

On A Search for a Stable Regional Order

Idea Workshop on the Future of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

In early September and mid-October 2019, the Protestant Academy organized an idea workshop that on the future of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus in Loccum and in Minsk. In cooperation with the IFSH (Institute for Peace research and Security Policy at the University Hamburg) and the Minks Dialogue Forum, this event brought together 45 scholars, think-tankers, journalists, and representatives from the NGO world from the six Eastern European and South Caucasian countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) together with experts from Germany and Russia in order to search for innovative ideas for a more inclusive regional order and develop policy recommendations how to maneuver to a more stable situation in light of current conflicts in the region and the competitive dynamics between Russia and the West. The following report is the outcome of this dialogue endeavor and reflects the consensus reached by the participants. Apart from policy recommendation it contains two contrasting foresight – a ‘dark sky’ and a ‘blue sky’ scenario – of how the region might evolve until 2030.

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PREAMBLE

Europe's security architecture is in crisis. The current confrontation between Russia and the West, which has become tangible in particular in the Ukraine conflict, has been materializing since 2014 in numerous policy fields. Furthermore, the ongoing tensions in Georgia, Moldova, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan show that Eastern Europe and South Caucasus are two regions especially exposed to strategic uncertainties. This increasingly unstable situation can be attributed to a high degree to the competitive dynamics between the rivaling geopolitical poles. Due to their influence, the countries of the regions are often referred to as 'in-between states'.

In this perspective, the countries' and societies' leeway for political decisions usually remains neglected. However, the regions' future development seems to be crucially dependent on whether the states or the region and their civil societies succeed in a close co-operation rather than pursuing their own particular interests.

Considering each country's special characteristics in regard to its history, challenges and opportunities, it is self-evident that any attempt to treat the regions as a homogenous entity must fail. But despite of all their multiple dissimilarities, the six Eastern European and South Caucasian countries face similar challenges and are situated in a region that is to varying degrees unstable, unreformed and shaken by conflicts. According to the majority of, the participants of the idea workshop, an increased political integration of these states can be a crucial cornerstone to deal with those issues. As suggested by them, the two regions will be referred to as 'New Eastern Europe' in the further course of the report.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the 'dark sky' and 'blue sky scenarios' (see second part of the report), the participants of the Locom idea workshop identified a series of policy recommendations on how to maneuver to a stable regional order in 'New Eastern Europe'. These recommendations are addressed to the perceived key players of the region: the so-called 'in between countries', Russia and the European Union.

Due to this complexity of the subject, the following recommendations are in no way a comprehensive plan of action. Rather, they deliver ideas and starting points for political maneuvering.

The "In-Between Countries"

■ Modernize their economies and implement anti-corruption policy

The discussants unanimously consider corruption as a tremendous obstacle for economic growth. Transparency of the public procurements and of the entire budgetary cycle would encourage citizens to keep state institutions accountable. This will reduce corruption; increase doing business conditions and will lead to a more efficient public spending.

■ Diversify energy supply sources

The region in general is highly dependent on foreign energy supply. Thus, shifting to green energies could be a joint task for the 'New Eastern European' countries. Furthermore, the countries should diversify their trade relations, by exploring new export markets and find alternative sources for energy supply. Thereby, they should urgently focus on decarbonizing their economies.

■ Enhance Regional Cooperation

The experts recommend a more active participation of 'New Eastern European' states and societies in cross-county interregional co-operation organizations (e.g. Assembly of European Regions, Conference of Coastal regions of Europe, Association of border regions of Europe, etc.). The objective of interregional co-operation is an intensification of economic, cultural, educational and academic ties. The interregional level is more likely to be free from political and ideological clashes. Within this framework, the strategic goal is the establishment of macro-regional strategies in which all 'New Eastern European' countries will be involved.

The experts identified several *fields for a closer regional co-operation*: Common infrastructure projects are needed to drive regional integration. This will also have a positive effect on tourism, which is a third field of co-operation. Moreover, the implementation of a cross-regional network for civil society actors can help overcome hostility between different countries and societies.

Another factor to reinforce regional co-operation is to establish a *common zone of free movement*. This endeavor requires a roadmap including awareness raising, trainings, and a common info system. It also needs to be discussed if Russia should be involved. While part of the participants considers this as an opportunity for de-escalation, others prefer to exclusively include the six 'New Eastern European' countries.

To gain the societies' support for regional integration, the experts suggest establishing a 'New Eastern European' *cultural festival*. Through concerts, films, and art, the societies can be brought closer to each other's culture. In this context, there could be a contest for a European Award for Cultural Rapprochement. As an organizing institution, a cross-regional cultural council could be implemented.

■ Tangible and realistic neutrality as an anchor for regional stability

One of the major challenges between EU and Russia regarding New Eastern Europe is a difference in their foreign policy priorities. From Russia's perspective some of these countries intentions to get closer to EU is perceived as a threat to its national interests; whereas for the EU it is a way to promote democratic values, peace and stability in the region. In the created ontological setting the part of expert community advocates the idea of non-alignment/neutrality of the New Eastern European states as a solution to bypass the tensions between EU and Russia. While at the first glance Neutrality might be viewed as an attractive solution to the security challenges of New Eastern Europe, still there are *many concerns regarding the viability of its implementation*.

The fear of not respecting neutrality by Russia is the major issue that makes the adoption of non-alignment and other similar initiatives less realistic. In this context, the example of Moldova is often referred to. According to the Constitution, *Moldova* is a neutral country. But this neutrality is broken by Russia which keeps its 14th Army on Moldovan territory (Transnistrian region) though there is an OSCE Summit Convention signed in 1999 to withdraw its troops.

Therefore, if there is any discussion regarding the Neutral/non-aligned status of Eastern Partnership states, it will be of vital importance that these states get *tangible guarantees* that all parties involved

will respect the agreement and taken obligations. At the same time, any decision regarding the status of these countries, *should not be decided within formats like “Yalta 2”* meaning New Eastern European states inclusion on equal basis.

The concept of neutrality also should not be understood as indifference of New Eastern European states to each other and towards geopolitical tensions between EU and Russia. Instead countries should provide their own or support existing initiatives, which aimed at deescalating and mediating ongoing tensions (as an example Belarus’ initiative of “Integration of Integrations” between EU and EEU and so-called concept of “Helsinki-2” process developed for providing more regional security and decreasing risks of military turbulences between centers of power.

■ Progress in the democratization process

In particular, countries should strengthen their civil society and encourage civic engagement in public life, since these are the backbone of a well-functioning democracy. Actors from this sector can play a *decisive role in educating* broader parts of the societies on basic democratic rules. Independent media and transparent political parties financing will contribute to freer and fair elections and thus ensure that countries are governed according to people’s will. Fighting fake news and propaganda should be kept high on public agenda as well as the reforms for independent justice sector.

Besides, *ex-combatants need to be reintegrated* into the societies. It is essential to offer them requalification options.

Russia

For many experts of the Loccum Idea Conference, Russian foreign policy is perceived as highly aggressive. In order to de-escalate the relation between the Russian Federation and ‘New Eastern Europe’ the experts suggest to:

■ Create opportunities for people-to-people diplomacy

While the relations between the Russian government and some of the of ‘New Eastern Europe’ states are tense, it is important to still offer opportunities for the respective citizens to get in touch with each other. This could create entry points for a political rapprochement. People-to-people diplomacy, which could be of relevance for the relations between the ‘New Eastern European countries’ as well, can take the following forms: *Social media/bloggers* can deconstruct official state propaganda focusing and promoting positive stories and images of successes and achievements rather than speculating on the enemy image of the opponents. There is a need for human face stories, meaning individual stories of success facilitating a human dimension of cross-cultural co-operation.

Further, the systemic involvement of actors dealing with *private diplomacy mediation* (NGOs dealing with humanitarian issues, conflict prevention/resolution and shuttle diplomacy approach) has to be additionally supported by the creation of new local experts of change. Therefore, incentives for professionals have to be created to train a pool of local experts.

Especially the *young generations* in the respective countries need to be provided with new visions to win them as agents of change. This can be done by promoting a no-border approach through cultural cross-border encounters and visa facilitation for young people. Additionally, countries need to invest in multilingual competences of their youth. Projects of that kind are peculiarly suitable to promote the spirit of co-operate on mutually beneficial terms between the countries.

Another important area of people-to-people diplomacy identified by the experts are the *academic*

and epistemic communities. The countries should support those agents of change by financing transnational university networks. A multilingual curriculum in schools and universities can create the foundation for those programs. Therefore, the percentage of international students and professors needs to be increased.

■ Initiate a dialogue with the EU

A common European security architecture can only be built on a consensus between Russia and the EU, while simultaneously paying close attention to the needs of the 'New Eastern European' states and involving their representatives. Therefore, Russia must return to compliance of international law. Moreover, a crucial step to rapprochement will be a ceasefire in Donbass. The participants of the Loccum conference thereby pleaded that countries need to act beyond a "zero-sum" logic.

Dialogue/negotiations with between the EU and Russia could start *on an informal basis* without waiting for the situation in Ukraine to be resolved. As argued by part of the participants, the conflicts in the region are strongly connected to the broader question of finding a common European security architecture. Hence, an informal exchange on that question is needed to prepare a solution for them. However, others are skeptical about Russia's credibility in those talks.

Some participants provided the idea that dialogue between Russia and the West should also focus on the *implementation of security guarantees* for the 'New Eastern European' countries. While for some it is crucial to offer guarantees for Russia alike, others see no need for that.

Another subject that could be considered as a topic for informal discussion is the *clarification of legitimate influence*. Currently the opposing geopolitical actors accuse each other of illegitimately interfering in political processes of the 'New Eastern European' countries. However, they lack a common understanding of what kind of influence is actually legitimate and necessary, and what kind is not. This has to be discussed in co-operation with the regional countries.

European Union

The majority of experts consider the EU engagement within the Eastern Partnership initiative as a positive influence for the regional development. However, it was criticized that the EU is lacking a clear and tailor-made strategy for the individual countries. To improve EU's engagement, the experts suggest to:

■ Be transparent regarding the prospect of EU membership

The societies' hopes of joining the EU are very high. If the EU behaves hesitantly, they could be bitterly disappointed. Regarding the internal difficulties within the union, some participants suggested to form an intermediate status between a full membership and an association agreement.

■ Improve the financial support in terms of leverage and visibility

The financial support by the EU is regarded as crucial. In particular, investments in infrastructure are urgently needed. However, the EU countries should use its financing much more as a leverage for implementing the association agreements. Moreover, it is essential that the EU improves their visibility. Many citizens in 'New Eastern Europe' are little aware of the EU's support. A better communication strategy needs to be elaborated, reaching all layers of the societies.

■ Strengthen the EU's engagement in regional conflicts

Thereby, the union should put a stronger focus on working with conflict-affected people from the conflict zones. Especially funding for the reintegration of ex-combatants is very much needed. In regard to Russia the participants partly argue for a co-operative approach. They suggest promoting normalization policies, improving the relations with Russia. However, another part argues for an approach of soft deterrence.

■ Balance bilateral economic relations with Russia and the EU foreign policy

In particular, the German effort for Nord Stream II is perceived to undermine a common EU strategy for 'New Eastern Europe'. Hence, the participants of the Loccum conference made the argument that the individual states should adapt their economic interests according to an overarching EU strategy.

HOW THE "NEW EASTERN EUROPE REGION" WILL LOOK LIKE IN 2030?

The purpose of the scenarios that were developed during the Loccum conference was to shed light on blind spots, reflect current expectations held by the relevant actors, evaluate risks, and identify policy recommendations – outlined in the first part of the report.

A "Dark Sky" Scenario

To draft the 'dark sky' scenario, two expert groups independently searched for the key drivers shaping the regional development and discussed possible developments of those factors in the upcoming years – until 2030. Their task was to draw a rather pessimistic outlook of the future, however still a realistic one. They arrived at the following conclusions:

■ Escalation of regional conflicts

According to the 'dark sky' scenario, the conflicts in the region will escalate even further as a result of the growing tensions between East and West. Moreover, some participants see a high risk that additional conflict zones will be created. The spiral of violence will aggravate, leading to a high death toll, the destruction of infrastructure including hospitals, schools and roads and hence, tremendous challenges for the countries' political system as such.

As can already be observed, the expert groups fear that these conflicts will increasingly weaken the state capacities in the respective countries. Due to the enormous amount of resources spent on the defense sector, important investments in education, infrastructure, or health care will be neglected. As a result, the region will be further destabilized and becomes more and more vulnerable to internal and external power struggles.

■ Absence of reforms

As claimed by the majority of the participants of the conference, the slow pace of political reforms will breed disillusionment within the societies of the region. They foresee the danger that the high expectations for democratization will be disappointed. This will then lead to a growing distrust in democratic actors and political institutions. Citizens will feel betrayed by the political class and increasingly abstain from elections.

The low turnout could be identified as a flaw by domestic and foreign actors to influence the political situation in their favor. Participants express their concerns that those actors could benefit from a chaotic political situation, which in at worst would result in failed state scenarios. Moreover, if the capacities of the civil societies are not strengthened, they can show only little resistance to those developments.

■ Corruptive structures

The workshop participants argue that weak state structures enhance the possibilities for corruption. Until 2030 it might lead to a further oligarchizing of the region. On the one hand, this undermines any attempts to push the economic development. On the other hand, it might cause a reaction from social movements in form of protest and riots. Hence, the region will be further destabilized. In that situation, local elites could fear to lose their power. Part of the participants argue that those tensions can easily spark violent confrontations.

■ Poor economic development

The participants working on the 'dark sky' scenario state that the governments in the 'New Eastern European' countries could possibly fail to create modernized structures for economic development. Hereby, especially a lack of investments in infrastructure is regarded as one of the most harmful obstacles. In addition, some participants argue that the absence of legal protection for small businesses will further undermine economic growth until 2030 and will further force them into illegality.

Another issue raised by participants regards the poor production conditions in most factories. Considering the tensions of the ecological situation worldwide, outdated machines will increasingly cause environmental problems on a local and global scale.

■ Populist and nationalist patterns

There is a broad consensus within the groups stating that the poor economic development is likely to trigger populist movements in the regional countries. Internal conflicts in most regional societies are still alive. In a 'dark sky' scenario the division within these societies will become even stronger until 2030. The participants discussed the difference in language, history, and culture as possible breeding ground for nationalist parties. In light of those dissimilarities, some members of the conference critical reflect on the solidarity of the region in principle terms.

However, according to the majority of the participants, the most crucial division is the polarization between those seeking greater co-operation with the EU and those who align with the Russian Federation. Hereby, the participants partly fear an increasing emergence of Russian pressure groups trying to influence the public opinion on this issue until the year 2030.

■ Brain drain as demographic challenge

In relation to the aforementioned factors, a part of the experts discussed migration movements into EU countries as a tremendous demographic challenge for 'New Eastern Europe'. If those issues remain untouched the level of frustration in the respective countries might cause people to search for better opportunities elsewhere. Under the dark sky scenario, particularly a well-educated, highly skilled workforce would be painfully missed in the future.

■ Geopolitical influences

A concern that has been repeatedly mentioned by participants is that external actors will use the situation to exploit the region for their own advantage. It might be in their interest to further destabilize particular countries and escalate the so called “frozen conflicts”. Thus, some experts fear that the ‘New Eastern European’ states will lose their leeway to make political decisions completely until 2030 and that the region becomes merely a battlefield for great powers. In that regard, multiple developments and possible outcomes were discussed.

In one outlook, the West lacks a coherent strategy for the development of the region. Since part of the participants perceive the current situation of the EU as rather unstable and shaken by internal political developments, they see the EU failing to find a common vision for the region. Hence, participants wish for a higher prospect of integration into the union for the ‘New Eastern European’ states. They are concerned that on one hand, certain EU countries pursue their particular economic interests, undermining a coherent foreign policy. On the other hand, Eastern countries like Russia, Turkey and China could then further expand their influence. This could also possibly include additional military occupation attempts by the Russian Federation until 2030, according to a group of participants.

Another possible development within the ‘dark sky scenario’, which was debated by the participants, is an agreement on spheres of influence between Russia and the West. Hereby, sanctions might be withdrawn due to their negative effects for EU’s economies. In this particular outlook, pro-Russian parties take control over national regimes and establish an authoritarian rule. Media and elections will be influenced, and the region’s economies will be heavily dependent on Russia until the year 2030 – especially in the energy sector. The EU would be in line with those developments, since the need for stable economic relations with Russia is more important than the relations with ‘New Eastern European’ countries.

A third possible development within the ‘dark sky’ scenario, brought up by a group of participants, is a further confrontation between Russia and the West. The few channels for dialogue will break down, sanctions will make Russian foreign policy more aggressive, and NATO will strengthen its capacities at the Eastern flank. In this increasingly tense situation, small mistakes or misperceptions can spark a war with nuclear potential until 2030.

A ‘Blue Sky’ Scenario

The two separate groups, which during the Loccum conference worked on a ‘blue sky’ scenario, were given the task to develop an optimistic but plausible outlook for the up-coming years and picture future developments. The ‘blue sky’ scenario seemed to mirror many developments that were also addressed by the ‘dark sky’ scenario – although these groups were working completely independently. That the four groups – the two ‘dark sky’ and the two ‘blue sky’ groups – all identified similar factors and parameters on multiple occasions despite working separated from each other, can be assumed that the conference successfully pinpointed drivers, which are likely to be most important for all those wanting to implement an inclusive and stable regional architecture in ‘New Eastern Europe’.

■ De-escalation of regional conflicts

To de-escalate the regional conflicts in ‘New Eastern Europe’, part of the participants drafting the ‘blue sky’ scenario see a huge potential in track 2 and track 3 diplomacy. Acknowledging the

difficulties of elite negotiations, the experts see a willingness on those levels to discuss and implement cross-regional projects. These will enhance the co-operation between the regional countries and their relation to neighboring states until 2030. Applying an optimistic view on the upcoming years, civil societies and grassroots initiatives will have a crucial role in shaping future developments. On the contrary, another part of the participants doubts the ability of those projects to actually have a positive impact on the situation on a broader level.

■ Political and economic integration

The majority of participants agree that the region can only take a positive path if the efforts for a political and economic integration are increased. Therefore, 'New Eastern European' countries will find common issues to work on and consolidate accordingly. Especially a co-operation in the ecological sector was discussed among the participants. To support this integration process, a transnational body will be formed until 2030. Furthermore, some experts stated that additional multilateral formats will complement this development – such as transnational co-operation between cities.

Under the “blue sky scenario”, visa free area will be a crucial part of this regional integration. Until 2030, active economic co-operation between the countries is enhanced by tax free trade and collective infrastructure projects.

■ Geopolitical influences

Applying a positive perspective, the political and economic integration will be supplemented by a cultural one. Thereby, the participants discussed controversially what cultural integration actually means. Part of them plead for a common culture in the region. Others were rather skeptical and doubt this is possible or even desirable. They argue that this process is compatible with preserving regional differences at the same time.

However, both sides agreed that cultural diplomacy efforts will be beneficial for the region. Those efforts especially include the field of education. Beside the Erasmus-program, other cross-regional projects will be implemented until 2030 under the “blue sky scenario”, and transregional festivals for music and literature will be organized.

■ Good governance and fight against corruption

As suggested by the majority of participants of the “blue sky group”, the 'New Eastern European' countries will strengthen their civil societies until 2030 by implementing an NGO network. It will enable the organizations to benefit from synergistic effects. In addition, the governments will institutionalize the relations between the state and big businesses in order to counter the regionally intertwined oligarchization. Additionally, the countries will pass an anti-corruption reform which enables the tracking of conspicuous cash flows and tighten the transparency policies of high-ranking politicians.

■ Economic developments

The experts identified several economic sectors where the 'New Eastern European' countries will co-operate in the future. In a positive outlook, the region will become a tourist paradise by 2030. The income generated here will be invested in future-oriented technologies. Thereby, hi-tech economies, focusing particularly on IT and renewable energies will be developed. In those fields, the small size of most of the countries can actually be favorable for this process.

■ Geopolitical context

On a global scale, most of the experts state that an agreement to refrain from a 'sphere of influence' approach between Russia and the West will be crucial for a positive development of the region until 2030. Part of the participants suggests an inclusive economic space between the EU and the Eurasia Economic Union (EEU), including the 'New Eastern European' states. Others are rather pessimistic in this respect and refer to the Russian troops in occupied territories. For them, rapprochement is only possible if those troops are withdrawn and a ceasefire in Donbass is fully implemented. Moreover, a positive future will include international tribunals prosecuting individuals suspected of having committed war crimes.

However, nearly all of the participants agreed that a tailor-made support by the EU for each 'New Eastern European' country will be essential for a positive regional development. In addition, many want to overcome the asymmetric dependency on Russia and plead for a more balanced structural relationship.

PARTICIPANTS

Nina Akhmeteli, Regional BBC Reporter, Tbilisi

Sergei Akopov, Saint-Petersburg School of Social Sciences and Area Studies / Department of Political Science, St. Petersburg

Bakhtiyar Aslanov, Independent Researcher focusing on conflict resolution, Baku

Vera Axyonova, Academic Program Coordinator, Center for International Cooperation, Free University Berlin

Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska, Executive Director at Integration and Development Center for Information and Research, Kyiv

Fuad Chiragov, Head of Department, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku

Natalia Djandjgava, Project Officer, Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), Martti Ahtisaari Centre, Chisinau

Artem Filipenko, Head of Research Department of Danube and Black Sea Region in Odessa, National Institute for Strategic Studies, Odessa

Giorgi Gvalia, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences and Professor of Politics and International Relations at Ilia State University, Tbilisi

Dzmitry Halubnichy, Advisor, Belarusian Institute of Strategic Researches (BISR), Minsk

Karen Harutyunyan, Editor in Chief, Civilnet online TV, Yerevan

Kornely Kakachia, Director, Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), Tbilisi

Oleksandra Kalashnikova, Analyst, Association for Community Self-organization Assistance – All-Ukrainian NGO, Odessa

Roman Karapetyan, Associate Professor at the Chair of International Relations and Diplomacy, Yerevan State University

Anna Kreikemeyer, Researcher, Center for OSCE Research (CORE) at the Institute for Peace Research

and Security Policy (IFSH), Hamburg

Maxim Kruschwitz, Conference Assistant, Protestant Academy Loccum

Larissa Kunze, Conflict Mediator and Project Manager, inmedio peace consult, Berlin

Alla Leukavets, Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies, Minsk

Andrey Makarychev, Visiting Professor, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

Hrant Mikaelyan, Caucasus Institute, Yerevan

Mihai Mogildea, Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE), Chisinau

Murad Nasibov, Institute for Political Science, Justus-Liebig University Gießen and Former Director of Caucasus Research Resource Center in Azerbaijan, Gießen

Hovhannes Nikoghosyan, Adjunct Lecture of Political Science and International Affairs at American University of Armenia, Yerevan

Petr Oskolkov, Fellow, Institute of Europe at the Russian Academy of Sciences; lecturer at the MGIMO-University, Moscow

Polina Panainte, Program Manager, Association for Participatory Democracy (ADEPT), Chisinau

Alexander Papko, Research Fellow, EAST Center - Eurasian States in Transition, Minsk

Nino Pavlenishvili, International School for Caucasus Studies, Ilia State University, Tbilisi

Benjamin Poghosyan, Executive Director, Political Science Association of Armenia, Yerevan

Olexiy Plotnikov, Human Rights Advocate and Transitional Justice Expert, Odessa

Inna Ramasheuskaya, Researcher, The School of Young Managers in Public Administration (Sympa), Minsk

Sergei Rastoltsev, Council of Young Scientists and Specialists, IMEMO, Moscow

Julya Sahakyan, Project Manager, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Yerevan

Rail Adil Safiyev, Associate Professor, Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen

Anush Sedrakyan, Political analyst at Free democrats party, Yerevan

Zaur Shiriyev, Analyst for South Caucasus, International Crisis Group, Baku

Julia Smirnova, Journalist covering Eastern Europe (Die Welt), London

Dirk Splinter, Conflict Mediator and Co-Director, inmedio-peace consult, Berlin

Inna Supac, Executive Director of the Institute for Strategic Initiatives, Chisinau

Giorgi Tabatadze, Strategic Litigation Lawyer at Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, Tbilisi

Stanislav Tshymshitov, Association of Indigene Nations, Hamburg/Chabarowsk Region

Lyubov Tsibulska, Head, Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, Kyiv

Berbeca Veaceslav, Institute for Development and Social Initiatives, Chisinau

Olesya Vartanyan, Analyst, Eastern Neighborhood, Crisis Group, Tbilisi

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this conference report do not necessarily represent the position of all conference participants or their institutions. While the report conveys the main themes, conclusions, and recommendations, it is not a full account of the very rich and productive discussions held at the Protestant Academy Loccum. It aims to highlight the main points of convergence and divergence among the participants and to stimulate further work on a stable regional order in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

Contact

Dr. Thomas Müller-Färber

Protestant Academy Loccum
Münchehäger Str. 6
31547 Rehburg-Loccum
Germany

Tel: + 49 (0) 57 66 81-109,

Fax: + 49 (0) 57 66 81-9 00

e-mail: Thomas.Mueller-Faerber@evlka.de

Internet: <http://www.loccum.de>

About the Protestant Academy Loccum

Conferences at the Protestant Academy Loccum provide forums for open-minded discussions on urgent and pressing issues. They endeavor to establish dialogues between actors from different fields and backgrounds with the intention to provide impetus to “think out of the box”. The Protestant Academy Loccum hosts meetings over 48 hours/two nights for between 60 to 80 participants and is open to those with the expertise to share or an interest in the subject. To allow a free exchange of thoughts, the conferences are off-camera and off-record and strictly follow the Chatham House rules which allow participants to use the information received freely but neither reveal the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers or any other participant.

About the Minsk Dialogue Forum

The Minsk Dialogue was launched as a Track-II initiative focused on international affairs and security in Eastern Europe in early 2015. The mission of the Minsk Dialogue is to offer an open and geopolitically unbiased platform for research and discussion on international affairs and security in Eastern Europe. Regular Minsk Dialogue events gather international experts, as well as high-level officials and diplomats. In its work the Minsk Dialogue pursues the following main goals: to promote greater security in Eastern Europe, to help Belarus to advance its sovereign

interests in the system of international relations, and to enhance the potential of the Belarusian expert and academic communities in the fields of international relations and security.

About the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH)

The IFSH researches the conditions for peace and security in Germany, Europe and beyond. We examine challenges to the constitution and maintenance of peace, study the causes of crises and escalatory dynamics, and analyse foreign- and security policy processes at the national and international level. The IFSH conducts its research autonomously and independently. Established by the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg we work closely with the University of Hamburg as well as with institutions in the Hamburg metropolitan area and academic institutions at home and abroad.

About Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) at the IFSH

The IFSH's Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) is a leading academic institution specifically dedicated to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It closely co-operates with the OSCE, the German Federal Foreign Office and the national delegations in Vienna. The research focuses on structures, instruments and activities of the OSCE, including conflict management. CORE publishes the [OSCE Yearbook](#) and has trained incoming OSCE Chairmanship delegations since 2007. CORE led the establishment of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek and co-founded the [OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions](#). CORE closely co-operates with the German Federal Foreign Office. German Federal President Johannes Rau and OSCE Secretary General Ján Kubiš attended the opening ceremony in the year 2000.

This text was realized by:

Maxim Kruschwitz, University of Marburg