

EU perspective of the South Caucasus – getting closer through the ENP

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by ambitions and nationalist claims of countries once having been under the same political umbrella within the USSR. The South Caucasus region was also part of these unrests inheriting three conflicts, based mainly on territorial claims: Armenian-Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgian-Russian over Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. Challenged by difficult political and economic transitions complicated with security problems, social instability, high number of refugees and IDPs as a result of armed conflicts these countries for a long period had no time to think about the economic development and regional cooperation.

While Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts involving Georgia and Russia was not a direct obstacle for regional cooperation between the three countries (i.e. Georgian-Armenian and Georgian-Azerbaijani relations), the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh blocked all attempts initiated to create fully integrated regional networks and seriously impeded, among the rest, the transportation and trade flows.(14). These separatist disputes also have implications for Europe and the whole international community undermining security, creating conditions for terrorism, drug trafficking and other forms of organized crimes. Emerging poor communities constantly willing to flee into European countries and the US for better life is another headache for the West.

Due to the aforementioned reasons conflicts in South Caucasus, particularly the Armenian – Azerbaijan conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh were paid much more attention by the international community than any other conflict emerged

in the post Soviet arena (*See Annex 1 for the list of conflicts in Post Soviet arena*). Since early years of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh UN, OSCE, CE, Russia, US, Turkey and Iran (before it was squeezed out from the process) were actively involved in the conflict settlement process. Later in 1992 the steering wheel of the mediation process was entrusted to the OSCE MG who since 22 years tries to lead it under the dissatisfied glances of conflict sides hopelessly waiting the day to approach the shore.

As for other two separatist conflicts over South Ossetia in 1991-1992 and over Abkhazia in 1992-1993, it lead to de-facto independence of both of these regions previously having been part of the Soviet Georgia. According to the opinion of the overwhelming majority of experts and of the population of the South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Georgia these conflicts (South Ossetian and Abkhazian) were not ethno-conflicts but a collision of the Georgian and Russian interests (15). And due to the involvement of Russia, international mediators do not have much opportunity to interfere in political settlement of these conflicts restricting their involvement to the limits of humanitarian and economical assistance. Even after the 5 day war in August 2008 leading to complete independence of South Ossetia the international community preferred to keep silence. (15)

Though international powers including European structures and the United States can not actively participate in political settlement of conflicts involving Georgia, they try to actively participate in elimination of consequences of the conflicts and the European Union is in the front seat of this process increasingly focusing on institutional reforms and capacity building, on providing support to partner

organizations, ensuring that the link between the ENP and domestic reform processes is strengthened.

The aim of this paper is to find out how effective the EU may become in conflict resolution in South Caucasus, its strengths and weaknesses in building peace through integration of civil society and establishing mutual cooperation frameworks. The paper seeks to examine the progress of EU integration of the three South Caucasus countries with a particular focus on upgrading EU-Azerbaijan relations.

EU involvement in the peace process in the region

EU participation in the processes in the South Caucasus started in early 90s within the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Community of Independent States) Program launched in 1991 to assist CIS countries in their transition to democratic market-oriented economies. Later on TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia) was initiated as an international transport programme involving the European Union and 14 member States of the Eastern European, Caucasian and Central Asian region. Thus, assistance has been the major instrument of EU activity in the South Caucasus in the decade following the collapse of the USSR (14).

If not to consider the back up role to the OSCE MG activity over the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, the EU was not closely involved in the political settlement of the conflicts in South Caucasus while UN, OSCE and CE were actively working on this direction. Though some authors are tend to claim that as a mediator EU was involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process since 1992 represented by France as a member of the OSCE Minsk Group (16), author of this article is not agree with similar statements because none of the French co-chairs ever talked on behalf of the

entire EU during their activity. It was just a couple of years ago European Parliament, on the background of the obvious failure of OSCE MG, started discussing the issue of replacement of the French co-chair to the EU representative and to enforce its mandate on behalf of the EU. (17)

As for the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, despite the active involvement in peace-making process in the early stages of these wars EU has now lost the opportunity of being an authority in this regard, particularly after the “five day war” in August 2008 that made a significant correction to the role of the West, including EU, in this region. For many (of course not for Georgia) these two conflicts are ended. International “humanitarian interference” mechanisms are not welcomed by South Ossetia and Abkhazia who declared their independence and even were recognized by a couple of countries and their frontlines are backed up by Russian forces. Due to these reasons the rest of the paper will mostly be focused on the EU role in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

EU engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – what advantages does it have?

Before starting to explore the EU involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict I would like to give a brief overview of the dynamics of the NK conflict settlement process within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group.

Though less popular (compared to Balkans, Middle East and some other extensively highlighted conflicts) Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is one of the major conflicts in the Post-Soviet arena and in Europe posing serious security concerns and impeding the development of the region and its neighbourhood, including EU who has big energy

interests and investments in the South Caucasus, particularly in Azerbaijan which plays a growing role for the European energy supply.

Since the beginning of its activity the OSCE Minsk Group has been initiating number of proposals, however none of them was acceptable for both of the sides. For instance, when the latest iteration of the “Basic Principles” which were initially proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group to the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2007 and then revised in 2009, only six of the fourteen principles have been agreed and made public. These six principles stated the withdrawal of Armenian occupying forces, return of IDPs, provision of interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan's territory, provision of international security guarantees, including placement of peacekeeping forces, a corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia and the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh. Few times the sides were expected to come to agreement on them but peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was never achieved. The last two decades have been a rollercoaster of hopes and disappointments, and undoubtedly Kazan meeting in June 2011 and Sochi meeting in January 2012 of the Azerbaijan and Armenian presidents were promising hopes in the resolution process - but again the negotiations collapsed without yielding a single result (18).

Despite the parties have largely respected the ceasefire agreement of 1994, trying to avoid escalation of a full-scale war, military tensions along the frontline and international border remains high and getting escalated from time to time entailing fatal cases both from military and civilians. The latest escalation in the front-line in November 2014 after Azerbaijani armed forces shot down an Armenian helicopter that crossed the line of contact violating Azerbaijan's airspace is probably one of the most significant military incident between the two sides. (20) Earlier in June

2012 fighting broke out between Azerbaijani and Armenian troops along the front-line and reached its culmination since the signing of ceasefire agreement in 1994. This sudden spike in deadly armed clashes even promoted most of the local and international experts to forecast about the re-escalation of full fledged war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Zaur Shiriyev (10).

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan constantly make threatening statements and an arms race is at work in the entire region. Military expenses in Armenia and Azerbaijan have constantly increased in the past years. (5)

Meetings organized between the sides with the mediation of the OSCE MG and the personal initiative of Russia did not led to any significant results.

During the recent years the activity of the OSCE MG as the main responsible for the settlement of the conflict has been subjected to criticism from both sides. During its 22 years activity the co-chairs visited the region tens of times, conducted monitoring in the frontline, organized high level meetings between the two sides, issued reports. However, no one now creates hopes for the effectiveness of this long lasted mediation activity – neither authorities, nor the civil societies. This distrust has been repeatedly voiced directly to the co-chairs and they were called to take important steps to move forward or hand over their mediation mandate to another actor who will lead this protracted conflict to peace. However, the Minsk Group seems does not considering any modification neither in its format nor activity giving preference to its classical mediation mechanism - organizing meetings, conducting monitoring and issuing reports. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Minsk Group is still remains the only platform for continuing

dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani officials even it does not bring to the desired result.

On the background of this sluggish and unsuccessful activity of the OSCE MG there are statements since few years cultivating hopes for EU's potential contribution for the settlement of the NK conflict. These statements are voiced by officials of the conflicting sides, general public and sometimes by EU itself. However, when EU speaks about its possible intervention in the mediation process it appears very diplomatic and underlines its supportive role to the OSCE MG activity. (9). As the clear identification of its supportive role has never been explained publicly it creates number of questions towards the content of this support, whether EU wants to shape the activity of the Minsk Group or wants to undertake part of its mandate, or initiate another activities within MG mediation mechanism? International experts also note that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict negatively affects the situation in the entire Caucasus region and call upon the EU to be more active in the process of finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. (2).

EU role as coordinator of mediation efforts

One of the main obstacles for an effective international mediation effort is the lack of a coherent approach from the different actors engaging themselves in the conflict resolution process. The international mediation efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh have therefore partly suffered from a lack of coordination between the different mediation initiatives. (7).

Currently number of international organizations are taking part in the process of regulating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict including UN, OIC, Council of Europe,

OSCE. All of them have certain experience in settlement of similar conflicts and already have been involved in the NK conflict since more than 20 years. Another major factor is that all of these mediators have their own interests in the region and from this perspective are using different approaches toward the settlement of the conflict. In this situation, the EU could play a crucial role both for political settlement of the conflict and post conflict rehabilitation process by coordinating efforts of different mediators both for Track I and Track II initiatives. To avoid experiencing the same fiasco faced by OSCE MG, EU has to make significant changes in the tactics and strategy of international mediation mechanism to take out the negotiation process from the deadlock.

Conflict resolution or post conflict rehabilitation – making sense of the ENP

Currently EU seems willing to play a leading role only in Track II aiming to achieve peace through confidence building measures among civil societies of conflict sides within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership Policy (EaP). Established in 2003 the ENP aims at promoting peace, stability, security and prosperity in the southern and eastern neighbourhoods and also aspires to strengthen EU's contribution to the solution of regional conflicts. (13).

The ENP created new hopes for regional cooperation between the EU and countries of the South Caucasus region. However, though one of the main tasks of the ENP is conflict resolution and prevention, it fails to carry out this task in the context of the South Caucasus region including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this context, EU still prefers to remain a passive actor trying to be not that visible and active taking into consideration high interests of other major actors in the region. The EU seems to hope that a peaceful solution satisfying both sides will be found and the normalization

of relations would have direct positive impact on economic and societal developments in the region.

In the meantime, clarifying its less active role EU states that it has not been officially invited to conflict resolution process by the conflict sides. "We can do more. During the four years of my stay in Azerbaijan, I was asked why the EU is not involved in this process. But if we are not invited, it is very difficult to do this. We have a representative as France in the Minsk Group. We also have a special representative for the South Caucasus. We support the activity of the Minsk Group to resolve this problem." (8).

Analyzing statements (sometimes contradicting) of EU officials it is understood that the EU is ready to consider ways to further strengthen its engagement in conflict resolution and post-conflict rehabilitation, depending on the extent that this is requested by Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, currently the EU seems to be quite satisfied by only showing support to the OSCE Minsk Group and by stressing this statement repeatedly steps back from playing a more active role in the political resolution of the conflict. (8). Some experts create hopes for a stronger role of the EU in the conflict resolution process replacing France in the OSCE MG by the EU and also providing the EU special representative for the South Caucasus with a clear mediation mandate among the parties at conflict. In that case the EU could apply its Western Balkans experience in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. (6).

On the other hand, according to experts from the region, it would be erroneous to think that the EU is waiting for an official invitation to do something. Georgia has been asking the EU for more active participation in the South Ossetian conflict more

than once, yet the EU does not seem to be very eager or ready to become fully involved in the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict. (4).

Range of Civil Society engagement

Up to now the EU involvement in the civil society in Azerbaijan and Armenia has been very limited even after the appointment of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus in 2003 with a broad mandate and small staff and budget. (12). Increasing staff and enhancing budget in 2006 the EU started trying to appear more active in the conflict resolution though its involvement could not go far beyond the small unilateral projects and statements calling for confidence building.

The current EU approach seeks to integrating the civil society of conflict sides and reaching an agreement between them through confidence building measures which is extremely challenging in a state of evident “hostile distrust”. Having been involved in several conflict resolution projects in Balkans and in the Middle East EU has experience in undertaking the peace building process from other international actors. In the case of Balkans EU provided support in humanitarian assistance, civil administration, democratization, institution building and economic reconstruction. However, a similar picture can not be drawn in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as the conflict sides keep a strong control over the conflict and addressing the international actors only for mediation activities in the negotiation process. Besides, analyzing the failure of EU endeavours in Kosovo it is difficult to imagine the similar approach will be accepted in the South Caucasus context.

On the other hand, in the NK context regardless the achievement of the cease-fire regime there are still ongoing shootings along the frontline and as

mentioned above, sometimes these shootings intensifies to the degree that situation allows forecasting restart of full-fledged war. As a result of tense situation along the frontline ending in fatalities some fragile joint civil society initiatives are deteriorating and resulting in severe declarations to each others' addresses. Then it becomes difficult, even impossible to restore the previous relations. In this progress of the situation how successful would it be to bring the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities together and build confidence between them without achieving political solution to the conflict? In fact Azerbaijan is interested in political solution of this conflict and track-two diplomacy is not it's priority. Baku wants and needs track-one diplomacy, where EU involvement in negotiations could help with conflict resolution. (11). However, almost in all programmes and documents adopted on the South Caucasus – ENP, EaP, special resolutions of European Parliament and other documents the role of the EU was limited to efforts in supporting OSCE activity.

Experience showed that working separately with communities, providing grants and implementing unilateral projects does not bring any significant outcome. In this situation the most effective community projects could be those carried out jointly by both Azerbaijani and Armenian communities but it is impossible without political settlement of the conflict. Azerbaijani and Armenian communities could join the process once a peace deal is signed and attention shifts to the logistics of the situation on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh. (1)

In this regard, a community based project in NK should include Azerbaijani community of NK which has been compactly kept by the Azerbaijani government to counterbalance the pressure made by Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Community representatives also underline the necessity of the active EU involvement in the NK conflict regulation. They also underline necessity of the EU organized dialogue between the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities of NK. (19)

Recommendations and Conclusion

Analysing the situation, we came to conclusion that EU's active entry in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and using of its conflict settlement experience in other contexts could be an added value for the successful outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. The EU could use conditionality to a greater extent, including making the association agreements that are presently being negotiated with both countries subject not only to improving democratic standards, but also progress on the peace talks. There is a precedent for this as the EU successfully used the conditionality principle to gain results in the conflict between Macedonia security forces and the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army. Implementation of the Orchid Agreement was used as a precondition for Macedonia's EU membership aspirations. The role of the European Union Special Representatives (EUSR) should be enhanced and expanded, including having greater cooperation between the French OSCE Minsk Group co-chair and the EUSR; giving the EUSR observer status in meetings of the Minsk Group co-chairs; initiating a more inclusive form of track two diplomacy that would have a multi-stakeholder approach and include both Nagorno-Karabakh communities.

However, while considering the application of EU's Balkan experience in Nagorno-Karabakh it should be noted that EU has no advantage of influencing on conflict sides/preventing potential re-escalation of conflict by promising to

accept them in its membership in the future perspectives as the EU currently doing with Serbia and Kosovo. None of the South Caucasus republics was ever brought or even mentioned on EU agenda from this perspective. EU and countries of South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan may negotiate “strategic partnership” based on energy interests or taking the influence in its hands pushing out other actors in the region. In implementing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) the European Union offers a deeper political and economic relationship to its neighbours - but without a promise to EU membership.

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Annex 1

Conflicts in Post Soviet Arena

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
<u>Civil war in Tajikistan</u>	1992	1997	Began when ethnic groups from the <u>Garm</u> and <u>Gorno-Badakhshan</u> regions of <u>Tajikistan</u> , which were underrepresented in the ruling elite, rose up against the national government of <u>President Rahmon Nabyev</u> , in which people from the <u>Leninabad</u> and <u>Kulyab</u> regions dominated. The war ended with the signing of the "General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan" and the "Moscow Protocol". ^[1]
<u>2010 South Kyrgyzstan ethnic clashes</u>	2010	2010	Clashes between ethnic <u>Kyrgyz</u> and <u>Uzbeks</u> in southern <u>Kyrgyzstan</u> , primarily in the cities of <u>Osh</u> and <u>Jalal-Abad</u> , in the aftermath of the ouster of former <u>President Kurmanbek Bakiyev</u> on April 7.
<u>Tajikistan insurgency</u>	2010	2012	Sporadic fighting in <u>Tajikistan</u> between rebel and government forces.

North Caucasus

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
<u>East Prigorodny Conflict</u>	1992	1992	Inter-ethnic conflict in the Eastern part of the <u>Prigorodny district</u> .
<u>First Chechen War</u>	1994	1996	<u>Russian troops</u> invaded after <u>Chechnya</u> declared independence, but withdrew in 1996 leading to a <u>de facto Chechen independence</u> .
<u>War of Dagestan</u>	1999	1999	The <u>Islamic International Brigade</u> invaded the neighbouring Russian republic of <u>Dagestan</u> in support of the Shura of <u>Dagestan separatist</u> movement.

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
<u>Second Chechen War</u>	1999	2009	<u>Russia</u> restores federal control of <u>Chechnya</u> .
<u>War in Ingushetia</u>	2007	—	Separatist insurgency in <u>Ingushetia</u> .
<u>Insurgency in the North Caucasus</u>	2009	—	Separatist insurgency in <u>Chechnya</u> , <u>Dagestan</u> , and other parts of the <u>North Caucasus</u> region.

South Caucasus

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
<u>Nagorno-Karabakh War</u>	1988	1994	<u>Ethnic Armenian</u> separatism leads to the de facto independence of the <u>Nagorno-Karabakh Republic</u> .
<u>1991–92 South Ossetia War</u>	1991	1992	The separatist conflict leads to <u>South Ossetia's</u> de facto independence.
<u>Georgian Civil War</u>	1991	1993	Inter-ethnic and intranational conflicts in the regions of <u>South Ossetia</u> and <u>Abkhazia</u> .
<u>War in Abkhazia (1992–93)</u>	1992	1993	Abkhaz separatism leads to the de facto independence of <u>Abkhazia</u> from <u>Georgia</u> .
<u>War in Abkhazia (1998)</u>	1998	1998	<u>Ethnic Georgians</u> launched an insurgency against the <u>Abkhazian</u> secessionist government.

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
<u>Pankisi Gorge crisis</u>	2002	2004	An incursion by <u>Al-Qaeda</u> forces on behalf of Chechen rebels fighting in the North Caucasus. They were forced out in 2004 by <u>Georgian forces</u> with American and Russian backing.
<u>2004 Adjara crisis</u>	2004	2004	A popular revolt ousted the autocratic ruler <u>Aslan Abashidze</u> , <u>Adjara</u> reaffirmed its integration into <u>Georgia</u> as an autonomous republic.
<u>Russo-Georgian War</u>	2008	2008	A war between Georgia on one side and <u>Russia</u> , <u>South Ossetia</u> and <u>Abkhazia</u> on the other side confirms the de facto independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and leads to their recognition by <u>Russia</u> and <u>Nicaragua</u> . ^[2]

New East European states

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
<u>Transnistria War</u>	1992	1992	<u>Transnistria</u> , which is <i>de facto</i> independent from <u>Moldova</u> , has declared independence in 1990, due to its majority Russian-speaking population fearing union with <u>Romania</u> . A ceasefire between Transnistrian forces and Moldovan forces has been in place since 1992, enforced by the presence of Russian forces in Transnistria. ^[3]
<u>Euromaidan</u>	2013	2014	Civil unrest fueled by the perception of widespread government corruption, abuse of power and violation of human rights in <u>Ukraine</u> .
<u>2014 Ukrainian revolution</u>	2014	2014	Toppling of the Ukrainian government by Euromaidan
<u>2014 pro-Russian unrest in Ukraine</u>	2014	—	Violent protests of the Russian population in Eastern Ukraine, including separatism: <u>Siege of Sloviansk</u> , <u>Kramatorsk standoff</u> , <u>Odessa clashes</u> , <u>Mariupol standoff</u> , <u>Volnovakha checkpoint attack</u> , <u>Battle of Donetsk Airport</u> , <u>Siege of the</u>

Conflict	Start	End	Detail
			<u>Luhansk Border Base</u> , and <u>Shelling of Donetsk, Russia</u> .
<u>War in Donbass</u>	2014	—	Pro-Russian separatism in <u>Donetsk</u> and <u>Luhansk Oblasts</u> .
<u>2014 Russian military intervention in Ukraine</u>	2014	—	