

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:

1. How do you assess the current situation in the South Caucasus?

GVN: The current situation in the South Caucasus is still unstable, but apparently having started to move in the right direction. The region remains highly geopolitically fragmented and each of the three South Caucasus states pursuing different foreign policy goals and having developed divergent security threats assessments. Regional power is shared by Russia and Turkey, with Iran, the US, the EU, and some Middle Eastern actors increasingly interested to increase their regional influence. Georgia continues to suffer from what they call “Russian occupation of our territories”, while its Western democratic credentials are seriously backsliding.

If you asked me this question three months ago, I was deploring the feeling that the South Caucasus was not moving towards peace and regional stability. The trilaterally signed Statement of November 10th, 2020 left open key issues, such as: the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and 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 in its implementation; the conditions for the return of the displaced persons to the parts of Karabakh which are under the protection of Russian peacekeepers; how existing mistrust and animosities between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities from Karabakh would be overcome; the delimitation and demarcation 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 those issues have become bones of contention among the signatories and have made for, as Thomas de Waal had coined it “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”.

However, today, in the wake of the Sochi (November 26) and Brussels summits (December 14) of the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders hosted by the Russian and European Council presidents, respectively, I’m cautiously optimistic about the future of peace and regional stability in the South Caucasus. Although only very modest steps towards starting a sound process aiming at normalizing relations between ARM and AZE, and ARM and TUR, respectively, have been made, the signs of a change of mood towards peace in the South Caucasus have been apparent from all capitals concerned: Yerevan, Baku, and Ankara. Even better news was the apparent close coordination between Moscow and Brussels in taking forward the implementation of the Trilateral Statements of November 2020, and January 2021, during their respective hosted summits of ARM and AZE leaders in Sochi and in Brussels.

2. Will a peace agreement be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia?

GVN: I didn’t check it out on my crystal ball, but I strongly believe this is a key goal for all states and regional powers from the South Caucasus. The problem is in agreeing on the terms and conditions for such a peace agreement. If Baku wanted to see its territorial integrity recognized by Armenia, Yerevan was most interested to ensure a decent, secure life for the Armenians still living in Karabakh. Furthermore, if Baku wanted to be granted a corridor through Armenian territory to connect its mainland with its Nakhichevan exclave, as a

counterpart of the Lachin corridor connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh, Yerevan felt its sovereignty over its Syunik region would be endangered by allowing Azerbaijan and Turkey to trade people and goods (including potentially military-related) between its main perceived enemies without Armenian supervision. In Yerevan's eyes, potential Russian control over such a transit corridor would just further damage Armenian sovereignty over parts of its Southern territories and increase its security dependence on Moscow. And there are many other examples that could be offered in support of the current inability of Azerbaijan and Armenia to sign a peace agreement that would guarantee the implementation, and would complement the contents of the Trilateral Statements signed so far.

Signing a peace agreement must therefore be preceded by a sound multi-faceted negotiation process that would offer clear solutions on how to overcome the existing divergences of the parties. What it is probably less understood currently in both capitals is that such a process should be based upon plenty of "gives and takes", which would fall short of best options for either Baku or Yerevan. The internal political and socio-economic dynamics in both Armenia and in Azerbaijan might also seriously influence the outcomes of this process. For now, PM Pashinyan might have received the political legitimacy to follow such negotiations with Azerbaijan within limited areas of a range of issues. His internal legitimacy to go further with the negotiations would largely depend on the progress achieved on those limited areas and range of issues. However, if the Armenian public might get tired with the ineffectiveness of his government to pursue such a negotiating process in their favour, the next Armenian leader would be more constrained in his margin of negotiations, which would make positive outcomes even less likelier. In my view, if they wished to succeed in having a peace agreement signed, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia should build upon the momentum created during their latest summits in Sochi and Brussels to firmly grasp this opportunity and transform it into a sound multi-faceted negotiation process. Alternatively, the following four years will find us in the same situation where we were three months ago, and new political, socio-economic and security issues will prevent further progress, while making a new military conflict likelier.

3. How do you think the process of border demarcation and delimitation will be implemented?

GVN: The process of border demarcation and delimitation is an essential part (and an example for the contents) of the upcoming negotiation process. Clearly, further progress on negotiating a peace agreement will depend on the outcome of this mostly technical process. With the help offered by Russian and European experts to support this process and with the ability of both parties to "give and take" small pieces of territory so that the new border would be both relevant and consistent with the historical and geographical realities, and with the socio-economic and security needs of both sides, it could be successfully completed. However, one possible sticking point might consist of Armenia's interest to include in this discussion the borders of Nagorno-Karabakh, which, as seen from Baku, might look like a non-sense. Overcoming this kind of apparent stalemates might be key to an overall successful negotiation process. Therefore, thinking, well in advance, of possible creative political and legal solutions, that would respond to both parties' interests, might prove highly rewarding in avoiding such roadblocks being turned into process-breakers.

4. What can you say about anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia?

GVN: In the new regional context, where Russia is the guarantor of the security of Armenia, and the only protector of Armenians living in Nagorno-Karabakh, I'd say that anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia do not matter anymore. This is a geopolitical reality which has been explicitly accepted by Azerbaijan when it signed the Trilateral Statement on the cease fire in Nagorno-Karabakh of November 2020. In the foreseeable future, Armenia will not be able to embark on any security paradigm that would exclude Russia. This is a matter of survival for them as a nation. Therefore, betting on anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia is useless, and even counterproductive from an Azerbaijani point of view.

5. In your opinion, is a new military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia possible?

GVN: In principle, everything is possible. The issue is rather how likely is the outbreak of a new military conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia? In my opinion, it is highly unlikely as long as Russia would not allow it. The decisive external factors who enabled Azerbaijan to recover its lost territories from Armenia were Turkey's boldness in pushing through a military solution to the Karabakh conflict, and Russia's interested and limited tolerance of the Azerbaijani military offensive of the autumn of 2020. For now, neither Moscow nor Ankara have an interest to fight each other in the South Caucasus. The Russia-Turkey relationship is very complex and quite difficult to understand in terms of strictly national interests. Both parties have also major regional interests, which in some places (like in Syria or Libya) might collide, but in the South Caucasus they converged. Azerbaijani victory in Karabakh has been dependent on those converging Russo-Turkish regional interests. Most likely, only under strong extra-regional (Euro-Atlantic or Eurasian in the case of Russia) pressures could those Russo-Turkish converging regional interests forcibly change. In addition, from an Armenian perspective, the 2020 war did not affect the state-survival. However, the next major military conflict with Azerbaijan (or Turkey) would most likely question the survival of the Armenian state, and its costs and duration might rapidly supersede any apparently reasonable expectations.

6. How do you see the future of the region?

GVN: Ideally, the future of the South Caucasus region would be governed by a number of very broad and uncontroversial principles which we, at the European Geopolitical Forum, call the *Brussels Consensus on post-Conflict Regional Integration in the South Caucasus*¹. Those would include: the right of all people to live in peace and security; a shift from preparing for war to building enduring peace; good neighbourly relations as a basis for peace building; the right of all people to strive for economic prosperity; the right of all IDPs and refugees to return to their homes and/or lands, and live there in peace and security. However, in reality, the future of the region will largely depend on how the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia will be able to overcome their current conflicting interests and policy divisions and develop a common vision for a shared future. How to do that? Here, I'd rely on the wise advice received from two distinguished scholars, and very good friends of mine, one from Azerbaijan and the other from the Armenian diaspora in Canada. Elkhan Nuriyev: "*This is possible and feasible if all parties involved take a constructive approach to achieve a sustainable 'positive' peace built*

¹ European Geopolitical Forum- "Exploring the Role of Economic Initiatives as Peace Building Tools in the Nagorno-Karabakh Context", Brussels, 2014, http://gpf-europe.com/upload/egf_nk_summary_conclusions.pdf

on justice and filled with positive content aimed at restoring trust and confidence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The best way for the future of the entire Karabakh is to live in peace, concord and harmony and to strive to rebuild good neighbourly relations between the two countries”². And Alan Whitehorn: “Shattering Hate: If we are to lessen the hate narratives, we must find the stereotypes and prejudices and begin to break them down. Conversely, we need to build up the shared positive experiences. And if we have none, then search for one. And if we cannot find this, we must create it.”³

² Labarre, Niculescu- “What Future for Nagorno-Karabakh in the Wake of the 2020 Six-Weeks War?”, Study Group Information, Vienna, February 2021, from https://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/pfpc_sgi_rssc_extended_21_2_web.pdf

³ Ibidem.