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ENERGY

The path to renewables is the path to lasting peace in the Caucasus



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In early November, a cautious ceasefire was brokered between Azerbaijan ending one of the world’s longest-running and most intractable conflicts. The significance of this agreement and the stability it promises for the entire Caucasus, fraught with ethnic and religious tensions, cannot be understated. But in the years of war, maintaining this fragile peace poses a significant challenge. An unprecedented opportunity for regional energy cooperation, however, until now, during the conflict, presents the first piece of the puzzle. Renewables are t

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The war has seen energy supply across the Caucasus fragmented and disrupted. Pipelines carrying critical natural gas through the region, itself a crucial junction connecting markets in East and West, have faced lengthy and costly rerouting.

the passage of resources via road and rail. The implications of peace for trade normalisation and a cohesive regional energy strategy are clear. The entire world, indeed the world, stands to benefit. But perhaps the player with most to gain is Armenia.

Energy supply has long been a major problem for the landlocked nation, not least due to an energy blockade imposed throughout its illegal occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It is primarily dependent on imported fossil fuels from Iran, but also sources the remainder of its energy from the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, a soviet era relic, the only nuclear reactor in the Southern Caucasus, and widely regarded as one of the most dangerous nuclear plants in existence.

Like Chernobyl before it, the Metsamor plant is one of the few remaining reactors without primary containment structures. Instead it relies on an "accident tolerant system," designed to handle small ruptures. In the event of a large rupture, radioactive steam would vent directly to the atmosphere. It is therefore unfortunate that – like Chernobyl – the plant is built on some of the world's most earthquake-prone terrain. In fact, a 6.5 Richter Scale earthquake had its epicentre just 60 miles from Metsamor, prompting the plant's temporary closure in 1988. But it was reopened in 1995 to meet Armenia's severe energy needs during the war. By 2004 the EU called the plant 'a danger to the entire region'. In 2011 National Geographic openly asked: 'Is Armenia's nuclear reactor the world's most dangerous?' Indeed, the region is capable of anything up to a magnitude 7.5 earthquake, which would result in a disaster many times more explosive than Chernobyl.

Today, Armenia depends on this nuclear time bomb for more than 30% of its electricity, an amount so large that the EU's offer to finance its decommissioning of 200 million euros (\$289 million) was refused. The EU has similarly funded the decommissioning of soviet-era plants in Lithuania, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Armenia is the last to remain outside of Russia. It is Russia in fact, that through Russia's support has extended the plant's operational life until 2026. But now, in light of peace, a different path is possible.

With the lowering of the energy blockade, Armenia need no longer be reliant on Iran for fossil fuels. Whilst it is hardly common for an environmentalist

encourage the use of hydrocarbons, the peace dividend – in the short term connect Armenia to Azerbaijani gas and electricity grids, whilst rapidly tap enormous potential for this sunny and mountainous nation for renewable energy. Armenia will permanently wean the country from dangerous nuclear generation on a seismically crisscrossed by fault lines.

The opportunities for geothermal, hydroelectric, solar and wind are already being realised. Just this summer, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), a member of the World Bank Group; and the EU announced they would fund the development of the first utility-scale solar power plant in Armenia. It will also be the first in the Caucasus. Moreover, according to Armenian environmental activist and Chairman of the Greens Union of Armenia, Hakob Sanasryan, the infrastructure is already in place. “If it were exploited better, it could satisfy Armenia’s energy needs,” he told the National Geographic shortly after the Fukushima disaster.

The trend to renewables is already underway in Azerbaijan too, despite its oil-based economy. Already the Caspian Sea – the world’s largest inland body of water – has ten hydroelectric plants, and Azerbaijan has constructed an additional six biomass and ten solar power plants in a record two years between 2017 and 2019, with ambitious plans for renewables to meet 30% of its energy needs by 2030.

Devastated by decades of war, the Nagorno-Karabakh region must now be rebuilt and will include the provision of electricity. Through cooperation, there is an opportunity for Azerbaijan and Armenia to repair a fractured region, meet their own energy goals and begin their long journey down the path to lasting peace and prosperity. It will be a slow process. Wounds are deep and will take time to heal; the ceasefire is at the start. But mutual ambitions regarding renewable energy hold the promise of industrial opportunities, job creation and sustainable economic growth – and that, the transformation of an historic enmity into a fruitful and long-lasting partnership.

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