

Geopolitical Trends

Issue 16/August-October 2021

Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA

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Key points:

- 1) Post-Western Afghanistan has still to prove its intentions towards Central Asia.
- 2) Why the new Iranian president didn't rush into resuming negotiations on the "nuclear deal"?

3) Geopolitical miscalculations and the European gas crisis have left Kyiv in limbo over the Minsk Agreements.

1) Post-Western Afghanistan has still to prove its intentions towards Central Asia.

By mid-August, the Taliban took over Afghanistan from its melting pro-Western government, thereby essentially changing the regional balance of power in Central Asia. The reversal of President Bush's Taliban regime change has now been fully completed, as the pro-Western Afghan government didn't survive the U.S. military withdrawal which had backed it over the last 20 years.

On August 15th, while Afghan president Ashraf Ghani was fleeing abroad, Kabul fell to Taliban forces with almost no fighting, completing a fulminant capture of Afghanistan in just six weeks since the U.S. pulled out most of its forces. In the wake of this unexpected outcome the Taliban cofounder Abdul Ghani Baradar struck a conciliatory tone in a video statement recorded in Doha: "*Now it's about how we serve and secure our people and ensure their future to the best of our ability*", while the elected president admitted his government's defeat in a statement on Facebook: "In order to *avoid a flood of blood, I thought it was best to get out*". (https://washingtonpost.com)

The swift victory of the Taliban has taken everyone by surprise, including the U.S. intelligence services, while President Biden blamed the fleeing Afghan president and his government for their lack of resilience against the Taliban insurgency: "We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong. [...] We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future." (https://www.nytimes.com)

The following couple of weeks were both chaotic and dramatic with Western diplomats and tens of thousands of Afghans (having worked for/with them) desperately jamming the Kabul International Airport, in the hope to get on board of one of the too few outgoing military planes, for fear of possible Taliban vengeance. Meanwhile, Russia moved to take control of the talks with the Taliban, with the latter's explicit acquiescence, by proposing to restart the "Moscow Format". "*Russia stands for the need for an urgent transition to a national dialogue in Afghanistan with the participation of all forces; Moscow format on Afghanistan has the most prospects for creating conditions for restarting inter-Afghan dialogue*" Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said on August 19th. He recalled that all five Central Asian states, China, Pakistan, India, the United States, Iran, Russia and the Afghan *conflicting parties would be invited to participate.* (<u>https://www.intellinews.com</u>)

On September 7th, a new caretaker/interim Afghan government was announced. This appointed cabinet — all Taliban members, many of whom had close ties to Taliban founder Muhammad Omar excluded Afghanistan's former pro-Western leaders, such as former president Hamid Karzai and former national reconciliation leader Abdullah Abdullah, who had held talks with Taliban leaders in previous weeks. Members of the Haggani network, an insurgent group closely allied with the Taliban that has been labelled as terrorist organization by the U.S., were also named to head two ministries, including most notably the Ministry of Interior. (https://washingtonpost.com) This exclusive Taliban interim government has been exactly the opposite to what the whole of the international community had expected: a highly inclusive government controversial figures suspected without for involvement in international terrorist activities. However, according to U.N. high level sources, Mr. Baradar (vice-prime minister in the interim government) would have conditionally agreed with allowing the international humanitarian agencies to operate freely and securely across the country to alleviate the consequences of the imminent humanitarian crisis. He has apparently set a caveat pretending that the rights of people in Afghanistan were subject to the culture and religion of Afghanistan. Whatever did he mean by this is open

for anyone's guess.

In terms of foreign policy, the new Taliban government is facing two main challenges: first, is to gain international recognition and legitimacy such that they can govern, trade, acquire investment and participate in the global system. The second is to prevent extremist groups or other rebels from challenging their rule, whereas some factions from the Taliban share the Islamic State's global revolutionary agenda, and as such they might be less inclined to building an Afghan nation-state. (https://geopoliticalfutures.com) The future role of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the emerging new Central Asian regional setting will largely depend on how skilfully the new (interim) government would succeed in meeting those key challenges.

SCO leaders on making decisions to coordinate regional responses to the Afghan crisis, whereas they actually indulged into airing unrealistic claims that the outgoing U.S. and NATO allies should bear responsibility for providing Afghanistan with a chance of securing an acceptable future. In particular, president V. Putin of Russia was very explicit: "it makes sense to work with the United States [and] other Western countries for a gradual unfreezing of Afghanistan's reserves and restoring programmes through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund". Putin added: "The main part of the expenses related to Afghanistan's post-conflict rebuilding should be borne by the United States and NATO countries, who are directly responsible for the grave consequences of their prolonged presence in the country."



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Given the changing geopolitical context in Central Asia, where regional powers, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran are likely to run the show, the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) of September 17th held out high expectations regarding the much needed regional coordination to prevent Afghanistan slipping into humanitarian disaster and an economic hellhole.

However, little time and energy was spent by the

Meanwhile, his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, told a parallel summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) that without the necessary support, terrorism and drugs could flourish in Afghanistan, while the country could fall into a major humanitarian crisis. Other SCO and CSTO leaders called on the Taliban to create an *"inclusive political structure representing all ethnic groups and preventing Afghan soil from being used for international militancy"*, while Tajik President

Emomali Rahmon bluntly called for member countries of the SCO and the CSTO to create a "reliable security belt around Afghanistan to stop the possible expansion of terrorist groups" in the region. (https://www.intellinews.com)

In geopolitical terms, Western withdrawal from Afghanistan has offered both challenges and opportunities to regional states. For example, the SCO has got the opportunity to become the main multinational security framework aiming to contain the expansion of militant Islamism from the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) towards Central Asia. From this perspective, receiving Iran as a new member of the SCO made perfect geopolitical sense. However, the SCO summit, which was expected to prevent post-Western Afghanistan turn into a regional threat and burden, failed to deliver the geopolitical signal widely awaited by everyone: "from now on, We (i.e., the SCO) are in charge for ensuring regional security".

In our Issue 14/April-May 2021 we noted that the U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan was reflecting a dramatic change of American strategic interests in Eurasia: a shift from the "Heartland" to the "Rimland", motivated by the imperative to contain Russia, and China. Recently, well known geopolitical strategists have confirmed Afghanistan had been a mere "strategic distraction" which should have ended long time ago. "Afghanistan was indeed a strategic distraction, because once it had been taken out as a safe haven for international terrorists, no further American interests were at stake." (https://www.egmontinstitute.be) With China's global rising there was no other way out of strategic confusion.

Indeed, "The end of the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan is another sign of the de-Westernization of interventionism, already at work in Libya and Syria.[...] The United States must accept that, with its military withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is losing influence and de facto outsourcing the country's future to regional powers." (https://gmfus.org) However, the geopolitical trend reflected by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has been a deliberate shift of its global focus: from Eurasia to the Indo-Pacific, and the next move to replacing the exhausted global hegemony with what George Friedman has called "indirect warfare strategy". That is maintaining the balance among regional powers by supporting one then another in a perpetual balancing act. Instead of acting on the ground, where neighbouring China and Russia would have a clear strategic advantage, the new U.S. strategy would favour naval control of the Indo-Pacific seas. This way, the U.S and its allies could recover some of the regional influence lost the withdrawal of their forces from with Afghanistan, coupled with lowering their regional responsibility and costs.

What will post-Western Afghanistan be up to? Is it heading towards the settlement of an Islamic Emirate resonating with a new Central Asian regional system? Or will it spread ethnic-religious strife. international terrorism, and criminal trafficking? The responses to those questions would be expected from the Taliban, and the other local political forces, while the main responsibility for regional security in Central and Southern Asia will increasingly fall on the shoulders of the regional powers whose interests and priorities might be quite diverse. The West may still remain involved in alleviating the imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, but it would hardly likely do much more than that for regional security.

2) Why the new Iranian president didn't rush into resuming negotiations on the "nuclear deal" with the United States.

The outcome of the June 18th, 2021 presidential elections in Iran has hardly taken anyone by surprise. Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi won 62% of the votes cast, and has become the eighth president since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. His electoral success was highly predictable considering the

Guardian Council's decision to exclude prominent potential rivals from the electoral race, while he has been seen as a potential next Supreme Leader.

President Raisi's political success will principally depend on whether he can create a major shift in the Iranian economy. "President-elect Raisi is fortunate that the worst of Iran's economic crisis is over. Iran's economy is now growing, albeit slowly, following nearly three years of contraction. [...] But this economic recovery is too weak to allow Raisi to rest easy." thought Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, a visiting fellow of ECFR (https://ispionline.it)

In principle, under the new president, Iran's foreign policy might display a lot of continuity with that of his predecessor. However, he has already set a higher priority to restoring relations with Iran's neighbours, and he is expected to relaunch a "Look to the East" strategy whereby relations with China and Russia would largely prevail over repairing the currently tense relations with the West. The recently acquired Shanghai Cooperation Organization-SCO membership, at the September 2021 summit in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), has confirmed the Eastern drive of the Iranian foreign policy. His geopolitical orientation might be motivated his ideological profile, by as conservatives are known to have been more prone to looking to the East than moderates and reformists. (https://ispionline.it)

Mohammad Ayyatolahi Tabaar made similar points in a very recent article published by *Foreign Affairs*. He thought that President Raisi would shelve previous presidents' aspirations of *rapprochement* with the West and instead pursue strategic alliances with China and Russia. However, the primary focus of Iranian foreign policy would be in the Middle East, where Teheran might seek bilateral security and trade agreements with neighbours and double down on strengthening the so-called *"axis of resistance"* consisting of Iranian proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and the rest of the region. The U.S.-Iran relations would most likely be transactional and revolve around immediate security concerns, as the window of opportunity for a "grand bargain" between the two states would have closed. (<u>https://www.foreignaffairs.com</u>)

The fact that Mr. Raisi came under U.S. sanctions in 2019 for alleged human rights abuses, including his role in the 1988 Tehran Death Committee, is also likely to have a negative impact on future U.S.-Iran relations.

"In sum, Raisi's election spells the continuation of longstanding conservative policies: domestically, to consolidate power and silence the opposition, and regionally, to build on Iran's gains during the past four decades and fill the vacuum generated by the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Middle East". (https://geopoliticalfutures.com).

Therefore, the revival of the "nuclear deal" with the U.S. will hang in the air until president Raisi will grasp on the matter. However, irrespective of the outcome of Vienna negotiations, U.S.- Iran relations could remain tense or even hostile because of their huge ideological and regional policy differences.

Obviously, for President Biden this is all bad news since getting the 2015 nuclear accord back on track has been a top goal for his Administration. In addition, the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was also critical to Mr. Biden's effort to restore damaged relations with European allies, who had negotiated the original deal, along with the U.S., Russia and China.

The extensive work carried out from April to June 2021 in Vienna by the Iranian and U.S. negotiators to restore the "nuclear deal" are still to be proven useful. Six rounds of negotiations ended with what one American official called "*a near-complete agreement*" were followed by silence — and a refusal by the Iranians to return to Vienna.

Furthermore, Iran has used the period since 2018,

when former president D. Trump had withdrawn the U.S. from the JCPOA, to develop, test, and deploy over one thousand advanced centrifuges that dramatically shorten the time it would need to reach a bomb's worth of fissile material. Even if negotiators succeeded in getting all parties to reaffirm their commitments to the JCPOA, the deal's original value would have been significantly degraded by Iran's increased proximity to a nuclear weapon's capability. "A country enriching at 60% is a very serious thing — only countries making bombs are reaching this level," International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Raphael Grossi noted in a recent interview to "Financial Times". "Sixty per cent is almost weapons grade, [while] commercial enrichment is 2, 3 [per cent]."

In the same vein, Robert Malley, the lead American negotiator, said in an interview: "There's a real risk here that they come back with unrealistic demands about what they can achieve in these talks". In addition, nuclear experts made no secret of their concerns that the Iranians were learning a lot from their work now underway so that, in the near future, it may be impossible to return to the old accord. (https://www.nytimes.org)

However, as seen from Teheran, the aims and the terms of the revival of the JCPOA are completely different from how they are seen from Washington or Vienna (at the Headquarters of the IAEA, the international watchdog on the use of nuclear energy). In the third decade of September, a spokesman for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the Vienna talks are going to be resumed "in the next few weeks". Furthermore, on September 21, in a previously recorded speech to the United Nations General Assembly, President Ebrahim Raisi declared that he "considers useful the talks whose ultimate outcome is the lifting of all oppressive sanctions," but gave no indication of when the Vienna negotiations should restart. At the same time, he repeated Iran's insistence that nuclear weapons "have no place in our defense doctrine" and are "forbidden" based on a religious decree by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader. Beyond that, President Raisi has said little about the resumption of the Vienna negotiations, other than confirming Iran wanted to return to the table, while insisting that it would not succumb to Western "pressure" and that it wanted sanctions lifted. (https://washingtonpost.com)

In conclusion, four months after his election, the new Iranian president did hardly rush to reviving the nuclear deal with the U.S. His reasons might be a mixture of strategic, tactical, and practical issues.

On the strategic front, he might aim at having the Biden Administration remove as many as possible of the myriad of sanctions imposed, over the years, against Iran by an array of U.S. administrations. This is very unlikely to happen, as not all sanctions imposed on Iran were due to its controversial nuclear file. Meanwhile, officially hiding behind Ayatollah Khamenei's religious outlaw of the nuclear weapons, president Raisi might be also under the strong pressure from Iranian "hawks" (most notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-IRGC) who would like to preserve Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and maintain the ability to weaponize the nuclear program, in case the revived JCPOA would fail for a second time.

On the tactical front, it is obvious that a perceived victory against U.S. efforts to revive the JCPOA as a basis for a future *détente* would resonate quite well with his Iranian conservative supporters. For the latter a return to the JCPOA would be the ceiling for future relations with the U.S. and it should therefore offer a maximum of sanctions' relief. Apparently, there is no interest for the Raisi government to conclude further agreements with the U.S. on ballistic missiles programs, or on limiting the freedom of action of Iranian proxies in the Middle East. However, it is likely that Teheran will spend much more diplomatic energy in persuading

its pro-American neighbours (first of all, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Azerbaijan) that it is determined to apply a most benign regional policy aiming at sharing rather than fighting for regional influence. Iran's strategic partnerships with China and Russia would be expected to reinforce and build upon the new Iranian "good neighbourliness" policy.

Iran's new conservative president Ebrahim Raisi would most likely make negotiations on the revival of the nuclear deal much tougher. His Achille's heel might be in the dwindling state of the economy, which he would need to address rapidly and effectively. U.S. sanctions relief would bring a much needed breath of air to Iranian economy. But Raisi's tougher negotiation might be also vulnerable to brinkmanship.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the outcome of the temporarily frozen¹ Vienna nuclear negotiations, the overall U.S.-Iran relationship would most likely become more combustible due to the harshly contrasting ideological and geopolitical perspectives in Teheran and in Washington.

3) Geopolitical miscalculations and the European gas prices crisis have left Kyiv in limbo over the Minsk 2 Agreements.

In our <u>Issue 13/February-March 2021</u>, we noted a "nexus between "de-oligarchization" and Ukraine's battle to get broader external support for overturning the Minsk 2 agreements has been operationalized over the last couple of months." And we highlighted a "new geopolitical trend [...] consisting of intertwining the domestic "de-oligarchization" (read "Westernization") of Ukraine with the growing geopolitical fragmentation and great powers' rivalries in Eastern Europe." They have been both accelerated during last summer's events, while pushing Kiyv towards a limbo over

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accepting or overturning the Minsk 2 Donbas Agreements. The consequences of those evolutions are unpredictable while the risk of renewed military conflict/tensions in Donbas is significantly higher.

On September 1, president V. Zelensky of Ukraine met U.S. president J. Biden at the White House. Mr. Zelensky made it clear that he had come to Washington with security (including energy security) at the top of his agenda. He raised the issue of establishing a potential timeframe for Ukraine joining NATO, as well as the possibility of Washington playing a bolder role in the Donbas peace talks. According to V. Socor, Zelensky's immediate objectives for this visit were: "making the case for White House reconsideration of its Nord Stream Two and NATO MAP decisions; bringing the United States into negotiations over Russia's war in Ukraine's east, on a basis other than the Russianimposed Minsk "agreements"; and obtaining some additional US defence assistance funding" (https://www.jamestown.org).

However, he returned to Kyiv with merely a joint statement announcing plans to "reinvigorate" the Strategic Partnership Commission, and with a few other sectorial agreements signed by higher level officials. President Biden also confirmed the allocation of a new \$60mn security assistance package for Ukraine. (https://www.intellinews.com)

In the wake of the presidential meeting, seasoned Atlantic Council experts commented: "An Oval Office sit-down with the Ukrainian president might not generate wall-to-wall cable news coverage to drown out the latest from Kabul. But it does represent a "foreign-policy win", as Russia and China seize on the Afghanistan withdrawal "to sow doubts about the reliability of the US as a partner and ally." They have also noted that certain sticking points in the relationship remained, including Nord Stream 2, and widespread corruption in Ukraine. (https://www.atlanticcouncil.org)

¹ On October 27, Ali Bagheri, the new top Iranian negotiator, announced that Iran has agreed to return to the nuclear negotiations in Vienna by the end of November.

Moreover, V. Socor noted that the joint statement on the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership had a rather technical than strategic character since: "*It does not spell out the major, shared national interests and mutual strategic objectives underlying such a partnership. The United States has yet to focus on integrating Ukraine (along Europe's likeminded allies) into a coherent strategy of containing Russia in East.*" (https://www.jamestown.org).

Not long after his return to Kyiv with very little to show, president Zelensky didn't shy away from publicly displaying his disappointment with the outcomes of his trip to Washington: "Ukraine is knocking at a door that no one intends to open. We are not begging. NATO needs us. NATO would be weaker without Ukraine. If you want to strengthen Ukraine". then do not take in Russia, (https://www.president.gov.ua) And while admitting the slow pace of his anti-corruption reforms, he added in an apparent allusion to the joint statement on the Strategic Partnership: "What we need is not strategic partners but strategic friends. Let the strategic partners talk about our shortcomings, let the strategic friends close ranks with us". (https://www.jamestown.org).

The disappointments in Kyiv might have been further deepened by media reports on the visit of Ms. V. Nuland, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, on 12-13 October, to Moscow. During her visit she met deputy foreign minister S. Ryabkov, in charge of U.S.-Russia relations, arms control and strategic stability negotiations, as well as President Putin's foreign policy aid Y. Ushakov, and D. Kozak, deputy chief of the presidential administration in charge of the Ukrainian crisis. According to Kozak, "We confirmed that the Minsk agreements remained the sole basis for resolving this conflict. Nuland confirmed the US position [...] that any significant progress toward conflictresolution necessitates an agreement on the future parameters of the autonomy of Donbas in

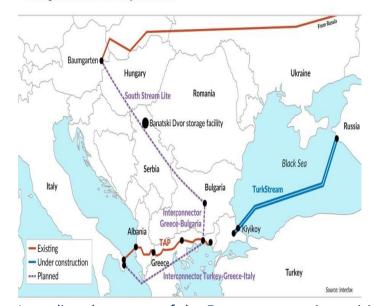
Ukraine—in other words, a special status of Donbas." The U.S. Embassy in Moscow later confirmed D. Kozak's "reading" of his meeting with Ms Nuland. Furthermore, according to Kremlinconnected analyst Feodor Lukyanov "The United States seeks a mutually accepted modus vivendi with Russia regarding the Donbas problem; and Biden's team is prepared to exert its influence on cooperate toward that aoal." Ukraine to (https://www.jamestown.org). Obviously, the current U.S. position on the war in Donbas has left Kyiv isolated in its attempts to overturn the Minsk 2 Agreements, while complementing the efforts of the "Normandy Format" to move that conflict towards a peaceful resolution.

As of the end of September, the European gas prices crisis has poured "gas over fire" in Kyiv, given that Russian efforts to avoid, to the largest extent possible, shipping its gas exports to Europe via Ukraine or Poland have plaid a significant role in this crisis. According to Stratfor, despite the booming gas prices on the European markets, during the months of October and November, Russian Gazprom did not book any additional volumes of natural gas via its pipeline through Ukraine and booked only about a third of the offered additional natural gas transit capacity via the Yamal-Europe pipeline through Poland. (https://www.stratfor.com). Russian pressure on the E.U. to accelerate the operation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, and Moscow's lobbying for changing E.U.'s energy policies that promote spot and short-term contracts over long-term delivery agreements were often referred to in the experts' discussions.

For example, Balkans countries gas imports via the Balkan Stream -an extension of Gazprom's Turkish Stream pipeline that runs via Southeast Europe to Hungary, bypassing Ukraine- are flying well through the current gas prices crisis. The only apparent looser might be Ukraine -a former transit country,

but not anymore. No wonder that Ukraine's national gas company Naftogaz claimed on October 1 that the deal by Russia's Gazprom to supply Hungary and reduce gas supplies to Ukraine was the "use of gas as a weapon", and demanded the U.S. and E.U. impose sanctions against it. "Whether Germany acknowledges it or not, Russia has aimed its energy weapon at all of the EU. The threats to punish Russia at some future date no longer suffice. The very credibility of the Western deterrents is on the line and the time to respond is now", Ukraine's national gas transport company said in a tweet from its corporate account the same day. (https://www.intellinews.com)

Linking TurkStream to the European network



In reality, the causes of the European gas prices crisis are much more complex and only partly due to Gazprom's commercial manoeuvres. According to an Energy Comment paper published in September 2021 by the Oxford Institute of Energy Studies: "a very cold Northern hemisphere winter combined with a perfect storm of lower-than-expected supply additions, higherthan-expected demand growth (including rapidly rising gas demand in China), and a limited storage buffer in Europe have converged leading to record high prices."² Therefore, it is very unlikely that in the middle of a crisis where Moscow's collaboration is essential for mitigating the serious socio-economic consequences on its member states, the E.U. would impose any sanctions on Gazprom, upon the request of Kyiv. Who would punish the baker in the middle of the famine, even if his controversial manoeuvres were partly responsible for triggering it?

What is next? In the most reasonable/liberal scenario, president Zelensky would return to the "Normandy Format" table with some concrete steps forward implementing to the Minsk Agreements. Alternatively, in the most cautious/conservative scenario he might just aim at freezing the Donbas conflict, and wait until a more favourable geopolitical context emerged from the shifting global, Eurasian and East European balances of power. Or, in the worst case/ultranationalist scenario, he might decide to escalate the Donbas conflict (such as, for example, by using the recently purchased Turkish drones or the U.S. Javelin missiles to attack separatist forces) in the desperate hope that he would be able to outmanoeuvre Moscow into a larger Eastern European conflict, potentially also involving some EU and NATO members.

²Read more on <u>http://gpf-</u> europe.com/forum/?blog=economics&id=438



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About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at www.gpf-europe.com.

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Dr George Vlad Niculescu is originally from Bucharest, Romania, and is currently the Head of Research of the European Geopolitical Forum. He is also a co-Chair of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group of the PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes (PfPC). In October 2019, he has successfully defended his PhD thesis on "SECURITY SCENARIOS PLANNING IN THE GEOPOLITICAL AREA FROM THE BALTIC SEA TO THE WIDER BLACK SEA (INTER-MARIUM)" at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (NSPSPA) Bucharest and received his PhD degree in June 2021. He has also academic experience as a member of several other PfPC working groups, as well as assistant professor and/or visiting lecturer at the NSPSPA, "Dimitrie Cantemir" University, NATO Studies Centre, and the PfP Training Centre from Bucharest (1997-2004). Dr Niculescu has been involved in several international research projects sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation), the European Commission (HiQSTEP Project), and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. His full CV and list of publications could be found <u>here</u>.

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