



Caucasus  
Talks

Caucasus Talks Manifesto 2020

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# Manifesto

The South Caucasus has for decades been politically managed and governed by three nation-states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), with little cross-over in terms of regional cooperation. The paradigm of the nation-state and the context of inter-state wars and internal conflicts have prevented the peoples of the region from confronting common issues in a cooperative manner. Our common political, social and economic issues have been inherited from a shared history and geography, and it is only logical that we take on these issues together, rather than within the parochial and rigid paradigm of the nation-state, which has thus far been ineffectual in providing solutions to our shared problems - of which one indicator is the “enduring conflicts” that are perpetuating with no end in sight.

We believe that the only way for us to tackle our common issues is through open and informed dialogue. The primary aim of CaucasusTalks is to become a platform for those who care about issues connected to the South Caucasus and the surrounding regions to discuss them openly and in a way that is not only confined to the context of their respective nation-state. Our platform will bring together young activists, journalists, academics and the like to participate in a long-lasting and consistent dialogue among the peoples of the South Caucasus and the surrounding region(s). We are particularly keen on offering this platform to young people who are influential in shaping the region in the future. Our primary objective is to facilitate the familiarisation of the younger generations in the region with one another, since they have for so many years been hidden from each other by the restrictive forces of the nation-state. From time to time, we are also going to invite activists and experts from the older generations to join our platform and engage in exchange of knowledge with their younger colleagues.

**Common challenges in the South Caucasus region include the following:**

## Economic Inequalities

Poverty and economic inequality are pertinent to all societies across the globe. The South Caucasus shares a common history and experience in this regard; it has gone through the Soviet economic project and then experienced the shock of an abrupt economic liberalisation. After the collapse of the centralised command economy of the Soviet Union, criminal-oligarchic figures came to the political fore and some continue to engage in speculative robin hoodism. The urban/rural divide in these countries is stark, as harmful stereotypes, especially directed at the rural population, persist. Poverty levels across the region are markedly high, with small pockets of extreme wealth. Corruption and nepotism, political entrenchment of criminal-oligarchic regimes, poor economic policy-making, as well as violations of workers' rights and mismanagement in the private sector comprise some of the main issues under the focus of civil society groups in the South Caucasus, resulting in court cases and social movements. CaucasusTalks is set on openly discussing economic inequalities wherever they manifest themselves, whether in governmental institutions or private corporations.

## Ecology

In recent decades, the South Caucasus has been facing serious ecological problems, some of which have a transboundary character and require trans-regional cooperation. Ecological problems in the region include, but are not limited to, the following: pollution from mining and hydropower plants, deforestation, harm to biodiversity and river pollution. We have opted for the term 'ecology' rather than 'environment' in order to emphasise the intimate relationship that biological organisms (including humans) have with one another. The term 'environment' has come to denote a context in which humans are separate from nature and that they simply seek to dominate and exploit nature - a paradigm that we reject. Activists in this field in each society have attempted to fill the gaps left behind by their respective governments and to raise these issues in public. In some cases, they have recorded notable successes. Nevertheless, policy makers in the region continue to pay little attention to ecological issues and activists receive little support. Our platform is a space for those interested and engaged in ecological issues to recount their experiences and express their opinions on these issues. Ecological activists across the region can familiarise themselves with one another and with their respective ecological problems, which often take a regional character.

## Human Rights

Since 1991, the sovereign states of the South Caucasus have joined a number of conventions and hosted international organisations concerned with human rights. There were grand hopes that this would lead to the direct improvement of the human rights' situation in each country, however this has not always been the case. Systemic human rights violations take place on a daily basis in the South Caucasus, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways in each country. In addition, the rights of those living in the unrecognised republics are especially precarious, considering their lack of international recognition and voicelessness in the international arena. The idea of human rights in the South Caucasus, although discussed at the highest levels of politics, academia and activism, are thus far inaccessible to the general masses of the region who are provided with little information on these matters and so are in many cases unable to exercise their rights.

Our areas of interest in the field of human rights include the following:

- Women's rights
- Workers' rights
- LGBTQ+ rights
- Rights of people with special needs
- Rights of children
- Rights of ethno-religious minorities

## Ethnic Nationalism

The so-called “national consciousness” that developed among the three main ethnic groups in the South Caucasus - Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians - led to the formation of three nation-states based on those ethnic identities in the early 20th century. Since then, institutions such as the government, schools and the army have undergone a nationalisation process that has fused ethnic identity with such institutions. This has led to the formation of real and rigid national borders in the South Caucasus and the perception that people in each nation-state lead separate lives, are on “unique national trajectories” and that one nation is in competition with the other. One dangerous indicator of this is the militarisation of society and the ever-increasing spending made on defence budgets. We believe that real security comes from the encouragement of dialogue and cooperation, openly discussing our common issues and understanding one another’s insecurities rather than solely focusing on one’s own traumas. This requires a change in attitudes when it comes to security and a nuanced understanding of history, which has thus far been framed in terms of national traumas and struggles in each respective nation-state. One of the aims of our platform is to dispel the myths perpetrated by ethnic nationalist ideology and to encourage young people to gain more nuanced perspectives on ethnic identity and their understanding of history, which is common and not solely national. We hope for our discussions to revive and co-create narratives of community and cooperation that overcome ethnically/nationally defined groups of belonging.

## Geopolitical Intrigues

For centuries the South Caucasus has found itself caught in-between great empires to the North, West and South. The South Caucasus region has never lost its strategic importance for its regional neighbours; in recent decades the influence of the Russian, Turkish, and to a lesser extent, Iranian states have had political, economic and social impacts on the region. We are also keen on putting the influences of superpowers in the region under the microscope. We will direct our attention to the geopolitical interests and the roles of the USA, the EU and China in the region. Within the paradigm of international relations, the South Caucasian nation-states have little choice but to attempt to make geopolitical alliances that would work in their national interests, however, these endeavours often come at the cost of cooperation between these countries. We aim to discuss the possibilities of regional cooperation in order to mitigate the negative externalities of contemporary geopolitical settings.

## Preservation of Cultural Heritage

The diverse cultural heritage across the South Caucasus has come under assault from the regimes instilled since the 20th century. The socialist realism of the Soviet Union sought to remove historical and cultural traces that did not fit into the vision of the Soviet elite. Then the crony capitalist tendencies following the fall of the Soviet Union have subject cultural sites to profit-seeking ventures. The rampant consumerisation of life has also meant that cultural and artistic expression has been forced to succumb to the dictates of marketing and mass demand. The enduring political antagonisms between the societies of the South Caucasus have been

manifested in assaults against each other's cultural heritage. We value the vital role of cultural heritage as well as contemporary artistic work in both providing meaning to our lives and in unmasking the social, political and economic issues of our societies - a linkage that is all too often neglected. We aim to inform the public on the regional challenges faced by those active in the field of 'culture' and the significant role they play in deconstructing and reflecting upon our private, social and political, roles.

## The Surrounding Region

Our central focus on the South Caucasus arises from the entangled historical experiences of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia over the past 100 years. CaucasusTalks is nevertheless intent on engaging with interested parties from the surrounding region, expanding to the North Caucasus, Turkey and Iran. The social, political and cultural interactions between the South Caucasus and its surrounding regions are clear to see for any traveler who has journeyed through the whole region and are even clearer for those who study it. The historical and contemporary developments in the regions of Turkey, Russia and Iran have always had direct impacts on the South Caucasus and this very interconnectivity is the reason why we are keen on engaging with activists, journalists, researchers and academics from those countries.

# Dialogue Principles

## Nobody knows everything

We adopt a conception of knowledge that constitutes an ever-expanding and ever-transforming body. Therefore, everyone is limited in their knowledge, both of themselves and others. Our platform accepts this principle and seeks to bring in as many informed perspectives as possible in order to fill in gaps in each individual's knowledge. Listening to perspectives other than one's own is the best way forward when it comes to reaching compromises and making multilateral decisions.

## To speak or not to speak?

We are all for people expressing their opinions and recounting their experiences. All humans carry prejudices and critical opinions about others, and we support the idea of agonism, in which positive outcomes can arise out of conflictual ideas. However, ideas, thoughts and opinions that carry an essentially discriminatory character are not tolerated since they lead to real physical and psychological harm. In addition, we believe that speaking with supreme confidence does not equate to the level of knowledge that a given individual possesses on a given topic. The merits of one's opinions and thoughts are valued based on their content rather than the way in which they are expressed.

## Listen to the "other side"

People tend to live in the context of particular discursive narratives and to stay in their normative comfort zones. The willingness to leave that bubble and to listen to people with differing, sometimes contradicting experiences and perspectives on common matters is the first step towards peaceful co-existence. Listening to different perspectives does not necessarily mean leaving one's beliefs and values behind, but necessarily means respecting and taking into account others' beliefs and values.

## Deliberative democracy

The idea behind deliberative democracy is that citizens are informed of politics and that informed citizens can then participate actively in political debates about policies that have real-life outcomes. This is in contrast to representative democracy, in which politicians are elected simply based on their electoral platform, but citizens have an insignificant role to play in the political process thereafter. We aim to incorporate aspects of deliberative democracy into our platform, which has the objective of bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to discuss common issues in an open and informed manner. We hope that a culture of deliberative democracy can begin to flourish in the South Caucasus and the surrounding regions.

## Our vision

Our ultimate goal is to bring about a sense of well-being in the hearts and minds of the peoples of the South Caucasus and the surrounding regions through a process of respectful and constructive discussion, dialogue and deliberation. We envisage a South Caucasus where both individualism and communalism can thrive as one - where people are free to express and indulge in their individual creativity, and to feel part of communities wherein cooperation, rather than competition, is accepted as a core ethic.

We are especially keen to garner support among the young generations in the region who are already thinking across borders and would be willing to cooperate with us. Nevertheless, we do not only want to preach to the converted, we strive to bring about changes in the modus vivendi of actors living and working in the restricted paradigm of the nation-state.

Our purpose is to address the aforementioned common challenges as shared problems, considering the shared geographic, cultural, humanitarian, economic and socio-political heritage. By doing so, this platform is not only expected to bring about changes in our methods of dialogue and certain solutions to specific challenges, but it will also bring forth a trans-regional approach to the aforementioned challenges through comparative and jointly conducted analysis and cross-border engagement, which will circumvent the parochialism of the nation-state.

Our platform is also open to engage and cooperate with other such initiatives and movements across the globe who share a sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the common challenges mentioned above.