



South Caucasus: Leveraging Political Change in a Context of Strategic Volatility

**18th Workshop of the “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group”,
Reichenau, 08-10 November 2018**

**09 November, 11:30-13:00, PANEL 2: The Perspectives from
Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia**

- This panel will be an occasion to explore more closely how political change and strategic volatility could impact on Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The fact that they are not internationally recognized states doesn't isolate them from the sweeping changes of the international system resulting from the reshaping of the European and global order.
- Whether they wish it or not, their efforts to survive in what they might perceive as a semi-hostile regional neighbourhood must take into account the evolving regional order as a consequence of changing interests of, and relations among, regional powers.
- For example, the Russia-Turkey cosy relationship in the South Caucasus and in the Wider Black Sea, partly motivated by a growing entanglement of both of them with the Middle East, US's unclear strategic interests in the South Caucasian affairs coupled with its open hostility against neighbouring Iran and the growing

confrontation with Russia, EU's focus on recasting its future identity, shape and international role, as well as Western European capitals' struggle to re-balance the Trans-Atlantic relations may be matters of concern throughout the South Caucasus.

- Of particular interest in this panel would be the impressions of the Syrian decision on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and how this helps or hinders their relations with the titular country. It would also be interesting to find out why, in the opinion of experts, the Nagorno-Karabakh Line of Contact remained so peaceful while the Armenian government wrestled with opposition figures in Yerevan.
- Are current political changes perceived as a factor of risk, or as opportunities? Can we expect, for instance, an opportunity for peaceful resolution of conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh thanks to the arrival of Mr. Pashinyan in office? Inversely, do Abkhazia and South Ossetia expect Tbilisi to harden its stance after Syria's declaration of recognition?

Concrete questions

- What were the circumstances of Syria's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia? If sponsored from Moscow, was the recognition connected to Georgia's recent attempts at peace overtures towards them?
- What was the overall context of the upheaval in Nagorno-Karabakh, at the beginning of June 2018? What could be expected from the demonstrations in Nagorno-Karabakh in the future? Were there any links with the "Velvet Revolution" in Armenia?
- Why didn't Azerbaijan seek to take advantage of Armenia's domestic troubles? How was Azerbaijan's relatively calm approach against Armenia's domestic troubles of last spring perceived in Stepanakert?

09 November, 16:00-17:00, Interactive Discussion

- At our latest workshop in Minsk, we noted the increasing instability and unpredictability of international relations, and the inconsistencies between the post-Cold War European security architecture and current realities.
- On the same occasion, we agreed that existing international institutions needed reforms to make them more inclusive and operational within the changed international context.
- During the two separate breakout groups in Minsk we concluded that while having a major influence on SC regional stability, Russia and the West could minimize the negative impact of their current geopolitical confrontation by focusing on economic integration, conflict resolution, as well as on addressing new security risks, such as terrorism, religious extremism and radicalism. This, as well as initiating some forms of dialogue on countering hybrid threats could be ground for renewed security dialogue and cooperation within the SC region.
- Furthermore, in Minsk we reconciled ourselves to the notion that, for the foreseeable future, joint problem solving through international cooperation would need to co-exist with inter-State competition. In particular, we thought that a more optimal correlation between the concepts of territorial integrity and self-determination would be critical to maintaining regional stability of the SC against the backdrop of the current Russia—West confrontation.
- After the withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)- also known as the Iran nuclear accord-, Iran is preparing for regional confrontation, and possibly for war, in the Middle East. However, it is still counting on the EU, Russia, and China to succeed in mitigating the economic sanctions re-imposed by Washington to punish Teheran for its assertive regional policy. This means that Iran's international attention might be focused away from the South Caucasus towards Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and the broader Middle East. But Teheran cannot forget completely about the South Caucasus, basically a friendly neighbourhood that might serve in the future as a strategic bridge towards Russia, Turkey, and the EU against potential threats from the US and its Middle Eastern allies.
- I'd like to remind you that one purpose of this workshop is to provide an appreciation of the context of South Caucasus upheavals, and to determine

connections between events (and non-events), as a form of “stock-taking” endeavour. The second objective of this workshop is to identify opportunities for peace building, conflict management and resolution brought about by regional political change in the South Caucasus, that would be detailed tomorrow morning during the fourth panel and the subsequent Interactive discussion on the Policy Recommendations.

- I’d suggest that during this first session of our Interactive discussion, while taking stock of the content of the first three panels of this workshop, we should strive to figure out whether or not there might be any inter-connections between domestic and international events in the region, and to cast them against the backdrop of regional power relations.
- We should therefore aim to respond the following key question: **“Do political changes threaten or promote stability in the case of the South Caucasus? If so, how could we mitigate/inhibit political changes or, upon the case, benefit from them as opportunities for positive regional transformation?”** This discussion should be developed against the background of our understanding of the broader European geopolitical context, as described in the Policy Recommendations from the previous workshop, in Minsk. Who wants to take the floor?
- **Additional questions** which might be addressed in this section:
 - Why didn’t Azerbaijan seek to take advantage of Armenia’s domestic troubles?
 - Why didn’t Russia react more forcefully to the events in Armenia?
 - Did the global attention triggered by the World Cup peace talks in the Korean Peninsula, and the soaring military tensions in the Middle East facilitate/precipitate political upheaval in the South Caucasus?
 - What are the circumstances of Syria’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia? If sponsored from Moscow, is the recognition connected to Georgia’s recent attempts at peace overtures towards them Abkhazia?
 - What foreign and security policy changes can be expected from the elections in Azerbaijan and Turkey?

**How Do Recent Political Changes Affect Regional Stability in South
Caucasus? How to Benefit from/ Mitigate/Inhibit Them?**

Political Changes	Opportunity/ Threat for Stability?	How to Benefit or Mitigate/Inhibit?