

UDC 327.5

DOI [https://doi.org/10.32689/2523-4625-2022-4\(64\)-1](https://doi.org/10.32689/2523-4625-2022-4(64)-1)

**Ahmadli Ulvi Mansur**

PhD student, Baku State University, 1148 Baku, Azerbaijan, st. Z. Khalilov 23  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7828-6318

**Ахмедлі Ульві Мансур**

докторант, Бакинський державний університет, 1148, Баку, Азербайджан, вул. З. Халілов 23  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7828-6318

## EU'S MEDIATION ROLE IN AZERBAIJAN-ARMENIA CONFLICT AFTER SECOND KARABAKH WAR

### РОЛЬ МЕДІАЦІЇ ЄС В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНО-АРМ'ЯНСЬКОМУ КОНФЛІКТІ ПІСЛЯ ДРУГОЇ КАРАБАХСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ

*The Second Karabakh War, broke out on 27 September 2020, is perceived an event changed the geopolitical scene in the South Caucasus. The stability in the region was challenged after the war. The mutual untrusty and regency of war requires a mediator for reaching peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The political powers in the South Caucasus initiate their own platforms for mediation to the conflict settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. European Union is one of the main powers which seen active in the peace process. The article covers the opportunities for the EU to mediate the relations between conflicted parties. For understanding EU's role, we researched the theoretical background for mediation based on the indicators. Noting that Brussels is not the only actor, the potential of EU has been analyzed comparatively. The mediator should have motive for the peace between parties. Russia is interested to keep its military presence in the region. So that the continuation of the conflict could be beneficial to Moscow. However, Brussels needs the stability in the South Caucasus and the withdrawal of Russian military contingent. In order to reach these goals, the peace is in the interest of Brussels. In this context, EU's activities in the South Caucasus face the geopolitical challenges from Russia. Especially after the war in Ukraine started in 2022, Kremlin chose harsh position against EU's role, which is understood not as mediation but political domination in Russia. Kremlin's aggressive policy in Eastern Europe alarmed Brussels to take serious actions. The range of activities shouldn't be limited in Ukraine but also other conflicts in the regions surrounded Russia. Since the start of Karabakh conflict, Brussels stayed passive to the processes. However, after the Second Karabakh War, EU transformed its stance to active position. The regency of meetings between Baku and Brussels grew since 2021. EU seems more active player in negotiation process.*

**Key words:** Azerbaijan, Armenia, Karabakh, European Union, Russia.

*Друга Карабахська війна, що вибухнула 27 вересня 2020 року, сприймається як подія, яка змінила геополітичну арену на Південному Кавказі. Після війни стабільність у регіоні було поставлено під сумнів. Взаємна недовіра та тривалість воєнних дій для досягнення миру між Азербайджаном та Вірменією потребують медіації. Політичні сили Південного Кавказу ініціюють свої платформи для медіації у врегулюванні конфлікту між Азербайджаном та Вірменією. Європейський Союз є одним із головних чинників, які беруть активну участь у мирному процесі. У статті розглядаються можливості ЄС виступати медіатором у відносинах між сторонами, що конфліктують. Для розуміння ролі ЄС ми досліджували теоретичні засади медіації на основі індикаторів. Враховуючи, що Брюссель не є єдиною дійовою особою, було проведено порівняльний аналіз потенціалу ЄС. Медіатор повинен мати мотив досягнення миру між сторонами. Росія зацікавлена у збереженні своєї військової присутності у регіоні, тобто продовження конфлікту вигідно для Москви. Проте Брюсселю потрібна стабільність на Південному Кавказі та виведення російського військового контингенту. Для досягнення цих цілей на користь Брюсселя потрібен мир. У цьому контексті діяльність ЄС на Південному Кавказі стикається з геополітичними викликами з боку Росії. Після того, як 2022 року розпочалася війна в Україні, Кремль зайняв жорстку позицію щодо ролі ЄС, яка розуміється не як медіатор, а як політичне домінування в Росії. Агресивна політика Кремля у Східній Європі змусила Брюссель зробити серйозні дії. Спектр діяльності не повинен обмежуватись Україною, але й іншими конфліктами у регіонах, що оточують Росію. З самого початку Карабахського конфлікту Брюссель залишався пасивним у цих процесах. Однак після Другої Карабахської війни ЄС змінив свою позицію на активну. Кількість зустрічей між Баку та Брюсселем зросла з 2021 року. ЄС видається активнішим гравцем у переговорному процесі.*

**Ключові слова:** Азербайджан, Вірменія, Карабах, Євросоюз, Росія.

**Introduction to problem.** The Second Karabakh War changed the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus. It led the active power politics over the region between Western bloc and Russia. The new geopolitical

view generated threat to stability and peace in the region.

The war brought out the necessity for peace which is required to end the confrontation by the participation of mediator. In order to achieve peace

over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the most necessary factor in the mediation is an unbiased approach. In contrast to these principles, the co-chairs of the Minsk Group and regional powers like Russia, Turkey and Iran hold deep geopolitical interests in the region. Their participation serves the goal of maintaining influence in the South Caucasus. Until the Second Karabakh War and the war in Ukraine, the EU had more economic interests than political ones in the South Caucasus. Russia, the main rival of the EU, started to expand its sphere of influence through occupation alarmed in Brussel. Moscow's position in the South Caucasus is the main threat to Brussels' mediation. Attempts by the Kremlin to limit the EU's engagement will force Brussels to play a role in political dimension along its borders.

**The degree of research of the problem.**

The EU's mediation role was analyzed on the bases of theoretical and analytical approach. The theoretical background was covered by the works of William Zartman, Saadia Touval and Marieke Kleiboer. The role of Brussels was analyzed based on the researches of Shamkhal Abilov, Beyrak Hajiyev, Valeri Modebadze, David Janssen.

**The purpose** of this article is to analyze the mediation role of EU, its potential and geopolitical obstacles to its role.

**Research methods.** The comparative analysis was used to compare the mediation role of EU and other regional players. In order to analyze Brussels' role in the legal framework, document analysis was applied.

**Theoretical background.** Conflict resolution is defined as removing disputes and achieving peace. Peace itself means the absence of war and fear. It expresses harmony, conciliation and mutual trust among people. Sometimes, parties can't reach the necessary level of trust to solve the problem. It leads to violence in the form of military confrontation.

Mediation is the involvement of a third party to assist end the conflict. This process should be based on an unbiased position, not using direct use of force. It allows adversaries to communicate and attempts to build trust between parties. Mediators initiate suggestions for compromise and hold talks directly with conflicted sides. In parallel, parties also call a particular mediator to ensure their own interest. The mediator's interest in the conflict could be defensive or increase of influence. In the first version, the continuation of the conflict should harm the interests of the mediator, so that the mediator will work on finding a solution. Secondly, the conflict solution has no direct importance for mediators. Its main interest comes from increasing the influence on parties [1, p. 31-32].

The characteristics of a mediator are an essential part of third-party conflict resolution. Three aspects should be noted as the characteristics of a mediator: (im)partiality, leverage and status [2, p. 368].

Impartiality means the position of the mediator for the conflicted parties. It happens when the mediator selects one party over the other. In this situation, the achievement will not be long-standing. As we see mediation efforts in the Arab-Israeli and Indian-Pakistan conflicts. Leverage is another essential part in terms of the mediator's characteristics. So much leverage could lead to pressure which spoils the negotiation process. Sometimes, lower leverage could increase credibility and sincerity. The status relies on the mediator's reputation, special expertise and success chance. Overall, the mediator shouldn't be chosen randomly. It should hold several features in order to gain sustainable achievement.

**EU as a mediator to Azerbaijan-Armenia negotiation process.** Several actors like Turkey, Iran, Russia and the EU play a role in the Azerbaijan-Armenia talks. However, the EU's role differs from others. It should be analyzed in the context of motives and characteristics as we mentioned above.

As a motive, peace in the South Caucasus is in the interest of the EU. Brussels follows the path to being a global actor. For realizing this aspiration, the EU needs to provide security along the borders of the union. The EU enlarged its border to the East and reached post-Soviet space. Now, the unsettled conflicts pose threats to Brussels' security interests. The territorial conflicts of Crimea in Ukraine, Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia in Georgia are the main problems that remain unresolved and generate instability on the borders of the EU. In Ukraine and Georgia, the EU used the tool of sanctions, cooperation through trade, transport, ensuring no return to hostilities. Such moves have not entailed a solution yet [3, p. 312-313].

Throughout all year, the EU has not relied much on power in a "realist sense" but rather performs as a "normative power". The EU set up cooperation frameworks through ENP and EaP. The EU's main target in the solution of the conflict is forming good relations and cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia [4, p. 156, 158].

After the Russo-Ukrainian war threatening the EU's security, the motive for Brussels became vital in order to reach a positive conclusion to the Karabakh problem. In the context of characteristics, the EU is not a part of the conflict. The EU has been involved in several conflict resolution processes as a mediator, starting from its neighborhood Serbia-Kosovo to Yemen.

However, the EU never directly participated in the negotiation process until the Second Karabakh War.

Starting from 2021, Brussels became the center for Azerbaijan and Armenia negotiation process. In 2022, April and May, the meetings have been held at the level of leaders. It is the start of EU direct involvement in the Karabakh talks. The main reason for the activation of Brussels is the Russo-Ukrainian War. Russian foreign policy analyst Arkady Dubnov claimed that Moscow is very busy in the war against Ukraine, which leads to its position weakening. Additionally, both parties seem happy to have the EU as a counter to Russia [5].

The other powers, which could take a role in Azerbaijan-Armenia negotiations, have specific interests in the region. Turkey is perceived as an ally to Azerbaijan. So, it is not acceptable to Armenia. Iran is another option. However, Iran is perceived as having sympathy for Armenia by Azerbaijani officials. Additionally, Iran is opposing relations of Azerbaijan with Israel [6]. In overall, Tehran's geopolitical position doesn't allow it to become a mediator.

The most influential in the region and most interested in this conflict is Russia. As a mediator, Moscow achieved the cease of the Second Karabakh War by trilateral statement. On the other hand, the Kremlin could also trigger tension between Baku and Yerevan. It could make Russia become the main mediator in the scene [7, p.31]. Moscow perceives the activity of EU on the negotiation process between Azerbaijan and Armenia as a geopolitical move. Russian spokesperson of Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova noted that EU has nothing to do with the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In her speech made in August 31, 2022, she called EU's move as "pseudo initiative" of Europeans [8].

Russia's characteristic as a mediator is partial, but has huge leverage. One of the conflicted sides, Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. It means that, Kremlin and Yerevan are in the same military alliance. At the same time, Russia deployed its military base in Armenia. Interestingly, Russia remained silent during the Second Karabakh War. The reason was that war didn't happen within Armenia's territory. Thus, Moscow couldn't be involved. In geopolitical terms, it is an opportunity to punish the pro-western Armenian government. At the end of the war, Russia deployed its military forces in Karabakh, which gave it high-level leverage over both Baku and Yerevan.

In terms of the status of the mediator, Moscow doesn't seem an appropriate one. Russia is

interested in keeping the frozen conflict in order to block European integration in South Caucasus. The Kremlin views the region as its backyard [9, p.10, 108]. This approach diminishes Russia's compatibility, being a mediator.

Concluding all the above-mentioned criteria, the EU's position is more reliable. However, it shouldn't be understood that the positive outcome from Azerbaijan and Armenia negotiation was based on the mediation of the EU or Russia. It is based on mutual effort. Both sides shouldn't push each other into a political rivalry over the conflict resolution. Russia has a huge level of leverage and the EU is a neutral and interesting side in reaching peace in the region. The possibility of this situation is under question, but the necessity is very high.

**Supporting mediation and negotiation process.** The European Union played a very limited role in the mediation and negotiations process during and after the Second Karabakh War. Additionally, Brussels was not directly engaged in the peace process. There were also objective reasons that the EU mainly focused on internal issues and the Brexit problem. At the same time, the EU has not enough tools for influence in the South Caucasus [10].

However, Brussels has the potential to participate in mediation and negotiation processes for achieving peace between the two sides. Contribution to peace by the EU derives from certain documents. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union set "preserving and preventing peace, and strengthening international security" as one of the main goals of the EU. Article 43 allows the EU to engage in civil and military means in order to prevent conflicts [11].

The Treaty of Lisbon which entered into force in 2009 introduced Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) which provides the EU with operational capacity on civil and military assets. By the Lisbon Treaty, the EU can use this tool outside of the union for "peacekeeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security". Of course, the EU should implement this mission in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter [12].

We could see similar steps in the EU's engagement in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflict. After achieving a 6-point ceasefire agreement, the EU deployed the European Union Monitoring Group in the conflicted territories in Georgia consisting of 203 members from 23 EU states. The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus (since 2003) and the EU Special Representative for the crisis in Georgia also participated in the negotiations. The EU took part in the Geneva International Discussions.



This is another instrument for monitoring the situation and implementing humanitarian aid [13, p. 91-95].

The EU launched direct participation in the negotiation process since the end of 2021. Brussels is becoming the center for talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia. On 6 April, The President of the European Council, Charles Michel hosted a meeting between Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders. Noting that, Brussels organized meetings in December 2021 and February 2022 with the participation of the French president, March 2022, before the April meeting. The frequency of meetings is the indicator of the EU's activation in the negotiation process. In the latest meeting, Charles Michel emphasized the desire of Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister to move toward peace [14].

**Geopolitical obstacles for EU's role.** The new geopolitical situation after Second Karabakh War in the South Caucasus puts some limits on the EU's role in conflict settlements. In this period, control of Moscow grew and Brussels' influence reduced. Because the Kremlin doesn't want to see other actors in the conflict settlement exists in post-Soviet space. The other type of obstacles includes the EU's internal issues, which lessen the efforts of the EU on the South Caucasian agenda.

The regional balance is no longer the same after the 44-day war. Moscow seized the opportunities in the Second Karabakh War to follow its policy by the deployment of military forces in Karabakh under the flag of peacekeepers. The Kremlin perceives post-Soviet space as its own sphere of influence. Therefore, Russia tries to prevent the influence of Western actors by using different tools. Russia attempts to block Euro-Atlantic integration by offering its own models such as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Union [15]. However, Azerbaijan didn't choose any side and remained neutral. Its neutrality is important for the EU, because if Azerbaijan becomes a member of the Eurasian bloc, it means game over for Brussels in the South Caucasus. None can say what will be the choice of Baku in the future [16, p. 64, 65]. If the EU wants to gain influence on the region, so it has no luxury to remain silent or act passively

The Russian military presence in Karabakh and having direct contacts with local Armenians could weaken the EU's role. Peacekeepers were involved in reconstruction and security processes in mountainous Karabakh right after the deployment. These activities boosted the image of Russian peacekeepers for the Armenian

people. Russian forces were accepted as "savior brother" [17].

However, Kremlin is also in a trouble with the war against Ukraine led to sanctions and made Moscow exhausted. Both sides face many challenges, but opposite geopolitical interests owned by Russia and the EU will force them to enter the game of rivalry. Although collaboration between the two powers is the best option in order to achieve peace between Baku and Yerevan, the lack of mutual trust and desire make this option impossible.

**Conclusion.** The Second Karabakh War exposure the fragility of the region and proved that the security of the region is at risk. There exists a demand for a mediator to be engaged in the peacebuilding process. The European Union possesses opportunities to contribute to the peace between the two nations. The EU participates in negotiation processes directly. The absence of the West could lead to the monopoly of conflict settlement by the Kremlin. Moscow's current intention of making peace seems suspicious. So, increase in the EU's efforts is required to achieve peace.

As there are opportunities, obstacles to these opportunities also exist. The main threat to the EU's interest in the region is the Kremlin's geopolitical interests. The deployment of Russian peacekeepers makes Moscow the far more powerful actor in the Karabakh conflict resolution. Russia will use its power to broker the negotiation process alone and exclude Brussels. Another obstacle is internal problems of the EU. The war in Ukraine leads to the global economic stagnation. Several European countries withdrew their companies from Russia and ceased commercial relations. Such movements reflected inflation in the EU and devaluation of the Euro. The problems could limit space for engaging peace processes in the South Caucasus for the EU.

Despite the obstacles, the South Caucasus locates neighborhood of the EU, so that stability at the door means stability inside. The territorial conflicts put stability into a risk. While the need for conflict solutions rises, the geopolitical rivalry with the Kremlin also increases. Moscow's influence on the region affects Baku and Yerevan's maneuvering capability in foreign policy and limits Brussels' steps. While Moscow has become a key player in conflict resolution, the EU shouldn't make itself stand behind the processes until the Kremlin monopolizes conflict settlement. If Brussels wants to have stability in its near abroad, so that, it should sharp its tools. In another way, all the opportunities which are possible today will fade.

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