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**The European Union's Conflict Resolution Capacity  
in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova:  
Undermining the Eastern Partnership?**

**Abstract**

The current article presents an overview of the European Union's conflict settlement mechanisms in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova and discusses their impact on these countries' Europeanisation in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. A comparative analysis suggests that the EU's conflict resolution capacity is largely dependent on the significance attached to conflict by the partner countries and the applicability of the EU's soft power mechanisms.

*Keywords: European Union, conflict resolution, soft power, national security, Europeanisation*

## Introduction

The 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU) changed the security agenda of the EU considerably. Once several former Socialist countries<sup>1</sup> effectively upgraded their political and economic systems and joined the EU, the political instability and protracted conflicts in post-Soviet states became unprecedentedly relevant for the EU's own stability. Western Newly Independent States (NIS) – Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine – became the EU's immediate neighbours attaching more significance to the entire post-Soviet area. While the enlargement was a chance for the EU to promote its norms and values beyond its borders, it was ultimately a worrisome development that surrounded the EU with countries like Belarus that not only did not develop a democracy but consolidated autocracy instead, or Moldova that was facing deep economic crisis, extreme poverty and two unresolved conflicts in Transnistria and Gagauzia. Moreover, although the EU and Russia shared a border even before the Eastern enlargement, the latter brought the two regional powers much closer making the Western NIS a buffer zone between them.

The Communication from the European Commission “Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours” (European Commission, 2003) introduced the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as an effective tool to interact with the EU's new neighbours stressing the importance of securing the EU's external borders. As a further remark on neighbouring countries, the European Security Strategy (European Council 2003) defined the main threats and challenges for the EU's foreign policy: terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, “failed states” and organised crime. Especially after the inclusion of South Caucasus countries into the ENP, the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria became concerning issues for the EU's security driving the latter to get better involved in the resolution of these conflicts. However, in the framework of the ENP the EU has largely failed to support peacebuilding in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova due to the EU's insufficient soft power which in turn undermines the EU's reforming potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

This article provides a general analysis of the EU's conflict resolution capacity in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova through presenting the EU's involvement in peace-building activities over the protracted conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. The upcoming chapters will discuss the soft security measures taken by the EU in each of the countries concerned in the light of their Europeanisation. It is argued that the EU's conflict resolution capacity is largely dependent on the significance attached to conflict by the partner countries and the applicability of the EU's soft power mechanisms.

### **Nagorno-Karabakh and the EU's Uncertain Involvement**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has probably allowed least room for the EU's involvement since the conflict is between the two partners of the EU – Armenia and Azerbaijan – and an EU support to either side would be viewed as unfair treatment which might lead to a drastic fall of the EU's legitimacy. Therefore, the EU has usually avoided positioning over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and has constructed its relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan based on cooperation in other spheres. In Georgia and Moldova, the other conflicting party is Russia which allows the EU to defend its partners' interests.

The EU-Armenia ENP Action Plan (AP) mentions the EU's willingness to support the settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through close cooperation with the OSCE (European External Action Service 2006a, p. 9). However, the OSCE Minsk group is co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States and since the EU is not directly represented, it has a limited influence in the peace negotiations. Even for France and the US, Nagorno-Karabakh is not a priority issue while Russia is deeply interested in keeping an eye on the conflict dynamics. Additionally, Armenia is a founding member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and has a number of bilateral contracts with Russia. These strong links with Russia further deprive the EU of the chance to interfere with Armenia's hard security. The EU has attempted to interfere with the settlement process through its Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus but the latter's engagement with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been limited (Freire, Simão 2007, p. 184).

Furthermore, the EU has made no effort to engage the authorities in Stepanakert, nor the wider Karabakh society in a dialogue with Brussels, Yerevan and Baku (Simão, 2012, p. 198) further alienating the issue from its South Caucasus agenda.

With few resources to influence the conflict resolution, the EU chose to employ soft power means such as bringing stability democracy promotion in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. This idea was precisely included in the Commission's 2007 Communication "A Strong European Neighbourhood Policy" which mentions: "The EU has a direct interest in working with partners to promote their resolution, because they undermine EU efforts to promote political reform and economic development in the neighbourhood and because they could affect the EU's own security, through regional escalation, unmanageable migratory flows, disruption of energy supply and trade routes, or the creation of breeding grounds for terrorist and criminal activity of all kinds (...). The EU can make an important contribution by working around the conflict issues, promoting similar reforms on both sides of the boundary lines" (European Commission 2007, p. 6).

However, this approach is only partly applicable in EaP countries since in reforms in Georgia and Moldova might attract Abkhazian, South Ossetian and Transnistrian authorities which would prefer joining their "parent" states and receive similar assistance from the EU rather than choose independence with limited development perspective. On the contrary, this traditional soft power tool cannot be used to attract the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities since the EU must provide similar support to both Armenia and Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh's joining to either side cannot change the level of EU's assistance.

Another factor that makes the EU's limited involvement in conflict settlement more visible is the significance attached to Nagorno-Karabakh by the Armenian authorities and the general public. If Georgia and Moldova have been in position to somewhat separate the conflict resolution from the economic and political integration with the EU, Armenia put security at the top of its foreign policy agenda while democratisation has been deemed less important in terms of statehood. Any political and economic shift could be perceived as legitimate if it didn't harm the territory and population of Artsakh. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue has been so significant to the country's security that it has even confined the political competition to the ones that take uncompromising stance vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. In other words, popular support has been available only to

the ones that could (or at least promised to) resist Azerbaijani threat over Artsakh. With complementarity officially recognized as primary foreign policy principle since 2007 (National Security Strategy 2007), the Armenian government has consistently tried to ensure an effective balance between the EU and Russia in its foreign policy where the EU was supposed to support economic development and Russia to guarantee hard security since the latter is not regarded as a credible source of policy templated for modernisation (Delcour, Wolczuk 2015, p. 502).

However, this balance leaned towards Russia in 2013 when the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Armenia was not signed largely due to announcement of the Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan that “participating in one military security structure [i.e. CSTO] makes it unfeasible and inefficient to stay away from the relevant geo-economic area” (President of the Republic of Armenia 2013).

After a “strategic pause” the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed between the EU and Armenia on 24 November 2017 in the margins of the Brussels EaP summit. The new document, widely regarded as “association-lite”, includes Armenia’s first-ever participation in the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions which together with the NATO’s Partnership for Peace might somewhat diversify Armenia’s military sphere. However, CEPA is not too different from previous documents between the two parties in terms of security. It continues to offer only indirect support to conflict resolution through the support to the efforts of the OSCE Minsk group (Council of the European Union 2017, p. 17) with no reference to the EU’s willingness to engage in peace negotiations directly. It can be assumed that CEPA will be the edge of EU-Armenia cooperation in the foreseeable future unless the EU delegates more resources to influence the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict dynamics.

### **The EU’s Engagement in Georgia And Moldova: a Clear-Cut Approach?**

The EU’s role in Georgia and Moldova has been more visible largely due to the fact that the two countries’ security and sovereignty is challenged by Russia which makes them willing to accept any form of the EU’s engagement in conflict resolution. The EU in turn has been more interested to facilitate the peace process in Georgia and Moldova

than in Nagorno-Karabakh since its legitimacy would never be harmed by its engagement in conflict settlement. Besides, both countries attached paramount significance to European integration and steadily moved towards the EU orbit.

The 2003 Rose Revolution ensured almost a unanimous election of a clearly Western-oriented leader Mikheil Saakashvili as the president of Georgia who declared the EU membership a top foreign policy priority while the Russian support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia was perceived as a direct threat for the country's sovereignty. Such developments made Georgia the EU's foreign policy pillar in the South Caucasus. As far as Moldova is concerned, it was declared permanently neutral by the Constitution (*Constitution of the Republic of Moldova* 1994) in order to avoid falling back under the Russian sphere of influence (Lupu Dinesen, Wivel 2014, p. 153).

However, the National Security Strategy of Moldova claims European integration as the goal of the country's foreign and security policy. Namely, the Strategy mentions that Moldova's security "may not be conceived separately from the European security. The process of European integration and acquiring of EU membership will positively influence and consolidate the security of the Republic of Moldova and will bring stability and prosperity to the country" (*ibidem*, p. 153). Such a strong reliance on the EU ultimately gave the latter the political power to intervene with the conflicts in both countries despite the shortage of hard power tools.

The ENP APs for Georgia and Moldova are much more ambitious in terms of security than the one for Armenia. The EU-Georgia AP states that the EU is ready to continue supporting the settlement of Georgia's internal problems through close cooperation with the OSCE as well as further deep involvement (European External Action Service 2006b). The EU-Moldova AP (European External Action Service 2005) aims to support the long-term democratisation process in Moldova in order to make it prosperous, stable and more attractive to the breakaway region of Transnistria (Del Medico 2014, p. 24). These formulations clearly show the EU's position over the conflicts referring to them as inseparable parts of Georgia and Moldova while in no document Nagorno-Karabakh is viewed as part of either conflicting party.

In a comparison, Moldova benefited from the EU's practical involvement in the conflicts more frequently and arguably more widely than Georgia. However, the EU has used exclusively soft power tools in order to avoid direct confrontation with Russia

which was maintaining peacekeeping troops in Transnistria. With a clear view of defending Moldova's territorial integrity, the EU imposed a travel ban on Transnistria because of the latter's lack of cooperation with Moldova over conflict resolution (Council Common Position 2003). Another set of restrictive measures were taken to oppress the campaign against the Latin-script Moldovan schools in the Transnistrian region (Poli 2015, p. 159).

A major manifestation of the EU's interest in Moldova was its engagement in the 5+2 format of negotiations proposed by Moldova's 3-D strategy (Demilitarisation, Decriminalisation and Democratisation) in 2004. The five key parties were Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine and Russia while the EU and the United States joined in 2005 as observers. Additionally, the EU appointed an EUSR dealing with the Transnistrian conflict (Popescu 2011, pp. 47-49). In 2005 the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) was established in order to create incentives for the breakaway region to comply with Moldova's customs regulations (Del Medico 2014, p. 24).

EU's assistance to Georgia became more visible after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In October 2008, the European Council published a high-level document condemning "Russia's unilateral decision to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That decision is unacceptable and the European Council calls on other States not to recognise this proclaimed independence" (European Council 2008).

With this document, the EU showed its clear support to Georgia which put the latter in a more beneficial position over the foreign policy choice than Armenia. Additionally, in the framework of CSDP the EU delegated a fact-finding mission to the conflict areas which had never been practiced in Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflicts in Georgia were so significant in the regional context that led to the establishment of the EaP which again did not create means of direct involvement in conflict settlement but provided an enhanced soft power toolset (civil society promotion, visa liberalisation, etc.). Besides, in terms of hard security Georgia heavily relies on the US support which in no way contradicts the EU's involvement.

A major factor determining the EU's engagement in Georgia and Moldova, is the state of the conflicts themselves. Despite the presence of Russian troops in both countries, the security situation between Georgia and Moldova and their contested territories is rather stable and has not generated direct threats. On the contrary, the Nagorno-

Karabakh cannot even be considered a “frozen” one as active military clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan continue not just in the contested territory but also across their northern border. The conflict over-escalated in April 2016 when the tragic 4-day confrontation claimed hundreds of lives from both sides. Therefore, Armenia is in no position to negotiate a development agenda without considering its security situation while Georgia and Moldova can rely on a long-term settlement of the conflicts.

In the new stage of relations, the EU continues to support the resolution of the protracted conflicts in favour of Georgia and Moldova. The AAs signed with both countries in 2014 claim that the new cooperation framework aims to create a security environment for both countries with respect to their sovereignty and territorial integrity (*Association Agreement between the EU ... and Georgia* 2014; *Association Agreement between the EU ... and the Republic of Moldova* 2014).

## Conclusion

The overview and analysis of the EU’s role in the settlement of conflicts in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova offers three broad conclusions.

1. The EU has various soft power tools to influence the conflict dynamics in its disposal but they are used only when found necessary and practical. In case of Georgia and Moldova, the EU has employed its conflict resolution mechanisms more often and in a more effective way than in Armenia. However, in all three cases the EU’s soft power failed to create stability in the contested territories.
2. The EU usually works around the conflict avoiding direct interference. In case of Georgia and Moldova where the other conflicting side is Russia, the EU seeks to make the “parent” countries more attractive to their breakaway territories through supporting long-term democratisation and economic development. While in case of Nagorno-Karabakh this approach is not applicable since there is no “parent” state officially recognised by the EU and both conflicting parties are the EU’s partners. Therefore, democracy promotion and economic development in Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot generate neither popular nor political aspiration in the Nagorno-Karabakh to join either country.
3. The level of EU’s engagement in the conflict settlement is largely determined by the significance attached to the conflict by the partner country. When the conflict



is not considered a major obstacle for Europeanisation such as in Georgia and Moldova, the EU has broader scope of involvement. On the contrary, when the conflict is deemed a national security priority, the EU's capacity becomes extremely limited.

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