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## GEORGIA AND THE BLACK SEA REGION IN THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL ORDER

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This Seminar Report is presented for information only and does not necessarily represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Paul Cook, Director of the Economics and Security Committee.

1. Despite coping with a hostile neighbour that currently occupies part of its territory, Georgia has made significant progress in its democratic, economic and security sector transition since the Rose Revolution. There are, however, persistent concerns related to poor relations between government and opposition. The net impact of these divisions is to slow reform, undermine public faith in national governing institutions and lower resilience in the face of a persistent Russian campaign to foster political alienation and cultivate anti-liberal ethno-nationalist forces hostile to the West. These divisions along with hesitations in some NATO member countries pose a challenge to Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, although there are expectations that the coming NATO summit will signal a more rapid pace of integration.
2. Although it has been ten years since NATO allies communicated that Georgia would one day become a NATO member, it has not yet been invited to join the Alliance, even though between 70 and 80% of the public now supports the idea. Through public education programmes and dialogue, democratic forces in the country, with the support of NATO, have worked to transform this sentiment into a more resilient and informed form of support. Greater resilience is critical, particularly given the persistent Russian campaign to chip away at these pro-Western sentiments both by sowing dissension and by attacking Western values through fake news and other forms of hybrid war.
3. Deepening democratic development and building resilience in the face of active Russian measures to undermine Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations were two central themes of a three-day NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) Rose Roth Seminar held in Batumi, Georgia from 23-25 April with the support of the Swiss government and the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF).
4. **Paolo Alli**, President of the NATO PA, and **Mikheil Janelidze**, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, noted that this year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Georgia's initial declaration of independence from the Russian empire. This independence was short-lived as Georgia had little international support from friendly countries in the face of the Red Army's aggression. They said in the opening session of the Seminar that history should serve as a reminder of the need for greater solidarity in the free world.
5. Mr Janelidze noted that his country has made a firm commitment to move along the path toward European integration and economic development. The goal is to make Euro-Atlantic accession an organising principle for the country's transformation and he said that international support has been key to the country's progress. Although parts of Georgia remain occupied, the country has renounced violence to solve these problems, and it is actively seeking ways to achieve reconciliation. He noted that Georgia has made great strides in strengthening civil society. He added that the judiciary has undergone three stages of reform and has achieved a significantly higher level of autonomy than was the case even three years ago.
6. Georgia has worked very closely with NATO to focus its efforts to enact positive security sector reform. Georgia has supported NATO missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere and is working with the Alliance on a range of issues including cyber defence and countering hybrid threats. The country is currently spending more than 2% of its GDP on defence and 20% on defence investment. **Levan Izoria**, the Defence Minister of Georgia, outlined the specifics of Georgia's cooperation with NATO, including a programme to improve readiness and adopt NATO standards. Readiness is particularly important to the country's security establishment which is very focused on Black Sea security issues particularly in light of Russia's military build-up in the region.
7. The Minister strongly endorsed the current sanctions regime on Russia. He characterised the 2017 Spring Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly as reflecting Georgia's commitment to the values of the Alliance and he said that the parliamentary dimension has become a crucial part of advancing Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. As Georgia moves toward Alliance membership, it is important to see more Georgia in NATO and more NATO in Georgia and Mr Izoria argued that this

was the best means of deterring Russian efforts to subvert Georgian sovereignty as well as the sovereignty of other states in the region through traditional and hybrid tactics.

8. **Giorgi Margvelashvili**, the President of Georgia, warned delegates that Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared that his country is in the midst of a super power stand-off and is engaging in a series of proxy wars. He said that NATO needs to deal with this reality and should not create vacuums which might invite conflict. Rather it should consolidate those territories that are already in the liberal democratic camp. "We need to lock down the area of freedom," he said, "if you do not move fast, these territories will be lost." He said that the Russians are working to radicalise politics in the region and do so by stoking tensions with propaganda and fake information designed to widen existing divisions. It has clearly done so in Georgia and Ukraine but also in NATO member countries. The President said that coping with this challenge requires significantly deeper multinational cooperation and a determination to preserve fundamental democratic freedoms including freedom of the press. He warned that dealing with Russia requires strength and firmness. Moscow exploits any sign of weakness and it makes no sense to worry about making Russia more aggressive than it already is. He also said that it is important to begin a dialogue on how Article 5 might be applied to occupied territories. This is important to advance the accession process, he added, and it should not pose a barrier to admission.

9. Mr Margvelashvili stressed the importance of EU solidarity which has taken the form of an Association Agreement with Georgia, visa-free travel, and a free trade regime. He noted that Russia is exploiting its energy leverage to further its ambitions to divide the region. On the energy front, the President said, Georgia is playing an important role in providing corridors to move to market alternatives to Russian gas and said that ultimately it will be important to link up the Western and Eastern Caspian regions with a gas pipeline in order to move Central Asian gas westward.

10. The speaker of Parliament, **Irakli Kobakhidze** indicated that the idea of joining NATO has become increasingly popular, with at least 70% of the public currently supporting this foreign policy ambition. In the last elections 90% of the public voted for parties supporting Euro-Atlantic integration. He stressed that moving quickly toward accession is important particularly as Georgia is ready for full membership and because Russia is threatening the foundations of security in the Black Sea region and undermining human rights in those regions occupied by its forces. He also stressed the importance of cooperation with key regional players like Turkey.

11. **Roy Allison**, a Professor of Russian and Eurasian International Relations, and Director of the Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, delivered the keynote address at the Seminar. He opened his remarks by suggesting that a great effort is underway to understand Russia's overarching strategic logic. Yet, many Western governments fail to grasp fully what is driving President Putin. First, much of Russia's policy is reactive even if it seems tactically adroit. It has largely been driven by domestic political imperatives and authoritarian consolidation. This is captured in the fortress Russia rhetoric. More importantly, Russia is a declining power and the Kremlin's desire to somehow imitate China is fanciful. Across a range of economic and social categories it simply cannot compete with its large and dynamic Asian neighbour. Its decline means that it will have to make strategic choices although its public pronouncements never allude to these very real limitations.

12. One line of argument is that it will seek to reintegrate Russian speakers abroad into a greater Russia. This would imply an ambition to assert a kind of hegemonic control over many of the states along its borders and would, by extension, imply that it has far more to accomplish in Ukraine. But Ukraine is now very hostile to this notion and implementing this would be both costly and very risky for Russia. The costs would be daunting particularly for an economy which confronts so many structural difficulties.

13. Ultimately Russia will have to make difficult choices and decide whether it wants to be a power in its own neighbourhood or on the global stage, for example in the Middle East. It simply lacks the

resources to do both. In many respects it is now stalemated by Ukraine and would like to confront resistance in Central Asia as well as the South Caucasus and China. This might encourage it to look more to the global stage. President Putin stands at the apex of Russian decision making but he cannot act alone. Many of the country's security leaders are most fixated on the West and they want to deny NATO strategic access to areas they consider sensitive.

14. Finally many of these thinkers see the Southern Caucasus and the Black Sea as a buffer. Now that Russia has bases in Syria it sees this region as a critical connection to another area of strategic interest. The situation is not stable. Moreover, Russia has used Armenia as a critical forward basing location for its troops and has made Armenia a hub of regional military planning. It has also integrated units with forces from Abkhazia. The Gali region is now essentially a military zone and the Russian Army has integrated South Ossetian units into the Russian force structure for training and deployment. Georgia sees this as a move toward annexation of the occupied lands. Russia has no direct land link to its forces in Armenia and this is a source of concern for its strategic planners. This is also a concern in Georgia which lies between Russia and Armenia. Russia sees Georgia as an impediment to its strategic ambition both in the Black Sea region and beyond, to the Middle East. Russia's interest there go beyond Syria. It has also stepped up diplomacy in Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Iran and Iraq at a moment when the US policy in the region is very uncertain. Russia also faces a long-term challenge from China which is far more dynamic. The Chinese Belt and Road initiative could be understood as part of its quest for primacy in Central Asia and it will invariably bolster its influence in the Caucasus.

15. Crimea is another key piece in Russia's strategic posture. Moscow has essentially reconstructed the kind of basing system it established there during the Cold War. It has developed an anti-access/area denial defence system which is changing the strategic equation in the Black Sea where it seeks to establish permanent regional maritime supremacy. Ukrainian officials are very concerned about this force build up and are seeking to develop deterrence systems to counter it. Russia now claims part of Ukraine's sea shelf and this too could be a source of future tensions.

16. But there are clear limits to Russian ambition. Its economy has fared poorly, and it simply lacks the resources to underwrite all of its military-strategic ambitions. Sanctions on Russia have also begun to impede growth and undermine investor confidence. Several procurement programmes have had to be delayed or stretched out, although the government continues to make a priority out of modernisation. That said it is not positioned to compete with Western military technologies across the spectrum although it remains an important military power.

17. **David Dondua**, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, suggested that the best way of coping with Russia is to focus on consolidating democracy, enhancing business opportunities, peacefully finding solutions to conflict and bringing Georgia closer to Europe. In 2007 Georgia made a clear choice to make definitive progress towards the goal of NATO accession, and it submitted an application for the MAP. This was denied at the summit, although the Final Communique mentioned that both Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of the Alliance. This pledge has been reconfirmed at every subsequent summit. Mr Dondua said that Georgia is now working to enhance its resilience so that it can better cope with a range of domestic and international challenges. This includes strengthening democratic credentials, finding peaceful ways to cope with Russia and working with all NATO countries to clear a path for Georgia to become a full member of the Euro-Atlantic community. Obviously, some of these decisions lie beyond Georgia's control as the ball is also in the court of NATO member countries. In the discussion he stated that Georgian officials expect that a tangible improvement in relations with NATO will be one result of the upcoming Brussels NATO Summit.

18. The Deputy Minister noted that Georgia has made a tremendous effort to wean itself off Russian energy and is now sourcing from other suppliers including Azerbaijan. Georgia is a bridge between Caspian energy suppliers and European consumers and it strongly supports the construction of a viable and secure East-West energy corridor. He warned about the dangers of the

Nord Stream II project and noted that German Chancellor Angela Merkel has shifted her position and is now also clearly concerned about the negative security implications of the proposed project.

19. **Fatma Ceren Yazgan**, the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, said that her government is convinced that Georgia should be a member of NATO. This will create a more secure environment for Georgia. Turkey is a key player on the southern flank, the Ambassador argued, and it intuitively understands that Georgia is prepared to contribute to Allied security. She noted that its defence spending meets Allied target levels and that the country has shown itself to be politically resilient.

20. **Dessislava Ivanova-Kozleva**, the Ambassador of Bulgaria to Georgia, is also the NATO contact Ambassador in Georgia at a moment when Bulgaria holds the Presidency of the EU. She too cited strong Georgian support for Euro-Atlantic accession but she said that Georgia needs to move from an emotional platform to a more controlled and information-based approach. In this, the country has made great progress. There have been important reforms and the new Constitution specifically indicates that NATO and EU memberships are key national goals. Defence spending is above 2% and the government has worked to allocate sufficient funds for equipment and training. They have developed an innovative approach to synchronising foreign assistance through meetings with donors and supporters in order to eliminate overlap. They are also working with journalists and young people to ensure that they understand what NATO membership requires and offers.

21. **Ihor Dolhov**, the Ambassador of Ukraine to Georgia, said that it is mistaken to speak of a new geopolitical order as the system, in fact, is characterised by disorder. He suggested that the West has been deliberating for too long over the question of Georgia and Ukraine's memberships. The time frame for President Putin has been far shorter. He said that it only took Russia 30 days to occupy South Ossetia and Crimea. The pace of NATO enlargement should increase accordingly. In recent years, NATO has been deliberating while Russia takes highly aggressive action.

22. The seminar also explored the ways Russia has instrumentalised its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It has done so both by building up its military presence in those regions and by nurturing frozen conflicts that unsettle Georgia's borders. This has meant that Georgia, through no fault of its own, is unable to meet one of the ostensible preconditions for membership in NATO. Georgian leaders told participants that this border problem should not disqualify Georgia from serious consideration for membership.

23. Several speakers argued that the conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not entirely frozen as there are myriad incidents along the administrative boundary line, some of which are violent. **Erik Hoegg**, Head of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, said that Russia is also heavily militarising its presence in both of these regions. Russian forces have acquired new weapons and capabilities and have one mechanised brigade in each province, which is a violation of the six-point cease-fire agreement brokered by the EU. These forces are an integral element of Russia's southern military district command.

24. Russia is also pursuing a process of "borderisation" designed to cement the view that these regions will never be returned to Georgia and could eventually be incorporated into Russia – a notion that is confirmed by the growing russification of education policies in the two regions.

25. There have been infrequent armed incidents since 2008 along the border and these underline the fragility of the situation. The Russians have reinforced the administrative boundary line and it is heavily militarised with over 12,000 Russian armed border guards under the command of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB). The EUMM has observed myriad military convoys moving armoured troops, tanks, air defence systems, and military helicopter flights. Military fire is heard frequently, and this shapes threat perceptions for those who live in the area. It is difficult to assess the full scale of these exercises, but it is evident that the Russians are increasing combat readiness. All of this restricts freedom of movement and prevents people from returning to their homes. Ethnic Georgian property has been damaged and this will make any return more difficult.

26. Russia's violation of Georgian sovereignty has had high costs for the inhabitants of the two regions who are increasingly cut off from family relations in Georgia itself, and are denied economic and educational opportunities while being stripped of basic political and human rights. A climate of fear and oppression is apparent in both regions and the situation has been made worse by persistent Russian efforts to drive powerful wedges between the ethnic groups living in the two regions. **Ketevan Tsikhelashvili**, the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality in Georgia, warned that Russian policy is endangering the identity of the people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. She noted that the Georgian government recognises that the problem cannot be solved by violence and that it needs to create venues for dialogue, support services and economic development to begin to address the very serious problems in the region. Georgia pays for all the energy used in Abkhazia and provides health care support to many.

27. Ms Tsikhelashvili said that international access to these occupied Georgian regions is not allowed so it is nearly impossible to engage in genuine human rights monitoring. Three hundred thousand people are denied the right to return to their homes. There are currently 100 kilometres of barbed wire separating these Georgian regions from Georgia proper and they divide a number of villages. Over sixty villages are directly affected, and many people cannot gain access to their farmland. Illegal detention is widespread and socio-economic conditions are very bad. Ethnic Georgians in Gali suffer random violence and comprehensive discrimination and are deprived of the right to education in their own language in the schools. All schools are now taught in Russian in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgians are also denied basic property rights. A person in Gali cannot buy land, a house or even a car. They are given temporary IDs which make them guest workers in their own regions.

28. The government of Georgia has sought to facilitate trade across the lines but there are many barriers. People are engaged in a kind of backpack trade and Georgia has opened its market to encourage this practice. The view is that trade can be a powerful driver of peace. Georgia also grants people from the occupied regions access to its education system and other services. The Government of Georgia does not believe that this problem can be solved through violence and war, and it pursues a peaceful strategy of fostering contacts. It currently does not have diplomatic relations with Russia. There are many Georgians living in Russia and they are well integrated there. The problem does not come from people, she said, it comes from Russian policy.

29. The Seminar also took up the theme of domestic constitutional and democratic reform and here there were evident disagreements between government and opposition representatives. The political divide in Georgia remains very sharp and this was made clear in the discussions.

30. **Archil Talakvadze**, leader of the parliamentary majority, opened his remarks by saying that joining NATO is a top priority for the Georgian government, and this is openly expressed in the new Constitution. He also noted that this new Constitution includes better institutional protection of human rights as well as the right to assembly, property rights and freedom of speech. He noted that in Georgia successive governments have sought to tailor the Constitution to their needs. The new Constitution can only be amended when two consecutive Parliaments have confirmed the change. He said freedom of the media has been a problem in the past, but there are now no media representatives jailed. He also noted that the court system is vastly improved.

31. These views were disputed by **Sergi Kapanadze**, Deputy Speaker of the Georgian Parliament and a member of the opposition. He said that international rights groups such as Freedom House have pointed to serious media problems in Georgia related to the ownership patterns of major media outlets. The US State Department has pointed to a strong media bias in favour of the government. He also said that the new Constitution has introduced a winner-take-all format and that a proportional election system will only be introduced in 2024. The Venice Commission called this highly regrettable. He also pointed to the criminalisation of the opposition and the fact that members of the political opposition have been jailed. He called this selective and politically motivated justice, which has been criticised by a number of international observers. Judges are subject to political pressure

and there is a clear lack of transparency in the system. He cited the problem of informal governance, in which real power is actually wielded by a figure that is no longer in government but controls and funds the ruling party. Freedom House has said that informal governance remains an impediment to political development.

32. **Ana Natsvlishvili**, Parliamentary Secretary of the President of Georgia, suggested that the most recent redrafting of the country's Constitution represented a missed opportunity insofar as opposition concerns have not been adequately incorporated into the state's new legal architecture. The politicisation of the judiciary, political interference with the media and the criminalisation of the political opposition, or at least part of it, also remain a concern for NGOs and international observers despite the important strides the country has made. Significantly more work needs to be done on all these fronts. She described a "one party Constitution" which has been opposed by a range of civil society organisations, the opposition as well as the President of Georgia. The Venice Commission issued several reports on the matter and has clearly expressed its regret that the Constitution was not the product of a broad-based political consensus and that this is not a new problem in the country. Ms Natsvlishvili also expressed deep concerns about the independence of the judiciary although she too recognised that this problem is long-standing and deeply entrenched. She said the key words here are depoliticisation and transformation and she lamented what she called a "missed opportunity" to build a more independent judicial order. She also noted that sadly the judicial system has been used against independent media and at one point this required an intervention by the European Court of Human Rights.

33. She lamented the disconnect between Georgian citizens and the party structure. Although this could provide an opportunity for new parties to engage these citizens, there is also a real risk of disengagement. Democracy cannot flourish if the public is not engaged in the political process and the life of the state. Many in the public see politics simply as a game of infighting, in which their own interests are utterly neglected. This, the Parliamentary Secretary said, is not sustainable.

34. **Giorgi Gogvadze**, Deputy Director at the Georgian Centre for Security and Development, argued that there has been an uptick in anti-Western propaganda in Georgia. Fake news and propaganda have also become real problems. This demands that the state develop a powerful and well-coordinated strategic communications strategy between ministries. Proactive communication is essential to build broader resilience in the face of these challenges. Some Georgians believe that Georgia's accession to NATO would trigger a war with Russia or that Georgia does not belong in the West. These are views that fake news and propaganda have helped cultivate. But the messages change quickly and opportunistically exploit traditional fears and concerns.

35. **Nodar Tangiashvili**, Public Policy and Accountability Adviser at the East-West Management Institute, discussed public support for NATO. He said that while many support joining NATO, fewer people actually fully comprehend what this entails. This is a potential problem, and there has been some slippage in support in recent years. Anti-Western propaganda has begun to have an impact. Many have access to Russian television and there are more and more ethno-nationalist newspapers and television which undermine the pro-Western orientation of vulnerable citizens, even though the mainstream parties strongly support EU and NATO accession.

36. **Vitalino Canas**, a NATO PA Vice President and constitutional lawyer, spoke on *The Parliament's Roles in Semi-Presidential and Fully Parliamentary Systems*. He stressed how difficult it is to say which of these systems, including the purely parliamentary model, work better because every context is different. There is no single good model *per se*. There are also problems of definition. For example, Mr Canas challenged the idea that the French system is semi-presidential. A genuinely semi-presidential system is more permeable to the political environment. The place of the President in the hierarchy of a parliamentary party is also consequential. The number of relevant political bodies shapes the context and the way of voting might legitimise these bodies. In a presidential system the cabinet is led by the President, while in a parliamentary system the cabinet is led by the Prime Minister. In a semi-presidential system, the President, the Parliament and the Prime Minister

all have the power to block laws and this system of checks and balances can lead to concertation, but it must also avoid gridlock. This is one reason semi-presidential systems are useful for transitioning societies. He also said that strong party systems are critical. Among other things, they can give opposition groups essential leverage to encourage compromise.

37. **Irakli Sesiashvili**, the Head of the Georgian delegation to the NATO PA, noted that Georgia has had a model that looked like a parliamentary model. However, the President retained the power, which created the double standard rule. The President actually vetoed the new Constitution and he also oversaw a powerful National Security Council. He mentioned the well-known Estonian model which did not feature a National Security Council but did have a Defence Council which becomes large and powerful in wartime. National catastrophes can cause problems. Parliaments can give the army powers in peace time under the control of the Defence Ministry but this, in turn, can lead to abuse. Parliamentary oversight is thus critical.

38. **James Sherr**, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, said that Russia cannot accept the notion that independent countries on its border could ever be friendly countries. Moreover, the Kremlin sees the West today as an extension of the Holy Roman Empire and cannot conceive the notion that the West might be a values-based concept that goes beyond those historic borders. This mindset obviously colours Russia's relations with the Southern Caucasus as well as with the Baltic States and Ukraine.

39. **Konstantin Eggert**, a Russian journalist, noted that Russia's economic model is failing, and it simply cannot reform that economy without threatening the current political order. The Kremlin now bases its legitimacy on the promise of restoring a Russian *imperium*, although whether this will be restricted to its so-called near abroad – regions that once were part of the Soviet Union – or if it has a more global reach – into the Middle East, for example – is not yet clear. In either case, the Caucasus will hold a special interest for Russia insofar as the region lies within the confines of what was once Soviet territory and provides a natural bridge to the Middle East. For this reason, Russia will continue to see Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions as both illegitimate and a threat to its own ambitions. This is why the use of force becomes an interesting distraction. Russia is portrayed as both a great power and a fortress against a hostile West led by the United States and as including Ukraine and the Baltic States. It is constantly compelled to invent enemies, but this has started to take a toll.

40. He suggested that recent events in Armenia constitute an important defeat for Russia as they have demonstrated the existence of political forces that are capable of moving in contravention to President Putin's stated interest. President Putin and those around him tend to think that societies do not matter and that they can never substitute stability for freedom. But this runs against reality. Russia itself has faced protests in the past and it will likely do so in the future. Young people show themselves to be utterly alienated from the Kremlin and see only stagnation and corruption. It is interesting that President Putin never really discusses the future. He does not because it is rather bleak. President Putin has sought to walk a tightrope between democracy and totalitarian rule, but this is very difficult to do over the long run. China is something of a model, but Russia lacks the resources to pull this off. It had more leeway when oil prices were high. But they are not now, and the economy is both highly centralised and corrupt. It is not a liberal order and its leaders do not intend to push it in this direction. The state is nationalising a number of large firms which will only render its top heavy economy even more unwieldy and incapable of critical innovation. This will dramatically impinge on its capacity to compete on the military front. It does not match up with the West except in nuclear weapons, but it does see weakness as a provocation. This dynamic played out in Georgia when the West did not respond with more alacrity to Russian aggression. Russia moved the administrative lines a number of times as it never faced consequences for doing so. It needs to face those consequences in order to discourage it from continuing this kind of aggression. Sanctions should aim to make it more difficult for Russia to achieve what it is seeking. It needs high technology and so this is an area in which sanctions could be very useful.

41. **Benjamin Poghosyan**, the Vice President for Research and Head of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense Research University in Armenia, **Zaur Shiryev**, a Fellow at the Europe Program of the International Crisis Group and **Dennis Sammut**, the Director of LINKS (Dialogue, Analysis, Research), discussed enduring security concerns in the South Caucasus. All three countries in the region will soon celebrate 100 years of independence, but all are fragile. There are evidently significant problems on the horizon. Russia no longer sees this region as a buffer zone but rather as an integral element of its southern strategy. Each country has made distinctive choices. Georgia, for example, has opted to integrate in Euro-Atlantic institutions, Armenia is part of the Eurasian Economic Union and is embedded in the Russian security system. Azerbaijan is a leading member of the non-aligned movement.

42. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in a long-running, costly and destabilising frozen conflict. The introduction of far more sophisticated weaponry could have terrible consequences if an actual conflict breaks out again. There has been a worrying escalation along the line of contact since 2016 but that standoff continues. Most experts believe only a political solution based on compromise can actually resolve the dispute. During the Medvedev presidency there was a genuine push for negotiations initiated by the Russians, but Moscow has backed away from this under President Putin and escalation has resulted.

43. In Azerbaijan the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh remains the dominant concern. But the rise of extremism constitutes a growing threat. The problem began in the Northern Caucasus, but it has spread to the South and the return of foreign fighters to the region will exacerbate the risk. The recent uprising in Armenia is not likely to alter Armenia's position on the conflict.

44. **David Lewis**, a Senior Lecturer and Director of Education at the University of Exeter, and **Jos Boonstra**, the Coordinator of the Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) initiative at the Centre for European Security Studies (CESS), explored Central Asia's evolving political and strategic landscape. In geopolitical terms, Russia, China and the United States remain the dominant outside powers and competition among these three has had spillover effects in the region. China sees Central Asia as an important link to Europe through the Belt and Road Initiative while the United States sees it through the prism of Afghanistan and Iran.

45. At the same time countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have their own ambitions and they have a degree of agency which allows them to help set the agenda for the region as a whole. Even smaller and weaker countries like Tajikistan are beginning to assert themselves. There are also mixed views of both China and Russia among these countries. Many are concerned, for example, about the environmental impact of Chinese investments and there have been some spontaneous uprisings against Chinese firms, which are not always welcome. Governance and corruption are two other important challenges which are hindering the region's development.

46. Central Asia was struck hard by the global economic crisis. Falling energy prices were a prime factor here. That crisis demonstrated to Kazakhstan that it needed to diversify its economic base. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan both have many workers living in Russia and are thus partly dependent on Russia's economic growth. This also gives Russia leverage with these two countries. Much of the region is anti-American in a vague way and this may be due to the access they have to Russian television. These two countries are demographically young and are moving away from their Soviet heritage although they, like Kazakhstan, maintain close ties with Moscow. Nationalism has become a new animating force. This is important but potentially dangerous as minority groups can be marginalised when nationalism is a driving force. These trends coincide with mass movements of people from the countryside to Central Asia's urban centres. Islam had an important social role in the villages but there is a risk in urban centres that more radical agendas will be adopted by some of those struggling to make their way in these changing societies. Some of this is local but there are also some who are being radicalised abroad.