The EU’s role in South Caucasus Conflict Resolution  
by Carol Weaver

There is a story of a traveller who stops in a small mountainous village somewhere in Eastern Europe and whilst chatting to an elderly villager asks him if he has ever lived in any other countries. The reply is that, yes, the man has lived in many different countries even though he has never moved from this village.

The South Caucasus region is where many empires, including the Ottoman, Russian and Persian, have met. Even British troops occupied the region for a short time after WWI. These empires encouraged emigration or immigration for their own purposes and the three states of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia are still attempting to come to terms with multi-ethnicity. Today this strategic region is the point where East, West and Middle East meet.

The three new democracies of the South Caucasus were never one state in the way that Yugoslavia was, although they were all part of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, since the break up of the USSR there have been parallels made with Yugoslavia i.e. different groups fighting over territory and independence as well as ethnic cleansing. The main conflict areas have been South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and Nagorno Karabakh (NK) in Azerbaijan. These areas are often referred to as ‘frozen’ conflict areas but are more like ‘smouldering’ conflict areas in reality.

Russia and the US are currently vying for influence in the South Caucasus area. Can the EU do something to ameliorate the situation or is it just regarded as another hegemon? According to the architects of the EU’s new Eastern Partnership proposals these neighbours could one day become full members of the EU.

This article will concentrate on the Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan.

The Armenian-Azerbaijan Conflict

The Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict is international rather than internal, with Armenian forces currently occupying much of Azerbaijan’s undisputed territory as well as NK. Nagorno (meaning mountainous in Russian) Karabakh (meaning Black Garden in Turkish) was mostly populated by Armenians in the time of the USSR but was an autonomous part of the Azerbaijan SSR not the Armenian SSR. When the USSR dissolved, tensions arose followed by conflict. Eventually most Azerbaijani...
killed or driven out of the area with Armenian forces occupying seven Azerbaijani districts located around NK and Armenia as well as NK itself. Reportedly, these districts have now become populated by poor Armenians encouraged to live there by the Armenian government which says it is protecting the Karabakh region from attack by Azerbaijan as well as providing a corridor so that supplies can be administered. The conflict was ‘frozen’ in 1994 but there is still sporadic violence. There have been four UN Security Council resolutions demanding that Armenia should withdraw its troops from the territory of Azerbaijan but the situation continues.

Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have inhabited the South Caucasus for centuries. Both peoples have suffered terrible traumas from ethnic cleansing often perpetrated or encouraged by outsiders such as Russia and Turkey. Both peoples will continue to live in the South Caucasus. Forgetting is not possible but whipping up hatred only seems to cause more suffering and delay resolution. Outsiders, now including the US, seem to be interested in the area for their own purposes.

Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have been accused of the destruction of historical monuments often because they do not want to recognise history. The Armenians are even calling the region Artsakh after the old province of Armenia and ancient Albania. Similar happenings occurred in Bosnia Herzegovina where there is still much animosity and dispute. Ethnic cleansing took place in the South Caucasus at the same time as in Bosnia but was largely ignored by Europe even though the four UN resolutions adopted in 1993 specified that there should be territorial integrity, Armenian withdrawal and the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Ex Armenian President Ter-Petrossian seemed to agree with these resolutions wanting a settlement of the NK conflict (not a freezing which he predicted could lead to disaster and poor Armenian growth). Unfortunately he lost power. Earlier this year he stood once again for the Armenian presidency but lost to President Sargsyan who was supported by the previous President Kocharian. Both Kocharian and Sargsyan were born in NK and involved in the military conflicts. Many Armenians thought that the elections were not free and fair. There were mass demonstrations and many Ter-Petrossian supporters were killed or arrested.

**Conflict Resolution**

The Minsk Group was appointed by the forerunner of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) in 1992 to find a political solution to the
Nagorno Karabakh dispute. The current Minsk Group OSCE co-chairs are from Russia, US and France which could be seen as an unfortunate combination as all these countries have in the past had close relations with Armenia or the Armenian diaspora. So far no solution has been found. The original Minsk Group proposal was not agreed upon so a step-by-step phased withdrawal was proposed. Ter-Petrossian favoured this option but lost power to hard liners. Currently both the Armenian government and the unrecognised powers in NK seem to want the Status Quo solution (i.e. wait so long that the world will accept it).

Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev is not happy with the status quo and is currently being encouraged not to stockpile arms with the country’s new oil money in order to solve the dispute through military means. On the other hand there are, no doubt, many willing-to-supply arms dealers. With elections coming up in Azerbaijan in the autumn, the international community will need to watch the situation carefully.

**The role of the EU**

EU policies which focus on the South Caucasus region are the ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) and Black Sea Synergy. More recently there has also been a proposal for an Eastern Partnership which outlines a relationship between all countries of the EU and the ‘Black Sea’ countries not in the Barcelona Process (Mediterranean Union). These are Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and possibly Belarus. Policy areas would include negotiations on visas and a free trade area. Eventually after adoption of the acquis there could be prospects of membership of the EU, although this is not promised.

The ENP action plans already permit the EU to engage in conflict resolution but the plans are bi-lateral not regional. Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership are both regional policies but have a great deal of overlap which could be problematic. Also, Russia has stated its displeasure with the plans for the Eastern Partnership saying Moscow should be consulted on issues affecting CIS countries.

The new democracies in the South Caucasus are still very young but are fast approaching their coming of age. Perhaps it is time now for the three countries to take more responsibility for themselves and to begin to advance beyond their dangerous sibling rivalry all too often fuelled by outside controlling parental figures. But this cannot happen without good international assistance to resolve the existing conflicts.
In fact there is a strong possibility that hostilities could recur. The Minsk Group has not succeeded so far. Could the EU do better?

The International Crisis Group has appealed to the European Parliament to assist in two ways; firstly, to engage with non-recognized parties in order to promote democratisation, the rule of law and civil society in the South Caucasus conflict regions; and secondly to make stronger pledges in support of a resolution on NK. They also say that the Armenian side wants international peacekeepers and a right to self-determination (in the same way as Kosova). The EU could certainly help in peace keeping and the withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied territories but self-determination has to be a stumbling block because an ethnically cleansed region should not be allowed to decide on issues of independence, at least not until peace has been restored and IDPs have returned home.

EU countries must agree on how to deal with the conflicts in the South Caucasus, including in Nagorno Karabakh or we could be facing the prospect of more Yugoslavian type wars in our neighbourhood. The matter is of some urgency.

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