



**28th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

**“Connectivity Risks and Opportunities
in the South Caucasus”**

– Programme and Workshop Outline –

7-10 November 2024

Reichenau/Rax, Austria

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 enables multinational collaboration 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, Chisinau (twice), Varna, Minsk, Berlin, Rome, and Naples have demonstrated that the RSSC SG has 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 tidal pulls witnessed since the invasion of Ukraine alters the geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus region. As a result, one divines a process of re-alignment within the region. We note that Armenia and Azerbaijan seem closer to a possible peace deal, having begun formal border demarcation activities in the Spring of 2024, and maintaining regular diplomatic exchanges on a draft agreement whose content would have been reportedly 90% agreed. At the same time, however, it seems that the Euro-Atlantic powers are on the cusp of losing Georgia as it is distancing itself from the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes. What does this mean for the infrastructural projects which could connect Asia to Europe? How will various types of socio-economic (business, subject matter professionals, environmentalists, civil society) and ethnocultural groups in the South Caucasus adapt and react to new political, economic, and security arrangements over which they have little influence? The RSSC SG has oftentimes dealt geopolitical influences over the South Caucasus. The co-chairs feel that there is an opportunity to address the challenges experienced by particular groups or sectors of the South Caucasus in an attempt to make sense of new patterns and emerging relations. It is in this context that the co-chairs are convening the RSSC SG workshop **“Connectivity Risks and Opportunities in the South Caucasus”** to be held on November 7-10, 2024, in Reichenau/Rax, Austria.

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

In the past, the RSSC SG had enthusiastically explored developments where Georgia was taking centre stage in mediating the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and where Türkiye increased its level of interest in the outcomes of that “protracted conflict” too. The hopeful pre-Covid days which promised diplomatic renewal in Georgia, and a negotiated peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, now appear distant and fading memories.

It is not an exaggeration now to state that the Euro-Atlantic agenda is in turmoil, and that its allies’ and partners’ unity are showing signs of fraying due to the on-going war in Ukraine, but also that the values which underpin the expected reforms in the South Caucasus seem not only out of reach, but out of fashion. The issue becomes one of simple survival of both “states” as well as “ethnocultural groups.” In such circumstances, the South Caucasus becomes extremely vulnerable to this maelstrom, as we have seen in past workshops in Chisinau (April 2024) and Reichenau (November 2023). In many ways, adverse developments in the South Caucasus are leading the RSSC SG’s own agenda away from its intended goal. The RSSC SG’s aim is to generate and stimulate a vision of the South Caucasus as a strategic region *sui generis*.

This eventuality appeared dashed by the 2020 44-Days-War and the short, sharp resumption of fighting in September 2023 which resulted in restoring the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the massive exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, Georgia’s Western orientation came into question. It is possible that the Georgian government – notwithstanding its alleged cozying up to Moscow – may have been intimidated by the invasion of Ukraine and disillusioned by the West’s response to Russia’s actions. As a result, Bidzina Ivanishvili vowed to return to Georgian politics, upon claiming in April 2024 that Georgia had to pivot away from Europe, which failed at fulfilling its promises. Under this vision, many think that Georgia would be aligning itself with Russia. However, this might not be necessarily the case, as the Georgian Dream government and leaders have never gone so far yet as to publicly consider Georgia’s possible realignment with Russia. What does this say of Georgia’s Western orientation so far? In the spring of 2024, as if to punish Georgia, the United States cancelled/postponed the annual joint military training exercise Noble Partner, while, in July 2024, the European Commission has frozen the entire European integration support package, after Georgia had gained candidate status in December 2023. A pattern of disconnection/reconnection is palpable.

While Armenia and Azerbaijan were apparently edging closer to some sort of peace deal, concerns over Baku’s commitment to sign a legal document with Armenia anytime soon persisted. While the Armenian government had recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, accepted the post-September 2023 status quo, did not raise the issue of Armenians’ right of return in public discussion, and accepted the Azerbaijani demand to withdraw from several areas along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border without any guarantee that Azerbaijani troops would reciprocate in the Armenian territories captured during their 2021 and 2022 incursions, Azerbaijan kept making new demands and imposing fresh preconditions for signing a peace agreement with Armenia. These included changing the Armenian constitution and other laws, the dissolution of the OSCE

Minsk Group, providing an extraterritorial corridor to Nakhichevan via Armenia, and recognizing a genocide in Khojaly in February 1992. The disconnection/reconnection patterns at work in the region require sense-making. Are the appropriate policies in place to bring the region the unity it needs to fend for itself? Are Euro-Atlantic powers using their utmost influence and power of attraction to compel the South Caucasus countries to enact meaningful political and military reforms? Is the former South Caucasus regional connectivity agenda still relevant or has it been superseded by a plethora of new regional connectivity projects pushed forward by regional powers, Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and newcomers China, India, and the Gulf states?

We must not forget the impact of these developments on the populations in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region of Georgia. They are the constituents whom we rarely hear from, and who, because of strategic or legal considerations, scarcely have a voice. There is a risk that the EU/NATO may lose its grip on the region both in a geopolitical and normative sense. This loss may affect EU's access to Eurasia's resources and trade. It may also cast a shadow on the whole edifice of European values as transmissible to other regions and peoples. The RSSC SG has an opportunity to revisit the role that makes it unique and consider the human security risks and threats in the South Caucasus region, and the opportunities for boosting regional connectivity ensuing from building resilience against them. The workshop therefore apprehends the topic of "connectivity" among a variety of angles, which will help make a bridge with past workshops and future orientation of the Study Group.

PANEL 1: Infrastructural connectivity in the South Caucasus

The RSSC SG has delved into this question in detail in 2017, with the prospects of establishing a regional energy security centre. Those years suggested manageable stability in the region, and a certain predictability of relations among South Caucasus states. The 2020/2023 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan has put that myth to rest, and with a possible peace deal in the offing, the notion that the whole region will be stable enough to enable strong industrial, energy and infrastructural links to be made sounds promising. This panel will be invited to present risks and opportunities to the eventual connectedness between Europe and Asia. Some questions to consider;

- What regional advantages can be expected from an Armenia-Azerbaijani peace deal?
- Can the South Caucasus be lost as a bridge between Europe and Asia by Georgia's geopolitical re-orientation?
- Can the establishment of infrastructure projects linking Europe and Asia pre-empt the South Caucasus from slipping away?
- What are the conditions for the South Caucasus to establish itself as a reliable energy security actor?
- Would Iran and Russia act as spoilers of East-West connectivity?

PANEL 2: Human connectivity in the South Caucasus

To many, the geopolitical and strategic upheavals affecting their region can seem overwhelming. Many groups, institutions and individuals struggle with ambivalence and as a result find themselves vulnerable to demagoguery or radical political messaging. Although we have considered the dangers of polarization in the South Caucasus in earlier workshops, this is an opportunity to revisit this topic with the aim of exploring the challenges brought about by enduring conflicts. For instance, we may consider the difficulties faced by individuals who want to do business with unrecognized entities, or who want to visit loved ones, apply for educational opportunities, or seek medical help in forbidding regions or contexts. The free movement of persons, goods and ideas is a universal aspiration regardless of governance model. This panel may explore this topic under a variety of perspectives. For instance, contributors may look at the more pressing challenges, and at practical

ways to facilitate free movement across real or imagined borders. Questions to consider may include;

- What is the role of education in facilitating human connectivity?
- Can a common approach to inter-entity travel be established to expedite commercial and private transit?
- How can returnees (former IDPs) reintegrate their former living spaces without triggering renewed clashes with other groups?
- Can the conception of a meta-identity such as “South Caucasus identity” foster greater regional unity?
- How can a South Caucasus meta-identity be conceived?

PANEL 3: The risks of South Caucasus’ disconnection

Recent official decisions from Euro-Atlantic capitals reveal a worrying trend; the South Caucasus seems to be left to its own devices – or, more precisely, to the devices of powers inimical to the West. This panel should explore this turn of events with a view of underlining the risks and consequences of neglecting South Caucasus developments, including in Georgia, where much treasure and effort has been expended over the last several years. Among those, one can clearly perceive reputational risks (on both sides of the equation Georgia and NATO/EU), security risks (internal as well as international), and normative risks (here, we mean the clash of norms, of governance models, in short, a clash of “civilizations”). Some questions to consider;

- Should policy offer more – not less – support to Georgia?
- If Georgia is abandoned, what message will that send to other Western partners (in Europe or elsewhere) and Armenia in particular?
- What can be expected from the purported Russian naval base at Ochamchire?
- How, and for what purpose should the Russian diaspora be leveraged (if at all)?
- What role for Türkiye in the event of complete disconnection?

Interactive Discussions

The interactive discussions 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. Like the rest of the workshop, they are held under Chatham House rules.

Programme

Thursday, 7 November 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, 8 November 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**

Markus RITZER, Head, European Union Mission in Armenia, Yeghegnadzor

09.30 – 11.00 **PANEL 1: Infrastructural connectivity in the South Caucasus**

Chair: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Gulnara ASLANBAYLI, American-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce, Baku
Yeghia TASHJIAN, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International
Affairs – American University of Beirut
Mustafa AYDIN, Kadir Has University, Ankara
Razi NURULLAYEV, “Region” International Analytical Centre, Baku

11.00 – 11.30 Coffee Break

11.30 – 13.00 **PANEL 2: Human connectivity in the South Caucasus**

Chair: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

Nino TLASHADZE, Georgian CSO-Human Rights Centre, Tbilisi
Olesya VARTANYAN, International Crisis Group, Tbilisi
Mariam FRANGULYAN, Venice
Tatia DOLIDZE, European University, Tbilisi
Ahmad ALILI, Caucasus Policy Analysis Centre, Baku

13.00 – 14.15 Lunch

14.15 – 15.30 **PANEL 3: The risks of South Caucasus disconnection**

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

Henry WATHEN, PeaceTalk, Geneva

Shalva DZEBISASHVILI, University of Georgia, Tbilisi

Vasif HUSEYNOV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku

Benyamin POGHOSYAN, Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies,
Yerevan

Svetlana IKONNIKOVA, Technical University Munich

15.30 – 16.00 Coffee Break

16.00 – 17.30 **Interactive Discussion, Part 1**

Group Fortnum: Georgia's future

Moderation:

Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Elena MANDALENAKIS, George C. Marshall European Center for Security
Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Group Mason: Armenia and Azerbaijan:

Building Connectivity on Human Security

Moderation:

George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

19.00 Dinner

Saturday, 9 November 2024

07.00 – 08.30 Breakfast

08.30 – 09.30 **Interactive Discussion, Part 2**

Group Fortnum: Georgia's future

Moderation:

Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston
Elena MANDALENAKIS, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Group Mason: Armenia and Azerbaijan

Moderation:

George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

09.30 – 10.00 Coffee Break

10.00 – 11.30 **Policy Recommendations Formulation**

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

11.30 – 11.45 **Outlook, Invitation to the 29th RSSC Workshop**

Esra HATİPOĞLU, Rector, Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul

11.45 – 12.00 **Official Closing Remarks**

12.00 – 13.00 Lunch

13.00 **Departure to the Side Programme**

Sunday, 10 November 2024

Individual Departures