

THE HAGUE

CONVERSATIONS ON CONFLICT



Pandemic and Politics – the South Caucasus and Corona

Summary of proceedings of a webinar event held on 25 June 2020

On Thursday, the 25th of June, LINKS Europe and The Hague Humanity Hub, in collaboration with commonspace.eu, virtually hosted the seventh event in The Hague Conversations on Conflict series, titled 'Pandemic and Politics – the South Caucasus and Corona'. The event, taking place exactly one year after the launch of the series, shone a spotlight on the South Caucasus, looking at how the countries of the region have handled the ongoing coronavirus pandemic; challenges and developments in the countries' domestic political environments; and the often tense and always finely balanced regional relations.



In order to address these topics, we were delighted to welcome speakers from each of the three countries of the region: from Armenia, Benyamin Poghosyan, Chairman of the Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies, who spoke from Yerevan; from Azerbaijan, Ahmad Alili, the Chairman of the Caucasus Policy Analysis Center, who spoke from Baku; and from Georgia, His Excellency Mr George Sharvashidze, the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, who spoke from the Georgian Embassy in The Hague. The virtual event was moderated from The Hague by William Murray, Project Officer

for LINKS Europe and Co-convenor of The Hague Conversations on Conflict series. Speakers and attendees were welcomed by Jill Wilkinson, Managing Director of The Hague Humanity Hub.

The speakers first addressed the current situation in each of their countries regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, giving some explanation of the approaches taken by their governments.

Ambassador George Sharvashidze opened the discussion by drawing attention to the relative success of Georgia in handling the virus outbreak. At the time of the event, the country of 3.731 million people had recorded only 917 cases of the coronavirus with 14 virus-related deaths. The Ambassador credited his country's success to decisive action – amongst other things, the timely call for a state of national emergency; the closing of the country's major cities; and the repurposing of 84 hotels as secure locations for quarantined individuals.



We then heard from Benyamin Poghosyan, who addressed the relatively severe situation in Armenia. With a population of 2.965 million, Armenia has been the worst affected country in the region with 25,000 cases and some 530 coronavirus-related deaths [figures valid from the day of the event]. Poghosyan gave two reasons for the spread of the virus: 1) the government's failure to adequately enforce a lockdown in the country; 2) the government's relaxing of lockdown measures at the beginning of May on economic grounds, whilst case numbers were still growing.

Next, Ahmad Alili addressed the situation in Azerbaijan, which – as a country of 9.981 million – had recorded 14,852 cases and 174 coronavirus-related deaths at the time of the event. Alili noted that the government's efforts to prevent the spread were initially successful, with the leadership seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to demonstrate Azerbaijan's competence and develop the country's international image. However, in the second phase, as the government began to lift lockdown measures, cases skyrocketed. With the number of cases so low during the first phase of the virus, Alili suggested that citizens struggled to grasp the severity of the pandemic and became complacent. He also addressed the mismanagement of the distribution of financial aid to citizens, which resulted in large queues and unnecessary gatherings where such aid was available. Alili finished by emphasising that nearly half-a-million tests had been conducted in Azerbaijan, which is considerable and provides hope for the country.

The speakers then addressed the domestic political situation in their countries over the course of the pandemic.

From Armenia, Poghosyan raised that the Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, has faced considerable pressure from opposition politicians due to the perceived mishandling of the crisis. Gagik Tsarukyan – one of the country's wealthiest individuals and chairman of the main opposition party, Prosperous Armenia – demanded the resignation of Pashinyan's government. Tsarukyan has since been arrested by the Armenian Security Services, who have opened three criminal investigations into his activities. Poghosyan highlighted the alignment of both old and new opposition parties against the Prime Minister. They are calling for the creation of an interim national unity government in order to steer the country out of the crisis.

The Ambassador of Georgia then discussed the domestic political situation in his country as it prepares for the upcoming parliamentary elections in October. He admitted that due to this, there has not been the same cross-party consolidation to combat the virus that has been visible in some other countries. That said, he noted that across political dividing lines, the parliament did vote to approve the Georgian President's call for a state of emergency. The key issue on the Georgian political agenda this year has been electoral reform and the transition of the country from a majoritarian to a proportional electoral system. Even though such changes were widely supported, the Ambassador suggested that due to inadequate interpretations of the bill, the main parliamentary opposition parties were reluctant to support it. ([The changes were subsequently approved by parliament on the 29th of June](#)).

From Azerbaijan, Alili discussed the country's snap elections, which took place in February and came with expectations of considerable political change. Due to the ongoing pandemic, however, such changes have been paused and would now have to wait until the crisis subsides. He also mentioned that the Parliament passed legislation in May intended to tackle the spread of COVID-19-related disinformation on social media; however, this was met with criticism from some in Azerbaijani civil society, who feared that it could be used to hamper freedom of speech. Overall, Alili suggested that independent observers had given support to the country's quarantine measures.

The speakers then turned their attention to how COVID-19 has affected the regional dynamics of the South Caucasus and its simmering conflicts, as well as the involvement of external players in the region.

Firstly, H.E. Mr Sharvashidze drew the audience's attention to the "destructive actions of the Russian Federation and its occupation forces" across a number of issues. He argued that while countries the world over have directed their attention towards the crisis, Russia has shown "no signs of respite as for its illegal activities in the occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region [South Ossetia]". The Ambassador referenced the Russian occupation forces' illegal "borderisation" – their installation of barbed-wire fences, so-called border lines, and the digging of dividing trenches – reportedly occurring in Georgian controlled territories. In addition, the Ambassador expressed serious concerns over the Russian-supported regime in Tskhinvali's denial of medical evacuations for the occupied district of Akhlagori (mainly populated by ethnic Georgians), which resulted in the death of a resident on the 20th of May. The Ambassador also warned that Russia had deliberately intensified its hybrid warfare tools and use of disinformation, referencing claims that the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research – presently working against the coronavirus – had been creating military pathogens. Similarly, he condemned accusations – reportedly spread by the Tskhinvali KGB – of Georgia artificially spreading the Coronavirus across South Ossetia in an attempt to launch a "second so-called genocide of the Ossetian people". Ambassador Sharvashidze concluded by stating that the recent provocations visibly demonstrate that Georgia continues to be in a state of war with Russia, as the latter further violates the 12 August 2008 UN-mediated ceasefire agreement, and lives continue to be lost.

Reflecting on Azerbaijan, Ahmad Alili suggested that there have been developments in its relationship with the EU over the course of the pandemic, arguing that the EU Parliament and other institutions have recently adopted several resolutions considered positive for the country. In relation to Russia, he spoke of the incident on the border with Dagestan – where hundreds of Azerbaijani citizens were prevented from returning home – suggesting that it led to the cancellation of President Aliyev's attendance in Moscow at the Victory Day Parade marking the 75th anniversary of the end of WWII. Alili went on to discuss how COVID-19 affected the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh, noting that it has led to a marked drop in ceasefire violations – from ~90 per day to ~80 per week. There was, however, some controversy surrounding ceremonies held by Karabakh Armenians in Shusha – a city with huge cultural significance for Azerbaijan. He did, however, note that there have been some contacts between the countries' respective foreign ministries over possible cooperative assistance for those in the disputed territory. Despite nothing coming to fruition, Alili expressed hope that over the coming weeks and months, there could be cooperation to help the Karabakh Armenians' fight against the coronavirus.

In relation to external players in Armenia, Poghosyan spoke of the financial support given to the country by the US and the EU; the Russian provision of a military laboratory for the treatment of Armenian forces; and the delivery of test kits, PPE and ventilators by the Chinese. He expressed that the image of the EU is likely to increase in Armenia due to it being the most generous donor. Like Alili, he suggested that there may have been a reason that the leader of his country did not attend the Moscow Victory Parade, as there was no notable change to the COVID-19 situation in Armenia between June 9th (when he confirmed) and June 19th (when he cancelled). According to Poghosyan, some have argued that real reason for the cancellation was that Moscow was somehow behind the recent political moves against the Prime Minister – especially following the statement by Tsarukyan, who is known to have a friendly relationship with Russia. Like Alili, he also acknowledged the significant reduction in ceasefire violations on the line of contact, but partially attributed this to a general reduction in tensions since 2018. He expressed concern that whilst the current situation on

the ground around Nagorno Karabakh is calm, no major progress has been made on the more substantial issues of conflict settlement or the status of the territory. Over the last few months, there has been increased rhetoric from President Aliyev, expressing dissatisfaction with the current status quo. Poghosyan expressed fear that without a major breakthrough on the key issues of the conflict, we could see a resumption of hostilities between the two countries.

A member of the audience then asked the speakers whether they envisage cooperation between the three countries in order to tackle the inevitable economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Georgian Ambassador agreed that regional cooperation is very important for his country; not only with Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also with Turkey. Tourism, for instance, is one of the fastest developing sectors in Georgia, and a significant proportion of its 95 million international visitors last year came from Armenia and Azerbaijan. He acknowledged the difficulties involved in trilateral cooperation between the countries, but that a strong Armenia and Azerbaijan are key to the future of Georgia, and it hopes to strengthen its economic relationship with both of them.

Alili also acknowledged that cooperation between Azerbaijan and its neighbours is necessary for the country's recovery. He referenced good cooperation and integration between Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, and expressed that despite difficulties, we need to find ways to bring Armenia in. Alili suggested that any cooperation with Armenia should start small, with things such as the aforementioned cooperation with the WHO over COVID in Nagorno Karabakh. There are also key issues such as Azerbaijanis being held in Armenian prisons, which make cooperation more difficult. He expressed that once we see development on smaller issues such as these, the countries may be able to discuss economic cooperation.

Poghosyan said that he cannot presently see any possibility of direct cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan due to the ongoing Nagorno Karabakh conflict, but that cooperation between Armenia and Georgia is going well. Since Pashinyan took power in 2018, there have been a number of a number of visits of the current and former Georgian Prime Ministers to Yerevan – a practice that the Georgian Ambassador referred to as a tradition. The Black Sea in Georgia is also the most popular tourist destination for Armenians, but this year, summer travel doesn't seem likely due to pandemic restrictions. He noted that there have also been efforts by Armenia to establish a trilateral relationship with Georgia and Iran, in the form of the 'Persian Gulf – Black Sea international transportation and transit corridor', but that US sanctions placed on Iran in May 2018 have made this much more difficult given the high level of defence, security and economic cooperation between the US and Georgia.

The final audience question of the event sought to further explore the impact of disinformation or fake news over the course of COVID.

Poghosyan implied that the Armenian government's messaging on the severity of COVID had not been strong enough. Even after the WHO had announced a global state of emergency, Pashinyan was still actively working towards his constitutional referendum, originally scheduled to take place in April; and before, in March, the Armenian Health Minister stated that COVID-19 was not particularly dangerous. Poghosyan suggested that due to this, the country was much more susceptible to social-media conspiracy theories, such as the virus being harmless, a hoax to sell vaccines, or that such vaccines would be a cover for the insertion of malicious computer chips under people's skin.

Alili weighed in, attributing the spike in cases during the second phase in Azerbaijan to disinformation regarding the virus. As mentioned before, the successful first phase made Azerbaijanis more susceptible to disinformation questioning the virus's severity and the government failed to use soft

power to encourage the population to act responsibly. The government now are introducing hard measures to stop the spread, but he believes soft measures, combatting disinformation, would be much more effective.

The Georgian Ambassador then spoke of similar problems regarding COVID disinformation in the initial stages of the virus, especially within his country's non-ethnically Georgian communities. However, this was soon mitigated by the government's distribution of information in languages other than Georgian. He remarked that when you have a free media, you must anticipate a level of disinformation. To finish, he reinforced his condemnation of Russia's use of disinformation, attempting to discredit the Georgian government and its key foreign policy objectives.

In their closing statements, all three speakers expressed a hopefulness of further cooperation between the South Caucasus countries, thanking LINKS Europe and the Hague Humanity Hub for the opportunity to speak. LINKS Europe and The Hague Humanity Hub would like to thank all three of our speakers for joining what was an interesting and valuable discussion. We must extend a special thank you to the Ambassador of Georgia to the Netherlands, H.E. Mr Georgia Sharvashidze, who stepped in to speak at very short notice.

A video of the event is available to watch in full [here](#). For information on past and future events in The Hague Conversations on Conflict series, as well as other activities towards a more peaceful and just world, you can follow LINKS Europe and The Hague Humanity Hub on Twitter: [@LinksEurope](#), [@HumanityHub](#).