



## **CEASEFIRE VIOLATIONS DOWN AS ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN IMPLEMENT SOUTH CAUCASUS STUDY GROUP RECOMMENDATION**

*By EGF Editorial Staff*

**George Niculescu<sup>1</sup>, co-chair of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) confirms: Since the end of October 2018, a new operative communication line (crisis hotline) has been established between Armenia and Azerbaijan, two countries that have been at war over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), a region recognized as Azerbaijani by the International Community, but inhabited by a majority Armenian population.**

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This information had been initially picked up by Frederic Labarre<sup>2</sup>, the other co-chair of the RSSC SG, at a special roundtable on Crisis Management in the South Caucasus, organized in Vienna by the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management (IFK) of the Austrian National Defence Academy 22-23 October 2018.

According to official sources from both sides, the level of military tension on the Line of Contact (LoC) between the conflicting parties has significantly decreased (from about 90 reports of ceasefire breaches/day, to about 20 reports/day). The opening of this new communication channel had been agreed several weeks before by the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and the Prime-Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, during an informal meeting held in the margins of the CIS summit in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) on 27-28 September 2018. Although the idea of a crisis hotline had been voiced before, the policy recommendations of the RSSC SG, may have helped bringing this solution to the top of the mind of decision-makers.

Indeed, the first recommendation of the 10<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG workshop, held in Reichenau in November 2014, urged the following; “keep communication channels – especially informal ones – open.” The RSSC SG participants further urged the parties not to miss “opportunities for dialogue”, and to establish a “formal and informal” conflict resolution platform that would have some “permanence to enable relationships to blossom.” Armenia and Azerbaijan seem to have risen to the challenge of making this “platform a reality and better engage...official actors from the region.”<sup>3</sup>

The co-chairs were unanimous in praising the diligence of the Study Group’s partners in conveying the results of its interactive discussions and policy recommendations to nearly 800 academic and policy agencies in the South Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, and within the Euro-Atlantic region. “Without promoting the work of the RSSC SG, who knows if this particular solution would have been implemented?”

Both co-chairs congratulate the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments for taking this important step forward. This is an example of courage and wisdom that should inspire the rest of the South Caucasus to follow suit. They also credit the participants of the RSSC SG workshops for their enthusiastic participation and openness. It is through their participation that the vibrancy of the RSSC SG workshops, which resumed in November 2012, could be achieved.

The RSSC SG brings together twice yearly some 35 participants per workshop from South Caucasus countries, from neighbouring Russia, and Turkey, as well as from interested EU and NATO countries. Representatives of the civil society from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh have also participated in most cases. Workshops have taken place in Reichenau, Austria, in Tbilisi, Istanbul, Kyiv, Chisinau, Varna and Minsk. The RSSC SG is composed of a roster of 200-plus experts on frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus. It is a Track 2 diplomacy initiative and part of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, strongly supported by the Austrian Ministry of Defence and the Austrian National Defence Academy.

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<sup>3</sup> Felberbauer, E. and Labarre, F., eds. “Towards Europe?! Straddling Fault Lines and Choosing Sides in the South Caucasus.” Band 23/2014, Vienna: Austrian National Defence Academy, p. 155-156.