

**Dr. George Vlad Niculescu, Head of Research of The European Geopolitical Forum from Brussels (<http://gpf-europe.com>) responds to Ms Jamila Chebotareva, [caliber.az](http://caliber.az):**

**1) Ilham Aliyev is meeting today with EU President Charles Michel. What are the expectations?**

GVN: They are probably not too high, but still the meeting of the president of the European Council C. Michel with president of Azerbaijan I. Alyiev and prime-minister of Armenia N. Pashinyan might have geopolitical relevance and significant political, socio-economic and security implications. Geopolitically, it is widely acknowledged that the 44-Days War ceasefire agreement has created a new geopolitical reality founded upon a Russo-Turkish partnership, where the Western powers (whether collectively – from within the OSCE and the EU- or individually), are seeking to play an important role in stabilizing the South Caucasus region and in having Armenia and Azerbaijan eventually sign a Peace Treaty and establish good neighborly relations. Both objectives are essential for the EU in particular in the wider context of stability and security in the Wider Black Sea area. From this perspective, C. Michel's meeting with the two leaders could be seen as a golden opportunity to increase EU's involvement in the South Caucasus region. However, this attempt, particularly if it proved successful, should not be perceived as a challenge from the EU against either Russia or Turkey. EU does not have the power tools nor the willingness to compete with either of the current key regional stakeholders from the South Caucasus. However, it has certain soft power tools with whom it might contribute to peacebuilding in the aftermath of the 44 days war. And I believe the EU's contribution should be welcome by both the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders, as well as by presidents Putin of Russia and Erdogan of Turkey.

As about the possible implications of EU's deeper involvement in the South Caucasus and engagement with regional states there are a number of policy recommendations which could be pursued. Over the last year or so, I co-chaired several virtual and in-person roundtables and workshops with experts from Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia under the aegis of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group of the PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes (RSSC SG/PfPC) which issued plenty of such policy recommendations. Among those, I'd like to offer as an example the possible development and implementation of the "Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative" (PNI) proposed by Georgia, and where the EU could play a key role in terms of conceptualizing and funding regional cooperation. That initiative could be supported by the European Union under the Eastern Partnership. According to the policy recommendations issued by the RSSC SG/PfPC regional experts, the PNI should be the fruit of a bottom-up initiative to ensure that there is local ownership of the effort by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, first and foremost. As a regional cooperation platform, it should focus on issues of common interest, such as environmental sustainability, transport, energy, water resources, and human security needs. Several sub-platforms would help the PNI address discrete issues directly among stakeholders, such as demographic issues, brain-drain, fighting organized crime, etc. It was also suggested that the PNI, or a PNI-like structure, could have a parliamentary component which could bring greater legitimacy to the PNI, but it would also raise its profile.

## **2) Can we say that Azerbaijan is pursuing a balanced policy?**

GVN: Yes, sure. Azerbaijan is pursuing a balanced foreign and security policy. In an era of great powers' competition is absolutely reasonable that medium sized countries situated in strategically important regions and having access to key energy resources would follow a national strategy driven by a balanced approach against the regional powers. For now, Azerbaijan is balancing mostly between Turkey and Russia and it is no secret that this sort of strategy has eventually plaid out in favour of Baku's victory in the 44-days war of September-November 2020. I've also noticed a certain rapprochement of Azerbaijan to NATO, in particular as far as military relations are concerned. Nevertheless, for now, Baku didn't express any intentions to pursue NATO membership, and therefore the US and NATO are not playing an essential role in the national security strategy of Azerbaijan. And this is rightly so, as a change of this policy would clearly damage relations with Russia, which is not in the best interest of Azerbaijan. As far as I can see, the current dual balance between Russia and Turkey practiced by Azerbaijan is unlikely to change to either trilateral or quadrilateral balances involving the US/NATO and the EU. But still Baku could gain a lot from further expanding its bilateral engagement with both the EU and NATO, as long as it proved those relations were complementary and consistent with, rather than competitive against, its currently privileged relations with Moscow and Ankara.

## **3) Will there be any progress after Aliyev and Stoltenberg's meeting?**

GVN: The meeting of president Aliyev with NATO secretary general Stoltenberg is extremely positive, particularly within the currently charged East European strategic context created around Ukraine. NATO and Russia are at loggerheads over Ukraine, and I believe it is good for Azerbaijani national interests to reaffirm its neutrality against the current NATO-Russia confrontation over Ukraine. Given the particular brotherly relations of Azerbaijan with NATO member Turkey, while Russian peacekeepers are deployed on Azerbaijani territory for at least four more years, Baku could not do wiser than that. However, as explained in my answer to your previous question, NATO is not a pillar for Azerbaijani foreign and security strategy, and this is unlikely to change after the expected Aliyev-Stoltenberg meeting. On the other hand, NATO would likely continue to offer Azerbaijan with experts advice and practical support on defence and security reforms, military interoperability, and counter-terrorism, and I suspect that Azerbaijan's achievements, priorities and prospects in those areas, and an exchange of views regarding regional security would offer the bulk of the content for the discussions between the two leaders, as well as between president Aliyev and the North Atlantic Council. Any progress to be expected from NATO-Azerbaijan relations would almost certainly emerge from the mutual interests of both parties to continue their collaboration under Azerbaijan's Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), as well as under other relevant NATO programs.