

EU strategy for the South Caucasus

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Evgeni KIRILOV (S&D, BG) on the need for an EU Strategy for the South Caucasus. It reaffirms that the EU's main objective in the region is to encourage the development of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia towards open, peaceful, stable and democratic countries, ready to establish good neighbourly relations and able to transform the South Caucasus into a region of sustainable peace, stability and prosperity.

Overall, the European Union has to play a more active political role in the region, by developing a strategy that would **combine its soft power with a firm approach**.

Security issues and peaceful resolution of conflicts: according to Members, retaining the status quo in the conflicts in the region is unacceptable and unsustainable. Action, therefore, needs to be taken to resolve all the conflicts under way. In this regard, the EU has an important role to play in contributing to the culture of dialogue in the region, as well as mutual understanding. Conflict management and conflict resolution necessitate the recognition of the rights and legitimate interests of all relevant parties, their openness to review perceptions of past events and their willingness to overcome hatred and fear. Members call on external players (including the European Union) to use their powers and influence, in ways that are fully consistent with international law to ensure that there is progress in the settlement of conflicts but without introducing conditions for the respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the South Caucasus states.

Members then move on to review the conflicts under way in the region and make the following remarks:

- **Nagorno-Karabakh:** although Members welcome the dynamic pace of the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, they call on the parties to intensify their peace talk efforts for the purpose of a settlement. They condemn the idea of a military solution and call on both parties to avoid any further breaches of the 1994 ceasefire. The international community is called upon to show courage and political will to assist in overcoming the remaining sticking points which hinder an agreement. In the meantime; the urgent problem of the refugees and displaced persons needs to be resolved. **Members call for the withdrawal of Armenian forces from all occupied territories of Azerbaijan** allowing the return of displaced populations to their homes and request international forces to be organised so that the displaced persons can return to their homes. To prepare for a lasting peace, Members call on all relevant authorities to avoid provocative policies and rhetoric, inflammatory statements and manipulation of history so that public opinion accepts and fully understands the benefits of a comprehensive settlement. Members believe that the position according to which Nagorno-Karabakh includes all occupied Azerbaijani lands surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh should rapidly be abandoned. They note that **an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh** could offer a solution until the final status is determined and that it could create a transitional framework for peaceful coexistence and cooperation of Armenian and Azerbaijani populations in the region;
- **Armenia-Turkey:** Members welcome the strengthening of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey, including the opening of the common border;
- **Georgia:** Members reiterate their unconditional support for the territorial integrity and inviolability of the internationally recognised borders of Georgia, and supports the continuous efforts made by the Georgian authorities to achieve a settlement of its internal conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; as well as the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) the extension of which they call for. Members deplore the attitude of Russia and the de facto authorities of the occupied territories, which are under Russian effective control, which are blocking parts of its implementation. They call

on Russia to honour its commitment to withdraw its troops to the positions held before the outbreak of the August 2008 war and **condemn the recognition by the Russian Federation of the independence of the breakaway Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia**. They also stress the importance of protecting the safety and rights of all people living within the breakaway regions and of promoting respect for ethnic Georgians' right of return under safe and dignified conditions. Georgia is called upon to continue implementing its IDP Action Plan and assisting the IDPs within its territory. More generally, Members emphasise the importance of confidence-building measures and people-to-people contacts across the conflict and encourage the EU to promote projects of freedom of movement along with Administrative Border Lines between affected people. They also invite the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) to make every effort to give new and fresh impetus to these talks with a view to reaching a satisfactory stabilisation of the situation.

Progress towards democratisation and respect for human rights and the rule of law: recalling that any progress in the region cannot take place without efforts towards democratisation, good governance, political pluralism, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, Members call upon the countries of the region to pursue their efforts in these vital areas for good cooperation with the EU. Efforts are also required to strengthen the political dialogue with these countries and to consolidate the democratic institutions of these countries (e.g. including the independence of the judiciary, strengthening parliamentary control over the executive,...). Particular efforts are required to fight against corruption, to guarantee the holding of free and fair elections (with the help and supervision of the EU), to enhance freedom of expression and of the press, to fight against torture and harassment and ill-treatment of journalists or civil society. Members also invite the parties to participate in the work of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly in order to facilitate the coming together of parliamentarians from all the parties.

Economic issues and social development: Members hold the view that broader cooperation on a regional level and with the EU in sectors such as economy, transport, energy and environment is essential for the optimal development of the sectors themselves and for ensuring stability in the region. Cooperation needs to be regional but also to involve legal and police aspects and include border management. Initiative should also be taken to stimulate a favourable climate for economic activity. Members express concern at the rapidly increasing military and defence spending in the South Caucasus and the build-up of military arsenals and point out that this part of domestic budgets drains away a remarkable amount of financial resources from more urgent issues like poverty reduction, social security and economic development. They note the strategic geopolitical location of the South Caucasus and its increasing importance as an energy, transport and communications corridor connecting the Caspian region and Central Asia with Europe and considers it of the utmost importance and, therefore, that **EU cooperation with the South Caucasus be given high priority** (this region is an important transit zone for energy supplies to the EU thanks to the Nabucco and White Stream corridors). They call for the setting in place of **early warning mechanisms for energy disruptions** as well as efforts to promote energy efficiency, invest in renewables and for environmental concerns to be taken on board. They also call for the strengthening of social cohesion and local social dialogue, giving priority to the promotion of gender equality, education and health.

Towards a European strategy: Members welcome the Eastern Partnership and takes note of the related initiatives that have been activated but stress that, in order to make it credible, it should be accompanied by concrete projects and adequate incentives. The partnership, according to Members, should focus on the following aspects:

- **resolution of conflicts:** in Members' opinion, the EU is well placed to support confidence-building, reconstruction and rehabilitation. They call for the creation of spaces for civic engagement not just between leaders but also between civic organisations and strengthening of regional cooperation measures. Concerned by the risk of a spillover of frozen conflicts in the region, Members recommend the setting-up of a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the South Caucasus,

embracing the countries concerned and the relevant regional and global actors. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty justifies a more prominent role for the EU and, in particular, in regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Humanitarian aid and assistance to the population in the Nagorno-Karabakh region is called for, in particular for refugees. Aid distribution programmes and information dissemination programmes should also be deployed in Abkhazia and Ossetia. Members also call for the funding of confidence-building measures between parties;

- **democratisation and respect for human rights and the rule of law:** although Members support aid being given to the region they consider that the partner countries need to respect their political commitments (such as that of the Georgian government to relaunch democratic reforms). They suggest that targeted aid be given to Azerbaijan and Georgia and that funding to strengthen the rights of minorities be given to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Actions in regard to media freedom and strengthening civil society also need to be considered;
- **economic cooperation and social development:** Members stress that the Union must continue to support the economic development, trade and investment in the South Caucasus. The establishment of a comprehensive **free trade area** should be considered, including among the South Caucasian countries themselves. Given the geopolitical situation of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in relation to the European Union, Turkey as an EU candidate country, Russia and Iran, Members consider that trade is one of the key components of the EU's overall policy. They call on the Commission to identify common areas of economic interest that can overcome divergences, facilitate dialogue and promote regional cooperation. They call for greater EU engagement and involvement with a view to bringing about integration in the region. Welcoming initiatives taken to foster relations between the partner countries, Members call on Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to improve their progress towards fulfilling their respective ENP Action Plans. Particular attention should be accorded to energy security because it is a common concern. These projects should respect European standards and seek to develop sources of alternative energies. Once again, Members reaffirm that political stability is essential for the reliable and uninterrupted supply of energy resources and recall that the double energy corridor formed by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines fosters rapprochement between the EU and the Caspian region. Lastly, they insist on the significance of people-to-people contacts and mobility programmes.

In conclusion, Members highlight the necessity for the EU to develop a strategy for the South Caucasus, given the importance of the region for the EU and the potential role that the EU has in fostering further its development and in the solution of its conflicts. Reiterating their full support for the European Neighbourhood Policy, they call for the European Parliament to be kept immediately and fully informed of all initiatives taken in this area.