



AGBU EUROPE BRIEFING
**THE EUROPEAN UNION SHOULD ENGAGE WITH NAGORNO-KARABAKH
AND PROVIDE AID**

1. Our objectives

Since the end of the Karabakh war, in 1994, the European Union (EU) has avoided establishing any contacts in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and has failed to provide any assistance to its long-suffering population¹. International human rights and humanitarian organisations are all but absent from the territory. Yet, there are many reasons for the EU to get involved in Nagorno-Karabakh, to provide relief and aid to people living there and to engage with civil society.

AGBU Europe therefore urges the EU's decision-makers to muster political courage and use the instruments created to promote peace and solidarity in order to break the isolation of people of Karabakh.

While these incremental advances would not end the conflict in themselves, they would nevertheless represent the most substantial shift in European policy in the past 20 years. They would end the isolation of Karabakh and of its people, substantially contributing to peace and security in the region.

¹ The EU's sole project in connection with Karabakh, the European Partnership for the Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK, <http://www.epnk.org>) promotes dialogue between individuals from Azerbaijan and Armenia and does not involve any assistance to the population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

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2. The need for assistance in Nagorno-Karabakh



About 150 000 people live in Karabakh today, facing considerable challenges daily.

- The recent Four-Day War (April 2 - 4, 2016) has forced many people to flee their homes. The Karabakh authorities must now find the resources to rebuild their houses and resettle displaced people.
- There are allegations of war crimes committed during the Four-day war: prisoners of war executed by Azerbaijani soldiers, some in particularly barbaric fashion and civilians tortured and killed. The bodies of some NKR soldiers and civilians killed were reportedly mutilated.
- Karabakh is effectively under siege, with front lines on its Northern, Eastern, and Southern borders. It is connected to Armenia (itself under a blockade from Azerbaijan and Turkey) by a long mountain road. Air transport is impossible, with Azerbaijan threatening to

shoot down any aircraft landing in Karabakh, including civilian aircraft. The economy is therefore heavily handicapped by the situation and ill-equipped to fully cater to the needs of the people.

This situation also disrupts the lives of the civilian population of Karabakh in many ways. For instance:

- Shootings and the threat of violence have a significant psychological impact on the population. More than 86% of women in villages close to the frontline reportedly suffer from mental health issues such as depression, stress and neuropsychological conditions thought to be related to the hardships of life on the frontline².
- Nagorno-Karabakh has one of the world's highest per capita mine casualty rates, on par with Afghanistan, according to the Halo Trust, the leading international experts in mine-clearance. A quarter of these victims are children. "Beyond the physical danger, mines and cluster bombs cripple the economy by denying farmers the use of their land. Many do not know that every year there are civilian casualties...in 2014, there were 8 accidents resulting in two deaths and two amputations"³. According to the leading charity in mine-clearance, the Halo Trust: "Nagorno-Karabakh's unrecognized status prevents many governments

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/02/living-in-one-of-europes-frozen-conflicts-movses-nagorno-karabakh>. Accessed August 2016

3 <http://www.landminefreeartsakh.com/about-us/>. Accessed November 2016

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from funding humanitarian activities in the territory and HALO receives no funding from the Armenian Government. Until recently, our only major donor in Karabakh was the US Government, through USAID, but its funding is restricted to land within the Soviet boundary of the autonomous oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh”⁴.

From a moral and humanitarian point of view, there is no question that assistance is badly needed. The EU should provide both material and moral support to the long-suffering population of Karabakh because that is consistent with its principles and policies: the EU provides assistance in all regions of its neighbourhood that need it, regardless of the political status of the territories in question.

Indeed, Karabakh is not the only unrecognized state in the European neighbourhood: South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria and Northern Cyprus, among others, fall under the same category and they all receive substantial assistance from the EU. Projects are also being implemented in Moldova's breakaway region, Transdnistria. Far from being ostracized, Transdnistria will even benefit from the favourable trade regime negotiated between Moldova and the EU⁵. As for Kosovo, also once a non-recognized territory⁶, it has received a total of 2 billion Euros in assistance, much of it before the process of international recognition had begun.

There should therefore be no reason to single out Karabakh for a boycott and isolation.

The EU's boycott of Karabakh is not only incomprehensible from a humanitarian point of view, **it is also counterproductive**.

The stakes in the region are high. The risks of thawing of the conflict and escalation of hostilities have been widely recognised, as well as threats of other regional actors being drawn in. The EU's current stance is often rationalised as the best way to stay engaged and help pacify the region: upsetting Azerbaijan on this question, some EU officials argue, could harm their relations and diminish EU leverage.

4 <https://www.halotrust.org/minefreenk/our-role-in-nagorno-karabakh/>. Accessed November 2016.

5 <http://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/moldova-eu-commission-clarifies-intentions-about-transnistria/>. Accessed November 2016.

6 Several EU member states still do not recognize Kosovo's independence, including Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece.

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Indeed, the Republic of Azerbaijan invests considerable political and diplomatic energy as well as financial resources to enforce its blockade of Karabakh and ensure that foreign political leaders and journalists stay out of the small territory. They even maintain a black list of all those who have travelled to Karabakh, and consider them *personae non gratae*.

The EU has so far indulged Azerbaijan's intransigence at the expense of its own values, as well as its leverage and authority. But this approach is counterproductive. Europe's policy of placating the most intransigent party in the dispute diminishes its leverage and authority.

The EU is failing to help reduce tensions, build bridges or create an atmosphere of trust. That is likely to promote, rather than prevent, instability.

The EU's interests and the interests of peace and prosperity would therefore be much better served ensuring that its involvement is fully in line with its core values and principles: engaging with the people of Karabakh would be a good first step in this regard.



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BACKGROUND: NAGORNO – KARABAKH AND EU POLICY

Nagorno-Karabakh is a small territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It was incorporated in the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan during the Soviet era. However, its overwhelmingly Armenian population felt discriminated against under the Soviet regime, prior to 1991, and sought to take advantage of the democratization of the Soviet Union in the late 1980's to voice their grievances. The overreaction on the part of Azerbaijani authorities in the form of pogroms and deportations of villagers prompted the formation of self-defence groups. This situation eventually led to a war from late 1991 to May 1994. Against all expectations, the Karabakh “self-defence army” won the war, but no peace treaty was signed. Instead, a Russian-brokered cease-fire was concluded in May 1994 between Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia. It remains the only fragile foundation for the current status-quo.

Since 1994, negotiations have made no progress as Azerbaijan insists on full sovereignty over the territory, but refuses to provide credible security guarantees to the population of Karabakh. At the same time, Azerbaijan refuses to negotiate directly with those concerned, the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh, seeking to create the fiction that the war resulted not from gross mistreatment of a minority, but from an aggression by the Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia for its part refuses to agree, on behalf of absent Karabakh negotiators, to Azerbaijani control over Karabakh.

After more than 20 years of negotiations, the talks over the future status of Karabakh have turned into a rather theoretical exercise due to the total absence of trust between the parties. Armenians complain that prior agreements have been routinely flouted and have repeatedly pointed out the atrocities committed during the war. They are also concerned that the level of hostile rhetoric by public authorities and the media is such in Azerbaijan that peaceful coexistence is unthinkable unless the effects of this rhetoric are reversed.

The situation is further complicated by the geopolitical games being played in the Caucasus: Russia seeks to preserve its sphere of influence, Turkey seeks to expand its own influence in the region, particularly in Turkic and Muslim areas, while the US seeks to assert its own global authority and oil interests. Baku is now a major oil producer, and the Caucasus is a bottleneck for communication between continents, especially for the transport of hydrocarbons.

Observers of the conflict over Karabakh have for years warned that war could flare up at any time and could trigger a wider conflagration involving some of the regional powers, including Turkey, a NATO member, Russia and Iran. For years, ceasefire violations have been occurring between the two armies at the contact line, causing hundreds of casualties.

These fears have been confirmed by the outbreak of the “Four-Day War” in April 2016. An attack on several fronts by Azerbaijani troops led to fierce fighting and a number of casualties estimated between 100 and 350, including civilians. This was the most severe episode of the conflict since the cease-fire of 1994.

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The fall-out from the Syrian war is a prime example of the profound effects that conflicts in the European periphery can have throughout the continent. Can Europe really afford another preventable war?

EU Policy towards Karabakh

Since the end of the Soviet Union, different European institutions have sought to extend the European model of cooperation between states to former Soviet Republics, including the Caucasus. The European Union in particular has sought to contribute to this effort with its European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, the goal of which was to promote stability, democracy and prosperity in these countries through a closer integration with the single market and through closer political cooperation.

The vision was that growing economic interdependence, combined with a wide-ranging “dialogue”, would promote constructive cooperation rather than conflict between states. It is consistent with this approach that the EU has avoided antagonising Azerbaijan and decided not to engage with Karabakh in any way.

However, the Eastern Partnership policy has clearly shown its limits in recent years, particularly in the Ukraine and in the Caucasus, which now experience greater instability than before. Ironically, it is precisely since the EU first formulated its policy for the region, in 2003, to promote democracy, a market economy and conflict resolution in the area, that Azerbaijan has solidified into a hereditary oil dictatorship whose leader, Ilham Aliyev, exacerbates nationalism and hatred of the Armenians to quell dissent and consolidate his control over his country.

As Azerbaijani authorities have also systematically refused to cooperate with any Armenians in multilateral fora, the EU's investment in dialogue has clearly failed to build bridges between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. With the current approach to the region reaching its inherent limitations, it is time to question its approach to the region and engage with the population of Nagorno-Karabakh.

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