

Russia-Armenia Nuclear Energy Cooperation and the Metsamor Power Plant

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Metsamor, a Soviet-made nuclear reactor still operating in Armenia, causes serious security concerns not only within the region, but also at the international level. Unfortunately, the nuclear threat in the Caucasus is pressing, as Metsamor lacks the requisite safety containment structures, and is located in a seismically active zone. Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as the wider neighborhood, Turkey and Iran, have expressed serious concerns regarding the recent Russia-Armenia nuclear agreement to prolong Metsamor's operational life. Due to Armenia's inability to implement a more secure energy production policy, and Russia's continued interference and influence, Metsamor remains operational in the face of international warnings and the clear nuclear threat. The West is also concerned about Russia-Armenia nuclear cooperation. The EU and the US, accordingly, advocate for the decommissioning of the plant, as this would prevent future environmental catastrophe as well as helping to limit Russian dominance in the region. This paper examines how Russian-Armenian nuclear cooperation influences regional security in the South Caucasus and entrenches Russian dominance in the region. The paper also discusses the developments that could avert potential nuclear crisis and force Armenia to decommission this outdated nuclear plant such as the normalization of political relations within the South Caucasus, the development of Armenia's renewable energy sector, and the clear foreign policy visions of the surrounding powers towards the region.

Keywords: Metsamor, nuclear energy, Armenia, Russia, Azerbaijan, South Caucasus.



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Introduction

Metsamor, the only nuclear plant in the South Caucasus, is located in an earthquake-prone area and lacks the requisite safety measures. It represents a real security threat; Metsamor could lead to potential nuclear catastrophe and put the wider region at risk in the event of an - earthquake, other natural disaster or even human error. There is also an even greater political risk, namely the strengthened nuclear cooperation between Armenia and Russia, which raises serious security concerns among Georgia and Azerbaijan, as well as neighboring Turkey and Iran, and even the West. The region has been under significant pressure to maintain its hard-won independence, or more precisely, Russian-free domestic politics. Fear of Russian interference looms larger

In addition, Russia has remained militarily present in Armenia since 1995. The 102nd base and aircraft stationed in Gyumri and the Erebuni airfields are Russian military contingents located on Armenian territory. This military presence has served as an effective instrument of interference in Armenian policy, and also represents one of Russia's strategic tools for countering NATO interests in the Black Sea region.

in Azerbaijan and Georgia, which share their northern borders with Russia, than in Armenia, as Yerevan has traditionally enjoyed strong support from the Kremlin.

However, such support is often criticized and perceived as comprehensive Russian control over Armenian domestic and foreign affairs. Russia has acted as Armenia's protector in international relations ever since the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.¹ In addition, Russia has remained militarily present in Armenia since 1995. The 102nd base and aircraft stationed in Gyumri and the Erebuni airfields are Russian military contingents located on Armenian territory. This military presence has served as an effective instrument of interference in Armenian policy, and also represents one of Russia's strategic tools for countering NATO interests in the Black Sea region.² According to 2010 agreement, the Russian bases will remain until 2044.³ Moreover, Russian investment in Armenian nuclear sector has entrenched Russian dominance in Armenia. With considerable Russian financial and technical support, the Metsamor plant will continue operating until 2026.

1 Ipek, P. (2009) 'Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy and Challenges for Energy Security', *Middle East Journal*, 63 (2), pp. 227-239.

2 Abrahamyan, E. (2015) *The Evolving Role of Russia's Military Presence in Armenia*, Available at: <https://pfarmeria.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/the-evolving-role-of-russias-military-presence-in-armenia/> (Accessed: 14 March 2018)

3 Osborn, A. (2010) *Russia to beef up military presence in former Soviet space*, Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/7952433/Russia-to-beef-up-military-presence-in-former-Soviet-space.html> (Accessed: 14 March 2018)

Metsamor, therefore, is another Russian-led project in Armenia that causes serious security concerns even among international actors. This is because stronger nuclear cooperation between Russia and Armenia involves not only controversial energy agreements but also greater Russian political and financial control over Armenia. This cooperation could entrench Russia's presence in the region, and even undermine Georgian and Azerbaijani independence. By accepting Russian nuclear investment, Armenia has made clear its eastward-looking policy and estrangement from the West. By contrast, Georgia and Azerbaijan want Russian-free domestic politics and are willing to seek other regional partners such as the EU and Turkey in order to prevent overwhelming Russian influence in the region. This complex web of interests and divergent foreign policies among the three countries could cause deeper conflicts and alienation, making the region more vulnerable and susceptible to foreign influence. From this perspective, the West is similarly anxious about Russia-Armenia nuclear cooperation. The EU and the US have clearly stated that an aging nuclear plant must be decommissioned as soon as possible due to security concerns.

Soviet Nuclear Reactor

The Armenian Nuclear Power Plant (ANPP), often referred to as the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant (MNPP) was built during the Soviet period in 1976. It was shut down in 1989 after the devastating Spitak earthquake, which claimed 25,000 victims, and then reopened in 1995 due to the severe economic crisis and energy scarcity in newly independent Armenia. As one of the five remaining Soviet nuclear reactors, Metsamor raises numerous security concerns in the region and beyond. Initially, ANPP consisted of two model V-230 reactors, each of 407.5 MWe gross, which supplied power from 1976 and 1980, respectively.⁴ Both reactors were shut down after the earthquake. However, only one of two units - Armenia 2 - was rendered operational again in 1995, due to the devastating economic crisis that hit Armenia after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia 2 already fulfilled its designed lifespan of thirty years in 2016, but the Armenian

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4 Semenov, B.A. (1983) 'Nuclear power in the Soviet Union', *IAEA Bulletin*, 25(2), pp. 47-59.

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government agreed to extend its life for ten more years until after the new reactor is commissioned. This decision was supported by the Russian government, which decided to provide considerable financial assistance to extend the plant's life to 2026.⁵ In 2015 Armenia accepted a \$30 million grant from Russia and approved a \$270 million loan for 15 years at 3% to support the upgrade.⁶ Intensive talks regarding the construction of a new reactor yielded positive results in 2014 when the Armenian government announced that construction of the new unit would start in 2018.

Today, Metsamor is the only nuclear power plant in the South Caucasus that consistently raises concerns not only among Armenia's neighbors, but also at the international level. The EU and the United States have been actively involved in assessing the gravity of the situation by offering financial assistance and expertise. To combat future security risks, the US government offered technical assistance in nuclear energy safety analysis and capacity building. In addition, the US government also suggested policy shift towards regional energy integration, renewable and alternative energy.⁷ The West is interested in the development of alternative, cleaner and safer energy in Armenia because the current state of Armenian nuclear production poses serious security risks. The best solution would be to shut down the reactor.

In order to persuade Armenia to close down the outdated reactor, the EU was ready to provide a considerable financial loan of €200 million (\$289 million) to finance Metsamor's shutdown but Armenia rejected the proposal.⁸ Consequently, the EU, in revolt, froze €100m in aid.⁹ In spite of international warnings, the Metsamor nuclear plant continues to supply Armenian population with approximately 40 percent of the total country's

5 World Nuclear News (2017) *Russia to start upgrading Armenian plant in 2018*. Available at: <http://www.world-nuclear-news.org/C-Russia-to-start-upgrading-Armenian-plant-in-2018-15061701.html> (Accessed: 3 February 2018)

6 World Nuclear Association (2017) *Nuclear Power in Armenia*. Available at: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/armenia.aspx> (Accessed: 4 February 2018)

7 USAID (2013) *Armenia: Country Development Cooperation Strategy FY 2013-2017*. Available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/Armenia-CDCS.pdf> (Accessed: 8 February 2018)

8 Rabajova, S. (2013) *EU seeks shutdown of Armenia nuclear power plant*. Available at: <https://www.azernews.az/region/49878.html> (Accessed: 8 February 2018)

9 Brown, P. (2004) *EU halts aid to Armenia over quake-zone nuclear plant*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2004/jun/02/energy.europeanunion> (Accessed: 10 February 2018)

energy needs.¹⁰ The biggest concern is that unlike the other four Soviet outdated nuclear plants, MNPP is located in a quake-prone area and lacks the necessary safety requirements.¹¹ The Fukushima disaster has forced Yerevan to reassess Metsamor due to the absence of containment structures, a security obligation for all modern nuclear reactors, and its location in a highly seismic active zone. In this context, the plant has earned the epithet of “the most dangerous nuclear plant in the world”.¹² Regardless, the Armenian government accepted Russian help to prolong the plant’s life and Metsamor’s operational period has been extended to 2026. Due to the potential nuclear threat, there is great concern that the Chernobyl or Fukushima scenarios could occur in Armenia, gravely endangering the regional security environment.

Reasons for Reopening the Metsamor Plant

Armenia is a landlocked country in the South Caucasus region. This former Soviet republic has struggled to establish peaceful and prosperous foreign relations ever since it became independent in 1991. It has endured the devastating consequences of a bloody conflict with its eastern neighbor over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territories. Due to unresolved issues with Azerbaijan and its weak economy, Armenia is in very vulnerable position, especially in terms of energy security. During Metsamor’s period of inactivity from 1989 to 1995, the domestic population suffered significantly as a result of energy shortages. The Armenian government was forced to reduce power consumption to only one hour a day for several years.¹³ This traumatized Armenia to the extent that the population was ready to reopen a highly dangerous nuclear reactor.

Although many countries urge Armenia to focus on developing a renewable energy sector (primarily thermal or solar), past

10 Ogutcu, O. (2016) *Nuclear Threat in the South Caucasus; Metsamor to Continue Operating*. Available at: <http://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/nuclear-threat-in-the-south-caucasus-metsamor-to-continue-operating> (Accessed: 13 February 2018)

11 Garthwaite, J. and Lavelle, M. (2011) *Is Armenia’s Nuclear Plant the World’s Most Dangerous?* Available at: <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/energy/2011/04/110412-most-dangerous-nuclear-plant-armenia/> (Accessed: 8 February 2018)

12 Ibid.

13 Sahakyan, A. (2016) *Armenia Continues to Gamble on Aging Nuclear Plant in a Quake-Prone Area*. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/armine-sahakyan/armenia-continues-to-gamb_b_9788186.html (Accessed: 8 February 2018)

experience has taught Armenians that the extraction of alternative energy resources comes at a high price. Throughout Metsamor's period of inactivity, Armenians were forced for wood to provide heat during the harsh winters, leading to serious deforestation. Furthermore, Lake Sevan, one of the largest lakes in Armenia, suffered a great deal due to sharp rises in water flow in order to produce more hydroelectricity.¹⁴ It comes as no surprise that Armenia is very concerned about Metsamor's closure, since the reactor represents a vital pillar of national energy production. The West is outspoken about the development of renewables in Armenia and is ready to support alternative energy projects. However, given the experience of the early 1990s, Armenia will not be easily convinced to pursue such expensive projects, even though they could provide more secure and cheaper energy in the long run. The nation still recalls the suffering that followed Metsamor's temporary, leaving many without enough power even for basics.

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Nagorno-Karabakh war, Armenia received gas and oil from Russia and Turkmenistan via Azerbaijan. But since the beginning of the conflict, Azerbaijan has refused to supply Armenia in the absence of a peace agreement that includes the return of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territories.¹⁵ Moreover, via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) project that transfers Azeri oil from the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Turkey all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, Azerbaijan has managed to bypass its western neighbor. This has deepened Armenia's political and economic isolation.¹⁶ Other Azeri-led energy projects,

the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Pipeline (BTE) gas pipeline, also bypass Armenian territory.

Turkey has expressed great concern over Armenia's decision to prolong Metsamor's life. Turkish officials oppose any further advancements of the plant and advocate for its closure because

14 Garthwaite, J. and Lavelle, M. (2011) *Is Armenia's Nuclear Plant the World's Most Dangerous?*

15 Sahakyan, A. (2016) Armenia Continues to Gamble on Aging Nuclear Plant in a Quake-Prone Area.

16 Cornell, S. E. and Ismailzade, F. (2005) 'The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: Implications for Azerbaijan', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies*, pp. 61-85.

of security risks.¹⁷ In order to protect human life and the environment, the regional countries, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey have all spoken out against the plant. In the event of a nuclear accident, the wider region will also face serious nuclear fall-out. In contrast to its troubled historical and political relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia has developed strong ties with its southern neighbor – Iran. Armenia and Iran have maintained strong strategic and energy relations. Because of the Azerbaijani and Turkish border closures which prevent Armenian energy imports, and the unreliability of Russian energy deliveries (such as during hostile episodes between Russia and Georgia), Iran remains Yerevan's only trustworthy energy partner in the region.¹⁸ However, Iranian gas supplies are not nearly enough to meet Armenian demand, particularly after Russia intervened and reduced the diameter of the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline from 1,420 to 700 millimeters.¹⁹ Russia continues to block every serious attempt by either Armenia or Iran to deepen their energy cooperation. Interestingly, Iranian-Armenian energy relations are based on a swapping arrangement. According to the twenty-year agreement signed between Tehran and Yerevan in 2014, for one cubic meter of Iranian gas, Armenia sends 3.2 kilowatt-hours of electricity to Iran.²⁰ But despite traditionally good Teheran-Yerevan energy ties, Armenia remains unable to escape the regional isolation.

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Why Does Russia Continue to Support the Armenian Nuclear Program?

Russia has shown great interest in developing a strong national nuclear program. The Kremlin recognizes nuclear energy as a powerful tool in maintaining its status as a great power.²¹ Moreover, Russia has continued to scrutinize every opportunity

17 Turkiye Newspaper (2016) 'Armenian nuclear plant should be shut down', says Turkish minister. Available at: <http://www.turkiyenewspaper.com/business/9573.aspx> (Accessed: 14 February 2018)

18 Zarifian, J. (2008) 'Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran: Two (Not so) Strange Companions Geopolitical Stakes and Significance of a Special Relationship', *Iran & the Caucasus*, 12(1), pp. 123-151.

19 Giragosian, R. (2015) *Armenia as a bridge to Iran? Russia won't like it*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/08/armenia-bridge-iran-russia-won-150830063735998.html> (Accessed: 13 February 2018)

20 Aravot Daily (2017) *Iran to increase gas supplies to Armenia: Armenian delegation talks in Tehran*. Available at: <http://www.aravot-en.am/2017/12/18/204953/> (Accessed: 8 February 2018)

21 Josephson, P. (2010) 'Technological utopianism in the twenty-first century: Russia's nuclear future', *History and Technology*, 19(3), pp. 277-292, DOI: 10.1080/0734151032000123990

to invest in nuclear programs abroad, ensuring that its nuclear leadership remains entrenched within the region. The fact that Russia currently has 35 operating reactors totaling 26,983 MWe and over 20 nuclear power reactors confirmed or planned for export construction clearly demonstrates Moscow's determination to maintain its position as a nuclear energy leader.²² Apart from the astonishing results in the domestic nuclear energy field, Russia's policy of interference helps strengthen its nuclear monopoly across the wider neighborhood.

Since the reopening of Metsamor's atomic station, Moscow has been heavily involved in every step from technical to financial areas in the plant's upgrade. In order to reactivate the plant, Armenia imported more than 500 tons of equipment, mostly from Russia, to improve the outdated unit.²³ However, Russian help has

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come at a high price. Armenia's foreign debt has risen to about \$40 million due to the volumes of imported Russian fuel. Moreover, the nuclear station has been operated by a subsidiary of RAO UES and Rosenergoatom since 2003, as part of an agreement to help pay off those debts to TVEL.²⁴ Russia demands significant ownership and operational authority, just as with its other energy projects abroad. Armenian energy sovereignty is severely curtailed as a result of its dealings with Russian energy companies. Almost every significant energy-related infrastructure in the country is owned by Russian companies.²⁵ Armenia has to make huge compromises when it comes to Russian energy investments.

Even more concerning for Azerbaijan and Georgia, along with Turkey and Iran, is the fact that Russia closely monitors Armenia's energy relations with other countries, and if necessary, blocks them effective interference in Iranian - Armenian gas project has shown that Russia still exerts an essential influence over regional energy relations. During the negotiations over the Iran-Armenia natural gas pipeline project, Gazprom managed to reduce the pipeline's diameter from the initially planned 1,420 to 700

22 World Nuclear Association (2018) *Nuclear Power in Russia*. Available at: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/russia-nuclear-power.aspx> (Accessed: 8 February 2018)

23 Garthwaite, J. and Lavelle, M. (2011) *Is Armenia's Nuclear Plant the World's Most Dangerous?*

24 World Nuclear Association (2017) *Nuclear Power in Armenia*.

25 Yengibaryan, D. (2017) *Energy security in Armenia: accomplishments, dangers and risks*. Available at: <https://jam-news.net/?p=69454> (Accessed: 14 February 2018)

millimeters, preventing Iran from reaching European markets.²⁶ Russia will not permit Tehran to increase Iranian influence in the South Caucasus, or to become a competitive supplier in Europe. This intervention entrenched Armenian gas dependence on Russian supplies, and considerably limited Iranian energy influence. Moscow will continue to oppose every project that could threaten Russian energy leadership in the Caucasus, and to support those which allow Russian influence to thrive.

Armenia's desperate energy situation can be easily manipulated and used for the increase of foreign influence. The Western proposal regarding the developments of renewables in Armenia was declined because it did not offer a feasible alternative. If the plant had not been reopened, Armenia would have faced another power shortage. Decommissioning the plant would deprive millions of people of electricity and significantly undermine national security of the country. Russia could not let this opportunity slip away and offered something more tangible. The attractiveness of the Russian proposal lies in the fact that it brings immediate results, and ensures Armenia's power supply even if such help continues to jeopardize regional security. With Russian financial help, the nuclear plant will continue to operate at least for ten more years. Upgrading Metsamor's reactor will postpone the closure, but also prevent an energy shortage, the most frightening prospect for an already traumatized population.

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The Russian–Armenian nuclear relationship is deeply troubling not only to the West, but also to other countries in the wider region. First of all, if this cooperation continues, Russian influence could become greater in the South Caucasus region. That might be perceived as another vector of an already aggressive Russian foreign policy to entrench its presence in the South Caucasus, and increase anxiety among the post-Soviet republics about their hard-earned independence. This cooperation seems to be a part of the larger Russian nuclear strategy. Alongside the considerable investment in its national nuclear program, Russia has prioritized nuclear exports in promoting itself as a worldwide

26 Socor, V. (2007) *Iran-Armenia Gas Pipeline: Far More Than Meets The Eye*. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-armenia-gas-pipeline-far-more-than-meets-the-eye/> (Accessed: 13 February 2018)

specialist in nuclear technology and engineering.²⁷ However, the idea that Russia has been heavily involved in the South Caucasus' energy relations remains a serious concern for other countries in the neighborhood. Turkey and Iran consider the Caucasus as an important area of influence that could strengthen their respective positions in the ongoing battle for the regional dominance. On the other hand, Russia is perceived as a strong opponent, given its historical ties to the region. Recent developments in Russia-Armenia nuclear cooperation have left many sides wondering what this friendship could mean for the already complicated regional relations.

Azerbaijan and Georgia have considerable concerns about increased Russia-Armenia nuclear cooperation, as such relations imply not merely energy agreements but also political and financial control over Armenian domestic affairs. Ever since the collapse of Soviet Union, the South Caucasus has struggled to maintain its independence and protect itself from the Kremlin's control. Azerbaijan has to be very careful in dealing with Russia because there is a constant fear that Moscow might use the unresolved political issues in the South Caucasus to regain

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control over Azerbaijan. The stronger Russian presence in Armenia signals that Russia could impose tighter controls over the other two South Caucasus countries. Currently, Azerbaijan is in a very difficult position. Because of domestic economic difficulties, notably the depreciation of the local currency caused by the fall in oil and gas prices, as well as growing distance in its relations with the West and Turkey, Azerbaijan has no choice but to continue cooperating very carefully with its perilous neighbors, Russia and Iran.²⁸ Georgia has suffered considerably as a result of Russia's aggressive

foreign policy. Russian interference in Georgia's internal conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the full-scale Russia-Georgia war in 2008 have made Georgia determined to pursue EU membership and turn more to the West.²⁹ Fears around a

27 Fisher, E. (2011) *Rise of a giant: Russia's nuclear future*. Available at: <http://www.power-technology.com/features/feature-rise-of-a-giant-russias-nuclear-future/> (Accessed: 15 February 2018)

28 Kogan, E. (2017) *Azerbaijan's Relations with Russia: Beware the Bear*. Available at: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/6155/Azerbaijan%E2%80%99s-Relations-with-Russia%3A-Beware-the-Bear> (Accessed: 13 April 2018)

29 Melikyan, J. (2014) *Georgia looks west, Armenia east*. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/johnny-melikyan/georgia-looks-west-armenia-east-EU-CU-NATO> (Accessed: 14 April 2018)

greater Russian presence are justified; these small former Soviet republics are aware of Russia's ambitions to re-establish regional hegemony and turn them into puppet states.

Concluding Remarks

Dialogue on the modernization of the existing unit and plans for building a new, more secured reactor could be a good starting point for calming the growing anxieties. However, much more can and should be done to tackle the nuclear issue in Armenia. The Armenian government should focus more on developing alternative energy resources and improve its foreign policy by becoming more open for cooperation with Azerbaijan, especially in regard to resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russian aid will only postpone the same problem regarding the safety of Metsamor's operations. The highly hazardous nature of the location is not a variable that can be changed, regardless of upgrades to the existing unit or even a new, improved reactor.

Due to the current geopolitical issues in the region and Moscow's continued interference, Armenia remains unable to find a less hazardous option for energy production. Instead, the only nuclear plant in the South Caucasus is forced to continue producing despite its risky location. Located in a quake-prone zone, ANPP poses a threat not only to the local population but also to the neighboring countries. Moreover, the plant is not fortified with required safety structures despite recent upgrading. Current negotiations over the construction of a new, more secure nuclear plant at the same location have sparked contradictory opinions. The dilemma of whether or not to maintain a nuclear plant in a seismically active area, even with improved safety arrangements, remains in place. Armenia's complex energy situation and economic vulnerability make the development of alternative energy sources more difficult. The US and the EU are interested in helping Armenia to strengthen domestic capacity in alternative energy production, but their proposal requires major investment - and above all the closure of the essential source of Armenian power – Metsamor.

On the other hand, the Russian offer is much more palatable, because it does not force Armenia to cut off a vital link to its current source of energy security. Instead, with Russian financial support and expertise, Armenia has extended the plant's life and

postponed the domestic energy crisis. Regardless of the ever-present natural seismic threat and potential nuclear catastrophe, Armenia is ready to jeopardize regional security rather than to face electricity shortages. However, Russian aid never comes without strings attached. Russia has been eager to entrench its presence in the region ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its expansionist foreign policy has remained highly opportunistic. Energy investments abroad are a key dimension of Russia's strategy to maintain regional hegemony. Therefore, the Kremlin will continue to oppose any project that could threaten Russian energy leadership in the Caucasus, and support those that allow Russian influence to flourish.

Thus Armenia's dependency on Metsamor, together with Russian control over nuclear power in Armenia, have clear implications for regional stability and security, as well as for the EU and the US. The energy security of the South Caucasus requires the normalization of political relations within the three post-Soviet republics, as well as clear foreign policies of the surrounding powers towards the region. The principle of non-interference, either militarily or financially, is crucial for the regional countries, and at this juncture, Russian expansionism is causing significant damage to the region.

First of all, Russian interference and aggression undermines the hard-earned independence of the three countries. Armenian dependence on the Metsamor nuclear production deepens divisions within the region. Secondly, Armenia's eastward-oriented politics and submission to the Kremlin forces Georgia and Azerbaijan to build alliances with other regional and international actors in order to maintain independence. Within this scope, increased Russian-Armenian cooperation will only add to already tense relations within the region. With every new energy agreement, Russia is looking for an opportunity to either boost its presence or to undermine other countries' energy influence in the region. This leaves the South Caucasus weak and divided, and susceptible to Russian influence. The development of renewable energy in Armenia and reconciliation within the South Caucasus remain a key focus for the West. This is because it is evident that the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh will continue to threaten the security situation in the region. In the same vein, energy security in the Caucasus will continue to suffer as a result of unsettled political questions.