

# “Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance”

*Tbilisi, Georgia, March 30- April 2, 2023*

## **31 March 2023, 09:30 - 11.00 PANEL 1: “The Likeliest Scenario(s) for Tomorrow’s Russia”**

- At our previous workshop in Reichenau of last November we noted the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus following Russian entanglement in the Ukraine war, and its potential impact on regional stability. Over the past months this geopolitical trend has further evolved thereby raising the risk of regional turmoil. Besides the war in Ukraine, the shifting balance of power in the Middle East, and the uncertainties around Turkiye’s post-elections, in May 2023, regional policy might be key drivers of change. For example, Iran has increasingly threatened to interfere with the fragile Russia-Turkey balance of power established by the ceasefire agreement of the 2020 Karabakh war. Or the EU has eventually understood why deeper involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations wasn’t a bridge too far, but a key to securing European strategic interests.
- In practical terms, the ongoing geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus have included:
  - Delaying/temporarily stalemating last autumn’s apparent progress of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations.
  - Sharpening the domestic political strife within Georgia, while threatening its Euro-Atlantic credentials and prospects.
  - Armenia discovering the need to complementing its strategic alliance with Russia by extending strategic partnerships with Iran, EU, and even India.
- On the other hand, the ongoing war in Ukraine has made clear that the geopolitical objective of Russia today is not only to get geopolitical control over Ukraine, but to reshape the rules and the *modus operandi* of the OSCE-based European security system. Consequently, the older OSCE-Based European order is being perceived as broken, while a new European order is yet to be envisioned and being built.
- Speakers have been asked to evaluate the chance, the nature, and scope of the changing Russian influence, and its likely impact on the South Caucasus region: Amid the current geopolitical confrontation in Eastern Europe, what would be the likeliest scenario(s) for tomorrow’s Russia? How might evolve in the near future Russia’s regional influence, and how it might change the European, Eurasian, hence the South Caucasus, security? Can we anticipate a more or a less dangerous Russia? If we are facing a more pragmatic Russia,

what impact will it have on the European security in general, and on the South Caucasus security in particular?

## **Conclusions**

In the South Caucasus, local and regional players are being engaged in a geopolitical chess game. At tactical level, positions and policies might look messy. At strategic level, Russia is struggling to hold on its “game maker” role, whereas the U.S. and the regional powers are challenging its dwindling regional dominance. Unresolved disputes over contested corridors, garnered with coercive and “feet-dragging” diplomacy, are threatening to shatter the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Ultimately, they might lead to splitting the South Caucasus along two main geopolitical axes: Russia-Iran-Armenia versus Turkey/West-Azerbaijan-Georgia. The jury is still out on the shifting regional balance of power, but the clock is ticking, and the bomb might explode at any time.

Regarding **possible security scenarios for Eastern Europe**, I’d like to refer the findings of my PhD research on “Western Confrontation with Russia: Security Scenarios Planning In The Geopolitical Area From The Baltic Sea To The Wider Black Sea (Inter-Marium)”, finalized in summer of 2019. That doctoral research started from the assumption of four empirical scenarios being most likely for Eastern Europe in 2025-2030:

- 1. An Inter-marium Alliance: New Cold War.**
- 2. The Buffer Zone: Power Sharing and Limited/Controlled Stand-off.**
- 3. Western Decline: European and Trans-Atlantic Unity broken.**
- 4. Regional Chaos: Turning Confrontation into War.**

Those scenarios had been developed and their validity tested by means of the scenario planning method combined with a regional geopolitical analysis. On that basis, a scenario matrix was drawn up along two clusters’ axes: globalization thrives vs. globalization recedes; and cooperation vs. conflict prevails in relations between the West and Russia.

Looking at various possible endgames of the war in Ukraine, it seemed that the New Cold War or the Regional War scenarios are the most likely scenarios for the future of Eastern Europe. They would correspond to either containing or escalating the war in Ukraine, respectively. In contrast, the Buffer Zone scenario is the least likely for now, as it would assume that either Russia or the West would be prepared/forced to accept a geopolitical compromise on Eastern Europe. On a short term, the Western Decline scenario is also hardly foreseeable, while its odds might grow as we approached the next US presidential elections.