

Conference Executive Summary

*Forging the future
of the Caucasus:
The past 20 years
& its lessons*

On June 28th 2012, *Caucasus International* (CI), the Baku-based Center for Strategic Studies (SAM), and *Turkish Policy Quarterly* (TPQ) held a conference entitled “Forging the future of the Caucasus - the past 20 years and its lessons” in Baku with the participation of Dr. Alexander Rondeli (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies), Professor Gerard Libaridian (Michigan University), and Azerbaijani MP Dr. Rasim Musabeyov. The panellists spoke initially about the historical, social, economic, and political independence experiences of their respective countries: Alexander Rondeli on Georgia, Gerard Libaridian on Armenia, and Rasim Musabeyov on Azerbaijan. With reference to these experiences and the lessons learned, the speakers speculated on development of both regional and domestic politics within the South Caucasus.

The aim of conference was to examine the future of the region through the lens of the lessons of the past 20 years, from the illustrative perspectives of three experts. Each of these three individuals played important roles in their country’s respective struggles for sovereignty, and had much to offer in terms of reflections on national aims and strategies in terms of national identity, economic restructuring, and repositioning in the regional and global arena. The personal involvement of the panelists in the process of post-independence nation building grounded the debate in

an awareness of concrete challenges and practical detail. The discussion was enriched by their understanding of the political, economic, and social changes across governments and the population. Ultimately, Libaridian, Rondeli, and Musabeyov - the wise men of the region – focused on the available means to foster close multilateral relations across the region near future, pursuant to the lessons of recent history.

The panellists qualified their analyses with a statement of the difficulty of identifying true success stories from the region. In this sense, the first conclusion drawn was that “nothing has changed”. Alexander Rondeli lamented the enduring nature of the problems and the lack of hope-inspiring results. To him “*the problems which Georgia encountered from the very first days of independence are still almost the same*”. Professor Libaridian considered the “nothing has changed” argument from a different angle. For him, this stasis is representative of the powerful illusion at play regarding the end of Cold War; the problems within the region have not been resolved because “*it is very clear that the Cold War did not end in the Caucasus, that there is a mini Cold War still ongoing in terms of outside influences and controls*”.

States and societies in the South Caucasus have endured the pains of the last 20 years under the banner of “change”; when change has not

materialized, people have yielded to despair. This was experienced most profoundly when the astronomic expectations of the South Caucasus people following independence collided with the grim realities entailed in early independence. Connected to this, the second conclusion reached by the speakers was that independence was perceived by society as the signpost to prosperity, wealth, and integration with the rest of the world. But this required a successful transition from a socialist state to a liberal democracy. The transition did not occur straightforwardly, and nor was transition alone enough to secure integration with the West. To Dr. Rondeli, *“Georgians had fantastically high expectations about the future... We thought that billions of dollars would come immediately [with independence] because we are the hub of the world, we are the best”*. However, the *“realities turned out to be much more difficult and tragic.”* In a similar vein, Professor Gerard Libaridian agreed that *“independence came and it was supposed to resolve all of our problems”*, but the realities proved that *“high expectations were problematic from the start; we realized that independence doesn’t necessarily mean that you can do what you want.”* Dr. Musabeyov posited a third shared approach, that the third party involvements have severely threatened and damaged peaceful political relations and development in the Caucasus. Thus in the view of the panellists, the process of transition – both

the shaping of foreign policy and the mechanics of nation building - was from the very beginning subject to third party interference.

The third conclusion drawn by the panellists was that “the South Caucasus is a malfunctioning or non-functioning region”. Over the course of time, the incapacity for integration with the West merged with the poor regional integration, hindering promising or hope-inspiring developments in the South Caucasus. The war, bloodshed, ethnic resentment, enmity, hatred, and lack of empathy overwhelmed hopes for peaceful co-existence and harmony throughout the region. These experiences have generated the mutual distrust, summoned by the panellists in support of the view that it is difficult to describe to the South Caucasus as the region. Indeed, the description of the South Caucasus as a geopolitical illusion and an intellectual fallacy marked the most notable consensus among the panellists. The argument was put forth by Dr. Gerard Libaridian but immediately endorsed by Dr. Rasim Musabeyov and Dr. Alexander Rondeli.

The panellists also agreed that being a territorially small state makes states fragile and vulnerable to third party involvements, and leaves them open to manipulation. Although the panellists stressed the necessity of independence and the mistake of inviting big states to engage with lo-

cal problems, foreign involvement is also perceived as not only inevitable but the rule of the game. In this game, small states cannot make mistakes or act freely. In this regard, integration and functionality as a region were put forth as remedies for the challenges of being a small state.

The final topic for discussion was the state of neighborly relations in the South Caucasus, in the context of open conflicts. In the view of the panelists, the conflicts – exacerbated by independence – have severely inhibited the sustainable development of individual countries and the region as a whole. The areas that have suffered in particular in terms of failure to develop include successful transition from a socialist state system to a well-functioning liberal democracy, inclusive state/nation building for long-lasting ethnic cohesion, politically and economically binding cooperative bilateral relations, intra-regional collaborations for security and confidence building, and finally integration with the world economy and politics as a regional bloc. The historical evolution of the conflicts demonstrates that there have been opportunities to end the quarrels and fighting between neighbors. However, these problems (failures in developments) have in turn blocked successful conflict resolution. The conflict blocked successful transitions and peace building; consequently these have further deepened the conflict and created an isolated region

with seemingly intractable problems. Thus, in order to successfully build a sustainable future, first and foremost the conflicts need to be resolved, which will increase regional integration.

The formulae offered by the panelists for resolving regional are as follows:

Dr. Alexander Rondeli believes that the first task is to create a model for strong, viable statehood and to become a modern inclusive democratic nation, with guarantees for minority rights. This will pave the way for the enhancement of closer relations with the Euro-Atlantic community: *“Georgia’s decision to join the Euro-Atlantic family of nations was not just a fashionable idea that suddenly sprung to the minds of some crazy Georgians. Georgia is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. If Georgia fails as a democratic society, it will disintegrate, especially with the help of some of our neighbors. So the only way for Georgia to survive and to become a viable and modern, inclusive democratic nation is to be part of the Euro-Atlantic community.”*

Dr. Gerard Libaridian thinks that the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will continue if states continue to come to the table with maximum demands. For him, the demands for zero-sum solution will prevent the two countries from reaching a positive conclusion. *“What I*

am arguing is that if we are looking for a solution we have to stop thinking in terms of formulae; we have to stop thinking in terms of creating a narrative that is good for us. If you do not know what really happened in the past and do not take responsibility for your mistakes, then there is no way out. I would also say that the reliance of one of side on the principle of territorial integrity, coupled with the other side's reliance on the principle of the right to self-determination, are blocking solutions. They do not resolve any problems. These are just words behind which we hide and refuse to make basic compromises. What we need to do to solve these problems is to refrain from hiding behind principles and secondly, to step out from behind maximum demands. Maximum demands are the easiest to formulate and present; maximum demands can make me appear a super patriot. I want this, this and this. I want this kind of solution and we will not accept anything else. Negotiations cannot succeed if you are going there with only maximum demands and without a clear understanding of your minimum demands and minimum needs. Negotiations succeed when you focus on your needs rather than wants."

Dr. Rasim Musabeyov first of all addressed Turkey's increasing positive influence in the region, which he believes will enhance the independence of the three countries, and subsequently, their integration. In Musa-

beyov's view, Russia needs to be balanced, and Turkey shines out as the sole power in the region to take on such a role. Secondly, Musabeyov that although "it seems impossible to talk about the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the near future [...] if we can ensure positive changes towards the resolution and involve Armenia into the integration processes, I think the South Caucasus would benefit greatly and be a more secure area."

The full report is available at <http://www.fileden.com/files/2012/2/20/3267392/POST-CONFERENCE-EVALUATION-REPORT.pdf>