

# Geopolitics of the South Caucasus after the 44 Day War: A Failure or an Opportunity for the EU?

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A new geopolitical order emerged in the South Caucasus following the 44 Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in late 2020. Upending the former status quo, the war brought in Turkey as an active player in the regional power games but also reinforced Russia's military standing in the South Caucasus. Concurrently, as a result of the war, the South Caucasus experienced a further decline of Western influence over its regional affairs. The European Union (EU) found it difficult to impact the regional politics – both during the war and afterwards. The EU was thus widely criticized for failing to play an assertive international role even in a region very close to its borders, in contrast to the geopolitical aspirations of the incumbent European Commission. Although the new geopolitical order formed by the war in the South Caucasus promises to be more sustainable and peaceful, there are myriad factors that might undermine regional peace and lead to new armed escalations. The EU does not have a military presence in the region, unlike Turkey and Russia, to play an impactful security role; however, this article argues that it still has some options to become influential, help the region's countries more confidently counter security challenges, and meaningfully contribute to regional peace and stability. Analysing how the EU could adjust its policies toward the South Caucasus to the post-war regional realities, the article suggests a set of policy recommendations for the EU's foreign policy apparatus and the leading member states that are more actively engaged with the countries of the region.

**Keywords:** EU, South Caucasus, geopolitics, 44 Day War, Azerbaijan, Armenia



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### *Introduction*

Despite the launch of the ambitious Eastern Partnership Programme in 2009 and the establishment of new framework agreements with Georgia (2013) and Armenia (2017), the EU's role in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus has, over subsequent years, failed to make substantial progress. This failure was most visible during the Armenia–Azerbaijan war from 27 September to 9 November 2020, which was arguably the second major geopolitical event in the region since the mid-1990s, after the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia.

Following the war, the EU found its place in the geopolitics of the South Caucasus further diminished because Russia gained a military presence in Azerbaijan, the only country in the region where there had been no Russian military presence before the war. This erected another major obstacle to the intensification of relations between the South Caucasus countries and the Euro-Atlantic community. This is widely interpreted as a failure on the part of the EU, as there had been opportunities for the West to push forward a Western-coordinated breakthrough towards the resolution of the [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict before the war. These opportunities were never fully realized.

Nevertheless, there is still a range of opportunities that the EU can utilize to reinforce its role in the region. The sizeable aid package allocated by the EU for the socio-economic development of the region's countries in summer 2021 served as testimony to the potential of the EU in its policies towards the South Caucasus. The EU, however, should take care not to repeat its past mistakes in future engagements, or it is doomed to be outmanoeuvred in this highly contested region.

The remainder of this article explores the central geopolitical configurations of the South Caucasus in the aftermath of the 44 Day War, looks into the EU's role in the new regional realities, identifies challenges and opportunities for the EU to play a proactive role in the region, and suggests ways to improve its image and reinforce its influence. The paper concludes with recommendations for the foreign policy apparatus of the EU and its leading member states that are more actively engaged with the countries of the region.

### *South Caucasus after the 44 Day War*

The geopolitical order established in the South Caucasus in the early 1990s after a brief period of instability following the collapse of the Soviet Union remained largely unchanged for long years, despite periodic attempts (e.g., the Russia–Georgia war of 2008) to modify it. Russia had secured a dominant position over the foreign policy options of the regional countries owing to the conflicts in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia, and the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, where Russia largely pulled the strings. By recognizing the “independence” of Georgia’s separatist regions in 2008, Moscow effectively dangled a “sword of Damocles” over Tbilisi’s foreign policy, which remains unchallenged despite all the efforts of Georgians.

The other two regional powers neighbouring the South Caucasus, namely Turkey and Iran – although they have succeeded in wielding some influence, to varying degrees, in and/or over the three small states of the region – fell short of resolutely challenging Russia’s dominance.

Against this backdrop, and being more of a normative and economic power in its origins, the EU succeeded in taking the lead regarding the geo-economic map of the South Caucasus. In a relatively short period of time, the EU became the main trading partner of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia – accounting for, respectively, 36.6%, 23%, and 18% of their total trade turnover in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The EU has, however, had to manoeuvre in substantially more contested regional geopolitics, regardless of its occasionally declared aspirations for an impactful geopolitical role in its Eastern neighbourhood and across the globe.<sup>2</sup> Having failed to buttress the European aspirations of Georgia, the EU gave disturbingly discouraging signals to Azerbaijan and Armenia and forced them to reconsider their foreign policy agendas.

The 44 Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, from 27 September to 9 November 2020, was another major test that the EU could not successfully pass. Neither the EU nor its leading member states could meaningfully impact the war and its outcomes, although they were expected to play an influential mediating role in line with the mandate

1 European Commission, “Countries and Regions: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia”, available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/> (accessed: 1 October 2021).

2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany, “The ‘geopolitical’ European Commission gets to work”, 3 December, 2019, available at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/european-commission/2284908> (accessed: 1 October 2021).

of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>3</sup> France, one of the co-chair states of the Minsk Group, a major international institution mandated to mediate the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace negotiations, had to confine its roles to fruitless mediation while, on occasion, it did not conceal its pro-Armenian bias. Entirely disregarding the mandate France has undertaken within this institution, both chambers of the French parliament in late 2020 even went so far as to unanimously adopt legislative documents calling for the recognition of the independence of a puppet entity, the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”, that was once established in the sovereign territories of Azerbaijan.

Against this backdrop, not only was the EU sidelined by Russia and Turkey during the war, but also in its aftermath, when the conflicting parties drew the contours of the post-war geopolitical and geo-economic picture of the region through Russia’s mediation. Hence, the EU does not have any impactful role in the post-war negotiations between Baku and Yerevan, though it offered mediation in the talks over the delimitation and demarcation of the international/state border between the two countries and contributed to the exchange of Armenian detainees for maps of the conflict-affected territories’ minefields, mediating the talks together with the USA and Georgia.<sup>4</sup>

Russia has thus managed to further strengthen its influence over the South Caucasus – the region it does not shy away from calling part of Moscow’s “zone of privileged interests”.<sup>5</sup> By deploying its peacekeepers to the territories of Azerbaijan and enjoying the major mediator status in the negotiations for the reopening of the regional transportation and communication routes, Russia has become an indispensable actor for the peace between the two parties and is not eager to share this privilege with other members of the OSCE Minsk Group.<sup>6</sup>

3 France24, “Azerbaijan is ‘ready’ to start peace talks with Armenia, president tells FRANCE 24”, 28 September 2021, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-interview/20210928-azerbaijan-is-ready-to-start-peace-talks-with-armenia-president-tells-france-24> (accessed: 29 September 2021).

4 Zurabishvili, S., “Georgia is back to its historic mediator role”, Interpressnews, 13 June 2021, available at: <https://www.interpressnews.ge/en/article/114004-salome-zurabishvili-georgia-is-back-to-its-historic-mediator-role> (accessed: 7 November 2021).

5 Trenin, D., “Russia’s Spheres of Interest, not Influence”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 23 September 2009, pp. 3–22.

6 Petrosyan, T., “Russia’s position on Karabakh crosses out Minsk Group’s negotiation format”, *Caucasian Knot*, 4 September 2021, available at: <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/56642/> (accessed: 6 September 2021).

Tensions between official Baku and Russia's peacekeeping contingent are increasingly surfacing as time passes. One major bone of contention between Baku and Moscow is caused by Russia's failure to stop the transfer of Armenian armed forces to the Karabakh region that is under the temporary control of its peacekeepers. Although the trilateral statement of 10 November 2020, signed by the leaders of Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, envisaged the withdrawal of the Armenian armed forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan in parallel with the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, Russia has yet to ensure its implementation. Among others, the fact that the number of the peacekeepers has apparently (owing to the deployment of additional personnel within the framework of humanitarian centre established in the Karabakh region) exceeded that agreed in the 10 November statement causes concerns in Azerbaijan.

Russia, however, has had to reconcile its activities with Turkey's growing influence in the region, in particular with its special relations with Azerbaijan. The war boosted Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus thanks to its strategic alliance with Azerbaijan, which played a critical role in Azerbaijan's victory in the war. Although Ankara fell short of obtaining a role equal to Moscow's in the post-war peace process between Baku and Yerevan, it became, after the war, a significantly more influential player than before.

### ***Challenges for the EU in the South Caucasus***

The absence of a strong hard-power dimension in the EU's foreign policy has been a major shortcoming of its international outlook in most directions. The South Caucasus is one region where the EU has failed to provide hard-power backing for its engagements with the regional countries (specifically, in the case of Georgia, to counter Russia). Although the normative and soft-power elements deployed by the EU enabled it to rally pro-European sentiments among some local people and encourage them to seek pro-Western orientation in their states' foreign policies, this has not been sufficient to confidently counter the powers that oppose the EU. This has undermined the EU's regional ambitions as well as disillusioning pro-Western groups in the region.

The Second Karabakh War was such a moment that demonstrated that

the EU is either reluctant or simply unable to play a serious geopolitical role in a region close to its borders and of importance for its larger geo-economic and security interests. The war was a critical juncture in the politics of the South Caucasus and, in this sense, can be compared to the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine by Russia in 2014. These redrew the geopolitical contours of the region – and the new status quo is likely to remain intact for the foreseeable future – without consultation with or involvement of the EU.

A different scenario was, however, possible. Any breakthrough in the conflict on terms affected by the EU would have prevented its geopolitical role from further diminishing in the region following the 44 Day War. Instead of this, the EU chose an unjustified neutrality between the victim (Azerbaijan) and the occupier (Armenia) and, thus, could only watch the prolongation of the conflict. Having failed to play a role in the settlement of the conflict, the EU could not help but recognize the new, post-war regional realities.

It is quite telling that Russia's deployment of its armed forces under the name "peacekeepers" in the Karabakh region has not been seen as a concern to be addressed by EU officials in their numerous visits to the South Caucasus countries since then. Russia's virtually unchallenged dominance in the South Caucasus will have ramifications for the foreign policies of all three countries of the region and, in particular, their choices concerning issues relating to Russia's interests.

Instead of countering its rival, the EU seems to acknowledge Russia's "zone of privileged interests". Not only does this further diminish the EU's image in the region, but it is also gradually undoing the positive developments it has achieved.

The regional cooperation initiative promoted by Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia in the wake of the war, being more internally focused, reflects the post-war geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus. The so-called "3+3" cooperation platform (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan + Russia, Turkey, and Iran) for this initiative, if realized, will cement the post-war geopolitical order of the region. Georgia, owing to its conflict with Russia, refuses to participate in this platform and proposes an alternative in the form of a 3+2 format (the countries of the South Caucasus + the EU and United States) named the "Peaceful

Neighbourhood Initiative”. However, Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani has acknowledged that it would be “necessary” to participate in the regional geopolitical projects “in some form”.<sup>7</sup>

For Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, Russia–Turkey cooperation is the “guarantor of stability” in the new geopolitical configuration of the South Caucasus and the alignment of Azerbaijan–Turkey–Russia will constitute the core of the new cooperation platform.<sup>8</sup> Highlighting that Armenia will also join this format, President Aliyev underscored that “This format is sufficient for us – Turkey–Russia–Azerbaijan–Armenia. Anyone interested in joining in may join, those who aren’t are in a better position to judge.”<sup>9</sup> President Aliyev has yet to publicly comment on the 3+2 format, while Georgia is hopeful that Azerbaijan will join the initiative.<sup>10</sup> Although this format, if ever realized, is unlikely to prevail over the 3+3 framework in geopolitical substance, as it excludes major players such as Russia and Turkey, it would provide a mechanism for communication between the West and the South Caucasus as a region.

### *Opportunities for the EU in the South Caucasus*

Truly, the challenges facing the EU in its relations with the South Caucasus countries are overwhelming and hard to overcome any time soon. There are, however, a number of opportunities that would positively contribute to the development of the EU’s relations with the countries of the region, if properly handled. These include the desire of the regional states to counterbalance other major powers through close partnership with the EU; the still-relevant pro-European aspirations among the local people; the EU’s substantial share of the region’s foreign trade; and its critical significance as an investor in the region’s economies.

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7 Hetq.am, “Georgian Foreign Minister says participation in South Caucasus ‘3+3’ format is problematic but necessary”, 8 October 2021, available at: <https://hetq.am/en/article/136480> (accessed: 7 November 2021).

8 Official Website of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the meeting with representatives of the general public in Jabrayil”, 5 October 2021, available at: <https://en.president.az/articles/53474> (accessed: 12 November 2021).

9 Ibid.

10 Itv.ge, “Azerbaijan endorses PM-tabled Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative, FM says”, 29 September 2021, available at: <https://1tv.ge/en/news/azerbaijan-endorses-pm-tabled-peaceful-neighborhood-initiative-fm-says/> (accessed: 20 October 2021).

The West (i.e., the EU together with the USA) has traditionally been seen in the region as an indispensable geopolitical force for counterbalancing the pressure of other powers, particularly of Russia and Iran. Although not as explicitly as Georgia, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have been supportive of this policy line and, for this purpose, occasionally made significant attempts to deepen cooperation with the West. However, the regional power dynamics, coupled with the EU's reluctance to confront other powers, forced Armenia and Azerbaijan to reconsider their strategies, while Georgia, being in deadlock with Russia, could not help but continue to strive for Euro-Atlantic membership. The Armenian government led by Nikol Pashinyan has tacitly rejuvenated Armenia's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration even though his country, being overly dependent on Russia in well-nigh all spheres, including economy and security, has limited room for manoeuvring in foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> Russia's further rise in regional dominance in the wake of the Second Karabakh War makes a comprehensive partnership with the EU even more important for the regional countries.

The European aspirations among the people living in the South Caucasus constitute another factor that should be taken into account. Public opinion polls in the region have consistently demonstrated generally strong (though to varying degrees) public support in the three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia,<sup>12</sup> Azerbaijan,<sup>13</sup> and Georgia<sup>14</sup>) for intensification of the relations between their states and the EU. The EU's image is, however, often damaged by the shortcomings of its regional policies. For example, the Azerbaijani people are disillusioned with the lack of consistency in the EU's policies towards the territorial conflicts

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11 Dovich, M., "The view from Yerevan on Belarus-Russia integration", *Civilnet*, 21 September 2021, available at: <https://www.civilnet.am/news/633370/the-view-from-yerevan-on-belarus-russia-integration/?lang=en> (accessed: 2 October 2021).

12 East European Security Research Initiative, "Results and analysis of the opinion poll conducted by the Analytical Centre on Globalisation and Regional Cooperation (ACGRC) in Armenia in 2018 on the attitude of the Armenian Society to international organizations, the EU, EEU, CSTO and NATO", February 2019, available at: [https://eesri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-02\\_Poll-Armenia-EU-EEU-CSTO-NATO\\_ACGRC\\_PB-ENG.pdf](https://eesri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-02_Poll-Armenia-EU-EEU-CSTO-NATO_ACGRC_PB-ENG.pdf) (accessed: 2 October 2021).

13 EU Neighbors East, "Opinion Survey 2020: Azerbaijan", March 2020, available at: <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/stay-informed/publications/opinion-survey-2020-azerbaijan> (accessed: 2 October 2021).

14 National Democratic Institute, "NDI Poll: EU and NATO support remains strong but threatened by Russia and perception of harm to culture and values; Armenian and Azeri communities respond differently to NATO membership", 28b May 2019, available at: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-eu-and-nato-support-remains-strong-threatened-russia-and-perception-harm> (accessed: October 2, 2021).

in the post-Soviet space. While the EU put a strong emphasis on the principle of territorial integrity for Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine in their conflicts with Russia, it has avoided taking a clear stance based on that principle in Azerbaijan's territorial conflict with Armenia. The EU can better its image in the region by addressing these problems and making proper amendments to its policies wherever possible.

Based on this principle, the EU should play a more active role in the post-conflict peace process between Baku and Yerevan and should encourage the sides to sign a peace treaty recognizing each other's internationally recognized territorial integrity. Towards this end, Azerbaijan expects political support from the EU in the demarcation and delimitation of its state borders with Armenia. Yerevan should be persuaded and, if necessary, pressured by its European partners to launch negotiations on the demarcation of state borders with Baku through international mediation. The reluctance of some European states to recognize the post-war realities and the attempts to question Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the Karabakh region or to make it subject to international negotiations are helpful neither for peace in the South Caucasus nor for the EU's image in the region.

The economic bonds between the countries of the South Caucasus and the EU give the latter a kind of leverage which it would be difficult for Russia or other powers to substitute in the near future. As stated above, the EU is a major export market for the region's economies. Apart from these strong trade relations, the importance of investments, grants, aids, loans, etc. provided by the EU to the regional countries cannot be overstated. For example, the latest aid package announced by the EU for these countries comes at a time when the local economies are mostly in trouble owing to pandemic-related and other setbacks. The EU has pledged €3.9 billion to Georgia<sup>15</sup> and €2.6 million to Armenia<sup>16</sup> in grants, loans and loan guarantees, over the next 5 years, as part of an "economic and investment plan" drafted by the European Commission

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15 European Commission, "Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press point with the Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili", 7 July 2021, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-press-point-prime-minister-georgia-irakli-garibashvili\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-press-point-prime-minister-georgia-irakli-garibashvili_en) (accessed: 7 November 2021).

16 European Commission, "Armenia: Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press point with Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan", 7 July 2021, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/armenia-remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-press-point-acting-deputy-prime-minister-mher-grigoryan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/armenia-remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-press-point-acting-deputy-prime-minister-mher-grigoryan_en) (accessed: 7 November 2021).

for six ex-Soviet republics involved in the EU's Eastern Partnership Programme. This is expected to be a great boost to local small- and medium-sized enterprises and to the construction of vital transport infrastructure, thus promoting regional connectivity. Meanwhile, Armenia has yet to receive any significant financial backing from its ally Russia to revive its economy that is debilitated after the latest war.

Nevertheless, the EU's decision to allocate substantially less assistance to Azerbaijan (less than €200 million) within the aforementioned package was a major drawback of the initiative. The EU turned a blind eye to the fact that Azerbaijan needs to invest billions of dollars to demine and rebuild its liberated territories in order to provide necessary conditions for the return of up to a million IDPs to their homes. The EU's reasoning that "Azerbaijan is a prosperous country that might not need the financial assistance of the European Union"<sup>17</sup> was refuted by the Azerbaijani government while citing the necessity of additional funds for the Karabakh region's rehabilitation.<sup>18</sup> It also begs the question of whether the EU can contribute to peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus and challenge the geopolitical dominance of its rivals while alienating the biggest and most populous country of the region.

In the areas addressed by the aid package, the EU has rightly focused on connectivity projects in the region. These would not only provide better conditions for Europe–Asia connectivity but also make important contributions to economic development at the local level. Substantial amounts of investment have been allocated for building roads, bridges, and other transportation projects in Armenia and Georgia. However, for unknown reasons, Azerbaijan was largely excluded from this package. Indeed, having long played a leading role in the promotion and implementation of the regional transportation projects (roads, railways, ports, and so on) that now form parts of the Europe–Asia Middle Corridor, Azerbaijan should have received at least equal amounts of financial support for its ongoing projects, including for the Zangazur Corridor project. Considering that the Zangazur Corridor,

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17 European Commission, "Azerbaijan: Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the end of his visit", 8 July 2021, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/azerbaijan-remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-end-his-visit\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/azerbaijan-remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-end-his-visit_en) (accessed: 2 October 2021).

18 Turan, "Ilham Aliyev criticizes the EU for unfair distribution of aid to the countries of the region", 23 July 2021, available at: [http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/7/free/politics\\_news/en/6065.htm](http://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/7/free/politics_news/en/6065.htm) (accessed: 19 September 2021).

when realized, will cut the length of Middle Corridor significantly, the EU's reluctance to financially assist in its construction does not serve the interests of the concerned countries in South Caucasus and Europe.

The Azerbaijani people find it truly disappointing that the demining process in the recently liberated territories, which is one of the most challenging and costly elements of the post-war reconstruction work, was also not properly addressed by the EU's aid package. Although the demining of the liberated territories is absolutely necessary for the rapid rehabilitation of the region and quick return of more than 700,000 people to their homelands, the EU has not included it among the priorities of the assistance programme.

Nor does the EU pay the necessary attention to the environmental problems in the South Caucasus – which is at odds with the Union's larger policy of tackling climate change. In this respect, it is unfortunate that the EU has yet to react to the pollution of Azerbaijani rivers by companies operating on Armenian territory. For example, recent reports about the pollution of the transboundary (Armenia–Azerbaijan) Okchuchay River in its Armenian section with industrial waste caused great environmental concern in Azerbaijan.<sup>19</sup> The revelation of the fact that one of biggest companies that operated in the region and polluted the Okchuchay River belonged to Germany until 2019 caused anger and frustration in Azerbaijan.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, neither the EU nor major non-governmental institutions of Europe have yet reacted to the calls of the Azerbaijanis, even though environmental protection tops the EU agenda at home. Nor has the EU, in its investment package to Armenia, addressed the concerns about the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant of Armenia, which poses considerable risks to the people and environment of the region.

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19 Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Oxçuçayın Ermənistan tərəfindən çirkləndirilməsi balıqların kütləvi ölümünə səbəb olub” [Pollution of the Oxchuchay by Armenia has led to the mass death of fish], 10 March 2021, available at: <http://eco.gov.az/nazirlik/xeber?newsID=12102> (accessed: 7 November 2021).

20 Inews.az, “Oxçuçay təhlükəli səviyyəyədək çirkləndirilib: Almaniyanın CRONIMET şirkəti Qarabağın ekologiyasına təhdid yaradır – FOTO” [Oxchuchay polluted to dangerous level: German company CRONIMET poses a threat to the ecology of Karabakh – PHOTO], 29 April 2021, available at: <https://1news.az/az/news/20210429102828315-Oxchuchay-tehlukeli-seviyyeyedek-chirklendirilib-Almaniyanin-CRONIMET-shirketi-Qarabagin-ekologiyasina-tehdid-yaradir-FOTO> (accessed: 7 November 2021).

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

The 44 Day War brought about numerous challenges to the EU's policies with regard to the countries of the South Caucasus. While the settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict can be interpreted as a burden lifted for the Eastern neighbourhood agenda of the EU, the war's outcomes have certainly led to new burdens for the Union. The deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the Karabakh region and the dominance of Moscow over the post-war peace process handicap the EU's engagement with the region. There are, however, important opportunities that could be instrumental for the EU to promote relations with the countries of the South Caucasus. The regional governments view the EU as a geopolitical counterbalance against other powers; their economies are connected with the European market; and their societies support intensification of these ties. Below, this brief provides a number of policy recommendations for how the EU could deal with the existing situation in the South Caucasus while pursuing its interests and promoting peace and security in the region.

*Promote* the 3+2 regional cooperation platform (the three countries of the South Caucasus plus the EU and the USA) initiated by Georgia as a complement to the 3+3 format of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia + Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The two proposals need to evolve in harmony rather than being exclusive, and so not become a matter of competition and rivalry between the great powers. Not only would such rivalries undermine the regional cooperation initiatives, they would also badly affect relations among the states of the South Caucasus who have different geopolitical visions in foreign policy.

*Promote* the reconciliation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan by initiating contacts between the governments and peoples of the two countries. The lasting settlement of the conflict would open up enormous opportunities for the prosperity and integration of the regional countries. Here, the EU should encourage the two countries to sign a comprehensive peace agreement recognizing each other's internationally recognized borders and territorial integrity.

*Support* Azerbaijan's efforts to peacefully reintegrate its citizens of Armenian origin living in the Karabakh region. The re-establishment of peaceful coexistence in the Karabakh region would allow Azerbaijan to terminate the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region, in

accordance with the fourth provision of the trilateral statement of 10 November 2020.

*Reconsider* the EU's policies of financial assistance to the countries of the South Caucasus and properly address Azerbaijan's need to demine and rehabilitate the Karabakh region that has been comprehensively destroyed and massively mined by Armenia while the region was under its occupation.