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EXPERIENCE OF THE GUAM STATES: LESSONS TO THE WORLD

*All views and assessments are of the author
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Abstract. The author depicts the evolution of the geopolitical context in and around the GUAM region during the last three decades and explains the rationale behind the creation of GUAM, its development, goals, and objectives in a changing context. This will help understand the true intentions and objectives of the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine, not the ones that they declare. This article may be considered an attempt to understand why this war became possible at all within the existing system of international relations and global security order; to assess the probable implications of this war on the global security order and future security architecture. The author seeks to project how this war will affect countries and the region, and how GUAM as a regional tool should be utilised to reshape this region as the zone of peace, security, and stability to avoid such tragic scenarios in the future. The article also offers insight into the current state and prospects of the settlement process between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the 44-day victorious war of Azerbaijan.

Keywords: GUAM, regional cooperation, security, international system.

Glory to Ukraine and its Heroes! I would like to express our admiration for the fortitude and firmness of the Ukrainian people and our unwavering support and solidarity with Ukraine in this epic fight for not only their independence and freedom but also the new world. We wish you every success and victory!

At the outset, GUAM emerged as a collective response to the security challenges that each of the founding countries confronted when they regained their independence after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. All our nations have inherited a plethora of problems intrinsic to the imperial 'divide and rule' policy. We have been witnessing all sorts of instigated from outside ethnic conflicts, secessionist movements, and local and regional wars with the consequences of occupations and annexations. All the mentioned posed serious threats to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the young independent states, hampering their development and blocking integration into an international community.

Even though these conflict situations differ in many characteristics and manifestations, they have one common denominator – the Kremlin as their source. Russia was keeping the strings to manipulate the situations. It pulled these strings here and there to raise tensions and then intervene as the ‘peacekeepers’ when needed to retain its presence and control over the situation. The know-how is well-known. Suffice it to say that the GUAM area has been one of the most overflowed with ethnic and military conflicts, which have been posing serious risks and threats to regional and international security and stability for decades.

The Russian Federation was among the initiators of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and recognised all its geopolitical consequences, including the emergence of the newly independent states (NIS). Nevertheless, the process of dismantling the empire was not complete with the collapse of the USSR. The imperialistic instincts and ideology were deeply rooted in the political elites of the RF, and they awaited the moment to revive, to restore the empire. In the early 2000s, they made it explicitly clear to the world that they viewed the USSR’s collapse as ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.’ They viewed rectifying this ‘historic mistake’ as their ‘sacred mission.’

Another important factor is the GUAM geography. It was at the periphery of the former empire, essential for its existence and survival. Losing control over these former territories – now independent countries – would accelerate the process of decay of the RF itself in its present shape and its eventual complete and final collapse as an empire. Besides the centrifugal tendencies of the NIS to preserve their independence, new outside actors emerged in the region that exacerbated the process. Historically this geography was the zone of rivalry and contention for influence and dominance of the regional and global players. The combination and collision of these factors could exacerbate the confrontation between different forces and accelerate the imperial collapse. It is in light of the interplay of these two factors that we can view and interpret the developments in the region and understand the ill-feted logic of the aggressive behaviour of the RF.

It was a common challenge for all four countries, and their leaders decided eventually to combine their efforts in confronting to make their voices louder and their stance more visible and weightier to mitigate risks and threats of further escalations. On 10 October 1997, the Presidents of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine signed the Joint Communiqué in Strasbourg establishing a new regional initiative known as GUAM by the acronym of first letters of the names of the founding countries. Among declared objectives were, indeed, ‘contribution to peace, stability, and security based on norms and principles of international law.’

The initiative was widely hailed as a brave move in the right direction and quickly found support from partner countries and international organisations (IO). The promising beginning of the initiative has naturally led to its

transformation into a full-fledged IO. At the 2006 Kyiv Summit, the Heads of State of the GUAM nations decided to expand and deepen cooperation, embracing political, parliamentary, economic, and business dimensions. The organisation also amended its title and became the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM (ODED-GUAM). The city of Kyiv houses the headquarters, Permanent International Secretariat, aimed at organising and coordinating GUAM activities.

Among the prior objectives was to forge cooperation in the main areas, namely transport, energy, and trade, as core elements. Of course, the spectrum of activities also covered many other spheres, including tourism, education, healthcare, emergencies, combating organisational crimes etc. Yet, the main goal was to bring GUAM countries closer together, to strengthen their trade and economic ties so that this geographic area could be interwoven with new alternative transport routes and roads, energy pipelines, and further bound with free trade and FDIs. Not only did we seek to project our geography as a new alternative bridge connecting Europe and Asia, two economic powerhouses, but also to promote and shape this area as the zone for free transit, trade, and investments.

If realised, these objectives would facilitate not only the cooperation between the GUAM MS but most importantly, also the integration of the region into a global economy, forming it as a new geopolitical entity within the European architecture of security and interaction. Should these ideas and initiatives have been fulfilled, we could have had a completely different situation in our region today.

Russian leadership perceived it as a scary scenario for their delayed plans. From the very inception of GUAM, the Kremlin considered it a threat to their national interest and acted accordingly. They had undertaken regular smearing campaigns to discredit GUAM and utilised all available channels, including through impact on political elites in the GUAM MS, to impede the cooperation between them and their partners.

Nevertheless, the period from inception in 1997 until the summer of 2008 was dynamic and fruitful in the ODED-GUAM activities. During this period, the Heads of State held nine Summits, providing strong political guidance and leadership. Numerous ministerial and high-level expert meetings have ensured the elaboration and adoption of the basic documents to support the efficient functioning of the organisation. The legal and regulatory framework laid the foundation for enhancing interstate cooperation. New conceptual ideas on building future cooperation and integration have served as guidance for projects and initiatives.

It should be emphasised that GUAM activities were founded firmly on the norms and principles of international law, the fundamental provisions of all major international organisations. Therefore, the ODED-GUAM was quickly recognised by the UN, the OSCE, the COE, and other international organisations. Mutual recognition of the territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders

of the GUAM MS was the cornerstone of our cooperation. MS started using international platforms to promote their common course by putting drafts of joint resolutions forward. There are many good examples of coordination of their activities in IO, as well as economic, financial, and humanitarian support in different and difficult situations.

This young and ambitious regional initiative had been gaining momentum in promoting peace, cooperation, stability, and development.

This positive dynamic was broken by the Russian aggression against Georgia in August 2008, just a month after the last GUAM Summit held in Batumi during the Georgian Presidency. With this brutal 5-day war, the RF blatantly violated the territorial integrity of Georgia, invading and occupying Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region.

The aftershocks of this aggression were tangible across the region and far beyond. This was the first brazen, overt, demonstrative, and, to some extent provocative act of the RF in front of the international community to test its reaction, effectiveness, and resilience of the system of international relations. The disappointing response of the international community and its lamentable consequences are well known. The unprincipled and weak international reaction to this flagrant violation of the norms and principles of international law by the permanent member of the UNSC against a small nation, which dared to define its own future, was to the satisfaction of the Kremlin. On the contrary, we saw the attempts of appeasements of the RF, reconciliatory initiatives, and acceptance of the consequences of the aggression de facto.

This reaction paved the way for more aggressive and assertive behaviour of the RF towards neighbour countries aimed at imposition of control upon them and subjugation them to its will. For that purpose, RF leadership utilised the usual and tested arsenal at their disposal – coercion through intimidations, threats, blackmails, violence, instigation of local hostilities, information manipulations, interventions into internal politics and election campaigns through their proxies, etc. As a result, we witnessed internal political upheavals, outbursts of ‘frozen’ conflicts, and overall tension and instability in the region.

Such an environment affected the activities of GUAM. We even had cases when the political leadership in some GUAM MS doubted the rationality and aptness of the organisation. Despite all the complications, the organisation continued its activities, albeit routine and low-profile, with no significant advancements.

The world didn’t have to wait long until the next shock – the aggression of the RF against Ukraine in 2014. As previously, this was another desperate act of aggression to stop the path of Ukraine to Europe away from Russia. This war, obviously, was the logical sequence of impunity in previous cases and terminated with the occupation of the Eastern parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the annexation of Crimea.

The international community's reaction was more responsive, global leaders were more engaged, and new frameworks and mechanisms have been created to mediate the settlement. However, on what terms? True, undertaken measures this time entailed harsher sanctions against the RF; Russia was excluded from the G7 club and incurred some reputational damage. Still, were those measures strong enough to force Russia to alter its behaviour? No. Quite the opposite: Western leaders were pressing Ukraine for concessions, whilst behind the scenes, the RF and the West continued their relationship in a 'business as usual' style, as if nothing happened. The RF fiercely continued its strategy of entangling Europe with hydrocarbon tentacles and corrupting political elites. At the same time, the RF pursued the policy of economic suffocation of Ukraine through transport and transit blockade, cutting the volumes of natural gas transit to Europe and, consequently, revenues for Ukraine, aiming at dismantling and destroying the national system of pipelines, essential for the European energy security.

The Revolution of Dignity in February 2014 brought new political leadership in Ukraine with a clear pro-independent and pro-Euro-Atlantic agenda. The new situation in the region increased the significance of GUAM in addressing new economic challenges. Focusing on transport/transit, trade, and economic issues, the organisation has resumed high-level meetings. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, the GUAM Summits of the Heads of Government were held with two principal issues on the agenda – the realisation of the GUAM Transport Corridor concept and the implementation of the Agreement on the Establishment of the GUAM Free Trade Area.

Soon a new flashpoint flared up in our region. After a series of provocations on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and in the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan in September 2020, we witnessed yet another full-scale war between two neighbouring countries, dubbed the Second Karabakh war. After nearly three decades of fruitless, endless, and hopeless international mediation efforts in conflict resolution, Azerbaijan relied on Article 51 of the UN Charter and opted for the liberation of the illegally occupied territories after the First Karabakh war in the early 1990s. The victorious 44-day war set in motion new dynamics across the region with promising prospects for conflict resolution and restoration of the territorial integrity of the GUAM MS. Of course, this was potentially another scary scenario for the Kremlin, which tried to keep the region under control.

In a year and a half, the region entered a new cycle of violence. On 24 February 2022, the RF started an unprovoked, unjustified full-fledged war against Ukraine, unprecedented in its scale and cruelty, bearing a genocidal feature and the potential of going global and even nuclear. This war in the centre of Europe in the 21st century was unprecedented and inconceivable. With this war, the RF even further challenged the global order and the system of international relations to bring them to paralysis and complete failure.

What was different this time? This war had been predicted and warned well before it started and, I believe, could have been prevented through pre-emptive actions should the global leaders have been more principled and decisive. However, we once again witnessed that the world has been shocked and frightened, lacking any idea or plan of action and limited to condemnation.

Moreover, in such a tragic and dangerous moment, the Western leaders were inconsistent and incoherent in their reactions and response. Some even doubted the decision to resist and predicted a quick defeat for Ukraine. Unfortunately, the inertia of previous attitudes and behaviour prevailed at first. As a result, we have heard the rhetoric of appeasement, calls to give up, and proposals to the leadership for assistance in fleeing the country.

The international community was preparing to turn a blind eye to even such a gross violation to pacify the RF and stay in their comfort zone. The West was ready to sacrifice Ukraine, seriously undermining the foundations of the system of international relations, trust in law, institutions, declared values, and principles. A lot was at stake.

Ukrainian people ruined envisaged scenarios. They opted to resist the second most powerful army worldwide and fight to the death. Instead of fleeing the country, the leadership demanded more arms and support in this struggle to defend democratic values and the West. That was the moment of truth. It is the stance of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the unbreakable spirit and will of Ukrainians that defined the course of subsequent events on the battlefield and perhaps even the course of history.

Societies in Europe and across the globe were deeply shocked by the images of the atrocities and brutal nature of the war with millions of refugees fleeing Ukraine during the first days. The waves of anger and condemnation of the aggression, solidarity with Ukraine, and demand for its support spread worldwide. It could not pass unnoticed by the politicians and perhaps was one of the main reasons for their backtracking from the initial hesitancy.

The European and global democracies eventually got united and decisive and threw their political, financial, military, and humanitarian support behind Ukraine. This change of attitude remains one of the most important and crucial factors in the fight between Good and Evil. The outcome of this fight, the degree of further damage and destruction, deaths, and sufferings of people will depend on this support's intensity, consistency, and continuity.

Now, we are at the pivotal crossroads of global history. The old system of world order and international relations, stereotypes, narratives, and everything related are crumbling before our eyes. Yet, the new system is not there to replace the old one. So far, it is only the coalition of the willing that keeps the situation from sliding into the abyss.

I believe after the war and the victory of Ukraine, the world will enter the intensive process of rethinking, redesigning, and recalibration of the existing system of international relations and updating global security architecture adequate to the new reality.

However, it is only through honest and uncompromised analysis of the happenings during the last decades after the fall of the iron curtain, understanding them in their entirety and complexity that will help improve the system. In this context, the experience in the GUAM area can contribute to that aim.

The deliberate focus is on the GUAM countries and the region, where the inefficiency, inadequacy, impotence, and erosion of the system of international relations and global order manifested themselves to the full. The history of the conflicts on the territories of every GUAM MS (the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the NK region of Azerbaijan; Transnistrian region in Moldova; Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region in Georgia; Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, and now Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions in Ukraine) and the attempts and efforts of the international community for their so-called resolution can be viewed as a stress test for the rule-based world order and international system that oversees it, and for the ability of the latter to ensure and maintain peace, stability, and security.

I have already explained why there are so many conflicts in our region. But why were all the violations, tragedies, horrors, and brutality, which our nations lived through, possible and allowed by this system to happen in the first place when the law and fairness were on the side of the GUAM MS? Who should bear the responsibility? The answer is obvious – the system has failed and needs to be changed!

The conflicts and wars in the GUAM region exposed all the problems inherent to the existing system of international relations and the global security order. The international community should consider the lessons learned here when drafting future security architecture. Those lessons are obvious and as follows:

- Impunity of perpetrators for violating the norms and principles of international law in the first instances had led to further brutal violations.
- Even though international organisations have condemned these violations in the resolutions and decisions, they had little or no impact on the behaviour of perpetrators.
- Attempts of the international mediators to facilitate peaceful resolution and settlement in all the cases of the GUAM countries looked more like an imitation of the process. In fact, their efforts were not aimed at achieving just and lasting solutions but at procrastinating the process and inducing the victims to recognise and accept the imposed decisions agreed upon behind the scenes and without their participation. The most vivid case in this sense with known consequences was the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

– Endless and fruitless mediation efforts, while the law and justice, as well as the decisions of main international bodies, were clearly on the side of the GUAM MS, gradually leading to the establishment of the new norm when the law of the strongest substituted the rule of law.

– All the above mentioned gradually brought to the situation when absolute impunity of perpetrators and permissiveness, coupled with the conformity and the compromise of the international system, has whetted the appetites of the aggressors and their proxies. In fact, we were witnessing a silent indulgence on the part of the international system and an invitation to perpetrators for further aggression.

Based on the above, we can draw main conclusions and recommendations for the future system:

– No violation of the rules, even minor, should be tolerated and left unpunished.

– The international system should have effective instruments and mechanisms for the monitoring and observance of the rule-based order and implementing its decisions.

– The international system should be objective, just, and consistent and comply with the rules and its own decisions to be trustworthy. The principles ‘mighty is righty’, or ‘big and powerful do what they want, and small and vulnerable do what they must’ should be eliminated from international relations.

– There should be no room to double standards in attitude and treatment, lies and hypocrisy, hidden agendas, politics of appeasements, etc.

So, what kind of implications we might expect from the ongoing war and the victory of Ukraine on the system of international relations. How will the current system change, and in which direction and how will it evolve?

To me, it seems that the rule-based system should be maintained and strengthened. The norms and principles of international law, basic international documents laying the foundations of peaceful coexistence and ensuring equal and fair rights for all members of the international community should be preserved. However, the institutional, organisational, and operational aspects of the existing system need to be updated to allow monitoring and ensuring the observance of these rules, sustaining peace, security, and stability. The representation in the main bodies should be reconsidered and enlarged, the decision-making mechanism should be streamlined, bureaucracy – eliminated, and veto rights and consensus mechanisms – restricted to very narrow specific matters or abolished completely. The new international system should be more responsive, decisive, agile, representative, inclusive, predictable, and pre-emptive.

The new system should also address another important aspect – ethics and morality in international relations, issues of consistency, coherency, continuity, and responsibility. The integrity and honesty of political leaders acquire particular

relevance in today's situation. One of the bitter conclusions that can be drawn from the experiences of the last decades is that the international community itself, more precisely, global leaders, has nurtured and created the monster through pander, appeasement, and flirting with the leader of the RF. To some extent, they are the creators of the current tragic situation and bear a certain degree of responsibility. That is why we are seeing quite radical transformations of the leaders of democracies, acknowledging errors in their past policies and admitting personal mistakes. That is why they are ready to pay high prices for past mistakes.

I suspect that recalibration and updating of the international system will be developed bottom-up, with more focus and attention at the national level. I think the post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction will start with the strengthening of national security and defence of many countries. Due to the discredit of the system of international relations and its institutions, devaluation of the norms and principles of law, and loss of trust in the system, national states will tend to rely mostly on themselves in dealing with challenges and focus on strengthening their national defence and security capacities. As seems now, it will be the main trend in the post-war world.

Considering this trend, I believe the regional groupings based on joint interests and strategic vision will gain more importance as a critical element of regional security and stability and become an integral part of the future global architecture and emerging new world order.

Globally, there will be obvious centres of gravitation: Euro-Atlantic (around the USA and the EU) and Asiatic (around China). They will compete with each other to attract countries into their sphere of influence. The process of developing new global order and ensuring it international system with its institutions will require some time.

However, what seems obvious, against the above international background, is that the post-war rehabilitation will stir the formation of regional groupings based on mutual, shared, and long-term interests to withstand potential turmoil in the future. And here, GUAM, with its organisational setup, developed instruments, mechanism of cooperation, strategic vision, and practical agenda, stands yet another historic chance to assume its rightful place in shaping our region as the zone of peace, security, and stability. GUAM MS should assume the role of actual owners and stakeholders in the region.

I do hope that the victory of Ukraine will create all necessary prerequisites for the ODED-GUAM to fully realise its potential as an important multilateral platform. I also hope that the external environment will be conducive and supportive of the implementation of its ambitious initiatives and projects. The GUAM geography is of growing importance for the world economy and security, and it should be integrated into the European and wider international connectivity and security architecture. Such a development scenario will be in the interest of the entire international

community. Still, the main actors and drivers behind the process should be the GUAM MS. Our objective is to transform the GUAM region into a zone of free trade, investments, and transit, and we should put the process firm on track. We also hope and expect that our partners, as well as the EU and its member states, will be engaged in the process. Implementation of GUAM projects and initiatives will generate new dynamics in the region with profound and irreversible transformations and will have a strong spillover effect spreading well beyond its frontiers.

With the vital regional infrastructure in place and functioning, the GUAM MS can expand its cooperation in the areas focusing on / aimed at ensuring its security and reliability. In 2023, during the GUAM Ukrainian Chairmanship, MS may wish to introduce changes to the modus operandi of GUAM to enhance and strengthen the organisational capacities, make it more relevant and adequate to the new challenges and focus on new horizons.

The framework of GUAM lacks any specific mechanisms to address the issues of stability in the conflict zones on the temporary occupied territories of the GUAM MS. We use various international platforms to raise awareness, attract attention to continuous violations, and call for the reaction of the international community on the issues of concern. They can relate to the violations of territorial integrity, creeping annexation, and ‘borderisation’ as is happening in Georgia; violations of human rights, rights of refugees and IDPs in the occupied territories; illegal actions of the occupying forces concerning the destruction of the cultural and historical heritage; usage of the territories as the grey-zones for smuggling and illegal arms, drugs, human trafficking etc. We are regularly raising the issues of security and stability in the GUAM region because of aggression and occupation, at the UN and other international platforms and IO. Annually, the GUAM MS diplomatic missions to the UN initiate and promote resolutions on the conflicts on the territories of the GUAM MS and their implication for international peace, security, and stability. Here are just a few examples to illustrate. During the Ukrainian Presidency at the UN SC in 2017, the GUAM MS initiated bringing the issue of regional conflicts and the risks and threats that they pose to international peace, security, and stability to the Agenda of the UN SC meeting with the participation of GUAM SG. In 2018, a special session was organised at the OSCE Permanent Council meeting by the initiative of Georgia, presiding over GUAM activities then. After the substantial report of GUAM SG on the situation in the region and the activities of the organisation, a substantial Q&A session was held with the participants of the meeting. A similar initiative was held at the Council of Europe during Moldova’s GUAM Chairmanship.

Besides coordinating and collaborating in raising and promoting our joint initiatives, our countries also support each other in their individual initiatives and cases under consideration at the IOs. Issues like illegal elections on the occupied territories, detentions and tortures of the citizens of the GUAM MS, violations

of the territorial integrity and sovereignty through the creeping annexation, as in Georgia, and so on.

We consider it necessary and important to raise and maintain these issues on the international agenda, in the focus of the international community, albeit it does not always have expected results, even when international bodies adopt decisions in support of the GUAM MS.

Nevertheless, the GUAM MS use these resolutions and decisions as a mean of pressure and appeal to the international community for adequate reaction and support. Because these conflicts on the territories of the GUAM MS, indeed, are major impediments to national and regional developments, as well as pose high risks for regional and international security and stability. As we can see now, after years of persistent, laborious, and continuous efforts of the GUAM MS and the inaction of the international community, we are on the brink of something terrible with unpredictable consequences.

Regardless, our countries continue collective and coordinated efforts in support of the issues related to the situations in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Tskhinvali region.

However, we all witnessed that the essence was emasculated from the process in reality. Perpetrators remained unpunished and vice versa, they continue to resort to all kinds of manipulations through inventing contrived arguments, recurring to various provocations, blackmailing, and sometimes presenting themselves as victims, like in the case of Armenians, to affect the opinions and decisions of the international community. This is vividly manifested in situations related to Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

Against the background of the inefficiency of the international community, our MS have found themselves in this vicious circle of endless and fruitless attempts. This eventually led to the situation when the so-called 'frozen conflicts' transformed into hot, bloody wars with very dangerous consequences.

As I mentioned above, Azerbaijan has restored its territorial integrity by utilising the legitimate right envisaged by Article 51 of the UN Charter. After the glorious victory in the 44-day war in 2020, Azerbaijan has liberated its internationally recognised territories, which have been under illegal occupation by Armenian armed forces for nearly 30 years. This victory and the capitulation of Armenia have opened the opportunity for the final peaceful settlement and the definitive resolution of the conflict between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan. In a new situation after this victory, the conditions for a truce and conflict settlement were agreed upon and recorded in the Joint Statement signed by the conflicting parties and the RF, which acted as mediator. It was agreed that during the transition phase, a limited contingent of the Russian Peacekeeping Mission (RPC) would be temporarily deployed to ensure stability and security in the area of residence of the Armenian population.

Now, it looks like, after two years of consultations and negotiations, the process towards ultimate resolution entered its concluding phase. Concrete steps and commitments of the parties have been defined during this period to clear the grounds before the final peaceful settlement between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia and the signing of the Peace Agreement.

Among the commitments taken by the parties are remaining the complete withdrawal of illegal armed formations and disarmament of the civilian population, which is not fulfilled yet. In addition, there are reports of the smuggling of arms from Armenia to the areas of responsibility of the RPC and some illegal activities on the territory of Azerbaijan under the supervision of the PRC. There is evidence that some incidents are occurring with the direct or indirect involvement of the PRC.

We are also hearing some revanchist and militarist rhetoric, even calls for the extension of the period of stay of the RPC in Azerbaijan. Quite recently, the suggestion was voiced to extend their period of stay on the territory of Azerbaijan for 10 or 20 years. All the above indicates that there are attempts to derail peaceful settlement, in contradiction of the commitments, of course, and raise the question about the true intentions of other signatories to the Statement. Of course, it causes certain concerns but does not pose a real threat to the process so far.

Placing the PRC on the territory of Azerbaijan was a goodwill gesture of Azerbaijan, bearing in mind some concerns and unjustified fears of the Armenian population there. The period of stay of the RPC is agreed upon and limited to 5 years, without a clear mandate, but to ensure the security of the transition process. This means they have about two years left. Thus, the parties need to fulfil all undertaken commitments and obligations fixed in the Joint Statement.

Azerbaijan is acting in full compliance with taken obligations of the document. The stance of Azerbaijan is expressed clearly and categorically in the statement of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan: The issue of NK is over; it is history. Azerbaijan proposed five basic principles for a peaceful settlement on the provisions of the UN Charter and other main international documents. We can negotiate only the issue of settlement of bilateral relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The leadership of the country has comprehensive rehabilitation and development agenda for the liberated territories to rebuild and reintegrate them. I believe that the signing of Peace Agreement will facilitate the whole process, including delimitation and demarcation of the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

I doubt that the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Azerbaijan poses a threat. Of course, their behaviour raises the question about trust to the RF. However, it seems that the situation on the ground is under full control of the Azerbaijani armed forces. The incidents and attempts to destabilise the situation, including on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, are immediately and resolutely suppressed by the armed forces of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has the initiative and acts from the position of strength.

The positive side of the process is the genuine interest of the international community in speedy peaceful settlement and reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan based on recognition of the territorial integrity and sovereignty within internationally recognised borders. Apart from the Moscow track, there are also efforts and incentives to the process provided by Brussels and Washington. Unlike Moscow, they recognise Karabakh as an integral part of Azerbaijan and leave the issue of defining the status of those Armenians who choose to stay and accept the citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan to national authorities.

This gives hope. Russia is not in a position to dictate its terms. Intentions might be understandable but not realistic at least for now and the near future. Moreover, I believe this is also not in the interest of the current leadership of Armenia.

Currently, Russia is tied up to the ears, or even higher, in its criminal adventure in Ukraine. Its resources are overstretched and capabilities are seriously limited and fettered by the full-scale war in Ukraine. Against enormous losses in Ukraine, they are very seriously weakened and doubtfully able to even think of any new undertakings.

The war in Ukraine is draining the limited and depleting resources of the RF. They desperately need the truce and respite to lick the wounds. I think they are not in a position to act on several fronts, particularly in Azerbaijan. Moreover, Azerbaijani leadership is acting cautiously and wisely, strictly following the agreed, and not providing any reason and 'justification' for new provocations. Most importantly, Azerbaijan keeps the situation under full control and holds the initiative. The process is irreversible.

The liberation of the illegally occupied territories of Azerbaijan and the initiation of the process of a peaceful settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan raised hopes and set in motion new dynamics in the Caucasus that will eventually lead to the liberation of all occupied territories in the region and establishment of peace, stability, and cooperation.

I strongly believe that outcome of the war started by RF against Ukraine will have the same result for Ukraine, as for Azerbaijan: victory and full restoration of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. The big advantage of Ukraine is that the whole world united in its support. Provided that the support will be firm and continuous, this enhances the chances of the soon victory. Undoubtedly, defeats on the battlefield incur serious blows to the Russian imperialistic ambitions.

The victory of Ukraine will have a profound impact on our region and all our countries, and on the ODED-GUAM; we will have the greatest opportunity to make a great leap collectively into a new spiral of national and regional development and prosperity.