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The Transformation of Peacemaking in the Wider Black Sea Region Across Decades

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of peacemaking in the wider Black Sea region since the early 1990s, situating it within the broader global shift challenging the liberal peacemaking order. Focusing on conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, it identifies three phases of peacemaking in the region: multilateral optimism (1992–2008), multilateral erosion and stalemated negotiation (2008–2020), and fragmented and state-led mediation (2020–present). The analysis demonstrates that the wider Black Sea region has not merely mirrored recent global trends in peacemaking, such as sidelined multilateralism, fragmented mediation, and warmaker-peacemaker conflation, but has actively driven them, raising urgent questions about whether this new architecture can go beyond short term cease-fires and produce durable peace.

Introduction

Conflicts and peacemaking in the wider Black Sea region have undergone a fundamental shift since 2020. This shift parallels the ongoing transformation of the global landscape of peacemaking and peacebuilding practices, which some scholars have called the “end of the liberal peacebuilding” era. (Mac Ginty, 2025) Although there are different views as to what has changed and how, most of the recent scholarship agrees on the following features of the new peacemaking landscape.

First, there has been erosion of the rule-based international order and a decline in the role of multilateral organizations in peacemaking, in general and in mediation in

particular, especially of the United Nations (UN) but also of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (Bell, 2023; Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025). While the UN mediated most of the armed conflicts between 1992 and 2009, especially after 2020, it has routinely been sidelined or reduced to ratifying agreements negotiated elsewhere. This decline is evident in data showing that personnel deployed to multilateral peace operations fell by 42% between 2015 and 2024, from 161,509 to 94,451, and that no new large-scale UN-led mission has been launched in the past decade, despite the rising number of conflicts around the world (SIPRI, 2025).

The eroding role of multilateral organizations in peacemaking is partly due to a decline in the number of armed conflicts receiving mediation over the last decade. While the overall demand for mediation declined, the supply of mediators continued to increase in the last decade (Lundgren & Svensson, 2020). Parallel to this trend, the number of comprehensive peace agreements is declining, as is the overall number of peace agreements, with only 210 agreements signed worldwide between 2020 and 2024, the lowest four-year total in 25 years. And no comprehensive peace agreement has been signed in the last several years (Adhikari et al., 2026). These two trends are alarming because they indicate that, while the number of violent conflicts increases, they are far from being addressed through peaceful settlement mechanisms established within the international system since 1945. What has replaced the peaceful settlement of disputes in the last decade is mostly conflict parties seeking unilateral military impositions.

Another main reason the UN is sidelined is that the Security Council has been paralyzed since 2022. In 2023, the Council held 271 public and private meetings and adopted only 50 resolutions, the fewest in 10 years (United Nations, 2024). The use of the veto proliferated compared to previous years. In fact, the Russia-Ukraine war, a Black Sea conflict, has been a major driver of dysfunctional multilateralism, triggering vetoes by the permanent five at the UN and the weaponization of the consensus mechanism at the OSCE, which created a post-2022 funding crisis. Thus, the wider Black Sea has not just been a recipient of global trends, but a major cause of them.

The second major shift in the peacemaking landscape is the fragmentation of mediation processes, with regional state actors emerging to fill the void left by multilateral organizations and Western mediation actors (Bell, 2023; Adhikari et al., 2026). As UN and OSCE channels have closed, middle-power and regional mediators, such as Qatar, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others, have engaged more in recent critical conflicts, including U.S.–Taliban talks in Doha, Astana talks on Syria, Israel–Hamas negotiations in Doha, Russia–Ukraine negotiations in Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, Iran-US negotiations with Oman and later in Pakistan to name a few.

The current conflict landscape has seen not only a fragmentation of peacemaking efforts but also a fragmentation of conflicts. Conflicts within a state have shattered into multiple conflicts at multiple levels: sub-state conflicts alongside national, regional, and international ones. Often, each of these levels draws a different mediator, and the parallel processes are uncoordinated and not linked. This trend has been observed in recent conflicts in Myanmar, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Ukraine (Adhikari et al., 2026).

The third shift in the peacemaking landscape follows the decline of the comprehensive peace processes as an approach, which had a relatively clear political goal, a written and formal comprehensive agreement, and often a deliberate mediation mandate. What has replaced this is *ad hoc* mediation attempts by multiple state actors, each tackling a narrow aspect of the conflict, often symptomatic, related to a ceasefire or a humanitarian pause, without introducing a comprehensive political solution. Most of the recent agreements reached, if any, are ad hoc, short-term, and informal, lacking the formal written legal status that requires ratification (Peter, 2025).

In addition, most of these agreements lack clear steps or plans for implementation. Furthermore, some mediators who are simultaneously involved as a conflict party in the same case are becoming more visible and common, a phenomenon Helmüller and Selaymeh call the "warmaker-peacemaker conflation." (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025) They describe this as a new type of mediation and call it 'transactionalist' (Hellmüller & Salaymeh, 2025). However, others have previously identified this type of mediation and called it partisan, principal power mediation, or biased mediation (Svensson, 2014; Heemsbergen and Siniver, 2011). This approach deviates from the conflict transformation perspective, which advocates addressing the conflict as a whole and focusing on transforming its root causes. Transactional mediation instead focuses on containing the conflict for short-term gain. This new type of peacemaking also challenges one of the traditional principles of mediation, impartiality, which has long been recognized as a 'best practice' (United Nations, 2012). Most empirical studies to date have shown that impartial mediators work better in resolving intra-state conflicts, and the contributions of biased mediators are limited to a few contexts, such as where power asymmetry means the reluctant and powerful party can only be persuaded with the help of a biased mediator (Svensson, 2014).

The recent mediation and negotiation data from 2024 clearly indicate this fragmentation globally (Peter, 2025). For instance, in Sudan, at least 17 agreements were mediated over five years, involving numerous mediating actors ranging from the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Saudi Arabia, the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Ethiopia, Egypt, Qatar, the UN, the European Union (EU), the League of Arab States, and the US at different moments and in different capacities. Similarly, in Syria, at least 106 local ceasefire agreements were signed between 2011 and 2017, of which 72 involved third-party mediation at the sub-national level (Lundgren et al., 2023) alongside competing national-level tracks (UN-led Geneva

talks) and a regional track involving Russia, Türkiye, and Iran, which the UN reluctantly endorsed (Astana process). Still, this fragmented mediation landscape was insufficient to achieve a peaceful negotiated solution to these conflicts. While the Sudan war is still raging, the Syrian conflict ended with one side winning over the other rather than through a negotiated settlement mediated by a third party, though conflicts at the sub-national (with ethnic and religious minorities) and regional levels (with Israel) are still ongoing. There is a rare consensus among practitioners that the scale and intensity of this fragmentation are novel, unlike previous coordination problems in multi-track mediation, and that it is fundamentally altering the peacemaking landscape.

How do these new global trends in peacemaking affect the wider Black Sea region, and vice versa? This paper examines the implications of the evolving nature of peacemaking in the Black Sea region over the decades and assesses to what extent the region aligns with or diverges from them, tracing the shift from multilateral, negotiation-based conflict resolution to a landscape defined by unilateral military impositions, deadlocked multilateralism, and *ad hoc*, particularistic, uncoordinated state mediation. Has multilateralism through the UN and the OSCE also been sidelined in the Black Sea? Have mediation and peacemaking fragmented? Has mediation become transactional or ad hoc, focusing solely on managing violence rather than being comprehensive and transformational?

The paper focuses on four deadly conflicts in the wider Black Sea region— Georgia (Abkhazia/South Ossetia), Moldova (Transnistria), Ukraine (Eastern Ukraine and beyond), and Armenia-Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) — and identifies three phases of peacemaking: multilateral optimism (1992–2008), multilateral erosion and negotiation stalemate (2008–2020), and fragmented peacemaking with new state mediators (2020–present).

Peacemaking in the Wider Black Sea Region in the 1990s and 2000s: Multilateral Optimism

The end of the Cold War brought a significant surge in the number of conflicts in the wider Black Sea region, especially intra-state conflicts, as in other regions. But in this post-Soviet geography, in most conflicts, the new Russian state was either a primary or secondary actor in the conflict. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the dominant peacemaking paradigm in the Black Sea region was to seek solutions to conflicts through multilateral, negotiation-based methods — anchored institutionally in the OSCE and supported by the UN, EU, and contact group formats. During this time, the OSCE and associated multilateral formats were established as the primary vehicles for conflict resolution in the region.[1]

[1] On the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security and the conflict cycle, see OSCE, "Conflict Prevention and Resolution," https://www.osce.org/conflict-prevention-and-resolution.

The Minsk Group, created in 1992, was mandated to promote a peaceful, negotiated resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It was the longest-running mediation format in the OSCE's history, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, mandated to promote a peaceful, negotiated resolution and to deploy OSCE multinational peacekeeping forces, a provision that was never realized.[2] Over three decades, the Group facilitated several near-agreements, including the Key West Principles (2001), the Madrid Peace Principles (2007), later revised in the Minsk Group (2009-2012), the Lavrov Proposal (2015/2016), and Aliyev-Pashinyan meetings and proposals (2018-2020), but none of these negotiated proposals resulted in a final agreement until the war broke out in 2020.

The OSCE Mission to Georgia (1992–2008) was tasked with monitoring the conflict zones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and facilitating dialogue. The UN and the OSCE were the leading actors in negotiating the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict through UNOMIG and the UN-led Geneva process, complemented by the Track 2 Schlaining Process run by the London-based non-governmental organization (NGO) Conciliation Resources. The OSCE Mission to Georgia, established in November 1992, was one of the organization's earliest field operations. Its mandate expired on 31 December 2008, after Russia vetoed its renewal in the aftermath of the August 2008 war.[3] The Geneva International Discussions (GID), established in October 2008, replaced the mission as the sole international format addressing the conflict co-chaired by the UN, OSCE, and EU.[4] Although the GID still operates through two working groups: one on security and stability (ceasefire implementation, non-use of force), and another on humanitarian issues (internally displaced persons (IDPs), freedom of movement, cultural heritage), it has been mostly stuck since 2022.

Negotiations on the Moldova Transnistria conflict began with the Yeltsin–Snegur ceasefire declared in July 1992, which ended the brief war between Moldovan forces and the Russian-backed Transnistrian separatists. The OSCE Mission to Moldova has facilitated talks since 1993, and since 2005, the talks have operated in the 5+2 format: Moldova and Transnistria as parties, the OSCE, Russia, and Ukraine as mediators, and the EU and United States as observers. Various settlement attempts, such as the 1997 Primakov Memorandum and the 2003 Russian-drafted Kozak Memorandum, have produced no political settlement to date, indicating a trajectory similar to that of the Georgia-Abkhazia/South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts.

Though not under a UN or OSCE framework, unlike previous conflicts, Russia and Ukraine preferred a negotiated peaceful settlement, especially regarding nuclear

[2] OSCE, "Mandate for the Co-Chairs of the Minsk Process," 23 March 1995. The Minsk Group also included Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Türkiye as participating states.
[3] The OSCE Mission to Georgia was established by decision of the CSCE Council of Ministers, Stockholm, 14–15 December 1992. Russia blocked the mission's mandate renewal at the OSCE Permanent Council in December 2008.
[4] The 66th GID round was completed in March 2026; on the GID's structure and achievements, see EU EEAS, "Statement on the 64th Round of the Geneva International Discussions." OSCE Permanent Council No. 1527, 10 July 2025; and EU EEAS, "Statement on the 65th Round," OSCE Permanent Council No. 1543, 20 November 2025.

weapons and the Black Sea Fleet after Ukraine's 1991 independence. Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan agreed to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear states through the Trilateral Statement (14 Jan 1994) in Moscow, in which Presidents Clinton, Yeltsin, and Kravchuk set conditions for the transfer, dismantlement, and purchase of warheads and uranium. The Budapest Memorandum (5 Dec 1994), signed by the US, UK, Russia, and Ukraine, guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity, forbade force or coercion, and promised UN Security Council action if threatened with nuclear weapons. The Black Sea Fleet question was also resolved through bilateral negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, without external guarantors. After five years of negotiations following independence, the agreements signed in 1997divided the fleet with 81.7 percent to Russia and 18.3 percent to Ukraine and granted Russia a 20-year lease on naval facilities in Sevastopol until 2017 (with a five-year renewal option), paid largely through offsets against Ukrainian gas debts. Presidents Yeltsin and Kuchma also signed the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership, in which Russia formally recognized Ukraine's existing borders, including Crimea.

The Erosion of Multilateralism: Frozen Conflicts and Stalemated Negotiations (2008-2020)

Following the initial era of multilateral optimism, there has been a gradual erosion of multilateralism and of the peaceful settlement of disputes in all of these conflicts. The established negotiation mechanisms produced many rounds of talks but led to an ongoing stalemate, with no political settlement or durable peace. Over time, they became mere instruments of conflict management, intended not to resolve conflicts but to manage daily tensions and maintain the status quo. Thus, conflicts have become frozen in a 'no war-no peace' limbo for more than a decade. During this period, the conflation of warmakers and peacemakers has also become the *modus operandi* in almost all of these conflicts. However, this situation did not abruptly end the multilateral formats, and they continued to exist while some changed their modality to address the new situation. The Georgian-Russian war of 2008, Russia's Kozak proposal for a new federation in Moldova, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine with Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, and Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 did not end efforts to seek negotiated agreements and in fact generated new negotiation processes, but these negotiations were never structured to transform these conflicts politically. They remained as mechanisms to manage the tensions and maintained the status quo.

OSCE-led negotiations were still favored as the format after the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, with the establishment of the GID, led by the EU, UN, and OSCE co-chairs, together with the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), led by the EU and the OSCE, to monitor and respond to crisis escalations. Russia's veto of the

OSCE mission's renewal marked the beginning of systemic erosion. The GID replaced the OSCE mission and could manage but not resolve the conflict.[5]

Russia increasingly exploited the consensus principle as a veto mechanism while simultaneously acting as a conflict party. Progress in GID has been minimal on core issues. Russia, Abkhaz, and South Ossetian participants have repeatedly walked out of the humanitarian working group, preventing discussion of IDP return.[6] The Ergneti IPRM on the Georgian-South Ossetian border continues to operate, but the equivalent mechanism in Gali on the Georgian-Abkhaz border remains suspended. Georgia illustrates a conflict stuck between a deadlocked multilateral format that manages the tension through IPRM, but cannot resolve the political issue. The political context has become more complicated with Georgian backsliding, the Russian integration of breakaway regions, and the Russia-Ukraine war, which is reshaping the facts on the ground outside the negotiating room.

The 2014 deployment of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine and the establishment of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) were another last resort to use a multilateral framework for a negotiated solution in Ukraine (ECFR, 2024). The Minsk agreements of September 2014 (Minsk I) and February 2015 (Minsk II) were negotiated within the Trilateral Contact Group (OSCE, Ukraine, Russia) and politically endorsed by the Normandy Format (France, Germany, Ukraine, Russia). The agreements assigned the OSCE the task of monitoring the ceasefire line (Regenbrecht, 2025).[7] The SMM documented over 1.5 million ceasefire violations between 2016 and 2021, fulfilling its mandate, but it was never set up to deter violence or seek a political solution (Hartel et al., 2021; Global Public Policy Institute, 2025). A fundamental structural deficiency of the negotiations was Russia's ability to present itself as a mediator, on par with Berlin, Paris, and the OSCE, while simultaneously being a party to the conflict. The warmaker-peacemaker conflation was a severe issue in this case, as Ukraine insisted that the negotiations should not be taking place with the Donetsk and Luhansk separatists but with Russia instead. This "mediator-as-conflict-party" problem crippled the multilateral framework of the TCG throughout.

SMM helped manage and stabilize the status quo, serving as a placeholder for political negotiations under the TCG, which never moved forward decisively, much like the roles of IPRM and the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia. This phase exposed a fundamental tension between monitoring as a tool for managing the situation on the ground, rather than monitoring the implementation of a political agreement. The

[5] The GID were established pursuant to the EU-mediated ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008 and implementing measures of 8 September 2008. See EU EEAS, "Statement on the 65th Round of the Geneva International Discussions," OSCE Permanent Council No. 1543, Vienna, 20 November 2025.
[6] U.S. Mission to the OSCE, "On the 62nd Round of the Geneva International Discussions," 14 November 2024; UK Statement to the OSCE on GID, 13 March 2025. Georgia has pledged unilaterally since 2010 not to use force; Russia has rejected a reciprocal commitment.
[7] None of the provisions explicitly assigned obligations to Moscow allowing Russia to present itself as a mediator rather than a conflict.

SMM's mandate encompassed ceasefire monitoring, verification of heavy weapons withdrawals under the Minsk agreements, and broader human dimension reporting (OSCE, 2019). Thus, both indicated a shift toward daily conflict management rather than transformative mediation.

As for the Karabakh and Transnistria conflicts, this decade continued with numerous rounds of stalemated negotiations too, under the OSCE mediation, again without any progress toward a political solution.

Deadlock of Multilateralism and the Rise of State Mediators (2020–present)

While the multilateral negotiation format struggled, it still continued after 2008 but collapsed completely after 2020. The 2020 Second Karabakh War, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Azerbaijan's September 2023 military takeover of the remaining Armenian-held Nagorno-Karabakh collectively shattered the remaining understanding that multilateral negotiation was the operative mode of conflict resolution in the region. Since 2020, multilateral formats have been either deadlocked, hollowed out, or formally dissolved. Wars have replaced negotiations as the primary mechanism of conflict resolution. The mediation landscape has become increasingly fragmented, dominated by state mediators and, if any, bilateral diplomatic efforts, especially in the Ukraine-Russia war and the Armenia-Azerbaijan war. Finally, following the global trend, we also see an increasing war-maker-peacemaker conflation after 2020 as conflict parties act as third-party mediators in the same conflicts.

The multilateral mediation format has been terminated in the Ukraine, Azerbaijan-Armenia cases and has come under immense strain and deadlock in Georgia and Moldova, after the Ukraine war. The Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh was formally dissolved in September 2025. On 8 August 2025, Armenia and Azerbaijan, with US mediation, initialed an agreement in Washington and jointly appealed to the OSCE to dissolve the Minsk Group. On 1 September 2025, the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted a consensus decision closing the Minsk Process and all related structures, declaring all previous OSCE decisions on the conflict null and void (OSCE, 1 September 2025).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 abruptly terminated the SMM. Russia did not support the mission's mandate renewal at the Permanent Council on 31 March 2022, ending the OSCE's operational presence in the conflict (Wittkowsky, 2022).

Moldova and Georgia show how one regional conflict (Ukraine) can collapse the institutional negotiation structure of another. In the Moldova case, the 5+2 format for Transnistria has been inactive since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as two of the three mediators are now at war with each other (Congressional Research Service,

2025).[8] What has replaced the 5+2 is direct bilateral engagement between Chișinău and Tiraspol, with the OSCE facilitating at a lower level through shuttle diplomacy and 13 thematic working groups on practical issues (OSCE Mission to Moldova). The only recent agreements here are narrow, short-term, and transactional, rather than political talks seeking a long-lasting solution. For example, the early 2025 energy crisis led to practical concessions: Transnistria released detained Moldovan nationals and agreed to broadcast Moldovan public media in exchange for gas transit arrangements (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

In Georgia, the GID still takes place officially, but with immense strain. The EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), deployed since October 2008, is the only international monitoring presence on the ground, but it operates exclusively in Georgian-controlled territory, as Russia bars access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[9] The situation has been further complicated by Georgia's democratic backsliding under the Georgian Dream government. In January 2026, twenty-three OSCE participating States invoked the Moscow Mechanism to assess Georgia's compliance with OSCE commitments, the first such use for Georgia (OSCE ODIHR, January 2026). Similar to Moldova, the EUMM and the IPRM mechanisms in Georgia continued to tackle pragmatic concerns on the ground.

In addition to the termination or severe crisis of the multilateral negotiation format, any agreement that was mediated since 2020, especially between Ukraine and Russia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan, reflects the other two broader global trends. The mediation landscape in the region is also highly fragmented with the rise of state mediators. There is also a shift from seeking comprehensive political agreements to narrow, issue-specific, humanitarian agreements.

In the Russia-Ukraine case, at least 22 official mediating actors (17 of which are states and only 5 are intergovernmental organizations) and 8 non-state actors have operated in parallel between February 2022 and April 2026, without a single comprehensive political process linking them (Al Jazeera, 18 February 2026). Of the 17, 7 states are involved in the African Peace initiative, but each took an individual initiative (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2023). Unlike in Syria or Sudan, the Russia–Ukraine landscape is overwhelmingly state-led. In fact, at least three different state mediators, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, were involved in mediating just the prisoner exchange efforts.

Türkiye's early 2022 mediation efforts at the Antalya meetings and the Istanbul communiqué of March 2022 represented the most advanced and comprehensive diplomatic negotiations, conducted outside multilateral structures (Çuhadar & Diaz-

[8] The 5+2 format was suspended by Russia and Transnistria in 2006, resumed in 2012, and effectively halted again following the 2022 invasion.
[9] The EUMM was established by EU Council Joint Action 2008/736/CFSP of 15 September 2008.

Prinz, 2022; Butler, 2024). The following initiatives were also by state actors: Saudi Arabia hosted National Security Advisors' meetings, China and Brazil positioned themselves with a 12-point peace plan, South Africa led the African Peace Plan, the Vatican through Cardinal Zuppi's mission, and, most consequentially, the Trump administration's bilateral engagement with both Kyiv and Moscow. However, the only successful agreements so far have been on small-scale, pragmatic, and interest-driven issues pertaining to humanitarian and cease-fire mediations, such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative with Turkish and UN mediation, or the prisoner exchange mediated by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye at different moments. State mediators have partially filled the vacuum left by institutional multilateralism, but with a fundamentally different logic: short-term pragmatic solutions to mostly humanitarian issues, and oriented toward stability rather than comprehensive peace.

In the Armenia-Azerbaijan case, this trend holds even more starkly. After the OSCE Minsk Group was sidelined in 2020 and formally dissolved in September 2025, mediation became a competitive marketplace of overlapping bilateral channels operating in parallel and often at cross-purposes. Russia brokered the cease-fire in 2020 that ended the Second Karabakh War and deployed roughly 1,960 peacekeepers in Karabakh until their withdrawal in April 2024, and hosted a series of trilateral summits between Putin, Aliyev, and Pashinyan (Sochi 2020, 2021; Moscow 2022, 2023). Russia and Türkiye jointly operated the Russian-Turkish Joint Monitoring Center at Aghdam from January 2021 until its closure in April 2024, which was a Turkish entry point into cease-fire monitoring. The European Union pursued summit diplomacy under European Council President Charles Michel, who hosted Aliyev and Pashinyan in Brussels in December 2021, April 2022, May 2022, August 2022, May 2023, and July 2023, with parallel Prague (October 2022) and Granada (October 2023) meetings co-hosted with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz; the EU also deployed the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia (EUMCAP, October 2022) and its successor, the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA), in February 2023, with around 200 monitors along Armenia's side of the border. The United States ran a parallel track: Secretary Antony Blinken facilitated foreign-ministerial talks in Washington (May 2023, July and September 2024) and a Blinken-Scholz quadrilateral on the margins of the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, and the Trump administration brokered the Washington Joint Declaration of 8 August 2025, in which Aliyev and Pashinyan initialed the peace agreement, jointly requested the dissolution of the Minsk Group, and assigned 99-year development rights for the 'Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity' (TRIPP) connectivity corridor. Iran advanced the '3+3' regional cooperation platform with Russia, Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (meetings in Moscow 2022, Tehran 2023, and Istanbul 2024). The United Arab Emirates hosted a direct Aliyev–Pashinyan dialogue in Abu Dhabi in July 2025. Smaller regional states played supporting roles: Kazakhstan hosted Foreign Ministers Mirzoyan and Bayramov in Almaty in May 2024 to draft border-delimitation language; Georgia hosted a trilateral meeting of deputy foreign ministers in Tbilisi in

April 2025; Switzerland facilitated a parliamentary track through the Inter-Parliamentary Union in late 2024. Bilateral border-delimitation talks between Deputy PMs Mher Grigoryan and Shahin Mustafayev (begun May 2022) operated as a separate technical track, while Pope Francis and the Vatican made discreet humanitarian appeals, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) facilitated several prisoner releases. This dense interplex of mediators is the clearest illustration in the wider Black Sea region of disaggregated, transactional, and competitive bilateral mediation replacing a single multilateral track (Avdaliani, 2025).

Finally, in addition to the fragmentation of the mediation landscape, all four conflicts share another commonality of the global trend: mediators in the post-2014 era are increasingly stakeholders in conflicts rather than impartial third parties. Hellmüller and Salaymeh's 'warmakers as peacemakers' framing overlaps to a great extent in this region. This can be observed in a number of cases. Azerbaijan's military victory in the 2020 Karabakh war was followed by Russia's brokered ceasefire on November 10, 2020, and the deployment of Russian troops as peacekeepers, despite Russia being in a military alliance with Armenia. In Ukraine, Russia was part of the mediation mechanism in the TCG, but also a secondary conflict party in Ukraine. Similarly, Russian involvement in the Transnistria talks as a third party was tangled with its role as a secondary party supporting the Transnistrian separatist parties. Similarly, Türkiye became a mediating country vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine, while also considering itself a strategic partner of Ukraine. Türkiye also supported Azerbaijan and indicated an interest in serving as a third party between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

Across three decades, peacemaking in the wider Black Sea region has moved through three distinct phases. In the post-Cold War decade of multilateral optimism (1992–2008), the OSCE, supported by the UN and the EU, led peace processes through standing mandates, consensus-based negotiation formats, and ceasefire-monitoring missions. In the period of multilateral erosion and stalemated negotiation (2008–2020), these mechanisms ossified into instruments of conflict management rather than transformation. Since 2020, we have seen a complete collapse of multilateral frameworks and comprehensive peace negotiations replaced by fragmented, transactional, regional state-led mediation. The Minsk Group has been dissolved, the SMM and TCG terminated, the 5+2 inactive, and the Geneva International Discussions reduced to a humanitarian management mechanism. What has replaced multilateral mediation is not exactly the absence of mediation, but its proliferation across uncoordinated bilateral tracks operated mostly by states, some with stakes in the conflict, leading to a partisan mediator model.

Therefore, the four cases align unevenly, but consistently, with the three global trends identified at the outset of this paper. The sidelining of multilateral negotiations is most complete in Ukraine and Karabakh, and attenuated in Georgia and Moldova, where

residual OSCE and EU mechanisms persist precisely because they are instrumental in crisis management rather than motivated by ambition to politically settle the conflict.

The fragmentation of mediation reaches its regional apex in the Russia–Ukraine case (over twenty official mediating actors since 2022) and in the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict (a dozen overlapping state and non-state mediators after 2020), where it operates as competitive geopolitics rather than a complementary division of labor. The drift toward humanitarian and ceasefire issues, as the only possible agreements within reach, has become the dominant game in town, as exemplified in the Black Sea Grain Initiative, prisoner-exchange protocols, and the Washington Joint Declaration on TRIPP development. These agreements have largely replaced the comprehensive political settlement model that the 1990s frameworks aimed to deliver, but failed to do so.

The dynamics of the wider Black Sea region have not merely been a recipient of the global trends but also a principal manufacturer of them. The presence of biased or self-interested mediators, as in Russia's conflated role, was already structurally embedded in the 1990s formats, but was rather disguised and subtle.

The post-2020 peacemaking architecture is bilateral, focused on specific issues, state-mediated, and oriented toward stability and connectivity rather than toward justice, broader conflict transformation, or based on liberal norms such as human and minority rights. The cost of this shift is borne disproportionately by thousands of displaced people, marginalized minorities, and unheard and unattended victims of the conflict.

Wars and unilateral ultimatums, not negotiations, have reshaped territorial realities across the region — and the institutional memory of the multilateral era is being actively dismantled (the OSCE's September 2025 decision declaring all previous decisions on the Karabakh conflict "null and void" is the starkest example). The defining feature of the current Black Sea peacemaking landscape is perhaps not full chaos but a different architecture: bilateral, transactional, competitive, and driven by power rather than principle. Whether this architecture can produce durable peace, or only manage the next war, is the open question that will define the next decade of Black Sea security.

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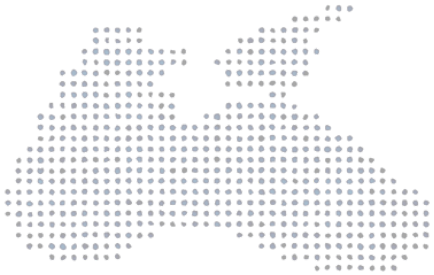
Esra ÇUHADAR

Dr. Esra Çuhadar is associate professor at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey, where she has taught since 2006, and serves as Head of Research of the Ottawa Dialogue at the University of Ottawa, Canada. With over three decades of experience in dialogue facilitation, mediation, and conflict assessment, she was selected in 2023 to join the United Nations standby team of senior mediation advisers as a process design and inclusion expert.

Dr. Çuhadar received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, along with an advanced graduate certificate in applied conflict resolution. Her research focuses on inclusive peace processes, mediation, track-two diplomacy, civil society in peacebuilding, negotiation pedagogy, and political leadership. She has authored more than 50 articles in books and leading academic journals such as *Political Psychology, Journal of Peace Research, International Studies Review, and International Studies Perspectives*. In addition to numerous research grants she has conducted, her awards include the Kadir Has Foundation Promising Scientist Award (2025), the Young Scientist Award from the Turkish Science Foundation (2013), the Jennings Randolph Senior Research Fellowship from the United States Institute of Peace (2018), and the Fulbright Senior Scholarship (2011).

Her extensive mediation career includes serving as a UN mediation adviser (2024-present), senior expert on dialogue and inclusion at the United States Institute of Peace (2020-2023), regional mediator for the World Bank (2011-2020), and OSCE advisor. She has supported dialogue and mediation initiatives in Afghanistan, South Caucasus, Ukraine, Turkey, Cameroon, Venezuela, Cyprus, Israel-Palestine, Greece-Turkey, Turkey-Armenia, and Somalia-Somaliland. She has been a member of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network since 2020.

SecureBlackSea



The Black Sea region has long been a focal point of geopolitical competition, shaped by historical rivalries, strategic interests, and evolving security dynamics. In recent years, the region has witnessed growing instability due to escalating tensions, hybrid threats, and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These developments have not only disrupted regional security but have also posed broader challenges to the European and transatlantic security order. Given NATO's strategic interest in the region, a comprehensive reassessment of security frameworks is necessary to address emerging threats and enhance regional stability.

SecureBlackSea seeks to examine and propose a future security architecture for the wider Black Sea region, aligning with NATO's evolving strategic priorities. Through an in-depth analysis of existing security structures, regional conflicts, and cooperation mechanisms, it aims to provide evidence-based insights into key threats and potential policy responses. A particular focus will be placed on the intersection of conventional military threats, hybrid warfare, economic security, and geopolitical rivalries, recognizing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of regional security challenges.

The project activities include expert workshops, field research, and data-driven assessments. It will evaluate the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks and NATO's role in shaping stability in the region. In collaboration with policymakers, security experts, and academic institutions, the project team will facilitate policy dialogues and strategic foresight discussions to identify pathways for strengthening regional security cooperation. These efforts will result in the development of comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional resilience and fostering a more cooperative security environment.

The expected outcomes of this initiative include a thorough assessment of regional security threats, a set of actionable policy recommendations, and strengthened dialogue between NATO and regional stakeholders. By producing analytical reports and policy briefs, the project will contribute to an informed security discourse and provide practical solutions for mitigating risks in the region. By fostering collaboration between academic and policy communities, it will support long-term strategic planning and resilience-building efforts.

SecureBlackSea aspires to provide a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving security landscape in the Black Sea region. It will offer insights that can guide NATO's strategic engagement in the region. Thus, it aims to contribute to a more stable, secure, and cooperative Black Sea security environment in the face of emerging geopolitical complexities.

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