



EUROPEAN UNION SUPPORT TO THE ARMENIAN- AZERBAIJANI PEACE PROCESS: NEW REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Discussion paper



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Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road
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Author: David Lewis

Copy editor: Aaron Griffiths

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Cover photo: European Council President Charles Michel receives the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan in Brussels, Belgium on May 22, 2022.

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BACKGROUND

This discussion paper summarises findings from an assignment organised by European Resources for Mediation Support (ERMES) to assess the evolving challenges faced by EU peacebuilding in the South Caucasus. It was written by David Lewis, Professor of Global Politics in the Department of Politics, University of Exeter, UK.

The aim of the ERMES assignment was to assess the new regional and global context for peacebuilding in the region and to discuss new approaches to EU-funded peacebuilding programmes in the new environment following the 2020 Karabakh war. This paper provides an assessment of the transformed global and regional context for peacebuilding while also drawing on the experiences and views of practitioners from the region. It combines views 'from above' (regional and global political trends) with views 'from below' (the lived experience of civil society practitioners on the frontline of conflict).

The assignment included workshops held in 2021–22 that brought together South Caucasus practitioners, including journalists, conflict resolution experts and civil society leaders, primarily from Armenia and Azerbaijan, with representatives of international NGOs and EU institutions, including the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the office of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia (EUSR).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September–November 2020, the second Karabakh war transformed the context of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan’s victory was decisive, and it regained most of the territory it had lost to Armenian forces in the 1990s. Following a Russian-brokered ceasefire, Armenia and Azerbaijan made faltering steps towards a revived peace process. The European Union (EU) emerged in a new mediatory role, facilitating dialogue between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at successive meetings in Brussels.

This discussion paper explores the evolving regional and global contexts for the EU’s support to peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It reflects both on lessons learned from earlier experiences of peacebuilding and the numerous obstacles and challenges confronting EU support to both formal negotiations and peacebuilding programming through civil society networks.

The war in 2020 took place in a new geopolitical and normative climate, which differed radically from the early 1990s, when the first Karabakh war took place. Understanding this new environment is vital to comprehending: (i) why existing peacebuilding and diplomacy around the Karabakh issue failed to prevent the 2020 war; and (ii) how to move forward with new approaches that could assist in managing and resolving the conflict. The paper identifies three major features of the new regional landscape that are significant for EU peacebuilding:

The return of war

Azerbaijan’s use of force challenged unrealistic assumptions that the conflict could only be resolved through a political solution. Regardless of popular framing as a ‘frozen conflict’, military force had always played a central role, and a kinetic force since 2014. The EU and peacebuilding networks face the challenge of a new regional security environment in which the use of military force is increasingly normalised as an instrument of policy.

The rise of regional powers

Regional powers such as Russia and Turkey played a critical role in the outcome of the conflict in 2020. Russia was also one of three Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group mandated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By contrast, the other Co-Chairs (France and the United States) and other multilateral actors were side-lined, a situation compounded by OSCE paralysis after war in Ukraine began. The EU and EU-supported peacebuilding networks in Armenia and Azerbaijan need to find new ways to promote conflict resolution in this more complex regional security landscape.

The marginalisation of civil society

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Armenia and Azerbaijan have long been marginal to the peace process and played no significant role during the conflict. Civil society networks lacked influence either on policymakers or on wider society. EU approaches to peacebuilding should support the development of wider and more inclusive networks beyond traditional CSOs to promote peaceful solutions to the conflict.

This paper aims to promote new thinking in EU institutions and among international partners. But the main initiative in transforming approaches to peace and conflict must come from actors in the region. Rethinking the relationship between international and local actors will also be an important step towards developing effective frameworks for peacebuilding in the South Caucasus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenging militarisation

1. The EU should redouble efforts to counter the growing use of military force in the region. EU-supported peacebuilding should prioritise conflict prevention initiatives to constrain military action and promote peaceful means of dispute resolution. In the short term, this should include continued monitoring capacity deployed to potential hotspots (such as disputed border areas). In the longer term, conflict prevention activities will require more work in education and media to overcome entrenched stereotypes and to challenge the growing militarism in societies in the South Caucasus.

2. Civil society peacebuilding networks need a better understanding of the role and impact of the military in their societies. They should engage more closely with groups that played a role in the fighting in 2020. These include serving personnel, but also mothers and wives of deceased soldiers, the families of missing persons, and veterans and their families. Peacebuilding networks should also attempt to understand better the role of Russian peacekeeping forces by deepening their expertise in Russian operations.
3. The EU, peacebuilding CSOs and human rights organisations should work to halt the cycle of impunity for human rights abuses by military forces. Human rights abuses – including socio-economic rights – serve both to facilitate new conflicts and to deepen existing ones. Redress of grievances can contribute to long-term peacebuilding.

Engaging in regional geopolitics

1. Peacebuilding needs to be integral to a regional strategy and not siloed. The EU's strategy in the South Caucasus consequently needs to develop new responses to the growing role of regional powers in conflict. This would ideally involve more engagement with regional powers on security, although deeper engagement with Russia will be highly constrained for as long its war in Ukraine continues. Regional conflict prevention strategies will be most effective if aligned with efforts by other like-minded and multilateral actors.
2. Peacebuilding networks should recognise the new reality of multipolarity in the region and seek new ways to engage with 'track two', civil society and expert networks in neighbouring countries, including through universities and think-tanks. The EU can continue to play an important role in supporting regional linkages, especially with Turkey. Links to Russia and Iran are extremely challenging, but ties to some academics and experts are possible on an individual level.
3. The EU is in a strong position to support improved regional connectivity and transport infrastructure, diplomatically and economically. As part of its approach, it should encourage wider public and civil society participation in discussions on the future of regional trade and transport links to improve the conflict sensitivity of infrastructure projects.

Rethinking civil society

1. Peacebuilding needs to develop as a much broader concept that goes beyond traditional CSOs. It should embrace a wider spectrum of organisations and formats – from local grassroots start-ups to networks of experts and technical advisers in universities, business and think-tanks who can provide expertise and know-how to policymakers.
2. CSOs need to think about the comparative advantage they can offer to policymakers and officials, whether it is in access to external funding, advice on conflict sensitivity, or connecting officials to information resources and networks of experts. Policy advocacy alone is unlikely to be influential without contributing expertise and other inputs to the policy process. Not all CSOs are suited to policy advocacy. At other scales, local humanitarian work and other pragmatic, practical assistance – working with displaced communities, for example – can provide an important entry point for peacebuilding work in a wider range of communities.
3. Peacebuilding groups need new media and communication strategies that avoid clichés and jargon and find non-confrontational ways to engage with different groups in societies where nationalist positions remain entrenched or are gaining ground. There is a need for more engagement on contemporary social media platforms in accessible formats.
4. EU funding for peacebuilding on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict remains critical. But in the longer term, peacebuilding groups and civil society should seek to reduce their dependence on external funding to allow them to develop a more independent and sustainable position in society.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1.1 THE CONFLICT SETTING

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict remains the longest-running conflict in the former Soviet space. After a bitter war over the status of the disputed region between 1988 and 1994, Armenian forces came to control not only most of Nagorny Karabakh, the mountainous territory contested by Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but also seven regions (in whole or in part) around the contested area.¹ The conflict was often labelled a 'frozen conflict', but this was misleading. Occasional clashes along the frontline and deaths from sniper fire were common, especially after 2014. More than 200 soldiers died in a four-day war in 2016. Moreover, the ongoing trauma and structural violence caused by the conflict – including to internally displaced persons, refugees, war veterans and families of the missing – was often overlooked. Nevertheless, the front lines of the conflict remained largely static for over 25 years, while the world changed around it.

Azerbaijani forces launched a major military offensive to retake territory around and within Nagorny Karabakh in September 2020. Although there had been growing tensions since 2016 and many observers expected renewed violence, the scale of the Azerbaijani military offensive took many by surprise. After six weeks of fighting, Russia negotiated a ceasefire agreement on 9 November 2020. The ceasefire left part of the territory of Nagorny Karabakh and the Lachin corridor linking it to Armenia, to be policed by Russian peacekeeping forces for a minimum of five years. Azerbaijan regained control over large swathes of territory, including around one-third of Nagorny Karabakh itself and the symbolic town of Shusha (known as Shushi to Armenians). The result was a devastating defeat for Armenians and a victory for Azerbaijan, backed diplomatically and militarily by Turkey.

The conflict is not over. The essential core of the dispute dating back to the Soviet period – the status of Nagorny Karabakh – remains unresolved. There has been no progress on a political settlement: Azerbaijan continues to demand full control over the territory, offering no proposals even for autonomy within the Azerbaijani state. Most Armenians continue to support the idea of Nagorny Karabakh as an independent state or as part of Armenia. Soon after the end of the war, the Armenia-Azerbaijan international state frontier became the focal point of new violence, with armed clashes taking place along the border. In November 2021 at least 15 Armenian and 7 Azerbaijani soldiers were killed in an Azerbaijani cross-border incursion. In September 2022, unprecedented cross-border strikes on Armenia

claimed the lives of hundreds of soldiers from both sides. As a result of these episodes, Azerbaijan now occupies small areas of the territory of the Republic of Armenia along its border with Azerbaijan. There has been only limited progress so far on other aspects of the ceasefire, such as opening trade and transport routes, although talks have begun on reviving rail links.

Over its first year, the Russian peacekeeping operation was largely effective in curtailing actual fighting around Karabakh itself, but shoot-outs, which France, Russia and the United States (US) described as violations of the ceasefire by Azerbaijani forces, continued. New escalatory dynamics followed Russian over-extension after the invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022. In March 2022, three Armenian soldiers died in an escalation in Karabakh; further clashes in Karabakh in August 2022 claimed the lives of both Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers.

Diplomacy and peacebuilding

The war was a major setback for international diplomacy and peacebuilding efforts. Diplomatic initiatives to resolve the conflict – which had been relatively active in the late 1990s and 2000s – had ossified by 2020. The OSCE Minsk Group, led by three Co-Chairs – France, Russia and the US – had been increasingly marginalised after 2011. The US and France were often disengaged from attempts to resolve the conflict. The nature of the OSCE, with its consensus-based decision-making, made it difficult to update outdated processes and mechanisms. These were designed in the early 1990s but lost traction with key actors in the conflict and were no longer fit for purpose.² The EU was not a major actor in mediating the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, but it did fund a long-standing civil society track.

Civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives faced enormous challenges in promoting peaceful solutions. The EU funded a European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) from 2010–19, which brought together international NGOs (Conciliation Resources, Crisis Management Initiative, International Alert, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and LINKS) with local partners in the South Caucasus to work on a wide range of peacebuilding activities. Its goal was 'to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh and the prevention of further violence'. In 2019–20, EPNK was replaced by new programmes within the frameworks of new 'EU4Peace' and 'EU4Dialogue' projects. These featured a combination of new and previous partners and focal areas.

Civil society peacebuilding was always going to struggle for impact when there was no powerful constituency for peace on either side and successive attempts to resolve the conflict had failed. But there were also structural problems with existing civil society frameworks and approaches that are discussed in more detail below. The 2020 war highlighted many of these challenges – above all showing a disconnect between peacebuilding initiatives and wider societies. During the conflict, many civil society representatives took sides, representing nationalist positions rather than calling for a halt to fighting and a negotiated solution. This outcome demonstrated how fragile commitments to peace could be in the face of military success or failure, and further fractured already fragmented communities of peacebuilding practitioners.

1.2 CONTEXT: REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

The 2020 war took place in a transformed international landscape. The diplomatic and normative frameworks for addressing the conflict – from the OSCE to civil society – dated back to a very different era, the triumphant decade of liberal norms in the 1990s. At that time, new approaches to resolving conflicts – often dubbed ‘liberal peacebuilding’ – were developed. They emphasised the importance of international negotiation and the role of local and transnational civil society. Despite some success, by the mid-2000s the limitations of this model were becoming obvious. Many wars remained unresolved. Civil society and ‘track two’ approaches often proved ineffective. States instead shifted towards military solutions. For example, wars in Chechnya and Sri Lanka were ended through brutal counterinsurgencies, not through peace talks.

This backlash against liberal peacebuilding took place in the context of a shifting international balance of power. In the 2000s a rising China and a revived Russia challenged norms and rules around conflict, both in their neighbourhoods and in multilateral forums such as the United Nations (UN) and OSCE.³ The UN Security Council became deadlocked in addressing internal conflicts around the world, because of these normative and ideological splits, while tensions over norms among participating states also paralysed the OSCE. Even Western allies such as Turkey had a very different understanding of how to respond to insurgencies and civil wars.

Instead of liberal peacebuilding, these states pursued policies that produced ‘illiberal’ or ‘authoritarian peace’, a top-down, state-centric imposition of ‘negative peace’ that relied on the use of military force and state coercion to prevent further outbreaks of fighting.⁴ In these imposed political settlements, norms of stability and political order were prioritised over democracy and human rights. State and regime security were considered more important than human security.

Russia was particularly active in developing this new model of authoritarian, coercive stabilisation. Its intervention in the war in Syria demonstrated a capacity to combine military force, diplomacy, and economic and humanitarian measures to suppress an insurgency.⁵ Turkish and Russian involvement in the civil war in Libya also demonstrated the capacity of regional powers to control conflicts in ways that suited their national interests. In each case, the UN was side-lined, and multilateral approaches were marginalised, while regional powers took the lead.

The 2020 war in Karabakh demonstrated vividly how these changes in the wider international environment are impacting on regional conflicts. Multilateral frameworks to address the conflict through the OSCE gave way to illiberal approaches based on the interests of regional powers. This new international environment has posed serious challenges to the model of peacebuilding supported by the EU in the South Caucasus.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 severely worsened the regional security context. Fears abounded that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict could reignite while international attention was focused on Ukraine, fuelled by significant escalations of violence in Karabakh in March and August. In late March, Russia accused Azerbaijan of violating the 2020 ceasefire by attempting to establish a new military post in the area of responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. In August, Russian peacekeepers again appeared powerless to prevent another escalation in the area of the Lachin corridor.

These challenges fuelled speculation that Russia could face problems in maintaining an effective peacekeeping and mediation role while overstretched by its war in Ukraine. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and its subsequent diplomatic isolation also made it more difficult for the international community to engage with Russia on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. This was reflected in the apparent disintegration of the OSCE Minsk Group in the weeks following the invasion of Ukraine.⁶

2. CHALLENGES TO EU PEACEBUILDING IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

There are at least three major areas of challenge to peacebuilding in this rapidly evolving regional and global context:

- First, an international and regional environment in which the use of military force as a policy instrument is increasingly common;
- Second, a shift away from multilateral ‘liberal peacemaking’ responses to armed conflict to a multipolar approach in which regional powers are more influential and able to impose illiberal or authoritarian forms of ‘peace’ and conflict management;
- Third, a fundamental challenge to the current predominant model of peacebuilding through externally funded CSOs. The marginalisation of civil society during and after the November 2020 war demonstrated the limitations of existing approaches to civil society-led peacebuilding.

2.1 THE CHALLENGE OF THE RETURN OF WAR

Before November 2020, international diplomatic meetings on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict frequently repeated the mantra that “there can be no military solution to the conflict”.⁷ This was not a statement of fact, however, but a normative claim, reflecting a widespread – if naïve – hope in Europe that the age of military solutions to territorial disputes was over. Yet such beliefs bred complacency. Historically military force has been the traditional instrument to resolve such disputes. Outside Europe the military has increasingly been used to resolve and manage conflicts in the last decade.⁸ Powers such as Russia and Turkey have demonstrated their willingness to use and project hard power and to engage in coercive bargaining and coercive diplomacy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is only the most egregious example of this trend.

The more frequent resort to actual versus merely threatened military force as an instrument of policy poses profound challenges to the EU and to its preferred models of peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

First, it challenges the normative power of the EU and its self-understanding as pursuing a values-based foreign policy. After a long period when the EU and many other international actors rejected the use of military force to achieve strategic goals, many states are once again relying on hard power and the use of force. The EU is ill-prepared to deal with this new landscape, which is highly resistant to a law-based and norm-governed regional order. Crises over migration, energy and regional security all encourage trade-offs that pose a challenge to the EU’s values-based foreign policy.

Second, the use of military force poses a challenge to multilateral and diplomatic responses to conflict. In the case of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, France and the US – as the other OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs working alongside Russia – were poorly equipped to engage in diplomacy once the fighting started. Western states could only call for a return to a ceasefire. Russia and Turkey, on the other hand, understand the use of force as a central element in coercive diplomacy. They have often used the threat or direct use of military force in negotiations, both as signalling to other parties and as a coercive mechanism to impose ‘peace’.

The EU has responded to the continuing threat of the use of force through the deployment of a small monitoring mission along the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan, drawing on personnel from its monitoring mission to Georgia. This mission of 40 experts, known as EUMCAP (EU Monitoring Capacity to Armenia), was deployed on 20 October 2022 for a period of two months. As the mission was wrapped up in December, the EU announced the deployment of a transitional planning assistance team in Armenia, linked to the possibility of a civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission to the country in the future.⁹

The renewed use of military force in Europe is not simply a high-level challenge for strategic and military planners. Civil society peacebuilders must also consider how to address the problem on the ground. Practitioners from the region consulted for this research raised several problems.



Joghaz Water Reservoir, Tavush Province, Armenia © Karen Faljyan / Shutterstock

First, many talked of the misapprehensions and lack of foresight that led them to discount the possibility of a full-scale war and of the feelings of self-recrimination and depression that followed. Such sentiments are also present among many Western analysts and diplomats. The possibility of a full-scale war in Karabakh had been largely discounted by many. Analysts had a status quo bias and were often poorly informed on the growing strength of the Azerbaijani military and on Azerbaijani political intentions. Armenian officials and analysts were often complacent about the prospects for a successful Azerbaijani offensive, citing out-dated military analyses that did not take into account the modernisation of the Azerbaijani armed forces and new, revolutionary capabilities provided by drones and loitering munitions to small armies such as Azerbaijan's.

Second, civil society and external partners have found themselves struggling to challenge growing militarism within Armenian and Azerbaijani societies. Rhetoric and political posturing on both sides deepened the level of militaristic rhetoric after 2016 and during the 2020 war. Threats of the further use of force have continued. Challenging these discourses is difficult. Many practitioners spoke of the disappointment they felt when former friends and partners appeared to condone militarism during the conflict. The Azerbaijani government has further embraced militaristic rhetoric and in 2021 opened a Military Trophies Park in Baku, celebrating its victory in the second Karabakh war, provoking widespread international criticism for its glorification of violence, while the International Court of Justice ordered it to cease inciting racial hatred and

discrimination against Armenians.¹⁰ In both Armenia and Azerbaijan there has been a trend towards 'patriotic' and military education, which makes it more difficult to overcome stereotypes and engender mutual understanding. Reversing this trend is very difficult, but long-term programming on education, media and the arts can slowly challenge these dominant discourses.

Third, in the current situation in which military forces control the situation on the ground, peacebuilders have struggled to engage with the new reality of military forces deployed to and around Nagorny Karabakh. The ceasefire agreed a five-year peacekeeping role for just under 2,000 Russian soldiers to police the non-Azerbaijani-controlled parts of Nagorny Karabakh and the Lachin corridor.¹¹ Russian peacekeeping forces control all aspects of life inside the zone and play a critical role in mediating disputes and protecting civilians. They also have de-mining and reconstruction roles. There is no easy way for civil society to engage with the Russian peacekeeping force or to influence its decisions on how the territory is governed: Russian peacekeepers limit access for foreign journalists and international NGOs.¹² Nevertheless, gaining a better understanding of Russia's peacekeeping operations would be beneficial. Territories recaptured by the Azerbaijani military also remain off-limits to visitors, including civil society groups, outside of government-organised tours and companies engaged in reconstruction.

Fourth, the November 2020 ceasefire has not resolved the conflict and therefore has not removed the threat of future war. While diplomatic activity was at times intense

in the aftermath of the war, with numerous tracks in play between Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders, foreign ministers and other senior policymakers, little tangible progress was made. Azerbaijan refused to discuss any special status for Nagorny Karabakh, while Armenia insisted that credible arrangements were needed to guarantee the rights and security of the Karabakh Armenian population. Although their direct influence on decision-making is limited, peacebuilding networks can play an important role by drawing attention to the high risk of renewed fighting and by developing more effective conflict prevention mechanisms at both local and international levels.

2.2 THE CHALLENGE OF REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS

The vision for the South Caucasus promoted in Europe and the West in the 2000s was of a pro-Western Georgia and an increasingly pro-Western Armenia and Azerbaijan as important members of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP was designed to manage the complex relationship between the EU and its eastern neighbours, while promoting reforms and avoiding conflict with Russia.

But since 2014 the EaP has faced a series of crises. Conflicts in the EaP countries have deepened: in Belarus, between state and society; in Ukraine, with Russia; in Georgia with the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (and Russia); and in Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh. Despite these developments, the EaP does not have a specific conflict dimension and the EU has not played a major mediation role in the numerous conflicts in the EaP – although, as noted earlier, it has begun to engage more closely in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in 2021–22.

The OSCE has also been marginalised. Despite the deep divisions between Western states and Russia after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group formally remain the main international negotiating forum for the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. But when the ceasefire was signed on 9 November, France and the US were hardly consulted and the Group was side-lined. As Laurence Broers argues, the 2020 ceasefire agreement reflected “the sweeping aside of the multilateral diplomacy represented by the Minsk Group by multipolar power dynamics”.¹³ Instead of the OSCE, Turkey and Russia were the central actors. Turkey openly backed Azerbaijan's military offensive, while Russia's indispensability to regional security was further underlined.

Turkey was not a signatory to the ceasefire agreement, but it remains an important player. In late January 2021 Russia and Turkey opened a joint centre to monitor the ceasefire in Azerbaijan, but that was the extent of Turkey's formal involvement in the peacekeeping operation.¹⁴ Although Russia and Turkey were often

viewed as being on opposite sides of the conflict, with Turkey allied to Azerbaijan and Russia supposedly backing its ally in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia, the reality was more complex. It was important for Russia to retain close relations with Azerbaijan and to be seen as a mediator rather than a party to the conflict. Russia and Turkey had long experience both competing and collaborating in conflicts in Syria and Libya. Both states had similar normative frameworks: they rejected the liberal peacebuilding model promoted by the OSCE and instead pursued more authoritarian approaches to managing the conflict that also undermined the influence of other Western actors, including the EU.

There is a new configuration of forces in the South Caucasus. The old contours of post-Soviet space have become blurred by combinations of alternative geographies, both old and new.¹⁵ The region is historically part of the extended Middle East, as well as being in the former Soviet space and on the periphery of Europe. Iran, Turkey, China, Israel, Pakistan and other states have important interests and play significant roles. This political and geographic complexity also widens the potential for new fractures and divisions to emerge. Russia's relationship with Turkey is increasingly competitive. Iran and Azerbaijan have a difficult relationship.¹⁶ Despite these differences, new regional formats may emerge. In October 2021 Russia backed a Turkish proposal to form a '3+3' grouping to include Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey and Russia. The idea reflects a growing trend for regional formats to replace Western-led initiatives on regional stability, but the format has gained little traction so far.

Despite the challenge of a changing regional order, the EU can still play a leading role in the region, including on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Russian over-extension in Ukraine has enhanced this possibility, although to what extent remains unclear. The EU continues to have significant economic and political levers and has proved its convening power with the two sides. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia have signalled their openness to greater EU engagement on the diplomatic level. President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan have met in Brussels on several occasions beginning in December 2021. The EU can offer an alternative vector for states in the region to balance the growing influence of regional hegemony.

The peacebuilding community in the South Caucasus is poorly prepared to engage with these shifts in geopolitical reality. Its relationships are primarily with organisations in the West – particularly with EU institutions. There are some ties with civil society networks in Turkey, but only limited contacts with other regional academic and expert networks. In authoritarian states such as Russia and Iran, civil society has been severely suppressed, making more extensive regional civil society initiatives very difficult.



Russian soldiers deployed as a peacekeeping force arrive in Stepanakert (known as Khankendi in Azerbaijani sources), the regional capital of Nagorny Karabakh. © Jack Losh

The role of Russia and the challenge of engagement

The 2020 war appeared to reverse a decline in the profile of Russia as the dominant and indispensable security actor in the Caucasus region. Russia's deployment of a peacekeeping force to Nagorny Karabakh in November 2020 highlighted its capacity to use military and political means to promote its own model of stabilisation and ideas of peace. But Russia's mediation and peacekeeping deployment also pose risks for Russia itself, and its war in Ukraine has made it more vulnerable in the case of a resurgence in fighting. Renewed war in Nagorny Karabakh could force Russia either to become more deeply involved in the conflict (a commitment for which it has few available military resources) or to conduct a humiliating withdrawal.¹⁷

EU-supported peacebuilding networks have not found effective ways to engage with Russia on the conflict or on regional security in the South Caucasus more broadly. Engagement has become even more challenging after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia has repressed all independent media and civil society networks and relations with the EU are unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future. Yet a better understanding of Russian policies – and its strengths and weaknesses – is important to inform a sustainable peacebuilding process. In the present context, informal ties with Russian academics and experts (including those working outside the Russian Federation) are likely to represent the limits of potential civil society engagement.

Armenia-Turkey relations

The area of regional politics seen as being the most promising in the post-2020 war period was ties between Armenia and Turkey. The two countries failed twice to develop diplomatic relations – in 1992–93 and again in 2009–10 – but now have a chance to make progress after Azerbaijan's recapture of territories around Nagorny Karabakh lifted Turkey's main objection to restoring relations.¹⁸ The first direct talks for a decade were held in Moscow in January 2022 to begin work on a roadmap for diplomatic recognition and opening the Turkish-Armenian border.¹⁹ However, the prospect of progress did not appear to be enhanced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which repositioned Turkey vis-à-vis Europe and the United States in ways that for Ankara further deprioritised normalising relations with Armenia. Moreover, Turkey continued to tie progress on normalisation to progress towards Azerbaijan's preferred outcomes in the conflict with Armenia. Finally, whereas civil society networks had been active in promoting connections between Armenia and Turkey in the past – including through the EU-supported 'Armenia-Turkey Normalisation Process Support', which included four Armenian and four Turkish NGOs – this was no longer the case.²⁰ By mid-2022 a fragile political process was faltering, without the cushion of ongoing interactions among webs of civil society networks.

Regional transport and infrastructure

The November 2020 ceasefire agreement promised that “all economic and transport connections in the region shall be unblocked”, including a transport route between Azerbaijan and its exclave in Nakhchivan.²¹ In the absence of progress on the question of status, the possibility of regional connectivity and transport links appeared to be the most promising area for progress. Yet, so far, there has been no mechanism for civil society involvement in this process – discussions have taken place at government level through a tripartite mechanism formed in January 2021 involving Russian, Armenian and Azerbaijani deputy prime ministers, and at meetings of national leaders convened by the EU in 2021 and 2022.

The proposals involve reactivating routes that have been closed since the first Karabakh war. They would reconnect Yerevan with Russia by rail and provide an overland connection between Nakhchivan and the rest of Azerbaijan. These restored routes open the prospect of a long-discussed North-South route from Russia to the Persian Gulf, but also a new East-West route from the Caspian to Turkey via Armenia.²² Reopening the railway would be particularly advantageous for Armenia to export its goods to Russia – 80 per cent of goods currently travel the difficult route along the Georgian Military Highway.

The most controversial route under discussion is the railway and/or road connection through Armenia that would link Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. This is often interpreted in Azerbaijan as a ‘sovereign corridor’ where Azerbaijan would have some form of jurisdiction – an idea that is anathema to Armenians. Azerbaijan has insisted on visa- and customs-free travel along any corridor. In April 2021 President Aliyev warned that Azerbaijan might use force to control a transport corridor and even claimed that the region was historically Azerbaijani territory. There was some progress at a meeting in Brussels in December 2021 between President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan, convened by President of the European Council Charles Michel, at which the parties appeared to signal agreement on the reopening of the rail link between Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan, but implementation of these proposals faces significant obstacles.²³

The EU is in a strong position to support improved regional connectivity and transport infrastructure, diplomatically and economically, although it is unlikely to play a direct management role.²⁴ As part of its approach, it should encourage civil society participation in discussions on the future of regional trade and transport links to improve conflict sensitivity of such projects. Peacebuilders could play a role in promoting the restoration of regional transport links. Civil society has a role in ensuring that the views of local communities in border areas and those affected by new transport routes are represented in negotiations.²⁵ More engagement between peacebuilders, conflict specialists and technical experts on infrastructure and international trade could improve the conflict sensitivity of these projects.

2.3 THE CHALLENGE TO CIVIL SOCIETY

A third major challenge is how civil society can adapt to working in a new context defined by: (i) a more hostile international environment, marked by stronger, more authoritarian states and shrinking space for civil society; (ii) the direct obstacles for CSOs working on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict that appeared during and after the war.

Globally, CSOs have faced legal and political pressures in many countries, as they have come to be associated with Western-backed political change and ‘colour revolutions’. This trend has also been evident in the South Caucasus.

The biggest challenge in the region has been for CSOs operating in Azerbaijan. Since 2014 there have been increasing restrictions on their registration, their ability to use foreign funding and their right to hold public events or access media. Many international NGOs and agencies have closed their operations because of new restrictions. Police harass and detain civil society activists. Those involved in peacebuilding face particular pressures. Civil society activists calling for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in September 2020 were questioned by the police and faced a backlash from other Azerbaijanis in social media.²⁶ Even after the 2020 war, Azerbaijan has not relaxed the pressure: a new media law is even more restrictive and there have been further cases of violence against the opposition.²⁷

Armenia has a much more open environment for civil society, but pressure on CSOs also increased during and after the conflict. Radical nationalists threatened CSOs and called them ‘enemies of the people’.²⁸ Nevertheless, civil society remains active and vocal, although it faces a different array of pressures – above all, how to engage with different social groups in a fragmented political system and a traumatised society.

Perhaps not surprisingly, civil society was unable to bridge the divide during the conflict. Practitioners faced considerable social pressure to support their own side in the conflict. Many former peacebuilders took sides or advocated military action. Others felt powerless to impact events or unable to speak out and were marginalised. Ties that had been built across the divide between Armenian and Azerbaijani peacebuilders were broken, sometimes apparently irreversibly. Rebuilding connections and links among civil society will be difficult.

Several broader structural problems related to the nature of peacebuilding and how peacebuilding CSOs can engage more effectively with states and societies are elucidated below.

First, the nature and definition of peacebuilding and the peacebuilding community has become contested. For some peacebuilders in EU-funded programmes, peacebuilding has become a profession and there is occasionally some suspicion of others who are seen as 'part-time' peacebuilders. Peacebuilding has its own funding streams, organisations, language and jargon, and style of work. This produces an important cohesion that helped many of these networks survive the conflict. But many activists fear that they have become part of a 'peacebuilding bubble' without the capacity to reach into wider society.²⁹

Second, this narrow peacebuilding community has faced difficulties in engaging with policymakers and with wider society. Practitioners identified two major problems: the lack of *vertical engagement* to influence policymakers and political leaders; and limited *horizontal engagement* with wider society.

Vertical engagement: influencing policymakers

In the first case, peacebuilders need to find ways to build stronger relations with state officials, policymakers and state institutions. But this will only happen if peacebuilders and CSOs can provide important inputs into the policy process, whether that is expertise, external funding or new channels of influence with external partners. The normative stance of peacebuilders in favour of peace is not in itself sufficient to ensure effective engagement with policymakers.

There are objective reasons why connecting with decision-makers is difficult (experienced also by advocacy organisations in many other countries). In Azerbaijan, a small coterie around the president dominates decision-making, making access very difficult. Armenia has some more opportunities for access – and there are individuals from civil society at senior and mid-ranking layers of government – but access has reportedly become more difficult since 2020. Even where there is dialogue with government, it has often proved difficult to translate engagement into policy change.

Certain traditional models of policy advocacy appear to be ineffective. In the peacebuilding field, attempts to develop track 1.5 processes to include officials and others who might be able to influence policy have not been successful. Mid-ranking and senior officials who are influential in policymaking circles are seldom willing to speak freely with CSOs. There is more scope to develop 'track two' processes involving experts who may have some access to government officials. Engagement with individuals and networks close to government can provide useful two-way channels to feed information and ideas into political systems, but expectations of any direct impact on policy need to be tempered.

CSOs often do not have sufficient deep expertise and new ideas to make themselves indispensable to policymakers. CSOs could play a useful role as hubs and facilitators to bring in technical expertise on key conflict-related issues, such as de-mining and border demarcation. In other cases, they can develop expertise on areas such as conflict sensitivity for major infrastructure and investment projects. New initiatives to advance this kind of conflict-sensitive technical dialogue will require more training and the development of a wider reach by CSOs into expert networks.

The expertise and advocacy gap applies not only to relations between civil society and policymakers in the South Caucasus, but also to providing a flow of information and analysis to the EU and other external partners. In addition to providing information and analysis on the conflict, CSOs in the region need support and training to improve their capacity to mount advocacy campaigns directed at international partners.

Horizontal engagement: influencing society

The second problem is how peacebuilders engage with wider society. Peacebuilders found themselves an isolated and marginalised voice during the conflict. Many practitioners have begun discussing ways to step out of the 'peacebuilding bubble' and engage more effectively with the rest of society.

Peacebuilding needs to widen its appeal and its engagement with different groups in society, in three vectors or directions.

- First, language and communication: Peacebuilders need to find more effective ways to communicate. Strategic communications have been difficult, as social media and traditional media has been dominated by nationalist and militaristic voices. Finding new voices on new platforms (e.g. Clubhouse, Substack, Telegram, TikTok, and so on), and new ways to use older platforms (e.g. Reddit, Twitter Spaces, Instagram) is vital to extend peacebuilding messages to new demographics. Practitioners also attest to the accumulated impacts of decades of falsehoods about the history of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations being embedded and circulated in curricula, education and popular narratives across the divide. Addressing these impacts requires further work on narratives and their modes of transmission.
- Second, engaging with new groups: Peacebuilders concede the need to engage with a wider range of influencers and groups. As regional economic cooperation becomes increasingly important, engagement with business groups and cross-border traders may be a useful first step. Border communities,



Deminers from the Halo Trust scan the earth for unexploded ordnance in the village of Aygestan near Stepanakert © Jack Losh

displaced communities and war veterans are all groups experiencing serious upheaval and change whose views need to be represented. Such groups are more likely to be receptive to groups offering concrete, practical assistance and humanitarian aid. But they may also have reserves of resilience, for example in the form of remembered traditions of pre-conflict cross-border interactions and connections, or pragmatic approaches to the resolution of localised problems.

- Third, more pragmatic and flexible approaches are needed. The bureaucracy of external funding makes it more difficult for local organisations to be flexible. Recently, grassroots initiatives (such as the Bright Garden Voices platform, the Caucasus Talks Facebook group and the Post-Soviet Peace Initiative) have created small online spaces where Azerbaijanis and Armenians can talk about the issues dividing them and the politics of coexistence. These informal, networked platforms are very different to established NGOs and CSOs and demonstrate how grassroots organisations can offer a more agile alternative that can react quickly to changes in society and in conflict dynamics.

These three vectors can be partly addressed by rethinking peacebuilding as a much broader concept that goes beyond traditional civil society structures. It should be viewed less as a profession and more as a state of mind. Peacebuilding networks should develop beyond CSOs into universities, think-tanks, humanitarian organisations and business. Rather than focus on 'peacebuilders', it would be better to encourage a wider range of individuals with diverse profiles and skills to be involved in peacebuilding activities. Such an approach involves some risk – it may dilute the peacebuilding message – but it offers a more effective way to build networks of expertise and know-how that can influence political decision-making in both states and have a wider impact on the affected societies.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenges facing effective peacebuilding in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict are not unique to the South Caucasus. Both the EU and peacebuilding networks need to find new ways to respond to rapidly changing regional and global contexts for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Peacebuilding across the world has been undermined by an increasing normalisation of the use of force in civil wars and in relations between states. Reversing this trend requires efforts to constrain the use of force through active diplomacy, the promotion of stability through peaceful means, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, conflict prevention initiatives, and longer-term programmes to challenge militarism in societies.

Peacebuilding also faces a rapidly shifting diplomatic environment, in which regional powers are much more influential and multilateral organisations are side-lined. The EU remains a vital player in the South Caucasus, but the positions of Turkey and Russia remain critical for the future of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Engagement with regional powers is very difficult – particularly with Russia – but peacebuilders need to use creative mechanisms to develop regional networks to inform their work.

Finally, CSOs engaged in global peacebuilding face a crisis of effectiveness and legitimacy. Civil society needs to develop new models and formats to adapt to a more challenging global and regional environment. It needs to be flexible to respond quickly when there are opportunities for grassroots initiatives. But civil society also needs to be open to new formats and networks, including more ties with disparate actors – think-tanks, universities, technical and sectoral experts, civic initiatives, youth networks, businesses and veterans – to promote peacebuilding in new and innovative ways, less as a chosen vocation and more as a wider commitment to peaceful change that broad swathes of society can buy into.

Any new approaches to peacebuilding around Nagorno Karabakh will need to take account of this rapidly changing international order. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine should not distract from the importance of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict – nor should the conflict be viewed solely primarily through the lens of Russia's confrontation with the West. Rather, the invasion of Ukraine should refocus attention on the urgent need to resolve a series of inter-related conflicts within EU partner countries across the EaP. The EU's role is vital but will be strengthened if it can embed peacebuilding within a wider policy framework that promotes development, connectivity and reform across the region.

Armenian and Azerbaijani peacebuilding practitioners are strongly supportive of an enhanced EU role in the South Caucasus region. They advocate more policy attention being paid to conflict resolution in the EU's wider engagement strategy and in the EaP. A consistently reiterated request from practitioners in Armenia and Azerbaijan is for the EU to ensure that its policy instruments and strategies fully reflect local perspectives from those communities most directly affected by the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

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Conciliation Resources, Burghley Yard,
106 Burghley Road, London NW5 1AL UK

@ cr@c-r.org

+44 (0)20 7359 7728

www.c-r.org

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