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Attempts to Build Peace Between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Post-War Period

Abstract

This article examines the European Union's (EU) role in the peacebuilding process between Armenia and Azerbaijan following Azerbaijan's restoration of sovereignty over Karabakh in September 2023. It analyzes the historical context of the conflict, emphasizing issues of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and international law. The study evaluates the evolution of the EU's foreign policy toward the South Caucasus, particularly through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership. Despite the EU's limited involvement during the conflict, its growing strategic interests have led to a more active engagement in post-conflict recovery and regional stability. The EU's approach prioritizes social learning and passive enforcement mechanisms over direct intervention, promoting dialogue, democratic governance, and adherence to international norms. The article concludes that the EU's effectiveness lies in prevention and reconstruction rather than in resolving entrenched geopolitical disputes.

Keywords: Post-war, Conflict Resolution, European Union, Azerbaijan, Armenia

Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan Arasında Savaş Sonrası Dönemde Barış İnşa Çabaları

Öz

Bu makale, Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) 2023 yılı Eylül ayında Azerbaycan'ın egemenliğini Karabağ üzerinde yeniden tesis etmesinin ardından, Azerbaycan ile Ermenistan arasındaki barış inşa sürecindeki rolünü incelemektedir. Çalışma, çatışmanın tarihsel bağlamını ele alarak toprak bütünlüğü, egemenlik ve uluslararası hukuk konularına odaklanmaktadır. Ayrıca, AB'nin Güney Kafkasya'ya yönelik dış politikasının evrimini, özellikle Avrupa Komşuluk Politikası (ENP) ve Doğu Ortaklığı çerçevesinde değerlendirmektedir. AB'nin çatışma sürecinde sınırlı bir rol oynamasına rağmen, bölgesel çıkarlarının artması, onu çatışma sonrası yeniden yapılanma ve istikrarın desteklenmesinde daha etkin bir aktör haline getirmiştir. AB'nin yaklaşımı, doğrudan müdahaleden ziyade sosyal öğrenme ve pasif uygulama mekanizmalarına öncelik vererek diyalog, demokratik yönetim ve uluslararası normlara bağlılığı teşvik

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etmektedir. Makale, AB'nin etkinliğinin doğrudan çözümünden ziyade çatışma önleme ve yeniden yapılanma alanlarında ortaya çıktığı sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaş Sonrası, Çatışma Çözümü, Avrupa Birliği, Azerbaycan, Ermenistan

Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the Armenian population residing in Karabakh declared the establishment of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.” Prior to this declaration, a referendum was held in the region with the direct support of the Soviet leadership, creating the appearance of broad public support for independence, and “elections” were organized in December. Although the “republic” formally proclaimed its independence in early 1992, this independence was never recognized by the international community. Soon after, armed clashes broke out between ethnic Armenians in the region and the Azerbaijani armed forces. A ceasefire was brokered in 1994 which, despite occasional violations, largely remained in force for years. Situated in southwestern Azerbaijan, the Karabakh region had historically been recognized as an autonomous oblast within the former Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and was home to a substantial Armenian population. From 1992 until its dissolution in 2023, the region was governed by an unrecognized but de facto self-administered authority. The autonomous oblast originally covered approximately 4,400 square kilometers; however, during the conflict, the self-proclaimed republic expanded its control to nearly 7,000 square kilometers (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025, April 9).

The unresolved status of the region led to recurrent violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, most notably during the First Karabakh War (1988–1994) and again in 2020. In the early 1990s, Armenian forces in Karabakh not only consolidated control over the enclave itself but also advanced into neighboring Azerbaijani territories. This resulted in mass displacement on both sides, particularly among Azerbaijanis, many of whom became internally displaced persons (IDPs). By the early 21st century, roughly one-seventh of Azerbaijan’s territory remained outside the government’s control, with the humanitarian consequences of displacement still deeply felt. Periodic elections organized by the de facto authorities in Karabakh were consistently rejected by Azerbaijan and deemed illegitimate under international law (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024, April 11).

In 2020, tensions flared again, leading to the most intense clashes since the 1990s. In September, Azerbaijan launched a military campaign that resulted in significant territorial gains, including the strategically important city of Shusha. On 9 November 2020, a ceasefire agreement

was signed under which Armenian forces withdrew, while Russian peacekeepers were deployed in the region, particularly along the Lachin Corridor connecting Karabakh with Armenia. Azerbaijan not only regained territories liberated during the war but also restored control over the districts of Aghdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin. In 2023, Azerbaijan fully reasserted its sovereignty over the region, leading to the official dissolution of the separatist Karabakh (Artsakh) Republic. Following this development, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan declared Armenia's readiness to recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024, April 11).

Thus, Azerbaijan's restoration of complete control over Karabakh has brought about a significant shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the region. This development has removed one of the main obstacles to peace and created a historic opportunity for the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At present, the focus rests on ongoing bilateral negotiations based on mutual recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025).

The Role of International Organizations in the Resolution of the Karabakh Conflict

The United Nations

The United Nations (UN) played a significant role in the early 1990s by adopting a series of Security Council resolutions that supported Azerbaijan's legal claims over Karabakh. These resolutions collectively emphasized the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of armed forces from the occupied Azerbaijani territories, and respect for Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In particular, Resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884 reaffirmed Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and demanded the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied regions, including Kalbajar, Aghdam, Zangilan, and others. These documents also called upon the parties to engage in peace negotiations within the framework of the OSCE (formerly CSCE) Minsk process and provided an important legal basis that strengthened Azerbaijan's position in the international arena (United Nations Security Council, 1993).

OSCE (Minsk Group)

The OSCE Minsk Group was established in 1992 by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, now OSCE) with the aim of facilitating a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, following Azerbaijan's military victory in the 2020 war, President Ilham Aliyev declared that the conflict had been resolved and criticized the Minsk Group for its ineffectiveness over the course of three decades. The format effectively lost its relevance due to the weakening cooperation among the co-

chair countries—Russia, the United States, and France—as well as broader global geopolitical tensions. In 2023 and 2024, President Aliyev firmly opposed the revival of this format and called for its formal dissolution (TASS, 2024, February 16).

European Union (EU)

A considerable body of academic literature and policy analysis exists on the role of the European Union (EU) in the Georgia–Russia conflict; however, the same level of attention has not been extended to the Karabakh conflict. One of the main reasons for this discrepancy is that, during the 1990s, while the Karabakh region was being occupied by Armenia, the EU had not yet emerged as a strong actor in foreign policy and played only a limited role in resolving conflicts in its neighborhood. This raises the question: what prompted the EU’s increased interest in the issue during the 2000s?

First, the deepening of European integration enabled the EU to adopt a more unified and proactive stance in foreign policy. Second, the EU’s enlargement not only brought new member states into the Union but also expanded its borders, thereby bringing new neighboring regions, such as the South Caucasus, within the EU’s sphere of interest. Today, the EU consists of 27 member states, with several candidate countries awaiting accession. In particular, Turkey’s candidate status, despite ongoing challenges, has further reinforced the EU’s engagement in the South Caucasus. The launch of the Eastern Partnership program in 2009 marked a turning point, as the EU formally recognized the South Caucasus countries as part of “Eastern Europe,” signaling that their security concerns were now included within Europe’s broader security agenda.

The European Union’s Competencies in the Conflict Resolution Process

With the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, the European Union (EU) officially articulated its foreign policy objectives for the first time. These objectives included conflict resolution, the maintenance of peace, the enhancement of international security, the promotion of regional cooperation, the fight against transnational crime, and the advancement of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (European Union, 1992). These priorities were further reinforced through subsequent treaties and policy developments, ultimately being codified in the Lisbon Treaty. The Lisbon Treaty emphasizes that the EU’s external actions should be directed towards preserving peace, preventing conflicts, and strengthening international security. Such actions must be conducted in accordance with the Union’s foundational principles—democracy, human rights, the

rule of law, equality, solidarity, and respect for international law and the Charter of the United Nations (European Union, 2007).

The 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) directed the European Union's (EU) geographical focus toward stabilizing its neighboring regions, assessing nearby armed conflicts, weak governance, and socio-political instability as direct security threats. The Strategy emphasized the creation of a "ring of well-governed countries" around the EU, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, to foster strong cooperative relationships with these states (Council of the European Union, 2003).

This strategic approach links the EU's core values—democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—to its broader objectives, namely conflict prevention and the promotion of regional cooperation. These values serve not merely as normative goals but also as practical instruments for preventing and resolving ethno-political conflicts arising from legal violations and systemic injustices. The EU has explicitly stated that sustainable peace and security require strengthening institutions, developing civil society, and promoting socio-economic progress (Commission, 2001a).

The EU does not act solely as a normative power; it also maintains practical interests in promoting peace and democratic governance within its immediate neighborhood. The European Security Strategy notes that unresolved or "frozen" conflicts—regardless of the persistence of active violence—pose a threat to EU stability, given their proximity and potential for spillover effects. "Frozen conflicts," such as those in Cyprus, Abkhazia, and Karabakh, are typically characterized by long-term stalemates resulting from a military victory by a minority group (often with external support) and the establishment of a *de facto* authority unrecognized under international law (Tocci, 2007).

In addressing such conflicts, the EU generally supports governance-sharing or federal solutions that balance territorial integrity with minority collective rights and autonomy claims. This approach has been evident in the EU's support for the Annan Plan in Cyprus, mediation in the Serbia-Montenegro union, and backing for UN and OSCE-proposed federal solutions in Georgia's conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In other cases, the EU promotes integration through the enhancement of individual, cultural, and minority rights. For example, support for the rights of Kurds in Turkey, including decentralization and effective political participation, reflects this approach. The EU has rarely endorsed secession—exceptions include Kosovo and Montenegro—and only in specific cases, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has it supported a two-state

solution, aligning with international consensus that recognizes the right of peoples to self-determination (Tocci, 2007).

Regarding the Karabakh conflict, the EU has consistently supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and rejected unilateral measures that could undermine the peace process. For instance, in an official statement dated 2 August 2002, the EU declared that it did not recognize the legitimacy of the presidential elections held in Nagorno-Karabakh and reaffirmed its support for Azerbaijan's sovereignty and the mediation efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group (Council of the European Union, 2002). This position was reiterated in 2007, emphasizing the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons to return home and participate in political processes. The EU reaffirmed its commitment to achieving peace through negotiations and its support for the diplomatic efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group (Council of the European Union, 2007).

The Potential Role of the EU in the Peacebuilding Process

How can the European Union (EU) contribute to the resolution of ethno-political conflicts through contractual relations and associated institutional, legal, political, and economic instruments? One of the EU's key mechanisms is its ability to alter the incentive structures underlying conflicts. This is achieved by binding the parties to one another through mutual contractual arrangements. Such agreements—whether in the form of Association Agreements, trade deals, or partnership frameworks—contain expectations that can influence the behavior of the participants.

Conditionality as a Tool for Conflict Transformation

Over the past two decades, particularly during the EU's eastward enlargement, the Union has increasingly applied conditionality as a central strategy. This approach aims to influence reforms in governance, civil society, and economic structures. In general, conditionality involves the application of rewards or penalties contingent upon the fulfillment of certain obligations. Politically, this is accompanied by requirements to comply with human rights standards and democratic principles in order to benefit from EU advantages (Smith, 1998).

Conditionality can take the following forms:

- **Positive (incentive-based):** Benefits are offered in exchange for the fulfillment of pre-determined conditions. This form is typically applied in financial assistance programs or during membership negotiations.

- **Negative (sanction-based):** If obligations are not met, benefits may be reduced, suspended, or withdrawn entirely. This approach is evident in the EU's sanctions imposed on countries such as Serbia, Libya, Belarus, and Iran.

These obligations may encompass political, economic, legal, institutional, and technical dimensions and are often aligned with the EU's *acquis communautaire*. Conditionality may be applied *ex ante* (before benefits are granted) or *ex post* (after benefits are provided).

Effectiveness and Limitations of Conditionality

Both positive and negative conditionality aim to influence the behavior of actors, yet their implementation differs in practice. Positive conditionality enhances credibility by aligning the interests of donor and recipient parties. However, if the EU becomes overly eager in offering benefits, ensuring compliance with conditions may become difficult. Negative conditionality, applied for example through sanctions, can backfire if the target country finds alternative allies or resource providers. Moreover, such an approach may reinforce a “siege mentality” within the target country and weaken its willingness to compromise or implement reforms (Tocci, 2007).

Conditionality Beyond Membership

Outside the context of EU membership, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) provides a softer form of conditionality. However, the limited benefits offered under this policy—compared to those available to candidate countries—reduce its transformative potential. Imposing membership-level requirements on non-candidate countries can be both unfair and ineffective. Nevertheless, EU policy documents, including European Parliament reports, emphasize that Association Agreements signed with Armenia and Azerbaijan should support the peaceful resolution of conflicts to promote regional stability, while conditioning EU support on measurable progress in human rights and democratic governance (European Parliament, 2012).

Social Learning

Beyond material incentives, the EU's contractual relations can influence the dynamics of conflicts through social learning mechanisms—a gradual process of change resulting from persuasion and the dissemination of norms. Unlike conditionality, this mechanism focuses not on actors' cost-benefit calculations but on internal transformation, wherein actors voluntarily internalize EU norms and values.

As described by Checkel and later elaborated by Tocci (2007), this process—termed *complex learning*—can lead actors to adopt new values and interests without direct incentives, eventually guiding them to act according to a different *logic of appropriateness*. Such transformation may

involve a reconceptualization of fundamental principles, including sovereignty, democracy, and human rights, and a shift from unilateralism and confrontation toward dialogue, compromise, and adherence to international law (Tocci, 2007). However, the success of social learning is not guaranteed. The process may stall or produce counterproductive effects if the EU's normative framework appears illegitimate, if domestic practices are deeply entrenched, or if institutional linkages are weak. In such cases, reform initiatives may provoke backlash, reinforce authoritarian tendencies, or strengthen nationalist rhetoric. Even if formal agreements are achieved through social learning, these agreements may not lead to sustainable solutions unless they address the core needs and concerns of all parties.

Application of Passive Enforcement

The third mechanism through which the EU can influence conflict transformation is passive enforcement—an indirect promotion of rules-based behavior through the EU's legal and institutional frameworks in external relations. Unlike conditionality, passive enforcement does not rely on rewards or punishment. Instead, it assumes that cooperation within clear and legally binding rules will gradually incentivize third parties to comply.

Two conditions are essential for the effective operation of passive enforcement:

*Rules must be clearly defined and incorporated into EU agreements.

*Third parties must not perceive these rules as a burden or must view cooperation with the EU as inevitable.

This mechanism is particularly significant in contexts where sanctions or conditional approaches are politically infeasible. Its effectiveness depends on the third parties' sense of EU membership or aspiration for deeper integration. In the absence of such motivation, parties may resist rules-based cooperation—especially in deeply rooted conflicts shaped by long-standing state ideologies and identities built on enmity.

Application in the South Caucasus

In the South Caucasus, particularly regarding the Karabakh conflict, social learning and passive enforcement offer a longer-term and more sustainable approach than coercive conditionality. Through the ENP and its Eastern Partnership dimension, the EU has implemented initiatives to promote dialogue with Armenia and Azerbaijan and support alignment with European norms.

Through sustained interaction with EU institutions and programs, conflict parties may gradually reconsider established positions on identity, sovereignty, and governance. Over time, this increases the likelihood of adopting more peaceful approaches based on compromise and international law. However, these processes are inherently gradual and dependent on political will.

Passive enforcement provides an alternative path by reinforcing cooperation through legal frameworks. Yet its success depends heavily on the willingness of conflicting states to cooperate with the EU and accept its normative requirements—a challenge in the case of Karabakh, where both Armenia and Azerbaijan have structured national policies around mutual hostility. Changing such deeply entrenched narratives, especially after decades of conflict-oriented state-building, carries significant political risks.

European Neighborhood Policy and Conflict Resolution

The ENP explicitly seeks to promote the EU's core values—democracy, human rights, rule of law, and good governance—as a means to ensure stability, security, and prosperity in its eastern and southern neighborhoods. One of ENP's primary objectives is to strengthen the EU's role in regional conflict resolution, presenting this as a key aspect of EU external action. This includes counter-terrorism, prevention of weapons of mass destruction proliferation, protection of international law, and promotion of peace-based settlements (Commission, 2004a). The ENP Strategy Document reinforces this commitment, emphasizing that the EU's privileged relations with neighboring states are based on mutually shared values, including respect for human and minority rights, the promotion of good-neighborly relations, and adherence to international law—preconditions for sustainable peace and regional cooperation.

To achieve these goals, the EU employs a constructive engagement strategy, combining diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and, occasionally, military tools. These measures are implemented through bilateral agreements and contractual frameworks, targeting the gradual integration of partner countries into the EU's economic, legal, and political systems. Such contractual relations are not merely integration instruments; they aim to encourage long-term structural change within and among neighboring states, prevent and resolve conflicts, and create a basis for post-conflict reconstruction (Commission, 2001a, 2001b). Importantly, the ENP does not aim to replace existing agreements—such as Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) or Association Agreements (AAs). Instead, it builds upon these agreements, strengthening and expanding the *acquis* through country-specific Action Plans. These plans include concrete measures for regional cooperation, conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction,

while also promoting interpersonal contacts and intensive dialogue to support peaceful political settlements (Commission, 2004a). Despite these ambitions, the link between ENP instruments and actual conflict resolution remains underdeveloped. The EU tends to prioritize post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding over direct mediation, although it has taken certain steps to enhance its potential in this area, such as mediation efforts, security sector reform, disarmament, and peace-training programs.

Country-specific ENP programs reflect this approach. The National Indicative Program for Azerbaijan highlights EU support for achieving a peace agreement and maximizing post-conflict benefits. The corresponding program for Armenia emphasizes the EU's engagement in monitoring the peace process, reconstruction, and infrastructure recovery, particularly in transport, energy, and demining (Crises Group, 2006). These measures aim to create the socio-economic conditions necessary for long-term peace and regional reintegration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the European Union holds a stronger position in preventing conflicts and supporting post-conflict reconstruction than in direct conflict resolution. The EU's main strengths lie in fostering interpersonal contacts, promoting confidence-building measures, strengthening regional cooperation, and funding joint initiatives among civil society organizations representing the parties. This approach aligns with the EU's early vision of "making war impossible," promoting peace through deeper integration.

Nonetheless, unresolved or frozen conflicts, such as recurring violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, pose serious obstacles to such cooperation. While the EU generally prefers to avoid direct intervention, it is often compelled to engage in conflict resolution within its neighborhood. Through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and particularly the Eastern Partnership, the EU supports stability and encourages the development of amicable relations between conflicting parties. In this context, the EU favors mechanisms such as social learning and passive enforcement over coercive conditionality. The more gradual and constructive approach of social learning allows parties to reconsider their values and strategies—for instance, by promoting respect for human rights, democratic norms, and the rule of law, and fostering a culture of negotiation and compromise instead of unilateral action and violence.

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