

## **Proposals for the EU's Contribution Towards the Peaceful Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict began in the final years of the Soviet Union and developed into a fully-fledged war in the early 1990's. The Minsk Group established under the OSCE auspices has been facilitating negotiations between parties to the conflict since 1992. It is co-chaired by three senior diplomats representing France, Russia, and the USA.

Nagorno-Karabakh representatives participated in the talks until the late 1990's. Despite the failure of the Minsk Group to broker an agreement, an international compromise to maintain the format of the status negotiations persists.

The European Union currently plays no role in the peace process. When asked about their potential contribution, the European External Action Service (EEAS) declare themselves incompetent and limits their contribution to expressing support for the Minsk Group. The EU funds a number of small-scale initiatives under the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK), but it has limited impact and outreach.

Constant skirmishes and ceasefire violations, and the outbreak of open hostilities in 2016 however, demonstrate that the peace process is in urgent need of support. The EU certainly has a role to play.

The suggestions outlined below were formulated by the European Friends of Armenia (EuFoA) and the Armenian General Benevolent Union Europe (AGBU Europe) to initiate a discussion on the best way for the EU to actively engage with Nagorno-Karabakh. A number of MEPs, NGO activists, academics, and representatives of the de-facto authorities in Stepanakert have contributed their views on the subject on the occasion of a recent [event on the topic organised at the European Parliament](#). This document has been drafted to take those comments into account.

EuFoA and the AGBU Europe share the view that, by acting upon some of these recommendations, the EU and its member states could help de-escalate tensions around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and contribute to confidence-building among all sides in the conflict. There are indeed meaningful ways for the EU to contribute to the normalisation of relations and to conflict resolution without interfering with the OSCE Minsk Group process.

### ***The context of EU action***

The primary responsibility of the Minsk Group negotiators is to broker an agreement on the status of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and to help prepare a roadmap from conflict to peaceful co-existence. The proposals presented here do not include any initiative directly related to the military and political aspects of the conflict, nor do they include any measure directly related to the legal status of the territory.

To advance the cause of peace, the EU should therefore challenge and incentivize authorities on all sides to tolerate, support, and even actively participate in projects that might help change entrenched perceptions and offer models of effective cooperation. The EU also has the potential to support the humanitarian initiatives of other credible neutral actors.

### ***The EU should support demining in the region***

Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the most heavily mined territories in the world; it also has the highest per capita incidence of mine-related injuries and fatalities in the world. Demining has so far been conducted by the British NGO Halo Trust. It has received mostly private funding, as well as funding from USAID.

The EU has consistently advocated against the use of landmines globally and has supported demining activities throughout the world. As recently as [February 2018](#), the EU published a [comprehensive policy document](#) emphasising its commitment to demining worldwide. The estimated budget needed for completing the demining of Nagorno-Karabakh is roughly 3.5 million euros. This is a negligible amount for the EU budget, but it would yield meaningful improvements to the lives of people in Nagorno-Karabakh and render the area safer for future generations, regardless of their future status, which should serve the interest of all parties.

This initiative garnered support both from the political circles in the European Parliament and experts from academia and NGO sector, as well as from the de facto authorities in Stepanakert.

The EU already successfully cooperates with the Halo Trust in many places around the world, so working with them in Nagorno-Karabakh should pose no problem.

### ***The EU can contribute to developing confidence-building measures***

Creating a measure of trust between communities affected by conflict is a key EU objective in the South Caucasus and the EU has already developed a similar initiative in the region – the [Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism \(COBERM\)](#) – implemented in Georgia with the UNDP. COBERM yielded positive results in a wide number of areas such as: facilitated access to timely medical care; improvements to agricultural production; youth exchanges ("Youth Peace Express"); gender equality; and establishing ties across conflict divides.

In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, greater trust could be generated through such initiatives as: the coordinated management of water sources; preventing wildfires near the contact line; introducing humanitarian flights between Stepanakert and Yerevan; and cross-border projects aimed at improving the condition of people living along the international Armenian-Azerbaijani border.

Water shortages and wildfires adversely impact the livelihoods of people in these areas. A jointly managed prevention system, backed by EU agencies' know-how, could contribute not only towards confidence-building, but towards the overall improvement of the lives of people impacted.

There are currently no flights out of Stepanakert as Azerbaijan threatens to shoot down any plane flying over the territory. As a result, people in Nagorno-Karabakh face precarious conditions traveling to Yerevan for medical services that are not available in Stepanakert, particularly during winter months.

Despite some late efforts by the governments, insecurity and poor living conditions persist on both sides of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. Cross-border projects could help improve the livelihoods of people indirectly affected by the conflict and could significantly contribute to confidence building.

Drawing from its experience in confronting other frozen conflicts, the EU could also initiate a shuttle-diplomacy dialogue between Baku, Stepanakert, and Yerevan limited to civilian confidence-building modelled on the so-called "technical dialogue" between Belgrade and Pristina. A "technical dialogue" between Caucasian capitals could serve as a platform to address the aforementioned issues in a status-neutral manner and without prejudice to the peace settlement. Sessions could take place under the auspices of the EUSR, on neutral grounds, such as at their Tbilisi office.

***The EU can help create a space for normalisation of relations between non-institutional actors***

At the moment, Armenian and Azerbaijani civil society entertain almost no contact. For example, it is virtually impossible for Armenians to visit Azerbaijan, and even long-distance cooperation between NGOs is hampered by the authorities in Baku. In unison with aggressive rhetoric and even hate speech, these adversely affect any attempt at confidence-building.

In parallel with the existing initiatives, the EU should propose holding regular low-key civil society dialogues with the participation of key stakeholders, including representatives of NK CSOs and Azerbaijanis from Karabakh, to review the evolution of the situation. NGOs should meet alternatively in Yerevan and in Baku under the auspices of the EU delegations in respective cities.

The EU could also contribute more towards real capacity-building for civil society organisations in NK to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the needs of their communities. Current efforts under the EPNK and PeaCE umbrellas leave much to be desired.

Additionally, the European institutions should encourage both parties to set up a system allowing for a small number of former residents to visit their homelands (i.e. Azeris from NK and Armenia and Armenians from Azerbaijan) and to create such conditions where these visits are carried out securely and in a positive climate.

Both sides accuse one another of destroying cultural heritage. Such destruction is a signal that people associated with a particular group can never return. Erasing the traces of ethnic cleansing, furthermore, is a prerequisite to denial, and therefore to impunity. Protecting cultural heritage thus helps prevent future ethnic cleansing.

A neutral task force comprised of UNESCO experts and other specialists, under EU patronage, should investigate the extent to which cultural heritage has been destroyed since the beginning of the conflict and should formulate recommendations to the parties aimed at preventing further destructions, repairing the damage done where possible, and addressing the consequences of irreversible destruction.

***The EU should provide support to human rights initiatives in the context of the conflict***

The absence of any monitoring on the ground creates conditions conducive to human rights violations. The International Federation for Human Rights even considers that this absence contributed to the latest outbreak of military hostilities between 2 and 5 April 2016.

The lack of institutional relations should not mean that the EU turns a blind eye to human rights violations taking place in the context of the NK conflict. Parties to the conflict accuse one another of atrocities and other human rights violations, including the targeting of civilians. However, there is no human rights monitoring on the ground and no international organisation has investigated the nature of these crimes within the context of this conflict.

A neutral mission of human rights experts, including Council of Europe and international human rights organisations, with the support of the EU, would help establish the facts on the ground and counter disinformation. The knowledge that future human rights violations would be divulged and denounced will create an incentive for restraint and go a long way towards preventing future atrocities and improving the overall human rights situation.

Additionally, public discourse helps determine the public's attitudes towards the other side, towards human rights, and towards human rights violations. It therefore also affects the likelihood of escalation of the conflict. Tackling hate speech and war rhetoric is crucial to any effort to reduce tensions and the EU should use its soft power to influence the parties to the conflict to refrain from hate speech.

***The EU should prepare itself for a pivotal role in implementation of the peace agreement***

Though it is clear that there are many institutional limitations to EU engagement in the peace process itself, some EU officials have signalled the Union's readiness to engage in the implementation of the eventual peace agreement from day one. The EU should, therefore, designate key staff empowered to visit Nagorno-Karabakh on a regular basis and to gather the needed information about the situation on the ground.

The EU authorities do not currently allow their staff or representatives to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh, relying exclusively on third parties for any information gathering. Without first-hand intelligence, the EU remains unable to form informed judgements even on the gravest or most urgent issues. It is effectively deaf and blind, and therefore will be ill-prepared to address any issues of the peace implementation.

Ensuring that key EU staff regularly visit the territory would allow all relevant EU instances to better understand the conflict and the issues affecting the local population. This would in turn allow them to better formulate both current and future policies. The EU's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia (EUSR) and his team are well positioned to carry out these tasks.

In the preliminary phase, the EUSR could be involved in future Minsk Group assessment missions to Nagorno-Karabakh, similar to the one organised in 2010, which at the time included other elements from UN agencies and ICSSOs. The EU's potential financial contribution to the demining effort could even be agreed within the framework of the Minsk Group discussions, further strengthening the OSCE-EU synergy needed for a successful implementation of the agreement.