Caucasus as an invasion to its traditional sphere of influence. Thus, the policy of both powers over this region turned into zero-sum game, where one’s gains regarded as other’s loss. Additionally, Turkey and Iran are trying to have a hand in the South Caucasus for their geopolitical national interests. All these competitions are regarded as a factor that “broke” the region, as well.

The role of Russian imperial legacy on the fragmentation of the region is debatable. Some argues that the dominance of Imperial Russia and later its successor the USSR brought the kind of unity and cohesion that was not experienced before. Russia gathered different nations and ethnic groups under single political entity where they coexisted and interacted (German, 2016). For instance, in the first half of twentieth century, there were two integration projects. First state, namely The Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR) emerged after the collapse of Russian Empire and encompassed today’s the South Caucasus region. Back then Russia was too occupied with its own civil war to intervene the Transcaucasus, on the other hand regional countries needed to join in the face of approaching threat of invasion from the Ottoman troops. Thus, the leaders of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia established TDFR on 22 April 1918, but it sustained only for one month (it is important to mention that Azerbaijan was not uncomfortable about the advance of their Turkish brothers, but Georgia and Armenia was). The federation dissolved after Georgia declared its independence on 26 May 1918, which was followed by Azerbaijan and Armenia. After the establishment of USSR, the regional integration topic found its place on the Soviet agenda because of two reasons: firstly, this project aimed to consolidate central governance over the region, secondly Soviet rule needed stability as the minorities like the Abkhaz, Karabakh Armenians, Ajarians and Ossetians was destabilizing the region for the last years, thus the Soviet authorities targeted to create four autonomous entities for this minorities within new regional unity endeavor. With the suggestion of Vladimir Lenin, the first head of government of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia formed The Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet (TSFS) which is mostly known as *Zakavkazskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika* (ZSFSR) on 12 March 1922. After the adoption of the Soviet Constitution in 1936, the federation was dismantled into three separate republics.

This fact that Russian influence bonded the region together finds its evidence in the opinions of the populations, as well. From their perspective, these nations had more things in common during Soviet time than they had after gaining independence. Literature and popular culture also played a role in the establishment of “Caucasus identity” (Asatiani, 2007). Therefore, Russian influence contributed to the integration of the South Caucasus. There is also opposite view about the Russian legacy that the USSR applied its traditional tactic, namely “divide-and-conquer” policy to this region in order to maintain its power. In doing so, it ignited ethnic differences among the neighbors to make them weak to oppose the central government. Ronald Gregor Sunny indicated that provoking nationalism could be the result of political miscalculations of the Soviet Union which ended with the breakup. He wrote a book called “The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union” as a response to the people who claimed that the collapse of the USSR was the result of the policy which took the freedoms and rights of the diverse ethnic groups away and imposed some kind of alien values to them. Nevertheless, the author took totally opposite stance in his work, pointing out to the nationalism which paved a way for internal disintegration as a reason for the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The people of the republics of Soviet Union were severely differing from one another for their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious affiliations. Instead of forming single and stable Soviet identity and citizenship, the strategy of the USSR provoked the national differences among the populations. For instance, Vladimir Lenin thought that if the central authority showed tolerance and ensured national self-determination, the separatism inclination of the nations would decrease. Sunny called this idea “a utopian fantasy”. Later, Joseph Stalin repeated the same mistake of not paying sufficient attention to the nationalism factor and showed ethnic tolerance. If the real reason for collapse of the USSR was the centralized ethnic policy as many argued, the “openness” and “restructuring” reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev would strengthen the foundations of the unity, instead of causing disintegration (Sunny, 1993). Sunny’s analysis could be an evidence to the fact that, Soviet past of the region caused fragmentation.

Another component that made the countries of the region even more alien toward one another was the distinct policy orientations they chose following their independence. Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia relied on different external actors for providing their security which paradoxically decreased the safety level of the South Caucasus. Instead of working in collaboration, economic and political powers approached their policy toward this region as a zero-sum competition, this

further divided this territory. At the result, despite being a region, the Southern Caucasus failed to operate in unity and every regional integration attempts come to naught.

§ 1.2. Previous Regional Cooperation Initiatives

The South Caucasus is situated on a propitious geopolitical and geostrategic location which captured the interest of the political and economic superpowers. It constitutes a transportation and communication bridge connecting east and west, north and south and is rich with natural resources such as oil and gas. These components were sufficient for the South Caucasus to become prosperous and sustainable region and to reach inclusive economic and social development. However, the dissolution of the USSR was followed by military confrontations and grievous events which brought suffering, damage, destruction, and tragedy to all people of the three newly independent states. The armed conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia and Ossetia, Georgia and Abkhazia and later between Russia and Georgia prevented to achieve further progress in economic and social fields in the region. The situation gets even more pessimistic if we add ongoing political tension and skepticism between the countries of the region and their immediate neighbors (Turkey and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran) and between neighboring states themselves (Turkey and Russia, Turkey and Iran) into the picture. Basically, the stability of the South Caucasus is threatened by the geopolitical realities and security challenges which also hindered the utilization of the potential that this region holds for economic welfare and social growth. It became evident that this area needed an effective platform where the states could find common ground by harmonizing their political interests, settle the existing conflicts through negotiation and create conditions for peaceful coexistence. Because the absence of peace and prosperity at regional level appears as a major hurdle to reach full potential at state level.

On the bright side, it did not take long for stakeholders to realize the significance of transnational collaboration since they already witnessed the devastating consequences of the armed disputes and its adverse political, economic and social impacts. Several regional cooperation initiatives were proposed by the heads of the government of the South Caucasus after the collapse of the USSR in order to respond to transnational problems in a coordinated manner. However, unfavorable prevalent conditions in the region intercepted the engagement in comprehensive partnership. The continuous collapse of regional cooperation attempts in the South Caucasus once again proved that this was not simple task to attain. Thus, it is useful to investigate the prior cooperation initiatives and find out the reasons for persistent failure, before focusing on the last partnership proposal,

namely 3+3 platform and investigating the chances and the challenges for the realization of this venture.

Peaceful Cooperation Initiative. Georgia undertook leading role to form regional institution which would gather the three countries of the region together for cooperation and integration. And it was not a coincidence, because the diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia was deteriorated after Armenia occupied the Nagorno Karabakh and adjacent districts of Azerbaijan. Even if the conflicting sides recognized the significance of deepening and comprehensive regional cooperation, achieving progress toward this end seemed intractable unless this dispute found its solution. As an only state which had diplomatic relation with other regional countries, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia thought of itself as a “connecting bridge” between these two countries as indicated on Georgia’s Foreign Policy Strategy of 2006-2009 (Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006). Hence, the leaders of Georgia began to use every means at their disposal to persuade other regional powers of the advantages they could derive from this kind of partnership. One of the earliest steps, in this regard, was made by the former President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia on 28 February 1996. He set forth six principles which later became the basic ground for the “Peaceful Cooperation Initiative”. These points seem universal in nature, but they reflect the requirements of South Caucasus to become peaceful place for cooperation:

1. Respect for the territorial integrity and inviolability of existing borders,
2. Commitment to the protect human rights anywhere and from anybody,
3. The protection of transport and other communication means and non-acceptance of their blockade,
4. Joint efforts to preserve the natural environment and to fight the consequences of natural disaster,
5. Promotion of ethnic and religious tolerance, and the renunciation of extreme forms of nationalism,
6. Support and comprehensive protection of international projects and investments in the Caucasus region (Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000).

The intriguing nuance of the regional cooperation initiatives in the Southern Caucasus is that every proposal emerged as an endeavor to overcome political challenges in certain crisis periods. If we take into account the distressing phase the region was in early 1990’s, it is possible to say that Shevardnadze proposal was developed as a response to Georgian-Ossetia, Georgian-Abkhazian,

First Chechen and First Nagorno Karabakh wars. The rationale behind this proposal was to convert the prevailing military confrontations into long-term peace and stability and immature economies into national economic well-being. The point about the inviolability of territorial integrity and sovereignty, on the other hand, aimed to lay strong groundwork for a stable environment in the region. Another main element of Shevardnadze's venture was economic cooperation and integration. Owing to the advantages of commercial ties, the economic interdependence gives interested parties strong incentives to engage in conflict resolution. The Peaceful Cooperation Initiative encompasses not only Southern Caucasian states and their neighbors, but also the republics, territories and regions of the North Caucasus.

The Peaceful Cooperation Initiative served as an agenda for the Caucasus Summit, which was held in Kislovodsk, the Russian Federation on 3 June 1996. At this meeting then Presidents of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia and Georgia, Heydar Aliyev, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze respectively, and heads of republics, regions and districts of the Northern Caucasus adopted a declaration entitled 'For Inter-ethnic Accord, Peace and Economic and Cultural Cooperation in the Caucasus' (Górecki, 2020). This document underlined the shared responsibility of the parties to ensure peace, security, and stability in the South Caucasus by achieving definitive settlements of the destructive conflicts of the region in accordance with the norms and principles of international law and by restoring the traditional cooperation and relations among these countries. Historically, this region was homeland to the people from diverse religious, national, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic background, therefore the significance of promoting ethnic and religious tolerance was also included in this declaration. By focusing on the respect for human rights and basic freedoms, the signatories expressed their willingness to generate conditions for voluntary repatriation of displaced persons and refugees to their homelands (United Nations General Assembly, 1996). The participant countries acknowledge the benefits they could derive if they continue to gather and make these meetings traditional. Russia alongside with both Southern and Northern Caucasus countries had several summits together during 1996-1997 which is also known as Kislovodsk processes and adopted statements on different topics. This initiative had a real potential to create "Caucasus Home" and contribute to the peaceful resolutions of the existing conflicts. The signing of declaration on inter-ethnic harmony, peace, and economic and cultural cooperation in the Caucasus was manifestation of the interest and support by the concerned countries for the realization of regional cooperation. However, little progress to fulfill abovementioned commitments in practice and Russia's ambitions to become hegemon power in

the Caucasus instead of sharing equal status as other stakeholders broke all the progresses down and brought the failure of this attempt. Nevertheless, this regional partnership venture paved a way for future frameworks of cooperation.

The Caucasus Stability Pact. The next initiative to bring peace, stability and security to the conflict-rich region was based on the proposal President Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan put forward at the Istanbul Summit of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on 18 November 1999. While inviting all interested parties such as Turkey, Armenia, Russia, the USA and the EU to take determined actions to solve the problems the region suffered for years, Aliyev explained the importance of this cooperation with these words: “Such a pact should fix basic principles of interstate relations and eliminate conflicts, ... exclude the foreign military presence and dividing lines in the region, prevent aggression and ethnic purges, put an end to separatism and terrorism, actions on the basis of the “fait accompli” and double standards”. Moreover, he believed that under this pact, the three countries of the region will be able to increase their economic welfare by coming up with peaceful solutions to the detrimental conflicts which negatively impacted almost every vital aspects of their lives and the development of the South Caucasus as a whole (Aliyev, 1999). Aliyev’s proposal was welcomed and supported by the leaders of regional and great powers.

The President of the Republic of Turkey, Suleyman Demirel paid an official visit to Tbilisi, Georgia on 14-15 January 2000 at the invitation of the President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia. During this visit, Demirel suggested the creation of “Pact on Stability in the Caucasus” within the framework of the OSCE which was very similar to the multilateral cooperation scheme offered by Azerbaijan. Demirel was inspired by the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe that involved international attempts to reinforce peace in the Balkans and thought equivalent platform could assist Trans Caucasus as well (Celac et al., 2000). According to some, Turkey was a little bit late to come up with a project, but the rationale behind the timing was to offset the enhancing dominance of Russia in the South Caucasus as it was reaching to the victory in Chechnya and turning its attention closer to this region. To gain support for his idea, Demirel sent a detailed letter to the heads of 14 countries where he explained his stance about the situation in South Caucasus and the importance of bringing regional countries together with their neighbors (Imanbeyli, 2016). “Pact on Stability in the Caucasus” envisaged more active participation of Western actors in this area while then acting President of Russia, Vladimir Putin wanted to establish regional partnership within the borders of The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and only under his

leadership. Any western intervention was inadmissible and against the interest of Russia. This fact find its expression on the Russian National Security Concept of Russia which was adopted in 2000 stating that any attempts by other states “to weaken Russia’s position in Europe, the Middle East, Transcaucasus, Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific Region” is defined as a threat to its national security in the international area (The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2000). For this reason, on the same month, Putin developed new model of cooperation, namely “Caucasus Four” which is also known as 1+3 format (Russia + Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) to address regional security concerns of both North and South Caucasus. While excluding Western powers from playing a part in the political matters of the region, this proposal was actually aiming to establish the dominance of Russia. For these two reasons, even if the “Caucasus Four” had meet several times, it failed sustain itself.

During this period, another novel collaboration platform venture came from President Robert Kocharyan of Armenia during his speech in the Georgian parliament on 29 March 2000. He described a regional cooperation that based on 3+3+2 agreement i.e., Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia + Turkey, Russia, Iran + the USA, the EU and which would not only cause peace and stability, but also encourage economic growth and democratic reforms (German, 2016). According to the President, the success of this kind of partnership depends on the participation of all countries in the region. He believed that the materialization of this format was especially crucial now since both Georgia and Azerbaijan withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on 2 April 1999. Armenia intended to evade from the years long isolation from the region that caused by the illegal invasion of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territories. However, the negative image of Armenia as an occupant country caused suspicions about its genuine intentions which in the end brough the failure of this initiative as well.

The Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi of Iran was in Baku as a part of his official visit to South Caucasus on 28 April 2003. While mentioning the importance of regional security for Iran, he put forth ‘Security System for the Caucasus states’ or 3+3 proposal which included three countries of Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia) and their immediate neighbors (Iran, Russia and Turkey) (Górecki, 2020). 3+3 cooperation initiative was not stemmed from altruistic intentions of Iran, instead it was rational policy choice to strengthen its influence and to keep its main rival USA out of the region. Back then, under the “war on terror” policy, the USA was increasing its presence in the southern and eastern parts of this country by waging war against Iraq and Afghanistan which

caused serious concerns of Iran. Kharrazi emphasized the role this cooperation could play in build trust among the members and added that the security of the region could only be provided by regional powers not by the external actors. This initiative destined to fall down from the beginning as it did not take the political realities of that time into consideration. Back then Azerbaijan was having good relations with USA and both Georgia and Azerbaijan intended to have closer ties with the EU, therefore it was not rational for them to sacrifice what they already had for deeper cooperation with Iran. On the other hand, above mentioned neighboring countries had their own diverse and mostly conflicting agendas about the South Caucasus which was another factor for the failure of this venture.

If all the regional cooperation initiatives that proposed between 1999 and 2003 analyzed together, certain pattern that contributed to the unsuccess of these ventures reveals. The first and the most important factor was the absence of settlement for the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict. Heydar Aliyev made it clear during the meeting with the delegation of the European Consortium of Political Research on July 17, 2000: “All the countries that have interests in this region want peace, security and stability in the Caucasus, also the Southern Caucasus, and they are ready to increase their efforts in this field ... it is not an easy problem, but also easy at the same time. Because there is one condition for the realization of this program and the intended proposals. It is the solution of the conflicts in the Southern Caucasus in the first place” (Aliyev, 2000). At the result of armed conflict that lasted from 1988 till 1994, 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s international recognized territories was invaded by Armenia which was against international law and almost one million people lost their home. Even if parties signed ceasefire agreement on 12 May 1994, that was not enough for pushing regional cooperation. Unless Armenia liberates the occupied area and displaced persons returned to their homeland “we cannot even talk about stability in the Southern Caucasus”. Another challenge was clashing interests of Russia, Turkey and Iran in the region which found their expressions on the offered proposals and the diverse strategic targets Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia had about potential partnership (German, 2016). Moreover, even if the stakeholders were acknowledged the importance of recognizing the key role of Western powers in promoting peace and stability of the South Caucasus, the EU showed little interest to these projects which is evaluated as another impediment to the realization of regional cooperation. Back then the EU already had bilateral and multilateral relations with Southern Caucasus states and launched their own program called the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) which basically covered the targets

of the abovementioned proposals. Hence, it was not reasonable for the EU to participate in the almost similar projects at the same time (Huseynov, 2022a).

Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. As mentioned above, every initiative for regional partnership in the South Caucasus was set forth following the disturbing event which put the stability and security of the region in jeopardy and 2008 The Russo-Georgian War became the next catalyst in this regard. The negative impacts of the military escalation between Georgia and Russia were not limited at state level but brought instability to wider regional countries and once again proved that the lasting peace is impossible goal for the South Caucasus unless protracted conflicts found their decisive solutions. In this respect, the formation of cooperation among interested countries became actual topic of political discussions. Concerned with the latest developments in Georgia, then Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan came up with a new “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” (CSCP) or 3+2 format which encompassed Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Turkey, Russia. This cooperation initiative is evaluated as renewed version of the previous venture made by Suleyman Demirel in order to prevent the spillover effect of Chechen war to South Caucasus. In attempt to materialize his proposal, Erdogan paid an official visit to Moscow, Russia (where the proposal was made public) on 13 August 2008 and a day later to Georgia and discussed the prospects of this cooperation with the officials from both states (Fotiou, 2009). CSCP was designed as a dialogue platform where “Caucasus Five” would put their efforts together to minimize the conflict potential and contribute sustainable economic development in the region by encouraging conflict resolution, restoring the relations, and building confidence. Erdogan’s active stance on conflict resolution and regional cooperation was stemmed from pragmatic needs to secure national interests of Turkey. As Turkish professor Mitat Çelikpala mentioned, the war between Georgia and Russia was more harmful to Turkey than Georgia excluding the territorial integrity component (Çelikpala, 2010). Because, besides being the main trading partner of Turkey, Georgia also provided this country with energy supplies and the status as energy transit state through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipelines. Failed bomb attacks (or for some, a deliberate message) by Russian jets to the Georgian sections of BTC oil pipeline raised serious concern and made Turkey to establish a strategy to deal with the security challenges brought by the regional instability. Moreover, CSCP served the new foreign policy priorities of Turkey that first presented by former Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu, in 2004. Basing on “Peace at Home, Peace in the World” principle coined by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turkish official desired to develop a new role for this country as a “regional

stability contributor” in order to boost Turkey’s regional prestige (Erşen, 2013). In this context, CSCP could be understood as a direct rational consequence of “zero problems towards neighbors” tenet of these priorities which is based on the political and economic cooperation to consolidate peace and stability in its neighborhood. However, this policy change also envisaged to strengthen Turkey’s international position, by transforming its long-known role as a “bridge” connecting Europe and Asia with a “central” country status.

At first, the reaction of the stakeholders toward CSCP were positive: Russia expressed its enthusiasm about the “Western-free” proposal which later followed by Armenia. Even though Georgia and Azerbaijan were hesitant about the possible outcomes this initiative could cause, they did not openly refuse to participate in this initiative. The stakeholders had a few meetings, including on 4-5 December 2008 in Helsinki, Finland and 26 January 2009 in Istanbul, Turkey (Imanbeyli, 2016). However, since 2010, the interest toward the realization of CSCP has faded due to several reasons. First of all, as it was case with all the failed partnership attempts in the region, the unsolved conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia prevented any progress. Especially, Azerbaijan was not satisfied with the reproachment between Turkey and Armenia in line with “zero problems with neighbors” approach during 2008-2009. Turkey's closed-door policy has failed to bring expected results in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but still it was Azerbaijan’s trump card over Armenia. When Armenia-Turkey reconciliation process reached to its peek with the signing of Zurich Protocols on 10 October 2009, the Foreign Ministry of Azerbaijan stated in its press release that the Turkish government’s decision “directly contradicts the national interests of Azerbaijan and overshadows the spirit of brotherly relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey built on deep historical roots” (Shiriyev, & Davies, 2013). On 16 December 2009, using country’s energy dominance, President Ilham Aliyev said: “What state would agree to sell its natural resources for 30 percent of world market prices, especially under current conditions? This is illogical” to indicate the price Azerbaijan put on natural gas for Turkey (Mikhelidze, 2010).

Russia was highly concerned about the possible expansion of the EU or the NATO to the South Caucasus – the region it approached as its sphere of influence - and defined it as a threat to the national interest. Therefore, this deliberate exclusion of the Western actors, i.e., the USA and the EU from the cooperation was favored by Russia. However, this exclusion is also blamed for the unsuccess of CSCP in the first place. After the proposal made public, Matthew James Bryza, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, took critical stance with

regard to Ankara's initiative saying albeit Turkey and the USA had a coordinated policy about Southern Caucasus region, they did not inform us about this new platform and "we were really surprised with the actions of our partner". Considering the importance of western integration for Georgia, absence of Western power also alienated this country from cooperation. Furthermore, another influential regional actor who had political and economic impact to the South Caucasus, Iran was also held out of CSCP. Having problematic relations with Russia, Georgia was not eager to become a part of CSCP, because the possible inclusion of new republics, namely South Ossetia and Abkhazia in this format means a direct threat to the territorial integrity of Georgia. Moreover, two important regional powers, Turkey and Russia shared the same intentions to create productive regional environment for peace and prosperity, however they also shared conflicting interest to become regional hegemon which turned into another obstacle for the success of Erdogan's initiative (Fotiou, 2009).

To conclude, the materialization of CSCP faced with the ongoing distrust issues, lack of consensus and the absence of security framework in the region, all stakeholders had different visions and strategic objectives which did not overlapped. All these factors had made it difficult for Turkey to establish a successful cooperation platform.

United Caucasus Initiative. The last proposal in the series of regional cooperation initiatives for the South Caucasus before the Second Karabakh War was made public by the President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia on 23 September 2010. During the 65th session of The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Saakashvili gave a speech about peace and cooperation and also emphasized the necessity of establishing "a vision for a free, stable and United Caucasus". He mentioned that the borders and the divisions among the people of Caucasus were built artificially by the governments, and it was time to change it by giving chance to unity and peace. Saakashvili called international community to help to secure peace in Georgia and in its broader region. Because according to his opinion, long lasting peace could only be achieved if regional countries summon their efforts together with international community and if "the world shows the commitment to a peaceful resolution of conflicts" in the Caucasus. "United Caucasus" was similar to the previous cooperation proposal of Georgian, namely "Peaceful Cooperation Initiative" by Shevardnadze in a sense that both included not only South but also North Caucasus. Saakashvili envisaged a specific model of cooperation for this region on example of the EU, because even if this region was once torn apart by hatred, destructive wars and conflicts that lasted for centuries,

European countries were able to turn this page of their history over and create single entity with the help of cooperation and interdependence. The initiative involved the creation of common market, free movement of people, the projects in cultural and social fields which would eventually lead to political and economic interdependence and “give birth to a United Caucasus”. Georgian president was aware of the difficulties his proposal could face due to the ongoing conflicts and the how much effort and compromise it would require for the implementation, but he was also aware of the fact that “our region will never be truly free if it is not united”. This kind of cooperation seemed against the national interests of Russia, but Saakashvili wanted “Russia as a partner and not as an enemy” offering this country to take part in this transformation instead of feeling threatened by it (Saakashvili, 2010).

A new proposal was welcomed by pro-government forces of Georgia, because twenty percent of country’s territory was under occupation and having good relationship with its neighboring states both in the Northern and Southern Caucasus meant to have needed allies and political support. In order to put his proposal into action, President Saakashvili met several officials from regional countries and tried to convince them about the necessity and the utility of “United Caucasus” idea. During Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s visit to Tbilisi, Georgia on 12 February 2011, where parties discussed the topic of promoting bilateral economic ties between two countries, President Saakashvili asked Turkey to help with the fulfilment of his proposal, as well. A year after the advent of the initiative, then President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan paid a two-days visit to Georgia on November 29, 2011. After having bilateral meetings, the Presidents of Georgia and Armenia hold the press-conference where Saakashvili once again touched the issue of regional cooperation, how states of the Caucasus need to stop fighting against each other and find strength in unity. “I am sure that all the conflicts in the Caucasus are imposed by the empire force whose major principle is divide and rule,” Saakashvili added. Agreeing with his counterpart, Sargsyan mentioned the possibility of resolving conflicts by mutual understanding and cooperation (Tsereteli, 2012).

Despite his efforts, “United Caucasus” initiative was never implemented. First of all, as the opposition in Georgia rightly criticized, Saakashvili’s regional partnership initiative was illusive and vague. Differently from prior attempt, the targets of this initiative was away from reality since the political conditions was not mature enough to apply the EU example to the Caucasus. On the other hand, from the beginning, Russia opposed to this framework which was against its political

agenda about the region. The resistance from the regional power that has enough means at its disposal to influence the political processes caused the unsuccess of the venture. During his meeting with Davutoğlu, Georgian President mentioned about the consent of Azerbaijan and Armenia about the united Caucasus, however, the mentioned parties have never openly expressed their agreement about this issue (German, 2016). If we include the frozen conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the picture, it is not difficult to understand their hesitant stance at that time. It was also argued that Saakashvili's main intention of promoting "united Caucasus" idea was to create a conditions for implementing his own regional policies.

The scrutiny of the modern regional cooperation attempts in the South Caucasus indicates that establishing conditions for peace, security and development was the focus of not only regional but also external actors. However, it also became clear that even though plenty of partnership formats was suggested in order to achieve this particular goal, none of them gave an expected outcomes. One of the root cause of the absence of cooperation in the Southern Caucasus region is the frozen conflicts it contains not only with neighboring countries, namely the Russia-Georgia conflict, but also between regional states, i.e., Azerbaijan and Armenia. The dispute over Nagorno Karabakh has been a major obstacle to the regional collaboration since conflicting parties rejected to take part in the same regional cooperation framework. Azerbaijan as a country that had twenty percent of its territories under Armenian occupation was not favored the attempts which would improve its enemy's condition and to decrease its position and negotiating power at the table of discussions. Another disturbing situation for the stability stems from the diplomatic tension between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The government of Georgia claims that Russia invaded 20 percent of its internationally recognized territory as the result of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War which is the violation of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Any cooperation initiative could include these newly established republics as a part of region and the participation of Georgia in the same initiative would be understood as Georgia's acceptance of the invasion. Therefore, becoming a member of regional cooperation is against the national interests of Georgia, unless Russia fulfills the legal obligations of the six-point ceasefire of 2008 and ends the occupation. Whereas the regional states needed to work jointly to improve political, economic, and social life of their region, these enmities between conflicting parties disrupted the solidarity of the Southern Caucasus. These disputes also negatively impacted the interests of external actors to get involved in the regional partnership projects because they were aware that any escalation of these conflicts into full-scale wars could erase all the progress they made.

Moreover, all stakeholders, including Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia as regional countries and Turkey, Russia, Iran, the EU and the USA had their own conflicted political and strategic priorities, agendas and objectives they wanted to impose which hindered successful implementations of the suggested initiatives. Georgia is taking all the measures to fully integrate into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, namely the EU and the NATO which was also expressed on their constitution (Government of Georgia, 1995). Armenia, on the other hand, has sought for more intensive involvement of its closest ally, Russia in the region. Because this country has been in vulnerable position by neighboring with Turkey and Azerbaijan, the countries which isolated Armenia from regional projects and thus negatively impacted its economic development. For decades, Azerbaijan maintained its balanced and independent foreign policy and the primary priority of this country was the restoration of its territorial integrity. Each regional state allied with different external actors for providing its security which resulted with the further polarization of the South Caucasus. The cooperation should contain compromises and mutual understanding, however when it came to this region, the neighboring powers of the South Caucasus had an incompatible interest of being dominant power. At the result of the geopolitical realities of the region even if there were plenty proposals for unity and prosperity, none of them have been implemented.

CHAPTER 2. NEW PERSPECTIVES TO REGIONAL COOPERATION

§ 2.1. Changing Geopolitical Realities in The South Caucasus

In September 2020 the South Caucasus was shaken by the eruption of war between decades-long enemies, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia. It was not unexpected occurrence, but just matter of time, especially in the light of several factor. First, even though the parties signed a ceasefire agreement on May 5, 1994, the hostilities and clashes on the border has never really stopped and continued to cause human casualties from both sides. Secondly, numerous outside actors initiated mediations between Azerbaijan and Armenia since 1990s which were unsuccessful to yield peaceful settlement. On the other hand, Azerbaijani side has never excluded the military solution of the conflict, if the diplomatic negotiation does not work, because the status-quo was not acceptable, therefore unsustainable for this country. Therefore, Azerbaijan increased its defence budget for the purpose of developing the military capabilities and suppling Azerbaijani army with new hi-tech weapon systems and equipment. The same tendency was observed in Armenia especially after the Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" in 2018, as well (Da Silva et al., 2020). For abovementioned reasons, Thomas de Waal preferred to use the term of "smoldering" (instead of "frozen") to describe the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory since it was similar to the volcano that was ready to explode (De Waal, 2010b).

The growing tension between parties following the military clashes on the Tovuz district of Azerbaijan (through which BTC and BTE pipelines pass) and Tavush region of Armenia on July 12, 2020, was the last event that begat the Second Karabakh War. The confrontations resulted with the death of twelve Azerbaijanis including a major general Polad Hashimov and four Armenian soldiers (Valiyev & Gafarova, 2020). The truce that was brokered by Russia in August to stop hostilities on the border lived short since the conflict turned into full scale war within two months. On 27th September, the 44 days war began after Azerbaijan military forces launch a counter-offensive operation as a response to Armenian attack to the villages of this country. Azerbaijan lost 2908 servicemen (MOD, 2021) and 146 civilians at the result of the war while the total number of deaths on Armenian side was 3822 according to the information of the Investigative Committee. The Patriotic War reversed roles of the winner and the loser in the region as Azerbaijan gained decisive victory against Armenia and restored its territorial integrity. This war also demonstrated that power politics is still effective because Azerbaijan liberate its territories in 44 days with military means which it was not able to achieve through negations for almost three decades.

The hostilities ended with the signing of 9-10 November ceasefire agreement by the President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, and the President Vladimir Putin of Russia. This trilateral statement envisaged the phased withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from Azerbaijani territories, the deployment of a peacekeeping contingent of the Russian Federation in Nagorno-Karabakh region and along the Lachin corridor, the repatriation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees and the exchange of war prisoners between sides. Another important point of the Russia-mediated agreement was about the restoration of all economic and transport links in the South Caucasus (MFA, 2020). Moreover, the issue about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh was not included to the text of the trilateral declaration which could be counted as a triumph of Azerbaijan, as well. With the signing of the truce deal, official Baku declared the conflict it had with Armenia to be resolved.

The Second Karabakh War was a proud moment of the history of Azerbaijan, but also had wider regional implementation as it transformed the geopolitical realities of the South Caucasus. The region suffered from the enmities, disputes and war for a long time and the settlement of this dispute was seen as a precondition for the regional stability, security and peace. The ceasefire agreement of 2020 terminated the neither-war-nor-peace situation between conflicting parties in this regard and created golden opportunity for the regional cooperation and reconciliation.

Azerbaijan was not the only winner of the Second Karabakh War, because the new geopolitical order was also in favor of Russia and Turkey. Russia was proved its domination over regional affairs by bringing parties to the negotiation table and being the only external power to sign the ceasefire agreement. Since the First Nagorno-Karabakh war, Russia wanted to be the main country to engage in the conflict resolution and mediation process. This desire revealed itself during the early 1990s, while the European countries was thinking on the ways to end the military combat between Azerbaijan and Armenian, the parties signed the Bishkek Protocol with the mediatorship of the Russian Federation. This country showed its capacity to act as broker on the six-week war, as well. Additionally, Russia was satisfied with the outcomes of the war as it deployed its troops to the only Southern Caucasus country that did not had Russian military presence on its land (Huseynov, 2022a). From different perspective, Russia was seriously concerned about the western-oriented steps of Armenia in the recent years. And it is known fact that how Russia reacts to any venture to change the state of affairs in the post-Soviet region as witnessed several times such as in Georgian case of 2008, Ukrainian wars of 2014 and 2022. On the other hand, this country used

the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh as a leverage on Azerbaijan to keep it under control and impede its rapprochement with the West, however Russia did not intervene the way things turn out with the breakout of the war in 2020. This change of strategy was explained with that Russia had calculated the possible outcomes beforehand and concluded that it has more to gain than to lose with the advance of new regional order. Thus, throughout the battles Russia preserved its neutrality despite being the member of the same military alliance with Armenia, namely CSTO. Article 4 of this treaty identifies any attack to one member state as an attack to all the members and requires procurement of any necessary supplies including military one (CSTO, 1992). However, Russia used the flare-up between conflicting parties for its own national interests by punishing the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan for his western inclination and showing Armenia's dependence on Russia (Minzarari, 2020).

Turkey sided with Azerbaijan in its war for justice and showed both diplomatic and political support to its ally. As a result, Erdogan did not only strengthen Turkey's political and economic position in the Southern Caucasus, but also consolidated its leadership in the Turkic world. The shift of regional balance following the 44 days war was in favor of Turkey. Even if this country was not the signatory of the 2020 ceasefire agreement, its military personnel accompanied Russian peacekeepers in the monitoring centers in Aghdam district of Azerbaijan (ICG, 2020). The loyalty to "one nation, two states" slogan allowed Erdogan to take more confident steps in pursuit of country's energy security goals in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as well. Another implication of the conflict resolution for Turkey is the establishment of a fruitful condition for rapprochement with Armenia. This country closed its border with Armenia as a protest to the invasion of Azerbaijan's region, Kalbajar in April 1993 and did not open since then. Even if there were several attempts for reconciliation between parties, they were unsuccessful as the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh continued. During Erdogan's visit to Baku for the victory parade, Turkish President expressed his intentions about opening the borders if Armenia showed some dedication to this process (Erdogan, 2020). While challenging Russian dominance in the region, Erdogan was aware that working in coordination with this country was important for bringing durable peace to the region. Thus, it is possible to say that the new geopolitical order created conditions to turn South Caucasus into a place of cooperation.

Considering the outcomes of the armed confrontation, Armenia was not the only country who lost according to Luke Coffey, the director at the Heritage Foundation, he called Iran a "big loser in

Nagorno-Karabakh war” (Coffey, 2020). By virtue of its historical legacy, Iran views itself as “a big wheel” in the region, because once both Azerbaijan and Armenia was under control of Persian Empire. Even if it has friendly ties with Armenia, the relations with Azerbaijan had its own ups and downs since the countries gained their independence. Iran was always cautious about the Azerbaijanis, the second largest ethnic minority that make up one-fourth of Iran’s population which effected the policy stance of Iran on the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict, as well. When the 2020 war erupted, Azeri minority of Iran showed their support for Azerbaijani government both on the street and social media. Later, on 10 December 2020, during the military parade dedicated to the victory of Azerbaijan, Erdogan recited the “Gulustan” poem of Bakhtiyar Vahabzadeh, which includes sentiments about the partition of Azerbaijani people by the political line through Aras River. Both events caused the anger of the government of Iran as it could ignite the self-determination wishes of the Azeri population of the country. On the other hand, Iran is not satisfied to have Russian peacekeeping force close to its border, thus it began to deploy more military troops to the northern part of the country. For decades Azerbaijan used Iran’s airspace and land in order to connect with its exclave, Nakhchivan, however the reconciliation of Azerbaijan and Armenia could result with the opening of borders, which means an economic blow to Iran. In brief, it will require efforts and dedication from Iran to adjust to the new order of the South Caucasus for being able to pursue its national security goals.

The security related engagement of the West in the region was within the framework of OSCE Minsk Group since 1992. However, the performance of this grouping was constantly criticized, because despite of numerous meetings at official levels, Minsk Group has never succeeded to come up with the peaceful resolution which were acceptable simultaneously for Azerbaijan and Armenia. From Azerbaijan’s perspective, this format had it flaws from the beginning since it gathered three countries, namely the USA, France and Russia that had large Armenian diaspora to impact their policy choices. During six weeks war, Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, i.e., co-chair of Minsk Group openly sided with Armenia which cause serious concern about the effectiveness and impartiality of European negotiation format. In general, Western actors failed to play constructive role in the regional affairs of the South Caucasus. Recently, the USA was busy taking measures against the rising power of China, while the EU countries were hesitant about interfering Russia zone of influence and deteriorating already tense relations with this country. Russia took the advantage of the incompetence of Western efforts and imposed ceasefire agreement between

conflicting parties outside of OSCE format. At the result, the new geopolitical order of the South Caucasus dictated the exclusion of western powers from the region affairs (Meister, 2021).

The security of the South Caucasus was threatened by the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict as it handicapped the creation of the conditions that is conducive for peace and stability. In this respect, the solution of this “Gordian knot” could be regarded as a watershed of the region, because it put an end to the old regional architecture and signified the beginning of new order. It offered better circumstances to change the detrimental fate of the region by cooperation and rapprochement. The further success of the 2020 ceasefire agreement to end decade-long enmity is up to the external powers efforts to keep the stability of the South Caucasus as much as it depends on the regional states. Instead of fighting over regional influence, they can collaborate and benefit from political and economic cooperation. It is also necessary to understand that Russia is still the most influential actor in the South Caucasus, thus its stance about the situation of the region impacts the future cooperation and stability.

§ 2.2. The Connection between Discourse and Conflict

Being witnessed the atrocities and the destructions that the world wars caused, the leaders and politicians tried to establish a new liberal international order to maintain peace and security since the second half of 1940s. However, the wars, the conflicts and the political violence between countries continue till this day which created an interest toward conflict studies among scholars. The research that focused on the discursive dimension of the political processes instead of looking to the issues from material perspective gave a rise to the poststructuralism in 1980s. This theory which views language as a powerful political mean was employed to understand the connection between discourse and war/peace (Hansen, 2012). The language is not simply used for reflecting what people see, or experience, this tool shapes their perceptions through interpretations. When the post-structuralism emerged, there were the East and the West, namely the communist and capitalist bloc which viewed each other as a threat to their existence, thus one of the first issues the post-structuralist examined was the “self” and the “other” dynamics. The construction of opposite identities has an implication on the conflict initiation and conflict resolution, as well. In this regard, the “enemies” of the country is not created or appeared by itself, they became one if they are called or labeled as adversaries. To put it another way, first the enemy is created through discourse before the weapons and armies enter in the scene (Carpentier & Kejanlıoğlu, 2020). While the “self” defines itself as victim and the dovish side, it draw the evil image of its “enemy other” whose aim

is to inflict harm and destruction. Afterwards, the rhetoric itself becomes shaped in accordance with the new reality and consolidated through oral or written language such as speeches, statements, documents, resolution etc. The war discourse plays an essential role on the mobilization of the two nations and further increase the differences among them as it is based on carefully selected arguments to justify the reasons why the war is the morally right option. Even if the war is regarded as the last resort for achieving a particular goal, the just war theory approach this mean as morally justifiable if it meets certain criterions. So apparently, there is an undeniable connection between discourse and conflict.

While war rhetoric could be employed to grow the tensions between the states and cause further escalation of the conflict, the dispute resolution became more possible by adopting more pro-peace language. The duality of the discourse is worthy of attention, in this regard. The peace could be achieved through reversing the war rhetoric. This variant become possible if the conflict is over and settled which results with the absence of the “other”. It does not mean the other country ceased to exist, but there is not a necessity to label it as an enemy, thus the “other” transformed into different “not-enemy other” such as “neighbour”, “friend” or “ally”. At the result, the talking about peaceful co-existence become real and plausible and the authorities deploys new rhetoric which is the opposite of the previous one. The role of societies in the conflict resolution and peacebuilding process is worth examining. Even if the countries finally solved their dispute, if there is lack of trust and willingness to coexist with the other party, the reconciliation process will be hindered. Here the peace discourse plays an important role as well because it also effects the views and attitudes of the population. The creation of peaceful conditions is of great importance for regional cooperation since it is not feasible for the parties to the dispute to cooperate with their adversaries and allow them to benefit from these economic ties. In this regard, in the next section, the rhetoric of the President of Azerbaijan, namely Ilham Aliyev will be examined. This discourse analysis aims to find out how the certain events between 2003 and 2022 effected Aliyev’s attitude and how the cooperation on regional level was impacted by these alterations.

§ 2.3. Discourse Analysis of President Ilham Aliyev’s Speeches

Ilham Aliyev became the president of Azerbaijan at the result of the presidential elections of 15 October 2003. He came to this post with political knowledge and experience as he participated in different events alongside with his father, Heydar Aliyev and was Prime Minister of Azerbaijan before electing as a president. Thus, Aliyev also was closely engaged with the conflict between

Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and had enough background to deal with the situation. During Aliyev's first speech at his inauguration, he touched the dispute and described it as "the most painful problem" of Azerbaijan. He believed in the possibility of the conflict resolution within the norms and rules of international law, but if peaceful means would not work, he did not exclude the usage of military option saying, "Azerbaijan will liberate its territories for whatever it takes" (Aliyev, 2003a). but he also mentioned the ineffectiveness of the Minsk Group to provide the solution so far. At his speech on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that took place in 2003 in Geneva, Ilham Aliyev stated that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict "is not allowing full-scale regional cooperation" (Aliyev, 2003b). Next year, during the spring session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on 29th April, the President expressed that Azerbaijan will not cooperate unless the conflict finds it solution. Armenia will not be able to cooperate at regional level, because without the participation of Azerbaijan, the regional projects will not operate (Aliyev, 2004a). While evaluating the developments of 2005, Ilham Aliyev expressed his hopes about the possible improvement about the conflict in the upcoming year as the Minsk Group intensified its activities (Aliyev, 2006).

During his first term between 2003 and 2008, the main arguments Ilham Aliyev put forward about the Azerbaijan-Armenian dispute were that Armenia is an aggressor country which occupied twenty percent of Azerbaijan's territory including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts (Aliyev, 2004a; 2006a; 2008a). At the result of this invasion, one million people lost their homes and turned into refugees and IDPs. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted four resolutions (822, 833, 874, 884) and they have not been implemented. The President always mentioned the importance of the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity while repeated several times that Armenians already used their right for self-determination, so it is not justifiable for them to claim the same right again in Nagorno-Karabakh (Aliyev, 2005a; 2008b).

The topic of regional cooperation was also a part of Aliyev's speeches. He frequently mentioned the significance of deeper regional integration for the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, however the involvement of Armenia into these kind of projects is possible only after the liberation of the occupied territories (Aliyev, 2005b; 2007). The invasion harms the economic and social condition of Armenia by isolating this country from regional cooperation projects, thus ending the aggression is in the best interest of Armenia, in this regard. Ilham Aliyev was utterly resolute about the

impossibility of that regional cooperation without the involvement of Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2004b; c: d).

In 2008, the change of leadership happened in Armenia as Serzh Sargsyan won the presidency elections and stayed in the office until the Velvet Revolution of 2018. This alteration was accompanied with the stagnation in the process of conflict settlement until the clashes that started on 27 July 2014 and continued until 8th of August. Due to the number of casualties (total 19 soldiers, 13 from Azerbaijani side), this outburst is viewed as the bloodiest fighting since the 1994 ceasefire. The tension was prompted again following this events and Ilham Aliyev posted several tweets on his official Twitter account which were interpreted as war threats: “Just as we have beaten the Armenians on the political and economic fronts, we are able to defeat them on the battlefield.” (Aliyev, 2014a). Ilham Aliyev did not changed his position about the possibility of regional cooperation stating that only peace can create progress for the collaboration (Aliyev, 2014b) and Armenia’s aggression only harms itself by depriving it from regional developments (Aliyev, 2015).

Hopes for the solving of the dispute with peaceful means faded with the eruption of the four-days war in 2016 causing a death toll of hundreds. Ilham Aliyev indicated that these kind of clashes are the results of Armenian provocations. When Armenia feel pressure for peaceful solution by changing the status-quo which means withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied territories, they resort to this tactic (Aliyev, 2016a). Following April clashes, the rhetoric of the president was mostly pro-peace expressing that “we are committed to the negotiation process” (Aliyev, 2016b). However, another incident that happened on 4th of July, in 2017: Armenia killed two residents of Fuzuli district, 2 years old Zahra and her grandmother. This event triggered years long enmity among the societies of disputed countries and Ilham Aliyev said that this crime “showed the ugly face of Armenian fascism to the whole world” (Aliyev, 2017).

From the very beginning, Ilham Aliyev opted for the peaceful settlement of the dispute, however he always mentioned about how Azerbaijan’s military budget is increasing and how sophisticated the army is becoming year by year (Aliyev, 2009; 2013). These kind of statements once again exhibited Azerbaijan’s determination to get its lands back from Armenia at any cost. Azerbaijan’s confidence derived from several factors. First, by initiating and participating in the regional partnership ventures, especially on energy sector, this country was able to increase its economic conditions and social welfare. Secondly, with the help of growing gross domestic product (GDP) rate, Azerbaijan’s military expenditures increased, and its army was provided with high-tech

weaponry. The numbers were too high comparing to Armenia, thus gave Azerbaijan faith about the favorable outcomes of possible war. Moreover, Azerbaijan's position was based on international rules and norms, therefore it was conceived as a just war with the guilty enemy. Ilham Aliyev's war rhetoric was encouraged by the population at societal level as well. Being the victim of Armenia's atrocities, seeing the barbarian and brutal actions Armenia committed during the Khojaly genocide and the death of both military servicemen and civilians at the results of violations of ceasefire promoted the patriotism among people. In general, the period of 2003-2018, Ilham Aliyev was using more pro-peace talk as he believed and hoped that the mediation efforts of external actors will produce a result.

The year 2018 was marked by the change of political system and the leader of Armenia. When Serzh Sargsyan's candidacy was put forward for the Prime Minister post again, the population united in protests under the leadership of Nikol Pashinyan, the member of the Armenian parliament in March 2018. The revolution lasted almost for a month and resulted with the resignation of Sargsyan and the election of Pashinyan as Prime Minister. This protests were called "Velvet Revolution" because the political transition was smooth and did not cause any violent confrontation between pro-government forces and the opposition. At the same time, the transformation of Armenian political system from semi-presidential to parliamentary republic was completed. While these processes were happening in Armenia, Azerbaijan had the elections on 11 April and voted for the presidency of Ilham Aliyev for the fourth term.

The new system and the leader in Armenia gave great hopes to the government of Azerbaijan believing this change will be accompanied with the more constructive approach to the conflict. During his speech at the Cabinet of Ministers, Ilham Aliyev blamed the previous regime for the underdevelopment of Armenia as a country and called them "criminal junta" (Aliyev, 2018a). Aliyev evaluated the change in Armenian leadership to be the result of humiliating defeat at April battle where the myth of powerful military army was ruined. During the same speech, he also mentioned that Azerbaijan will continue its policy to isolate this country from regional cooperation projects unless the conflict finds its peaceful solution. Throughout the year Aliyev expressed his opinion about that Armenia should not repeat the mistakes that was made by previous leadership. In 2018, Azerbaijan held a military parade celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces. After talking about increased military capabilities of Azerbaijan from 2003 onwards, Aliyev stressed that the enemy must be interested in the resolution of the dispute through

negotiations because Azerbaijan is capable of destroying every single military or strategic facility of Armenia (Aliyev, 2018b).

The opportunity window that the revolution brought was closed soon as shortly after electing as Prime Minister, Pashinyan required the inclusion of de-facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities to the negotiations as a party to conflict. Even if Armenian position on this demand changed later, they began to stress the self-determination right of this territory repeatedly. All this “developments” changed the rhetoric of Ilham Aliyev, and he began to accuse Pashinyan of the lack of experience and knowledge on politics, coming to the leadership from streets (Aliyev, 2018c).

2019 was not a productive year for the settlement of conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, therefore the President called it “a lost year” (Aliyev, 2019a). However, the “interesting” statement was used by Pashinyan during his speech at the opening ceremony of the 7th Pan-Armenian Games on 5 August 2019, in Khankandi. Even if, Armenia approached Nagorno-Karabakh territory as an “independent state” and wanted their participation as a separate party, he stated: “Artsakh is Armenia, the point.” He also repeatedly used the Armenian nationalist slogan of 1980-90s, “miatsum” which means unification (Kucera, 2019). This statement was totally contradicting with the policy stance of Armenia, that is the reason why it cause immediate criticizing reactions not only by Azerbaijan, but also from Armenia as well. Pashinyan’s sentiment was a blow to negotiations process. Two days later Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released the statement saying that Pashinyan’s speech is misunderstood, and Armenia is loyal to peace talk with Azerbaijan. Ilham Aliyev responded to this claim of Armenia at the plenary session of the Valdai International Discussion Club was held in Sochi, Russia on October 3 saying: “Karabakh is Azerbaijan and exclamation mark!” (Aliyev, 2019b).

2020 began promisingly as Prime Minister Pashinyan and the President Ilham Aliyev attended to the panel discussions on Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which was held as part of Munich Security Conference on 15 February. Both sides referred to the history and put forward the facts that was in favor of their position. One main remark that was used by Azerbaijanis to tease Armenians came from Pashinyan when he mistakenly accepted Karabakh to be part of Azerbaijan: “I should say that I do not agree with President Aliyev, because Caucasian bureau decided Karabakh to be a part of Azerbaijan... Armenia, I am sorry” (“Panel discussions”, 2020). Pro-peace statements were also made which created hopes for the further progress on the talks, but it did not last long. The border clashes in July 2020 deleted every developments on the conflict

resolution that was achieved so far. This military confrontation resulted with the death of high ranked military officer Polad Hashimov and colonel Ilgar Mirzayev which triggered nationalism among Azerbaijanis. Thousands of people gathered in the streets of Baku for "Karabakh March" on 14 July to show their support to the military army of Azerbaijan. They used slogans like "Karabakh is ours!", "Martyrs do not die, the homeland will not be divided" "Either Karabakh, or death!", "Let the quarantine end, let the war begin!" Tovuz events were the messenger of upcoming Patriotic war.

The war discourse was frequently used following the July events. During the meeting of Security Council, Ilham Aliyev associated this kind of military provocations of Armenia with their critical internal conditions and economic decrease. Additionally, he once again emphasized that Azerbaijan will not agree with invasion and will do everything to restore its territorial integrity (Aliyev, 2020a).

The discourse analysis of the President of Azerbaijan between 2018 and 2020 till the Second Karabakh War reveals that the advent of new leadership in Armenia created hopes for positive improvements about the conflict resolution, however they vanished soon since Pashinyan's claims, and demands were implausible and unacceptable for Azerbaijani side. Moreover, Pashinyan used pro-war discourse that negatively affected peace negotiations. Even if some of them was aimed for internal audience to ignite nationalism among Armenians, they backfired and even was not welcomed by the Armenian people.

As mentioned above, the use of peace rhetoric becomes possible after the conflict is solved, and the "self" do not identify the "other" as enemy. This was case for Azerbaijan when the Patriotic War erupted, and the territorial integrity of this country restored after almost three decades. As Azerbaijani side was glad about the new status-quo, the discourse used by Ilham Aliyev changed toward positive. And these improvements paved a way for regional cooperation, because there was no reason from Azerbaijani's perspective to isolate Armenia from the benefits of collaboration. After the military parade in Baku at the end of 2020, Ilham Aliyev and Erdogan held press conference where Azerbaijani president expressed his opinion about the importance of creating new cooperation platform and showed his approval about the involvement of Armenia saying, "if the Armenian leadership draws the right conclusions from the war, renounces its unfounded claims and looks ahead, then they can also take a place on this platform. We are open to this" (Aliyev, 2020b). Aliyev also mentioned that Armenia should be interred in this kind of cooperation because

it would benefit this country's economy (Aliyev, 2022a). The only unsolved issue is the absence of peace agreement which is the main obstacle to consolidate peace in the region according to Ilham Aliyev (Aliyev, 2021b).

The results showed that Ilham Aliyev deployed both pro-war and pro-peace rhetoric during 2003-2020. Especially after 2018, with the rise of nationalism in Armenia and continues failure of negotiations, war discourse was preferred by Azerbaijan. However, his attitude toward the regional cooperation with Armenian participation did not change even the times when there were more hopes for peaceful settlement until the 2020 war. He repeatedly mentioned the one condition for accepting partnership with Armenia which is the liberation of Azerbaijani territories. However, the advent of new geopolitical order with the Second Karabakh War in 2020 changed the perceptions. Because the President Aliyev expressed his willingness for inclusive cooperation which is regarded as pro-peace discourse. This development created fruitful condition for achieving peace and stability in the South Caucasus.

CHAPTER 3. THE 3+3 REGIONAL COOPERATION INITIATIVE

§ 3.1. Six-Party Platform: What is at Stake?

The Second Karabakh War did not only affect the status quo between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it altered the geopolitical and geoeconomic architecture of the South Caucasus. The end of major conflict raised hopes for the prosperous and peaceful future of the war-weary region and provided more effective atmosphere for the cooperation and the normalization of the relations among regional actors and their immediate neighbors. Since the first day of his presidency, Ilham Aliyev indicated the significance of deeper and inclusive regional integration for the foreign policy of Azerbaijan, however the full-scale partnership at regional level was hindered by the unlawful Armenian invasion. The resolution of dispute removed the barriers in this regard, hence, following the ceasefire agreement of 2020, Azerbaijan expressed its readiness to cooperate with its neighbor, Armenia.

The new order of the region was accompanied by diverse ideas about possible partnership formations for the South Caucasus. The first regional cooperation initiative after the 44 days war was proposed by Turkish President Erdogan at the press conference following the victory parade on 10th December 2020. He elaborated on the requirements and the tasks regional peace sets before countries and the role the six-sided platform could play in this respect. As it was case with the previous regional cooperation attempts, this one also was suggested after a detrimental event, i.e., the military confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. 3+3 cooperation format encompasses three states of the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) and three countries of wider region (Turkey, Iran, and Russia). The inclusion of region's three big powers to this unity was not a coincidence, because they have had geographical, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and historical links to the South Caucasus. Ilham Aliyev shared the same view as his counterpart Erdogan and said regional cooperation will benefit and create win-win situation for all participants. Prior to this suggestion, there have been several separate groups of partnering states, such as Azerbaijan-Russia-Iran, Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia, Turkey-Iran-Russia, but the objective of the new proposal is to gather all these countries and Armenia under single cooperation framework. The initiative was envisaged to encourage enduring peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus through economic, trade, transport, communication, and infrastructure projects and to counter common threats and challenges. Besides its potential to build foundation for constructive relationships, six country cooperation platform could be useful for solving the political contradictions and disputes among

member states by building confidence. Ilham Aliyev believed that it is possible to eliminate “the future risk of war in the region to zero” by means of new all-inclusive format of unity (Aliyev, 2020b).

The first meeting of the six country platform held on 10th December 2021 in Moscow, Russia. The conference was attended by the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan Khalaf Khalafov, Turkish Sedat Onal, Armenian Vahe Gevorgyan, Russian Andrey Rudenko, and the head of the Eurasia Department of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Alireza Khakikiyan. Even if Georgia was also invited to this consultative session, "Tbilisi won't participate in the negotiations of the platform of six" said David Zalkaliani, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of Georgia (TASS, 2021a). The reason of refusal was the lack of political relations with Russia. During the session the flag of Georgia was present and all countries, including Russia expressed their willingness for Georgia's participation. The parties agreed to meet at least twice a year in one of the participating states on a rotational basis. The preparation for second meeting is continuing these days and the session is scheduled to take place by the end of July, Rudenko said on 17th May 2022 (Report, 2022). Moreover, he emphasized that the stakeholders should decide on certain agenda of the format, so that they can began to implement specific regional projects. Due to the absence of Georgia from the cooperation talks, the meetings are held on the basis of 2+3 format (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, Russia, Iran) however the initiative is still referred as 3+3 platform in the official sources, hopefully Georgian officials will change their mind and become a part of this cohesion.

When the cooperation proposal was made public, the initial reactions from the interested parties were different: Armenia and Georgia displayed uncertainty regarding the offerings of the initiative, while other four states welcomed this idea with enthusiasm. All these countries had their reasoning behind their support or resistance towards the creation of 3+3 format. As a victor of the Patriotic War, Azerbaijan is now ready to participate in the regional projects in which Armenia also holds a stake. Official Baku attaches considerable significance to the restoration of transportation and communication links in the region, ergo it is not hard to understand Azerbaijan's positive attitude toward this platform. On the other hand, the revanchist voices are heard in Armenia following the capitulation act of 2020 as the defeat was humiliating, therefore unacceptable for the Armenians. Ilham Aliyev warned Armenian government several times to refrain from revengeful thoughts and action, or it will have to pay the price of their bad choice (Aliyev, 2022b). In view of revanchist

forces of Armenia, official Baku needs to consolidate the peace in the region in order to ensure its gains from the war. 3+3 cooperation could serve the interests of this country as it envisages to create and strengthen economic relations among its member including between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Economic interdependence, in its turn, is believed to be an important element to contribute to peace which is explained with the necessity of protecting commercial contacts. The involvement in conflict severs economic ties with the other state, and if they have mutually beneficial relations, dispute means harming the economic interest of the state. Thus, economic independence, especially trade linkage, contributes to the elimination of the conflicts more than democracy or the alliances do (Gartzke et al., 2001). Six country platform could increase Armenia's stake in maintaining economic relations it has with Baku which serves the national interest of Azerbaijan as it wants zero risk of war and change of status quo.

During his speech at the parade, President Erdogan said that he already discussed 3+3 cooperation format with Vladimir Putin and got positive feedback from the president. Russia's support for the realization of this venture was not about country's enthusiasm about bringing peace and development to the region. Moscow is intended to fulfill its on national interests using this format. Firstly, the east-west route that connects Central Asia and Europe excludes Russia as a beneficiary, thus this regional cooperation could be Russian chance to enhance north-south trade level (Chausovsky, 2021). Vladimir Putin does not want the Western powers to be present in the "backyard" of Russia, for that reason the good relations between Georgia and the Biden administration was concerning him. 3+3 format is favorable for Russian national interest as it include neither European countries nor the USA. It is true that Russia did not oppose to the increasing influence of Turkey in the region since it already deployed its peacekeeper as a part of ceasefire deal in 2020. However, Russia still wants to keep the Turkish's role in check and new partnership initiative could be used to that end (Dzamukashvili, 2022). In this respect, the support of Putin to the 3+3 platform is associated with his long-term strategic plans to keep the South Caucasus region under his dominance. There are another factor that attracts Russian interests for the collaboration. Even if this country is regarded as the "big brother" of Armenia, it did not support it during the war to the expected extent. Therefore, Russia want to use new initiative as a way to restore Armenian confidence though the economic benefits of trade and communication links.

It is not the first time Erdogan puts forward a partnership platform for the region and in many respects 3+3 format is similar to CSCP. The inclusion of Iran is the only evident difference.

Turkey's eagerness for the stability in the South Caucasus stems from its economic and political interests as well. Because it would not be plausible to think that Turkey really that desperate to collaborate with Russia and Iran, especially as a member of NATO. Considering the legacy of Russia in the South Caucasus, Turkey choose to cooperate with this country for the sake of its policy strategies. In the light of weakening relations with the West, Turkey turned its attention to the Turkic countries for further economic cooperation which can be achieved with the openings of the new routes. Turkey was an economic actor for the region until 2020, however at the end of the war it was able to jointly employ its peacekeepers with Russia to the region which gave Ankara a political influence. Moreover, to display its solidarity with Azerbaijan, Turkey kept its borders closed for Armenia since 1993 which at the result cost its further economic development. Turkey put forward one condition in order to restore its relationship with Armenia, which is the liberation of Azerbaijani territories, but since the Nagorno-Karabakh solved this problem, the opportunity for reconciliation emerged. The positive opinions on this matter was heard as soon as the war ended from both parties. Even if Turkey was sided with Azerbaijan on this conflict, Armenia showed enthusiasm to normalize the ties with its neighbour.

In January 2021, Iran's former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif expressed his support for this new unity initiative and hold a regional tour visiting all potential members in order to discuss the ways and prospects of this partnership. Iran's economy have been heavily affected by the western sanctions. Thus, establishment of regional cooperation which also aims economic development through trade, communication and transportation tie is a chance for Tehran to take the advantage of the new regional order. On the other hand, Iran was left out from the affairs of the South Caucasus, while Russia and Turkey were consolidating their positions, from this perspective, 3+3 format offers Iran another chance for getting involved in the region. Even if official Tehran was labeled as the "big loser" of six weeks war, it had advantageous position in respect to the new cooperation initiative as an only outside country that have not been involved in any military conflict with the regional states. The relationship between Russia and Georgia deteriorated at the result of 2008 war and Turkey had its borders closed to Armenia. Even if the relation between Azerbaijan and Iran had its problems which sometimes reveals itself, it has never been at army level. Hence, Iran can overtake a mediator role in the talks within new cooperation framework. The possibility of opening the Zangazur corridor (will be discussed later) negatively affect the economic interest of Iran since it lost its leverage over other former dependent countries. However, the new

cooperation target the establishment of new trade and transportation link which could benefit Iran as a member state.

As mentioned above, Georgia and Armenia was hesitant about the joining new regional cooperation venture. Even if Armenia accepted to participate in the consultative meetings of 3+3 platform, Georgia preferred to avoid from getting involved. There are several rationale behind this choice. First of all, the relations between Russia and Georgia is tense due to the 2008 war. The participation in the same cooperation platform with its adversary is not plausible as Russia invaded 20 percent of Georgian territories, namely South Ossetia and Abkhazia. There is also a great likelihood that 3+3 platform would operate on the basis of 3+3+2 format since the “independent” republics could push for the participation. In this case, the presence of Georgia in this initiative is equal to jeopardizing its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Gigiadze et al., 2021). Moreover, Georgia is interested to expand its relations with the Western institutions such as NATO and the EU, and it is expressed in their constitution as well. Georgians does not feel like they belong to South Caucasus, and as the President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili mentioned during the interview with France 24, Georgians are sometimes more Europeans than Europeans themselves (FRANCE 24, 2022). From this point, lack of interest in Georgia is understandable, because one of specific characteristic of 3+3 platform was the exclusion of the West from the regional affairs. Georgia’s acceptance of regional partnership venture, on the other hand, could be understood as its validation of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus. For decades, Georgia cooperated with the regional states without the help of Russia or Iran, so they could stick to the present partnerships it has in the region without getting involved in six-country platform.

Initially, Armenia was reluctant to get involved in 3+3 cooperation platform as it was defeated country and has hardship to accept the new regional order of the South Caucasus. However, considering the presence of its main ally, i.e., Russia, official Yerevan agreed to take place in this partnership initiative. There were opinions that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov forced Armenia to accept the proposal, but it was denied by governmental official saying that Yerevan analyzed the cost and benefits and decided to participate by itself. During his press conference on November 23, 2021, Pashinyan emphasized that this attempt should differ from already existing ones and offer something novel and not discussed yet (Huseynov, 2022a). Armenia’s main interest is to normalize relations with Turkey which could be possible through six country project. Armenia

could reverse the situation for it favor by lifting the isolation with the help of trade and economic ties.

Azerbaijan officially considers its conflict with Armenia to be resolved with the signing of November 9-10 agreement and this factor brought a chance for peace and stability that was not possible before. This development could not be taken granted and requires efforts from both regional states and their neighbors to protect and consolidate this favorable condition. Today, the new geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus makes regional economic integration even more necessary.

§ 3.2. Zangazur Corridor as a Main Component of 3+3 Format

The ninth article of the ceasefire agreement signed by the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Russia, and the Prime Minister of Armenia in 10th november 2020 envisaged the restoration of all economic and transport connections in the region. According to the same point, Armenia should ensure the safety of the transportation links between Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhchivan (MFA, 2020). The leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia participated at the trilateral summit on January 11, 2021, in Moscow for the first time since the end of 44 days war. After four hours long talks the parties agreed to establish working groups co-chaired by the deputy prime ministers of the three countries in order to ensure the opening of the commercial and communication ties. Expert subgroups for rail, road, and combined transport was created with the task of presenting a list of activities and their implementation schedule for approval (MFA, 2021).

Besides restoring the economic ties between Azerbaijan and Armenia, this ceasefire has wider implementation for the region as it envisages the re-opening of Zanzagur corridor. Despite constituting small area, this corridor is of great importance due to its geopolitical role as a transit route. Considering its genuine potential for encouraging economic cooperation and political reconciliation among South Caucasus states and their immediate neighbors, Zangazur project could be a building stones of the 3+3 cooperation format (Huseynov, 2022b).

There are several reasons why the re-opening of this corridor is necessary for Azerbaijan. First of all, the mainland Azerbaijan will gain a direct access to its exclave, Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through Syunik province of Armenia and lift the three-decades old blockade. This process, in its turn, will improve the socioeconomic condition of the republic. The Zangazur corridor will provide 340 km shorter route to connect Azerbaijan with its brother country Turkey

compared to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway. The reduced transportation costs will intensify and deepen the economic relations between these two states. Besides its economic advantages, unblocked Zangazur route has political advantage for Azerbaijan as well. It will enable Iran to use its transit country role linking Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan as a leverage to impose political pressure on this state (Baghirov, 2021).

Zangazur corridor offers significant benefits to Turkey and Russia, as well. Currently Turkey depends on Iran and Georgia for an access to Central Asian states, which is both requires extra cost and gives Iran an advantage and the tool of political pressure. From this perspective, Turkey could benefit from trans-Zangezur route as an alternative passage to connect with Turkic world via Caspian Sea. The Russo-Georgian war of 2008 constrained Russian access to Armenia, its main ally in the region, therefore Russia mainly used the territories of Iran. However Russian sector of Caspian Sea freeze in the winter which makes it difficult to connect with Armenia through Iran as well. For these reasons, Zangazur project will ease the communication between Russia and Armenia using route via Azerbaijan. As indicated in the truce, Russian Border Service of the Federal Security Service will be in charge of controlling this route which will strengthen Russian position in the South Caucasus. Russia will gain a new link to the Middle East via Iran, therefore from Tehran's perspective, Zangazur project will improve its role as a transit country in the north-south corridor. Moreover, the corridor would provide new links between Russia and Turkey, Iran and Russia, Armenia and its "good friend" Iran.

The approaches were various in Georgia in regard with the opening of Zangazur corridor. The economy of this country immensely benefits and depends on the transit projects, for some, if implemented, this new route will harm the status of Georgia as intermediary country. The transport dependence of other regional states will decrease to a notable degree which will negatively impact the strong position of Georgia in the South Caucasus (Gigiadze et al., 2021). There is also another group of people which looks the matter from positive side saying Zangazur corridor will help the region to develop as a whole and be complementary to the existing routes because it is not easy to replace Georgia's transit role. This is true, because Azerbaijan and Turkey is not going to unuse all the established road and infrastructure where they put large amount of investment. Instead, this new route will help to diversify and broaden the transportation network. On the other hand, Georgia still provides a major and shorter access to Black Sea region. The other issue that concerns Georgia

is that Trans-Zangazur project will increase the engagement of Russia in the region by providing new and stable routes thus contribute its dominant position.

The Zangazur project will be advantageous for Armenia as well in a sense that it will lift the blockade that severely impacted Armenian economy since early 1990s. This corridor could be used as a Middle Corridor connecting China and Europe and economically benefit both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Despite all the economic profits it could derive from this project, official Yerevan is worried about the unfavorable political outcomes it could cause such as loss of sovereignty over the Syunik region and geostrategic risks. Therefore, the nationalist in Armenia strictly oppose to the opening of this route and it affects the position of government since they constitute large part of the population (Baghirov, 2021). Pashinyan also insisted that 9-10 november agreement do not mention “Zangazur” or “Syunik” corridor for connecting Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan, therefore the working group would not discuss this issue (TASS, 2021b).

In sum, Zangazur corridor could play an important role for bringing peace and stability to the South Caucasus and create a new atmosphere that is conducive for economic development. The participant countries of 3+3 format will also benefit from this project. As Ilham Aliyev said at the 8th Summit of Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, “the opening of the Zangazur corridor in terms of transportation will usher new opportunities for the whole region” (Aliyev, 2021c). The main threat to the realization of this route is the absence of political rapprochement and peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

§ 3.3. Opportunities and Challenges: Is Materialization Possible?

The analysis of the prior regional cooperation attempts revealed the reasons why the South Caucasus has consistently failed to integrate and operate as a single entity. The emergence of new geopolitical order following the Second-Karabakh war eliminated the main causes of fragmentation, and therefore built opportune atmosphere for inclusive partnership such as six country platform.

Azerbaijan restored justice by liberating its territories from Armenian occupation and the motive for isolating Armenia by excluding this country from cooperation projects is now disappeared. It is challenging for Armenia to restore its diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan right away, because it had to deal with the defeat and its negative outcomes. Nevertheless, Armenia needs economic relations with neighboring actors (which saves transportation costs) more than other stakeholders

of new initiative considering 80% of its international borders were close for decades. The lifting of the blockade will boost the economic and social condition of Armenia.

The lack of relation between Turkey and Armenia was another reason behind the “brokenness” of South Caucasus and the resolution created a great opportunity for Armenia to normalize their relationship. The benefit of re-establishment of economic and trade links with Turkey and Azerbaijan was highlighted by Armenia’s Minister of Economy Vahan Kerobyan saying that in two years the GDP rate would expand 30% (ARKA, 2021).

Georgia has been giving mixed signal regarding the new format. During his interview with Georgia Public Broadcasting, Georgian former Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Davit Zalkaliani emphasized the necessity of participation in regional cooperation projects in order to not fall behind from the regional developments which could hurt Georgia’s economic interests. He later mentioned that Georgia is not considering joining to 3+3 format since his opinion caused backlash, however it is interpreted as government’s tactic to check the reaction of the population.

Another impediment to the successful integration was the competing interests of external powers about the South Caucasus. The zero-sum thinking had negatively impacted the security of this territory for a long time. Evidently, new order caused the shift of balance in favor of Turkey and Russia did not counter to this process. Even if President Putin took the lead to deal with the problems of the region, today Turkish forces accompanies Russian peacekeepers. Turkey, in its turn, came to understand that the position of Russia in its “backyard” is too strong to challenge. Therefore, official Ankara is more cautious with its political actions not to threaten this state and collaborate instead. This kind of development raise hope about much better future of the South Caucasus.

Even if a new geopolitical reality is conducive for engagement in constructive relationship and thus the realization of 3+3 cooperation platform, there are still remaining challenges for the regional integration.

One of the main problem stems from Georgia’s unwillingness to participate. Instead, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili suggested different partnership format which includes the EU and the USA as external actors instead of Turkey, Iran, and Russia. Azerbaijan and Armenia have not commented about this proposal since they are already involved in 3+3 format. Revanchist ideas of Armenian nationalists negatively affects both the peacebuilding process with Azerbaijan and the

integration at regional level. Armenian government is aware of the advantages it could drive from stable political economic ties with Azerbaijan; however, it is cautious due to the discontent of the population against the government. This evasion undermines the prospects for the materialization of the six party initiative. Therefore, Azerbaijan and Armenia needs to sign a peace agreement to avoid another war and consolidate security and stability between them and in the region.

For any cooperation attempt to operate properly, there must be a safety mechanism to refrain the interested actors to cause instability. In this respect, the main problem of the South Caucasus region is its security deficit and unfortunately current mechanisms is not working. There is a need to formulate certain action plan which indicates the security goals and the ways to reach them. The security framework should provide tools for conflict resolutions and peacebuilding activities. In the absence of the security, it is unlikely that the South Caucasus would overcome its conflict-rich history and to become a prosperous region.

The solution of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is not remedy to all problems of the South Caucasus. Nobody expects sudden solutions of regions problem and the South Caucasus to be flourishing in a short period of time, however, change toward positive is possible. Once it was impossible to think the region that was scene to most devastating armed confrontations including the first and second World Wars to be one of the most peaceful territory, but today the Europe sets example for integration and development. It began as a contract between Germany and France and evolved into economic union. Same scenario could happen to the South Caucasus if the regional states put their effort together.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this master thesis was to investigate the 3+3 regional cooperation initiative in the South Caucasus from different perspectives and to analyze the opportunities and challenges for the materialization of this attempt. It also aimed to identify the role six-party format could play in developing conditions conducive for peace, security and prosperity of the region.

According to the findings, 3+3 format has great perspectives. The economic cooperation is the best policy option for the South Caucasus and has no alternative, because as already discussed, economic links decrease incentives of the countries to initiate conflict, because the benefit they derive from trade contacts becomes too essential for them to damage. In this sense the new initiative could be a good departure point. It is also possible that this links would lay the foundation for

solving political contradictions and problems among member states. The fate of South Caucasian countries and the region as a whole depends on the neighboring big powers, so does the successful implementation of any regional cooperation initiative, including a six-party cooperation platform. External actors traditionally competed for the dominance over the region which jeopardized integration process. The research revealed that with the shift of the geopolitical order, these actors became more interested to cooperate than collide to secure their national interests. If Turkey, Russia and Iran showed real interest to 3+3 platform and put their efforts together, they could bring the Southern Caucasian states to the discussion table as well.

Throughout the research, it also became evident that these developments should not be taken granted. The end of “no war, no peace” situation between Azerbaijan and Armenia would determine the future of regional cooperation. Even if Azerbaijan officially declared that the dispute is resolved, the absence of peace treaty creates uncertainty regarding this issue. The establishment of security framework which would provide defined policy strategies and their implementation tools for conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes could address the security deficit of the South Caucasus. The projects such as 3+3 is important for making the South Caucasus more peaceful and prosperous place. The EU case is best sample to show what kind of development could be achieved through cooperation.

This master thesis aimed to contribute to the existing knowledge by analyzing the discourse of Ilham Aliyev’s speeches to determine its effect on conflict initiation and conflict resolution which also had implementation for the success of regional cooperation.

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