

**SPEAKING POINTS BY MR. GEORGE VLAD NICULESCU,  
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**VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE OF THE RSSC SG/PFP**

**JUNE 25, 2020, 14:00-16:30**

**Intro**

Welcome to this virtual roundtable of the RSSC SG/PfPC on “Assessing and Mitigating the Impact of the COVID-19 Global Crisis in the South Caucasus Region”!

On March 11, 2020 the news from the World Health Organization (WHO) director general that the COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic has shaken the world. The global medical community devised a strategy for mitigating the coronavirus that depended largely on quarantine, and limiting contact among the infected and potentially infected, thereby reducing the virus’ transmission. Those plans have come at massive economic and human costs.

Experts conceded that while the Coronavirus might be generally a symmetrical threat (being able to affect everyone), its consequences would be mostly asymmetrical. How hard it would affect each state would ultimately depend on the resilience of its medical, food, energy and digital infrastructure and supply chains, the effectiveness of its crisis response system, and the size, and effective deployment of its economic recovery package in the aftermath of the crisis. Many states, including those in the South Caucasus, have limited capacity to effectively protect their citizens against the consequences of the COVID-19 global crisis, even with international help. Therefore, optimizing inter-agency and international responses to the COVID-19 pandemics is going to become crucial for regional stability over the next months and years.

The aims of this virtual roundtable will consist of:

- Assessing national and regional political, economic, and security and defence (including domestic crisis management) responses to the COVID-19 crisis in the South Caucasus region, with a view to developing policy recommendations aiming to reduce vulnerabilities to the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic.
- Updating the geopolitical examination of the South Caucasus region in light of the post- COVID-19 global and regional geopolitical trends, in order to provide actionable policy recommendations relevant to conflict management and conflict resolution.
- Extracting lessons learned from South Caucasus success stories and assessing the implications of the pandemic on issues of status for non-recognized or partially-recognized territories.

## Modalities for the Virtual Roundtable

After the speakers opened each section with a brief introduction (5 minutes each), the discussants will be invited to kick off the interactive discussions by providing an initial set of comments and questions for the speakers (5 minutes each), followed by the speakers' answers and further questions and comments from the other roundtable participants.

Building upon the outcomes of the discussion in the country-specific and the Policy Recommendations-focused sections, the Co-Chairs will wrap-up and finalize the draft policy recommendations.

## Additional questions to be discussed

- How did the states in the South Caucasus respond to the COVID-19 pandemics? Were they prepared and able to manage effectively the medical and crisis response challenges posed by the virus?
- How did COVID-19 affect the vulnerability of the South Caucasus region and states due to reduced cross-border cooperation, and a low capability to cooperate on the part of the national and local governments? In particular, how did the existence of the unrecognized states affect the vulnerability of the region to the spread of the virus?
- Did the dynamics of the unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh change? Have there been any signs of attempts to instrumentalise the crisis politically on the part of regional and external actors? **Within this new strategic context, what would be the best approach of the civil societies from ARM and AZE to helping in conflict management and resolution?**

## Closing

Francis Fukuyama wrote in “The Pandemic and Political Order”, in Foreign Affairs July/August 2020: *“It is already clear why some countries have done better than others in dealing with the crisis so far, and there is every reason to think those trends will continue. It is not a matter of regime type. Some democracies have performed well, but others have not, and the same is true for autocracies. The factors responsible for successful pandemic responses have been state capacity, social trust, and leadership.”*

This might have been also valid in the SC region. However, it would be futile to have the SC states competing in a sort of “beauty contest” on how they have managed the COVID19 global crisis. Instead, they should display solidarity against each other, and strive to cooperate more extensively and better with each other. On the other hand, SC regional powers like Russia, Turkey, Iran, EU, and the US should abstain to use the global pandemic in order to score points against the other regional powers, since that might eventually become self-defeating in terms of preserving peace and strengthening regional stability.

As history has repeatedly shown over the last millennium, rising great powers' rivalries might often threaten the independence and sovereignty of smaller actors against the backdrop of regional/great powers' efforts to prevail over their regional/global competitors. Unfortunately, within the context of the COVID19 global pandemic, the unresolved conflicts in the SC would be growing the security burden on the shoulders of the SC states and other actors. Such unresolved conflicts would ultimately hinder capacities to sustain competent state apparatuses, governments that citizens trust and listen to, and to boost effective political leadership able to make the right decisions at the right time. The lack of all those capacities might eventually backlash in growing regional instability, deeper geopolitical fragmentation, and even in future socio-economic irrelevance and backwardness. Which are definitely worth being avoided by all means!

