From V4 to SC3?

Lessons from Central European Regionalism for South Caucasus Cooperation

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Abstract

Amid intensifying geopolitical fragmentation and the weakening of established security architectures, regional cooperation has become an increasingly important tool for small and medium-sized states seeking to preserve strategic autonomy. This paper explores whether selected lessons from Central Europe's Visegrad Group (V4) can be useful for developing a South Caucasus Trio (SC3) involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Rather than advocating direct model transfer, it examines which elements of the V4's experience—particularly minimal institutionalization, flexibility, and low-politics cooperation—are adaptable to the South Caucasus context.

Against the backdrop of post-2020 regional transformations, declining Russian dominance, and expanding connectivity agendas linked to the Middle Corridor, the paper argues that a region-driven, pragmatic SC3 framework could enhance trust, support economic interdependence, and strengthen the collective agency of South Caucasus states without constraining sovereignty or external partnerships.

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This analysis was produced within the Think Visegrad Non-V4 Fellowship program.

Introduction: entering an era of regionalism?

"Nem úgy van, amint volt. A földön Minden mindegyre változik."
"Now it is not as it once was; on Earth all things constantly change."

Sándor Petőfi (1823-1849),
Hungarian poet and revolutionary

The geopolitical landscape of Eurasia is undergoing profound transformations as a result of shifts in the global order ("a nonpolar disorder"[1]) and, more specifically, the Russia-Ukraine war. These reverberations—felt most acutely in Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region, and South Caucasus—have prompted a renewed interest in regional cooperation formats[2] as mechanisms for enhancing resilience, strengthening strategic coordination, and preserving foreign policy agency. For small and medium-sized states, regional groupings offer a platform to amplify their voice, shape collective agendas, and navigate the pressures exerted by larger powers. This transformation has received different brands, such as regionalism, multipolarisation, or minilateralism[3].

Some experts explain multipolarisation, especially in the Western context, as each region taking responsibility for its own stability[4]. For others, multilateralism emerges as the states in Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltic Sea region are forging new transregional networks of connectivity based on shared security concerns, despite their membership in core European and transatlantic institutions, the EU and NATO[5].

Central Europe's Visegrad Group (V4)—composed of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—stands as one of the most durable examples of flexible regionalism in post–Cold War Europe. Beyond its well-known role in facilitating EU accession and sectoral coordination, the V4's less visible achievement lies in its ability to promote cooperation without undermining national sovereignty. Its informal, consensus-driven, and adaptive institutional culture has enabled shared messaging, policy coordination, and cross-societal cooperation, while allowing the group to endure periods of political divergence among its members.

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[1] Mihai Sebe, Ágnes Vass, Aidar Kurmashev, Péter Pál Kránitz. HIIA 4:1 – What Role Might Regional Cooperation Claim in the Emerging New World Order? Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 25 June 2024. https://hiia.hu/en/mki-41-what-role-might-regional-cooperation-claim-in-the-emerging-new-world-order/

[2] Mihai Sebe, Ágnes Vass, Aidar Kurmashev, Péter Pál Kránitz. HIIA 4:1 – What Role Might Regional Cooperation Claim in the Emerging New World Order? Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 25 June 2024. https://hiia.hu/en/mki-41-what-role-might-regional-cooperation-claim-in-the-emerging-new-world-order/

[3] Aarshi Tirkey. Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance. Observer Research Foundation, 1 September 2021. https://www.orfonline.org/research/minilateralism-weighing-prospects-cooperation-governance

[4] Tamás Péter Baranyi, Ágnes Vass. Will there be a new Central Europe? Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 8 March 2025

[5] Yuliia Kurnyshova &Andrey Makarychev. Regionalism at a distance? War and minilateralism at Europe's eastern flank. Australian Journal of International Affairs, 15 September 2025. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2556896

By contrast, the South Caucasus remains one of Eurasia's least institutionalized regions. Divergent domestic trajectories, conflicting foreign policy priorities, and, above all, the nearly four-decade-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan have long hindered regional cooperation. However, the post-2020 period, characterized by renewed Armenia–Azerbaijan peace talks, emerging connectivity agendas, and the declining influence of Russia as the region's dominant external power, has created an unprecedented opening to rethink regional cooperation frameworks.

This paper explores how selected lessons from the Visegrad Group can inform the design of a potential South Caucasus Trio (SC3), a flexible cooperation format involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It does not argue for a direct transplantation of the V4 model, as the historical, cultural, and institutional contexts of Central Europe and the South Caucasus differ substantially. Rather, the paper examines which elements of the V4 experience are adaptable, while also drawing on its shortcomings to avoid replicating them in the South Caucasus context.

Methodologically, the study employs comparative analysis and policy review of Central Europe and the South Caucasus. It identifies both the opportunities and constraints of applying the V4 analogy and offers practical recommendations for developing a trilateral cooperation mechanism. Ultimately, the paper argues that the South Caucasus would benefit from a region-driven, flexible, low-politics cooperation format—not as a substitute for deeper integration, but as a means of building trust, coordinating policies, and presenting a more coherent regional voice to external partners.

Why the Visegrad Group matters: institutional logic and achievements

"Több szem többet lát."
"More eyes see more."

Hungarian proverb

Genesis and Purpose

The creation of the Visegrad Group (V4) must be understood against the backdrop of one of the most transformative moments in modern European history. The collapse of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet sphere of influence, and the end of the Cold War fundamentally reshaped the continent's geopolitical landscape. For Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, this period was marked by both unprecedented opportunities and deep uncertainty. These states faced the dual challenge of dismantling authoritarian political systems while simultaneously undertaking profound economic and societal transformations.

The strategic aspiration uniting these countries, "Striving for European Integration,"[6] reflected a political, cultural, and institutional ambition to (re)join the European mainstream after decades of

[6] Dávid Nagy. The Institutionalization of the V4. Danube Institute, March 2021.

enforced separation. For them, the EU and NATO membership was widely viewed as the most reliable pathway to political stability, economic modernization, and long-term security.

It was in this context that the Visegrad Group was established on 15 February 1991 in the Hungarian town of Visegrad. The founding meeting brought together Václav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, Lech Wałęsa, President of Poland, and József Antall, Prime Minister of Hungary. The choice of location evoked a historical parallel[7] with the Congress of Visegrad in 1335, when the kings of Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland met to strengthen political ties and coordinate economic interests. In both cases, Central European leaders sought cooperation as a means of enhancing collective autonomy and regional influence.

Importantly, the Visegrad Group emerged as a regionally driven initiative rooted in shared historical experience and converging strategic interests. Archival materials from the early V4 period highlight four core motivations[8] behind its creation: the determination to dismantle the remaining structures of the communist bloc; the ambition to overcome long-standing historical mistrust and rivalries within Central Europe; the belief that coordinated regional action would accelerate political and economic transformation as well as Euro-Atlantic integration; and the ideological proximity of political elites who came to power during the democratic transitions of the early 1990s.

During its initial phase (1991-1993), the Visegrad Group played a particularly prominent role as the coordination among the three countries proved valuable in negotiations with NATO and the European Communities, especially in presenting the region as politically stable, reform-oriented, and strategically reliable. Following the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the framework expanded to four members, as both Czechia and Slovakia assumed full participation.

The eventual accession of the V4 states to the EU and NATO symbolically marked the completion of their original mission. Rather than dissolving, however, the Visegrad Group adapted to the new political environment, evolving into a symbol of Europe's reunification and a practical model of regional cooperation within the EU[9], capable of shaping policy debates and enhancing the collective influence of its members.

Institutional design: flexibility over bureaucracy

One of the defining features of the Visegrad Group (V4) is its deliberately low level of institutionalization. From its inception in 1991, the V4 was conceived not as a formal international organization, but as a flexible framework for political coordination among Central European states pursuing a shared strategic objective: integration into Euro-Atlantic political, security, and economic structures. Some argue[10], the V4 demonstrates that effectiveness and longevity in

[7] History of the Visegrad Group. The archival site of the former V4 portal. Accessed 1 December 2025. https://archive.visegradgroup.eu/history/history-of-the-visegrad
[8] History of the Visegrad Group. The archival site of the former V4 portal. Accessed 1 December 2025. https://archive.visegradgroup.eu/history/history-of-the-visegrad
[9] 30th anniversary of the Visegrad cooperation. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland. 15 February 2021. https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/30th-anniversary-of-the-visegrad-cooperation
[10] Dávid Nagy. The Institutionalization of the V4. Danube Institute, March 2021

regional cooperation do not necessarily depend on dense institutional structures, binding agreements, or extensive bureaucratic apparatuses, which its architects rejected. This choice positioned the V4 as an informal, pragmatic, and politically driven project, enabling cooperation while preserving national sovereignty and accommodating divergent national interests.

The institutional architecture of the V4 rests on a small number of core elements:

- an annual rotating presidency,
- regular meetings at multiple political and sectoral levels (prime ministers, foreign ministers, line ministries),
- *ad hoc* and flexible working groups,
- and the absence of a permanent secretariat or binding decision-making mechanisms.

This minimalist structure fostered agility, reduced political and financial costs, and lowered barriers to participation. Crucially, it allowed cooperation to persist even during periods of political differences among member states. At the same time, the lack of formal mechanisms also exposed vulnerabilities, particularly in the mid-1990s, when divergent domestic political developments—particularly in Slovakia under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar—temporarily slowed collective momentum[11].

Despite recurring debates among scholars and policymakers regarding deeper institutionalization or enlargement, V4 political leaders have consistently rejected these options. A more formalized structure, it is argued[12], would undermine the group's primary advantage: its capacity to enable selective cooperation among politically diverse governments without imposing rigid obligations. Further institutionalization could also risk duplicating EU and NATO structures without enhancing effectiveness.

The late 1990s marked a revitalization of Visegrad cooperation, driven by renewed recognition of the benefits of coordination during the EU accession process[13]. In 1999, the V4 introduced a more structured—yet still non-institutionalized—operational framework, centered on the rotating presidency. Each presidency country sets annual priorities, hosts political meetings, and represents the group *vis-à-vis* external partners once a common position has been reached. This arrangement enhanced continuity and predictability without creating permanent institutions, while the rotating presidency system represents a procedural rather than institutional deepening of cooperation, reinforcing coordination while preserving the flexibility that remains central to the V4's effectiveness and longevity[14].

[11] Tomáš Strážay. Visegrad—Arrival, Survival, Reviva. Visegrad Group official page. Accessed 2 December 2025. https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/bibliography/visegradarrival-survival-120628
[12] Tomáš Strážay. Visegrad—Arrival, Survival, Reviva. Visegrad Group official page. Accessed 2 December 2025. https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/bibliography/visegradarrival-survival-120628
[13] Pàl Dunay. Subregional co-operation in East-Central Europe: the Visegrad Group and the Central European Free Trade Agreement. Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft, 2003.
[14] Dávid Nagy. The Institutionalization of the V4. Danube Institute, March 2021

Soft institutionalization: International Visegrad Fund

The most significant step toward institutionalization within the Visegrad Group occurred in 2000 with the establishment of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF)[15], the only permanent V4 institution. The Fund introduced a distinct societal and soft-power dimension to Visegrad cooperation by supporting cultural exchange, education, research, youth mobility, and civil society initiatives. Its intergovernmental and consensus-based governance structure—centered on the Conference of Foreign Ministers and the Council of Ambassadors—reflects the V4's broader preference for light institutional design.

Jointly financed by the four member states and supplemented by external donors, the IVF operates with an annual core budget of €11 million[16], complemented since 2012 by approximately €10 million in additional contributions from partners such as Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.S.[17]

Over more than two decades, the Fund has financed nearly 6,750 projects involving NGOs, universities, local governments, and cultural actors, benefiting over 3,500 organizations across more than 700 cities in Central and Eastern Europe[18]. It has also supported over 3,000 academic mobilities and more than 600 artistic residencies, with total funding exceeding €140 million[19]. These activities have made the IVF a key instrument of what may be termed "societal regionalism," extending cooperation beyond elite political coordination, strengthening transnational social ties and also supporting external engagement (through the Fund`s support to projects in the neighboring regions such as the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries).

In parallel, the Think Visegrad platform[20] within the IVF serves as a structured network of several research centers for policy-oriented dialogue on issues of strategic importance to the V4. Covering energy security, EU politics, regional cohesion, relations with the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, migration, and security, the network provides analysis and recommendations to V4 governments, rotating presidencies, and the IVF, further reinforcing the group's soft institutional ecosystem.

Policy achievements and continued relevance

[15] About Us. International Visegrad Fund official page. Accessed 5 December 2025. https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/
[16] About Us. International Visegrad Fund official page. Accessed 5 December 2025. https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/
[17] International Visegrad funds. Žilinská univerzita v Žiline. Accessed 5 December 2025. https://svf.uniza.sk/index.php/en/international-cooperation/international-projects/international-visegrad-funds
[18] International Visegrad Fund Celebrates 25 Years of Cooperation – Connecting, Inspiring, Growing. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. 11 June 2025. https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/visegrad_group/international_visegrad_fund_celebrates.html
[19] International Visegrad Fund Celebrates 25 Years of Cooperation – Connecting, Inspiring, Growing. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. 11 June 2025. https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/visegrad_group/international_visegrad_fund_celebrates.html
[20] Think Visegrad: About the Think-Tank Platform. Accessed 11 December 2025, https://think.visegradfund.org/

The most visible achievement of the Visegrad Group lies in its successful coordination during the EU accession process. Through harmonized positions, shared expertise, and joint diplomatic advocacy, all four member states joined the EU in 2004, thirteen years after the group's founding. In the security domain, cooperation within NATO was similarly significant: Poland, Hungary, and Czechia acceded in 1999, while Slovakia followed in 2004, reinforcing the region's strategic alignment.

One of the tangible examples of defence cooperation is the Visegrad Battlegroup (V4 BG), established under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. The battlegroup completed standby rotations in 2016[21] and 2019, the latter under a V4+ format that included Croatia. Though never deployed, the initiative demonstrated the V4's capacity for practical military coordination, with Poland typically acting as the framework nation.

The post-accession V4 still retained relevance as a platform for joint advocacy within the EU. Member states coordinated positions ahead of European Council meetings on issues such as EU enlargement, neighborhood policy, migration, energy security, Schengen governance, defence cooperation, agriculture, and research and innovation.

The 2014–2015 migration crisis marked a defining and controversial moment for the group, whose collective opposition to the European Commission`s mandatory relocation quotas led to legal proceedings before the European Court of Justice; the latter ultimately ruled against Hungary and Slovakia, and later against the entire V4 bloc. These events significantly increased the group's visibility within the EU, while underscoring its cohesion and its limits[22].

The V4 member-states have been quite active in designing the EU neighborhood policies—most notably through Poland's role in launching the Eastern Partnership—and lobbying for EU enlargement into the Western Balkans[23]. Cooperation has also focused on strengthening regional energy diversification and transport infrastructure (along the North–South axis)[24].

Debates over expanding the Visegrad Group sporadically resurface, with proposals to include other Central European states (e.g., Croatia, Slovenia, the Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria), though most analysts consider formal enlargement unlikely[25]. Instead, flexibility has been preserved

[21] Nuala Casey, Oldrich Holecek, Michal Novak. V4 EU Battlegroup serves its first rotation. Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces of the Czech Republic, 17 May 2016. https://www.mo.gov.cz/en/ministry-of-defence/newsroom/news/v4-eu-battlegroup-serves-its-first-rotation-122886/

[22] V4 Strategies in the European Union: Rifts within the EU and the Visegrad Group. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Budapest and Political Capital. June 2021.

[23] Anton Bendarzsevszkij. The Future Prospects of the V4. Danube Institute, 31 March 2021. https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-future-prospects-of-the-v4

[24] Anton Bendarzsevszkij. The Future Prospects of the V4. Danube Institute, 31 March 2021. https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-future-prospects-of-the-v4

[25] Anton Bendarzsevszkij. The Future Prospects of the V4. Danube Institute, 31 March 2021. https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-future-prospects-of-the-v4

through the Visegrad+ or V4+ framework[26], enabling cooperation with external partners such as Egypt[27], South Korea[28], and/or Türkiye[29] without formal expansion.

Managing internal diversity and structural limitations

Despite shared historical experiences and comparable geopolitical positions, the member states of the Visegrad Group differ in political orientations, foreign policy priorities, and domestic governance trajectories, which may periodically damage the V4`s monolithic look. Tamás Baranyi identifies three key factors weakening internal cohesion and the Group's influence within the EU: differing views on the war in Ukraine, divergent relationships with major powers, and debates surrounding Poland's middle-power status[30].

While the V4 once demonstrated unity by challenging EU consensus during the migration crisis, the Russia–Ukraine war has posed a far more severe test. Hungary—and to a lesser extent Slovakia under Fico—has openly opposed EU policies on sanctions against Russia and military aid to Ukraine. Most recently, in mid-December 2025, Budapest led efforts[31] to block EU plans to use frozen Russian assets and, together with Bratislava and Prague[32], refrained from partaking in Brussels` €90 billion loan package for Ukraine. These positions have underscored the limits of V4 unity on core security issues.

Beyond political divisions, the Visegrad Group faces enduring structural and economic constraints. A major challenge is the lack of an integrated regional energy market and underdeveloped energy infrastructure. Strengthening connectivity with the Balkans, Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria will be essential for improving energy security, diversification, and reducing dependence[33] on external suppliers, including through prospective energy routes from Azerbaijan via the Balkans.

Economic integration within the V4 also remains limited. Intra-regional trade is relatively modest, reflecting persistent infrastructural shortcomings. European transport networks continue to favor

[26] Aneta Bąk-Pitucha. The Role of the Visegrad Group in the European Security System. Przegląd Strategiczny, January 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377621816_The_Role_of_the_Visegrad_Group_in_the_European_Security_System

[27] V4 + Egypt Joint Statement. Visegrad Group, 5 July 2017. https://www.visegradgroup.eu/v4-egypt-joint-statement

[28] Second V4 + Korea Summit in Budapest. Visegrad Group, 4 November 2021. https://www.visegradgroup.eu/second-v4-korea-summit

[29] V4 and Turkey: Shared Interest in Regular Dialogue. Visegrad Group, 12 May 2015. https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/2015/v4-and-turkey-shared

[30] Tamás Baranyi. The chances of reviving the V4. Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 3 October 2025

[31] Joakim Scheffer. Orbán Claims Key Role in Blocking EU Russian Assets Plan, Praises de Wever. Hungarian Conservative, 23 December 2025. https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/orban-russian-assets-eu-plan-bart-de-wever-ukraine-loan-opt-out/

[32] Alex Stezhensky. Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia refuse to join €90 billion EU loan program for Ukraine. The New Voice of Ukraine, 19 December 2025. https://english.nv.ua/nation/hungary-czech-republic-slovakia-opt-out-of-eu-s-90b-loan-plan-to-support-ukraine-in-2026-2027-50569771.html

[33] Anton Bendarzsevszkij. The Future Prospects of the V4. Danube Institute, 31 March 2021. https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-future-prospects-of-the-v4

an East–West orientation, leaving Central Europe with insufficient North–South connectivity[34]. Expanding road and railway links along this axis represents one of the most tangible opportunities to enhance regional trade, mobility, and economic cohesion, and to reinforce the practical foundations of Visegrad cooperation.

Conclusion: fewer institutions, more adaptability

Over three decades, the Visegrad Group has evolved into a recognizable political and cultural brand and a distinct regional identity. As emphasized[35] in the 2021 quadrilateral declaration marking its 30th anniversary, the V4 is widely viewed in Europe and beyond as a symbol of successful political and economic transformation, a pillar of Europe's reunification, and an example of effective regional cooperation within the EU.

Collectively, the four Visegrad countries constitute[36] Europe's fifth-largest economy and rank twelfth globally. With the EU's third-largest population after Germany and France, the region holds considerable growth potential. Its central location provides strategic economic and infrastructural advantages, enabling both East–West and North–South connectivity, as well as land-based access to Mediterranean and Adriatic routes—an increasingly relevant asset amid disruptions to maritime trade routes[37].

Although the group's original objective was accession to Euro-Atlantic structures, the V4 has since reinvented itself as a flexible regional consultation platform in search of renewed purpose. Its experience demonstrates that effective regional cooperation does not require deep institutionalization. On the contrary, the V4's longevity and adaptability stem largely from its informal, consensus-based, and pragmatic design.

By prioritizing coordination over bureaucracy and flexibility over binding commitments, the Visegrad Group has established itself as a resilient framework for joint advocacy rather than a traditional international organization. This institutional minimalism has become a defining feature of the Visegrad / V4 brand, enabling it to withstand political disagreements and shifting strategic contexts.

Despite internal divergences, the Visegrad Group remains a functional platform for regional dialogue and cooperation. Its future relevance will depend on its capacity to advance infrastructure development, energy integration, and societal cooperation—areas where adaptability, rather than formalization, continues to be its greatest strength.

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[34] Anton Bendarzsevszkij. The Future Prospects of the V4. Danube Institute, 31 March 2021. https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-future-prospects-of-the-v4

[35] Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group. 17 February 2021. https://www.visegradgroup.eu/home/documents/2021/declaration-of-the-prime

[36] Anton Bendarzsevszkij. The Future Prospects of the V4. Danube Institute, 31 March 2021. https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/the-future-prospects-of-the-v4

[37] Ágnes Vass. Stronger Together: Hungary's Vision of the V4's Central European Voice. Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 27 February 2024. https://hiia.hu/en/stronger-together-hungarys-vision-of-the-v4s-central-european-voice/

South Caucasus: a region without a region?

"Bu dağlar, göylərdə oynayan bu dağlar, Bağrında filizlər qaynayan bu dağlar…Həp sənsin deyilmi olanım, olmazım, Qafqazım, Qafqazım, qazanclı Qafqazım."
"These mountains, these mountains playing in the skies, With ores bubbling in their heart…
Are you not my everything, My Caucasus, my blessed Caucasus
— Mikayıl Müşfiq (1908-1938), Azerbaijani poet

Historical fragmentation: why rhe Caucasian House failed?

"A region called South Caucasus does not exist," claims[38] the Armenian political expert Alexander Iskandaryan, on almost every occasion, noting that while the area may appear regionally coherent from the outside, it is not experienced as such by its inhabitants. Indeed, following the dissolution of the USSR, the newly independent Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia failed to coalesce around a common regional vision.

Although the idea of a *Caucasian House*—first articulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—re-emerged intermittently in the post-Soviet period, it never progressed beyond rhetoric. During Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia[39], the concept envisioned a broad political, military, and economic alliance linking Georgia with selected North Caucasian peoples. This ideational and expansive approach gradually gave way to more pragmatic thinking on regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. Under Georgia's second president, Eduard Shevardnadze[40], emphasis shifted toward functional cooperation based on shared interests rather than ethno-cultural bonds. His *Peaceful Caucasus Initiative* sought dialogue among Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, marking a clear departure from earlier pan-Caucasian romanticism, but likewise failed to generate lasting institutions. A similar pattern persisted under Georgia's next leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, who frequently invoked the idea of a "united Caucasus," [41] [42] aligned with reform and the West.

Meaningful regional consolidation nevertheless remained elusive. The post-independence trajectories of the three South Caucasus states were shaped by conflict, insecurity, and diverging geopolitical orientations. Armenia and Azerbaijan became locked in a protracted and violent conflict over Karabakh, which dominated their domestic and foreign policies and effectively blocked regional dialogue. Georgia, meanwhile, faced separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, culminating in the 2008 war with Russia. Simultaneously, each state pursued distinct external alignments: Georgia largely followed a pro-Western path; Armenia aligned closely with

[38] Политолог: Сейчас региона Южного Кавказа как такового не существует. News.am, 4 November 2025. https://news.am/rus/news/913387.html
[39] Rick Fawn. Ideology and National Identity in Post-communist Foreign Policies. 2013. ISBN: 0714655171
[40] Alessandra Russo. Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area: Ideas and Institutions in the Making. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN-13: 978-3319606231
[41] Саакашвили говорил о «едином Кавказе» на заседании ГА ООН. Civil.ge, 24 September 2010. https://civil.ge/ru/archives/177022
[42] Saakashvili claims to have historic responsibility for Georgia's reunification and greater Caucasus unity. 1tv.ge, 25 June 2025. https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/saakashvili-claims-to-have-historic-responsibility-for-georgias-reunification-and-greater-caucasus-unity/

Russia and Eurasian structures; and Azerbaijan adopted a balancing, multi-vector foreign policy, deliberately positioning itself between major power centers.

As a result, cooperation developed primarily through selective bilateral partnerships rather than inclusive trilateral frameworks. The Azerbaijan–Georgia strategic partnership[43] centered on energy and transport projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum pipelines and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway[44], enhanced connectivity but underscored the absence of a comprehensive regional framework, highlighting the structural limits that ultimately undermined the Caucasian House concept.

3+3: when numbers and substance do not match

Thus far, the principal regional cooperation proposal has been the 3+3 platform, initiated following the 2020 Karabakh War and intended to include the South Caucasus states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) alongside neighboring powers (Iran, Russia, and Türkiye). In practice, however, it has never functioned as intended, convening only partially and lacking substantive outcomes.

The notion of a broader Caucasus cooperation framework is not novel. In the 1990s, Presidents Süleyman Demirel[45] of Türkiye and Heydar Aliyev[46] [47] of Azerbaijan, separately, called for a 3+3+2 format, which would have additionally included the EU and the U.S. After the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan advanced a 3+2 format involving the South Caucasus states, Russia, and Türkiye, but regional tensions again prevented implementation. The current 3+3 format[48] was revived by Erdoğan in December 2020 after the Karabakh war and

[43] Maka Botchorishvili: "The strategic partnership between Georgia and Azerbaijan is truly exemplary. I am confident that our relations will deepen even further". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 16 January 2025. https://mfa.gov.ge/en/news/593787-maka-botchorishvili-saqartvelosa-da-azerbaijans-shoris-arsebuli-strategiuli-partnioroba-namdvilad-sa

[44] Bilateral diplomatic relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Accessed 8 December 2025. https://www.mfa.gov.az/index.php/en/category/europe/gurcustan

[45] Rusif Huseynov. Time for 3 in South Caucasus. Topchubashov Center, 30 January 2025. https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3718/time-for-3-in-south-caucasus

[46] Speech made by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, at the Istanbul Summit of OSCE – November 18, 1999. 1905.az, 1 October 2014. https://1905.az/en/speech-made-by-president-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-heydar-aliyev-at-the-istanbul-summit-of-osce-november-18-1999/

[47] Arkadiusz Legieć. Prospects for the Development of the "3+3" Format on the South Caucasus. PISM, 21 December 2021. https://pism.pl/publications/prospects-for-the-development-of-the-33-format-on-the-south-caucasus

[48] Turkey proposes 6-way Caucasus platform for peace and stability. Hurriyet Daily News, 11 December 2020. https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-be-patient-and-see-what-trend-emerges-after-biden-takes-office-erdogan-160776

strongly supported by Russia and Iran[49], both of which viewed it as a means to limit Western involvement in the region[50] [51].

In reality, the 3+3 has operated as a 2+3 mechanism due to Georgia's consistent absence[52] [53] from the Moscow (2021), Tehran (2023), and Istanbul (2024) meetings. Armenia, while formally participating, has grown increasingly skeptical[54] as it reorients toward Western partners, raising concerns that the exclusion of the EU and the U.S. serves to marginalize Western engagement. Azerbaijan, more confident[55] after resolving the Karabakh issue, has adopted a pragmatic stance, trying to avoid exclusion and to balance the influence of Russia and Iran through Türkiye's involvement.

Even if revived, the 3+3 initiative is unlikely to offer a meaningful response to current regional dynamics. It risks[56] reintroducing post-2020 power arrangements in which security concessions are exchanged for political compliance, potentially undermining progress achieved through bilateral and Western-mediated initiatives. A framework dominated by Russia, Iran, and Türkiye would constrain regional agency and limit access to broader international engagement and investment, particularly given Russia's sanctions-strained economy, Iran's isolation, and Türkiye's risk of overextension.

To date, the 3+3 has remained largely consultative with minimal tangible outcomes, and its revival could entrench obsolete power structures rather than promote open, diversified, and forward-looking regional cooperation aligned with current geopolitical realities.

Post-2020/2022 geopolitical shifts

The 2020 war in Karabakh marked a decisive turning point in the South Caucasus, fundamentally altering a decades-long geopolitical paradigm. Azerbaijan's military victory and restoration of control over territories occupied by Armenia for more than thirty years reshaped the regional balance of power in Baku's favor. Beyond its immediate military significance, the war reduced

[49] Zarif: Iran seeking to form six-party union in the Caucasus region. Tehran Times, 26 January 2021. https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/457391/Zarif-Iran-seeking-to-form-six-party-union-in-the-Caucasus-region
[50] Beyrak Hajiyev. The 3+3 Initiative in Retrospect: A Framework Out of Step with Current Realities. Commonspace, 18 September 2025. https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/33-initiative-retrospect-framework-out-step-current-realities
[51] Eka Javakhishvili. The "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 2022.
[52] Eka Javakhishvili. The "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 2022.
[53] Georgia does not rule out participating in 3+3 platform. OC Media, 21 February 2025. https://oc-media.org/georgia-does-not-rule-participating-in-3-3-platform/
[54] Eka Javakhishvili. The "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 2022.
[55] Eka Javakhishvili. The "3+3" Platform for Regional Cooperation: Conflicting Foreign Policy Preferences. Caucasus Analytical Digest, 2022.
[56] Beyrak Hajiyev. The 3+3 Initiative in Retrospect: A Framework Out of Step with Current Realities. Commonspace, 18 September 2025. https://www.commonspace.eu/opinion/33-initiative-retrospect-framework-out-step-current-realities

Russia's relative influence[57] while significantly strengthening Türkiye's role as a key regional actor. It also reinforced Azerbaijan's growing self-confidence[58] as a security provider and agenda-setter, consolidating its upper hand over Armenia and redefining its position within the regional hierarchy. For Armenia, the defeat triggered a profound reassessment[59] of long-standing domestic[60], foreign and security policy[61] assumptions.

A second major inflection point came with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Moscow's deep engagement in Ukraine curtailed its capacity to project power across the post-Soviet space, creating a strategic opening that Azerbaijan used to consolidate full sovereignty over Karabakh in 2023 and secure the withdrawal of Russian forces[62]. This further enhanced Azerbaijan's strategic autonomy while, for some observers, the closure of the Karabakh chapter also removed a long-standing structural burden[63] [64] from Armenia's domestic and foreign policy agenda, opening space for normalization.

These regional shifts unfolded alongside broader changes in the external power environment. Russia has increasingly deprioritized South Caucasus[65] or is being constrained[66] by the Azerbaijani-Turkish tandem. Iran has seen its influence, already limited, further constrained by mounting internal and external pressures, as well as Israeli strikes that culminated during the twelve-day conflict in June 2025. Together, these developments have loosened long-standing geopolitical rigidities and reduced the dominance of traditional power brokers.

At the same time, gradual normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan—the principal obstacle to regional integration—has become a defining feature of the post-2020 landscape. The year 2025

[57] Sergey Sukhankin. The Second Karabakh War: Lessons and Implications for Russia (Part One). Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor, 01 May 2021. https://jamestown.org/the-second-karabakh-war-lessons-and-implications-for-russia-part-one/

[58] Farid Shukurlu and Joseph Shumunov. Azerbaijan's Active Non-Alignment: How Baku is Pivoting to Greater Power. Baku Dialogues, 9 December 2025. https://bakudialogues.idd.az/articles/azerbaijans-active-non-alignment-09-12-2025

[59] Irina Ghulinyan-Gerz. Disappointed in Russia: Armenia's security disillusionment. Heinrich Böll Stiftung Tbilisi, 1 November 2022. https://ge.boell.org/en/2022/11/01/disappointed-russia-armenias-security-disillusionment

[60] Mikael Zolyan. National Identity Rethink Confronts Armenians With Hard Truths. Carnegie Politika, 10 December 2025. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/11/armenia-new-national-identity?lang=en

[61] Mikael Zolyan. Defeated Armenia Looks to a New, Post-Russia Foreign Policy. Carnegie Politika, 27 November 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/11/defeated-armenia-looks-to-a-new-post-russia-foreign-policy?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia

[62] Rusif Huseynov. "Russians never leave," or how Azerbaijan proved the opposite. Topchubashov Center, 17 May 2024. https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3651/russians-never-leave-or-how-azerbaijan-proved-the-opposite

[63] Wojciech Górecki, Krzysztof Strachota. The Caucasus deregulated. The region on the anniversary of the end of the second Karabakh war. OSW, 26 November 2021. https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-11-26/caucasus-deregulated-region-anniversary-end-second-karabakh

[64] Does the Armenian population of Karabakh hinder the signing of a peace treaty? Opinion from Baku. JAMnews, 8 December 2022. https://jam-news.net/does-the-armenian-population-of-karabakh-hinder-the-signing-of-a-peace-treaty-opinion-from-baku/

[65] Stefan Hedlund. Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus. GIS Reports, 20 August 2025. https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/armenia-azerbaijan-russia/

[66] Roman Chernikov. The End of Russian Hegemony: How Azerbaijan Rewrote the Rules in the Caucasus. Ridl, 25 December 2025. https://ridl.io/the-end-of-russian-hegemony-how-azerbaijan-rewrote-the-rules-in-the-caucasus/

proved particularly consequential, with the peace agreement text reportedly agreed and initialed, followed by direct leader-level meetings between the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Abu Dhabi in July[67] and at a high-profile summit in August facilitated by the President of the United States Donald Trump[68]. The Washington meeting underscored expanding U.S. engagement and linked the normalization process to broader regional connectivity initiatives, including discussions surrounding the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) as part of a wider Armenian–Azerbaijani transit framework[69].

The war in Ukraine has intensified international attention to the Middle Corridor —a geoeconomic and connectivity project linking Central Asia to Europe via South Caucasus[70]. As global actors seek alternatives to routes passing through Russia, the region's strategic value as a transit hub has increased substantially. Azerbaijan, leveraging its energy resources, transport infrastructure, and political capital, positions itself as a key node along this corridor, reinforcing not only its economic relevance but also its aspirations for regional leadership and, increasingly, middle-power status.

Simultaneously, all three South Caucasus states are undergoing notable—if differently framed—foreign policy adjustments. Armenia, while maintaining its membership in Eurasian integration structures, increasingly signals a westward drift[71] [72], forges collaboration with India[73] and even starts *rapprochement* with some Islamic countries[74] [75], framing this shift as foreign policy "diversification."[76] Azerbaijan, for its part, continues to pursue a strategy of *equidistance*[77] [78] while

[67] Ilham Aliyev met with Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan in Abu Dhabi. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, 10 July 2025. https://president.az/en/articles/view/69350

[68] Historic moment in Washington as Armenia and Azerbaijan end decades of conflict and open the door for a new era. Commonspace, 9 August 2025. https://www.commonspace.eu/news/historic-moment-washington-armenia-and-azerbaijan-end-decades-conflict-and-open-door-new-era

[69] Stefan Hedlund. Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus. GIS Reports, 20 August 2025. https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/armenia-azerbaijan-russia/

[70] Vusal Guliyev. The Rising Significance of the Middle Corridor. Baku Dialogues, 18 October 2022. https://bakudialogues.idd.az/articles/the-rising-significance-of-the-middle-corridor-18-10-2022

[71] Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia's resilience. EU Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 5 April 2024. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05_en

[72] European Union and Armenia adopt new Strategic Agenda to deepen partnership. EU Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 2 December 2025. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-union-and-armenia-adopt-new-strategic-agenda-deepen-partnership-2025-12-02_en

[73] Mikael Zolyan. Defeated Armenia Looks to a New, Post-Russia Foreign Policy. Carnegie Politika, 27 November 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/11/defeated-armenia-looks-to-a-new-post-russia-foreign-policy?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia

[74] Armenia, Saudi Arabia Establish Diplomatic Relations. Azatutyun, 25 November 2023. https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32699587.html

[75] Xandie (Alexandra) Kuenning. Armenia and Pakistan establish diplomatic relations. OC Media, 1 September 2025. https://oc-media.org/armenia-and-pakistan-establish-diplomatic-relations/

[76] Sona Hovsepyan. Leaving Russian orbit. Novaya Gazeta, 10 April 2024. https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/04/10/leaving-russian-orbit-en

[77] Rusif Huseynov. "Russians never leave," or how Azerbaijan proved the opposite. Topchubashov Center, 17 May 2024. https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3651/russians-never-leave-or-how-azerbaijan-proved-the-opposite

[78] Rusif Huseynov and Gulkhanim Mammadova. Azerbaijan's Pivot to Central Asia. RUSI, 8 April 2024. https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/azerbaijans-pivot-central-asia

deepening engagement with Central Asia and embedding itself within a broader Turkic[79] and Eurasian geopolitical mosaic—an approach that reflects both heightened confidence and an ambition to shape, rather than merely adapt to, regional dynamics. Georgia has begun to move away from its traditionally unequivocal pro-Western orientation toward what the ruling Georgian Dream party describes as "multi-vectoralism."[80] [81]

Taken together, Azerbaijan's equidistance, Georgia's multi-vectoralism, and Armenia's diversification seek greater strategic autonomy, reduced dependency on any single external power, and enhanced room for maneuver in an increasingly fluid geopolitical environment. Yet within this shared trajectory, Azerbaijan stands out as the most assertive actor, leveraging post-2020 realities to translate military success into diplomatic influence, connectivity leadership, and emerging middle-power ambitions[82]. Collectively, these shifts underscore the emergence of a new regional reality—one that creates unprecedented space for rethinking cooperation frameworks beyond zero-sum logics and inherited constraints.

Economic interdependence and connectivity potential

Despite persistent political divisions, the South Caucasus exhibits significant economic complementarities and untapped connectivity potential. Azerbaijan occupies a central role as both an energy producer and transit state, supplying hydrocarbons to Europe while investing heavily in transport, logistics, and digital infrastructure. Georgia has traditionally served as the region's primary logistical hub, linking the Caspian basin to the Black Sea. Armenia, amid a gradual foreign policy recalibration, is seeking new trade routes and partnerships to overcome decades of isolation.

Since 2022, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the key drivers of the Middle Corridor[83] [84]. With sanctions constraining transit through both Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan—and by extension South Caucasus—has assumed renewed strategic importance as a *geoeconomic bottleneck*, echoing Zbigniew Brzezinski's characterization of the region's role in Eurasian connectivity[85]. Substantial Azerbaijani investments in ports, railways, highways, and logistics hubs have reinforced this position, turning the country not only into a transit state but also as an agenda-setter in regional connectivity planning.

[79] President Ilham Aliyev: Turkic world is "our family". APA, 05 April 2024. https://en.apa.az/foreign-policy/president-ilham-aliyev-turkic-world-is-our-family-433096
[80] Jaba Devdariani, Tornike Zurabashvili. The False Promise of Georgia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy. Geopolitics, 8 May 2025. https://politicsgeo.com/the-false-promise-of-georgias-multi-vector-foreign-policy/
[81] The dangerous illusion of the Georgian Dream's "multi-vectoral" foreign policy. Globalnews, 27 February 2024. https://globalnews.ge/en/georgia/456-multiveqtorulobis-sasisi-iluzia-qartuli-ocnebis-sa
[82] Mehmet Fatih Oztarsu &Rovshan Ibrahimov. No longer small? Azerbaijan's pursuit of middle power status. Third World Quarterly, 18 November 2025. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2582694
[83] Derya Soysal. Azerbaijan: Gateway and driver of the Middle Corridor. EU Reporter, 7 August 2025. https://www.eureporter.co/world/azerbaijan-world/2025/08/07/azerbaijan-gateway-and-driver-of-the-middle-corridor/
[84] Anthony Kim. The Lynchpin of the Middle Corridor: The Merits of Greater Strategic Interaction with Baku. Baku Dialogues, 18 October 2022. https://bakudialogues.idd.az/articles/the-lynchpin-of-the-middle-corridor-18-10-2022
[85] Zbigniew Brzezinski. The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives. BasicBooks, 1997.

Armenia has likewise intensified its focus on connectivity, viewing it as both an economic necessity and a strategic tool for diversification. The government's Crossroads of Peace initiative[86], which envisions expanded transport links in all directions, contingent on normalization with Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and reintegration into regional networks is increasingly tied to resilience and long-term stability.

Within this evolving framework, Azerbaijan views the proposed Zangezur corridor[87]—linking mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave and Türkiye via Armenian territory— as part of the broader Middle Corridor. One of the key elements under discussion is the TRIPP, currently being negotiated between Armenia and the United States. Beyond economic gains, shared infrastructure has the potential to foster interdependence and support peace-building.

Recent steps illustrate this shift. In 2025, Azerbaijan lifted long-standing transit restrictions on Armenia-bound cargo[88] [89], enabling grain shipments via its territory and signaling a move from isolation toward cooperation. Later that year, Azerbaijan exported petroleum products to Armenia[90] by rail for the first time in decades, marking a symbolic transition from conflict to trade and reinforcing confidence-building efforts.

At the same time, expanded Armenia–Azerbaijan connectivity does not necessarily diminish the role of Georgia which has long enjoyed a de facto monopoly[91] over Azerbaijan–Türkiye connectivity and still remains indispensable to Black Sea access and westward routes. Nevertheless, some in Georgian political and expert circles are concerned that new east–west routes bypassing Georgian territory could reduce the country's relative importance[92] [93]. These perceptions underscore the need for inclusive, region-wide coordination to ensure that emerging connectivity frameworks are viewed as complementary rather than competitive.

Overall, if leveraged effectively, shared investments in energy, transport, and digital infrastructure could significantly deepen regional interdependence and provide tangible incentives for cooperation. Connectivity thus functions not only as an economic tool but as a strategic

[86] Crossroads of Peace project designed to connect Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Black Sea, Caspian Sea and Mediterranean Sea. Armenpress, 18 November 2023. https://armenpress.am/en/article/1124418

[87] Javidan Ahmadkhanli. The importance of the Zangezur corridor in three dimensions. Topchubashov Center, 27 October 2021. https://top-center.org/en/expert-opinion/3247/the-importance-of-the-zangezur-corridor-in-three-dimensions

[88] Sabina Mammadli. Russia begins shipping wheat to Armenia via Azerbaijan. Caliber, 23 December 2025. https://caliber.az/en/post/russia-begins-shipping-wheat-to-armenia-via-azerbaijan

[89] Arshaluys Barseghyan. Armenia to receive third batch of wheat through Azerbaijan. OC Media, 15 December 2025. https://oc-media.org/armenian-to-receive-third-batch-of-wheat-through-azerbaijan/

[90] Azerbaijan begins fuel exports to Armenia by rail for first time in decades. Euronews, 18 December 2025. https://www.euronews.com/2025/12/18/azerbaijan-begins-fuel-exports-to-armenia-by-rail-for-first-time-in-decades

[91] Ilgar Velizade. The EU steps into TRIPP: Georgia loses its monopoly as Zangezur moves to center stage. Aze Media, 3 December 2025. https://aze.media/the-eu-steps-into-tripp-georgia-loses-its-monopoly-as-zangezur-moves-to-center-stage/

[92] Tural Heybatov. Why Georgia Sees Zangezur Corridor as Threat? Caspian Post, 3 December 2025. https://caspianpost.com/analytics/why-georgia-sees-zangezur-corridor-as-threat

[93] Azerbaijan-Georgia sparring over trade. Eurasianet, 15 December 2025. https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-georgia-sparring-over-trade

mechanism for embedding peace and transforming the South Caucasus from a fragmented space into an emerging platform for regional integration.

Structural obstacles to regional cooperation

Despite emerging opportunities for dialogue and connectivity, the South Caucasus continues to face deep structural barriers to regional cooperation. Foremost among these are fragmented geopolitical alignments reflecting divergent strategic visions and limiting the scope for collective action. Rather than converging around a shared regional agenda, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia pursue distinct—and at times incompatible—foreign policy trajectories.

Georgia has traditionally positioned itself as a pro-Western state, a course enshrined in its constitution[94] and reflected in sustained cooperation with NATO[95] and other transatlantic institutions. In recent years, however, this trajectory has shown signs of recalibration[96]. While practical cooperation with NATO continues, relations with the broader transatlantic community have cooled, pointing toward a more multi-vector approach and uncertainty about Georgia's long-term orientation.

Armenia, by contrast, has historically been embedded in Russian-led political, economic, and security structures, including the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union. Although Yerevan has recently sought to diversify its partnerships and engage more actively with Western actors[97] [98], its formal institutional anchoring in the Eurasian frameworks continues to shape perceptions of its geopolitical alignment and constrain strategic flexibility to some extent.

Azerbaijan has pursued a different path, maintaining a policy of relative equidistance from both Western and Russian/Eurasian blocs. In recent years, Baku has increasingly invested in the idea of the Turkic world[99] [100] as an emerging geopolitical pole[101] [102], positioning itself as a central actor

[94] Article 78 – Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Constitution of Georgia. Accessed 11 December 2025, https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36

[95] Iana Maisuradze, Amanda Paul. NATO and Georgia 13 years on: So close, yet so far. European Policy Centre (EPC), 31 May 2021. https://www.epc.eu/publication/NATO-and-Georgia-13-years-on-So-close-yet-so-far-3f974c/

[96] Is Georgia's government abandoning EU integration, aligning with Russia. DW News, 28 November 2025. https://youtu.be/SfPZPwkxO4Q?si=lLJ4-kskukZrnKvh

[97] Joint EU-US-Armenia High Level Meeting in Support of Armenia's resilience. EU Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 5 April 2024. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-eu-us-armenia-high-level-meeting-support-armenias-resilience-2024-04-05_en

[98] European Union and Armenia adopt new Strategic Agenda to deepen partnership. EU Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, 2 December 2025. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-union-and-armenia-adopt-new-strategic-agenda-deepen-partnership-2025-12-02_en

[99] Farid Shafiyev. Azerbaijan and the Rise of Turkic Unity: The Journey of the Organization of Turkic States. AIR Center, 07 January 2024, https://aircenter.az/en/single/azerbaijan-and-the-rise-of-turkic-unity-the-journey-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states-1338

[100] Ilgar Huseynov. Azerbaijan cements the Turkic Union with its economy. Aze Media, 6 October 2025. https://aze.media/azerbaijan-cements-the-turkic-union-with-its-economy/

[101] Asif Adil. Baku leads the formation of a new power center in the Turkic World. Aze Media, 9 October 2025. https://aze.media/baku-leads-the-formation-of-a-new-power-center-in-the-turkic-world/

[102] Huseyin Nurlu. From fraternity to framework: The Turkic world's strategic turn. TRT World, 16 October 2025. https://www.trtworld.com/article/047e702d6118

within a broader Turkic and Central Asian strategic space. Baku`s close alliance with Türkiye has become the cornerstone of its security and foreign policy, reinforcing autonomy while preserving a distinct strategic framework.

These divergent alignments are compounded by unresolved conflict legacies, particularly between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite ongoing normalization efforts, trust remains limited. Borders remain closed, diplomatic relations absent, and a formal peace treaty unsigned, despite the tangible peace-oriented steps in 2025. In addition, Azerbaijan continues to view[103] [104] certain elements of Armenia's legislative framework as implying territorial claims and therefore calls for constitutional amendments or the adoption of a new constitution that unequivocally removes these provisions as a prerequisite for confidence-building and full normalization.

Incompatible security arrangements further constrain cooperation. Azerbaijan benefits from a strategic alliance with Türkiye[105], a NATO member state; Armenia remains formally within the CSTO, though its participation is effectively frozen[106]; and Georgia stands outside collective security structures despite cooperation with NATO. The absence of a shared threat perception or compatible security frameworks hampers confidence-building and crisis management.

External actors add another layer of complexity. Much depends on the trajectory Russia adopts following the war in Ukraine—whether it returns to South Caucasus as a more reserved actor focused on damage control, or as a more assertive power seeking to reassert dominance[107]. Türkiye's role is also evolving: while Ankara has deepened its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, it still lacks full diplomatic relations and open borders with Armenia, though recent normalization efforts suggest cautious progress[108] [109]. Iran's perspective adds another layer of complexity as Tehran views[110] [111] developments in South Caucasus—particularly in Azerbaijan—through a prism

[103] Rusif Huseynov. Towards the peace deal: abandoning territorial claims and 1990 document. Topchubashov Center, 14 November 2023. https://top-center.org/en/expert-opinion/3581/towards-the-peace-deal-abandoning-territorial-claims-and-1990-document

[104] Tabib Huseynov. Armenia's constitutionally enshrined territorial claims against Azerbaijan: Quo vadis? Topchubashov Center, 18 July 2024. https://top-center.org/en/reports/3663/armenias-constitutionally-enshrined-territorial-claims-against-azerbaijan-quo-vadis

[105] Ali Hajizada. Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations: The building of an alliance. Aze Media, 29 April 2024. https://aze.media/turkiye-azerbaijan-relations-the-building-of-an-alliance/

[106] Suren Sargsyan: How "Frozen" is Armenia's CSTO Membership. Caucasus Watch, 28 January 2025. https://caucasuswatch.de/en/interviews/suren-sargsyan-how-frozen-is-armenias-csto-membership.html

[107] Giorgi Badridze, Mahammad Mammadov, Murad Muradov, Sergei Melkonian, Hugo von Essen. Russia in the South Caucasus: Losing, Adapting, Overcoming. SCEEUS, 2 February 2024. https://sceeus.se/en/publications/russia-in-the-south-caucasus-losing-adapting-overcoming/

[108] Turkey says Armenia normalization hinges on Yerevan's peace with Baku. Turkish Minute, 19 November 2025. https://www.turkishminute.com/2025/11/19/turkey-says-armenia-normalization-hinges-on-yerevans-peace-with-baku/

[109] Arshaluys Barseghyan. Armenian and Turkish special envoys hold talks in Yerevan. OC-Media, 12 September 2025. https://oc-media.org/armenian-and-turkish-special-envoys-hold-talks-in-yerevan/

[110] Nina Miholjčić. Understanding the Baku-Tehran Relationship. Baku Dialogues, 27 January 2022. https://bakudialogues.idd.az/articles/understanding-the-baku-tehran-relationship-27-01-2022

[111] Punhan Sariyev. Religion meets realpolitik: Why Iran fears Azerbaijan's independent diplomacy. Azernews, 14 September 2025. https://www.azernews.az/analysis/247374.html

shaped by historical legacies, concerns over Shiite solidarity, sensitivities regarding Israel's presence in the region, and fears of geopolitical marginalization[112].

Overall, fragmented alignments, unresolved conflicts, incompatible security arrangements, and competing external visions continue to constrain regional cooperation. While shifting power balances create new openings, any sustainable framework will need to be flexible, incremental, and sensitive to entrenched asymmetries and historical grievances.

When models travel—and when they do not: V4 lessons for South Caucasus

"Nem mind arany, ami fénylik."
"Not everything that glitters is gold."

— Hungarian proverb

The Visegrad Group (V4) is often cited as a successful example of small-state regional cooperation. Yet its experience must be approached with caution when applied beyond Central Europe. This section examines which elements of the V4 model are relevant to South Caucasus and which are not, underscoring the importance of contextual sensitivity in transferring regional cooperation frameworks.

Preconditions for cooperation: when does regionalism work?

The early success of the V4 rested on a favorable constellation of structural and political conditions. Shared strategic objectives—most notably democratization and accession to the EU and NATO—coincided with a relatively stable security environment free from active interstate conflicts. Political and cultural affinities rooted in a Central European identity further facilitated cooperation, while the prospect of EU and NATO enlargement provided a powerful external anchor, offering both incentives and strategic direction. Early V4 cooperation was pragmatic and sector-focused, developing through low-politics areas such as economic reform, trade, and institutional adaptation.

South Caucasus lacks many of these enabling conditions. Although recent geopolitical shifts and growing economic interdependence have created new incentives for cooperation, the region continues to grapple with a legacy of unresolved or recently active conflicts, divergent foreign policy orientations, and the absence of a unifying regional identity. No external institution currently provides an integrative pull comparable to EU accession or NATO membership, which remain contested or unrealistic across the three states. (Even Georgia's formal status as an EU

[112] Golmohammadi V, Azizi H. A Status Quo Power in a Changing Region: Iran's Regionalism in the South Caucasus. *Nationalities Papers*. Published online 2025:1-14. doi:10.1017/nps.2025.10084

candidate has been widely characterized as largely symbolic, with membership prospects viewed as unrealistic in the foreseeable future[113] [114].)

At the same time, important structural parallels between Central Europe and South Caucasus can still be found. In both regions, relatively small or mid-sized states operate in environments shaped by larger powers, using cooperation to amplify national agency rather than surrender sovereignty. For the V4, historical proximity to Germany/Austria/West and Russia/Soviet Union shaped strategic choices, while South Caucasus has effectively been squeezed among Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, who still impact regional dynamics. Economic and infrastructural complementarities—particularly in energy production, transit corridors, and connectivity—offer South Caucasus states opportunities for pragmatic, functional cooperation despite political differences.

However, several defining features of the V4 do not translate directly. The conflict legacy differs fundamentally: Central European states had largely resolved disputes before forming the V4, whereas South Caucasus has experienced active interstate conflict until recently, limiting trust and constraining deep political cooperation. External alignments are more divergent: unlike the broadly Euro-Atlantic trajectory of the V4, South Caucasus states maintain distinct and sometimes competing security partnerships. The institutional environment is also weaker: the EU provided a strong, unifying external anchor for the V4, while no equivalent framework exists in South Caucasus. Finally, cultural and political heterogeneity is more pronounced, with deeper historical and normative fragmentation.

Taken together, these differences suggest that wholesale replication of the V4 model would be misguided. Instead, limited, flexible, and sector-focused cooperation—adapted to local realities, emphasizing connectivity, trade, and low-politics sectors—represents the most realistic pathway for building trust and advancing regional cooperation.

Lessons from the V4 for designing an SC3 format

Although the V4 model cannot be directly transplanted, it provides several instructive lessons for the development of a South Caucasus Trio (SC3) framework. By selectively adapting its principles, the SC3 can pursue practical regional cooperation while remaining sensitive to local political realities.

Minimal institutionalization and voluntarism: A key strength of the V4 has been its light institutional structure. Flexibility reduced political costs and sovereignty concerns, allowing states to coordinate without binding supranational bodies. The V4's rotating presidency, flexible consultation mechanisms, and the experience of *ad hoc* working groups can be adopted by the SC3. Maintaining minimal institutional overhead maximizes flexibility, lowers political risk, and facilitates gradual confidence-building among participating states.

[113] EU calls Georgia 'candidate in name only' in damning 2025 enlargement report. OC Media, 4 November 2025, https://oc-media.org/eu-issues-2025-enlargement-report-says-georgia-is-a-candidate-country-in-name-only/
[114] Lucy Papachristou. Georgia has gone backwards in bid to join EU, bloc's envoy says after 'devastating' report. Reuters, 4 November 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/georgia-has-gone-backwards-bid-join-eu-blocs-envoy-says-after-devastating-report-2025-11-04/

Also, establishing secretariat-based coordination may be unlikely in the South Caucasus context due to the existing distrust between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and also the poor experience with other faded-away organizations in the post-Soviet space: who now remembers where are the secretariats of the CIS or GUAM located at?

Low-politics and pragmatic sectors: The V4's initially focused on sectoral cooperation (economic reform, trade, and institutional adaptation) rather than ambitious political projects. Similarly, the SC3 should prioritize concrete areas such as connectivity, transport infrastructure, trade facilitation, energy transit, digital governance, and public administration. Recent developments can also support this approach: in October 2025, Azerbaijan lifted a 30-year cargo transit embargo to Armenia, and in December began petroleum exports there.

Environmental and energy cooperation, as proposed by the recent GCSP-backed Armenian–Azerbaijani papers[115] [116], could similarly serve as low-risk sectors. Initiatives like a Regional Emergency Action Partnership (REAP) for joint disaster response, potentially including Georgia, could build trust and consolidate cooperation. Historical precedents, such as the earthquake diplomacy between Greece and Türkiye or Armenian–Turkish humanitarian collaboration in 2023, demonstrate how crises can catalyze cooperation.

Civil Society and soft-power instruments: The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) demonstrates the value of supporting cooperation beyond governmental channels. Though a formal *Caucasus Cooperation Fund* may be premature, joint research initiatives, academic exchanges, mobility programs, and cultural projects can still be relevant and useful.

In this context, substantial experience on dialogue initiatives supported by Western donors and frameworks such as EU4Peace, EU4Dialogue, the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), many of which have focused on Armenian–Azerbaijani or trilateral Armenian–Azerbaijani–Georgian engagement, has been accumulated. More recently, these efforts have increasingly shifted toward direct and bilateral formats. The most notable example is the Peace Bridge Initiative, launched in fall 2025, which brings together civil society actors, think tank experts, and media representatives from Armenia and Azerbaijan, complementing and reinforcing official peace negotiations.

Coordinated external engagement and shared messaging: The V4 has effectively leveraged coordinated policies and communication *vis-à-vis* external actors, particularly the EU and non-Western countries. SC3 could adopt a similar strategy, using the forum as a platform for consultation and joint positions on transport corridors, trade facilitation, regulatory harmonization, and foreign investment. Such coordinated engagement enhances the collective

[115] Anar Ahmadov, Agha Bayramov, Tatul Manaseryan, Arman Martirosyan. Enhancing Prospects for Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan through Joint Climate Change and Energy Security Action. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). 1 November 2024. https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/enhancing-prospects-peace-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-through-joint-climate-change

[116] Anar Ahmadov, Vasif Huseynov, Rusif Huseynov, Tatul Manaseryan, Arman Martirosyan, Niko Orell. Proposal for a Regional Emergency Action Partnership (REAP) for Peace in the South Caucasus, 9 December 2024. https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/proposal-regional-emergency-action-partnership-reap-peace-south-caucasus

bargaining power of the participating states and reinforces the region's visibility and credibility in international dealings.

Respect for diversity and conditional participation: The V4 experience underscores that political divergence need not prevent cooperation. The SC3 should institutionalize flexibility through opt-in and opt-out mechanisms for specific initiatives, avoid consensus requirements on sensitive topics, and maintain a non-security mandate initially, respecting sovereignty and reducing polarization.

Failure scenarios and safeguards: Finally, the SC3 must anticipate potential obstacles. Renewed conflict, great-power interference, or the emergence of competing regional blocs could undermine the initiative. Success will depend on pragmatic sectoral focus, confidence-building measures, flexible participation, and sustained engagement with external actors. By addressing these risks, the SC3 can avoid being "dead on arrival" and gradually develop into a viable platform for South Caucasus cooperation.

From fragmentation to coordination: policy options for structuring the South Caucasus Trio (SC3)

"El bir olsa, dağ oynadar yerindən."
"Unity can move mountains."

— Azerbaijani proverb

Time for South Caucasus Trio (SC3)

As discussed in the previous sections, the only existing regional cooperation platform formally including the South Caucasus is the 3+3 framework. While it was designed to provide a forum for dialogue among regional and neighboring powers, its asymmetrical participation, dominance of larger actors, and limited agency for South Caucasus states have undermined its effectiveness. Given differing geopolitical orientations, security interests, and power asymmetries among participants, the 3+3 format, even if it continues to exist, is unlikely to evolve into a cohesive regional mechanism[117].

Against this background, South Caucasus states face an urgent need to turn toward a more localized and cohesive approach to regional cooperation. A trilateral framework involving only Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—South Caucasus Trio (SC3)[118]—could offer a more balanced and potentially effective model. Especially in the context of ongoing global turbulence and crises affecting neighboring regions, a simplified three-state format could foster a distinct South Caucasus identity, address shared security and connectivity challenges, enhance economic

[117] Rusif Huseynov. Time for 3 in South Caucasus. Topchubashov Center, 30 January 2025. https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3718/time-for-3-in-south-caucasus
[118] Rusif Huseynov. Time for 3 in South Caucasus. Topchubashov Center, 30 January 2025. https://top-center.org/en/analytics/3718/time-for-3-in-south-caucasus

interdependence, and strengthen regional ties without being overshadowed by external power rivalries.

Drawing inspiration from successful minilateral formats such as the Visegrad Group (V4), the Baltic Trio, and the Central Asia Five (C5), the SC3 should be designed as a gradual, flexible, and lightly institutionalized framework by prioritizing coordination over integration, functionality over ideology, and trust-building over formal commitments.

Political divergence need not preclude cooperation: the Visegrad Group succeeded despite internal differences, while Central Asian states maintain functional collaboration (through institutionalized annual consultative summits, a shared regional identity, and engagement with global powers within the structured 5+1 formats) despite unresolved disputes, such as the recurrent Kyrgyz–Tajik border clashes.

These cases illustrate that regional identity is not a prerequisite for cooperation, but often its outcome. In this sense, SC3 should be understood as a practice-driven project, allowing cooperation to generate trust incrementally rather than assuming political convergence in advance.

Institutionalizing SC3: forums, leadership, and working groups

The foundation of the SC3 framework can be a regular South Caucasus Ministerial Forum, ideally convened at the level of foreign ministers. While ad hoc interactions already exist—such as the deputy foreign ministers' meeting[119] hosted by Tbilisi in April 2023 or occasional encounters at the level of prime ministers on the margins of the Silk Way Forum[120]—these engagements have lacked consistency and institutional follow-up. Moreover, the reliance on prime ministerial formats is structurally limited, as Azerbaijan's executive authority resides with the presidency.

Regular meetings—whether annual, biannual, or quarterly—among the foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia would provide continuity, institutional memory, and a predictable channel for dialogue. Parallel or alternating meetings of transport, economy, or development ministers would complement these discussions, reflecting shared priorities such as regional connectivity.

A rotating presidency among the three states would ensure balance and shared ownership, while the forum could serve as the main agenda-setting body, coordinating policies and prioritizing sectoral cooperation.

At its highest level, this process could culminate in a South Caucasus Summit, bringing together the leaders of the three states and signaling political commitment to regional cooperation.

[119] Trilateral Meeting Between Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia Held in Tbilisi. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 17 April 2025. https://mfa.gov.ge/en/news/237034-tbilisshi-saqartvelo-azerbaijani-somkhetis-sammkhrivi-politikuri-konsultatsiebis-pirveli-shekhvedra

[120] Tamilla Hasanova. Silk Road Forum to bring together Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian PMs. Caliber, 8 October 2025. https://caliber.az/en/post/silk-road-forum-to-bring-together-azerbaijani-armenian-and-georgian-pms

To translate dialogue into practical outcomes, SC3 can also consider thematic working groups focused on areas of mutual interest and low political sensitivity. Core priorities would logically include connectivity and transport, trade and customs facilitation, and digital and regulatory governance—sectors directly aligned with Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor, Armenia's Crossroads of Peace initiative, and Georgia's regional gateway role.

Coordinated transport corridors, simplified customs procedures, and enhanced intra-regional commerce would generate tangible economic benefits and provide incentives for sustained cooperation. Additional thematic areas—such as climate and energy transition, disaster management, and environmental monitoring—would further strengthen functional interdependence. Joint disaster response mechanisms, particularly in border regions, could serve as confidence-building measures while addressing shared vulnerabilities.

Chairmanship of these working groups could rotate among the three states, ensuring balanced participation and reinforcing the principle of regional ownership.

Building trust through low-politics cooperation

While the establishment of a fully-fledged civil cooperation fund modeled on the International Visegrad Fund may be premature at this stage, supporting societal-level cooperation should remain a long-term objective of SC3. In the interim, priority could be given to low-cost, high-impact initiatives such as academic networks, youth exchanges, joint research projects, and cultural programs.

Selected elements of the IVF experience could nevertheless be adapted. In particular, the Think Visegrad network—an agenda-setting platform linking think tanks—offers a useful template for a South Caucasus think tank community with rotating research priorities, joint policy briefs, expert exchanges, and fellowship schemes.

A rotating South Caucasus cultural week, hosted regularly by one of the three countries, could further promote people-to-people contacts and gradually foster a shared regional narrative. Such soft-power instruments would complement intergovernmental cooperation by building trust beyond official channels.

Given the region's history of conflict, SC3 should initially prioritize low-politics cooperation that delivers immediate and visible benefits. Joint initiatives in disaster response, environmental monitoring, and border management modernization offer practical opportunities to build trust while avoiding sensitive political issues. Success in these areas would demonstrate the added value of regional cooperation and help sustain political momentum.

SC3 and external partners: a sequenced approach

The experience of the 3+3 platform reinforces the conclusion that smaller, cohesive, and regionally owned formats are more sustainable. SC3 should therefore serve as the core framework for South Caucasus cooperation, complemented—but not supplanted—by flexible external engagement mechanisms.

In line with models such as V4+ and C5+, SC3 could develop a range of SC3+ formats, allowing coordinated engagement with external actors when beneficial. These could include SC3+1 formats with individual external powers such as the EU, Iran, NATO, Russia, Türkiye, or multilateral formats such as SC3+V4, SC3+C5 (Central Asia Five), or SC3+GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council).

Within this logic, the existing 3+3 framework would become one of several SC3+ variables rather than the central organizing principle of regional cooperation.

Viewed in this way, SC3 is not a rejection of multilateralism but a sequenced approach to regionalism—one that begins with trust, functionality, and regional ownership, and only then expands outward. If pursued pragmatically, the South Caucasus Trio could evolve into a stabilizing platform capable of enhancing regional resilience, reducing dependence on external actors, and strengthening the collective agency of the South Caucasus on the international stage.

Conclusion

"Bir olsa yoldaşın, dostun əməli,
Daşdan su çıxardar onların əli."
"If friends act together,
They can draw water even from a stone."

— Nizami Gəncəvi (1141–1209),
medieval Azerbaijani poet

The experience of the Visegrad Group offers valuable insights for the South Caucasus—not as a blueprint to be replicated, but as a reference point illustrating how small and medium-sized states can cooperate pragmatically without sacrificing sovereignty. Its most transferable lessons lie in minimal, flexible, and low-cost institutionalization, and a focus on functional, sector-based cooperation. Comparable experiences in the post-Soviet space, including the Baltic Trio and the Central Asian consultative framework, further demonstrate that regional cooperation can emerge despite political divergence, unresolved disputes, and differing foreign policy orientations.

For the South Caucasus, the post-2020 transformation of the regional order—combined with broader geopolitical restructuring and growing connectivity opportunities—has created a rare window for reimagining regional cooperation. In this context, the proposed South Caucasus Trio (SC3) is not intended to mirror the Visegrad model, but rather to adapt its most effective institutional and normative lessons to local realities shaped by conflict legacies, asymmetries, and ongoing political change.

By prioritizing low-politics cooperation in areas such as transport, trade, connectivity, disaster response, and societal exchange, embracing voluntarism and flexibility, and fostering engagement

beyond governmental elites, the SC3 could gradually strengthen regional resilience and enhance the collective agency of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Crucially, it could also contribute to conflict transformation by embedding cooperation in everyday practices and shared material interests, rather than forcing premature political convergence.

In an era of intensifying great-power rivalry and external pressure, a region-driven, pragmatic, and incremental cooperation framework may offer the most viable route toward a more stable, prosperous, and autonomous South Caucasus. Ultimately, sustainable regionalism cannot be imposed from outside; it must be shaped by the region itself. If carefully designed and locally owned, the SC3 could become a meaningful platform for shaping the region's emerging geopolitical architecture—turning fragmentation into coordinated action and vulnerability into collective agency.