



**Extraordinary Virtual Roundtable
of the PFP Consortium Study Group
“Regional Stability in the South Caucasus”**

**“Assessing and Mitigating the Impact of the
COVID-19 Global Crisis in the South Caucasus
Region”**

– Programme and Virtual Roundtable Outline –

25 June 2020

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Purpose

The Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes has emerged as the premiere Track 2 diplomacy platform for the region where intractable conflicts are discussed with discretion, in a serene professional 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 more than a dozen workshops being considered if not applied by South Caucasus actors/decision makers.

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 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 have been put in practice in Armenia. The RSSC SG is also leveraging the assistance of outside partners to accomplish a policy recommendation made in November 2017 pertaining to media literacy. The co-chairs are glad to pilot this effort, and to see that the work of the RSSC SG is finding a constructive outlet. Much remains to be done, however, and we expect this work to continue for the foreseeable future.

Past workshops 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 21st RSSC SG workshop on “Peace Building through Economic and Infrastructure Integration in the South Caucasus” should have taken place on 26-29 March 2020, in Tbilisi (Georgia). In the wake of the outbreak of the new Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic crisis, that workshop had to be postponed to a – hopefully – later date.

On March 11, 2020 the news from the World Health Organization (WHO) director general that the COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic has shaken the world. The global medical community devised a strategy for mitigating the coronavirus that depended largely on quarantine, and limiting contact among the infected and potentially infected, thereby reducing the virus' transmission. Those plans have come at massive economic and human costs. In this context, at the PFP Consortium Steering Committee (CSC) virtual meeting, held on April 29, 2020, the Operational Staff and the stakeholders of the PFP Consortium have strongly encouraged all working and study groups to resume their activities in virtual format for the time being. Given that the virtual format goes against the spirit and operational effectiveness of regular workshops, the Co-Chairs of the RSSC SG decided to organize this Extraordinary Virtual Roundtable aiming to provide policy advice on early recovery and consequence management in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemics in the South Caucasus region. It is therefore with great pride and anticipation that we invite you to join us at **the Extraordinary Virtual Roundtable of the RSSC SG on: “Assessing and Mitigating the Impact of the COVID-19 Global Crisis in the South Caucasus Region.”**

Partners

- Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, Garmisch-Partenkirchen
- Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

- European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
- Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston

Topic Outline

A flood of publications worldwide assessed the prospective implications of the COVID-19 pandemics. For example, experts feared that COVID-19 was not only a huge health crisis, but also a crisis of globalization and global governance. They envisaged moves to reduce global connectedness, including in terms of travel, trade, and financial, digital, and data flows, while highlighting the need for greater global cooperation. In that context, reviewing the modalities and the ideological assumptions of globalisation could become critical in finding a new balance to prevent a widespread protectionist drive that could result in a global economic depression.

Experts also conceded that while the Coronavirus might be generally a symmetrical threat (being able to affect everyone), its consequences would be mostly asymmetrical. How hard it would affect each state would ultimately depend on the resilience of its medical, food, energy and digital infrastructure and supply chains, the effectiveness of its crisis response system, and the size, and effective deployment of its economic recovery package in the aftermath of the crisis. Many states, including those in the South Caucasus, have limited capacity to effectively protect their citizens against the consequences of the COVID-19 global crisis, even with international help. Therefore, optimizing inter-agency and international responses to the COVID-19 pandemics is going to become crucial for regional stability.

In addition, the inability of Taiwan to alert the WHO because of its status – and China’s occult pressure – may provide creative openings in international law with regards to non-recognized or partially-recognized political entities and groupings. The implications for the South Caucasus are manifold, but the Coronavirus pandemic provides an objective circumstance against which to gauge the importance of “status” in international affairs and international law, when global security is threatened.

The aim of this virtual roundtable will consist of:

- Assessing national and regional political, economic, and security and defence (including domestic crisis management) responses to the COVID-19 crisis in the South Caucasus region, with a view to developing policy recommendations aiming to reduce vulnerabilities to the multi-faceted consequences of the pandemic. The following policy priorities might be envisaged: developing and implementing comprehensive and inter-agency coordinated post-COVID-19 early recovery and consequence management response packages; reviewing and updating existing legislation; enhancing the involvement of non-institutional actors, including civil society, private companies, the media, local communities and individual citizens; developing, and participating in bilateral and multilateral cooperation arrangements to manage the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Updating the geopolitical examination of the South Caucasus region in light of the post-COVID-19 global and regional geopolitical trends, in order to provide actionable policy recommendations relevant to conflict management and conflict resolution.
- Extracting lessons learned from South Caucasus success stories and assessing the implications of the pandemic on issues of status for non-recognized or partially-recognized territories.

To address the aims of this workshop, the co-Chairs are proposing the following questions to spur thinking among invited speakers:

- How did the states in the South Caucasus respond to the COVID-19 pandemics? Were they prepared and able to manage effectively the medical and crisis response challenges posed by the virus?
- What were the strengths and the weaknesses of the crisis management system (in terms of legislation, response structures, inter-agency coordination, strategic communication, accountability of the executive, etc.) in the fight against the pandemics?
- What were the socio-economic consequences of the measures adopted to fight the spread of the virus? How well did the political and the socio-economic (companies, banks, trade unions, employers' and professional associations, etc.) actors respond those consequences?
- How were the civil society, the media, local communities, and individual citizens involved in fighting the pandemics and in mitigating its consequences?
- What role have had the bilateral and multilateral agreements/arrangements with the neighbours and with the international organizations (UN, OSCE, EU, NATO, EEU, CSTO) in early recovery and consequence management?
- How did COVID-19 affect the vulnerability of the South Caucasus region and states due to reduced cross-border cooperation, and a low capability to cooperate on the part of the national and local governments? In particular, how did the existence of the unrecognized states affect the vulnerability of the region to the spread of the virus?
- Did the dynamics of the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh change? Have there been any signs of attempts to instrumentalise the crisis politically on the part of regional and external actors?
- Did local or regional actors attempt to restrict the freedom of movement and the implementation of the mandate of the EUMM under the pretext of virus containment? Should EUMM's operational profile be expanded and the focus increasingly be placed on humanitarian and medical support?
- How are the strategic calculations of the South Caucasus local and regional (Russia, EU, Turkey, and Iran) actors changing in the light of the crisis?
- What are the risks for the South Caucasus in deepening its relations with China as a strategic economic partner?

Modalities for the Virtual Roundtable

The RSSC SG virtual roundtable will take place according to the enclosed program. It is suggested that each regional country should have two representatives at the roundtable: one speaker and one discussant. The speaker would be invited to present a one-page outline including concrete policy recommendations (no written analysis required). The policy recommendations should be formulated according to the perceived needs of his/her own country within the scope described by the aims and the questions framing the expected content of the roundtable discussion. This outline should be sent as an initial draft to the Co-Chairs and the RSSC SG Secretariat **NLT June 18, 2020 COB**. Those outlines will be compiled by the RSSC SG Co-Chairs into one initial draft of the policy recommendations and circulated to all participants at the roundtable **NLT June 23, 2020**. The virtual discussion should focus on this initial draft, under the moderation of the Co-Chairs. Discussants will be invited to kick off the interactive discussions of each section by providing an initial set of comments and questions for the speakers, followed by the other participants. Building upon the outcome of the virtual discussion, the Co-Chairs will wrap-up and finalize the draft policy recommendations.

N.B.: As usual, the policy recommendations and the ensuing discussion will be subject to Chatham House rules, while the final draft of the policy recommendations should be subject to a short silence procedure approval by all participants.

Programme

Thursday, 25 June 2020

All times are Central European Time- CET (Vienna Time)

14:00 – 14.05 **Words of welcome** by Benedikt HENSELLEK, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna, and
Olaf GARLICH, PfP Consortium Operations Staff, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

14.05 – 14.35 **SECTION 1: Recommendations on Azerbaijan: Reflections, Clarifications**

Chair: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
Speaker: Elkhan NURYIEV, Humboldt Senior Fellow, Centre for East European and International Studies, Berlin
Discussant: Ahmad ALILI, Caucasus Policy Analysis Centre, Baku
Q&A

14.35 – 15.05 **SECTION 2: Recommendations on Georgia: Reflections, Clarifications**

Chair: Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston
Speaker: Teona AKUBARDIA, Tbilisi
Discussant: Givi SILAGADZE, GIP, Tbilisi

15:05- 15:15 Individual Coffee Break

15.15 – 15.45 **SECTION 3: Recommendations on Armenia: Reflections, Clarifications**

Chair: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels
Speaker: Benyamin POGHOSYAN, Chairman, Center for Political and Economic Strategic Studies, Yerevan
Discussant: Johnny MELIKYAN, Orbeli Analytical Research Centre, Yerevan
Q&A

15.45 – 16.15 **Section 4 – Discussion on the Final Draft of the Policy Recommendations**

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

16.15 – 16.30 **Information on Way Ahead for the RSSC SG Activities in 2020 and 2021**

Benedikt HENSELLEK, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

16.30 **Official Closing Remarks**

Benedikt HENSELLEK, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels