



Europe's options in Nagorno-Karabakh

An analysis of views of the
European Parliament*
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*The full report of the ComRes EuroPoll Panel survey can be found at <http://www.eufoa.org/en/publications>.

Background

“MEPs are most likely to support sending a permanent non-military EU observer mission to the region (Armenian-Azerbaijani Line of Contact) and upgrading the EU’s commitment to a peaceful settlement in the region by contributing to democratic capability building as ways of avoiding military escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh”. Even though the statement above properly reflects both the renewed military and diplomatic volatility around Nagorno-Karabakh and the need for a stronger EU action, it is not a forecast by an expert or commentator. It is the major and most relevant finding of a survey conducted by the ComRes EuroPoll panel among 100 MEPs between 19th July and 4th August 2010¹ regarding the potential EU role in avoiding the outbreak of war in Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K).

In order to better contextualise and analyse the results of this survey, it is necessary to describe the current political, military and diplomatic framework on the ground and the latest moves by the EU in this context.

Ceasefire progressively endangered along the LoC

Since the adoption of the latest European Parliament (EP) resolution called “A New EU Strategy for the Southern Caucasus”² the situation both along the Line of Contact (LoC) between N-K and Azerbaijani forces, and in the general framework of talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group (MG) has been progressively deteriorating. As a result of a mixture of an unprecedented rise – both qualitative and quantitative – of ceasefire violations and use of inflammatory political statements and war rhetoric coming mainly from the Azerbaijani leadership,³ the possibility of an outbreak of war, rather by accident than by intention, has become a dreadful but realistic scenario among the scenarios envisaged by the expert community and the policy making circles.

“MEPs believe that sending a permanent non-military EU observer mission to the region (Armenian-Azeri Line of Contact) and upgrading the EU’s commitment to a peaceful settlement in the region by contributing to democratic capability building are the best ways of avoiding military escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh.”

The consequent initiatives put forward both by the OSCE MG co-chairing countries, namely France, Russia and the USA, and by the EU intended to reduce the likelihood of a large-scale military escalation are gaining momentum and going beyond mere condemnations of the acts of aggression and incursions across the LoC. In fact, in addition to an OSCE-led Field Assessment Mission to the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh agreed upon by the parties in May 2010, to be deployed in late-September, the EU through its EUSR for the South Caucasus⁴ seems to be pushing for an international observation mission⁵, most likely with a core EU component along the LoC.

The major peculiarity of the truce regime, stemming from a ceasefire agreement between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh signed in 1994, is that it is a self-regulated ceasefire without any inter-position force between N-K and Azerbaijani troops. Thus, the current status of “no peace no war” along the LoC is upheld by the overall geopolitical balance in the region and by a subtle deterrence game. It is therefore self-evident that such a regime is precarious and vulnerable.

There are just six non-permanent OSCE monitors in charge of observing the ceasefire — basically a symbolic presence given that there are more than 20,000 soldiers on each side pointing guns at each other along more than 175 km of trenches. The bulk of mediation falls on three OSCE MG co-Chairs who keep up the tortuous negotiations over a compromise document in a climate of increasing distrust.

¹ The full ComRes analysis can be found at <http://www.eufoa.org/en/publications>.

² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2010-0123+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>

³ cf. www.eufoa.org

⁴ European Union Special Representative, Peter Semneby

⁵ <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE6870BK.htm>

The good news is that despite the stalemate in the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement since early 2010, some progress in talks over Nagorno-Karabakh has been registered both in the OSCE MG framework and through direct mediation by Russia's President Medvedev. However, the bad news is that the military instability on the ground is reaching unprecedented levels due to systematic violations of the ceasefire, incursions by special forces and drones mainly originating from the Azerbaijani side of the LoC, judging from circumstantial evidence.⁶

In fact, on June 18, only a few hours after the meeting of the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan mediated by President Medvedev in St. Petersburg, one of the worst incidents in years occurred on the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire line. Four Armenian soldiers and one Azeri were killed. The circumstantial evidence on the battlefield provides ground to claim that this was an Azerbaijani initiative, with the bodies remaining on the Armenian side of the LoC. Moreover, in recent weeks around one hundred truce violations were registered on a daily basis. The most recent attacks date back to August 31 and September 4, resulting in the death of four Azerbaijani servicemen and several injured on both sides. While these events have been condemned internationally, they threaten the precarious balance that has held since 1994, when the ceasefire deal ended fighting. They lead to an overall hardening of positions on both sides. Moreover, in the weeks leading to the 7 November elections in Azerbaijan the local political élite is trying to give substance to its firm willingness to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh by all means.

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It is clear that under the current circumstances – both military and diplomatic – the consolidation of the ceasefire regime is paramount to a decisive diplomatic push intended to reaching a framework agreement for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in line with the l'Aquila (2009) and Muskoka (2010) declarations by the Presidents of France, Russia and the USA. These are two high profile joint statements enumerating the basic principles governing the final solution of the conflict in line with the Helsinki Final Act, namely non use of force or threat of use of force, territorial integrity and equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

The most relevant EU reaction to the above mentioned threats of military escalation came on 8 September through the EUSR for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby and intends to consolidate the ceasefire regime. (...) "I believe the Azerbaijani leadership is aware of the enormous risks and potential costs that would be associated with an attempt to resolve the conflict by military means," Semneby said the same day in an interview with Reuters.

The most relevant EU reaction to the above mentioned threats of military escalation came on 8 September through the EUSR for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby and intends to consolidate the ceasefire regime.⁷ The senior diplomat advocates the "need to strengthen the ceasefire regime" by an international observation mission, most likely

with a core EU component, along the LoC. "I believe the Azerbaijani leadership is aware of the enormous risks and potential costs that would be associated with an attempt to resolve the conflict by military means," Semneby said the same day in an interview with Reuters.⁸

On the one hand there is no need to reiterate the importance of such a move for macro-regional peace and security, closely intertwined with the EU security. On the other hand, sceptics would point out the EU reluctance to take over such missions. The ComRes EuroPoll survey's findings, a survey conducted well before the recent statement by the EUSR, point exactly in this direction. They screen the EP position regarding the possible EU role in avoiding a military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, the results of the survey display the position of the EU demos expressed by political groups in the EP.

⁶ cf. press release EuFoA of 24 June 2010 http://www.eufoa.org/newsroom/83/31/New-Karabakh-shootings-prove-war-risk/?cntnt01currentpage=1&cntnt01orderby=item_date+DESC

⁷ <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE6870BK.htm>

⁸ idem

While the EP has a non binding consultative role in the formulation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in the event of the deployment of an international observer mission with a core EU component, the Parliament's role will be crucial in the process of securing the necessary budget to the mission.

ComRes Survey: The EP's take on avoiding a new war in Europe's East

Alerted by the worsening of the security situation along the LoC and being aware of the need for the consolidation of the ceasefire regime as a vital condition for the success of the current OSCE led negotiation, European Friends of Armenia commissioned ComRes, a UK based independent research company specialising amongst others in panel surveys in the EP, to carry out a poll among 100 MEPs from all political groups to assess their views on options for how to avoid a military escalation in N-K.

The question the interviewed MEPs were asked is the following:

Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the so called "frozen conflicts" in Eastern Europe's regions covered by the Eastern Partnership (EaP). To avoid a military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, similar to the one in Georgia in 2008, which of the following EU actions would you support?

The MEPs had five policy options to choose from:

- **"ESDP Mission"** – Sending a mainly military peace enforcing mission in the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) to the area.
- **"Replace OSCE with EU"** – Stopping the EU's support to the ongoing OSCE led negotiations and replacing it with a new EU format.
- **"Ceasefire consolidation"** – Brokering a cease fire consolidation agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan providing, for instance, for the removal of snipers from the contact line and the installation of international observers.
- **"Democratic capacity building"** – Upgrading the EU commitment for the peaceful settlement of the conflict by contributing to democratic capacity building in the conflict hit area (e.g. trainings and technical aid to the local administration and police).
- **"Permanent EU observers"** – Sending a permanent non-military EU observer mission to the region in order to avoid the break out of war "by accident".

The most relevant finding of the survey is that MEPs believe that sending a permanent non-military EU observer mission to the region and upgrading the EU's commitment to a peaceful settlement in the region by contributing to democratic capability building are the best ways of avoiding military escalations in N-K.

The ComRes report summarises that *"as means by which to avoid a military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the most popular among MEPs is sending a permanent non-military EU observer mission to the region in order to avoid the break out of war "by accident" – favoured by 47% of Members. 46% of MEPs favour upgrading the EU commitment for the peaceful settlement of the conflict by contributing to democratic capacity building in the conflict hit area (e.g. trainings and technical aid to the local administration and police)".*

Two in five MEPs (39%) would support brokering a cease fire consolidation agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan providing, for instance, for the removal of snipers from the contact line and the installation of international observers.

"As means by which to avoid a military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the most popular among MEPs is sending a permanent non-military EU observer mission to the region in order to avoid the break out of war "by accident" – favoured by 47% of Members. (...) while [only] 17% support stopping the EU's support to the ongoing OSCE led negotiations and replacing it with a new EU format."

One in five Deputies (21%) favour sending a mainly military peace enforcing mission in the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) to the area, while 17% support stopping the EU's support to the ongoing OSCE led negotiations and replacing it with a new EU format."

Consequently, in case the proposal by EUSR Semneby to consolidate the ceasefire regime by deploying an observer mission along the LoC gains momentum, the EP is likely to support this move.

Not least important among the findings is that the least supported policy option is the one proposing to "stop the EU's support to the ongoing OSCE led negotiations and replacing it with a new EU format". The EU cannot and should not interfere in the OSCE Minsk Group process both for methodological reasons, regarding the consolidated bargaining format, and in consideration of the fact that the Minsk-Group co-chairs seem to be very close to getting to an agreement between the parties. Besides, the EU does not have the mandate, thus the legitimacy, to perform such a move, for the time being.

Conclusion

Some Armenian political forces consider the perpetuation of the status quo as a guarantor of the political results of the victory on the battleground in 1994 in the hope that a Kosovo style approach to allow for the self-determination of the people of N-K will be applied sooner or later. For its part, oil-exporting Azerbaijan spends more than \$2 billion per year on its military and the Azerbaijani leadership seems to be confident in their capacity to conquer N-K. It's clear that the way out from the current situation lies elsewhere.

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It is a foregone conclusion that a new conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh would be catastrophic for the whole region, not just Armenia and Azerbaijan. Its effects would go well beyond the geopolitical unit these states belong to and will arguably affect EU's relations with Eastern Europe, Iran and Turkey. Furthermore such a scenario will deeply modify the understanding we have of energy security and humanitarian crises.

The EU has a unique opportunity to score a CFSP success by acting in a timely manner, jointly with the Minsk Group in the deployment of a permanent observation mission.

A window of opportunity can be at reach under the current positive framework of relations between the OSCE MG co-chairing states – France, Russia and the USA – and the EU for a combined push in terms

of a future peace-keeping mission, once a final agreement is brokered by the Minsk Group co-chairs. The EU's credibility could indeed be a key factor in this regard, since distrust on the ground is the major obstacle to reaching a peace deal.

However, in the short run the deployment of an observer mission, the implementation of Confidence Building Measures, such as the withdrawal of snipers from the front-line and the installation of observers, as well as the direct engagement by the EU with the Nagorno-Karabakh leadership would ease the path to a YES for an agreement on the basic principles for the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The EU has a unique opportunity to score a CFSP success by acting in a timely manner, jointly with the Minsk Group in the deployment of a permanent observation mission. It would not require large financial burdens. Following the data provided here, the establishment of such a mission would also not require strong political debates in the EU, especially in view of its civilian nature. Finally, according to the above mentioned format and under the existing conditions along the LoC, the EU would act according to its declared CFSP goals of timely engagement in conflict prevention and crisis management and effective multilateralism.