EU-Azerbaijan relations

2021/2231(INI) - 20/02/2023 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Željana ZOVKO (EPP, CZ) on EU-Azerbaijan relations.

The report noted that for more than three decades and still ongoing, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan have resulted in the occupation of territories internationally recognised as belonging to the sovereign territory of

Azerbaijan, tens of thousands of casualties, immense destruction, including of cultural and religious sites, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

Deadly military confrontations between Azerbaijan and Armenia continue to erupt periodically. The ceasefire statement of 9 November 2020, introduced following the 44-day war waged by Azerbaijan in 2020, has not been fully implemented.

Conflict resolution and normalisation of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations

Members are convinced that sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot be achieved through military means and the threat of use of force but requires a comprehensive political settlement in accordance with international law. They reaffirmed that, to be effective, a **comprehensive peace treaty** must include provisions that guarantee the integrity of Armenian sovereign territory, the rights and security of the Armenian population residing in Nagorno-Karabakh and other conflict-afflicted areas and the prompt and safe return of all refugees and internally displaced people to their homes.

The report welcomed the numerous steps undertaken by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaderships to overcome their differences and achieve lasting and sustainable peace in the region and commended their sustained engagement in ongoing negotiations. Members called on both parties not to lose momentum, to agree on **concrete steps forward** and to ensure a safe, secure and prosperous environment for the benefit of all ethnic populations in the region.

Members welcomed Azerbaijan’s commitment to normalising relations with Armenia and recalled the commitment of Armenia to withdraw its armed forces and to guarantee the safety of transport links between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to ensure the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions.

The Azerbaijani authorities are called on to:

- ensure freedom and security of movement along the Lachin corridor as prescribed by the trilateral statement of 9 November 2020;

- ensure the safety and respect of the rights of all minorities in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, as this is an essential prerequisite for the creation of conditions conducive to post-war rehabilitation and genuine reconciliation.

Both Azerbaijan and Armenia are urged to:

- fully implement the tripartite ceasefire statement of 9 November 2020 in all its aspects;

- refrain from any hostile rhetoric or actions that may be perceived as inciting hatred or outright violence or as supporting impunity, or from actions that risk undermining efforts to establish and promote an atmosphere conducive to trust, reconciliation, cooperation and sustainable peace, including people-to-people contact;

- increase credible confidence-building measures in order to counter polarisation, lack of trust and hate speech and other inflammatory rhetoric;

- set up a transitional **justice mechanism** as a confidence-building step towards acknowledging the suffering on both sides and to work towards reconciliation based on a factual assessment of events that have occurred during the armed conflict, starting in 1988.

Enhanced EU involvement

The report recalled that the EU's passive stance during and immediately after the 2020 war gave other regional actors, such as Russia, Iran and Turkey, the opportunity to continue exerting their influence in the region. It also recalled that more active European preventive diplomacy could have prevented such an outcome.

Members underlined the EU's readiness to be more actively involved in settling the region's protracted conflicts and expressed strong support for the initiative taken by President Charles Michel to convene and mediate **bilateral meetings** of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and encouraged the work on the ground of the EU's special representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia.

While welcoming the humanitarian assistance provided by the EU to the conflict-affected population in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, the Commission is called on to ensure **additional funding and assistance** for demining efforts, including equipment, training and risk education. The Commission is also called on to increase EU assistance to people in need, including in Nagorno-Karabakh, facilitate the implementation of more ambitious confidence building measures, promote interreligious and interethnic dialogue, protect minority rights and enhance people-to-people contacts between citizens on both sides of the border in order to build the foundations for a sustainable and peaceful coexistence.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms

The report emphasised the need to make any further cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan conditional on the country's effective and tangible progress towards respect for international standards and international commitments, in particular those related to democracy, human rights, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression and association, good governance, the rights of minorities, freedom of the media and gender equality.

Good governance, justice, rule of law and the fight against corruption

Members expressed its concern about the persistent lack of independence, impartiality and effectiveness of the judiciary as well as of transparency in its decisions and about systemic procedural shortcomings. They urged Azerbaijan to reform the judiciary and the prosecution system to ensure the complete independence of the judiciary. They expressed regret at the limited progress made by Azerbaijan on preventing and fighting against corruption.

Security and geopolitical challenges

While welcoming Azerbaijan's official support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as well as the humanitarian aid provided to Ukraine during the ongoing war, Members are, however, strongly concerned by the Declaration on Allied Interaction between Azerbaijan and Russia

signed in February 2022 in Moscow. They noted, furthermore, the lack of support from Azerbaijan for the resolutions voted on in the UN General Assembly on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and urges Azerbaijan to ensure that sanctions against Russia are not circumvented.

The report welcomed the security cooperation between the EU, its Member States and Azerbaijan and fully supported the further deepening of counter-terrorism cooperation. Contrarily, Members condemned the illicit and massively widespread use of the NSO Group's Pegasus surveillance software and repressive cybersecurity employed by Azerbaijan against journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, lawyers and politicians and called on the Azerbaijani authorities to refrain from using it.

Economic cooperation

Recognising the strategic role played by Azerbaijan as a provider of fossil fuel energy to the EU, the report called on the Commission to support foreign investments from international partners aimed at increasing connectivity between the EU and Azerbaijan. The Commission is called on to guarantee that no gas imports from non-EU countries could be whitewashing Russian gas under European sanctions. The Azerbaijani authorities are called on to undertake crucial steps to accelerate the development of renewables and increase energy efficiency.