

Altai EFENDIEV,
Secretary General of
Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM

GUAM AND MODERN REALITIES

All views and assessments are of the author and do not reflect the position of the organisation and the GUAM member states

Abstract. The author analyses the geopolitical situation in the region and adjacent territories over the past three decades, as well as outlines the GUAM foundations, its development, goals and objectives, relations with partners, implemented and planned activities, in particular in the energy sector. Conflicts and wars in the territories of the GUAM member states have demonstrated all the shortcomings of the current system of international relations and security order. Analysis of the processes in the GUAM region contributes to understanding the true intentions and objectives of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, not the ones that they declare. The article provides recommendations and forecasts for the development of the GUAM region and the transformation of the international system. The emphasis is put on the fact that the priority mechanism for maintaining peace and security for the GUAM states is joint and individual initiatives at the global level.

Keywords: GUAM, regional organisation, security, stability, Russia-Ukraine war.

GUAM initiative is a brave move in the right direction

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

At the outset, the 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 inherent 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 occupation and annexation. All the mentioned posed serious threats to the ter-

ritorial integrity and sovereignty of the newly 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 and pulling these strings here and there to raise tensions and then intervene as the ‘peacekeeper’ when needed to retain its presence and control over the position. 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 empire has not dismantled with the collapse of the USSR. The imperialistic ideology was deeply rooted in the political elites of the RF, and they awaited the moment to revive and 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.’ Thus, they viewed rectifying this ‘historic mistake’ as a ‘sacred mission.’

Another important factor is the GUAM geography 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 per se in its present shape, complete and final collapse as an empire. Besides the centrifugal tendencies of the NIS to preserve their independence, the emergence of new outside actors in the region exacerbated the process. Historically this geography has been the zone of rivalry and contention for influence and dominance of the regional and global players. The combination and collision of these factors could aggravate and accelerate the confrontation between different forces. It is in light of the interplay of these two factors that we can view and interpret the developments in the region to understand the ill-feted logic of Russia’s aggressive behaviour.

It was a common challenge for all four countries, and eventually, their leaders decided to combine the efforts to make the voices louder and the stances 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 founding countries. Among the declared objectives were ‘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). Kyiv houses the headquarters, Permanent International Secretariat, aimed at organising and coordinating the GUAM activities.

Among the main 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, health-care, emergencies, combating organisational crimes etc. Yet, the main goal was to bring the 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, bounded with free trade and foreign direct investments. 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, the integration of the region into a global economy, forming it as a new geopolitical entity within the European architecture of security and connectivity. 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. Since the very inception of the GUAM, the Kremlin has considered the organisation a threat to its national interest acting accordingly. Russia has regularly undertaken smearing campaigns to discredit the GUAM and utilised all available channels, including through affiliated political elites in the member states to impede the cooperation between them and their partners.

Nevertheless, the period from inception in 1997 to 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 projecting future cooperation and integration have served as guidance for projects and initiatives.

It should be emphasised that the GUAM activities were founded firmly on the norms and principles of international law, as well as the fundamental provisions of all major international organisations. Therefore, the UN, the OSCE, the COE, and other international organisations quickly recognised the ODED – GUAM. Mutual recognition of the territorial integrity and inviolability of the borders of the GUAM MS was the cornerstone of fruitful cooperation. Member states started using international platforms to promote their common course by putting drafts of joint resolutions forward. There are many good examples of their coordinated activities within 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.

Russia is an implicit threat to the world order

The positive dynamic of the organisation's development 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, invasion and occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region, the RF blatantly violated the territorial integrity of Georgia.

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 world community to test its reaction, effectiveness, and resilience of the international system. The disappointing response of the world 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 in foreign states 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 the GUAM. We even had cases when the political leadership in some member states doubted the rationality and aptness of the organisation. Despite all the complications, the GUAM continued its activities, albeit routine, low-profile, with no significant advancements.

The world did not 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. Obviously, this war was the logical sequence of impunity in former cases and terminated with the occupation of the eastern parts of 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 entailed harsher sanctions against the RF this time; Russia was excluded from the G7 club and incurred some reputational damage. Still, were those measures severe 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 were continuing their relationship in a 'business as usual' style, as if nothing had happened. The RF fiercely continued its strategy of entangling Europe with hydrocarbon tentacles and corrupting political elites. Meanwhile, 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 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 regional situation increased the significance of the 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 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 has 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 and 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 unparalleled and inconceivable. Thus, 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? The war had been predicted and warned well before it started and, I believe, could have been prevented through pre-emptive actions once the global leaders have been more principled and decisive. However, we have 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 was 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, besides 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 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.

Paving the way for the modernisation of the global security system

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 of the states 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; Russian occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region in Georgia; Crimea, parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, and now Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions in Ukraine) and the attempts and efforts of the international community for the 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 that 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 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.

– Despite the law and justice, as well as the decisions of main international bodies were clearly on the side of the GUAM MS, endless and fruitless mediation efforts gradually led 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 might we 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 mech-

anism 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 other important aspects – 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 created and nurtured the monster through pander, appeasement, and flirting with the leader of the RF. To some extent, they are the founders 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.

‘Our objective is to transform the region into a zone of free trade, investments, and transit’

Considering these prospects, the regional groupings based on joint interests and strategic vision will gain more importance as critical elements 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, the 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. The 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 and 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 world connectivity and safety 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 region into a zone of free trade, investments, and transit, and we should put the process firmly 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 the GUAM projects and initiatives will generate new dynamics in the region with profound and irreversible transformations and 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 or aiming at ensuring its security and reliability. In the 2023 GUAM Ukrainian Chairmanship, MS may wish to introduce changes to its modus operandi to enhance and strengthen the organisational capacities, make it more relevant and adequate to the new challenges and focus on new horizons.

Mechanisms of GUAM activity, risks of Russian peacekeeping and war in Ukraine

The GUAM framework lacks any specific mechanisms to stabilise the conflict zones on the temporarily occupied territories of the member states. 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’ – erecting of the border lines – 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 regularly raise 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 our territories and their implication for international peace, security, and stability. Here are just a few examples to illustrate. During the Ukrainian Presidency at the UNSC 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 UNSC meeting with the participation of GUAM Secretary General. In 2018, a special session was organised at the OSCE Permanent Council meeting by the initiative of Georgia, presiding over the GUAM activities then. After the comprehensive report of GUAM Secretary General 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 took place at the Council of Europe during Moldova's GUAM Chairmanship.

Besides coordinating and joint raising and promoting initiatives, our countries also support each other in their individual projects and cases under consideration at other IOs. They touch the issues like illegal elections on the occupied territories, detentions and tortures of the citizens of the GUAM MS, violations of territorial integrity and sovereignty through the creeping annexation as in Georgia, and so on.

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

Nevertheless, our countries use these resolutions and decisions as a means of pressure and appeal to the international community for adequate reaction and support. Because these conflicts on the territories of the member states, 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, 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 (Moldova), Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (Georgia). However, we all witness that the essence was actually emasculated from the process. Perpetrators remained unpunished; 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. It is vividly manifested in situations related to Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

Against the background of the inefficiency of the international community, the GUAM MS have found themselves in this vicious circle of endless and fruit-

less attempts. It 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 applying the legitimate right envisaged by Article 51 of the UN Charter. After the glorious victory in the 44-day war in 2020, Azerbaijan 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 Russian peacekeeping contingent (RPC) would be temporarily deployed to ensure stability and security in the area of residence of the Armenian population.

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

Among the commitments taken by the parties but not fulfilled yet are the complete withdrawal of illegal armed formations and disarmament of the civilian population. 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 Russian peacekeepers. There is evidence that some incidents are occurring with the direct or indirect involvement of the RPC.

We also hear some revanchist and militarist rhetoric, even calls for the extension of the period of stay of the RPC in Azerbaijan. Quite recently, there has been a proposal to extend the period for 10 or 20 years. All of the above indicate that there are attempts to derail peaceful settlement that undoubtedly contradict the commitments and raise the question about the true intentions of other signatories to the Joint 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 the Republic considering some concerns and unjustified fears of the Armenian population there. The period of stay of the peacekeepers is agreed upon and limited to 5 years. They do not have a clear mandate but aim 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: 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 decided on comprehensive rehabilitation and development agenda for the liberated territories to rebuild and reintegrate them. I believe that the signing of the Peace Agreement will facilitate the whole process, including the 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, who immediately and resolutely suppress incidents and attempts to destabilise the situation, including on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. 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 Russia, 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.

It gives hope. Russia is not in a position to dictate its terms. Their 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. The Kremlin desperately needs 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 ini-

tiation of the process of a peaceful settlement with Armenia 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 the establishment of peace, stability, and cooperation.

I am deeply convinced that the outcome of the war started by RF against Ukraine will have the same result for Ukraine, as the war with Armenia for Azerbaijan: victory and full restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty. The big advantage of Ukraine is that the whole world is united in its support. Firm and continuous support will enhance 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, all our countries, and the ODED – GUAM. We will have the greatest opportunity to make a great collective leap into a new spiral of national and regional development and prosperity.

Demining and reintegration of de-occupied territories: common experience

The demining and reintegration of de-occupied territories and the reform of emergency services can be one of the most important and urgent matters that the GUAM MS will need to address after victory and the liberation of territories. Sharing experiences and international cooperation can speed up the clearing of the territories and ensure more safety during the process of the rehabilitation and reconstruction of those lands.

We have accumulated certain experience of cooperation in emergencies in the framework of the GUAM. Within the specific working group, we have gained practice in interaction in addressing various emergencies. Representatives of the respective services of the GUAM MS hold regular training and exercises in special polygons simulating emergencies caused either by natural disasters or man-made accidents. As an example of practical interaction among the emergency services of the GUAM MS, I can refer to the assistance in extinguishing massive forest fires, which have increased in recent years.

Enriching cooperation in demining through sharing experience will serve the immediate objectives of member states and the whole region. In this field, perhaps Azerbaijan has gained the richest experience among the GUAM states after the liberation of the occupied lands in the 2020 victorious war. The country has embarked on a comprehensive programme for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of massive territories completely destroyed and devastated during the last decades by the Armenian occupants. All these areas are strewn with mines. The lack of adequate maps seriously impedes the process of demining. Unfortunately, even nowadays, we have cases of deaths and injuries among military ser-

vants and civilians, including constructors, workers, and journalists after hitting the mines. Therefore, I am confident that Azerbaijani experts have something to share, as they gained valuable experience through the newest practices of demining.

Azerbaijan has also gained impressive experience in the renovation of the liberated areas, reconstruction of destroyed villages and towns from the scratch, building new roads and airports, power stations, and gridlines – all based on new smart and environment-friendly technologies. This can be another area for countries to exchange their experiences, in particular given the huge and massive destruction of civilian objects caused by the Russian invasion. The programmes of rehabilitation and renovation of civic infrastructure and residential areas should include issues related to the protection of people during emergencies and wars.

In other words, the GUAM MS have a large amount of work ahead in this field, and mutual assistance and cooperation will significantly help including with international partners.

Security in the Black Sea and Caspian regions: joint approaches

We are developing new common approaches for ensuring regional security based on past ideas and initiatives. I have already emphasised several times the strategic importance of the GUAM area for global connectivity, security, and sustainable development. Our geography is the biggest and most valuable asset, the most attractive ‘selling point’ or ‘commodity’ speaking figuratively. This year we mark the 25th anniversary of the GUAM. Quite sufficient age. However, as an organisation, we have done little so far to ‘commercialise’ it, make it attractive and ‘sellable’. I think you will agree with me: nobody wants problems, especially caused and related to conflicts and wars. When you want to buy something or invest your money, instability and unpredictability are undesirable. Our initial idea when the GUAM was transformed into the ODED – GUAM was to promote our region not as an area congested with problems, conflicts, wars, and instability, but present it from a positive and promising perspective and make it attractive for trade, investments, and other forms of cooperation.

Unfortunately, we unjustifiably delayed the implementation of these initial ideas. I briefly touched upon the reasons. They are mainly objective, but also some of them are not really legitimate.

Here I will be a bit critical. Now we need to rectify this situation. We are standing yet another opportunity and historical chance to radically change this situation and get mobilised for the tasks for the benefit of the GUAM MS and the region as a whole. Geopolitical shifts create unique possibilities for us to utilise natural advantages immediately. Let me explain what I mean.

After the war, we must strengthen our efforts in weaving the region with transport, energy, and security projects. Our weakness today is defined by disunity. That is we are not tied by robust and unbreakable trade and economic relations that would transform the region into a solid economic space. We have weak, unreliable, expensive transport communications, no integrated energy market, and poor connections with regional and broader international economies.

What is more evident nowadays is the strategic significance of the GUAM geography not only for its member states but internationally. It is even more geopolitically pronounced today after the respective shifts exacerbated by the ongoing war. It has exposed even more vividly the need to engage the wider international community in the development of the GUAM transport corridor as an essential part of regional connectivity architecture uniting Europe with Central Asia and far beyond. Alternative and diverse transport and logistical infrastructure being able to render exponentially growing trade flow between two global powerhouses – Asia and Europe – serves the interests of both the GUAM and entire world. It will have an immense spill-over effect not only on member states but on adjacent regions as well. Maritime links are crucial elements in this transport architecture as can be concluded according to geographic maps. Therefore, free maritime navigation and merchant shipping across the Azov, Black, and Caspian seas should be at the foundation of future connectivity and security architecture. Vital alternative arteries connect huge powerful and rich economic poles, one – on the East, and another – on the West. And we are in the middle.

I am confident, if realised, these ideas could be the foundation of future regional stability, security, and prosperity because might create equal opportunities and serve the interests of all. When commerce flourishes and trade routes function, guns keep silent irrespective of how big egoistic national ambitions are.

These ideas have been discussed and promoted since the 1990s, but very little has been done in the context of regional and interregional connectivity. Suffice it to refer to the TRACECA initiative (Transport Corridor Europe – Caucasus – Asia), which, unfortunately, did not live up to expectations and failed for many different reasons.

Therefore, I believe that our biggest contribution to regional security will be the implementation of the GUAM transport corridor. When this project is operational, servicing large and growing volumes of trade and transit, its security and stability will be in the interest of the entire international community. When the GUAM MS have this common asset, we will expand and strengthen our cooperation in security to ensure its safety, efficiency, and competitiveness. I am sure we will be able to develop strong cooperation with international partners in this domain.

The GUAM is a developed interstate body standing a unique chance to significantly alter the geo-economic situation in the region. We have all prerequisites for that. As a full-fledged international organisation with established institutions, instruments, and mechanisms of cooperation equipped with such a vision and concept, ODED – GUAM can act immediately and efficiently.

We need to get involved in the process as soon as possible and prepare concrete projects and initiatives. Given the enormous magnitude and related challenges, we have to engage our partners and all interested in realising this process. Of particular interest will be the development of a regional cooperation framework with the EU, with which the GUAM MS have advanced bilateral relations. Meanwhile, proposing a regional format can bring a synergy effect and great benefits to all.

Another important initiative awaiting its fruition is the elaboration and adoption of the Vision Paper reflecting the strategic vision of our long-term cooperation, including in a security dimension. The GUAM Secretariat has prepared the draft, which is currently under study by the member states. I hope joint consideration of the paper will be resumed soon. I think the document will be amended and enriched, including the security part, considering the post-war realities and the security challenges in our turbulent environment.

Relations GUAM – EU: multilevel cooperation

The GUAM MS are looking forward to the possibility to formalise our relations with the European Union and develop productive and mutually beneficial cooperation. In this context, they welcome any development of interaction with the EU either at the state level or within regions. All GUAM countries have advanced bilateral relations with the EU. We are very gratified by the recent upgrades: Moldova and Ukraine have acquired the status of EU candidates. We remain optimistic that Georgia will join the club soon. The EU is significantly interested in advancing and strengthening the interaction and cooperation with the Republic of Azerbaijan. The partners upgraded their relations to the status of strategic partnership in energy and transport – the key areas of cooperation among the GUAM nations. Therefore, we consider the EU as the natural partner in promoting and developing those spheres.

We are focusing on implementing our flagship initiatives – GUAM transport corridor (TC) and free trade area. We are hoping to engage the EU in preparation of the comprehensive feasibility study for the TC, based on the European environmental, engineering, and technical standards. Therefore, taking into account all the above considerations we believe that the GUAM can be a reliable regional partner of geostrategic importance for the EU as its immediate neighbour.

We consider the EU's plans and programmes of Eastward expansion, in particular in energy and transport, as an excellent opportunity for deepening cooperation. These prospects are now even closer and very promising.

Energy security in GUAM activities

The role and significance of energy supply sources have exponentially increased in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine, due to the reduction and, eventually, termination of supplies from Russia. Given the volume of Russian exports and the degree of dependence on them (especially in Europe), the search for new suppliers and alternative routes is on the top international agenda to avert the energy crisis in anticipation of winter, and more importantly, prevent deepening of economic crisis and potential political instability.

Obtaining rich reserves and developed and operational infrastructure connecting the Caspian region with the European market, Azerbaijan perfectly fits into this new scenario. In 2021, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline connecting Azerbaijan with Greece, Albania, and Italy as a final destination has been inaugurated and put into operation. Therefore, Baku has started supplying through the Southern Gas Corridor, Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, and Trans Adriatic Pipeline systems to Europe. Now, against a backdrop of increasing demand, there are plans to increase the volume of natural gas supplies via mentioned pipelines and develop a new route through Bulgaria to Balkan countries. There are also discussions of supplying to Moldova and Ukraine.

Recently Turkmenistan expressed its interest in developing supplies of natural gas via the Trans-Caspian route using the existing pipeline infrastructure in our region. This is great news for us. Given the share of Turkmenistan's reserves of natural gas in the world reserves, cooperation with the country will largely contribute to the energy security of the GUAM and the EU.

There are also plans to transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Caspian to Romania via the Black Sea. For that purpose, the construction of the LNG terminals, exporting one in Georgia and receiving one in Romania, are also under consideration as part of the AGRI initiative (Azerbaijan – Georgia – Romania – Interconnector).

Therefore, we are witnessing the transformation of Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus into an important regional energy corridor, an essential element of the emerging European energy security architecture.

Azerbaijan and Georgia, two GUAM founding members, are closely cooperating in energy fields. Azerbaijan is also present in the Ukrainian market through its state oil company SOCAR. I am confident about the great long-term perspectives of such cooperation within the GUAM aimed at enhancing energy security and efficiency, developing alternative and renewable sources of energy, and eventually tying up our countries even closer. I envisage the activation of cooperation in the field after the war. Moreover, we have organisational and operational instruments in place, and we are ready to work. We can also see very promising prospects for cooperation in this sphere with international partners, including the European Union. With Moldova and Ukraine obtaining the EU candidate status, Georgia getting closer to the same status soon, and Azerbaijan having a strategic energy

partnership with the EU, we have prospects for enhancing both GUAM and European energy security through mutually beneficial cooperation.

The current state of relations with external partners

Nowadays, I assess the situation as temporarily quiet because of the changed conditions caused initially by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by two wars in our region. Yet, in general, I am very optimistic about the prospects of post-war expanding and deepening cooperation with partners, as well as other countries and organisations showing interest in the GUAM.

Increasing and strengthening relations with external actors – be it states, international organisations, or private and public entities – were among our priorities at the onset. Since the inception of the GUAM and its transformation into a full-fledged regional organisation, we have developed relations and fruitful cooperation with the US, Japan, the Visegrad group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), Baltic countries, and the Nordic states. The latter, though, are mainly within the parliamentary dimension. Some neighbouring countries, such as Romania and Türkiye, also showed strong interest in the GUAM, as well as states and regional organisations even from Latin America.

As an international organisation, the ODED – GUAM has got the status of a regional partner of the UN and its organisations and agencies, including the UN Economic Commission for Europe, the World Tourism Organization, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the UN Alliance of Civilizations etc. We also maintain working relations with the OSCE and the Council of Europe and cooperate with such specialised organisations as the International Road Transport Union in transportation, the Organization for Cooperation of Railways and so on.

The resumption of the summits of the Heads of Government in 2017 enhanced the visibility of the GUAM, and we viewed a surge of interest from many countries and organisations willing to support and help MS by means of regional cooperation. For example, in 2017, we started dialogues with Canada, Sweden, and Israel with good prospects of signing a memorandum with defined objectives and areas of cooperation. Regardless of obstacles, we managed to prepare the Memorandum of Understanding with Israel. Now we are waiting for the earliest occasion to sign it. In 2018, we were at the point of initiating a dialogue with some countries from Central Asia, Brasilia, and Mexico. Unfortunately, we had to postpone contacts until better times because of the above reasons.

I am convinced that after the war and victory of Ukraine, we will be able to expand the geography and enrich the cooperation with many new partners and organisations.

We are open and ready to develop cooperation with everyone who shares our principles and objectives and is willing to contribute to the peace, stability, and prosperity of this strategic region with enormous potential and ever-growing importance.