



27th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
"Regional Stability in the South Caucasus"

"Does the European Union Need a
Strategy for the South Caucasus?"

– Programme and Workshop Outline –

11 – 14 April 2024

Chişinău, Moldova

Purpose

In 2012, the Austrian Ministry of Defence, through its National Defence Academy and the Directorate General for Security Policy, resumed the scientific work begun in 2001 (but interrupted in 2005) by the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes on the South Caucasus. The “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG)” has emerged as the premiere Track 2 diplomacy platform where intractable conflicts are discussed with discretion, in a serene and academic atmosphere, but within reach of political ears. Deliberations are conducted strictly according to Chatham House rules, and this has contributed to a steady stream of successes, seeing recommendations from nearly a half dozen workshops being considered if not applied by South Caucasus actors.

For example, in 2015, the George C. Marshall Center held a high-level in-camera meeting for South Caucasus deputy ministers of defence, based on policy recommendations produced by the RSSC SG in November 2013. Armenia and Azerbaijan have enacted a crisis hotline, and an exchange of journalists based on recommendations made in past years. There is evidence that public communication techniques suggested in 2015 and 2017 by the RSSC SG are being put in practice in Armenia. The RSSC SG has also leveraged the assistance of outside partners to accomplish a policy recommendation made in November 2017 as Handbook project entitled “Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape” which has been launched in November 2022. This effort represents a new line of products for the PfP Consortium, but more to the point, accomplishes the promise of a multinational undertaking, uniting representatives of the South Caucasus towards a common goal. The RSSC SG is following up on that success with the production of a second handbook: “Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks” aiming to roll it out by the end of 2024.

Past workshops held since 2012 in Reichenau/Rax, and in Tbilisi (twice), Istanbul, Kyiv, Chişinău, Varna, Minsk, Berlin, Rome, and Naples have demonstrated that the RSSC SG had established a broad academic basis and the cohesion necessary to undertake more ambitious cooperative projects. Thanks to this cohesion, and our participants’ direct and indirect access to decision-making circles in their respective power centres, the RSSC SG continues to produce policy recommendations that are both constructive and practical.

The geopolitical upheavals that we have witnessed over the last decade culminating into the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the expansion of the war in Ukraine demand that the RSSC SG renew its efforts at raising awareness of geopolitical risks. Those wars have propelled the European Union’s (EU’s) Eastern Neighbourhood ever closer to the centre of the current geopolitical scene. At the previous workshop, held last fall in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, panelists have underlined the shifting geopolitical orientation of the South Caucasus largely to the detriment of the West. The ensuing Policy Recommendations noted that misperceptions on EU’s role and objectives in the South Caucasus region, confusions on its internal and external operational procedures, as well as on its abilities and capabilities have not been helpful in advancing new security arrangements in the South Caucasus. However, most participants agreed that while misperceptions or confusions should be clarified or removed, the EU should stay engaged, and some have even argued its role and capabilities deployed in the region should be expanded. It is in this challenging international and regional context that the co-chairs are convening the RSSC SG workshop “Does the European Union Need a Strategy for the South Caucasus?” to be held on April 11–14, 2024, in Chişinău, Moldova.

Partners

- Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
- Directorate General for Defence Policy, Austrian Ministry of Defence, Vienna
- Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, Garmisch-Partenkirchen
- European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
- Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Topic Outline

The EU has been often criticized over its lack of a strategy for the South Caucasus. An explicit, tailor-made, and overarching strategy for the region has never been developed by the EU. It has rather addressed relations with the regional states within broader policy frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and, since 2009, the Eastern Partnership. Judging from EU's recent engagement with the South Caucasus region, some experts identified four sets of objectives and/or interests of the EU in the region:

1. to export European values on good governance, democracy, human rights, including for persons belonging to minorities;
2. to promote stability and security in the region, by contributing to the resolution of the protracted conflicts and enhancing the resilience of the South Caucasus states against security and hybrid threats;
3. to gain economic benefit and secure energy and trade interests by contributing to economic governance and development, the development of transport and energy infrastructure;
4. to contain and push back the influence of the Russian Federation by promoting the resilience of Georgia and reducing the Russian grip over Armenia.¹

In December 2023, Georgia was granted EU candidate status, on the understanding that it would take the relevant steps as set out in the Commission recommendations. On that occasion, the European Council called on Georgia to demonstrate a clear commitment to EU values, continue progress on its reform agenda and meet the conditions for accession meaningfully and irreversibly. While Georgia's progress on reforms is crucial, there has also been a geopolitical element in this EU decision. Russian invasion of Ukraine highlighted what many experts had been saying for years – that the EU cannot just sit and watch major security evolutions in its neighbourhoods. It must also act in a geopolitically relevant way.

The EU's relations with Armenia are built on the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017. While Armenia's reform agenda remained essential for the future development of bilateral relations, the EU's active engagement in mediating the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process has recently monopolized much of the common agenda. In the wake of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, this peace process has been complicated by the evolving regional balance of power, and by the diverging strategic choices of Yerevan and Baku in the wake of the ongoing Russia-West geopolitical confrontation. Apparently, the Armenian government has put its bet on playing the West against Russia and on pulling Iran closer to the South Caucasian balance of power. However, closer Russo-Turkish relations have undercut Armenian tactics by pulling together Russian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani interests to finish the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Baku's decisive victory and Nagorno-Karabakh's capitulation and dissolution.

¹ B. Deen, W. Zweers, C. Linder: "The EU in the South Caucasus: Navigating a Geopolitical Labyrinth in Turmoil", Clingendael Report, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/the-eu-in-the-south-caucasus.pdf>.

Apparently, besides boasting its military superiority, this geopolitical shift has put Baku in a position of force whereby it could impose its will on any divergent issues negotiated with Yerevan, including the conditions for peace. This new regional reality paired by apparent tensions between Moscow and Yerevan have put the onus on further strengthening EU-Armenia ties.

The EU and Azerbaijan have had a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement since 1999. Negotiations for an enhanced agreement were launched in February 2017, but they have so far been inconclusive. In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan agreed to double European gas imports from Azerbaijan by 2027, thereby helping the former to reduce its dependence on Russian energy imports. However, concerns over safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the respect of the rule of law in Azerbaijan, as well as what is perceived in Baku as European bias in favour of Yerevan have recently chilled EU-Azerbaijan relations. Probably, the lowest point of this relationship was reached in October 2023 when Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev refused to meet Armenian Prime-Minister N. Pashinyan in the margins of an EU summit in Granada, citing “pro-Armenian statements by French officials ... and statements on the supply of weapons and ammunition (to Yerevan), on military cooperation”.² In addition, whereas European observers have been deployed in Armenia since February 2023 to contribute to regional security, Azerbaijan has not agreed to the deployment of EU monitors on its side of the border.

Within that broader regional and international context, this workshop will aim:

- to explore the European Union’s evolving role and strategic posture in the South Caucasus region (and in the Eastern Neighbourhood);
- to understand the gap between expectations on how to best integrate the EU with the evolving regional context, both at the level of regional states and regional powers, and actual possibilities;
- to figure out whether or not and, if so, how the European external action could be better strategized in the South Caucasus region.

PANEL 1: What Should Be the EU Goals in the South Caucasus Region?

The EU has never developed an explicit, tailored-made, overarching strategy for the South Caucasus. Supporters of such an EU strategy claimed that there would be opportunities for the EU to realize its broader objectives in the region, but only if they were prioritized and pursued in a consistent manner. A South Caucasus strategy should clearly outline the EU’s objectives and the way it aims to pursue them. It should have a clear focus on the security as well as on the (geo)political, economic, and normative dimensions.³ Critics of the EU’s regional strategies usually refer to past failures of such formal documents to streamline external action, while offering the “Black Sea Synergy” initiative, launched in 2007, as the most conspicuous example. The complex decision-making process within and among the EU institutions, which makes consensus difficult, might be a serious obstacle to EU’s regional strategizing.

- Does the EU need a strategy for the South Caucasus region?
- What would be the pros and cons of a strategic approach of the EU to the South Caucasus (and in the Eastern Neighbourhood)?
- How could the European Union contribute effectively and in a balanced way to the resolution of “protracted conflicts” and to decreasing geopolitical tensions in the South Caucasus?
- What should be the EU’s priorities in each of the regional countries and in the South Caucasus region more broadly?

² <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20231004-azerbaijan-s-president-refuses-to-attend-eu-talks-with-armenia-pm>.

³ B. Deen, W. Zweers, C. Linder: Op.cit.

PANEL 2: EU's Evolving Policies and Tools: Perceptions and Expectations from the Eastern Neighbourhood

This panel will explore the evolving role and strategic posture of the EU in the South Caucasus, and more broadly in the Eastern Neighbourhood while considering the consequences of Russian war in Ukraine and the outcomes of the Armenia-Azerbaijan settlement (44 days war, the demise of Nagorno-Karabakh and the subsequent Armenian exodus). Panelists will be invited to share their perceptions and expectations regarding the EU's efforts to adapt and respond to the regional turmoil and the geopolitical shifts in its Eastern Neighbourhood, as well as on the impact of these challenges on the current EU policies and tools.

- Have the changes in the strategic outlook of the South Caucasus impacted the position of the EU and its policy towards the region?
- If so, is this change aligned with the expectations of the regional states and does it alter their perceptions vis-à-vis the EU role in the region?
- Are the existing frameworks and instruments for integration and cooperation deployed in the South Caucasus still valid and sufficient under the current geopolitical changes?
- How could their development and implementation be enhanced? Ukraine's, and Moldova's potential accessions to the EU, and how they could influence the EU's role in the South Caucasus should be also discussed here.

PANEL 3: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration

This is basically a topic that had been discussed by the Study Group before, but with a different focus (i.e. European vs. Eurasian integration; energy security cooperation; peace building through economic and infrastructure integration) and in a less competitive/confrontational strategic context. At that time, EU's geopolitical role in the South Caucasus was both lighter and less controversial with the regional powers. Since February 24, 2022, the EU's level of engagement with the South Caucasus region has significantly increased. It is most likely that, at present, regional powers, such as Russia, and Iran would prefer to see the back of the EU in the South Caucasus, while Turkey might have, at best, mixed feelings about it. Therefore, it's worth exploring this topic again, from a purely geopolitical perspective, as the EU's enlargement, and democratic modernization, and conflict mediation efforts might be bluntly rejected by regional powers, and they might be partly controversial within some of the South Caucasus states' polities. The US interests ensuing from its global competition and regional rivalry with Russia, Iran, and China, and the revived interest for stronger Trans-Atlantic links should be also considered from this perspective.

- How would the states from the region see an EU policy to reconcile/harmonize European and regional integration processes in the South Caucasus?
- How would the regional powers – Russia, Turkey, Iran – look at EU's further involvement in the South Caucasus region?
- How would the US regional interests and policies influence EU's relations with the regional countries?

Interactive Discussions

The interactive discussions held in Chatham House Rules format are the main moderated platform that allows the group of experts to develop actionable policy recommendations by the RSSC SG. We invite all participants to take advantage of this opportunity to make constructive proposals on each of the topics discussed. As always, these policy recommendations are disseminated throughout the PFP Consortium network, covering some 60 countries, and 800 policy and academic institutions.

Programme

Thursday, 11 April 2024

till 18.30 Arrival of the participants

19.00 Words of Welcome

Andreas F. WANNEMACHER, Directorate General for Defence Policy,
Austrian Ministry of Defence, Vienna

Official Dinner

Friday, 12 April 2024

07.00 – 08.30 Breakfast

08.30 – 09.00 Introduction to the Study Group “Regional Stability in the
South Caucasus” and Administrative Remarks

Benedikt HENSELLEK, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
Olaf GARLICH, PfP Consortium Operations Staff, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

09.00 – 09.30 Keynote Address

Stanislav SECRIERU, Defence and National Security Advisor to the President of
the Republic of Moldova, Chişinău (inv.)

09.30 – 11.00 PANEL 1: What Should Be the EU Goals in the South Caucasus Region?

Chair: Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Daria ISACHENKO, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin
Fuad SHAHBAZOV, Independent regional security and defence expert, Baku
Yeghia TASHJIAN, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International
Affairs – American University of Beirut

11.00 – 11.30 Coffee Break

- 11.30 – 13.00 **PANEL 2: EU's Evolving Policies and Tools:
Perceptions and Expectations from the Eastern Neighbourhood**
- Chair: Elena MANDALENAKIS, Independent Lecturer and Researcher,
Heraklion
- George MELASHVILI, Europe-Georgia Institute, Tbilisi
Benyamin POGHOSYAN, Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies,
Yerevan
Ahmad ALILI, Caucasus Policy Analysis Centre, Baku
Elena MARZAC, Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives, Chişinău
Stephanie FENKART, International Institute for Peace, Vienna
- 13.00 – 14.15 Lunch
- 14.15 – 15.15 **PANEL 3.1: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration
(Regional Actors)**
- Chair: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
- Vasif HUSEYNOV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku
Stephan ASTOURIAN, American University of Armenia, Yerevan
Shalva DZEBISASHVILI, University of Georgia, Tbilisi
- 15.15 – 16.15 **PANEL 3.2: How to Reconcile European and Regional Integration
(External Actors)**
- Chair: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
- Nilufer NARLI, Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul
Marat TERTEROV, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
- 16.15 – 16.45 Coffee Break
- 16.45 – 18.00 Interactive Discussion, Part 1
- Sub-group 1:
Prospects and Challenges of Georgia's, Moldova's, Ukraine's
EU Accession Negotiations
- Moderation: Elena MANDALENAKIS, Independent Lecturer and Researcher,
Heraklion
- Sub-group 2:
EU's Evolving Role in Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process
- Moderation: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
- 19.00 Dinner

Saturday, 13 April 2024

07.00 – 08.30 Breakfast

08.30 – 10.00 Interactive Discussion, Part 2

Sub-group 1:

Prospects and Challenges of Georgia's, Moldova's, Ukraine's
EU Accession Negotiations

Moderation: Elena MANDALENAKIS, Independent Lecturer and Researcher,
Heraklion

Sub-group 2:

EU's Evolving Role in Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process

Moderation: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

10.00 – 10.30 Coffee Break

10.30 – 11.30 Interactive Discussion – Policy Recommendations Formulation

Moderation: Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

11.30 – 12.00 Official Closing Remarks

George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

12.00 – 13.00 Lunch

13.00 Departure to the Side Programme

Sunday, 14 April 2024

Individual Departures