





COMMENTARY


A Global Strategy Reduced to Rhetorical Action: How Has the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh Debunked the EU's 'Global' Ambitions?

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*This commentary was written by **Andrei Stanciu** | 17 November 2020

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

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VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



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I. Background

The revival of military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh on 27 September 2020, has once again faced the EU with the difficult task of managing a hot conflict in its eastern neighbourhood. Unlike previous crises experienced in Ukraine or Georgia, the conflict waged between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a very different challenge for the EU, both in scope and depth. The recent hostilities are the result of three decades of ineffective international mediation, marred by rampant bellicose rhetoric and sporadic military outbursts between the sides¹, being the worst level of violence witnessed ever since the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 1988-1994. At the time of writing this paper, Russia has managed to broker a peace deal between the sides, which formally recognizes some of Azerbaijan's territorial claims while officialising Armenia's military withdrawal from areas in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.²

The EU's engagement with Azerbaijan and Armenia on conflict related matters dates back to 2003, when Brussels appointed a Special Representative to the South Caucasus tasked with enhancing the Union's political profile, as well as assisting in matters related to the OSCE's peacebuilding efforts.³ Until then, the security situation in Nagorno-Karabakh ranked low on the EU's list of external commitments, both due its geographical remoteness and the Union's lack of a conflict management policy toolbox.⁴

However, following the appointment of a Special Representative, increasing security rationales⁵ led the EU to its creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and its Eastern Partnership (EaP) dimension of 2009, both of which established a comprehensive policy framework through which security matters could be addressed by tackling underlying governance issues.⁶ Since then, the latest policy developments have been guided by the 2015 ENP Review and the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), two interrelated policy documents which together call for the resilience-building and stabilisation of the EU's neighbours.⁷ Of these two, the EUGS has been the more important policy development in recent years, acting as a compass for the EU's security ambitions on the world stage, among which, a new 'Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises' for the protracted conflicts in the EaP countries.⁸

¹ de Waal, T. (2008). *The Karabakh Trap: Dangers and dilemmas of the Nagorny Karabakh Conflict*. Conciliation Resources. Available at: <https://www.c-r.org/resource/karabakh-trap-dangers-and-dilemmas-nagorny-karabakh-conflict>

Popescu, N. (2020, October 13th). European Council on Foreign Relations. *How the EU became marginalised in Nagorno-Karabakh?* Available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_europe_became_marginalised_in_nagorno_karabakh

² Gehrke, L. and Weise, Z. (2020, November 10th). Politico. *Russian troops arrive in Nagorno-Karabakh following cease-fire deal*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-troops-nagorno-karabakh-ceasefire-armenia-azerbaijan/?fbclid=IwAR3CgjsT3ve4mV1iZnGd4koEEH9ED3TplUHTJQrhd18Fvysyj6xcNPT3pzNk>

³ Council Joint Action 2003/496/CFSP of 7 July 2003 concerning the appointment of an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus OJ L 169, 8.7.2003, p. 74–75. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2003.169.01.0074.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2003%3A169%3ATOC

⁴ Delcour, L. (2011). 'The European Union's Policy in the South Caucasus: In Search of a Strategy'. in A. Jafalian (Ed.) *Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus*. Ashgate.

⁵ Evidenced by the European Security Strategy of December 2003. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf>

⁶ European Neighborhood Policy. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/330/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ EU Global Strategy (2016). p. 29. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eu-global-strategy/17304/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en

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The crisis unfolding around Nagorno-Karabakh is, therefore, relevant to the EU for a number of reasons, not least because the two belligerents are members of the EaP, which was specifically designed to promote stability and security among its partners; but also because the whole *raison d'être* of its policy developments since 2015 was to enhance its capabilities for dealing with neighbourhood crises.⁹

Adding to this is the conflict's energy dimension, which is directly tied to the EUGS' energy security goals.¹⁰ Azerbaijan is a major fossil fuel provider for Turkey, Georgia and the EU – Brussels having an ongoing €40 billion project with Baku over the Southern Gas Corridor - representing a strategic diversification partner from Russian energy imports especially for the last two.¹¹ Consequently, Azeri energy exports are of tactical importance for both Ankara and Moscow, (two governments with strong-anti-Western external agendas) which are actively increasing their regional linkages by overseeing the conflict's denouement.¹²

Against this background, the EU's HR/VP, Josep Borrell, assumed a very passive tone towards the evolving situation in the region, emphasizing the Union's helplessness in contributing to a resolution (at least until December) with more than just diplomatic attempts for dialogue.¹³ This foreign policy course signaled an unusually defeatist attitude taken by the Union towards a Neighbourhood crisis, especially one with such a destabilizing potential for both the EU and its partners in the Caucasus, asking for an inquiry into how has the EU's approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict changed since the EUGS and whether there are any inherent limitations in its foreign policy course towards the issue.(?)

II. State of play

EU's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan since the EUGS

The EUGS' new integrated approach to conflict and crises comprises, in short, of the EU's commitment to a synergistic use of all policy tools available during all stages of a conflict (prevention, response and resolution) while paying attention to all relevant actors and levels of action at which it unfolds, from local to national, regional and global level.¹⁴ Since its release, the EU's diplomatic relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan have undergone a round of renegotiations, to better reflect both its stabilisation and resilience-building goals, and the countries' increased ownership and differentiation of their relations with the EU, which are the hallmark principles of its 2015 ENP review.¹⁵ Nevertheless, notwithstanding the EUGS' commitments to conflict resolution, neither of these agreements entail a substantial upgrading of the EU's role in such matters.

⁹ Both the ENP Review (p. 12-14) and the EUGS (ibid.) emphasize the need to deal with protracted conflicts in the EU's neighbourhood. ENP Review Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/tenders/consultation_en_en

¹⁰ European Global Strategy (2016), p.22

¹¹ Bayramov, A. (2020, October 7th). Clingendael. *Why the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict matters to the EU*. Available at: <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/why-armenian-azerbaijani-conflict-matters-eu>

¹² AlJazeera. (2020, November 12th). *Turkey warns Armenia against breaking Nagorno-Karabakh truce*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/12/turkey-warns-armenia-against-breaking-nagorno-karabakh-truce>

¹³ [Nagorno Karabakh: Remarks by the High Representative / Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP plenary debate on the resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan](#)

¹⁴ EU Global Strategy (2016). p. 28-29.

¹⁵ ENP Review 2015. p. 2. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/tenders/consultation_en_en

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The new Partnership agreement the EU signed with Armenia in 2017, two years after Yerevan chose to join Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), echoes the EaP's four priority areas¹⁶ - economy, governance, connectivity and people to people contacts – making only one reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which reiterates the EU's support for a resolution in line with the current international efforts.¹⁷ Conversely, regarding Azerbaijan, the EU began in 2017 a series of renegotiations for a new framework agreement, set to replace the current Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in force since 1999. So far, the parties have only agreed on a set of Partnership Priorities in 2018, which like in Armenia's case echo similar EaP objectives.¹⁸ In matters related to Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU's 2014-2020 support framework with Azerbaijan specifies that relevant projects will be supported through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP).¹⁹

The IcSP is part of the EU's 'new generation' of financing instruments for external actions in the area of crisis response, preparedness and conflict prevention.²⁰ In relation to Nagorno-Karabakh, the IcSP allocated during the past four years a total amount of €6.5 million²¹ in peacebuilding projects between Armenia and Azerbaijan, all of the Instrument's published projects running seemingly during the time period of 2016-2019.²² However, while the EU's narrative change matches these projects' dates, some observations concerning its claims for an 'integrated' approach to conflicts and crises are still in order.

First of all, relative to the list of projects financed under the European Neighbourhood Instrument²³, the funds made available for Nagorno-Karabakh under the IcSP are peculiarly little, especially since 2016 coincided with the four-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which claimed the lives of 350 people.²⁴ This aspect is also pointed out by International Alert, the EU's main implementing partner of its biggest peacebuilding project in the region, EPNK3 (worth €4.7 million of the total), which claims that the lack of 'extra-flexible' funding within the project's overall budget has been a source of hindrance for new initiatives and quick reaction.²⁵ Moreover, it is also highlighted that so far, the project showed 'few signs in engaging national actors who can politicize peacebuilding work', there being no project wide engagement strategy for such key stakeholders.²⁶ Therefore, challenging the EUGS's claims for a *multi-dimensional* and *-lateral* approach to conflict resolution.²⁷

¹⁶ EU-Armenia Relations. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/armenia_en

¹⁷ Joint Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52017JC0037>

¹⁸ EU-Azerbaijan Relations. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/azerbaijan_en

¹⁹ Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan (2014-2017), p. 7. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/azerbaijan_2014_2017_programming_document_en.pdf

²⁰ [The EU's Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace \(IcSP\) | Service for Foreign Policy Instruments \(FPI\)](#)

²¹ Calculations made by the author based on the IcSP project map available.

²² IcSP Project Map – To see the projects click Armenia and Azerbaijan. Available at: <https://icspmap.eu/>

²³ €252-308 million for Armenia during 2014-2020 and €139-169 million for Azerbaijan during 2014-2020. Figures available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/8410/financing-enp_en

²⁴ Data regarding the number of casualties taken from the estimates of the U.S Department of State. Available at: [Background Briefing on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict](#). Figures on this issue vary according to different sources due to poor reporting of events at the time.

²⁵ International Alert: EPNK3 in the South Caucasus evaluation. p. 4. Available at: <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/epnk3-south-caucasus-evaluation>

²⁶ Ibid. p. 2-4.

²⁷ European Global Strategy (2016), p.28-29.

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Second of all, with a goal of enhancing its intervention capacities 'at all stages of the conflict cycle', the IcSP's current financing structure favours short-term crisis-response actions (allocated with 70% of the funds' entirety) over medium- and long-term prevention and peacebuilding components (left with the remaining 30%).²⁸ In Nagorno-Karabakh's case, such components seem to have lacked before the 2016 hostilities, when according to the 2015 IcSP's implementation report, Armenia and Azerbaijan did not receive any funding for peacebuilding projects.²⁹ While an argument could be made about the EUGS emphasizing these cycles one year later, the EU was already working on its action principles since the 2015 ENP Review³⁰, its IcSP's structure being yet to reflect the EUGS' *multi-phased* principles.³¹

The EU's foreign policy and its limitations

Despite these policy inconsistencies, the lack of funding and of a principled strategy have not been the root causes of the EU's shortcomings in its integrated approach towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The causes resided in fact with its perceived unreliability which, combined with the ENP's differentiated approach, determined Yerevan and Baku to pursue diplomatic relations with Brussels only in those areas serving their strategic interests the best.

The primary cause of the EU's unreliability is commonly traced to its promotion of contradicting bilateral principles with Yerevan and Baku on matters related to Nagorno-Karabakh.³² For example, the Partnership Agreement with Armenia stresses the 'right to self-determination of peoples'³³, whereas the one with Azerbaijan acknowledges 'territorial integrity' as contributory to the 'safeguarding of peace and stability in Europe'.³⁴

This issue became particularly bothersome for the Azeri officials after the 2015 EaP summit, when the EU's Joint Declaration referred to Ukraine and Georgia's inviolable territorial integrity but not that of Azerbaijan³⁵, being quoted by President Aliyev as one of the main reasons for which he refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU that year.³⁶

²⁸ The EU's IcSP. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/what-we-do/instrument-contributing-stability-and-peace-preventing-conflict-around-world_en

²⁹ 2016 Annual Report on the implementation of the European Union's instruments for financing external actions in 2015. p. 37. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/sites/fpi/files/documents/2016-annual-report-web_en.pdf

³⁰ EEAS - The ENP: evolution and review. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/330/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en

³¹ For a detailed report of the EU's 'integrated approach' see: Debuysere, L. and Blockmans, S. (2019). *Europe's Coherence Gap in External Crisis and Conflict Management*. BertelsmannStiftung. Available at: <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/europes-coherence-gap-in-external-crisis-and-conflict-management/> For the *multi-phased* assessment see p. 39.

³² Delcour, L. and Hoffmann, K. (2018). *The EU's policy in the South Caucasus*. Centre international de formation européenne No. 385. Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2018-1-page-7.htm>

Delcour, L. and Wolczuk, K. (2018). 'Well-meaning but ineffective? Perceptions of the EU's Role as a Security Actor in the South Caucasus', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 23(2018), pp. 41-60. See pages 52-55.

³³ Joint Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Union, of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52017JC0037>

³⁴ Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Azerbaijan, of the other part - Protocol on mutual assistance between authorities in customs matters - Final Act. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A21999A0917%2801%29>

³⁵ Council of the European Union, Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, 22 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21526/riga-declaration-220515-final.pdf> See paragraph 3.

³⁶ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2017, February 18th). *Ilham Aliyev attended panel discussion at Munich Security Conference*. Available at: <https://en.president.az/articles/22827>

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Moreover, the EU's handling of the Ukrainian crisis has also eroded its status of a security provider in the Azeris and Armenians' perceptions, reinforcing in turn Russia's strategic importance for any possible conflict resolution.³⁷ In fact, according to some Armenian officials, the fact that the EU's Special Representative never visited Nagorno-Karabakh was a blow to its credibility long before that.³⁸

As a result, Armenia sees the EU as an important partner only in matters related to social and economic modernization, but in matters related to Nagorno-Karabakh, being an issue through which most of its foreign policies are filtered, its strategic relationship with Russia always took precedence.³⁹ Similar is the case of Azerbaijan, which throughout the years has come to be very sceptical of the EU's commitment to protect its territorial integrity, treating the recent partnership negotiations as a real opportunity to assert a different ownership of their relations.⁴⁰ So it happens that the EU's expectation of building more effective partnerships through differentiation has in Nagorno-Karabakh's case backfired on its regional security goals, allowing its partners to bypass the Union's indecisiveness in solving their territorial grievances and leaving it powerless towards the situation without a unilateral demand for its involvement.

III. Policy recommendations

With due consideration to the Russian brokered ceasefire and its EU ambassador's comments⁴¹, at this moment in time, the EU could add the most value to the current situation by addressing the grave humanitarian consequences of the fighting. Thousands of people have already left Nagorno-Karabakh for Armenia with more expected to follow in the upcoming days.

Additionally, the civilian infrastructure in the region suffered considerable structural damage leaving the states scrambling for supplies in dealing with both war reparations and the pandemic situation. The EU is therefore in a position where its offers for lasting humanitarian assistance could actually make a difference on the ground in the following period. The EU could seize this opportunity in getting the sides' to discuss perhaps the prospects of a CSDP civilian mission, which could be conditioned upon increased humanitarian aid, or at least organise a reconstruction fund conditioned on the sides' progress towards implementing the OSCE Madrid Principles.

Furthermore, the fact that the conflict has finally reached its first peace deal since September should not be a sign of ease for Brussels. Angry Armenian mobs have already stormed their government's buildings following the agreement which is seen by many as a painful declaration of defeat.⁴² Conversely, while the Azeris have regained some of their first territorial losses since 1994 they have still not achieved full territorial integrity as hoped for during the beginning of the conflict.

³⁷ Delcour, L. and Wolczuk, K. (2018). p. 52-55.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Delcour, L. and Hoffmann, K. (2018). p. 13.

⁴⁰ Rahimov, R. (2017). 'Armenia and Azerbaijan: What do they seek from the EU?', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14(40). Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-azerbaijan-seek-eu/>

⁴¹ Rettman, A. (2020, November 11th). EU Observer. *No role for EU in Nagorno-Karabakh Peacekeeping, Russia says*. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/150027>

⁴² Losh, J. and Roth, A. (2020, November 10th). The Guardian. *Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal brokered by Moscow prompts anger in Armenia*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/10/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-pm-signs-deal-to-end-war-with-azerbaijan-and-russia>

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The situation is therefore still in a fragile state, the peace deal being still likely to be violated, or further adjusted, at the expense of one of the sides. In this case, the EU could still support the OSCE's resolution efforts through its member states. In order to achieve any significant impact, coordination will have to be key, particularly between Paris and Berlin.

That is because Germany has stronger politico-economic linkages with both Turkey and Russia, being also Council of Europe's designated chair from 18th of November onwards⁴³. With Germany's involvement, the EU could hope for a more effective two-track strategy towards Baku and Yerevan but also Ankara and Moscow, bridging in this way potential problems originating from the lack of intra-EU consensus or enmity towards itself as a Union.

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RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

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⁴³ Council of Europe: Chairmanship. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cm/cm-chairmanship>