

# **“Supporting New Conflict Management Platforms in the South Caucasus”**

**Reichenau/Rax, 04 – 07 November 2021**

## **General**

- Two months ago, at the RSSC SG workshop in Rome, I was deploring *“Nine months after the end of the 44day Karabakh war, there is the feeling that the South Caucasus is not moving towards peace and regional stability. The trilaterally signed Statement of November 10th, 2020 is NOT a peace agreement. It left open key issues*

- *(the (interim and final) status of Nagorno-Karabakh*
- *what happened to the status if the initial five-years mandate of the peacekeepers was not prolonged?*
- *the future role of the OSCE Minsk Group and of other international organizations and actors (other than Russia and the UNHCR) in its implementation*
- *the conditions for the return of the displaced persons to Karabakh*
- *how existing mistrust and animosities between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities would be overcome.*
- *the delimitation and demarcation and of the international borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan;*
- *demining the fields along and across the former Line of Contact and the exchange of prisoners of war.)*

*some of which have become bones of contention among the signatories and have made for “A Precarious Peace for Karabakh” and an uncertain future not only for the population of Nagorno-Karabakh itself, but also for the wider South Caucasus region”.*

- **Two months later, I’m a bit more cautiously optimistic about the future of peace and regional stability in the South Caucasus. Although there still isn’t any breakthrough towards starting sound processes aiming to normalize relations between ARM and AZE, and ARM and TUR, respectively, throughout September-October 2021, the signs of a change of mood towards peace in the South Caucasus have been apparent from all capitals concerned: Yerevan, Baku and Ankara.**
- **The “Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative” (PNI) could be an important step forward, and one which should be staunchly encouraged, as it mirrors one of the**

**objectives of this Study Group, i.e. to find a strategic persona for the whole South Caucasus, perhaps based on a formal partnership or institution. One of the aims of this workshop shall therefore be to determine the substance and the possible implications of the Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative on the region.** It would also be hoped that the Study Group consider ways to effectively (and perhaps more directly) make its recommendations known to the champions and supporters of this initiative.

- This RSSC SG workshop will **therefore endeavour to review the progress in the implementation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan-Russia Trilateral Statement on Nagorno-Karabakh of 10 November 2020, against the backdrop of the RSSC SG agreed Policy Recommendations.**

### **PANEL 1: Georgia at the Forefront of the Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative**

- The Prime Minister of Georgia reaffirmed the readiness of his country to continue its active facilitation role in order to ensure peace, stability and the gradual transformation of the South Caucasus into a region of new opportunities, development and peace. The most important way to do so is certainly the idea of the establishment of a **“Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative” which would likely involve all three South Caucasus countries.**
- For example, in his address to the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, **PM Garibashvili put forward this peace proposal “to promote peace and stability in the South Caucasus”. It appeared to be formed on the 3+2 (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia + the EU and the USA) format and aimed at “facilitating dialogue and confidence-building, and leading to the implementation of practical solutions to regional issues of common interest with our US and EU partners”.**
- This initiative could not be presented at a more opportune time, as the 44-Days War ceasefire agreement has created a new geopolitical reality founded upon a Russo-Turkish partnership, where Western powers (whether collectively – from within the OSCE and the EU- or individually), as well as Iran are seeking to play their role. The Georgian initiative inherently advocates restraint, and should be supported.
- **During the Rome workshop, suggestions were made for a variety of platform formats to mediate and negotiate restoring good neighbourly relations between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey for further improving stability. These platforms include Georgia, and therefore it would seem that, conceptually at least,**

**there is commonality (if not some overlap) between the ideas presented by PM Garibashvili and the RSSC SG policy recommendations over the past years aiming to support various forms of regional cooperation in the South Caucasus.** *We believe the RSSC SG would be of substantial assistance if it were able to determine how well the provisions of the November 2020 Trilateral Statement were implemented (if they were in any shape or form) and what it is the way ahead towards their consolidation. We would therefore encourage our participants to look critically not only at this issue, but also at the possibility of lending assistance to further implementation through past policy recommendations (such as the conflict resolution ideas presented in Rome), or through new ideas presented during this workshop.*

- **The overall intention therefore is to generate ideas that help dialogue move forward towards new forms of conflict management and regional cooperation.** In that latter case, much has been made of the promises of economic cooperation in bringing about a more lasting peace to the region.
- We expect participants to explore **the following questions:**
  - **What are the premises and the content of the Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative?**
  - **How can Georgia’s constructive regional initiative be supported?**
  - **How can the RSSC SG bring substance to the Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative?**
  - **How does Georgia’s Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative be impacted by the ongoing domestic political crisis? Are there any possible links between the two processes which could be exploited to leverage the former against the second?**
  - **Is the “Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative” a response to the geopolitical transformation of the South Caucasus region in the wake of the 44- Days War on Karabakh?**
  - **Conversely, is the US the AWOL (“Absent Without Leave”) in the South Caucasus, given that the current US administration expressed little to zero priority for developing security and defence relations with ARM and AZE? Could this limited approach become a harbinger for a future US South Caucasus regional security policy exclusively centred on GEO?**

## **Conclusions**

- PNI is an offer of “good offices” rather than a mediation exercise, and it is not meant to replace any existing processes. It was also not meant against anyone, but rather, seen as an inclusive process that excludes no one. The intention of the Georgian government was to build the platform around tangible actions, initiatives and projects. Georgia is hoping to attract EU and US support for concrete actions within the initiative.
- The expected resumption of official negotiations opens the door to further advance track 2 and track 1.5 diplomacy. It seemed that Georgia was still perceived as the right place to bring Armenians and Azerbaijanis together. However, in late September 2021 the launch of the “Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative” was the first time, when Georgia offered its good offices to establish a platform for Armenians and Azerbaijanis to meet and speak.
- The two possibly competitive regional cooperation proposals existing on the table (PNI and “3+3”) need to evolve as complementary to each other rather than being mutually exclusive, and as such, become a matter of competition and rivalry between great powers. Not only would such rivalries undermine the regional co-operation initiatives but also badly affect relations amongst the states of the South Caucasus who have different geopolitical visions in foreign policy. Secondly, but not less important, the fate of all these regional initiatives is also linked to the start of successful negotiations on a peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan. Regional co-operation projects would only make sense if the two countries are genuinely willing to sign such a treaty recognising each other’s territorial integrity in the near future.