

## Why is there no “Steinmeier formula” for conflicts in the South Caucasus?

On 6 October thousands of people rallied in Kiev against the signature of the “Steinmeier Formula” by Ukrainian authorities. The “peace formula” – first proposed back in 2016 by then German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier – aims to get around a dispute blocking the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. According to the plan, local elections would be held in Donbas and Luhansk – regions under the control of separatist regime – in accordance with Ukrainian legislation. If the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) considers the elections fair and free, a special status will be granted to these regions, and Ukraine will take over control of its eastern borders.

This said, the main focus here is not on political moves around this formula and its chances of success. Instead, in the light of such active and relatively successful diplomacy in Ukraine, we question the lack of active international diplomatic progress around the conflicts of the South Caucasus, specifically the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the Georgian conflicts. These are often defined as “frozen conflicts,” even though “forgotten conflicts” seems to be a more appropriate definition. It is the diplomatic efforts around them, not the conflicts themselves that are “frozen.” If in Georgia’s case peace talks are at a standstill, negotiation rounds between Armenian and Azerbaijani high officials continue to follow each other, but with no substantial plan, and therefore with no outcome.

To understand the reasons why diplomacy is “frozen” in the South Caucasian conflicts, we propose the following reflections. The first is about the presumed more pressing character of the Ukrainian conflict compared to the Caucasian ones. The ten-days war in Georgia in 2008 and four-days war in Azerbaijan in 2016 demonstrate extreme the fragility of ceasefires in the region. Armenia and Azerbaijan are engaged in an arms race, and have considerably modernized their armies in recent years. A sudden escalation of military operations may have heavy humanitarian, economic, and political consequences for the region. In addition, conflicts in the

South Caucasus have left in their wake hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs, waiting for their safe return. These factors indicate that resolution of the conflicts in South Caucasus is as urgent as that of the Ukrainian conflict.

The second reflection is about mediators. The configuration of mediators is roughly identical for all these conflicts. As in the Ukrainian conflict, the OSCE, with strong influence from Russia and the Western powers, is in charge of mediation in the conflicts of the South Caucasus. Russia undeniably holds a dominant position in the game of influence in Ukraine and in the South Caucasus. Some authors argue that the status quo would be favorable for Russia, providing it with the necessary means to apply pressure on the conflicting sides. This argument is valid as much for the Ukrainian as for the South Caucasian conflicts.

Perhaps the reason for the diplomatic intensity around the conflict in Ukraine is explained by the presumption that the mediators see themselves as parties to the conflict, while this is not the case in the South Caucasus. Russian troops are involved in the separatist regions of Donbas and Luhansk, and the EU became Ukraine's trade and political partner through an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Conflict mediation in Georgia, in conflict with Russian-backed separatist regimes and also an EU partner through an Association Agreement and DCFTA, is, however, quite static. In the Ukrainian case, Russia and Western powers intend, through the conflict settlement, to normalize their relations, which have deteriorated against the backdrop of this conflict. Meanwhile, in the Nagorno-Karabakh case, France, Russia, and the USA work together as parts of a unique body (the OSCE Minsk Group) charged with finding a peaceful solution, even in times of crisis dividing them on the international scene. Furthermore, they do not expect significant immediate geopolitical benefit from the resolution of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict.

Finally, it may be argued that the conflicting parties do not demonstrate the same degree of eagerness in the South Caucasus. Given the immense cost of unresolved conflicts, the resolution of them would seem to be a priority for all the parties to the conflicts. However, fatigue related to long-drawn-out peace talks may explain the lack of dynamism in the South Caucasian peace process.

Furthermore, the system established in the post-military phase of the conflicts has solidified, rendering the parties less flexible to concessions. In other words, the more the conflict remains unresolved, the harder is to achieve a resolution. The mediators' efforts to avoid this scenario for Ukraine are understandable from this perspective.

Whatever the reason, inefficiency in conflict resolution mediation in the South Caucasus is a fact. Conceivably, a success story in Ukraine might serve as an incentive for the remaining unresolved conflicts. It is no secret that the resolution and settlement measures are extremely hard to achieve, but they are much less costly compared to diplomatic apathy. This principle could be an engine for more dynamic and solid international engagement in the South Caucasus.