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The Role of the CIS and GUAM in the Implementation of Settlement Measures in Conflict Zones of the South Caucasus and Moldova (1991–2020)*

Abstract

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 revealed a range of geopolitical and security challenges in the post-Soviet space. Ethnic, political, and territorial conflicts intensified in states that had newly gained independence. In particular, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the South Caucasus, together with the Abkhaz and Georgian–Ossetian conflicts, as well as the Transnistrian issue in Moldova, contributed to regional destabilization and increased the need for long-term settlement efforts. In response to these problems, diplomatic and political initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts were implemented through various international and regional organizations. Although regional structures such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) undertook efforts to promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts, the effectiveness of these initiatives produced differing outcomes. This article examines the role of the CIS and GUAM in the settlement of conflicts in the South Caucasus and Moldova between 1991 and 2020. It analyzes the strategies adopted by these organizations, as well as their achievements and structural limitations in addressing conflicts that have become long-standing and “frozen.”

Keywords: South Caucasus, conflict resolution, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Georgian–Ossetian conflict

Güney Kafkasya ve Moldova’daki Çatışma Bölgelerinde Çözüm Tedbirlerinin Hayata Geçirilmesinde BDT ve GUAM’ın Rolü (1991–2020)

Öz

1991 yılında SSCB’nin dağılması, Sovyet sonrası coğrafyada bir dizi jeopolitik ve güvenlik sorununu ortaya çıkarmıştır. Yeni bağımsızlığını kazanan devletlerde etnik, siyasi ve bölgesel nitelikli çatışmalar yoğunlaşmıştır. Özellikle Güney Kafkasya’daki Dağlık Karabağ çatışması ile birlikte Abhaz ve Gürcü–Oset çatışmaları ve Moldova’daki Transdinyester sorunu, bölgesel istikrarsızlığa yol açmış

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ve uzun vadeli çözüm çabalarına duyulan ihtiyacı artırmıştır. Bu sorunlara yanıt olarak, çatışmaların çözümüne yönelik diplomatik ve siyasi girişimler çeşitli uluslararası ve bölgesel örgütler aracılığıyla hayata geçirilmiştir. Bağımsız Devletler Topluluğu (BDT) ve GUAM (Gürcistan, Ukrayna, Azerbaycan ve Moldova) gibi bölgesel yapılar çatışmaların barışçıl yollarla çözümünü teşvik etmeye yönelik çabalar göstermiş olsa da, bu girişimlerin etkinliği farklı sonuçlar doğurmuştur. Bu makale, 1991–2020 yılları arasında Güney Kafkasya ve Moldova'daki çatışmaların çözümünde BDT ve GUAM'ın rolünü incelemektedir. Çalışmada, söz konusu örgütlerin benimsedikleri stratejiler ile uzun süredir devam eden ve "donmuş" nitelik kazanan çatışmaların ele alınmasında ortaya koydukları başarılar ve yapısal sınırlılıklar analiz edilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Güney Kafkasya, çatışma çözümü, Dağlık Karabağ, Abhazya, Gürcü–Oset çatışması

Introduction

Taking into account the characteristics and scale of conflicts in the Caucasus region and, more broadly, within the space of the Commonwealth of Independent States, it is appropriate to examine issues related to international peacekeeping activities in the context of regional security. During the 1990s, the Commonwealth of Independent States emerged as the primary organization seeking to assume responsibility for conducting peacekeeping operations in the territories of several newly independent states. From the mid-1990s onward, however, this role was increasingly supplemented by the activities of GUAM.

The legal foundation for peacekeeping activities within the Commonwealth of Independent States was established through the agreement on groups of military observers and collective military forces for the maintenance of peace, signed by the participating states in March 1992 (Adliya, 2021).

Legal and Institutional Framework of CIS Peacekeeping Activities

The agreement provided for the formation of military observer groups and peacekeeping contingents tasked with separating the parties to a conflict, monitoring the implementation of ceasefire or peace settlement agreements, supervising disarmament arrangements, creating conditions for the peaceful resolution of disputes and conflicts, assisting in ensuring human rights and freedoms, and providing humanitarian assistance, including in cases of environmental accidents or natural disasters. The deployment of such groups was to be carried out by decision of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Adliya, 2021). The document emphasized that, when adopting relevant decisions, the organization was required to take into account the fundamental principles of peacekeeping endorsed by the United Nations. In particular, peacekeeping groups could be formed only if all parties involved in a confrontation submitted a formal request and if agreements on a ceasefire and the cessation of other hostile activities had been reached. These groups were not permitted to participate in military operations, while the states that signed the agreement undertook to strictly observe the principles of peacekeeping, neutrality, and impartiality, and under no

circumstances to involve their servicemen in direct participation in military conflict in the interests of any party.

Despite this normative framework, the peacekeeping potential of the Commonwealth of Independent States remained limited, as the formation of a fully functional multinational peacekeeping force did not take place. The Council of Heads of State adopted a decision to conduct a peacekeeping operation only once, in 1994, in the zone of the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict (Zaiavlenie Soveta glav gosudarstv, 1994; Kreikemeyer, 2021). The statement was addressed to the United Nations Security Council and called for a decision on the conduct of a peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia. It also indicated that, should such a decision not be adopted, the Commonwealth of Independent States was prepared to deploy peacekeeping forces composed of military contingents from the state or states party to the Collective Security Treaty into the conflict zone. After the UN Security Council did not approve the deployment of peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia, the decision of the CIS Council of Heads of State was formalized in June 1994 through the collection of signatures and subsequently approved at the next meeting of the Council in October 1994. Nevertheless, the CIS did not achieve the deployment of a genuinely multinational force, as participation in the formation of these contingents remained limited. In August 2008, the peacekeeping mission officially ended following Tbilisi’s refusal to continue the operation.

Two other peacekeeping missions, planned on the basis of agreements reached in 1992 in the Transnistrian region of Moldova and in the Georgian–Ossetian conflict zone in the Tskhinvali region, were carried out without the participation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In essence, these operations more closely resembled missions conducted by temporary coalitions of states, although in both cases such coalitions were of an atypical nature. In practice, these peacekeeping operations were conducted with the participation of Russian forces alongside military units associated with the parties to the conflict.

In September 1993, another decision within the CIS framework provided for the deployment of Collective Peacekeeping Forces in Tajikistan. However, these forces did not correspond to the classical understanding of peacekeeping. The basic conditions necessary for the formation of collective peacekeeping forces were not met, as at the time of deployment no comprehensive ceasefire agreement had been reached in Tajikistan. The forces were deployed at the request of the country’s authorities without the consent of the United Tajik Opposition. Moreover, the collective forces deployed in Tajikistan did not consistently adhere to the principle of impartiality, which constitutes a fundamental requirement of peacekeeping operations. As a result, their activities extended beyond conventional peacekeeping functions.

Over time, the nature of the CIS Collective Peacekeeping Forces changed. The Armed Forces of Tajikistan were withdrawn from their composition, and the CPF became primarily focused on protecting strategically important facilities. In operational terms, they were mainly involved in supporting border security activities along the frontier with Afghanistan. At the final stage of the conflict, the CIS Collective Peacekeeping Forces played an important role in facilitating the implementation of the military provisions of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan, signed in Moscow in 1997 (ReliefWeb, 1997). In order to circulate the General Agreement as an official United Nations document, a letter from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, addressed to the UN Secretary-General, stated that the President of Tajikistan and the leader of the United Tajik Opposition had agreed to request the Secretary-General of the United Nations to provide assistance and cooperation in the comprehensive implementation of the General Agreement (ReliefWeb, 1997). The Republic of Azerbaijan did not initially have high expectations of the Commonwealth of Independent States in terms of its potential contribution to conflict settlement. As is well known, on May 15, 1992, the Collective Security Treaty of the CIS countries was signed in Tashkent. However, the Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan did not ratify the founding documents of the CIS, and representatives of Azerbaijan participated in that meeting only as observers (Shakirzade, 2007). In 1993, following the election of Heydar Aliyev as Chairman of the Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the country joined the CIS on September 24. For Azerbaijan, accession to the CIS was viewed as a step toward addressing a range of pressing challenges, including managing political and social difficulties during the transition period, preserving territorial integrity, preventing acute internal conflicts, and creating favorable conditions for democratic reforms. It was also expected to reduce the risk of new conflicts stemming from unresolved territorial issues among former Soviet republics, facilitate coordinated economic reforms during the transition to a market economy, and contribute to the gradual mitigation of the Karabakh crisis through negotiated approaches. In addition, Azerbaijan sought to preserve and strengthen traditional relations with the peoples of the former Soviet republics, including the Turkic states, to reaffirm its openness to cooperation on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, and to expand political and economic ties with the broader international community.

Subsequently, expectations regarding collective assistance from the CIS in conflict settlement were not fully realized. Although the final declaration adopted at the Moscow meeting in April 1994 proclaimed principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of the borders of CIS member states, these principles were not consistently

implemented in practice (Vlasov, n.d.). As a result, the Republic of Azerbaijan refused to extend the validity of the CIS Treaty on Collective Security in 1999 and subsequently left the organization (Kulagin, 2007). In subsequent years, the Republic of Azerbaijan adopted a maximally independent format of cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States, signing only those agreements that corresponded to national interests, were considered expedient, or were supported by a clear strategy for their implementation. For example, the Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan participates in the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and develops cooperation with the parliaments of CIS member states on legislative issues and information exchange within this framework. At the same time, Azerbaijan does not support initiatives aimed at granting CIS bodies powers that would exceed national legislation (Shakirzade, 2007). One of the organizations that declared the resolution of conflicts in the territories of its member states as one of its principal objectives was GUAM, officially known as the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. The treaty-charter of GUAM, which was established in 1997 with the aim of harmonizing commercial, diplomatic, and democratic relations among its member states and ensuring their integration, was signed in 2001. A key characteristic common to all GUAM member states is that, during the period of their existence as union republics within the Soviet Union, each contained territories inhabited compactly by ethnic minorities. Following the collapse of the USSR, these territories became centers of ethnic tension. As a result, the resolution of both existing and potential conflicts constituted one of the underlying motivations behind the creation of GUAM.

In 2003, GUAM was granted observer status at the United Nations General Assembly. Subsequently, the organization expanded its activities toward the settlement of so-called “frozen conflicts.” In 2006, following an intense political struggle, a decision was taken on September 14 at the 61st session of the UN General Assembly, which opened in New York, to include the issue of “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet space on the agenda. Despite active opposition from the Russian delegation, the GUAM states succeeded in advancing this initiative with the support of the United States, the United Kingdom, and several other countries. This decision was widely interpreted as reflecting dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of existing peacekeeping arrangements in certain conflict zones, and as indicating the increasing diplomatic visibility of GUAM (RTVI, n.d.). On September 25 of that year, the foreign ministers of GUAM member states met in New York to discuss a range of issues related to the resolution of frozen conflicts within the CIS. The meeting was also attended by David Kramer, the U.S. State Department’s coordinator for GUAM (Aze.Az, 2006). At this meeting, to which the Russian Federation was not invited, the participants agreed on the establishment of their

own police forces intended to supplement existing arrangements in certain conflict zones (PointNews, 2006). However, the implementation of this agreement was postponed indefinitely. The positions of Azerbaijan and Moldova on this issue differed somewhat from those of Georgia and Ukraine. While Georgia and Ukraine advocated rapid implementation, Azerbaijan and Moldova favored a more cautious approach. In practice, such caution reflected the broader geopolitical constraints within which the organization operated. At a subsequent meeting of the GUAM Council of Ministers, the First Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia, Valeri Chechelashvili, was appointed Secretary-General of the organization.

In June 2007, the city of Baku hosted the second summit of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, held on June 18–19 under the theme “GUAM: Bringing Continents Together.” The agenda of the summit included discussions on the establishment of joint GUAM peacekeeping forces and the advancement of a transport corridor connecting the territories of the participating states (Trend IA, 2007). As part of the summit program, formal sessions of the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Foreign Ministers were convened. These were complemented by a series of bilateral meetings in the GUAM–United States, GUAM–Japan, and GUAM–Poland formats. Additionally, the Council of National Coordinators met, alongside joint consultations involving the heads of various ministries and governmental agencies.

The session of the Council of Heads of State took place in an expanded composition. Alongside the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine and the Prime Minister of Moldova, the meeting brought together invited high-level participants. These included the presidents of Lithuania, Poland, and Romania; the Vice President of Bulgaria; the Vice Speaker of the Estonian Parliament; the Minister of Economy of Latvia; senior representatives from the United States, Japan, the OSCE, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, and UNESCO; as well as heads of diplomatic missions accredited in Azerbaijan (GUAM Official Website, 2007). The Council adopted the Baku Declaration entitled “GUAM: Bringing Continents Together.” The Declaration placed particular emphasis on issues of energy security, the use of the transit potential of GUAM member states, and the fight against international terrorism, aggressive separatism and extremism, as well as transnational organized crime (GUAM Official Website, 2007). Thus, in 2007, the process of establishing military peacekeeping forces within the framework of GUAM was initiated, and joint military exercises were organized. Deepening integration and cooperation had the potential to enhance GUAM’s role in conflict resolution in the region. In August 2007, the foreign ministers of GUAM member states also agreed on a joint strategic plan of measures aimed at expanding international

support for the peaceful resolution of protracted conflicts in the territories of GUAM countries (Trend IA, 2007). In response to these decisions, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that Georgia was seeking to use GUAM's military potential to replace existing peacekeeping arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He argued that the presence of additional forces on Georgian territory could increase military and political pressure in the conflict environment and emphasized that the Russian Federation could adopt measures to prevent escalation (Kommersant, 2006). However, changes in global and regional geopolitical processes after 2008, including shifting priorities among external actors and a reduction in political support for GUAM member states, weakened the organization's standing and undermined its prospects for participation in conflict resolution. This trend became particularly evident after the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. Richard Weitz noted that GUAM proved largely unable to make a substantial contribution to resolving these conflicts due to multiple external and internal constraints (Weitz, 2008). In 2009, the President of the Republic of Moldova, Vladimir Voronin, responding to questions regarding the prospects of the organization, stated that GUAM was not viable as a regional organization and lacked future prospects. He emphasized that the organization had failed to achieve tangible results and that attempts to revive its activities had been unsuccessful (Regnum, 2009). The Russian factor also played a significant role in limiting GUAM's effectiveness. Through various political forces within GUAM member states, Russia sought to divert the organization from its objectives and undermine confidence in its activities. One prominent figure in this regard was Viktor Yanukovych, who, after being elected President of Ukraine in 2010, questioned the relevance of GUAM's activities and argued that the organization had produced limited practical outcomes over the preceding years (TSN, 2010). After 2015, attempts were made to revive GUAM's activities, particularly with respect to economic and trade cooperation. On March 27, 2017, a GUAM summit was held in Kyiv, focusing on issues related to trade cooperation and transport connectivity within the framework of the organization (Hromadske, 2017). The summit ended with the approval of a collective statement by the heads of government of the GUAM member countries. The statement reaffirmed the commitment of the participating states to continue cooperation within the organization and expressed their intention to pursue conflict settlement on the basis of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of internationally recognized state borders. In January 2019, Ukraine assumed the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development–GUAM. However, heightened regional tensions and the outbreak of large-scale military hostilities in 2022 reduced the organization's visibility and

practical activity, contributing to the deprioritization of GUAM-related initiatives in regional political processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experience of GUAM demonstrates that the organization was unable to achieve tangible progress in the resolution of territorial conflicts among its member states. Rather than being settled, these conflicts gradually evolved into protracted or “frozen” disputes, preserving a high potential for renewed escalation. Long-standing territorial and ethnic conflicts rarely remain static; instead, they are continuously shaped by the actions of the parties involved, each of which seeks to alter the existing balance in accordance with its own political and strategic interests. The persistence of such conflicts reflects the fact that the prevailing status quo does not represent a mutually acceptable outcome for all actors. More broadly, the post-Soviet experience illustrates the limitations of traditional peacekeeping approaches employed by regional international organizations in addressing conflicts that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR. Peacekeeping missions deployed under the auspices of such organizations often relied on military forces closely linked to, or heavily influenced by, the Russian Federation. As a result, these missions frequently lacked neutrality and failed to create the conditions necessary for sustainable conflict resolution. Consequently, the geopolitical reality of the post-Soviet space indicates that durable settlements remain difficult to achieve without taking into account Russia’s decisive role and influence in the region.

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