



From “Aspirations of EU Water Diplomacy in the South Caucasus” to the South Caucasus Water Academics Network (SWAN)

International Workshop of the UNIC-ER Seed Funding Project (2023-2024)^{1 2}

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Purpose of the Document

The workshop funded by the EU-UNIC Seed Funding project took place on 3-5 April, 2024 in Tbilisi, Georgia. The project started in November 2023 and was finalised on 30 June 2024. The meeting in Tbilisi was preceded by two video-conferencing calls with participants from various institutions, the kick-off meeting on 20 November 2023 and one on 25 January 2024. Since January 2024, Douwe van der Meer and Farhad Mukhtarov have been working on organising the workshop in an intensive manner. Individual calls have been organised with representatives of all five riparian states (Armenia, Iran, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye) and with societal partners from Türkiye (SUEN) and the Netherlands (Deltares). In addition, the UNIC partners (Koç University in Istanbul, Türkiye and Oulu University in Oulu, Finland) have been consulted regularly in order to create a longer-term strategy for a sustainable project. The workshop in Tbilisi was also facilitated by the office of the USAID funded Deloitte-led South Caucasus Regional Water Management Program. Follow up meetings are planned as well as activities to raise funding for future engagement, research and educational and capacity building activities.

As a result of this workshop, the **South Caucasus Water Academics Network** (SWAN) was established that has been actively meeting since April 2024 in monthly calls. It held a number of international events since and is currently looking for new funding opportunities to have impactful research and advocacy on water, development and peace in the South Caucasus region.

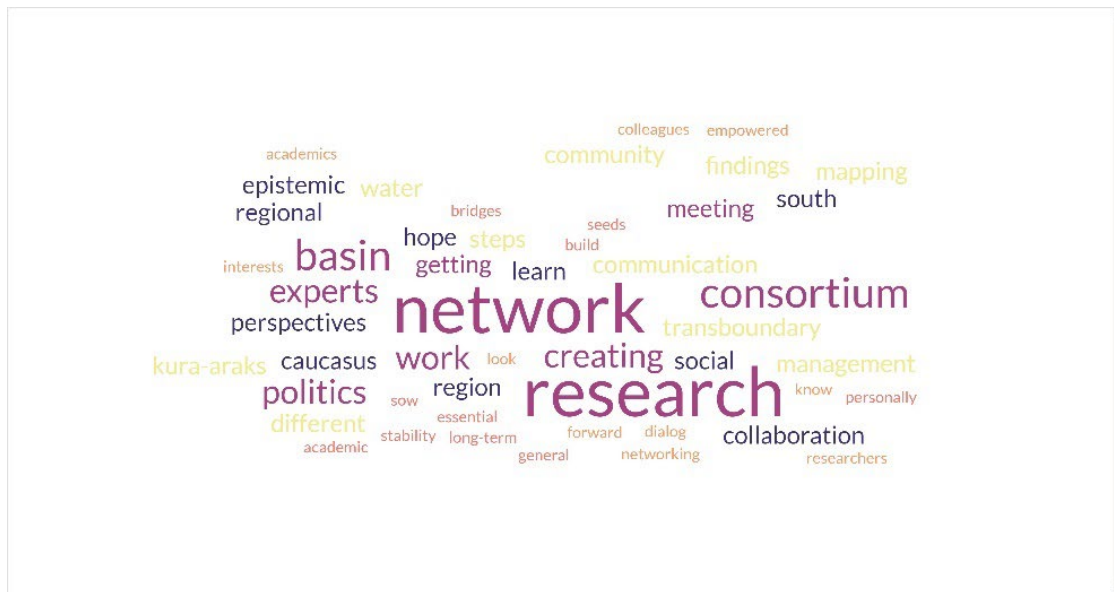
This report is to document the discussions and set the stage for the next steps of **SWAN**. It is also important for SWAN to enter the public space with the ideas and deliberations that emerged from the workshop as this is the ultimate goal of the network – contribute to the debate, knowledge and social justice around water governance in the region. The *Chatham House Rules* applied to the meeting, which stressed what has been discussed without stating who said what with the exception of the presentations (and some proposals) that have been delivered by certain individuals whose names are mentioned and who consented for their names to appear on the document before it was made public. This document is a public version of an earlier report that was prepared for internal use and discussed in multiple meetings of the SWAN Network that came to existence as a result of the foundational workshop. It needs to be cited and referenced when used by others in in their analytical or other work.

4 April Day 1

Session 1: Introductions and Small Group Brainstorming

The purpose of the session was to introduce participants to each other, set the ground rules for the event and brainstorm about motivations to participate in the network and objectives of this workshop.

Figure 1 Word Cloud Based on Motivations for Participants to Join the Network



Note: the larger the word, the more frequently it is used in the textual dataset. The graph above is based on the answers provided by the participants in a survey prior to the workshop.

The event started with the round of introductions of the participants. Dr. ***Farhad Mukhtarov*** emphasized the common interest to form a research network and collaborate, the unique opportunity that the event presents given the presence of all five riparian state representatives and the needs in the region. The focus should be on water and not the many issues that divide the region, without ignoring disagreement on various tensions in the region.

Dr. ***Burak Sakal*** is the director of the Social and Strategic Research Center at Cappadocia University, Türkiye. He possesses degrees in political science departments, public administration and international relations. Burak has worked on environmental issues for 15 years. He is interested to write on water/energy and geo-politics in the region.

Dr. **Arda Bilgen** works with the geographical focus on Middle East. This workshop is an opportunity to widen the scope of his work. He is driven by finding the knowledge gaps in the literature and finds that the Kura-Aras basin is understudied, which is an opportunity to expand in this arena for this network.

Dr. **Jeanene Mitchell** is a stakeholder engagement advisor, South Caucasus Regional Water Management Program funded by USAID (2023-2028), based in Tbilisi. She presented the small grants programme, with the objective to support initiatives like SWAN. She has background in research in oceans and the Kura-Aras river basin, has been active in the region with the “Restart Initiative”, a series of Armenia-Azerbaijan dialogues on issues such as transport, water and energy.

Ms. **Mary Kate Ugrekhelidze** was at the time of the workshop the water governance specialist at USAID. Formerly at Ilia State University, active in mountain ecosystems research.

Dr. **Bjorn Klove** is a water resources engineering, Professor at University of Oulu in Finland. Has worked in the Middle East, Central Asia but not in the Caucasus. Bjorn is interested to expand into this area, also with support from his colleague Dr. **Ali Thorabi** based at University of Oulu.

Dr. **Tuğba Evrim Maden** is a policy development coordinator at SUEN, the Turkish Water Institute. Dr. Maden works with the national global agenda and transboundary water issues. SUEN (Turkish Water Institute) conducts research, policy development, and capacity-building activities on water management. It advises decision-makers, supports international cooperation, coordinates regional initiatives, and provides training to national and international stakeholders. Has given many trainings to participants from Middle East, Azerbaijan, North Africa, about topics such as wastewater management, water governance and water diplomacy. Dr. Maden’s PhD dealt with the transboundary aspects of the European Union Water Framework Directive (EU-WFD). She is involved in official and semi-official negotiations on Tigris-Euphrates. SUEN also works on Kura-Aras, would like to get involved in the future projects. Dr. Maden has experience with track 1–1.5 initiatives on Tigris-Euphrates which may be useful in the Kura-Aras river basin too. Such initiatives can have an impact on official negotiations.

Dr. **Shahnoor Hasan** is an academic working on water governance, 6 years in Bangladesh, 9 years in the Netherlands. Works on politics of development in the context of international cooperation. The geographical focus is on Southeast Asia, Southwest delta in Bangladesh; middle and lower

Mekong and Central Java. Questioning the Dutch government's colonial attitudes in international water cooperation. Interested in understanding third-parties' positions in the region, but is not from the region and hence is naïve about the complexities. She posed questions to the group – “who are we”? “what are we working on”? “For whom”? How can we mobilize specific discussions”? “How can the discussions be balanced”?

Mr. **Alen Amirkhanian Gasparian** is director of the Acopian Centre for the Environment at American University of Armenia. The center has a large portfolio: water, waste (Swedish-funded), biodiversity, IT, energy. Degree programs and various projects with the focus on energy, green transition, IT, and environmental studies. Projects include monitoring compliance, waste management, energy transition, and developing green taxonomy, with a keen interest in water policy and engagement at both policy and grassroots levels. Involved in the PARITIA H2020 project, pioneering initiatives like the first citizens assembly on public transport. With a background in philosophy, they spearhead Political Economy Analysis for improved water management in Armenia, funded by the Copernicus program.

Dr. **Rovshan Abbasov** is a professor at Khazar University. PhD in hydrology, managed multiple development projects as a consultant. Flood management expert for UNDP, UNICEF and various international networks of experts. Currently involved in the national adaptation project in Azerbaijan, focused mostly on climate change adaptation in coastal communities, water management and agriculture.

Dr. **Saeed Morid** is at Tarbiat Modares University, which only focuses on PhD programmes and MSs. Many foreign, especially Middle Eastern and African, students. Water research (management) institute is a part of the university. He is a hydrologist, interested to work on climate change. Involved in transboundary studies for 15 years – e.g. the Helmand river basin. Involved in the Aras river basin for two years. Worked with Amsterdam Environmental institute and various other international enters. Main expectation: enhance cooperation in the basin, workshop paving the ground for an international treaty.

Mr. **Levan Pavlinashvili** representing Operational Research Institute, a think-tank that he founded. Used to work in public policy modelling. Worked on water management issues for 7 years. Operational research is applied mathematics, modelling of engineering, especially when applied to public policy. ORI aims to support the development of this profession in Georgia.

Public policy advisory work, when there is demand for it (not often). Water project: irrigation tariffs; water resource management; WFD. Expectation: contribute through modelling, mathematics-decision making.

Mr. **Douwe van der Meer** is a recent graduate of Leiden University with a degree in International Relations. As an intern at Clingendael Institute, Douwe researched transboundary relationships around the Aras river management. Douwe is active as a consultant and tour guide in Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Mr. **Paul Huber** is from research support office at ISS and will help guide this networks in finding grant opportunities to do research and capacity-building exercises.

Dr. Farhad Mukhtarov is Assistant Professor at International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam. He worked on various aspects of water governance and public policy in the past 15 years, now re-orienting to the region where he is originally from – Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus. Hopes to build a network of researchers and practitioners who would be willing to write together, apply for grants and pursue various projects. He is a PI for this UNIC project.

Break out Session 1

Three groups were formed with the request to consider the following questions: “who are we”? “what do we want to achieve”? “for whom”? and “how”? The groups convened separately for 15-20 minutes and reported back to the plenary. The main topics that emerged from this discussion are as follows, in our (Douwe and Farhad) synthesis.

Who are we? Building a functional network is building a movement based on shared values and objectives.

- **UNIC is unique.** The key strengths of this network include **relative independence** of academics and ability to **shape policy discussions** and agendas on various subjects (water, agriculture, energy), particularly in smaller countries of the region (e.g. Armenia and Azerbaijan). We are aware about the relative freedom in expressing our views as academics is a **“super-power”** in the context where often freedom is limited.
- The prestige of the universities we represent is a serious advantage and the platform is a rare phenomenon of both **quality and dynamism** in the region because of the weight it carries

academically. This makes the **network of scholars and practitioners on water management and governance** in the Kura-Araks river basin a very promising project.

- All of us carry a **double positionality** – as personalities and members of socio-political and cultural groups and as scholars/professionals. Paying attention to these identities and fostering links and inter-subjectivities they bring to the table are important for the community to move forward and have impact. We **cannot be neutral**, but we can be **open and transparent** in our discussions and have spaces and processes to speak through any tensions, disagreements and frustrations if and when these arise.
- There was a call for a **working method** to understand who we are. All of the above are helpful in brainstorming, framing and branding our collective. The question now is what the mission and the **genesis-narrative** of this network is. And how can we maintain this narrative internally and externally.

Multidisciplinary work is key to the success of this network.

- This group aims to engage in multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary work, recognizing the lack of institutional frameworks and infrastructure for such work – both nationally and in the projects hitherto funded by the donors. **There are so many silos in academia (both national and international)** and governmental thinking, a group of multi-disciplinary scholars with their networks can make a real difference if built on joint purpose and objectives.
- Another issue where multi-disciplinarity can help is the **role of data in decision-making**. There is a sentiment shared by the experts in the workshop that politicians make decision by intuition and not based on data, something that scholars in political science and economics have long established. Evidence is never used in policy/politics in a linear and direct fashion and is subject to politics and strategising of individual policy entrepreneurs as well as contingency inherent in policy-making.
- Finding new sources of data (e.g. open-source data, data transparency, citizen science) are important given securitisation of data on water flows and quality. However, this may not be sufficient for a desirable policy change. Bringing in expertise on communication, advocacy and the networks we possess, both new data and new ways of advocating for change will have an impact. We are UNIC-ly positioned to do so, especially if this work is based on views and preferences of the water users and communities, which may need to be collected bottom up. This is potentially an area to expand into.

The time is ripe. Several factors make the timing perfect for expansion in this region and for this type of an epistemic network.

- First, there is a real possibility of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan and a more regional, basin-wide approach to public goods issues.
- Secondly, regional benefits and political agendas get more aligned -- there's more focus on raising public awareness about such issues as water scarcity, floods, mudflows, pollution problems and the pros and cons of continuous public sector reform. There is also an opening in influencing government agendas and involving universities in decision-making. The push for EU-WFD standards and international projects in the region offer an opportunity for an integrated/harmonised approach to water and development.

Key objectives and next steps

- Key objectives include raising awareness about water related problems and challenges, supporting multi-tack negotiations in the Kura-Aras river basin, advocating for benefit-sharing measures, conducting collaborative research and capacity strengthening. Capacity-building was mentioned as a low-hanging fruit that is nevertheless very important. Training journalists was another idea, as well as training diplomats and public officials (beyond the ministries and departments of water).
- Group's **challenges** in building an active research community include the lack of institutional support (in individual countries or institutions we represent), siloed academia, and nationalistic sentiments in the region. There is also a new reality of complicated science-policy relationship/interface, especially since COVID.
- We would need to develop a common language, improve science communication, circumvent nationalism-driven agendas and seek for the right frames in our research proposals, papers and policy briefs.

Water positionalities are complex: water is viewed not just as a resource but also as a cultural and livelihood component, stressing the importance of considering local communities' perspectives. This has come out strongly in the workshop with repetitive statements from members that water is part of nature, ecosystem health is important, soil quality is crucial for survival of agriculture and prosperity/peace in the region. The network can be the first in the region to call attention to multiple ways of valuing/knowning water, and away from reductionist and siloed discussions of water quantity, quality and flows.

Session 2: Presentations from Riparian State Experts

This section will briefly summarise each presentation, the slides are provided below in the appendixes.

1. Rovshan Abbasov (Azerbaijan, Khazar University)

Water Management Challenges and Scenarios in Azerbaijan: A Comprehensive Overview

The presentation delved into regional water challenges, spotlighting Azerbaijan's situation, particularly considering the Kura-Aras basin dynamics. Decreasing transboundary water flow compounds Azerbaijan's internal water management issues, prompting cautious discussion around sourcing water for Baku from alternative reservoirs – a wrong approach given water scarcity in Azerbaijan. Within Baku, substantial water losses—potentially reaching 70%—underscore inefficiencies in distribution networks. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of irrigated land in Azerbaijan, coupled with reliance on rain-fed cattle breeding, and the lack of rain-water harvesting emphasizes the need for sustainable pasture management to mitigate virtual water usage. Critically, the misstep of irrigating pastures highlights systemic mismanagement. The presentation advocates reframing water loss as a primary water consumer to address these challenges effectively. Looking ahead, the presentation calls for collaborative research efforts to develop scientifically driven approaches demonstrating shared economic interests among basin countries. Suggestions include involving environmental economists to explore mechanisms such as payment for ecosystem services, potentially compensating upstream countries for water quality efforts that downstream countries benefit from. The call extends to embracing economics-based approaches (e.g. payments for ecosystem services, benefit sharing and cost-benefit analysis of various policy options) in water governance and diplomacy, alongside rigorous quantification of ecosystem services, to foster sustainable water management practices regionally.

2. Levan Pavlenishvili (ORI, Georgia)

Options and Implementation Guidance for Reforming Surface Water Abstraction in Georgia

This presentation originally developed for the National Water Dialogue in Georgia highlights recent legal and policy developments in water resource management. Georgia's adoption of the Water Framework Directive reflects a commitment to modernization, with a focus on agriculture and energy as major water consumers. Key policy documents, including Vision 2030 and NEAP4, guide water management strategies in the country. However, challenges persist, such as incomplete

river management plans and ambiguity in responsibilities among stakeholders. Recommendations for reform include improving water data collection, implementing enforcement mechanisms, and integrating energy and agriculture strategies with broader water management goals. The current data limitations, including reliance on self-reporting and limited resources, underscore the need for concerted efforts to ensure sustainable water management practices in Georgia.

3. Alen Gasparian (American University in Armenia)

USAID/Armenia Improved Water Management for Sustainable Economic Growth (IWM)

Armenia boasts abundant renewable water resources but faces water stress due to inefficient usage. Transit losses are high at 25%, with agriculture consuming the majority of water. Decentralization poses challenges, compounded by a historical reluctance to charge actual costs for water. Post-Soviet reforms have been implemented, including a water code and decentralized management framework. Climate change threatens Armenia's water resources, with vulnerability to evaporation. Collaborative research interests lie in standardizing methodologies for data collection, joint capacity building, and fostering dialogue among regional stakeholders. Needs include addressing gaps in communication, build trust, and invest in the young generation for sustainable water management in the region. The importance of fisheries was emphasised by the speaker and the fact that there is an ongoing debate in Armenia on giving Azerbaijan “free” water by filling in the reservoirs for fish and releasing those later downstream.

4. Burak Sakal (Türkiye, University of Cappadocia)

Kura-Aras Basin, The general situation on water in the upstream Kura-Aras Basin in Türkiye

Türkiye, with 25 water river basins including transboundary ones, aspires to operate under the EU Water Framework Directive, with the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Work (DSI) overseeing water basins. Challenges in the basins include pollution, water scarcity, floods, and data management issues, exacerbated by a lack of consolidated data on flows and quality.

In the Turkish part of the Kura-Aras/Çoruh-Aras area, less than one million people reside. The Aras region boasts more agricultural land compared to the Çoruh area, which is predominantly forest and pastureland. Hydroelectricity initiatives, including planned dams and water structures, are significant in the region, with projects like Besikkaya and Gokturk aimed at harnessing hydropower potential. Challenges persist in managing floods, pollution, and water stress in the Turkish part of Kura-Aras, exacerbated by data management issues. Collaboration opportunities

hinge on political will, increased regional connectivity post-Karabakh war, and geopolitical factors shaping water dynamics. The collapse of the Soviet Union has fundamentally altered Türkiye's geopolitical landscape, necessitating nuanced approaches to address water challenges across multiple borders. Future collaborative research interests center on understanding that political disagreements drive water problems rather than vice versa. The emphasis lies on de-securitizing and depoliticizing water issues, such as distinguishing between national government responsibilities for water and private sector involvement in energy.

5. Saeed Morid (Iran, Tarbiat Modares University)

Water Situation in Iran Along the Aras and Water Cooperation with the Riparian States

The water resources of the Aras basin have been the basis for major agriculture and economic activities (especially in energy sector). The total irrigated lands of the basin is about 1,186,000 ha. Iran shares 29% of this amount with relatively modern irrigation systems. These activities have the bases for different hydropolitical interactions of the riparian states. The investigation of the status of these interactions from the perspectives of cooperation and conflict was done for the period of 1926 to 2021 using IWED (International Water Event Database) database and other creditable sources. The results showed four significant subperiods, where the status of corporation and conflict were continuously shifted. Furthermore, the interactions were temporally evaluated with respect to type and dynamics using the TWINS (Transboundary Waters Interaction Nexus) framework. It was revealed that basin gains from numerous agreements, joint water projects, and joint technical commissions. However, the terrestrial conflict and its consequences on the geopolitics of the basin as well as water quality and upstream water projects are factors causes conflict. Finally, our study identified the factors affecting future of cooperation and conflict in the Aras basin. It is particularly true that upstream projects (e.g. the Turkey-DAP project) becoming operational with insufficient consideration about their effects on downstream states can increase dispute. Climate change as a serious external factor must receive more attention by the riparian states. It is essential that they invest in joint regional adaptation plans. In order to achieve this, multilateral agreements and a joint institutional platform (e.g. establishment of Aras River Commission) must be established. These would be effective steps toward ensuring sustainable cooperation in the basin.

Session 3: Presentations on Frameworks and Approaches

1. Arda Bilgen (UK, London School of Economics, LSE)

Hydro-Transparency?

Hydro-transparency refers to the degree to which information is available to outsiders that enables them to have informed voice in decisions and/or to assess the decisions made by insiders' (Florini, 2007). While various UN Conventions have recognized the necessity of data sharing, practical implementation faces hurdles such as data gaps, inconsistencies across datasets, reluctance to share data due to political reasons, lack of trust among riparian states leading to data securitization, and absence of a comprehensive framework to facilitate data and information exchange (e.g., customary law). Public participation, including engagement from NGOs and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), plays a pivotal role. "Governance through Disclosure", defined as the strategic use of transparency to enhance governance outcomes, emerges as a crucial approach. Utilizing tools like remote sensing data available through platforms such as NASA Reverb, USGS Earth Explorer, and Sentinel Hub EO Browser can significantly aid in this endeavour. One notable example is the [Global Surface Water Explorer](#), which democratizes data analysis by making it accessible to non-experts. Through graphical maps illustrating water distribution in specific geographic regions, it enables a deeper understanding of hydrological dynamics. The question arises: can the success of the case study in Iraq be replicated in the Kura-Aras basin? Future collaborative research endeavours should address whether to solely emphasize cooperation or also consider conflictual aspects within the discussion. Moreover, analysing the impacts and costs of maintaining the current state of hydrological disorder is imperative. However, establishing a multilateral river commission faces challenges, particularly concerning Türkiye's political stance, as it benefits from the existing status quo.

2. Shahnoor Hasan (The Netherlands, Deltares)

Embracing hydrosolidarity: Towards forging partnerships

Hydrosolidarity emerged as a deliberate effort to foster mutual understanding, common good, and ethical considerations concerning shared water resources. Solidarity is not inherent but rather a continual process, constantly evolving and requiring ongoing cultivation. It cannot simply be "achieved." In the context of the Kura-Aras basin, the experience from South Asia suggests that relying solely on anti-hegemonic strategies is ineffective. Aggressive modernization often overlooks the importance of incorporating local knowledge, which is essential for fostering hydrosolidarity. Examining the Ganges river example reveals complexities in achieving solidarity, particularly between hegemons like India and China. Water issues are consistently on the agenda

during state visits, yet sentiments towards solidarity are mixed. In India, concerns about national security overshadow discussions on water sharing with Bangladesh, leading to tensions. Despite shared cultural ties, cooperation on water management remains elusive between West Bengal and Bangladesh. The concept of "Hilsha Fish Diplomacy" highlights the asymmetry in power dynamics, where anti-hegemon often offer concessions in hopes of securing agreements with hegemon. However, in the case of India, internal political dynamics hinder effective negotiation, as demonstrated by the lack of dialogue between the central government and the West Bengali governor.

3. Bjørn Kløve (Finland, University of Oulu)

Water, Energy, and Environmental Engineering at the Faculty of Technology, University of Oulu

Specializes in a wide range of fields including river engineering, the water-energy nexus, groundwater, water supply, urban hydrology, land use and climate change, hydrological modelling, and water digitalization as tools in water management. In the (near) region, our work encompasses various vital areas such as Land Use and Land Cover Change Analysis, the effects of dams and hydropower, River Regime Alteration and Anthropogenic Impact Assessment, the impacts of climate change versus land use change, transboundary water studies, water pollution and drinking water analysis, and water diplomacy in Central Asia. Our current flagship project involves updating the groundwater directive, the largest endeavour of its kind in Europe, generously funded by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Digitalwaters.fi initiative is supporting 60 PhD positions, contributing significantly to research and capacity-building in the field. Furthermore, our collaboration with the OSCE's water and energy unit in Dushanbe and our contributions to the Central Asia Water Journal underscore our commitment to regional water diplomacy and knowledge dissemination. Projects such as Zerafshan, focusing on modelling energy systems and hydrology, and the World Bank's wind potential mapping in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, highlight our efforts to leverage technology and research for sustainable water management and development in the region.

Finland's ambitions to play a more significant role in water diplomacy are exemplified by initiatives like the training of diplomats through the OSCE, of which Finland is a member. Our collaboration with organizations such as water-ca.org serves as a platform for publishing research, facilitating information dissemination, skill development, and fostering collaborative efforts. The interest shown by USAID in investing in long-term water diplomacy in the South Caucasus aligns with our

vision for sustainable water management and cooperation in the region, and we look forward to potential collaboration opportunities in this regard.

4. Tugba Evrim Maden (Türkiye, SUEN)

Türkiye and Transboundary Waters

Talking about water management in Türkiye, in the ongoing efforts to harmonize water management approaches, particularly through Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and River Basin Management, significant progress has been made in developing management plans. While 11 plans have been completed, others are still in the planning stage. A question was asked underscoring a hegemonic position of Türkiye upstream, emphasizing its sovereign rights and rejecting third-party involvement. While the speaker advocates for cooperation, citing the importance of political will, challenges persist, especially amidst conflicts in Iraq and Syria, hindering collaborative efforts. Tuğba emphasized that the efficient use of basin waters is a shared responsibility, stating that Türkiye has been making efforts for the effective use of water and that similar commitments should also be undertaken by the other riparian countries. The suggestion for Türkiye to invest in more efficient water use downstream was taken with interest. Despite positive strides in official relations between Türkiye and Iraq since 2011, dialogues with Syria remain absent, reflecting broader regional tensions. Technical working groups, formed in 2018, signal progress, with efforts focused on improving relations with Iraq. She noted that although Iran is an upstream riparian in the basin, it has not participated in formal cooperation mechanisms so far. Alen's inquiry into Türkiye's approach to transboundary groundwater issues reveals a lack of information and a need for updated research, highlighting knowledge gaps in this critical area. Similarly, discussions regarding Türkiye-Azerbaijan relations touch upon existing technical cooperation and Azerbaijani concerns about the Kura River. Key questions arise concerning the evaluation of "significant harm" and downstream impact during the design phase of water management projects. "The absence of a mutually agreed definition of 'significant harm' has implications for international agreements, and this is one of the reasons behind Türkiye's decision not to sign the 1997 Agreement. Overall, these discussions underscore the complexities and challenges inherent in transboundary water management. While progress has been made, particularly in official relations and technical cooperation, significant hurdles remain, necessitating continued dialogue and collaboration to address shared water challenges effectively.

Session 4: Connections between Sessions 2 and 3

This session was aimed at stimulating pragmatic conversations between presenters from sessions 1 and 2 in order to find workable proposals. Paul: three questions

1. *Where do you see that our research interests overlap?*
2. *Where are partners complementary? Are there different approaches/ disciplines that are of interest to your own research? Overlapping expertise/ interests*
3. *What are possible objectives for future cooperation?*

Key issues discussed in this session are summarized below. These indicate areas of productive research and engagement in the future.

1. **Water Resource Management and Climate Change Impact**

- Identifying and understanding the resources of the basin, including consumption patterns, and assessing the impact of development projects and climate change.
- Emphasizing the importance of conducting baseline studies and comprehensive water governance analyses to inform policy and intervention strategies.

2. **Methodologies and Standards**

- Discussing challenges with standards and methodologies for data collection and analysis, and the need to align with international frameworks such as the OECD.
- Recognizing the political and economic implications of establishing standards (e.g. EU-WFD or other standards) and methodologies (e.g. the OECD methodologies), and the importance of research focusing on the political economy of standards and governance reforms (e.g. the work done by the Georgian participant).

3. **Transboundary Water Cooperation**

- Exploring successful experiences with transboundary water management in other basins and analysing the factors contributing to their success.
- Highlighting the challenges and failures in past transboundary water projects, such as the numerous unsuccessful attempts in the Kura basin. Why have there been so many projects in this region and why is there so little impact?

4. Political and Socio-Economic Dynamics

- Considering the political and socio-economic factors influencing water management decisions, including state policies, historical narratives, and power dynamics.
- Discussing the challenges of depoliticizing water issues and fostering trust and cooperation among riparian states.

5. Institutional Frameworks and Governance Mechanisms

- Examining existing institutional frameworks and governance mechanisms for water management and exploring opportunities for multilateral agreements and cooperation.
- Suggesting the establishment of river commissions and other cooperative mechanisms, while acknowledging the political obstacles and the need for long-term trust-building efforts.

6. Sustainable Management and Future Directions:

- Advocating for sustainable management approaches, including basin-wide pollution prevention and compensation mechanisms for upstream-downstream cooperation.
- Discussing the implementation of new principles for water management and the potential role of international organizations and agreements in addressing hydro-anarchy and promoting cooperation.

These discussions underscore the complex interplay of political, economic, and environmental factors in transboundary water management and the importance of collaborative efforts, interdisciplinary research, and long-term investments in achieving sustainable water governance.

5 April Day 2

Session 5a: Literature Review: Major Themes in Kura-Aras River Basin

Farhad Mukhtarov presented the literature review on the Kura-Aras river basin discussions in preparation based on the initial work by Douwe and Farhad. The work is divided in three sections: a) water governance issues in individual states that are contrasting or similar – and to what extent water diplomacy and water governance aspects are inter-linked; b) transboundary aspects of water diplomacy in the region with the special focus on issue-linkage and to the primacy of technical cooperation as opposed to political cooperation; and c) the issue of third-party involvement in the settling of the disputes and their positive and negative impacts. After the presentation, three corners were designated for a group discussion on these subjects with the guiding question – what the major issues per each of this section/problem are and how can we tackle these as a network.

The literature review is presented as an opportunity to write a joint article that would define the network and put it on the map of the water diplomacy world both in the region and globally.

Session 5b: Break-out Group Discussions and Key Insights

The discussions highlighted the intricate relationship between political cooperation and technical cooperation in water governance. Participants emphasized the importance of technical cooperation as a prerequisite for political dialogue, recognizing its role in building trust and facilitating cooperation. However, concerns were raised regarding the lack of continuity in personnel dealing with water issues, leading to challenges in sustaining technical cooperation efforts.

Key points included the need for a larger water governance structure incorporating water diplomacy in the region, (e.g. Türkiye engages in significant water diplomacy, but its water governance faces various challenges – the two elements can be combined and treated together). Participants also discussed the significance of data sharing in technical cooperation, with joint monitoring identified as essential for fostering cooperation, despite concerns about it signalling distrust among parties.

There was a debate over the role of third-party involvement in water diplomacy, with suggestions for mediation and capacity building to support local communities in sustaining project outcomes. Concerns were raised about the short-term nature of engagement and the need for clarity regarding strategic motivations in third-party interventions. There was also a comment to differentiate between different modes of involvement of third-parties and look for examples of positive engagement and boundary conditions for these.

Participants highlighted the complexity of engaging with different levels of governance and the challenges of navigating local dynamics. The upcoming meeting of the women in water diplomacy network in Georgia was noted as a potential avenue for further exploration of these issues. Overall, the discussions underscored the importance of addressing political and technical dimensions in tandem to foster effective water governance and diplomacy.

Session 6: Presentation from USAID and Discussion

Eric Viala's presented his vision of the USAID project in the South Caucasus. Jeanene Mitchell provided insights into the technical details of the small grants program, outlining its structure and objectives. The program offers grants of up to 1.5-2 million dollars, with a maximum of 50k per grant, and spans a duration of 12 months. It aims to be established initially in Georgia and Armenia, with potential expansion to Azerbaijan at a later stage, and is set to run until March 2025. Eligible entities include both for-profit and non-profit organizations, provided they are legally recognized, potentially including local universities.

Eric emphasized the need for water governance professionals in Georgia, as identified by the environmental ministry, suggesting universities as key institutions to fulfil this demand. Highlighting existing efforts, he mentioned the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) curriculum at Baku State and Tbilisi State Universities, initiated by UNDP GEF, with plans for expansion to other universities and additional curriculum development.

One participant for a shift in approach towards a more regional perspective, proposing that a unified curriculum could be applied across Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Another participant echoed this sentiment, suggesting the introduction of a regional dimension and emphasizing the importance of stakeholder engagement and collaborative curriculum development workshops, potentially held in Tbilisi. Discussion then turned to the review criteria for the grants program, focusing on consistency with program objectives, applicant capability, and potential for impact. It was agreed that detailed announcements were posted on Georgian and Armenian websites, with information sessions to follow, including communication with Farhad.

A different participant raised concerns about the sustainability of international programs in the region, prompting a discussion on the need for exit strategies and integration into national agendas. Another participant stressed the importance of program integration into national frameworks/budgets to ensure sustainability, with a further contributor emphasizing the grassroots nature of the initiative and the importance of seeking diverse funding sources to maintain continuity beyond initial funding from USAID.

Session 7: Ideas, Proposals and Grants

Session 7 discussed multiple proposal ideas and venues for applications and is kept in the internal report as these are draft ideas. For those willing to participate or collaborate in writing grant proposal applications, please get in touch with Dr. Mukhtarov or Mr. van der Meer to discuss.

Closing remarks and future plans

There is a clear interest in developing this network into a functional think-tank like network to work in various directions. Farhad and Douwe will take a lead to develop this work further by organising a call in a few weeks' time. The immediate projects to be worked by the network are the following:

1. Op-ed leadership by a member, emphasizing the importance of grants such as COST, Erasmus+, and USAID, along with ongoing projects like regional adaptation and basin plans.
2. The intention to share findings with policymakers in Iran, including documents and reports from workshops, as well as ongoing PhD projects focusing on the Aras/Kura region.
3. A focus on the purpose and audience of forthcoming papers, aiming to highlight the value of our network and resonate effectively with donors and states. This involves demonstrating actionable research with concrete contributions to regional dialogues, particularly on pressing issues like water management.
4. Appreciation for the productive meeting and a commitment to continuing collaboration through online platforms.

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Participants

1. Jeanine Mitchell –USAID South Caucasus Regional Water Management program
2. Mary Kate Ugrekhelidze – USAID South Caucasus Regional Water Management program
3. Eric Viala - USAID South Caucasus Regional Water Management program
4. Ana Kundadze - Ilia State University (only pre-workshop)
5. Salome Shedania - Ilia State University (only pre-workshop)
6. Rovshan Abbasov – Khazar University, Azerbaijan
7. Levan Pavlenishvili – ORI, Georgia
8. Shahnoor Hasan – Deltares, the Netherlands
9. Burak Sakal – University of Cappadocia, Türkiye
10. Arda Bilgen – London School of Economics, United Kingdom
11. Alen Gasparian Amirkhanian – American University of Armenia, Armenia
12. Tugba Evrim Maden – SUEN, Turkish Water Institute, Türkiye
13. Bjørn Kløve- University of Oulu, Finland (UNIC Partner)
14. Saeed Morid – Tarbiat Modares University
15. Douwe van der Meer – ISS, (UNIC Partner)
16. Farhad Mukhtarov – ISS, (UNIC Partner, PI)
17. Paul Huber – ISS, (UNIC Partner)
18. *Subnaz Yilmaz, Koc University (UNIC Partner), absent from workshop*

Appendix 2: Workshop Program 3-5 April

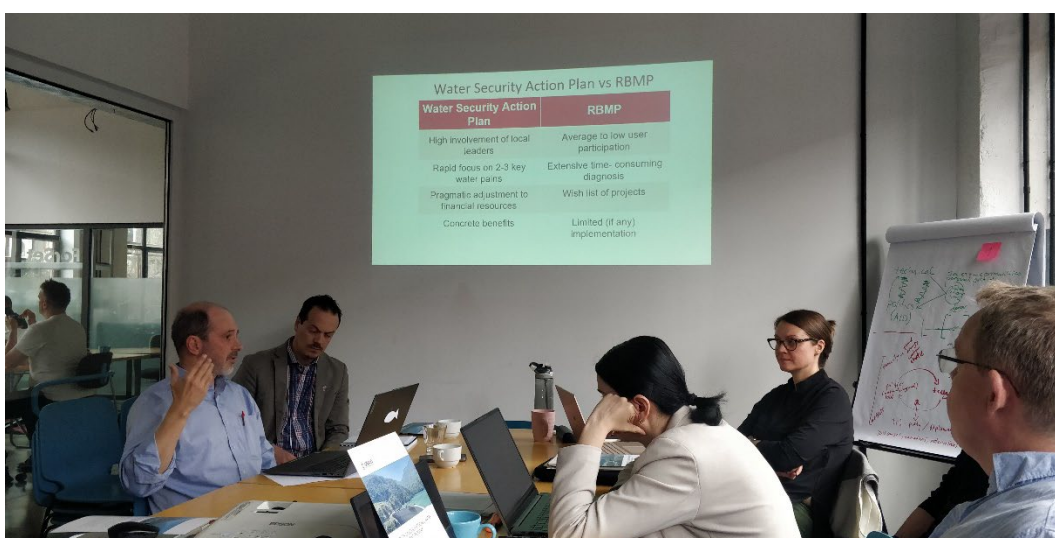
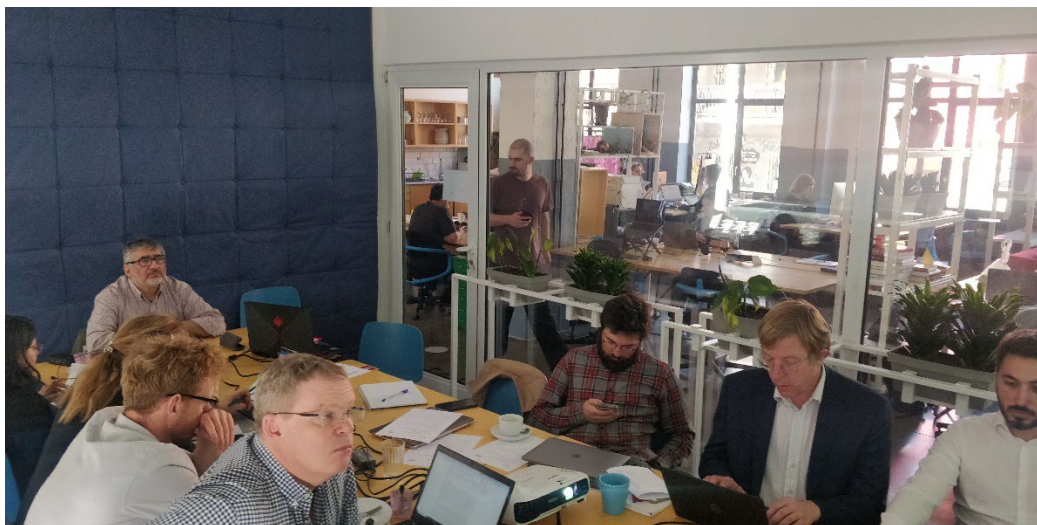
	3 April: Pre-workshop activities
14:00-17:00	Meet & Greet session at Ilia State University
19:00 onwards	Dinner

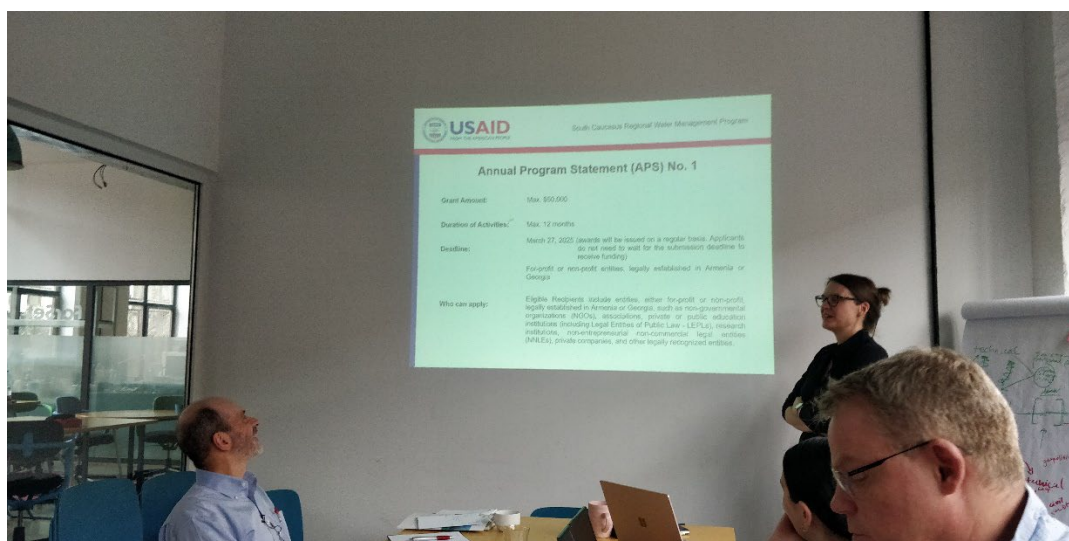
	4 April: Workshop day 1
9:00	Arrival and welcome Introduction by Farhad Mukhtarov on the ground rules and objectives of the workshop
9:30-11:00	Session 1: - Introduction of the participants. - Discussion in 3 small groups based on answers to questions from the survey - Facilitation by Douwe van der Meer
11:00-11:30	<i>Coffee Break</i>
11:30-13:15	Session 2 - Presentations from Rovshan, Levan, Alen, Burak and Saeed (15 minutes pp + 5 minutes clarification) - Facilitation by Jeanene Mitchell
13:15-14:30	<i>Lunch</i>
14:30-16:00	Session 3 - Presentations from Arda, Shahnoor, Bjorn and Tugba (15 minutes pp + 5 minutes clarification + general discussion) - Facilitation by Rovshan Abbasov
16:00-16:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
16:30-17:30	Session 4 - Plenary discussion of connections between sessions 2 and 3. - Facilitation by Paul Huber - Agenda for day 2
19:00 onwards	Dinner

	5 April: Workshop day 2
9:00	Arrival and welcome
09:30-11:00	Session 5 - Presentation of the draft literature by Farhad Mukhtarov and Douwe van der Meer. Facilitation and Q&A by Shahnoor Hasan. - Discussion of main sections from the draft literature review – brainstorming in small groups of 3-4 participants. - Plenary presentation of and feedback on the initial literature review by Farhad and Douwe. Facilitation by Bjorn Klove.

11:00-11:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:30-13:00	Session 6 • Presentations from USAID, EU-Delegation and NL Embassy in Georgia (15 minutes per presentation, general discussion at the end). Facilitation by Tuğba Madem.
13:00-14:30	<i>Lunch</i>
14:30-16:00	Baking Future Proposals • Plenary discussion on a) impact we want to achieve; b) activities that we can undertake to achieve the impact; c) grant opportunities that can enable this impact; d) immediate actions necessary. Objective is to come up with ideas for proposals, facilitated by Alen Amirkhanian.
16:00-16:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
16:30-17:00	Closing remarks and opportunity to speak and share thoughts on the past two days, facilitated by Farhad Mukhtarov
17:00-19:00	<i>Free time</i>
19:00 onwards	Dinner, kindly hosted by the USAID South Caucasus Regional Water Management program.

Appendix 3: Photos of the Event







Participants from left to right: Saeed Morid, Rovshan Abbasov, Arda Bilgen, Douwe van der Meer, Jeanene Mitchell, Mary-Kate Ugrekhelidze, Alen Gasparian, Tuğba Evrim Maden, Shahnoor Hasa, Bjorn Klove, Farhad Mukhtarov, Burak Sakal