

GUAM IN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

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The recent call of President V. Zelenskyy to “breath a new life” into GUAM and to develop it as an important and influential regional economic organization, stirred a flurry of comments, representing a wide political spectrum of views and opinions. As a general observation, they were rather of a political nature and mostly biased. At the same time, they showed little or incorrect knowledge about the Organization and its activities, which often brought about misunderstanding and led to misguide. Superfluous and frivolous interpretations of GUAM situation in some publications not only reflected a low level of expert proficiency and dubious journalistic ethics yet were clearly ideologically influenced and politically motivated. To cut short, it was somehow felt that in majority cases, their only purpose was to inflict damage to the image of GUAM.

This reaction was predictable though. From time to time, mostly when something suggestive was happening in the framework of the Organization, we used to observe this kind of media cacophony, which was orchestrated from certain centres and their proxy media outlets. This paper should not be viewed as an intention to enter into polemics with these far-fetched and false insinuations, revealing real reasons of their anti-GUAM motivations. Let’s leave it to the morality of the scribblers.

Rather, the purpose of this article is to provide information on a diverse perspective of GUAM to those with genuine interest. But most importantly, this is to support the call from the Ukrainian President explaining why this appeal is timely and important. I consider this as my personal and a professional duty. Important to note also, that all views, thoughts, assessments, ideas and suggestions, are of my own and do not reflect the official stance of the Organization, nor of GUAM member states.

The Background and the Rationale behind the Creation of GUAM

In order to better understand the reasons and objectives standing behind the creation of GUAM, paradigm of its development and the prospects for growth, it would be helpful to take a brief retrospective look at the evolution of the geopolitical context in a wider Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions late in the 20th century, with GUAM member states (further GUAM MS) being located at the core of this geography.

In the post-war system of international relations, the territories of the former soviet republics for decades were used to serve a buffer zone, cushioning the existential confrontation between Kremlin and its alleged Western adversaries. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 onward, these republics, after regaining their independence, became the owners of their destinies and stakeholders of their geography on their own rights, with their genuine interests of building independent states and ensuring their integration into the family of free nations. Consequently, the emergence of the independent states, dubbed then as newly independent states, or the NIS, along the periphery of the former empire, have

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triggered dynamic processes across this vast geographic area, altering the political landscape. Moreover, openness of the NIS area for international cooperation and political interaction contributed even more to the dynamics in the developments of the region, which is still considered by the Russian Federation as the sphere of its strategic interests. Thus, the interests of the NIS, of the Russian Federation and other stakeholders were closely intertwined, most often colliding. With the geopolitical balance in the world compromised, the NIS did not lose their “bumper” nature between East and West and the stakeholders on both sides were competing to accommodate their strategic interests in the newly created geopolitical vacuum, providing their defence and economic needs.

As soon as there were signs of the ostensible drifting of political elites of the NIS towards the West, allegedly jeopardizing the security balance in the region, an escalation of tensions through fuelling of ethnic, political and military conflicts could be observed across the region from the Baltic to the Black Sea and to the Caspian Sea region in the attempt to retain the NIS in the orbit of influence.

Thus, and so, the interplay of the diverging, and in certain instances, conflicting interests determined the dynamics and the evolution of this vast region for the last nearly three decades.

In order to safeguard their statehood, all NIS applied and have been accepted into global organizations and international institutions. In view of the growing tensions and with the purpose to further anchor new geopolitical realities, a number of new regional platforms have been established under support and with the involvement of major regional stakeholders, having the aim of preventing further escalations, promoting dialogue, confidence-building and regional cooperation.

Among such initiatives, created in the late 80’s and at the beginning of 90’s of the past century, we can refer to the Baltic Council, the BSEC, the CEI, the CIS, the ECO, the Stability Pact and others. Besides these regional organizations, different formats of partnership and cooperation have been proposed by the EU, NATO, UN regional branches and its special agencies. The latter were aimed at supporting internal reforms and institutional building, facilitation of integration into regional and wider international systems of international relations, establishment of market economy and development of free democratic society.

Despite these measures, since historical evidence shows, all above efforts in general have failed with their main objective – reduction of tensions and contribution to peace, stability and security in the region. Not only conflicts have been frozen for decades, though, they were rather deepening and new ones spreading across the region.

As an insider and a participant in many of the above-mentioned all-inclusive regional frameworks, the author can conclude that in their majority, these institutions under the pretext of cooperation, instead turned into arenas of competition and confrontation of different interests and objectives with nothing much but a miserable or no effect in the outcome. Apparently, a win-win approach was not a strong side of cooperation among their member states.

Indeed, in the described situation, one could see an interplay of the two main groups of factors that was embedded at the core of the regional dynamics. The first one could be characterized as centrifugal, reflecting the efforts of the NIS to distance from former metropolis centre towards more independence, balanced integration into regional and global economy, in particular, seeking their strength under umbrella of regional groupings. On the opposite side, the centripetal forces appear to hamper and to reverse efforts of the NIS, thus keeping them under their sphere of influence.

It was obvious that the divergence of interests and objectives of main actors, coupled by the asymmetries of political and economic weight, military power and resources, commitments to and consistency of the efforts lead to the situation when the majority of regional initiatives, international mediation and other efforts – were and still are unable to function up to their declared objectives. Hence, many promising regional initiatives and organizations started gradually slipping into irrelevance, without ability to avert dangerous developments in the region. Most vivid examples here are the OBSEC and the CIS. But these are not exclusions.

Under the circumstances, it happened that the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine turned out to be at the epicentre of major tensions across the region. With independence, the first three, inherited ethnic tensions with the territorial claims and from the very beginning were embroiled in fierce military conflicts, imposed and supported by external forces. They resulted in flagrant violation of the territorial integrity of the formers, with hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs. Ukraine, while also experiencing pressures from the start, and being the largest and by the far the most important target in the group, confronted with similar situation later on.

Such a desperate situation, after six years of independence, eventually led to the idea of establishing a new regional initiative based on common problems, shared interests and long-term strategic objectives, formally – without explicit political prejudice, predominantly on merely economic grounds. In October 10, 1997 after a round of consultations, the Summit of the national leaders held on the sidelines of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, has formalized the creation of a new regional initiative, known by the acronym of the capital letters of the founding countries. The Presidents of the four states adopted Joint Communiqué reflecting principle aims and objectives of the initiative aimed at fostering friendship and good-neighbourly relations, promoting regional cooperation, addressing security challenges and threats in the region, etc. Amongst other, *“the Presidents underscored the need for strengthening quadrilateral cooperation for the sake of a stable and secure Europe guided by principles of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of state frontiers...”*

20 Years of GUAM: Through Ups and Downs

The creation of the new regional initiative has been met with enthusiasm and support not only from within the countries, but also by a wider international community.

With the security and political agenda dominating at the very beginning, the initiative eventually evolved into further incorporating new spheres of mutual interests with areas of cooperation embracing trade and economy, culture and tourism, youth and sports, strengthening of national institutions, combating natural and man-made disasters, enhancing regional security and stability, democratic reforms etc.

Dynamic developments since the inception, was a clear manifestation of the political will and commitments that instilled optimism and raised expectations behind the initiative. National leaders hold their Summits annually. Visionary strategic ideas and concepts have been discussed and proposed to ensure clear guidance and perspective of the development, such as GUAM Transport Corridor, GUAM Free Trade Area, GUAM Cultural Corridor, close cooperation in consular, education, healthcare, customs, combating crimes, youth and sports and many other spheres.

Rapid expansion of cooperation into new areas brought to the agenda the necessity of the institutional and organizational support for coordination and consolidation of joint efforts. Thus, in May of 2006 at the GUAM Summit in Kyiv, Ukraine, GUAM regional initiative has been transformed into a full-fledged international organization under the new title – *“Organization for Democracy & Economic Development – GUAM”* with the international secretariat and the HQ based in Kyiv. Later on, with establishment of GUAM Business Council and GUAM Parliamentary Assembly, the cooperation has been extended into business and parliamentary dimensions respectively. Among other initiatives, the establishment of the Virtual Centre for Cooperation of the Law Enforcement Agencies is also worth mentioning.

Since then ODED-GUAM celebrated two remarkable Summits in 2007 (Baku, Azerbaijan) and in 2008 (Batumi, Georgia), with the attendance of the leaders and high-level guests from European states, the USA, Japan, senior officials and politicians across the world. Summits have triggered conceptual, project-based and result-oriented approach to cooperation that eventually transferred into important agreements, basic documents, visionary statements, strategic initiatives. Here we can refer to the main ones – *“The Agreement on the Establishment of Free Trade Area among GUAM Member States”* (GUAM FTA, entered into force in 2003), and *The Concept of the GUAM Transport Corridor* (further GUAM TC), adopted in 2013.

Besides, all the necessary statutory documents to ensure organization’s efficient functioning have been also elaborated and adopted during this period.

The Organization declared its openness and willingness for cooperation with all who shared same values, principles and objectives. And as mentioned above, GUAM initiative has attracted interest from many corners of the globe. The US, Japan, V4 countries, Turkey, the Baltic and the Balkan countries and others showed interest in establishing formal relationship. Eventually, a comprehensive *“GUAM-US Framework Program of Trade and Transport Facilitation, Ensuring Border and Customs Control, Combating Terrorism, Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking”* has been adopted that followed by the signing of the GUAM-Japan Cooperation Program that was further expanded in 2015.

Last GUAM Summit was held in July of 2008 in Batumi, during the Georgian Presidency. In a month time, a brief war exploded between the Russian Federation and Georgia that, besides known consequences, also interrupted positive dynamics of cooperation in GUAM. Moreover, the war has caused waves across the region that triggered changes of political elites in some countries, for whom engagement and high-profile cooperation in the framework of GUAM was not of a priority, or if can be said so, of political convenience and expediency. Thus, long-term strategic vision was substituted with short-sighted political manoeuvring and the Organization became the hostage of political conjuncture.

In contrast to the first decade, during next nine years, the activities within the Organization were kept mainly at the expert level, the visibility and the dynamics of activities within the Organization were gradually decreasing. This affected the moral in GUAM and overall discipline throughout its institutional hierarchy. Though the main decision-making body – the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs was holding meetings regularly, its decisions were mainly of routine nature, aimed at ensuring the functioning of the Secretariat and the Organization as a whole. It seemed as if GUAM lost sense of purpose. Some key partners started losing interest towards Organization, reduced or even withdrew their support and engagement. This period can be characterized as the time of lost opportunities.

New situation in the region emerged in 2014, after the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine and subsequent military confrontation between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Dramatic developments in Ukraine brought to power new pro-national political elites and the new situation in the region has foregrounded the importance of GUAM as a regional framework.

In September of 2016 at the meeting of the then Prime Minister of Ukraine V. Groysman and the Permanent Representatives to the Organization of GUAM MS accompanied by GUAM Secretary General, was decided to re-launch GUAM with high-level meeting with the focus on economic issues. On March 27, 2017, after nearly a decade since the last GUAM Summit, the first meeting of the Heads of government of GUAM MS was held in Kyiv.

The agenda of the meeting contained two main issues – the implementation of the Agreement on the Establishment of FTA and of the Concept of GUAM TC. To make the implementation of these initiatives open and inclusive, GUAM Business Forum has been launched, where Heads of government addressed business communities and invited them to close cooperation in the realization of these initiatives.

Since then, GUAM Summits are organized on annual basis, hosted by the Chairmanship-in-office and, as a rule, accompanied by the GUAM Business Forums.

During the last meeting held in Kyiv on December 12, 2019 President V. Zelenskyy received the Heads of national delegations and proposed an exchange of views on the future of GUAM. I believe that the recent call of President of Ukraine to “breathe a new life” to GUAM is a sequence of the substantial discussions and its outcomes.

Summarizing the above overview, we may say that since 2016 the Organization is in the process of accommodating to the new realities through recalibrating its sense of purpose and redefining its mission. The cooperation in the framework of GUAM has been renewed and gaining momentum. An impetus has been provided to a number of important developments that could provide the Organization with clear development strategy and sharpened medium to long-term vision.

Without diminishing the significance of the ongoing activities in many other fields, the interaction on two main tracks should be singled out. On the first – the Organization is focusing its activities on practical implementation of two mentioned flagship initiatives, expansion of the latter into an inclusive process with engagement of local and international partners, as well as development and further upgrading of legal and regulatory frameworks. On the second, – the member states attempt to project their cooperation into the future, to make it more comprehensive, enhance the synergies of the ongoing activities at national and regional levels. This presumes the elaboration of the strategic perspectives of cooperation based on the provisions of the *Chairman's Vision Paper*, adopted by the CMFA at 20th Anniversary meeting of the CMFA held on October 8, 2017 in Tbilisi, Georgia.

GUAM MS have also embarked on the elaboration of proper *Concept of Communication Strategy*. This is becoming crucial as the Organization is aiming at reaching out a wider public both national and international, as well as eliminating misinterpretation and confusion about the purpose and the activities of GUAM caused by the deliberate toxic media insinuations.

With above processes going in parallel, the ultimate objective is to re-brand GUAM, make it relevant and adequate to its tasks and objectives and to dynamic and evolving external environment. We aim to

make its activities project-based, result-oriented and delivering, so that it can be an active participant of and contributor to the regional developments.

Provided that GUAM maintains the focus on the set of objectives and implements its projects and initiatives, results of its activities can trigger positive trends across the region with potential benefits for the whole neighbourhood.

Learning from Experience

For this to happen it is crucial that the momentum of regional cooperation is preserved and further developed, avoiding mistakes of the past. The history of GUAM can teach us few important lessons in that respect, which can be useful to steer the Organization further through the dire straits of geopolitics.

Lesson 1

The Organization functions efficiently only when there is unity, solidarity, political will and leadership behind it.

As the experience of the first decade shows, the Organization can deliver only when there is commitment and engagement at the highest level. This is crucial because it affects many aspects of organizational behaviour: morality, coherence, consistency and continuity, discipline and mobilization through the institutional hierarchy. It provides necessary guidance, as well as project visibility and ensures international engagement and cooperation.

We need to restore institutional discipline, engage partnership and cooperation in implementation of its objectives. Therefore, leadership, commitment, visibility and predictability are the keys.

The Supreme body of GUAM is the Council of the Heads of state and government, which according to the GUAM Charter should meet once a year and it should lead by example.

Lesson 2

The mainstream cooperation in the framework of GUAM should not be affected by the situational internal politics.

Once and for all it should be agreed and acknowledged that at the very core of GUAM functioning are the strategic national interests and this should be a guiding principle for political elites of GUAM MS irrespective of their ideological orientation and political affinities. GUAM should be above short-term political agenda, and its activities should not be compromised for tactical political manoeuvring and fall under internal or external influences.

Activities in the framework of GUAM should be viewed and assessed solely through the prism of national strategic interests of GUAM MS and the region as a whole. GUAM should not be the object of far-fetched cheap propaganda and be used as an apple of political discord. These are crucial conditions to eliminate further ups and downs, dependence on internal political upheavals in GUAM and to ensure the consistency and continuity in its activities.

Lesson 3

The Organization is strongly dependent on the external environment in which it operates and is extremely vulnerable to it.

To a large extent this is closely linked with the above two aspects. When the environment is conducive and supportive, the Organization can operate effectively. When the environment is hostile and unpredictable – activities stall.

This is probably the most important lesson that GUAM MS should be addressing on a more consistent manner. Because it affects many other aspects – unity and solidarity, consistency and predictability, international engagement and cooperation, progress in results of activities, etc. And it depends to a large extent on the MS themselves, how they collectively contribute to the shaping a conducive environment.

Among major factors that adversely affect GUAM environment are the **regional conflicts** on the territories of GUAM MS. They are serious impediments for growth and sustainable development in the region. But they are also being utilized as main instruments for manipulation and influence GUAM MS. Therefore, they are essential elements of environment that should be collectively and persistently addressed, aiming at the mobilization of international support and more active and responsible engagement of major international and regional actors in their resolution. Moreover, they are also posing serious threats to the European and wider international peace, security and stability.

As was mentioned at the beginning, this factor was the premise of the creation of GUAM, which aimed at contribution to their resolution mainly through means of political interaction and economic cooperation. The Organization is not equipped with other means in that respect. Nevertheless, joint persistent and purposeful promotion and advancement of the common and solid stance, based on norms and principles of international law, in itself is a powerful message to international community and should be further continued and strengthened, raising awareness and attracting more support. Here GUAM MS should manifest their unequivocal unity and solidarity in their stance towards principle issues of all MS, excluding ambivalent interpretations of the official positions.

While assessing the situation around the conflict resolution, we also should acknowledge a complete failure of the international community in their attempts to restore the international law and order on the territories of GUAM MS. We all witness its fruitless attempts to mediate in conflict resolution without any promising prospects. Therefore, GUAM MS should take in this respect a more pro-active approach and be more creative and assertive in advancing GUAM as useful regional platform, able and capable of bringing about positive developments and changes in the region.

Lesson 4

Active international cooperation is the prerequisite for successful implementation of regional projects and initiatives in the framework of GUAM.

When GUAM functions and delivers it attracts interest of external partners. When it malfunctions the interest and support vanish. We have to regain trust and confidence of international partners through meaningful, project-based and result-oriented cooperation. Broad cooperation with partners is crucial for achieving our goals.

We need to develop and expand partnerships through consistent, continuous, coherent and purposeful engagements in order to bring up a new balance of interests in the region that will improve overall political climate. Mentioned earlier asymmetries in the interplay of interests and factors are among most serious challenges that the member states should take into consideration.

There are many examples in the development of important regional projects that prove that when there is broad coalition of committed, engaged and supportive partners, even unimaginable is becoming possible.

Lesson 5

The Organization can't be effective and influential without adequate communication strategy.

Since its inception GUAM became the target of deliberate and purposeful media attacks and manipulations, aimed at distorting its true aims and objectives, undermining its image and authority. STRATCOM is a missing part in our activities and have created an info vacuum for all sorts of manipulations of public opinion.

It is also obvious that toxic media insinuations are politically motivated. They are the secondary instruments for influencing political elites and to manipulate the environment. There are persistent, orchestrated attempts to depict GUAM as someone's tool in pursuance of its ominous goals directed against a specific third party. This is quite popular, deliberately propagated and replicated narrative used in fierce anti-GUAM propaganda. This is of course not only strongly biased and unfounded, but false, deceiving and irresponsible. There is nothing that can prove it, neither in GUAM documents, nor in its actions.

On the contrary, this kind of propaganda technique can be considered as an ideological justification for more aggressive and assertive attacks against GUAM.

This narrative creates a lot of speculations, conspiracy assumptions, frivolous interpretations and unnecessary tensions inside member states and in the relationship with their potential partners.

Some comments even go as far as stating that GUAM is a tool to facilitate EU's and NATO's encroachment into the region. Quite often this thesis is being used to unjustly scourge the Organization and, unfortunately, this hysteria reverberates in internal politics, affecting attitudes of political elites towards GUAM in some member states.

It is well known that both the EU and the NATO are important players and stakeholders in the region promoting security, stability, cooperation and development. They are engaged in different activities with the countries in the region on bilateral basis, as well as in multilateral formats. It is also true that some GUAM MS, have strategic interests, political aspirations and objectives of building closer relations with these organizations as a way to strengthen their independence and ensure integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

At the same time, long-term strategic aims and aspirations of GUAM MS are not necessarily same, or similar. Where our common interests in the framework of GUAM converge – it is in the strengthening of the independence, restoring territorial integrity and sovereignty of GUAM MS, in regional cooperation and implementation of common regional projects and initiatives, and, eventually, in

shaping this area as the zone of peace, security and stability. And our main tools are the means of economic, cultural and political cooperation.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that it would be in everyone's interest if the synergy effect of the activities in the region, contributing to peace, stability and sustainable development, irrespective of actors, are ensured and sustained.

To cut it short, all above insinuations are baseless, biased and mendacious. In the context of above-stated, it is worthwhile to emphasize another important thesis – **GUAM is a self-sufficient organization with its own clearly defined mission, objectives and agenda.** This is how it should be acknowledged and promoted and not be allowed that external forces and their local petty proxies impose their point of view with the purpose of political and public manipulation. In other words, GUAM should develop and pursue its own communication strategy to rectify this situation and prevent further political bullying of the Organization.

The Way Forward

Now, building on those lessons, GUAM MS need to develop collective policy responses to address all the mentioned challenges and to make the Organization relevant and adequate to utilize the emerging opportunities.

As it was mentioned above, conflicts on the temporary occupied territories of GUAM MS are our major challenge. Until they are resolved, the region will be kept hostage and regional development arrested. Conservation of such a situation will create more regional disparities and disproportions that will further add to the tensions and hostilities among the countries of the region.

Stagnation in the process of conflict resolution in the region is somewhat a reflection of the balance of interests and engagement in the region of the main stakeholders, referred to above. A breakthrough in the situation can be ensured only if all the interested and involved parties, by joint efforts can shift this balance in the desired direction, i.e. towards creation of positive development dynamics in the region that will be conducive enough for the conflict resolution. Of course, we are talking about the dynamics that can be generated only through the means of economic cooperation. Quite naturally, these developments will have a spill-over effect stretching well beyond the region and can be beneficial for a wider GUAM neighbourhood as well.

A **game changer is needed** in the current regional setup, and I believe that GUAM as a regional organization, can play such a role provided the support and participation of GUAM partners and wider international community in the implementation of its projects and initiatives.

This is in particular timely and important in view of the opening opportunities in the region of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea basin.

Given the fact that the Black and the Caspian Seas region is emerging as a very important integral part of the new alternative energy and connectivity architecture, linking new countries, regions and continents, its role and significance will increase exponentially. New geopolitical landscape is being shaped by new developments that eventually will define the role of the region and its specialization in regional and global economy.

GUAM MS through the large-scale national investment programs, as well as billions of FDIs, have implemented important national and regional projects in the development of energy and transport infrastructure that enable positioning of them as important regional hubs on the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

What GUAM MS should aim at is to catch-up the bandwagon of important global developments, in particular, the development of comprehensive, alternative connectivity infrastructure linking two global powerhouses of Asia and Europe. GUAM MS should act in prompt and consolidated manner to utilize its geographic advantage and transform it into competitive one along other East-West transportation routes.

As was mentioned above, to expedite the process, GUAM MS have redefined the priorities and streamlined the activities with focus on the implementation of two flagship initiatives – GUAM TC and GUAM FTA. These two issues are in the Agenda of the GUAM Summits during last three years. GUAM MS need to further consolidate their efforts and engage international partners in fulfilling the tasks assigned by the Heads of government.

GUAM Priority “To-Do List”

Here is what should be done consequentially in pursuance of the recent decisions of the GUAM main organs.

1. The preparation of the **Feasibility Study of GUAM TC** based on the Terms of Reference adopted by the Prime ministers of GUAM MS at their meeting held in 2018 in Chisinau should be started without further delays. The comprehensive Feasibility Study of GUAM TC might turn into a strategic roadmap of transforming GUAM geographic area into a zone of free, safe and competitive transportation/transit. We should expedite the process of the mobilization of necessary resources at national levels, as well as talk to partners and all parties interested in this project.

One of the advantages of GUAM TC is that, due to its central geographic location, it can provide interconnections with many other regional transport corridors and routes.

2. Full implementation of the “**Agreement on the Establishment of the FTA among GUAM MS**” should be expedited. This is crucial to stimulate transportation, trade and investment activities among our nations and make region attractive for FDIs.

3. Upon the instructions of the Prime minister the attention should be paid to the development of **business dimension** within GUAM and actively engage business communities of GUAM MS in the realization of main economic initiatives.

4. Parallel to practical implementation of the above initiatives, we should finalize and endorse the elaborated version of the **Chairman’s Vision Paper** that will equip GUAM with medium to long-term strategy of comprehensive and purposeful cooperation supplemented by medium- and long-term list of deliverables.

5. Finally, GUAM MS should elaborate and adopt **GUAM Communication Strategy**. The importance of it was sufficiently elaborated earlier.

At the foundation of all above-mentioned is the **institutional discipline**. Restored leadership, strategic guidance and proper coordination will enhance the capacity, efficiency and effectiveness of the Organization to that effect.

GUAM countries should assume the responsibility and become true owners of the organization and of the region. GUAM, as a regional framework, is able and capable to assist them in this mission. Unlike other regional organizations, GUAM possesses obvious and strong advantages that are underutilized. There are no antagonistic or conflicting interests among its founding members, but rather converging strategic objectives and aspirations. MS are the strategic partners. The Organization is charged with the vision and clear purpose and able to mobilize necessary resources. The organizational setup is well developed, balanced and can be very efficient. GUAM as the organization stands the chance of assuming its lawful ownership in the shaping of the region as the area of peace, stability, cooperation and development. This is more topical now than ever before.

In the context of the above mentioned, I would like to appeal, in particular, to the international community, including partner countries, international organizations, all others who are interested in safety, security and prosperity of the region. Stay committed and engaged, support and take part in our activities. Altogether we can ensure a win-win outcome for the whole region.

Concluding remarks

GUAM geography is at the epicentre of many important regional developments, as well as military conflicts and growing international confrontations and tensions. On the one side, it is emerging as an important pillar of the new international energy and transport security architecture, providing vital access to new alternative sources of energy and new markets. On the other, - this area hosts most protracted and dangerous conflicts in Europe that pose serious threat to international peace, security and stability.

Furthermore, should we take a wider look at the surrounding of its geography territories we will see a broader panorama of the escalation of political and military tensions, wars and calamities all along its perimeter. Instability in the immediate neighbourhood reverberates in GUAM MS. In addition to that, tectonic shifts in global politics, massive and unpunished flagrant violations of international law and order, helplessness and impotency of international institutions and feebleness of international community etc., only add to more uncertainty and unpredictability about the future the region.

As can be seen from the developments in and around the region, the geopolitical context is very dynamic, complex and rapidly changing. Yet the main owners and stakeholders of the region are the MS and they, together with their partners, should assume and co-share the responsibility for the future of the region. Depending on the joint and coordinated cooperation efforts further evolution of the region can be predictable and generating growth and development.

Or, on the contrary, it will continue to remain as a source of instability and uncertainty, kind of a “time bomb”, or a “powder keg”, when the Bickford cord can easily be set on fire at any “desirable” moment. Daily military clashes in Eastern Ukraine, “borderization” tactics in the occupied Georgian territories, tensions in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, or most recent grave incident on the Azerbaijani-Armenian border should serve as a reminder!

Then a natural question arises: what GUAM MS, its partners and other regional and global stakeholders in the region, altogether, can do to make the big picture more optimistic and promising for achieving a long-awaited peace, security and stability in the region?

The immediate and clear-cut answer to that is – the implementation of the above-mentioned two comprehensive GUAM initiatives. Their realization will undoubtedly impact the evolution of the regional landscape in the wider Black Sea and Caspian Sea region towards more inclusiveness and sustainable development. Moreover, if GUAM MS, through broader cooperation, will succeed in the creation of operational GUAM TC and in the development of GUAM geography as the zone free for trade, investments and transit, it subsequently could serve as “vital artery”, linking Asia and Europe, providing new connections and access to the markets for many countries in the Central and the South-Eastern Asia, the Gulf countries etc. Then, supposedly, in its stability and security will be interested not only parties involved, but wide international community. This, eventually, might also help in the resolutions of the conflicts on the territories of GUAM MS in the final instance. Just try to visualize it!

Once again, this is why the call of President V. Zelenskyy referred to at the beginning of this paper is so important and timely.

This article is an attempt to find an answer to all too tormenting questions: how to get out of the vicious circle of tensions and conflicts into the process of constructive dialogue, building of trust, stability, cooperation and eventually long-awaited peace in this geographic area of enormous economic potential and growing geostrategic significance.

I hope also that this brief overview will contribute to the better understanding of GUAM and resonate positively not only in the mindset of political elites representing wide political spectrum of GUAM MS, but also of our partners and all international community, including neighboring countries, those who interested in restoring peace, stability and development in this conflict-torn region.

Last but not least, I also hope that provided insights will invite and encourage the expert brethren to take a more engaged and responsible attitude in assessing GUAM and its activities. We at GUAM Secretariat are open and will welcome any constructive remarks and suggestions. We are also keen to build lasting partnerships with public actors and to make this an all-inclusive and continuous process so that the objectives of GUAM and the cooperation in the framework of the Organization are clear and no more serve as the feeding ground for all sorts of speculations and manipulations.

As a first step in this direction, the National Institute of Strategic Studies of Ukraine, together with GUAM Secretariat, will organize international conference on GUAM. And we would like to invite experts, politicians, the representatives of official, academic and business circles, all with genuine interest in GUAM, to join us at the Conference.