

**NETWORK of WOMEN MEDIATORS of SOUTH CAUCASUS  
FOR SINCERITY, TRUTH AND TRUST**

**NWMSC**

## **Is there a key to conflict resolution in the South Caucasus?**

*(Summarization of analytical notes by peace activists of the South Caucasus)  
2023*

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**Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, terminology, geopolitical names given by the authors of the individual portions of this joint authorship document belong to both experts and participants in the focus groups. They do not necessarily agree with the views and/or positions of other co-authors, presented in the study.

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## INTRODUCTION

The document presents a summary of materials related to the issues of conflict prevention and resolution in the South Caucasus. They are based on data from individual interviews and focus groups conducted and analyzed by members of the Network of Women Mediators of South Caucasus (NWMSC) and their colleagues. The Network was initiated by ICCN and established in 2018, covers all regions of the South Caucasus, including conflict zones<sup>1</sup>. The materials were created in 2022 within the framework of the project - "The Network of Women Mediators of South Caucasus for Sincerity, Truth and Trust" carried out under the GPPAC<sup>2</sup> Caucasus Dialogue program and the GPPAC Emergency Response Fund in order to support members' initiatives in emerging conflict situations.

The focus of the project concerns the role of women peace mediators in building trust in conflict zones, their involvement in formal and informal peacebuilding processes, conflict prevention and de-escalation. It includes various activities, including the development of the analytical material below. The document combines information notes written on the basis of the opinions of focus group participants and interviewed representatives of various strata of society in six locations in the South Caucasus. Therefore, some contradictions found in the text show how the same facts are covered and interpreted differently in war-separated societies, and to what extent they are in conflict with each other.

Reflecting the real state of affairs and the opinions of well-known experts in their communities in this summarizing document was one of the important goals of this program, as it allows women peacebuilders to comprehend what the real situation is and what the Network of Women Mediators of South Caucasus can do to resolve the most emotive problems that hinder peace process.

It should be recognized that in the South Caucasus, where there have been several armed conflicts which have not yet been resolved, and their consequences are acutely felt, the involvement of women is becoming increasingly important. It is generally recognized that the more women are involved in peacekeeping, the more effective this activity becomes.

It should also be noted that the number of women in the South Caucasus involved in analytical and research activities on peacebuilding and conflict resolution is extremely small. The study conducted by the authors is intended to fill this gap to a certain extent and consolidate the efforts of the Network members around identifying, comprehending, and analyzing the most problematic and sensitive issues of conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, which, in our opinion, should become an important element of women's involvement in these processes. For this reason, the authors this time limited themselves to the general questions listed below, which, however, does not preclude a more in-depth study of the gender aspect of the problems of civil peacekeeping and women's participation in the future.

Despite this, the opinions and visions of people actively involved in peacebuilding and the search for ways to transform and/or resolve conflicts presented from different regions of

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<sup>1</sup> [http://iccn.ge/files/nwmisc\\_lieflet\\_2019.pdf](http://iccn.ge/files/nwmisc_lieflet_2019.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gppac.net/>

the South Caucasus provide a unique opportunity to better understand the aspirations of the parties. This material is of great practical value for planning upcoming activities in order to aim them at specific tangible results. The materials presented within the framework of the project make their unique contribution to the process of restoring and building confidence, and provide a kind of guide to what confidence building measures could be.

It should be emphasized once again that in the opinions of the respondents, one can find both similar and sharply different assessments of conflict situations, which naturally come from the history and dynamics of conflicts. This is where the value of these materials lies. This palette of opinions makes it possible to better present the overall picture and outline the next most optimal steps for meaningful involvement of the civil sector, and especially women of the South Caucasus in peacebuilding.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research materials were collected in October-December 2022 according to the well-known method of conducting social surveys, including focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with experts. The focus groups were attended by experts involved in peacebuilding, civil activists, journalists covering issues of war and peace, representatives of non-governmental organizations, youth, women involved in peacebuilding. Conflictologists, political scientists, specialists in the field of gender and security issues, well-known public figures were involved as respondents of in-depth interviews.

In total, more than 130 people from the regions of the South Caucasus participated in the survey in one form or another. Conducting interviews and focus groups, as well as compiling six analytical notes on their basis, was carried out by members of the NWMSC.

The focus group participants and individual experts, interview respondents, expressed their opinions and gave their expert assessment based on the questions presented below, which were agreed in advance between the members of the NWMSC:

1. The most important concerns and fears related to the situation around the conflict;
2. What are the negative and positive trends in conflict resolution on your side and the opposite side of the conflict?
3. Geopolitical aspects of influence on the settlement of conflicts in the South Caucasus: USA, France, OSCE, EU, CE; the impact of war and political tension in the Black Sea region: Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and the South Caucasus;
4. What question would you like to receive an answer from representatives of the opposite side of the conflict?
5. What question and answer of the representatives of the parties to the conflict could contribute to the settlement of the conflict?

**In response to the requests of individual respondents not to identify their personalities in the summary document, it was decided to apply this approach to all respondents.**

## MAIN PROVISIONS AND FINDINGS

### View from Georgia

The material presents data from focus groups and in-depth interviews with respondents. One of the respondents is a peace journalist, winner of an EU award for covering various aspects of conflict and post-conflict situations, including the problems of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The journalist focuses on combating disinformation as a breeding ground for conflict. It is generally recognized that disinformation is an increasingly serious problem in the light of ongoing events, not only in Georgia, viewed through the prism of peace building.

People's fears have intensified after the start of the war in Ukraine, as “information” was intensively disseminated from various sources that Georgia could take advantage of the situation and launch military operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to reintegrate these territories. Therefore, the interview quite rightly emphasizes the need to equip both ordinary citizens and activists working to build peace, with the knowledge and skills enabling them to identify the authenticity of information.

The interview touched upon another topical issue – a study of the situation of women living in villages located near the administrative boundary lines (ABL) in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone formed after 2008. According to observations, there is an acute problem of human security and there is a full array of fears that are characteristic of this problem, supplemented by illegal detentions and abductions of Georgian citizens. Several hundred women were illegally detained by Russian border guards for crossing the ABL.

Respondents touch upon a very important, but at the same time, in many respects sensitive topic of communication between Georgians and Ossetians. The conditions under which the Ossetian side agrees to communication and dialogue are not new in principle and are well known. The approach - not to touch upon topics that initially hinder the beginning and development of a dialogue between the parties to the conflict, has in principle justified itself, having withstood the test of time. Accordingly, this approach will continue, as no alternative approach is envisaged at this stage. The interview details the reasons why such an approach can be considered uncontested at this stage.

The issue of relations between journalists on both sides of the conflict deserves attention. A positive trend in the past has been the opportunity for Georgian and Ossetian journalists from both sides to meet each other during meetings in Ergneti in the format of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) within the framework of the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). There they could exchange information and ask questions to the meeting participants and, most importantly, get reliable information. Unfortunately, for several years now they have been deprived of this opportunity - now journalists can only communicate with representatives of "their" side, but not with each other. Much depends on the political will of the authorities and international facilitators to resume this important format for restoring trust. Civil society activists and journalists continue to raise this issue.

As for the positive and negative points on the opposite side, here the respondent sees certain fears and unwillingness in the process of dialogue to talk about those issues that can be considered as “provocative”. According to the respondent, the Georgian participants of the

meetings try not to use irritating vocabulary so as not to create difficulties for colleagues from the opposite side.

Concluding the summary of this part of the material, it's worthwhile to quote the respondent: "It seems to me that both sides of the conflict should put aside the issue of status [of the secessionist regions]. If this issue is on the agenda all the time, this conflict will never end, and we will grind water in a mortar for years to come".

Another respondent focused on approaches to conflict resolution, which consists in metacognitive conflict management, when problems are solved together and "everyone needs to unite efforts", moving away from cognitive distortions. In his interview, it is noted that the main fear that has justification is the fear of war felt by all participants in the conflict, and it is justified, since there are certain forces that continue to provoke a resumption of tension. In the context of conflict transformations, attention is focused on the presence of the so-called. "reductionist thinking" designed to simplify complex conflict-related issues. Interesting, although probably controversial, is the concept of the respondent about the presence of secessionists and unionists in the Abkhazian society, and separatists and irredentists among secessionists.

Respondents and members of the focus group expressed their concern that at present there is no due attention to the topic of conflicts, and that at this stage the number of projects to establish a dialogue, conflict resolution strategies have decreased, and the activity of civil society in this direction has somewhat decreased.

The focus group participants gave a basically realistic assessment of the Government's strategy of "engagement through cooperation". It is generally agreed by all parties that its component of providing free and qualified medical care to residents on the other side of the dividing lines is having a beneficial effect, although it has not yet led to any tangible results that the initiators may have expected.

The same can be said about the program of the Government of Georgia "Step into the Future" with economic and educational components, which, although they are working, are not yet on such a scale as to speak of any tangible results. The responses of the respondents assessed both positive and problematic aspects of this program, and this can be considered a positive development, indicating that the respondents are realistic about the situation and consider it necessary to actively involve Abkhazians and Ossetians in the discussion of how to make this strategy more effective.

The focus group participants' approach the assessment of negative and positive trends in conflict resolution from the point of view of different interpretations of the approaches of the parties to the conflict, which is quite justified, and this was confirmed by summarizing materials from Abkhazia.

The most serious concerns in the region are related to the possibility of renewal of armed conflict. These fears exist in all regions of the South Caucasus, although they have different backgrounds, and different countries can be a source of fear for them. Respondents note that the war in Ukraine has renewed a military trauma that has not been fully healed either among the Georgian population or in the breakaway regions, where the actualization of the war-related trauma often takes place. These factors hinder the transformation of the conflict.

Regarding geopolitical aspects, all respondents noted that recent events in the region, in particular the large-scale war of Russia against Ukraine, have caused changes in the attitudes of leading regional and international players towards conflicts in the South Caucasus. Tensions between Baku and Yerevan continue to affect Georgia as well. The 3 + 3 format proposed by Turkey in 2021 (Turkey, Russia, Iran and three South Caucasian states) does not suit Georgia, since it includes Russia and does not include European countries. With respect to the war in Ukraine, Georgia is looking for a format that will allow the government to "save face" by not fully joining the international sanctions against the Russian Federation. Respondents were divided in their opinions when assessing such a policy of the Georgian authorities. Some assess it as pragmatic, others see it as a manifestation of the weakness of the state. The respondents also discussed the role of Georgia in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. "I would like to see Georgia as a mediator in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But in this case, mediators should be not only representatives of the current government, but also representatives of different strata of society. The help and support of our Western friends is very important, but we must decide for ourselves what we want and how we can achieve it", says one of the respondents. All respondents believe that the European Union should strengthen its role in the South Caucasus.

The recommendations provided by the respondents are generally meaningful. For example, returning to the agenda of reconciliation programs, and taking into account the positions and aspirations of the Abkhazians and Ossetians, when developing plans and strategies for reconciliation and restoration of trust, including the practice of direct contacts with them. The recommendation to involve youth in peacekeeping work deserves the most serious consideration, that the younger generation stands for the peaceful resolution of the conflict, and does not perceive their peers on the other side of the conflict as enemies. They are free from prejudices, more characteristic of the older generation. In this regard, respondents emphasized the need for a complex of specific youth projects for the parties to the conflict. There is a recommendation to search for new donors for the implementation of new programs and initiatives of civil society peace activists. Below, we will see that many of the considerations and recommendations from Georgia have something in common with those expressed by representatives of other regions.

### **View from South Ossetia**

In the answers and opinions of Ossetian respondents represented by journalists, civic activists and political scientists, the "red line" is the continuing awareness that the danger to South Ossetia comes from Georgia. Judging by the comments and responses, it is clear that the trauma after the 2008 armed conflict, as a fact of collective perception, still evokes strong emotions. Perhaps that is why, during interviews, respondents often focused on the terminology in the questions. For example, one of the respondents said that "this is not a conflict, but a war of Georgia against South Ossetia". Accordingly, this topic continues to play a role in domestic politics and public life. Although, summarizing and analyzing the answers of the respondents, it can be assumed that at this stage it is still not necessary to talk about the institutionalization of post-war traumatic memory.

In common with assessments from other regions is the linking of conflicts in the region and their resolution with the armed conflicts in Ukraine and Karabakh, as well as with the general geopolitical situation. Today, the war in Ukraine, according to respondents, is an



unconditional source of anxiety and tension in the South Caucasus. Fears and concerns are more connected not so much with the relationship between South Ossetia and Georgia, but with the general geopolitical situation, with what is happening in Ukraine. All respondents view the situation in South Ossetia in close connection with the events in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh. Some note with concern that “We practically do not see those who are ready to provide assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh”, and that assistance is largely declarative. Apparently, they are projecting the situation in Karabakh onto their region.

Despite repeated statements by the Georgian authorities that notwithstanding the events in Ukraine, there are no prerequisites for Tbilisi to try to resolve the issue of reintegration of South Ossetia by force, fears and concerns still exist in Ossetian society, and this was reflected in the answers of the respondents. They believe that Georgia does not leave attempts of revenge (with the support of NATO). Specifically, here the fears are connected with the fact that Tbilisi will not be tempted against the background of general uncertainty, to resolve the issue again by military means. As an example, the respondent recalls that something similar happened in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. One of the respondents suggested that constant awareness of the danger posed by Georgia is already a syndrome in society, and it does not provide an opportunity to demand change and development. Respondents' opinions: “We have always been on the razor's edge for the last 30 years, and nothing has changed”, “Regarding South Ossetia, international law is frozen forever, and we have nothing to hope for”.

For the Ossetian respondents, the decision of the Georgian authorities, as they put it, to remove the name South Ossetia from the map of Georgia was especially painful. Despite the fact that the Ossetian respondents call the conduct of the negotiation process (apparently, they mean the IPRM mechanism and the negotiations in Geneva), their main goals are still focused on seeking Georgia's recognition of South Ossetia as an independent state, which, in their opinion, will put an end to long-term conflict and revive mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation in the region.

In the answers of the respondents underlined the “red lines”, which the Ossetian side will under no circumstances cross over, and what is connected precisely with the issue of recognition as an independent state by Georgia.

The most difficult thing for the respondents was to answer what questions they would ask the Georgian side. We can say that this is an expected reaction. And if we take into account the references of individual respondents to the origins of the conflict, as was the case in materials from other regions, then we can state the importance of this issue, which deserves separate consideration. What is common in the respondents' answers is the absence, in their opinion, of progress in relations with Georgia and Georgians. However, their participation in various joint projects with Georgians shows that the channels for dialogue are not completely closed.

It is noteworthy that the Ossetian respondents disagreed about the positive trends in Georgian-Ossetian relations in the context of the conflict settlement. A very interesting find came to light - an emphasis on the youth of Georgia. It is with the Georgian youth, who, in their opinion, have different views on the settlement from the older generation, that some respondents associate the issue of settlement in the future. Interestingly, this to some extent echoes the position of the young participants in the Georgian focus group.

## **View from Abkhazia**

The focus group and interviews conducted in Abkhazia absorbed the views of the participants, which are very interesting from the point of view of conflictology and peacebuilding, in the short and medium term. The most important concerns and fears are related to the resumption of hostilities from Georgia in the conflict zone. These fears escalated after the start of the military conflict in Ukraine. It should be noted that the resumption of hostilities is associated with fears of further isolation of the country and at the same time indicate that this topic is sometimes used for domestic political purposes, to manipulate the public, suppress the political activity of the opposition, and so on.

One of the respondents from the NGO sector believes that the situation is beyond the control of either the authorities of Abkhazia or the authorities of Georgia. That both countries indirectly found themselves in the sphere of interests of major international powers. She draws a parallel with Nagorno-Karabakh, points to some similarities between the conflicts in the Caucasus, and says that what is happening in Nagorno-Karabakh has shown that peace in the Caucasus is very fragile.

Of interest is the evolution of the views of the Abkhaz establishment regarding ways to resolve the conflict and the vision of the future of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. It's sage to say that the opinions of the respondents to some extent made it possible to get an idea about this. One of the respondents believes that Georgia "has been ill with nationalism" and points to the existence of peaceful ways to resolve the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia - "if you tell the people the truth, and not broadcast an invented story".

Judging by the participants' answers to questions, there are still serious differences between Georgians and Abkhazians on a number of issues. Here we can trace, perhaps, a behavioral example inherent in all conflicts - victory in an armed conflict as a determinant of further behavioral patterns, expressed in the vision of the problem through the eyes of the winner. "There is the real politics of Georgia and the politics of Abkhazia - with bright distinctive features", says one of the participants.

When asked about the positive and negative trends in the conflict resolution on both sides, the respondents note the importance of the negotiation process and raising awareness. Some respondents believe that, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, interest in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has declined, and the role of Russia as a mediator has weakened. The positive aspects include the experience of joint operation of the Enguri hydroelectric power station, and among the negative ones, the non-signing of a peace treaty by Georgia and the existence of a law on occupied territories in Georgia were more often mentioned. Abkhaz respondents emphasize that a positive solution to these issues would contribute to the resolution of the conflict, noting that the reason for the tension in relations is this position of Georgia. It is interesting that the focus group participants seemed to draw parallels between Ukraine and Georgia, in their desire to create a unitary state, despite living in countries of many nationalities.

The answers of the respondents show that in addition to the low level of education, medical care and other social problems, the Abkhazian public is still acutely aware of the problem of international isolation, and accordingly they put the issues of de-isolation on the agenda as one of the tools for transforming the conflict. However, at the same time, in Abkhazia,

as before, they are distrustful of any initiatives coming from Georgia on this problem. The category of such issues includes the issuance of neutral passports by the government of Georgia to Abkhazians, which is not widely used in Abkhazia, as it is perceived there as a political step. From the answers of the respondents, it turns out, that in the Abkhazian society the attitude towards the status-neutral passports offered by the Georgian government differs from the attitude that the Georgian side has towards this. The topic of status-neutral passports has lost its relevance after the citizens of Abkhazia were granted Russian international passports. Accordingly, it is not surprising that all respondents reacted negatively to the decision of the European Union not to recognize these passports, thus limiting the travel of Abkhazians around the world.

At the same time, it is also noteworthy that the Abkhaz participants in the survey consider it “important not to cut communication channels and preserve all platforms for dialogue [with Georgians]”. Moreover, some survey participants suggest expanding these channels, considering them an important tool. The approach is based on the understanding that the parties to the conflict are geographically neighbors and must look for ways to resolve the conflict. This is an important observation. Some survey participants, noting the need to expand the negotiation process, suggested involving Turkey or an organization uniting the peoples of the Caucasus in it as mediators. Moreover, some respondents consider it necessary and possible to have a direct dialogue between Georgia and Abkhazia. One of the survey participants says that "we need a platform for direct negotiations, where we can find common ground." In many ways, this (irrelevance) is explained, judging by the respondents' assessments, by the ineffectiveness of the existing dialogue platform, such as the Geneva International Discussions. It should be noted here that the positions of the respondents, despite the fact that they are representatives from different spheres (in this case, a war veteran and an NGO representative, a parliamentarian), practically do not differ. It is possible that when studying the issue, it makes sense to think about how to make donors interested in supporting of initiatives related to the creation of new negotiation platforms and the expansion of the list of mediators, as well as stimulating direct negotiations related to prospects of cooperation out of politics. Moreover, a positive example is known - cooperation and interaction in the electricity power industry. The International Center for Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN), as an NGO, made a significant contribution to stimulate this connectivity and brought very concrete results.

An encouraging sign is that survey participants noted the important role of economic communication channels, in particular, the transit of goods. At the same time, economic relations are directly linked to long-term peace, without which the respondents consider it impossible to attract large investors to the region.

“Economic communication channels also play an important role. I have previously advocated the opening of the transit of goods across the Abkhazian-Georgian border; today the authorities of Abkhazia are demonstrating a positive attitude on this issue. In society, this is treated differently, and primarily because of the limited information..”- notes the member of the parliament of Abkhazia. The Abkhazian economist believes that “the railway could be a good project; we need to talk about it. We have not ceased to be neighbors, and there are always issues on which we need to communicate”. However, according to all respondents, the level of distrust between the parties and the political component hinders the development of economic cooperation.

Interesting is the opinion of one participant that “we need a platform for direct negotiations, where we can talk more frankly with each other and find common ground”, as well as the idea that “society should have more information about ongoing processes”, and that “behind-the-scenes” causes negative moods in society. On the other hand, as respondents noted, the conflict itself and its resolution are less and less relevant for Abkhazian society at large, and they are less and less thinking about the need to establish ties with Georgia. The reasons for such a somewhat divided position, apparently, can be explained by the fact that a significant part of the Abkhazian society believes that after the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia in 2008, the conflict is over. Respondents believe that Georgians and Abkhazians have different ideas about the history of Georgian-Abkhazian relations, as well as the origins of the conflict, and suggest starting a conversation on this topic, despite the severity of the process. They note that “now in Georgia there is no such political figure, with such colossal political weight, to start this conversation”. Respondents consider Georgia's mistake that “they belittled the role of their intelligentsia, and its voice is practically not heard”.

It follows from the respondents' answers that the search for ways to overcome distrust is still relevant and initiatives free from political burden. The development of relations between people that help reduce the level of distrust, do not meet with much opposition in the Abkhazian establishment. “No one has the right to limit the emergence of new platforms for dialogue, both bilateral and trilateral, the question is how open the conversation will be and for what purpose it is being conducted. This is a normal process when people talk after a conflict”, says one of the respondents. Among the respondents, there is an awareness that it takes time to gradually and patiently move towards trust, which, in their opinion, “everyone in the Caucasus needs”.

### **View from Azerbaijan**

Of the respondents' answers regarding various aspects of the Karabakh conflict, relations with Armenia, and the geopolitical situation, the gradation of fears in terms of the strength of the negative impact on the peace process is of interest. In the first place for the Azerbaijani respondents is the unwillingness of the Armenian establishment to come to terms with the results of the latest war in Karabakh, and to recognize its results. There are serious concerns about the possible prevalence of revanchist sentiments in Armenia, which could interfere with a peaceful settlement and cause a re-escalation of the conflict, as soon as proper conditions are created. The lack of trust in the other side is a very serious factor hindering peace.

After the Karabakh war, supporters of a forceful solution reproached the peacebuilders that over 30 years of peacekeeping activities, Azerbaijani peace activists could not come with their Armenian colleagues to a single agreed model for resolving the conflict. Supporters of a peaceful solution are convinced that it is possible to return the lands by military means, but this will not mean a final solution to the conflict. Therefore, the peacebuilders of Azerbaijan are confident in the need to continue peace initiatives in the form of a comprehensive process.

However, there are still groups of people in Armenian society who have risen to the pinnacle of power and acquired enormous wealth through conflict. They are not ready to come to terms with the results of the last war. Their platform is the separation and independence of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. No one in the world recognizes this independence, because it would mean a total revision of the entire world order that took shape after the Second World War. Represented in parliament as the opposition, it hopes for a Russian military victory in Ukraine, after which Russia will return to the South Caucasus as a host. Along with this, other groups of political activists are striving for power, using the already beaten card of the “eternal” Armenian-Turkic enmity. The respondents noted that the possibility of expanding the territory of Armenia to the east of Turkey is being actively discussed in the Armenian blogosphere. Professor of the American University Arman Grigoryan sadly says: “Have the patriots of Armenia thought about what 2 million Armenians can do with 25 million Turks and Kurds”. Based on the experience of Karabakh, will they try to deport local residents? The two warring political groups are united by the fact that they believe that Armenia should play for time, not fulfill its obligations, and leave the door ajar for revenge.

The respondents believe that if Armenia is a democratic country, then the resolution of the Karabakh conflict should also be democratic and fair. Today, Armenia accuses Azerbaijan of capturing the heights on the territory of Armenia. But there has been no official repentance for the capture of 30 years ago 7 regions of Azerbaijan around Nagorno-Karabakh and the exodus of 700 thousand internally displaced persons and the fate of more than 4,000 missing Azerbaijani citizens. Conflictologists' proposals to consider the liberation of the 7 occupied areas around NK and the return of its population to their homes separately from the negotiation process, namely within the framework of humanistic values and humanitarian law, ran into the opponents' argument that these lands are the subject of political bargaining in status negotiations Nagorno-Karabakh.

According to the respondents, the government of Nikol Pashinyan is forced to retreat under the pressure of real risks of the political process shifting to the rails of a violent confrontation with supporters of prolonging the conflict, supported by the Russian Federation and France. The RMK of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation stubbornly prevents wide contacts between the Azerbaijani and Armenian populations of Karabakh, and speculates on the confrontation between them. Ruben Vardanyan's business trip to Karabakh was a clear manifestation of Russia's imperial approach. Given the refusal of the Azerbaijani authorities to accept the Kremlin's envoy, considering him a mouthpiece for defending the interests of Moscow, and not the Armenians of Karabakh, analysts predicted that the Russian Federation could escalate and organize a bloody provocation with the death of civilians. The demonstration of activists on the Lachin road was a measure to prevent precisely one of the predicted provocations that are not rare on the line of contact in Karabakh and the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

Suffice it to recall the provocation of September 12-14, which began with a little-publicized fact of night-time rocket fire on the Azerbaijani modular barracks on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia from the territory of Armenia and resulted in a major escalation. As a result of the shelling, 79 soldiers sleeping in modular barracks were killed in the first hours, but this fact was not widely publicized. This allows us to conclude that was a pre-planned provocation by a third force to prevent productive peace negotiations.

President Ilham Aliyev, not receiving real consent to the recognition of mutual recognition of territorial integrity, ignores a peace potential, the translator of which civil society can become. He prefers official diplomacy and militant rhetoric, proceeds to use force, demonstrating that non-recognition of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan leads in this way to the non-recognition of the sovereignty of Armenia.

The presence on the territory of Azerbaijan of the armed forces of the "Artsakh Defense Army" financed from the Armenian budget, contrary to the obligations undertaken by Armenia and Russia under the Trilateral Statement, does not pose a real military danger to the country. However, even an insignificant military group is a potential threat to the Azerbaijani population, which is going to return to their lands after clearing the territories of thousands and thousands of mines, building infrastructure and ensuring the security of both the Azerbaijani and Armenian populations of Karabakh.

The detention of Armenian servicemen detained in the country after the announcement of the Tripartite Statement has a negative impact on public opinion of Armenia. The appeal to the President of Azerbaijan for their release, made by the late Georgy Vanyan and journalist Yuri Manvelyan, was publicly supported by well-known public figures of Azerbaijan, led to the release of 14 prisoners of war within 2 weeks, but, alas, had no effect on accelerating the release of all prisoners of war. After the clashes on September 12-14, another 20 Armenian soldiers were captured.

Thus, the most important fears that the respondents had were the inability to sign a peace agreement even in the form of a framework document. This will lead to the maintenance of the current status quo with sporadic escalations and permanent violence. Another potential option is the possibility of a large-scale war that could destabilize the region. Regarding question No. 2, according to the respondents, the destructive power of most of the Armenian opposition is obvious: ignoring the constructive proposals of Levon Ter-Petrosyan's party. Efforts to topple the Pashinyan government can cause a new surge of large-scale hostilities with huge human losses and with unpredictable consequences.

The positive aspects of the political line of the Azerbaijani authorities, according to the respondents, include their determination to speed up the peace process. A positive factor is the trust expressed twice by voters of Armenia to Nikol Pashinyan – follower of a moderate line. The people do not want war, realizing that other political forces will inevitably plunge Armenia into the maelstrom of a new bloody war. I am glad that voices calling for real reconciliation with their neighbors have begun to sound louder in Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Armenia, these are not only civil activists, but also members of Parliament.

Regarding question No. 3, according to respondents, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, interest in the South Caucasus region from various actors increased, but the level of cooperation between them decreased, which increases the risk that the region, to a greater extent than before, may become the scene of a clash between various geopolitical actors. For example, the role of the East-West corridor has increased significantly in the light of recent sanctions imposed by the EU and the US against Russia, which created an urgent need to find alternative routes, one of which goes from China - Central Asia - the South Caucasus - the EU. But there are geopolitical opponents to the creation of these routes, because conflicts in the region can be used to destabilize the situation. The absence of a peace agreement; the unwillingness of Armenia to provide access to Nakhichevan through

the Zangezur region on the one hand, and the desire for unhindered use of the Lachin corridor on the other, creates the prerequisites for a potential escalation that will be used by geopolitical forces (Iran and Russia) that are not interested in increasing the logistical potential of the region.

At the same time, actors such as the EU or the US are interested in stability in the region. Therefore, they are actively promoting the idea of signing a peace treaty between the parties and their presence has increased in the negotiation track. The most important beneficiary during the years of the conflict was Russia. Respondents believe that the recent events related to the war in Ukraine make Russia's position vulnerable, since the very fact that peacekeepers of the country that unleashed the largest war in Europe since World War II are in the conflict zone is nonsense.

Turkey has formalized a military-political alliance with Azerbaijan and, accordingly, acquired the opportunity to legally interfere in the resolution of issues of regional importance. The adoption of anti-Azerbaijani resolutions by the French Senate only further aggravated the situation in the region.

The US does not dispute the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and its ownership of the entire Karabakh region. Despite the visit of American lobbyists to Armenia, the main political heavyweights (decision-makers) of America, who have become more active lately, are in favor of the soonest signing of a peace treaty. Iran tried to secure its right to vote in solving regional problems, but met with widespread rebuff, primarily from the West. Relations with Azerbaijan also deteriorated due to a cycle of provocations and in the light of internal unrest.

Georgia stands for the implementation of international laws, because it has received huge damage due to the violation of these same laws. Through the mouths of its leaders, it offers to become a platform for negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Respondents say that China is quietly watching current events, confident that after the resolving disputable issues in the region, it will become one of the main beneficiaries as the carrier of its goods to world markets along the re-opened and newly created transit routes.

Question from respondents to the Armenian participants of the project: What are the main reasons why the other side opposes the idea of an unhindered route connecting the western territories of Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan? One gets the impression of an artificial escalation by interested circles around this topic. If the creation of the route will not create any threats to the territorial integrity of Armenia, since not a single Azerbaijani military will be stationed there, and the Russian Federal Customs Service with the corresponding Armenian services will provide control over the route. Then why create artificial obstacles and undermine the already weakened trust in each other? What fears contributed to such a strong rejection of the route through Zangezur/Syunik?

As expected, the Azerbaijani side has its own vision of many aspects of the Karabakh conflict and bilateral relations, which is different from the Armenian side. From the Azerbaijani documents, we can conclude that they are very closely watching the dynamics of socio-political processes in Armenia. This conclusion unequivocally testifies to the

positions of the parties that a common problem for Azerbaijan and Armenia can be considered the lack of involvement of civil society structures in the process of changing the political and psychological climate in the two neighboring countries.

### **View from Armenia**

The Armenian document analyzed the negative and positive trends in conflict resolution from the Armenian point of view, which noted "the predominance of negative tendencies over positive ones." The fact that the situation with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains extremely complex and unpredictable is once again stated, which is obvious to all parties. This, as emphasized by the respondents, is largely due to the failure to fully implement the provisions of the tripartite ceasefire statement of 09.11.2020.

According to respondents, the negotiation process has reached an impasse; tensions between the parties are increasing their rhetoric is tightening, and cases of hostile actions by Azerbaijan are already systematic. Actions on the part of Azerbaijan (including in the Lachin corridor) are unequivocally perceived by Armenian respondents as hostile. They believe that further escalation is fraught with serious consequences not only for the parties to the conflict and the South Caucasus region as a whole, but in the context of larger geopolitical processes. The aggravation of the situation and uncertainty are reasonably linked not only to the second Karabakh war, but also to tectonic shifts in world security architecture after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine. The importance of involving new actors in the process as mediators and the emergence of new negotiation formats are also emphasized.

As for the fears related to the situation around the conflict, judging by the comments of the respondents, the serious fears of Armenian society are associated with the risk of re-escalation of the conflict and the resumption of large-scale hostilities. Judging by the facts of ceasefire violations, the penetration of Azerbaijani military units into a number of territories of sovereign Armenia, along with belligerent statements of the Azerbaijani side that won the second Karabakh war, such a possibility is not ruled out. It is difficult to judge how likely such a scenario is, but the risks of such a development of events should not be neglected.

An important component of fears for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh and the border regions of Armenia are issues not only of physical, but also of human security. Due to the proximity of the dividing lines, residents of the border zone are unable to carry out agricultural work; children and teachers in some cases cannot easily and safely reach schools, and those in need of medical care cannot reach hospitals and clinics. The problems noted here are in many ways similar to those in other regions.

Respondents also paid attention to the state of civil peacebuilding. In this regard, the opinion of a civil activist deserves interest, who expressed the fears present in civil society that due to the current situation, when the declared course for peace comes into conflict with the real state of affairs, civil peacekeeping is also under attack, as it arises "a tangible threat of burning out the potential of civil activists, their psychological breakdown, and as a result, the weakening of this sector and its influence on the situation". I must say that such fear, to varying degrees, is also present among peace activists in other countries.



According to the respondents, in order to be qualified to judge negative and / or positive trends in conflict resolution, one must have at least a sufficient amount of reliable information regarding the nuances of the settlement process itself, which, of course, is not in the public domain. In view of this, and also taking into account the uncertainties in the confrontation between Russia and the West, the war in Ukraine and other regional and global events, it is extremely difficult to make serious forecasts about the future developments regarding the regional conflict.

For the respondents, the predominance of negative tendencies over positive ones in the conflict settlement, is obvious. Among the positive trends, one can note, perhaps, greater attention to the process on the part of international organizations and Western powers, in particular the United States, France and the European Union. The emergence of new negotiation formats, as well as some activation of the donor community with greater focus on specific local needs, and support to the initiatives in the field of civil peace dialogue, sets the task “to prepare societies for peace”, as the official language spells out.

Regarding the most dangerous negative trends, one should point out the growing intransigence of positions, the desire to achieve desired goals through dictate and permanent actions from a position of strength, demonstrated with increasing intensity by Azerbaijan. The unacceptable tone of speech and the aggressive rhetoric of the political leadership of Azerbaijan, to a lesser extent, but still used by some forces in Armenia, do not contribute in any way to progress in the settlement of the conflict.

In the conditions of such mutual rejection, and the absence of even a hint of trust between the parties, it is difficult to count on serious progress in resolving the conflict and achieving peace. The main reason why it will not happen is that peace from a position of force (Enforced Peace) cannot be lasting and it will be unable to ensure stability and security in the region.

Another common problem with other regions, which was highlighted during the interviews in Armenia, is the aggressive rhetoric of individual actors and the desire to achieve their goals, without taking into account or insufficiently taking into account the interests and aspirations of the other side. Armenian respondents are unanimous about the rejection of the rhetoric of the Azerbaijani officialdom, which, in their opinion, demonstrates intransigence and does not contribute to progress in the settlement of the conflict. Armenian respondents believe that this undermines trust, and serious progress towards peace becomes problematic.

As to the geopolitical aspect of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the opinions of respondents are largely in line with those of respondents from other regions on such issues as the geopolitical impact of the conflict in Ukraine on the situation in the strategically important South Caucasus region. Both the geo-economic and geopolitical interests of the major Powers are emphasized.

The main factors in this area that respondents believe have/may impact the development of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict are indicated below:

- The development and results of the war in Ukraine are the main intrigue of international life and will have a decisive influence on the formation of new principles and architecture of security systems and approaches to conflict resolution, including in Nagorno-Karabakh.

- Russia, which is currently in a rather difficult situation, still remains the only guarantor of maintaining the status quo, established as a result of the second Karabakh war and the physical security of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Russian contingent of peacekeeping troops on the dividing lines causes a number of well-deserved and undeserved criticisms, but no other country is ready to send its peacekeepers to this region.
- Activation of mediation efforts of the European Union and especially the US in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, most likely due to the desire to finally oust Russia from the South Caucasus region, may have a positive impact on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the participants have doubts, since it is not clear what kind of reaction from Russia can be expected in response to the greater involvement of new actors in this process.
- Turkey, not without success, is trying to raise its status from the rank of regional player to the rank of world player, is proactive in all key world processes, which, given its cultural, ethnic and military-political proximity to Azerbaijan, is difficult to interpret other than explicit support for Baku's position, which cannot but worry Armenia. On the other hand, the pace of the sluggish process of normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations leaves much to be desired and also does not justify the hopes of Armenia.
- Iran, another powerful neighbor of Armenia and Azerbaijan, is going through difficult times. The situation here is very complicated: the ambiguity with the nuclear deal, internal instability and some tension that has arisen in relations with Azerbaijan in connection with the latter's intention to open the so-called "Zangezur corridor". Iran has allied ties with Russia and it is condemned by the West. These factors make Iran's position on the Karabakh conflict an important factor for Armenia, which has friendly relations with Iran, significant economic ties and an important state border.

Questions of respondents to the opposing side are as follows:

- How do you see your goals? What do you want in principle - what is your maximum plan, what is your minimum plan?
- What is your vision for the future of Nagorno-Karabakh?
- How do you see the provision of Human Rights in Nagorno-Karabakh? Who or what will be the guarantee/guarantor of their observance?
- Why don't you go for unblocking all transport communications, and focus solely on providing the so-called "Zangezur corridor" by you? What is its paramount importance, how will it function?
- How ready are you for a peaceful solution to the conflict - is there any political will, motivation, and resources for that?

When asked what could contribute to the settlement of the conflict, the respondents specifically noted that the situation of the global collapse of the world order, when an atmosphere of permissiveness reigns and the temptation to resolve issues by force is great, does not in any way contribute to the settlement of one single Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There is no practical way to influence this global situation, to change it in the direction of softer, balanced decisions. However, it is possible and necessary to try as much as possible to resist the replication of such approaches in relations between the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The list of measures proposed by the respondents is as follows:

- Prevent a new military escalation, maintain the ceasefire;
- Withdraw the armed formations of Azerbaijan from the sovereign territory of Armenia to their initial positions;
- Categorically refrain from any hostile actions against the civilian population, exclude uncontrolled, spontaneous incidents, including with the use of weapons;
- Show restraint, do not succumb to provocations, no matter who they come from;
- Contribute to the achievement of not a unilateral, imposed, but an inclusive peace;
- Continue the negotiation process, including within the OSCE Minsk Group and other formats, including direct dialogue between Yerevan and Baku, and Baku and Stepanakert;
- Do not violate the agreements already reached;
- Strictly refrain from aggressive rhetoric, militant statements in public space;
- Immediately release all prisoners of war and other detainees;
- More actively use the potential and opportunities of people's diplomacy, involving in the process, including those directly affected by the conflict;
- Prepare nations for peace, involve experts and respected people in societies in open discussions on issues of peace and development.

The list of wishes from the Armenian side shows that the respondents are willing to grope for threads that would lead to a real detente from the existing tension in order to prevent a new conflict. From the opinions of the respondents, it follows that in the short and medium term, the most important action for the Armenian side is to prevent under any circumstances a new wave of military escalation, and to strictly observe the ceasefire. The Armenian participants noted “some positive trends” in the field of civil “peace dialogue” and “the activation of the donor community” to support civil peace initiatives.

### **View from Nagorno-Karabakh**

The analysis of the opinions of focus group participants represents a spectrum of fears and concerns expressed during interviews with three representatives of different segments of the population. The main focus of the respondents is on the threat to security, since after the war of 2020 the security zone practically disappeared. All communications, strategic heights are under the control of Azerbaijan, and the contact line of the fighting sides has doubled. As a result, a serious threat arose in the life support system of the region. The activity of the limited number of Russian peacekeeping contingent in the conflict with an unclear mandate, and restricted weaponry is another concern of respondents. The inefficiency of the peacekeeping forces, to which both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides have claims, is also an important finding, from the point of view of the experience of peacekeeping operations. It is possible that this negative experience will be taken into account in the future.

Respondents also noted the lack or insufficiency of support from Armenia, which, in their opinion, is “so obvious that its leaders either avoid discussing this issue or show their disinterest”. Respondents believe that as a result of the second war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the coercive and forced displacement of about a third of the population, a large number of victims and destruction during hostilities exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic problems, such as employment, inflation, rising prices for essential goods with a significant

lower living standards and incomes of the population. All this gave rise to uncertainty about the future, and fears that can be freely attributed to the problems of human security.

Most of the focus group participants said that they do not see positive trends in the settlement of the conflict on both sides. They accuse the Azerbaijani side of violating the ceasefire regime. At the same time, they stressed the importance of having even a fragmented dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan mediated by the European Council and Russia. In their opinion, the Minsk Group should remain the main internationally recognized format in conflict settlement. However, the respondents are unanimous in the fact that the still formally existing Minsk Group has actually lost capacity to fulfill its peace-making function. This discovery could well become a topic for a separate discussion about the reasons for the inefficiency of this mechanism, and about the search for the most optimal formats for the world, reckoning with new geopolitical challenges.

Considering the geopolitical aspect, the respondents single out the interests of the main actors of regional and world politics - the USA, the EU, Russia, Turkey, Iran. Some respondents believe that the big players like United States, Russia and Turkey, will not remain in the role of indifferent observers and will try not only to protect their interests in the conflict zone, but also to use the region as a springboard for promoting more global projects. As an example, they cite Turkey, which, after the second war in Karabakh, managed to achieve the deployment of a Russian-Turkish monitoring center in Agdam. Respondents believe that “Iran is the country closest to them in terms of interests”, which fears the spread of US influence in the region. Respondents believe that the impact of Western sanctions on Russia increases the latter's dependence on Turkey and Azerbaijan, since energy and transport communications pass through the territory of these countries, connecting Russia with partner countries.

The respondents would like to receive answers from the other side to questions regarding the historical roots of the conflict and its interpretation by the parties, how the Azerbaijani side would behave in the place of the Karabakh Armenians, what is the reason for not wanting to go beyond the usual rhetoric, what prevents direct contact with the Karabakh authorities, what are “red lines” that Azerbaijan should not cross in relation to the Armenian population of Karabakh.

What draws attention in the responses of the respondents, is the expressed need to understand the origins of the conflict, and to do this together with the other side, in order to achieve peace. The desire for a direct dialogue with Baku, the eagerness to go beyond the usual confrontational rhetoric, and to make changes in the consciousness, awareness and awareness of the two nations regarding the conflict - all this to some extent echoes the answers and opinions from other regions. This is a noteworthy indicator, which may be used in the future to find mutually acceptable solutions.

The views of the Armenian peace activists from Karabakh mostly focus on the threats to security. In their opinion, after the war of 2020, the security zone for them has practically disappeared, and the Russian peacekeepers deployed there do not provide enough security. Respondents unanimously state that there are no concrete plans or mechanisms for the settlement of the Karabakh conflict, and the immediate task is to at least minimize tension and prevent escalation. This approach can also be seen in many respondents from other regions.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The opinions of the respondents contain many interesting and truly noteworthy considerations. Based on the presented material from different regions of the South Caucasus, where there are both similar and different origins of armed conflicts, one can cautiously conclude that approaches to conflict resolution among societies separated by these conflicts are undergoing a slow evolution. The pace of this evolution largely determines when and how the conflicting parties will come to mutually acceptable solutions.
- The submitted documents (especially Azerbaijan and Armenia) show that in the structures of power and decision-making circles regarding policies toward conflicts in the South Caucasus, there has not yet been an understanding of the importance of the full inclusion of the civil sector in the process of conflict prevention, restoration of confidence and policy development. One can only welcome the fact that certain documents emphasize the need for more active involvement of international donors to support civil society's peacekeeping initiatives in the region.
- Almost all opinions expressed by the respondents emphasize the need and usefulness of building ties through public diplomacy with colleagues on different sides of the conflict in order to create space for dialogue. And this despite deadlocked formal negotiations, holding focus groups and creating policy briefs in conflict-divided communities is paving the way for a greater and better understanding of the concerns of the parties.
- The opinions of the interviewed respondents show that there is an acute deficit of trust, as well as different approaches to confidence building measures, and this, in principle, once again confirms that there have not yet been any fundamental changes in the established positions of the parties and there are no signs that they will occur in the foreseeable future. In addition, the need to introduce the practice of direct dialogue between the parties to the conflict is emphasized to varying degrees in almost all focus groups, and this is a very encouraging indicator.
- Opinions of respondents from different regions of the South Caucasus indicate that participants are concerned about solving many problems related primarily to human security, post-war degradation of resources, civilian reintegration, including ex-combatants, violence against women and children, the consequences of militarization, as well as issues economy, environment and sustainable development. For this, it would be beneficial to invest in the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills in this area.
- The considerations of the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Karabakh sides about the effectiveness of Russian peacekeepers who maintain the state of "neither peace nor war" are interesting, judging by the responses of the respondents. This could become a subject of discussion in a broader context. Peacekeeping operations in the South Caucasus should apparently be viewed on the basis of the changing geopolitical paradigms in and around the region.

- In the submitted materials, a great deal of attention is paid to security issues, including human security. It is quite understandable that the parties have their own approaches and visions regarding the nature and severity of this problem. The respondents emphasized importance of external military support. This is a very important finding, since the history of conflicts in the South Caucasus shows that this very factor gives the parties to the conflict the temptation to resolve the conflict by force.
- Interesting insights are provided on the special role of youth in building dialogue between conflict-torn societies. Although, this consideration did not prevail in the materials. The South Caucasus GPPAC program will continue to work in this direction.
- It should be emphasized that despite the periodic escalation of the conflict, despite the war, the achievement of South Caucasian women peacekeepers, as well as women and men peace journalists, is the preservation of contacts between the war-separated colleagues for many years. Today, it is a unique opportunity to continue and support interethnic dialogue.
- When studying analytical notes and interviews, insufficient attention was revealed to such a very important issue as the meaningful participation of women in existing international and regional formats and mechanisms for conflict resolution and peace building. For example, the “Geneva International Discussions” on the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) in the zone of these two conflicts. Both of these formats demonstrate insufficient effectiveness and efficiency.
- It is impossible not to notice that on some points there is a strong correlation with the positions and opinions of respondents from different regions. For example, the concerns of both the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides about the ignoring by the authorities of these countries of the potential of civil society in various components of peacebuilding.
- Summing-up and analysis of the presented analytical notes suggest that the cooperation and peace dialogue launched within the framework of the NSCWM will help in creating a variety of agendas, new platforms for dialogue. In this context, the materials developed within the framework of the project will contribute to the activation of alternative peace building strategies, including women's diplomacy.