

Conflict and security in Nagorno-Karabakh: What contribution from the EU

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Taking the issue of EU engagement in the South Caucasus, it is clear that the EU is now more intensively engaged in the South Caucasus than ever before. With the launch of the Eastern Partnership in May 2009 and the launch of the negotiations on the Association Agreements with the three countries of the South Caucasus, the EU has further signalled an increased level of ambition in this region. The Eastern Partnership is based on recognition of the level of interdependence between what we refer to as the "Eastern neighbours" and the EU, following the latest round of EU enlargement in 2005, as well as the importance of the region as a link to Asia and the Middle East.

Given recent history, none of us could have failed to notice that events in the Southern Caucasus directly affect the European Union. However, this new closeness is not just about geographical proximity - it is also one of values. In the past few years, we have seen an increasing convergence of values shared by the EU and the countries of our Eastern Neighbourhood.

The continued need to diversify energy resources and supply routes has also enhanced the interest and involvement of the European Union in the South Caucasus region. This only increases the interest of the EU in the region's stability and security, including addressing unresolved conflicts.

The EU maintains a fundamental interest in good, neighbourly relations and close cooperation between the countries in the region. Improving intra-regional relations generates mutual confidence and paves the ground for sustainable progress in the region.

For its part, the EU stands ready - now more than ever - to provide assistance where it is needed in order to consolidate democratic institutions, good governance, and respect for the rule of law. The Eastern Partnership is the EU's political answer to the challenges faced in the region today and a direct answer to the brutal war in Georgia in August 2008. Through this new Partnership, and in recognition of the new situation faced in the region today, the EU is substantially upgrading its contractual relationship with each partner. However, we do so whilst recognising that our Eastern partners do not have identical objectives in their relationship with the EU but all of them, to varying degrees, are carrying out political, social and economic reforms.

In summary, the Eastern Partnership is at the core of the challenges faced in the region. A new security crisis in our Eastern neighbourhood would have serious implications for our neighbours and also for the EU.

Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the least known and most dangerous of the conflicts in Europe's neighbourhood. A self-regulating ceasefire between deeply hostile parties poses serious danger for a volatile and strategically important region. With a growing role for the EU in the region as a whole, there are also justified expectations that the EU should pay greater attention to the conflict.

Broadly speaking, the EU - through the Eastern Partnership - believes that a contribution can be made to improving security in the region by effectively bringing our Eastern

partners closer to the EU. As with the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership aims to contribute to the stability and security on the EU's borders while enhancing good neighbourly relations and effective co-operation among partners. The Eastern Partnership will also seek to promote confidence in the region by increasing political contacts between partners (including among administrations, members of parliaments, NGOs and citizens) as well as reducing trade barriers.

We foresee more co-operation on specific issues within the EU's Common Foreign Security Policy and European Security Defence Policy. Security-related early-warning systems will be enhanced, with particular focus on conflict areas. Closer co-operation on arms-export practices and non-proliferation is also envisaged.

The need for more stability in the South Caucasus

It is clear that the unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus are the most important obstacles to the region's stability, security and prosperity. The current status quo with the ongoing conflicts in the region is unacceptable and unsustainable since it bears the constant risk of an escalation of tensions and a resumption of armed hostilities. The region, already so badly scarred by conflict, hardly needs a return to the tragic situation witnessed in the early 1990s.

In this regard, we continue to urge all sides to actively engage to achieve stability and peace. The war in Georgia clearly demonstrated that unresolved conflicts have the potential to negatively affect the EU's own security through the impact on energy supplies and trade routes. The protracted conflicts also undermine our efforts to promote political reform and economic development in the eastern neighbourhood. Furthermore, closed borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey severely hamper the full potential of the region, as does the absence of full-fledged relations between Russia and Georgia.

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The Georgian war demonstrated that frozen - unresolved - conflicts carry the danger of escalation and violence. The stalemate around Nagorno-Karabakh is also a precarious one, where 15 years of an uneasy ceasefire may have led both parties and their partners to complacency. If there was any lesson from the Georgia war, however, it was that frozen does not mean safe.

Regarding Nagorno Karabakh, the EU's increased engagement in the region suggests that the EU could play a much more assertive role. Though formally not part of the Minsk Group, the EU can still make an important contribution to the resolution of this protracted conflict. The EU stands ready to step up its engagement in the settlement process, within the framework of supporting the work of the Minsk Group.

It is clear to most observers that serious efforts are still needed to pave the way for a lasting peace for Nagorno-Karabakh. In my contacts with the leaderships in Armenia and Azerbaijan, I continually stress the need to avoid provocative statements and to work towards a settlement, to have the courage to make the difficult decisions needed, and to begin to prepare the ground to ensure that the public understands the benefits of a comprehensive settlement, and to gradually establish trust. Given that trust-building is a

long process, security is an indispensable element of any settlement. Ultimately this will involve peacekeeping arrangements in line with international human rights standards that involve both military and civilian aspects.

Efforts to find a settlement for the conflict saw some positive movement this past year. Let us recall that in July 2009, Presidents Obama, Medvedev, and Sarkozy issued a Declaration in L'Aquila setting out the main elements of the Basic Principles for the first time: this was significant in itself. These elements include:

- return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;
- the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and
- international security guarantees which would include a peacekeeping operation.

But the peace process is also being constantly threatened by many factors outside the scope of the negotiators. Domestic political factors have led to changing attitudes to the Basic Principles, as have extended factors such as the Turkish-Armenian normalisation process. It is important that efforts are made to ensure that these factors do not lead to a loss of momentum in the negotiations. Greater international attention to Nagorno-Karabakh may be necessary to ensure this.

There is a clear need to support efforts to prepare the societies for a peaceful settlement; in this regard, the EU has committed funding to civil society projects supporting people-to-people contacts, media development, and public awareness in Armenia and Azerbaijan, including Nagorno-Karabakh. These projects build on the EU's vast experience of peace-building in many other parts of the world. It is clear that the EU is in a unique position to make a contribution.

But there still remains a particular need to work with the populations of the two countries. We see a disconnect today between the highest levels - those conducting the negotiations, and the two populations still very much entrenched in their positions, relying on old stereotypes of the enemy. Without a shift in perspectives in these societies, it will be exceedingly difficult for the respective leaders to sell an eventual peace deal to their respective electorates. And the more time that passes, the more difficult it will become.