

# DİPLOMATİYA ALƏMİ

WORLD OF DIPLOMACY  
JOURNAL OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

№ 55, 2020

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“World of Diplomacy” journal is published since 2002.

Registration №1161, 14 January 2005

ISSN: 1818-4898

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## ARTICLES

### GUAM in Evolving Geopolitical Context: Challenges and Opportunities for Regional Cooperation

*Amb. Altai Efendiev\**

#### *Introduction*

The Organization for Democracy & Economic Development - GUAM, comprised of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (GUAM) recently has entered its third decade. Created in 1997 as a collective response to address regional security and development challenges, the initiative went through different phases in its evolution – from raising hopes and high expectations at the initial stage, to some disappointments and criticism for inability to deliver up to these expectations. Under the circumstances, the contribution of GUAM to the regional stability, cooperation and development appeared to be very little, if noticeable at all.

On one hand, following the dissolution of the USSR and subsequent collision of interests of local, regional and global players in the periphery of the former metropolis, GUAM geography appeared to be at the epicenter of most serious and growing geopolitical tensions. Growing number of conflicts and wars on the territories of GUAM member states (MS) resulted in flagrant violations of their sovereignty and territorial integrity, dozens of thousands of lost lives and millions of refugees and IDPs left behind. These conflicts as the most dangerous conflicts in the world are continuing to be major impediment to cooperation and development, source of threats to international peace, security and stability. This is also an indication of how hostile and volatile the external environment in which GUAM operates, and how fragile and vulnerable GUAM MS and the Organization as whole can be.

On the other hand, GUAM geography is also becoming an important integral part of the new emerging global connectivity architecture opening up enormous opportunities for regional cooperation.

To a large extent development of cooperation in the framework of GUAM, as well as its engagement with the third parties, was defined by the dynamics of the developments on the ground, and by the correlation between the Organization, its framework and structures and its external geopolitical environment in which it operated.

There are number of questions on to what extent the framework and its structures were adequate and pertinent to its environment; to what degree the collective policy responses were relevant and corresponding to the tasks in front of the Organization and the challenges facing the region; how both above-mentioned aspects affected the cooperation and the outcomes of the activities in the framework of GUAM; and, finally, what should be undertaken by the member states, their partners and international community to rectify the current status quo towards transforming GUAM into efficient and important regional player capable to contribute to the shaping of this geographic space as the zone of peace, security, stability and cooperation.

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This article seeks to find response to some of the above-mentioned questions and to offer certain suggestions to that effect<sup>1</sup>. This article is also an attempt to find an answer to all 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.

### **20 Years of GUAM: Through Ups and Downs**

The creation of the new regional initiative in December of 1997 was a collective response of the founding members to the security challenges they confronted with since regaining their independence in 1991. With the security and political concerns dominating at the very beginning, this 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 of GUAM MS hold their annual Summits to discuss visionary strategic ideas and concepts and to propose clear guidance for prospective cooperation, such as GUAM Transport Corridor, GUAM Free Trade Area, GUAM Cultural Corridor, as well as close cooperation in consular, education, healthcare, customs, combating crimes, youth and sports and many other spheres.

Rapid expansion of cooperation into new areas necessitated the institutional and organizational support for coordination of joint efforts. Thus, in May 2006 at the GUAM Summit in Kyiv, Ukraine, GUAM has been transformed from a regional initiative into a full-fledged international organization under the new title – “Organization for Democracy & Economic Development-GUAM” (ODED-GUAM) with the international secretariat and the Headquarters (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 Center for Cooperation of the Law Enforcement Agencies is also worth mentioning.

Since then ODED-GUAM held 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 US, Japan, senior officials and politicians from across the world. Summits have triggered conceptual, project-based and result-oriented approach to cooperation that eventually transferred into important agreements, basic documents and 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” (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. Since its inception the US, Japan, Visegrad-4 countries, Turkey, the Baltic

<sup>1</sup> This is an amended version of the article first published on the official website of the ODED-GUAM on August 3, 2020. Views, assessments and suggestions are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official stance of the Organization, nor of GUAM member states.

and the Balkan countries and others showed interest in establishing formal relationship with GUAM. 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.

August 2008 war between the Russian Federation and Georgia 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 maneuvering 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 dynamics of activities within the Organization were gradually decreasing. This affected the overall discipline throughout GUAM’s 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 the 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. Dramatic internal developments in Ukraine brought to power new pro-national political elites that also caused subsequent military confrontation in the Eastern and the Southern parts of Ukraine. These developments altered geopolitical context and created the situation in the region that have foregrounded the importance of GUAM as a regional framework.

In September 2016, GUAM MS 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 relaunch high-level meetings 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 Governments 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, Ukraine’s current President V. Zelensky received the Heads of national delegations and proposed an exchange of views on the future of GUAM. All participants expressed their interest and commitment to the enhanced, purposeful and result-oriented interaction.

To sum up, Summarizing the above overview, we may say that since 2016, the Organization is in the process of accommodating adapting to the new realities through recalibrating its purpose sense of purpose functioning and redefining its mission. The cooperation in the framework of GUAM has been renewed

and gaining momentum with. 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 – 1) 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. 2) 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 the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 at the national and international level, 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 rebrand GUAM, make it relevant and adequate to its tasks and objectives and to dynamic and evolving external environment with an 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 neighborhood.

### **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 presents 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 behavior: 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.

There is a need to restore institutional discipline, engage partnership and cooperation implementation of its objectives. Therefore, leadership, commitment, visibility and predictability are the key factors.

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. This provision should be strictly observed and this highest GUAM body should lead the Organization by example.

*Lesson 2 - The mainstream cooperation in the framework of GUAM should not be affected by the situational internal politics.*

It should be unequivocally agreed and acknowledged that the strategic national interests constitutes the very core of GUAM functioning 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 opportunistic interests in national political conjuncture, and its activities should not be compromised for tactical political maneuvering and fall under internal or external influences.

Activities in the framework of GUAM should be viewed solely through the prism of national strategic interests of GUAM MS, as well as their impact on the regional development 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 that.*

When the environment is conducive and supportive, the Organization can operate effectively, but 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. 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. These conflicts while continue seriously to impede the sustainable development in the region, are also being utilized as main instruments for manipulation and influence over the GUAM MS. Therefore, these conflicts should be collectively and persistently addressed by GUAM MS aiming at the mobilization of the support and active and responsible engagement of international community in their resolution. Moreover, they are also posing serious threats to the European and wider international peace, security and stability.

The factor of the existing territorial conflicts was the premise of the creation of GUAM, which aimed at contribution to their resolution mainly through means of political interaction and economic cooperation as the Organization is not equipped with other means in that respect. Nevertheless, joint persistent and purposeful advancement of the common and solid stance, based on norms and principles of international law, is a powerful message to international community and should be further continued and strengthened to raise awareness and attract more support. Here GUAM MS should manifest their unequivocal unity and solidarity in their stance towards principle issues of all MS.

While assessing the situation around the conflict resolution, one should acknowledge a complete failure of the international community in their attempts to uphold the international law to contribute to the restoration of the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of GUAM MS. In the light of fruitless attempts of the international community to mediate the conflict resolution without any promising prospects, GUAM MS should take a more proactive and assertive approach in advancing the Organization 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 properly, it attracts interest of external partners, but when it malfunctions the interest and support vanish away. Broad cooperation with partners is crucial for achieving GUAM's goals.

There is a 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. It is obvious that divergencies and asymmetries in terms of political and economic weight, military power and committed resources in the balance of interest in the region is one of the major challenges that should be in the focus and persistently addressed by GUAM MS. These 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 proving that when there is broad coalition of committed, engaged and supportive partners, even unimaginable is becoming possible.

*Lesson 5 - The Organization cannot 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.

Certain politically motivated toxic media insinuations are the secondary instruments for influencing political elites and to manipulate internal political environment in GUAM MS. 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 as there is no GUAM documents or actions proving that.

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 the 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. 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.

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 the common interests in the framework of GUAM converge are 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.

Therefore, 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 proxies impose their own 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 above-mentioned challenges and to make the Organization relevant and adequate to utilize the emerging opportunities.

The conflicts on the temporary occupied territories of GUAM MS are the major challenge for the Organization. Until they are resolved, the region will be a hostage, and this situation will create more regional disparities and disproportions that will further heighten the tensions and hostilities among the region's countries.

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 towards creation of positive dynamics in the region that will be conducive enough for the conflict resolution. These dynamics that can be also generated through the means of economic cooperation which will have a spill over effect stretching well beyond the region and can be beneficial for a wider GUAM neighborhood as well.

**A game changer is needed** in the current regional setup, and GUAM as a regional organization, can play this role with 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, by linking new countries, regions and continents, its role and significance will increase exponentially by linking new countries, regions and continents. 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 basins.

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.

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 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. The process of the mobilization of necessary resources at national levels, as well as talk to partners and all parties interested in this project should be expedited. 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 (see map).
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 ministers the attention should be paid to the development of business dimension within GUAM and active engagement of 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 relevant now than it has ever been before.

### **Conclusion**

As was mentioned at the beginning, GUAM geography is at the epicenter 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 neighborhood reverberates in GUAM MS. In addition to that, tectonic shifts in global politics, massive and unpunished flagrant violations of international law and order, 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 Azerbaijan-Armenia international border should be a reminder!

The implementation of the above-mentioned two comprehensive GUAM initiatives 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, its stability and security will be interested not only for the parties involved, but the wider international community. This, eventually, might also help in the resolutions of the conflicts on the territories of GUAM MS in the final instance.