

Introduction

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Much has been written and even more said in the course of the last ten years on the need to promote peace and stability in the Caucasus. Yet many of the issues appear to be no nearer resolution in 2002 than they were in 1992. In the South Caucasus alone, the viability of the Georgian state continues to be compromised by the local governments in Abkhazia, Ajaria and Osetia; the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is still disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan despite the best efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group; and the development of cross-border commerce is hampered by sometimes artificial obstacles, to name but three of the most obvious problem areas. The presence of the Chechen refugees in Georgia, the Armenian and Azeri refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, and the demands of the war on terrorism have ensured that the region remains very much on the international agenda. Worse, as geopolitics and energy politics enthusiasts use the region as a game-board, the impression is being fostered by a few interest groups that some of these problems are fundamentally insoluble, or that the inhabitants of the region are powerless pawns, unable to affect their own destiny. The threat of renewed violence on a large scale is never far below the surface.

Hence the need to continue to write and to talk, and just as importantly, to listen. While the political players and media in each of the countries in the region are active both nationally and internationally, and channels of communication are open even between countries whose official relationships are poor or non-existent, there is a pent-up demand in the populace at large for a debate at a more meaningful level. It is only recently that people have been able to debate these problem areas in public, and between individuals in different states or entities there is all too often no chance to meet and debate and hence no opportunity to develop understanding or mutual respect. It is easy to misinterpret the actions and intentions of a stranger or a foreign country seen through the prism of selective reporting; less easy to convince oneself of their 'enemy' status if there has been a chance for relationships to develop on a day-to-day business and personal level. Skewed perceptions, unfortunately, are the meat and drink of politics and the media, and so tend to become the daily diet of inhabitants with no access to alternative views.

Even truisms such as these require repetition in a Caucasian context, but restating them will not solve the problems. The fundamental prerequisite to resolving any of the many differences between the peoples of the region is a willingness to engage in a meaningful negotiating process. For this to have any chance of real success, it is not sufficient simply to meet and talk at a political or diplomatic level, with or without international mediation or facilitation. Unless the negotiators have a genuine mandate for their negotiating position based on a popular consensus, any deal agreed will tend to come unstuck sooner or later because of domestic opposition. And although it is tempting to build up a popular consensus based on an 'us against them' approach, the longer-term costs of this enmity-based consensus in our globalised society are likely to be economic hardship, which is felt first of all and most severely by the population at large. Thus, although it is much more difficult to achieve, a consensus based on realism and economic interest will

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carry more conviction at the negotiating table.

This applies equally to the influence of external players in the geopolitical game. Whether one believes in the 'conspiracy' theory of international relations or the more easily provable convergence or conflict of interests between countries over specific issues, there can be no doubt that the relationships of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to each other are heavily influenced by their relationships with Russia, Iran, Turkey and the USA, to name but four. But it would be as misleading to impute monolithic, unanimous intentions to those as it would be to multinational institutions like NATO or the CIS. The economic imperative, as epitomised in the Southern Caucasus by the multinational oil consortiums, is much more single-minded. This, where the foreign influence is at its most obvious, is also precisely the area where the South Caucasus states have most ability to influence their own futures. It is in their power to permit or prevent development by foreign economic interests in their own countries, and to set the conditions for any such development. It is also an area where other factors than the pure mathematics of the investment analysis have some importance. Given the choice between investing in a politically stable, economically expanding region where neighbouring countries see the advantages in cooperation; or a region prone to outbursts of xenophobia or violence where official governments have difficulty maintaining their authority by peaceful, legitimate means, foreign investment and so foreign interest will naturally choose the more prosperous option.

There are of course those, inside and outside the region, who believe that it may be the policy of outside states to keep the region unstable and therefore condemn its countries to a dependent relationship of one kind or another. Even if this were true, there is considerable scope for the region's inhabitants to render such a policy ineffective by developing and maintaining a constructive relationship among themselves. It is only in an atmosphere of suspicion that unresolved issues can be exploited by third parties. Despite this possibility, the plethora of potential conflicts in the Caucasus region has not developed into a plethora of actual conflicts: this fact is worth stressing, because it shows how the region has actually, if unconsciously, succeeded in implementing a policy of de-escalating avoidable conflicts.

The authorities in the region have also made a beginning in several areas of practical cooperation. All are convinced of the need to eliminate environmental hazards, cross-border crime, poaching, smuggling of drugs and weapons, and to invest in infrastructure to encourage economic development. More needs to be done, of course, in particular to eliminate administrative and other obstacles to free movement of goods and people, to say nothing of exploiting the region's key position in energy transit to mutual benefit. These joint beginnings need to develop scale and momentum, but the region's inhabitants will not be slow to recognise the real benefits they offer. Small, practical and achievable steps are arguably more useful in the longer term than the grand rhetoric of an 'all or nothing' approach to international relationships. Rather than ignoring one's neighbours or feuding with them, or concentrating on differences rather than similarities, it is time for all those interested in the welfare of the region to focus on the advantages that joint action to develop areas of common interest can bring.

It is against this background that the Institute for Civil Society and Regional Development (ICSRD) and its sponsors held a conference in late April 2002. The significant growth in the number and activities of non-governmental organisations in the Southern Caucasus is a very positive sign of a developing civil society, and

that so many are setting out to build relationships across the borders of the region shows the maturity of the inhabitants and their desire to move the confidence-building process forward. These are security organisations in the term's widest and most constructive sense. They also offer a window into society's aspirations and expectations. Many of them are new to the international fundraising and networking circus, and many international bodies have only recently begun to devote serious attention to the region (there are, of course, some noteworthy exceptions). There is therefore a significant knowledge gap on several sides, which it will take time to bridge. In the meantime, the success of the ICSR in bringing together high calibre experts from all but one of the neighbouring countries shows what can be done with minimal resources and maximum commitment. The well-deserved media interest which the conference attracted shows how much such activities are needed. The conference materials are presented here to enable their analysis to reach even further.

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