

# HOW TO STRENGTHEN STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE CAUCASUS

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Despite their dynamic diversity, the processes that unfolded in 2003 failed to improve the situation in the Caucasus. The regional countries—Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, as well as the contiguous and extra-regional players—did not change their main policies, and their approaches to the key issues on which local security and stability hinged remained the same. Today, as in the past, the situation can be described as insufficiently stable.

## Why?

First, the region is still exposed to the threat of international terrorism. Even though everyday life in Chechnia is noticeably improving and despite the measures (albeit fairly delicate) Tbilisi applied to the terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge, the extremist forces have not abandoned their attempts to turn the Caucasus into a foothold for their machinations. Georgia, which for a long time avoided any adequate steps designed to discontinue the activities of Chechen fighters and international terrorists on its territory, is still irresolute either because it fears the bandits or because it wants to spite Russia. Whatever the case, early in 2004 Georgian tactics remained the same.

Georgia's evasive policies look strange against the background of the recently established close contacts between Russia and Azerbaijan and complete understanding between Russia and Armenia. They will look even stranger if we take into account that Tbilisi insists on making a contribution to the international counter-terrorist coalition. While Georgia widely demonstrated its intention of becoming "America's main ally" in the antiterrorist struggle, it has never tried to bring law and order to its own territory. Former president Shevardnadze was fond of saying that the republic had no adequate forces to do this, but he never wished to pool efforts with Russia to achieve tangible results. Any concrete and straightforward actions would be an important contribution to antiterrorist struggle, to the Georgian-Russian dialog, and to stronger stability and security in the Caucasus.

Second, the situation is destabilized by the seats of tension; Chechnia in the Northern Caucasus and three conflict zones in the Southern Caucasus have been tearing the region apart for over ten years now. I am referring to the Karabakh conflict and the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts. In

2003, the region avoided direct clashes, which is quite an achievement seeing as relations between the sides remained strained. But nor was any progress achieved: continued tension rules out any discussion of the region's stability and of alternatives and systems conducive to regional security.

Third, regional security depends on the domestic policies and the socioeconomic situation in the local states. Last year certain progress was achieved in Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, which carried out elections, raised the level of political stability, and achieved certain dynamism in the economy.

Regrettably the situation in Georgia was different: irresponsibility, corruption, and complete disintegration of the country's economy resulted in November 2003 in a change of power virtually by force while the nation's complete disillusionment in the old leaders created obviously inflated expectations of the new ones. Will the Saakashvili-Burdjanadze-Zhvania triumvirate be able to organize political life, heal the economy, demonstrate a sober understanding of the republic's interests, overcome the anti-Russian psychosis, and establish good-neighborly relations with the adjacent countries? Early this year Saakashvili spoke quite reasonably—yet he limited himself to general declarations about friendship and better relationships.

Fourth, much will depend on developments on the track that may be tentatively called “geopolitical influence in the Caucasus.” In the past, Russia repeatedly warned that attempts to turn the region into a zone of geopolitical rivalry would negatively affect the climate in the Caucasus and the world over. The warnings were ignored: today the rivalry is even more pronounced than ever. It is caused by local oil, the “smell” of which irresistibly pulls the American military to the East. Moscow is aware of the continued attempts to isolate it from the sphere of its vital interests—the South Caucasian CIS countries. Russia's integration with its natural partners is threatened while its foreign policy role is shrinking. Nobody can expect Russia to dispassionately watch the negative developments on its southern borders that are threatening its national security.

There are other serious factors like the transportation corridor and oil and gas pipeline projects bypassing Russia, the efforts to oust its military structures from Georgia and the continued blockade of the region's main transportation routes, the Sochi-Sukhumi-Tbilisi-Erevan and the Erevan-Nakhichevan-Megri-Baku railways.

Time has shown that Eduard Shevardnadze's stakes on bringing Russia and the United States to loggerheads were fraught with an escalation of tension and negative consequences for the future of the entire region. The former Georgian president was obviously a shortsighted politician. Hence the present commotion around the Russian bases in Georgia, its military-technical cooperation with the United States and NATO, as well as the talks (that have become much louder recently) about NATO membership for Georgia and the deployment of extra-regional military structures on its territory.

## Prospects for the Karabakh Settlement

The still-unsettled Karabakh conflict impairs regional security to the greatest extent. By 2002 the talks that had been going on for many years stalled; in 2003 they were discontinued because of presidential elections in both countries and the grave illness of the then president of Azerbaijan. The dialog at the top level was renewed on 11 December, 2003 in Geneva yet, as expected, it did not produce tangible results. The newly elected presidents outlined their positions and agreed on continued personal contacts, which was a highly positive sign.

Obviously no one can expect any radical decisions on the Karabakh issue, there can be no progress without a dialog between the presidents.

The previous nineteen meetings between Heydar Aliiev and Robert Kocharian made it possible to remove certain differences and to reach certain (and rather fragile as time has shown) understandings. Azerbaijan acquired a new president and the dialog will start again from scratch.

Significantly, Russia, the U.S., and France, as co-chairmen of the Minsk OSCE Group, are closely cooperating within the conflict settlement, so the process has been spared any rivalry among the world powers. This is a positive factor, despite the sides' habitual criticism of the group's "passivity." In fact the never-ending deliberations about the intermediaries being either "too passive" or "too pushy" are caused by an overestimation of their role. They play a secondary role in the dialog between Baku and Erevan, even though today their balanced initiatives are needed.

To develop a full-scale negotiation process and enhance direct contacts between the presidents and the efforts of the Minsk Group, a continuous dialog between Armenia and Azerbaijan at the working level is very much needed. They should be able to discuss the settlement and its alternatives non-stop and in greater detail. This dialog did take place in Prague at the deputy foreign ministers level and should be revived.

Two indispensable conditions should be to agree on greater confidence measures and to discontinue the information war. The sides are nursing the insults accumulated throughout the years of conflict and mutual mistrust; this is all blended together to form "explosive material" and the well-known approach of "either all or nothing." The presidents will find it hard to meet each other halfway in the present psychological climate, it must be improved.

Nagorny Karabakh was (and is) excluded from the talks; its leader A. Gukassian repeatedly stated that Karabakh should have the final say in any decision made by the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Obviously the talks are concentrated on the status of Karabakh, therefore only drawing up a set of confidence-building measures will make it possible to switch to a package, step-by-step, or any other settlement alternative. Today the sides should improve the refugees' conditions, strengthen security in the conflict zone, and start economic cooperation in the region.

## Whence Georgia's Instability?

Today Georgia is a knot of various complex domestic, foreign policy, social, economic and territorial problems, which affect the region's stability. Some of them can be found in other CIS countries, others are purely Georgian. All of them, however, are caused either by objective reasons or by unfortunate economic, ethnic, and other decisions.

In the past Georgia was one of the most prosperous Soviet republics, while in the last decade it became the poorest of the CIS states and plagued by numerous problems. This possibly explains why, in an effort to remove all doubts about his country, its former president Shevardnadze insisted that it was not a "failed state." The doubts, however, were raised not only by Georgia's economic and political instability, but also by the highly unpredictable prospects of ethnic reconciliation with Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Adzharia, and some other regions. It must be admitted that only Russia's active peacekeeping prevented these smoldering conflicts from flaring up.

In November 2003, when the Saakashvili-Burdjanadze-Zhvania triumvirate came to power domestic confrontations lost some of their urgency, yet they are revived from time to time in specific and highly uncivilized forms. The "triangle's" stability will depend to a great extent on Mikhail Saakashvili's popularity at home.

It seems that the continued practice of letting off steam (that Shevardnadze used to relieve pressure) by targeting popular discontent against "foreign and domestic foes" (Russia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adzharia) will have a negative effect on all efforts to address key issues in future too. It has already boomeranged back on Georgia and raised tension across the region.

### Terrorism

This is the central problem in relations between Russia and Georgia. If Tbilisi continues its tactics of failing to implement resolute antiterrorist measures, the negative factors in the countries' bilateral relations will persist.

For several years the Georgian leaders placed their stakes on the "Chechen card" to force Russia to take more resolute steps in Abkhazia (by which Tbilisi meant use of force). In the latter half of the 1990s, Tbilisi established close contacts with Grozny: the visits of Georgian parliamentary delegations were reciprocated by top Chechen emissaries making trips to Tbilisi. In 1997, with the connivance of the country's leaders, a so-called "plenipotentiary representation office of Ichkeria" was officially opened in Tbilisi; later it acquired a ramified structure used to coordinate financial and material aid to the Chechen fighters camouflaged as distribution of humanitarian aid among the refugees. The same structure arranged medical aid for Chechen fighters in Georgia and other states, as well as periods of rest and recuperation in different countries, organized the transit of mercenaries from third countries to Chechnia, etc.

At different times, up to 2,500 Chechen fighters would be located in the Pankisi Gorge; they stored their armaments, ammunition, medicine, and foodstuffs there; they organized communication with other countries (Arab countries included). Part of this infrastructure can still be found in the gorge. Late in 1999 and early 2000, M. Udugov met with Osama bin Laden's personal representative in Georgia; international terrorists doubled their efforts to penetrate the Georgian economy to launder their money through the gambling business, trade, hotels, and the realty market.

Moscow's repeated invitations to cooperate in antiterrorist efforts were interpreted as attempts to draw Georgia into a "large Caucasian war," to move the hostilities to its territory, to encroach on its independent foreign policy, etc. At the same time, the country's leaders flatly denied that the Pankisi Gorge housed terrorists.

After the events of 9/11, President Shevardnadze found it much harder to encourage international terrorists; the Georgian leaders had to look for a solution. Finally, they had to admit that there were terrorists in Georgia. In September 2002, Minister of State Security Valery Khaburdzania declared that there were 700 to 800 fighters in the Pankisi Gorge, 100 of them being Arab mercenaries. In July-September 2002, those who had entrenched themselves in the gorge carried out several attacks against Russia. The relations between the two countries deteriorated even more.

This urged President Putin to express his concern with the situation in his messages to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the OSCE member state leaders. Moscow called on Tbilisi to observe the U.N. antiterrorist resolutions.

A widely acclaimed antiterrorist operation carried out in the Pankisi Gorge failed mainly because the terrorists stationed there had been warned in advance. They had moved to other places in Georgia or even left for other countries, so no bandits were arrested and handed over to Russia.

There were positive developments too: in December 2002, a terrorist group that included those who had blasted the apartment blocks in Moscow and Volgograd was liquidated in Eastern Georgia. Cooperation between the special services and law enforcement bodies of the two countries improved, yet the information center of international terrorists is still operating in the republic; they cross the borders and continue to store weapons and ammunition on Georgian territory.

This "flexibility" is pernicious for Georgia. Russian-Georgian relations can improve, the visa regime lightened, and Caucasian stability and security be made stronger, if the new Georgian leaders revise the old approaches.

### Territorial Problems

At one time Andrei Sakharov described Georgia as a "dwarfish empire." Indeed, this small state comprises several compact ethnic entities; 30 percent of its population is not Georgian, while the permanent ethnic squabbles remained subdued for a long time thanks to Moscow's stabilizing role.

The ultra-nationalist policies of the first Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who formulated the principle "Georgia is for Georgians," destroyed any understanding between the Georgian Center and the ethnic fringes. As a result any regular and normal contacts between Tbilisi and Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adzharia were severed. Tbilisi is putting harsh pressure on Samtskhe-Javakhetia, where the Armenian population predominates and there is strong influence from the Armenian nationalist movement Javakhk. The crisis of the last decade pushed the ethnic problem to the fore.

The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia unfolded at a fast pace and culminated in bloodshed. Settlement efforts have been going on for over ten years now without tangible results and positive dynamics.

### ***Will the Georgian-Abkhazian Settlement Move Forward?***

We can expect the new Georgian leaders' numerous statements about certain ideas related to the settlement in Abkhazia to develop into concrete steps. So far the political and diplomatic crisis persists. The efforts made by the U.N. and Russia to revive the talks between Tbilisi and Sukhumi were invariably blocked now by one and then by the other side, since their ideas about approaches to the final settlement were absolutely different. Tension in the conflict zone is as high as ever, while the danger of revived hostilities remains real.

The Abkhazian leaders flatly reject any ideas about restoring the vertical of power that existed prior to 1992 when Sukhumi was accountable to Tbilisi. The Abkhazians' previous experience (the attempts to assimilate them within the Georgian state) forces them to firmly insist on independence.

Meanwhile Georgia placed the stakes on economic blockade and isolation that brought Abkhazia to the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. Thousands of local people live on transborder trade with Russia or on free Red Cross meals.

Regrettably, from time to time Tbilisi reminds the world community that the use of force in Abkhazia is not excluded; it says that the peacekeeping mandate in the conflict zone should be changed in order to turn the peacekeeping forces (the main factor of peace and a guarantee against resumed armed clashes) into an instrument of pressure on the Abkhazians.

While Tbilisi issues official statements about peaceful solutions, some people go on with belligerent statements about the use of force. Nino Burdjanadze, for example, insists that if needed she is prepared "to send her sons to Abkhazia." People have not forgotten how 12 years ago the adventurist actions of Gamsakhurdia (highly popular at the beginning of his presidency) caused seven thousand deaths among civilians, drove tens of thousands out of their homes, and turned the domestic situation in Georgia upside down. We should bear in mind that it was thanks to Russia's mediating efforts that ten years ago, on 14 May, 1994, the sides signed an agreement on cease-fire and disengagement of the Georgian and Abkhazian forces.

Today Tbilisi cannot restore reliable control over Abkhazia single-handedly. After partial U.S.-supported modernization, the Georgian armed forces (about 25 thousand-strong) can theoretically defeat the Abkhazian forces (some five to seven thousand volunteers), yet Tbilisi's total military, economic, and human potential is obviously inadequate since the Abkhazians will inevitably move to a guerilla war.

The problem also defies a military solution because the world community will never approve it; when launching the Train and Equip Program, the Americans made it conditional on a pledge not to use the trained units in domestic conflicts.

It has become clear that Abkhazia cannot be politically and economically isolated and that attempts to do this have augmented hostility and created mistrust between the sides. As a result they are mutually alienated, while hostility is going down from the state to the personal level. Replacing the

“whip” with the “carrot” would have helped Tbilisi to improve its relations with Abkhazia and other breakaway regions.

Efforts to change the nature of the peacekeeping operation in the conflict zone and adjust it to the use of pressure against the Abkhazians by the Russian peacekeepers or by invoking Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter will fail. They will do nothing but raise the tension, not only in the conflict zone, but also between Tbilisi and Sukhumi as a whole.

Recently much has been done under the U.N. aegis to create a document on delimitating constitutional powers between Tbilisi and Sukhumi (the so-called Boden Document). During the period of total confrontation it could not be implemented—today the chances of its implementation remain slim. The diametrically opposed positions of Sukhumi and Tbilisi rule out any agreements on the status, yet this is not an impasse and a compromise may still be reached.

The settlement should preserve Georgia’s territorial integrity, on the one hand, and ensure the rights and interests of all ethnic groups in Abkhazia, on the other. Any progress suggests direct and permanent contacts between the sides, mutual account of each other’s viewpoints, and the desire to reach a compromise as the basis for a long-term settlement.

Today we should, first, patiently restore mutual confidence through mutually advantageous projects and concrete efforts. Second, the movement toward a settlement should be a gradual one and should take into account the political realities. The problem cannot be resolved at one fell swoop—this is an illusion. Third, the process should be a voluntary one: the Abkhazians will refuse to be pushed back into a unitary state by force. This “solution” will bring no peace and no long-term stability. Finally, there is another no less important condition: the peace process and cooperation should go hand-in-hand with the stage-by-stage return of the Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. They should be given the opportunity to come back home: Sukhumi should demonstrate magnanimity and patience.

The meeting of senior representatives of the U.N. Secretary General’s Group of Friends on Georgia held in Geneva in February 2003 became another step toward overcoming the clichés related to the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement. The participants recommended that the sides set up working groups under the U.N. aegis which would concentrate on economic rehabilitation and the refugee question while dealing with the political issues.

The meetings between the presidents of Russia and Georgia held in Sochi on 6-7 March, 2003 attended by Abkhazian representatives rekindled hopes that the negative trends could be altered. The sides agreed that the following issues should receive the greatest attention: the dignified and safe return of refugees and displaced persons to the Gali District, in the first place; renewed railway communication between Sochi, Sukhumi, and Tbilisi; modernization of the Inguri hydropower cascade, and deciding which hydropower projects in the upper reaches of the Inguri River should be implemented (with foreign investments if necessary).

The Sochi meetings were an important milestone on the road to settlement of the conflict: they made it possible to revive the settlement and negotiation process. It was wisely decided to move the status issues aside, along with other issues that defied solution at this stage. The participants in the Sochi meetings believed that restoring a common economic expanse would diminish tension and draw the local people closer together.

Regrettably Shevardnadze retreated from these decisions by creating a number of conditions: he made return of the refugees hinge on progress in the economic sphere, while an agreement on the refugees was made dependent on Sukhumi’s concessions on the political status of Abkhazia.

The events of the last few months have demonstrated that Russia and the Western participants want to coordinate their efforts designed to normalize the situation and create favorable conditions for an advance toward the settlement.

Today, the sides should seek mutually acceptable agreements; the settlement should be based on a stable regime of non-resumption of hostilities, as well as on amnesties and cooperation between the law enforcement bodies. It is equally important to continue negotiations and to set up an adequate mechanism at the level of the leaders. Whether people trust the processes or not will depend on how the economic, transport, and refugee issues are treated. A direct dialog at the grass-root level should be

restored to remove mutual mistrust and to reach a mutually acceptable modus vivendi after many years of confrontation.

In fact, there is no alternative to restored confidence and negotiations on the political issues of the future settlement: politics is still the art of the possible.

A Georgian-Abkhazian settlement could add stability to the Caucasus and strengthen regional security.

## Georgian-Osset Conflict: Specifics

South Ossetia differs from Abkhazia: it is much smaller while its population is ethnically connected to North Ossetia, which is part of Russia. The refugee problem is of a different nature there: the refugees are mainly the Ossets who moved from Georgia to North Ossetia and do not want to return. The Georgian population of South Ossetia is still living in the so-called Georgian villages.

The current Georgian constitution contains no mention of South Ossetia: the autonomy was liquidated under Gamsakhurdia. Today the area is called the Tskhinvali District. The Mixed Peacekeeping Forces consisting of Russian, Georgian, and Osset battalions were deployed in the conflict zone under the Russian-Georgian Agreement of 1992 on the Principles of Settlement of the Georgian-Osset Conflict.

Ossets, Georgians, and Russians are mainly involved in peace-seeking within the Mixed Control Commission (MCC) functioning since 1992. This conflict is as acute as that between Georgia and Abkhazia, yet at some point tangible progress in South Ossetia bred certain hope.

Still, the course of both conflicts and the attempts at a settlement are very similar: the same urge toward independence; the same hard talks with Tbilisi; the same humanitarian catastrophe; the same accusation against Russia of issuing Russian passports and establishing special visa regimes. The relations between the sides have been deteriorating synchronously. Still, there are certain specifics: Russia and the U.N. are involved in the Abkhazian settlement, while in the Osset settlement Russia is functioning together with the EU, which is operating in the economic sphere. The OSCE, with an office in Tskhinvali, is actively involved in a political settlement of the Georgian-Osset conflict.

Four years ago Russia and Georgia signed an intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation in Economic Rehabilitation in the Zone of the Georgian-Osset Conflict and Return of the Refugees, under which the MCC started drawing up intergovernmental programs; the Special Committee for Refugees resumed its work. The talks continued even after a new leader, E. Kokoity, was elected head of South Ossetia after two rounds of "presidential" elections in November-December 2001. All efforts to draw up an intermediary document expected to formalize the political status ran into an impasse.

In 2003, the situation became even tenser: the parliamentary elections in Georgia, the political crisis that followed, and the change of leaders directly affected the relations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. Today continued dialog depends on the level of confidence between the sides: here, just as on the Abkhazian track, the prospects of serious talks depend on the level of mutual understanding, without which no progress on the status issue is possible.

On the whole, the prospects are vague; everything should be done to prevent degradation of the negotiation process, demonstrate greater activity on the economic track, and abandon the practice of exchanging unfriendly statements. It is a good idea to revive cooperation between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali on restoring the Trans-Caucasian highway that connects Georgia and the Southern Caucasus with the Russian Federation; these efforts can be associated with the TRACECA program. The European Union has a good chance of contributing to the process; North Ossetia is also playing a positive role.

Just as in Abkhazia, all the problems in South Ossetia can be settled by means of a compromise: on the one hand, Georgia's territorial integrity should be preserved; on the other, the lawful rights of the peoples of South Ossetia should be protected. A settlement should rest on political decisions—this is the central principle.

## On Stronger Regional Security in the Southern Caucasus

Today, the regional balance of power is fragile, while the system of mutual containment consists of cease-fire regimes and delimitation lines. Besides the conflicts, the region abounds in debatable situations fraught with further fragmentation.

Many states, international organizations, and research centers have recently been displaying much more activity—a sure sign that regional security is an important issue. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Turkey, and the United States put forward all sorts of ideas; the European political studies center working in close cooperation with the EU also formulated its plan. The dialog within the “Caucasian Four” (Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) has moved onto practical matters.

On 8 March, 1996, on the initiative of the Georgian president, called “For the Peaceful Caucasus,” Eduard Shevardnadze and Heydar Aliev signed a Declaration on Peace, Security and Cooperation in the Caucasian Region in Tbilisi that reflected the sides’ desire to play a more active role in the Caucasus. The initiative, however, remained on paper.

In November 1999, at the Istanbul OSCE summit Heydar Aliev invited the U.S., Russia, Turkey, and the South Caucasian countries to sign a Pact on Security and Cooperation in the Caucasus to create a basis for the relations among the local states and the principles of conflict settlement. The document contained the idea of eliminating foreign military presence in the Southern Caucasus, while Armenian President Kocharian spoke of the need to create a system of regional security in which Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the U.S., and the EU should be involved.

On 15 January, 2000 during his official visit to Georgia, Turkish President Suleyman Demirel formulated the idea of a Stability Pact for the Caucasus as a multi-sided forum “to be guided by OSCE principles.” He expected all South Caucasian countries to join it, along with the leading world powers. In view of the strong political distrust between Erevan and Ankara, the initiative was obviously aimed at Turkey’s stronger position in the region. As such it was unlikely to succeed; the Turkish president offered the barest of outlines for the future structure.

In April 1999, at the Washington NATO summit the U.S. put forward an idea of the Caucasian Cooperation Forum (CCF) that presupposed a structure of multilateral economic cooperation in the region. Washington planned to hold the forum’s first summit in Tbilisi in October 1999. Heydar Aliev, however, declined the invitation on the grounds of the still unsettled Karabakh conflict. Russia was prepared to take part in the CCF as an economic cooperation structure as one of the co-founders (together with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia). Those ideas that offered general outlines of regional security on the very limited territory (the Southern Caucasus) and excluded direct Russia’s involvement proved unviable.

It seems that common approaches, tolerant public opinion in each of the states, and willingness to meet each other halfway should be treated as priorities. The use of force and blocs should be ruled out.

There is the opinion that the Caucasus and its interdependent problems should be regarded within the much wider context of the Black Sea-Caucasian-Caspian region.

## The Caucasian Four

Today the Caucasian Four is the only regional mechanism of multilateral dialog. The Kislovodsk Declaration of 1996 registered the concerted interests of the Caucasian states. The Caucasian Four is the only forum of promising cooperation in all spheres, including regional stability and security.

The Caucasus can be likened to an organism in which historical, cultural, economic, ethnic, and other traditional ties keeping the local nations together are intertwined. Millions of people moved from



the Southern Caucasus to Russia either temporarily or permanently while the South Caucasian countries are home to hundreds of thousands of Russians. The local states think about their future in very concrete terms rather than vague geopolitical abstractions.

On 25 January, 2000, presidents Heydar Aliev, Kocharian, Shevardnadze, and Putin met in Moscow for a working session at which they discussed the most topical issues of security and stability, as well as the possibility of ensuring the region's sustainable development. On 20 June, 2000, they met again to discuss conceptions related to peaceful settlement of the conflicts, strengthening security, the antiterrorist struggle, and possible cooperation in the humanitarian and other spheres. The final statement confirmed that the summits of the four leaders would be held regularly twice a year.

The Baku Declaration signed during Vladimir Putin's visit to Azerbaijan on 9-10 January, 2001 confirmed the vital importance of the Caucasian summits.

The final document of the Caucasian Four summit held in Minsk on 31 May, 2001 registered an agreement that the local states should be responsible for elaborating approaches to the security issues and regional cooperation. The presidents confirmed their dedication to peaceful, just, and long-term settlement of the conflicts in the Caucasus as the most important regional priority expected to remove all barriers on the road toward fuller cooperation. They expressed their concern with the spreading terrorism and extremism in the Caucasus as a serious threat to the region's future and announced that they were resolved to increase the efficiency of their meetings.

On the eve of the Minsk summit the four presidents initiated a scientific-practical conference on Peace and Development in the Caucasus in Moscow that attracted academics and politicians from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Russia, who discussed the present state and the future of regional cooperation in the Caucasus.

In November 2001, the Caucasian summit was held in Moscow; in July 2003, it took place in Kiev. "We have always paid much attention to stronger allied relations, conflict settlement and development of projects in infrastructure," with these words President Putin summed up the Kiev summit.

In November 2001, the heads of parliaments of the Caucasian Four met for the first time in St. Petersburg; later their contacts became regular: in 2003, they met three times.

Cooperation among the ministers of the interior (their meetings are called the Borzhomi Four after the place of their first meeting) also became regular. In March 2002, secretaries of the security councils of the Caucasian Four member states met in Sochi.

The Caucasian Four is a unique forum designed to create a calm and non-confrontational atmosphere in which the most sensitive issues of the region's present and future can be discussed.

### *By Way of a Summary*

The region's future and its stability and security depend on whether the most acute and important problems can be successfully resolved. They are conflict settlement, the antiterrorist struggle, greater understanding and cooperation within the region, and a lower level of geopolitical rivalry. The geopolitical environment and the nature of outside influence will play an important role; the nature of cooperation between the regional and extra-regional forces will greatly affect the international climate as a whole. Advancing along the key tracks and more clarity will allow the local countries to move toward more specific discussions of how to ensure their stability and security.