The EU as an External Actor in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

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The EU's Engagement as an External Actor in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

Introduction

The South Caucasus has emerged as a significant area for the European Union (EU) regarding European security, connectivity and geopolitical influence. The region, located at the crossroads of Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Central Asia, has been vital for energy transit, trade routes and the

overall stability across the EU's eastern flank. Europe's economic resilience and security interests are intertwined with stability in the South Caucasus, which the European UnionEU had pointed out in the connectivity strategy, especially in light of alternative transport and energy routes to bypass Russia. (European Commission, 2021)

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has failed Moscow's abilities to act as the main security guarantor in the South Caucasus. Multiple analyses by the International Crisis Group point out that Russia's declining influence has created a geopolitical vacuum, opening room for new external actors for engagement in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, including the European UnionEU (International Crisis Group, 2025)

However, the EU has sought to position itself as a more assertive geopolitical actor via frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership and the Global Gateway, so as to boost connectivity, economic integration and conflict prevention. This ambition has been indicated in the EU's growing diplomatic involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which had repeatedly escalated into large-scale violence, most notably in 2020 and again in 2023 (De Waal, 2003)

This article examines the historical evolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict before analysing the EU's engagement as an external actor, with a particular focus on mediation efforts under the Brussels Track. It analyses why these initativesinitiatives have resulted in limited consequences, especially when compared to alternative mediation frameworks dominated by Russia and the United States (US). The analysis uses the conceptual distinction between a "Trilateral Path" (EU-Russia-US involvement) and the "Trump Road"- representing episodic, power-driven U.S mediation and indicating how competing geopolitical approaches have constrained EU's effectiveness.

History of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict's roots are found in ethnic, territorial and political tensions emerging from the late Soviet period. Nagorno-Karabakh, a dominantly ethnic Armenian enclave located in the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, became a point of escalation as Soviet authority weakened in the late 1980s. In 1988, the regional parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to unify with Armenia, causing mass protests, ethnic violence and population displacement. (De Waal, 2003)

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the tensions escalated into the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994). The Armenian forces gained control over Nagorno-Karabakh, creating a de facto Armenian-controlled entity with no international recognition. A cCeasefire agreement brokered by Russia in 1994 froze the conflict without any resolving prospects. It established a fragile status quo, byquo, by militarization and failed negotiation efforts under the OSCE Minsk Group framework. (Cornell, 2001)

This status quo was diminished in 2020, when Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. With Turkish military support and advanced drone warfare, Azerbaijan regained significant territories lost in the 1990s. The Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the conflict after six weeks, introducing a Russian peacekeeping contigentcontingent for monitoring the ceasifireceasefire and securing the Lachin Corridor –- the crucial linking point between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. (International Crisis Group, 2025)

However, the post-2020 circumstances turned out to be unstable. Azerbaijan challenged the ceasefire framework between 2022 and 2023, blocking the Lachin Corridor and restricting humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh. Several international organizations warned that the blockade was creating a humanitarian crisis undermining the Armenian population. (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In September 2023 Azerbaijan launched a military offensive effectively diminishing the remaining Armenian political structures in Nagorno-Karabakh. The authorities announced their dissolution and the Armenian population fled to Armenia. This marked the de facto end of Nagorno-Karabakh of that form and gave victory to Azerbaijan. (Reuters, 2023)

These developments have weakened Russia's regional authority. Its inability or unwillingness to prevent renewed tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan resulted in damaging its credibility as a security guarantor in the South Caucasus.Russia'sCaucasus. Russia's declining influence with the ongoing war in Ukraine hasUkraine has created a geopolitical vacuum, opening room for new external actors for further engagement in the region, including for the European UnionEU. (SCEEUS(SCEEUS, 2023)

EU Engagement: Peacekeeping, Mediation and Conflict Prevention

The European Union'sEU's engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has historically been shaped more by its broader neighbourhood policies rather than a conflict-focused strategy. Between 1990s and early 2000s, the EU remained as an insignificant political actor in the region, mainly referring to the OSCE Minsk Group. The Union's early engagement were followed by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), aiming to promote closer political, economic and regional cooperation without offering any hard security guarantees. (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015)

Under these frameworks, both Armenia and Azerbaijan were treated as partners being involved in cooperative formats rather than as parties to an active conflict. While the EU supported confidence-building measures, it lacked the mandate and the political will itself to act as a core mediator itself. This approach reflected the EU's long-standing preference for soft

power instruments and its reluctance to challenge Russia's dominant role in the South Caucasus. (Manners, 2002).

The limitations of this posture became clear during the Second-Nagorno Karabakh War in 2020, when the EU played no role in neither crisis management nor ceasefire negotiations. The Russian-brokered trilateral agreement was formed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, emphasizing Russia's decisive role. (International Crisis Group, 2025). The EU's absence has exposed a significant gap between its ambitions and operational capacity.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, its role as a mediator declined, creating vacuum space for the EU for further engagement. This was emphasized with the launch of the Brussels Process, led by Charles Michel bringing Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders for EU-facilitated talks. European Council readouts concluded these meetings as confidence-building platforms focusing on connectivity, border delimitation and just peace treaty negotiations than coercive mediation. (European Council, 2023)

In institutional terms, the EU's engagement has been supported by the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus, enhancing stability and supporting conflict resolution. Moreover, the EU established the European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA) in 2023 deployed on the Armenian side of the border. It is tasked to observe, report and contribute to confidence-building, avoiding any military role. (European External Action Service, 2023)

Throughout this period, the EU has attempted to balance its neutrality claim with its normative agenda, focusing on democracy, rule of law and regional connectivity under the Global Gateway. These efforts were constantly challenged by Azerbaijan, as it viewed EU engagement, especially EUMA, as politically biased and Armenia criticizing the EU for insufficient security guarantees.

Considering this crowded mediation environment, the article conceptualizes the "Trump Road" as a symbol of competing frameworks. Unlike the EU's institutional diplomacy, the U.S. engagement has been characterized by transactionalism, speed and selective involvement. Adding Russia's coercive leverage and Turkey's support for Azerbaijan, they have constrained the EU's ability to act as a credible and dominant external actor in the region.

Impact and Challenges of the EU's Engagement

The EU's limited effectiveness in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict indicates incompliance between its normative ambitions and geopolitical constraints. It considers itself to be a peace-building actor focusing on international law and multilateralism, but lacks necessary hard power tools to enforce agreements or deter renewed violence. This discrepancy relates to Christopher Hill's "capability-expectations" gap, remaining highly relevant in the South Caucasus context.

Nevertheless, internal divisions between EU member states further undermine the EU's ability to be represented with one voice in external relations in this matter. France has taken a more open pro-Armenian position, while other member states, for example, Hungary, have prioritized economic ties with Azerbaijan. This weakens the EU's credibility as an actor and complicates the formulations of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. (HIIA, 2025)

The EU also faces competition from other external actors. Russia continues to have military leverage, whereas Turkey's support for Azerbaijan gives it direct influence over the region. The EU's overreliance on diplomacy and monitoring limits its deterrence capacity.

Therefore, the EU's credibility among other regional actors remains unstable. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been criticizing the EU for either political biasness and or fragile security guarantees. Although the EU has deployed substantial soft power tools, including humanitarian aid, mediation dialogues and sanctions diplomacy, they have not been effective in the conflict based scenarios.

The EUMA assessment clearly indicates that. On the one hand, the mission has been successful in enhancing situational awareness, increasing international attention and symbolizing the EU's long-term commitment to Armenia's security concerns. On the other hand, its civilian nature and lack of enforcement authority have proved it to be ineffective in deteringdeterring escalation, especially during the crisis. Therefore, EUMA carries a symbolic weight, emphasizing the EU's struggle to transform its soft power into hard power capabilities.

The EU's Joint Communication "The European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region" (JOIN(2025)135) emphasizes that Armenia-Azerbaijan relations isare no longer treated as just a neighbourhood conflict, but as part of a Black Sea-South Caucasus-Central Asia connectivity and security system. The document frames the Black Sea as a geostrategic bridge between Europe and Asia, considering strategic transit routes for energy resources and critical raw materials. Russia's war against Ukraine has required the EU to coordinate a more robust response to the security challenges in the Black Sea region.

The strategy names Armenia and Azerbaijan among key partner states in the Black Sea region and emphasizes that the EU will pursue peace and stability in the South Caucasus, particularly the normalization of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations and the swift signature of a peace treaty. It also ties the region to Global Gateway and a Connectivity Agenda linking Europe to Central Asia through the South Caucasus. The infrastructure corridors and supply-chain resilience are core instruments of EU regional power, however, mostly civilian and economic rather than hard-security guarantees. (European Commission, 2025)

This matters because the EU's mediation posture is now competing directly with alternative corridor routes supported by other great powers.

Recent Armenia-Germany's announced strategic partnership agenda notes that after a Washington summit hosted by US President Donald Trump, an agreement was reached to create a route connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenian territory, with implementation connected to a new TRIPP Company that would develop rail, road, pipelines and fibre optics. As a result, the connectivity becomes a new form of diplomacy: corridors are presented as peace dividends, but they also have an influence over transit governance sndand security responsibilities, faster than what the EU can deliver. (OC(OC Media, 2025)

At the same time, the EU Black Sea strategy directly links regional resilience to hybrid threats (cyber-attacks, disinformation/FIMI) and proposes security-adjacent tools (e.g., maritime security coordination), while also stressing enlargement dynamics-mentioning that the EU's role is increasing with accession negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova, and that Georgia's EU trajectory remains relevant "should the country revert to the EU path." Moreover, Armenia is indicating more and more aspirations on its path to the EU membership alongside Georgia. Armenia's European path is directly dependent on Georgia's accession process, due to the regional geopolitics. Therefore, EU engagement is expanding in vision of the Black Sea ,Sea, connectivity and resilience, but its credibility in Armenia-Azerbaijan still hinges on whether it can pair investment-and-dialogue with real security leverage and sustained political unity. (European Commission, 2025)

Simultaneously, the EU Black Sea strategy links regional resilience to hybrid threats (cyberattacks, disinformation) and proposes security-related tools (e.g., maritime security coordination), also emphasizing the enlargement significance –- mentioning that the EU's role is increasing with accession negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova, and that Georgia's EU path remains unquestionable, should Georgia revert to the EU path. Moreover, Armenia is indicating more and more aspirations on its path to the EU membership alongside Georgia. Armenia's European path is directly dependent on Georgia's accession process, due to the regional geopolitics. Therefore, EU engagement is increasing in the Black Sea region, but its credibility in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations still hinges upon whether it can pair investment and dialogue with real security guarantees and sustainable political unity. (European Commission, 2025)

Conclusion

The EU's engagement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict identifies a broader pattern in EU external action: high normative ambition compounded with limited political delivery. Throughout the post-2020 period, the EU has sought to position itself as a stabilising external actor by way of promoting dialogue, international law, and economic connectivity. This aligns with the EU's self-perception as a normative power, highlighting

mediation, institutional architecture and long-term integration over coercive instruments. (Manners, 2002). However, in the South Caucasus such a normative posture was always ineffective facing the hard real-life security challenges.

The EU's failure as an external actor stems from using structural weaknesses as a security provider. As demonstrated in Sections 2 and 3, the Union had been diplomatically active through the Brussels Process, the EUMA and the inclusion of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations in the broader Black Sea strategic framework. However, these efforts have neither prevented escalation, nor have changed the goals of local actors. This outcome emphasizes what Christopher Hill conceptualised as the capability-expectations gap: The EU generates expectations of peacebuilding whereas its instruments cannot fully meet them (Hill, 1993).

The EU has continuoslycontinuously overrelied on soft power tools –- dialougedialogue facilitation, monitoring, economic incentives and legal frameworks –- without any hard security guarantees. The EUMA enhances transparency and political plurality but lacks deterrent capacity. In contrast to traditional peacekeeping operations, they neither impose costs on violations nor protect civiliainscivilians in the moments of crisis. Therefore, EU presence has remained more symbolic, emphasizing that EU engagement is politically meaningful but strategically limited.

The TRIPP unites this imbalance in a meaningful way. Whereas the EU pursued a slow approach rooted in multilateralism, other actors promoted more decisive frameworks. Russia relied on military presence, even though its credibility was weakened after 2022. Turkey had a direct influence on the process through its strategic relations with Azerbaijan. The United StatesUS engaged periodically, but with effective diplomatic tools –- especially with the Washington- hosted talks and connectivity initativesinitiatives between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Those competing frameworks had a decisive impact on the geopolitical climate in the South Caucasus much faster than the EU diplomacy could respond.

Internal EU disunity further weakened the process. Diverging member-state positions, between those prioritizing values-based engagement and those focusing on energetical or strategic partnerships, undermined the overall EU credibility and neutrality. Without a one political line, EU diplomacy struggled to have a decisive influence neither on Armenia nor on Azerbaijan, emphasizing its inconsistent character. Especially in a region such as the South Caucasus, perceived unity itself is a form of powerpower, and its absence can cause severe costs.

However, the conclusion is not that the EU has been irrelevant. On the contrary, the EU remains uniquely positioned to shape the region's geopolitics, through integration dynamics and connectivity relevance. The EU's Black Sea Strategic Approach highlights peace and stability in the South Caucasus in a wider framework of enlagementenlargement and resilience. Armenia's deepening relations with the EU and Georgia's Euro-

pean aspirations give the EU the necessary platform to increase regional transformation by gradual integration and economic connectivity. (European Commission, 2025)

The EU can establish itself as become a credible stabilizsing actor in the region if and only it implements only if it pursues its diplomatic initiatives with three interconnected goals.mutually reinforcing objectives

Without these changes, the EU risks remaining a secondary actor in the South Caucasus, overshadowed by other more assertive actors. The EU has a great potential with cooperating those actors to transform its normative power to more assertive power aiming for further regional stability.

Graphs:

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Source: https://caspian-alpine.org/the-trump-route-in-the-post-conflict-architecture-of-the-south-caucasus/

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