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Arařtırma Makalesi

**THE EUROPEAN UNION'S CONFLICT RESOLUTION POLICY IN THE SOUTH
CAUCASUS***

Avrupa Birliđi'nin Güney Kafkasya'daki Çatıřma Çözümü Politikası

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Abstract

The South Caucasus region has served as a frontier between Western and Eastern civilizations for millennia. The area is rife with conflict due to international borders drawn after the collapse of the Soviet Union, without regard to historical consolidation and international legal reconciliation. The EU's approach to conflict resolution is underpinned by its political legitimacy and economic power, which enhance its ability to assert its presence in areas of conflict or crisis. However, while there is a desire among the region's countries for greater engagement with the EU, there is an asynchrony between the Union's security policy and the expectations of the South Caucasian states, resulting in an inefficient security situation. It seems that the security cacophony in and around the South Caucasus will continue unless there is a transition from neorealist behavior to positive peace and unless all actors change their foreign policy thinking.

Keywords: *European Union, South Caucasus, Karabakh, Conflict Resolution, Mediation.*

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Öz

Güney Kafkasya bölgesi, binlerce yıldır Batı ve Doğu medeniyetleri arasında sınır rolü oynamıştır. Bölge, Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından sonra oluşturulan ve tarihsel konsolidasyon ve uluslararası yasal mutabakat gözetilmeksizin çizilen uluslararası sınırlar nedeniyle çatışmalarla doludur. AB'nin ihtilaf çözümüne yaklaşımı, siyasi meşruiyeti ve ekonomik gücü ile desteklenmektedir; bu, çatışma veya kriz alanlarında varlığını gösterme yeteneğini artırmaktadır. Ancak bölge ülkelerinin AB ile daha fazla bağ kurma arzusu olmasına rağmen, Birliğin güvenlik politikası ile Güney Kafkasya devletlerinin beklentileri arasında bir asenkronizasyon güvenlik durumuna neden olmaktadır. Neorealizmden pozitif barışa geçiş olmadığı sürece Güney Kafkasya ve çevresindeki güvenlik sorunları devam edecek gibi görünmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, Güney Kafkasya, Karabağ, Çatışma Çözümü, Arbuluculuk.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) engages in conflict resolution efforts through both its military and civil missions deployed in various parts of the world. The EU's conflict resolution approach is underpinned by its political legitimacy and economic power, which enhance its ability to assert its presence in conflict or crisis areas. Furthermore, the EU's operational and structural capabilities have positioned it as a significant security actor.

The South Caucasus region has acted as a boundary between Western and Eastern civilizations for millennia. The region is rife with conflict due to the international borders established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which were drawn without regard for historical consolidation and international legal reconciliation. Consequently, the lingering predicament of the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination has impeded the resolution of conflicts in the South Caucasus.

From the perspective of hegemony, the EU's prolonged low profile in the conflict resolution process in the South Caucasus is largely due to the reluctance of EU member states to undertake further commitments over a wide geographical area that extends beyond their backyards. In addition, the difficulty of achieving political solidarity and unity of interests in matters related to foreign policy has always been the most obvious weakness of the EU. The prevailing uncertainty among the countries in the South Caucasus is also reflected in the EU's shifting priorities and strategic paradigms in regional integration issues. Therefore, any new game-changing initiatives introduced by global and regional actors must be contextualized to determine the future trajectory of the European security complex and regional security construction.

The comprehensive invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, has significantly altered the geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus, a strategic junction between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Moscow, traditionally the dominant security power in the South Caucasus, has seen its influence wane due to the Ukrainian conflict, leading to an increase in political and economic activity in the region by other nations, including Türkiye, Iran, and China. As Moscow's ability to maintain the status quo in the South Caucasus is increasingly compromised due to its military involvement in Ukraine, Brussels is also testing its potential as a diplomatic actor in the conflict resolution between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh.

The EU aims to focus on peace-building in the South Caucasus within its foreign and security policy, but neither the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) program nor other initiatives have explicitly set clear goals for resolving conflicts in the region. The ongoing war in Ukraine and the rise of far-right movements are causing significant and irreversible changes in Europe's security architecture and the EU's foreign and security policy agenda. Russia's aggressive actions also have implications for the security concerns of South Caucasus countries, presenting the EU with a unique opportunity to deepen and strengthen its relations with the region.

This paper aims to explore the increasing role of the EU in peace-building within the South Caucasus. It seeks to address questions about how the EU's Conflict Resolution framework addresses security threats in the region and how the EU perceives and shapes its role in the peace-building process as an active participant.

The article employs a methodological approach that involves analyzing the EU's strategic documents related to regional conflicts, as well as the various bilateral and multilateral cooperation

frameworks between the EU and the South Caucasus countries. Despite the EU's "normative" and "civilizing" influence, its capacity to engage with and influence conflicts in the region has been limited. However, the article highlights a shift in the EU's responsibility, transitioning from a stabilizing actor to one that increasingly impacts the peace-building process.

Conceptual Framework

As a geopolitically and geostrategically important region, the South Caucasus forms a bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and has a rich potential in terms of energy resources, transport corridors, and cultural diversity. Since their independence in 1991, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia in the South Caucasus have experienced various problems both within themselves and with regional and global actors.

In this study, the EU's conflict resolution policy in the South Caucasus will be analysed in the context of hegemonic strategies and the consequences of these strategies for the security, democracy and development of the countries in the region will be discussed.

Hegemony, which constitutes the conceptual framework of the article, was preferred as an explanatory concept instead of the concept of "power" after the realist paradigm failed to explain the changes in the international system in the 1970s. The basic ideas on the concept of hegemony in international relations are based not only on the writings of Antonio Gramsci, but also on the neo-Gramscian School, especially on the views of Robert Cox. The revival of the neo-Gramscian perspective of hegemony in international relations has contributed to the explanation and understanding of post-Cold War conflicts. In particular, the concepts of "hegemony" and "world order" help to analyse protracted and deeply rooted violent conflicts. According to Gramsci, hegemony is a form of domination achieved not only by force but also by consent. Neo-Gramscian theories recognise that the international system is not only composed of states, but that non-state actors also play a role. According to these theories, in order to be a hegemonic power in the international system, it is necessary to have not only military and economic power, but also ideological and cultural power. According to Cox, hegemony cannot be understood only in terms of inter-state relations, because hegemony is based on a model of production at the international level that enables states to connect with their social classes. This production model includes both economic and ideological elements.¹

This research emerged from studies of policy-making in various contexts, including the European Neighbourhood Policy. The choice of this perspective reflects the assumption that different approaches to conflict resolution depend on how the conflict is understood. Some approaches assume that conflicting identities are stable, especially in violent situations, while others assume that identities are flexible and can change over time.

This indicates the importance of evaluating the perspectives and concepts that EU policy-makers hold regarding conflict. Several previous studies on the EU's approach to resolving conflicts have highlighted the potential benefits of such an assessment. These studies have demonstrated how the EU's understanding of conflict, as conceptualized by EU policy-makers, can shed light on its policy preferences. Hughes provides an example of this by analyzing how the European Security Strategy conceptualizes the factors driving conflicts.

¹ See: (Cox, 1987; Cox, 1983: 162-175; Cox, 1981: 126-155).

The literature has made significant progress in enhancing our comprehension of the EU's involvement in resolving conflicts. However, its primary focus has been on identifying and empirically examining the factors that determine the EU's effectiveness in contributing to conflict resolution. In contrast, there has been limited attention given to analyzing the specific policies pursued by the EU when acting as a conflict resolution entity. This lack of analysis regarding the nature of the EU's conflict resolution policies poses an essential question: Does the EU's understanding of conflict resolution encompass the potential for transforming identities, as assumed in a considerable portion of the literature?

The EU's role and effectiveness in conflict resolution are often contested and challenged by both internal and external factors, such as divergent member states' interests, institutional fragmentation, limited resources, competing norms and values, and changing geopolitical dynamics. Therefore, it is essential to develop a conceptual framework that can help to understand and evaluate the EU's conflict resolution policies and practices in different contexts and scenarios. This article proposes such a framework, based on three main dimensions: the EU's identity, capabilities, and strategies as a conflict resolution actor. The paper argues that these dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing and that they shape the EU's opportunities and challenges in dealing with various types of conflicts. The paper also suggests some criteria and indicators to measure the EU's performance and impact on conflict resolution, as well as some recommendations for future research and policy development.

Evaluation of the EU Conflict Resolution Approach

There are significant opportunities related to the energy deposits of the Caspian Sea and the role of the South Caucasus as both a resource-rich area and a transit corridor for carrying petroleum and gas to Europe, counterweighing dependence on Persian Gulf oil and Russian gas supplies. EU member states have increasing economic interests in the region – a potentially lucrative and attractive place for foreign direct investment, especially for multinational oil companies. In addition, it seems that the successive crises experienced during the European Union integration process are essentially economic rather than political. It can also be seen that despite the EU's ongoing economic successes, this performance is by no means guaranteed during the crisis (Shiraliyev, 2022a: 149). Hence, resolving conflicts is considered a prerequisite for securing energy export routes. Additionally, internal political stability is essential for the development of crucial energy and infrastructure projects in the region. The European Union (EU) adopted a strategy in the South Caucasus between 1999 and 2001, focusing on specific policy mechanisms outlined in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) signed with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia in Luxembourg in June 1999. These PCAs marked a significant advancement in EU-South Caucasian countries relations. Despite the EU's notification at the Luxembourg summit that it would not support the status quo with substantial aid, EU actions and assistance were positioned as incentives for positive change. As a result, EU initiatives in the South Caucasus strengthened political dialogue with the young states, supported the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in conflict areas through funding small-scale rehabilitation programs, assisted the OSCE in monitoring sections of the Georgian–Russian border, and expressed readiness to support large-scale rehabilitation in the event of an Armenian–Azerbaijani settlement. However, during this period, the EU lacked a coherent approach in developing a more concrete vision for the South Caucasus. Despite calls from the European Parliament for stronger engagement, EU member states did not succeed in further elaborating EU policy. While the EU maintained an overall strategy for the region, specific member states had clearer agendas, with the possibility of adopting a unified approach under the common foreign

and security policy. In early 2001, there was increasing pressure for a significant review of EU policy mechanisms in the region. Then Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten and the late Anna Lindh, the former Swedish foreign minister, published a joint article emphasizing that “the EU cannot afford to neglect the Southern Caucasus” and committing to a more robust EU role in helping resolve territorial conflicts. This led to several measures by the EU to enhance political dialogue with the three states and a willingness to play a more active role in supporting mediation efforts. Predictably, the tragic events of September 11, 2001, prompted changes in EU policy, resulting in a redefined stance toward the South Caucasus. EU officials made repeated visits to the three states to assess progress in their political and economic transitions and the implementation of the PCAs (Nuriyev, 2007: 3).

During the period from low profile to increased interest, which lasted until the appointment of the EU’s Special Representative for the South Caucasus in 2003, the EU maintained a distant approach to facilitating conflict resolution in the region. The EU’s involvement in conflict resolution mainly consisted of passive political participation limited to political statements and communications. This approach served the EU’s belief that promoting economic development and civil society through such a policy will reduce the likelihood of conflicts reoccurring, thereby creating the preconditions for lasting stability. However, compared to other troubled regions close to the EU borders, such as Eastern European countries and the Balkans, the South Caucasus region was not a high priority on the EU’s foreign policy agenda. As a result, the EU preferred to maintain political distance and limit its political role to supporting the activities of the UN and OSCE (Popescu, 2007: 15).

However, political changes emerged in the light of the eastern enlargement wave, which led to revisions in the EU’s foreign policy towards the South Caucasus. Therefore, mitigating the potential threats posed by unresolved conflicts in the region has become one of the prominent issues on the EU’s foreign policy agenda. The EU’s growing interest in the region, including its vast hydrocarbon resources and its position as the critical energy and transport infrastructure corridor linking Central Asia and the Caucasus, especially the Caspian Basin with Europe, has conditioned its involvement in the region on economic interests (Ibrayeva et.al., 2018: 157).

The inclusion of the three republics in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 was the next turning point in EU-South Caucasus relations. Despite the adoption of Action Plans to help the South Caucasus states approach European standards, the EU has failed to increase its profile in conflict resolution in the region. Despite the adoption of Action Plans in 2006 to help these states approach European standards, the EU has failed to increase its profile in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus (International Crisis Group, 2006: 2). Although conflict resolution is addressed in the ENP Strategy Paper and individual Action Plans, these references have been vague, indicating a lack of a well-thought-out EU policy for conflict resolution in the region. While the issue of conflict resolution is addressed in both the ENP Strategy Paper and the individual Action Plans, these references have been rather vague across all documents, regardless of the growing understanding that the EU needs to raise its profile in conflict resolution in the region. For example, while emphasizing the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in the Action Plans, the fact that it underlines the “right to self-determination” with Armenia proves there is no well-thought-out EU policy for conflict resolution in the South Caucasus (Jafarova, 2011: 63-65). For this reason, the ENP is seen as an “indirect conflict prevention policy” or counterpart to the fact that the EU continues to avoid direct involvement in conflict resolution (Belyi, 2009: 222). The Eastern Partnership Program, which is another framework

far from designing a clear strategy for conflict resolution, was also evaluated as an attempt to camouflage the weakness of the Neighborhood Policy (Mikhelidze, 2009: 10). Since there are differences in security contexts between the regions concerned (Eastern Europe, South Caucasus) in the Eastern Partnership Initiative, several limitations and setbacks are likely to arise in implementing regional cooperation models that adversely affect the EU's role.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution in 2010 to support the conflict resolution process in the South Caucasus through confidence building. The resolution promised that the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty would accelerate EU activism in the region. However, the EU's role in conflict resolution remains considerably lower than other external actors such as the USA, Russia, and Türkiye, which have all-round advantages. Overall, the EU's involvement in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus has been indirect and limited, despite its growing strategic interest in the region (European Parliament, 2010).

The EU's Position in the Russo-Georgian War

The Russia-Georgia war of 2008 was a short but intense armed conflict that erupted in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and involved the intervention of Russian military forces on the side of the separatists. Also, this war is considered a significant event that unfolded in the post-Soviet space, highlighting the fragility of regional stability and the challenges of conflict resolution. The war revealed profound deficiencies in the Russian armed forces. Moscow was surprised by the poor performance of its air power, and more importantly the inability of different services to work together (Shiraliyev, 2023a: 9). A better understanding of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War offers important insights into the motivations that underpinned the Russian annexation of Crimea and how the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine has unfolded. The war posed a serious challenge for the EU, which had declared its ambition to play a more active role in global security and to promote a peaceful and cooperative neighborhood. In response to this conflict, the EU sought to play a prominent role in mediating and resolving the tensions between Russia and Georgia.

The EU's primary objective in addressing the Russia-Georgia war was to promote peace, stability, and the preservation of territorial integrity in the region. Recognizing the potential ramifications of the conflict, the EU aimed to prevent further escalation and mitigate the humanitarian and security consequences. Furthermore, the EU sought to foster a sustainable peace agreement, establish a constructive dialogue between the conflicting parties, and support the implementation of international law and norms.²

In relation to Georgia's secessionist conflicts, the EU's conflict resolution policies have four different objectives: conflict prevention, conflict transformation, international conflict management and conflict settlement.

The EU adopted a multifaceted approach to resolving the Russia-Georgia conflict, combining diplomatic efforts, mediation, and support for the peace process. Firstly, the EU engaged in diplomatic initiatives by actively encouraging dialogue between the conflicting parties. High-level EU officials visited Moscow and Tbilisi, urging both sides to exercise restraint and engage in negotiations. Additionally, the EU deployed its Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), contributing to confidence-

² See: (Forsberg and Seppo, 2011: 121-137).

building measures and facilitating communication between Russia and Georgia (EUMM, 2018). Mediation played a crucial role in the EU's conflict resolution policy. The EU, alongside the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), initiated the Geneva International Discussions (GID), serving as a platform for negotiations and conflict resolution. These discussions aimed to address core issues, including the security situation in the conflict zones, the return of displaced persons, and the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The EU actively participated in the GID, supporting dialogue and fostering a peaceful resolution (Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 2023).

Despite the EU's concerted efforts, the conflict resolution process faced several challenges and yielded limited outcomes. One of the major obstacles was Russia's reluctance to fully engage with the EU as a mediator, emphasizing its preference for bilateral talks with Georgia. This hindered the EU's ability to exert significant influence on the conflict resolution process. Moreover, the unresolved status of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia continued to impede progress, as the conflicting parties held divergent positions on their future.

Nevertheless, the EU's conflict resolution policy did achieve some notable results. The deployment of the EUMM played a crucial role in reducing tensions on the ground and facilitating humanitarian assistance. The EU also provided substantial financial support for post-conflict reconstruction and development projects in Georgia, which aimed to foster stability and reconciliation. Furthermore, the Geneva International Discussions, with the EU's active involvement, created a platform for ongoing negotiations and maintained international attention on the conflict. The EU's conflict resolution policy towards the Russia-Georgia war demonstrated the organization's commitment to promoting peace, stability, and adherence to international norms in the region. While facing challenges and limited outcomes, the EU's multifaceted approach, including diplomatic efforts, mediation, and financial assistance, contributed to mitigating the conflict's immediate consequences and maintaining a dialogue between the conflicting parties. Moving forward, the EU should continue to actively engage in the conflict resolution process, encouraging all parties to pursue peaceful solutions and supporting initiatives that facilitate a lasting resolution to the Russia-Georgia conflict.

The EU's Role as Mediator Before and After The 44-Day Karabakh War

The Karabakh conflict has been ongoing since the early 1990s and has been one of the most protracted and complex in the post-Soviet space over the years. Despite several attempts to resolve the issue peacefully, the parties have failed to reach a lasting and comprehensive settlement. The EU, as a regional actor along with other international actors such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, had been involved in mediating the conflict. The EU's involvement in the mediation efforts primarily consisted of providing political support, advocating for a peaceful resolution, and encouraging dialogue between the parties involved. The EU, through its External Action Service (EEAS), issued statements calling for a peaceful settlement and emphasizing the importance of negotiations. It also supported confidence-building measures, humanitarian assistance, and projects promoting reconciliation and dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani communities (Helfi, 2023).

However, the EU's influence as a mediator was limited due to several factors. First, the EU had to contend with the primary mediation efforts led by the Minsk Group, which had more direct involvement in the negotiation process. Second, the conflict remained highly complex and deeply rooted, with

multiple historical, ethnic, and geopolitical dimensions, making it challenging to find a mutually acceptable solution. Third, the EU's political leverage has been limited by its lack of direct involvement in the talks, its internal divisions among member states, and its competing interests with other regional powers, such as Russia and Türkiye (Shiraliyev, 2022c: 105-107).

Humanitarianly, the EU has been one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to the conflict-affected populations, both in Karabakh and in the surrounding regions. The EU has assisted in various sectors, such as food security, health care, education, housing, and infrastructure. The EU has also supported the activities of international organizations and civil society groups working on humanitarian issues. However, the EU's humanitarian role has been hampered by the lack of access to some areas due to security reasons, the politicization of aid by the parties, and the insufficient coordination among donors and implementers.

Despite the military aggression and the refusal to implement the four resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council in 1993 (Nos. 822, 853, 874 and 884) demanding the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, no sanctions were imposed against Armenia. No distinction was made between the aggressor state and the occupied state. On the contrary, Armenia has strengthened the occupation, committed war crimes, illegal settlement and illegal exploitation of our natural resources, and destroyed the cultural and religious heritage of the Azerbaijani people. Emboldened by impunity, Armenia has gone even further, threatening Azerbaijan with a new war for new territories and resorting to military provocations along the state border and the former line of contact.

The Republic of Azerbaijan, the largest state in the South Caucasus in terms of area, influence, geopolitical position, economic development level and natural resources, won a decisive victory over Armenia in the Second Karabakh War that started on September 27, 2020, liberated its territories that had been under occupation for thirty years and proved to be the most powerful state in the region militarily (Shiraliyev, 2022b: 184). Unfortunately, the application of double standards and selective approach regarding the norms of international law and the decisions of international organizations has a negative impact on the fair resolution of conflicts in the world. Following the war, a ceasefire agreement was brokered by Russia, sidelining the EU's role as a mediator in the immediate aftermath. Despite the support of some European countries, such as France, the occupying Armenia was defeated by the might of the Azerbaijani army for only 44 days. Azerbaijan's rapid and well-organized military offensives led to Armenia's disorderly retreat from the occupied districts (*rayon*) with heavy losses. With the signing of the act of capitulation, which meant the surrender of Armenia and included the demands of Azerbaijan, the seven Armenian-occupied districts adjacent to Karabakh were unconditionally and completely cleared of Armenian troops and civilians who had settled in these rayons without the consent of Azerbaijan. In addition, some settlements of the Karabakh region, especially the city of Shusha, which is of great importance for Azerbaijan, came under Azerbaijani control (Shiraliyev, 2023b: 34). Azerbaijan has proved to the world that it has sufficient military power to liberate its territory from occupation, but that it prioritizes the peace process for the settlement of the conflict in the region. Despite the constant and direct attacks on its own civilian population during the war and despite being provoked to do so, it has never targeted civilians or used disproportionate force. A controlled and peace-oriented process management Azerbaijan has realized it. This attitude of Azerbaijan is an important step for the future of the region. The steps taken by Azerbaijan towards the resolution of the Karabakh conflict have contributed to laying the foundation for a new multilateral cooperation environment in the

region in which Armenia will also participate. Because the realization of a lasting peace and cooperation process in the region can only be possible within the framework of ensuring the territorial integrity of the countries of the region and their respect for each other's sovereignty (Hasanoğlu, Memmedov & Maharramov, 2020: 523).

The European Union's (EU) new policy objectives for the post-2020 period prioritize enhancing security in the Eastern Partnership region, including Azerbaijan and Armenia. Rather than intervening militarily, the EU aims to strengthen the economy, communications, and society to achieve greater security in the region (European Council, 2023). The EU's participation in establishing sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is crucial for protecting its immediate environment and creating a security belt within its borders. As a normative superpower, the EU's interest in ensuring sustainable peace in the region is both a matter of welfare and security within the EU itself. Mediation activities between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been promoted through negotiations and projects under the Eastern Partnership, as well as official summits between the leaders of the EU and the conflicting countries. The EU's support for the territorial integrity of the countries in the region and the inviolability of their borders has been clearly expressed, and its mediation attempts have been more confident when Karabakh was stated as Azerbaijani territory (Azerbaijan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The EU's meeting in Brussels with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in December 2021 was a significant step towards showing the importance of possible cooperation between the conflicting parties in the South Caucasus and revealing the areas where reconciliation is needed (Huseynov, 2021). However, diplomatic talks and negotiations to resolve the remaining issues in the region after the 44-Day Karabakh War did not yield positive results.

The large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and as a result, the increasing international isolation of Russia, the traditional security hegemon in the South Caucasus, in the political scene, has both political and economic implications for Türkiye, Iran, and China as well as the EU throughout the Caucasus. created new economic opportunities. In the face of disappointment with Moscow's actions, the EU noticed opportunities to increase its role as a conflict resolution partner, especially in the Karabakh conflict. Trapped in Ukraine, Russia has become an increasingly unreliable guarantor of its de facto control over Karabakh. After the Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, Russia increased its influence in the region, gained power as the sole mediator of the 10 November 2020 triple ceasefire declaration, and succeeded in eliminating the other Minsk Group co-chairs – France, and the USA. By deploying peacekeepers to the Karabakh conflict zone, Russia has also fulfilled a long-standing goal in the region. However, Russia's peacekeeping mission in Karabakh failed to fulfill its peacekeeping role even before the all-out invasion of Ukraine. The fact that Russia had to transfer a large amount of equipment and personnel from Karabakh to Ukraine caused the Armenian population to express their dissatisfaction due to security concerns (Chanadiri, 2022). Starting in the summer of 2022, Azerbaijan demanded that the Russian peacekeepers withdraw from the Lachin Corridor (the only gateway connecting Armenia to Karabakh), which is controlled by the Russian peacekeepers within the scope of the 10 November declaration (Gavin, 2022).

On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense launched a limited counter-terrorist operation in the region where illegal armed units are located in order to restore Azerbaijan's constitutional order and neutralize them. In launching the operation, Azerbaijan made a number of demands: the Armenian armed units will lay down their arms and surrender, the illegal "administrative

institutions" in the region will be dissolved and the process of integration of the civilian population within the framework of the constitution and laws of Azerbaijan will begin. Azerbaijan had announced that the operation could be halted if all these demands were met. Within 24 hours of the start of the operation, the illegal troops in the region accepted Azerbaijan's demands and surrendered. The main reason for this was the lack of external support for the separatists and the successful military operation of the Azerbaijani army. When the Azerbaijani army first took control of strategic heights and the supply routes of these armed groups, they had no choice but to surrender. Indeed, Armenia was adamant that it would not decide the fate of the Armenians living in Karabakh against their will, while the international community wanted Azerbaijan and the Karabakh Armenians to start a direct dialogue. Therefore, the decision of Karabakh Armenians themselves to integrate into Azerbaijan invalidated the arguments of Armenia and its supporters. On September 21, 2023, in the Azerbaijani city of Yevlakh, talks were held on the integration of Karabakh Armenians within the framework of the Azerbaijani constitution. After this meeting, Azerbaijan used the Aghdam-Khankendi road to meet the needs of civilians in Karabakh. Thus, the Aghdam-Khankendi road, which had been blocked by illegal armed groups for a long time, was opened. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree establishing a commission for the integration of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijan. On the one hand, this commission will work to ensure the functionality of Azerbaijani state institutions in Karabakh in the future, to solve the socio-economic problems of the Armenians in Karabakh, as well as their integration into Azerbaijan. Ultimately, this operation meant the defeat not only of the illegal armed units in Karabakh, but also of the forces supporting them. In fact, these developments are the result of the failed diplomacy of the United States of America (USA) and the EU. Because the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides have been conducting peace talks recently with the mediation of the US and the EU, and frankly, Azerbaijan hoped that the conflict would be resolved in this way. However, both sides' recent unilateral voicing of Armenia's demands and unjustified allegations against Azerbaijan, France's radical anti-Azerbaijani positions, statements against Azerbaijan in the US Senate and ignoring Armenia's violations of the agreements caused the peace talks to spiral out of control. While this situation caused serious reactions in Azerbaijan on the one hand, on the other hand, it led to the impossibility of resolving the issue through negotiations. The voices opposing this operation in Western countries, which recognize Karabakh as Azerbaijani territory and are aware of the presence of illegal weapons there, further increased Azerbaijan's distrust of the West. In conclusion, the anti-terrorist operation launched by Azerbaijan in Karabakh, Azerbaijan's own territory, is the result of the failure of the EU- and US-brokered peace talks and Armenia's failure to fulfill its obligations (Veliyev, 2023).

The surprise joint statement of the Presidency of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia on December 7, 2023 reversed the 30-year state of war and the increasingly tense atmosphere between the two states in recent months. While there was talk in Armenia that Azerbaijan wanted to prolong the peace talks and in Azerbaijan that Armenia wanted to prolong the peace talks, this declaration was an important step in easing tensions and building trust between the parties. This declaration, which is the first joint declaration after the two states gained independence, was also welcomed by Turkey, the US, the EU, Russia and many international actors. According to this declaration, the two countries reaffirm their intention to normalize relations and reach a peace agreement on the basis of respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity; Azerbaijan releases 32 Armenian soldiers and Armenia releases 2 Azerbaijani soldiers; Armenia agrees to Azerbaijan's participation in the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP29) by withdrawing its candidacy;

Armenia and Azerbaijan hope that other countries in the Eastern European Group will support Azerbaijan's hosting bid; the Republic of Azerbaijan supports Armenia's candidacy for membership of the COP Bureau of the Eastern European Group. This joint statement is very important in terms of setting a positive agenda on the road to a peace agreement between the two countries. There are several reasons for this. First, the parties issued a bilateral declaration without the mediation of a third party. Whereas Armenia has always wanted a mediator between the parties, Azerbaijan has proposed to resolve issues on a bilateral basis. Second, it was a confidence-building step for Armenia to support Azerbaijan's candidacy to host an international meeting when the Armenian side had withdrawn in favor of Azerbaijan. Third, this declaration is not the result of pressure, but the product of common goodwill and political will. These three points will greatly contribute to the creation of a positive atmosphere between the parties (Veliyev, 2023).

The EU's mediating role in facilitating the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is of utmost importance for achieving lasting peace in the South Caucasus region. However, further EU engagement is essential to make significant progress in the peace process. As a regional power with considerable diplomatic influence, the EU can play a crucial role in bringing the two countries together to find a mutually acceptable resolution to their disputes. Through diplomatic efforts, the EU can help bridge the gap between Armenia and Azerbaijan and encourage dialogue to address the core issues at the heart of the conflict. By facilitating negotiations and acting as a neutral mediator, the EU can help build trust and foster an atmosphere of cooperation, essential for any sustainable peace agreement. Moreover, the EU can leverage its economic and political leverage to incentivize both parties to pursue peaceful solutions and avoid further escalation of hostilities. By offering economic support and trade incentives tied to peaceful cooperation, the EU can encourage Armenia and Azerbaijan to seek compromises and work towards a shared future. However, the EU's engagement should not be limited to high-level negotiations alone. It should also involve grassroots diplomacy and people-to-people contacts, promoting reconciliation and understanding between the societies of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Civil society organizations, educational programs, and cultural exchanges can all contribute to building trust and reducing animosities between the two nations. Overall, the EU's mediating role and increased engagement in the South Caucasus peace process can be a vital catalyst for achieving the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. By actively facilitating dialogue, offering incentives, and fostering reconciliation at various levels, the EU can make a meaningful contribution to the sustainable peace and stability of the region (Shiraliyev, 2023c: 68).

Conclusion

The European Union's conflict resolution policy in the South Caucasus is an important step towards reducing instability and tension in the region. Throughout this article, it has been focused on this European Union policy and discussed its various dimensions. Promoting dialogue between the parties in the conflict zones, prioritizing diplomatic efforts and mediation initiatives, and supporting humanitarian aid and economic development activities are the main features of the European Union's conflict resolution policy.

For the European Union's conflict resolution policy in the South Caucasus to be effective, it must ensure close cooperation, and coordination with local actors. At the same time, it is important to implement various peace-building programs and projects in cooperation with the international community and to conduct comprehensive analyses of the causes and consequences of the conflict.

The findings of this paper highlight the potential of the European Union's conflict resolution policy in the South Caucasus. However, the success of this policy will require sustained effort, patience, and a long-term perspective. Taking into account the deep historical, cultural, and political factors in the conflict regions, the European Union's contribution to the resolution processes will contribute to enhancing regional stability and security.

The article underscores the significance of the European Union (EU) adopting a proactive and consistent strategy to achieve its objectives in the South Caucasus region. The recommendations provided in the paper highlight the EU's geopolitical role in the area and propose measures to enhance its influence and efficacy. Here is a concise overview of the key recommendations:

1. *Dedicated Strategy for the South Caucasus:* The EU is advised to create a dedicated strategy tailored specifically for the South Caucasus region. This strategy should clearly outline the EU's objectives and elaborate on the methods it plans to employ to attain them. It should encompass a wide spectrum of areas, including security, political engagement, economic collaboration, and the promotion of shared norms and values.

2. *Multi-Dimensional Approach:* The recommended strategy should adopt a comprehensive approach that takes into account various dimensions such as security, political stability, economic growth, and the advancement of shared norms and values. This all-encompassing approach would enable the EU to effectively address the intricate challenges and opportunities existing in the South Caucasus region.

3. *Enhanced Field Presence:* The paper proposes that the EU should bolster its on-ground presence in the three countries of the South Caucasus. This could involve increasing the number of EU representatives, diplomats, and experts stationed in the region. A more robust field presence would facilitate improved coordination of EU initiatives and contribute to a more unified approach.

4. *Coherence in Efforts:* To maximize its impact, the EU should ensure greater coherence among different entities and actors involved in its undertakings in the South Caucasus. This entails aligning the efforts of the European Commission, the EU Special Representative, the President of the European Council, and the field operations in Georgia and Armenia. Moreover, bilateral efforts by EU member states should be harmonized to prevent duplication and achieve a harmonized approach.

5. *Balanced Engagement:* The article suggests that the EU's involvement in the South Caucasus should be well-balanced, addressing not only geopolitical and security considerations but also economic development and normative principles. By amalgamating these diverse dimensions, the EU can contribute to stability, prosperity, and democratic values in the region.

In conclusion, the European Union's conflict resolution policy in the South Caucasus should be seen as an important instrument for peace and stability in the region. This policy has the potential to serve the interests not only of the conflict regions but also of the international community. However, realizing this potential will require sustained efforts, cooperation and flexibility.

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