

The Failure of the OSCE Minsk Group to Solve Conflicts and Promote Regional Stability in the South Caucasus

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The OSCE Minsk Group, established in 1992 to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the [former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, failed to achieve its objectives for almost three decades, rendering it an ineffective and dysfunctional mechanism for conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. Co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France, the Group’s mediation efforts have been undermined by conflicting interests among its co-chairs, geopolitical shifts, and a lack of authority. Key historical junctures, including the failures at the 1996 Lisbon Summit, the 2001 Key West talks, the 2016 Four-Day April War, and the 2020 Second Karabakh War, highlight the Group’s inability to move beyond symbolic gestures and enforce the UN Security Council resolutions demanding Armenia to withdraw its occupying forces from the territories of Azerbaijan. The 2020 Second Karabakh War, culminating in Azerbaijan’s military reclamation of its territories and the sidelining of the Minsk Group with Russia’s unilateral mediation, underscored its obsolescence. Azerbaijan and Türkiye have consistently criticized the Group’s perceived biases and inefficacy, advocating for its dissolution and the adoption of a regionally led peace process. Conversely, Armenia’s initial reliance on the Group to advance its territorial claims under the ‘self-determination’ agenda has given way to a pragmatic acknowledgement of its post-2020 irrelevance. This article critically examines the Minsk Group’s establishment, operational shortcomings, and the geopolitical dynamics that precipitated its failure, arguing that its dissolution is a necessary step toward a more inclusive and effective framework for sustainable peace and stability in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: OSCE Minsk Group, South Caucasus, Karabakh, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Armenia



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Introduction

The South Caucasus, a region of profound geopolitical significance and intricate historical legacies, has long served as a crucible for conflict, most notably the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Established in 1992 under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Minsk Group was mandated to mediate this conflict and foster its peaceful resolution through multilateral diplomacy. Co-chaired by Russia, the United States, and France, the Minsk Group sought to reconcile the competing interests of Armenia and Azerbaijan while promoting regional stability. Yet nearly three decades of mediation efforts have failed to produce a comprehensive peace agreement, leaving the conflict unresolved until Azerbaijan’s military victories in the Second Karabakh War of 2020 and subsequent anti-terror operations in September 2023 fundamentally reshaped the regional *status quo*. The Minsk Group’s persistent inability to deliver tangible outcomes, coupled with its marginalization during critical escalations, such as the Four-Day War in April 2016 and the 2020 Second Karabakh War, has cast serious doubt on its efficacy, neutrality, and relevance in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus.

This article critically examines the trajectory of the OSCE Minsk Group, tracing its establishment, operational challenges, and ultimate dysfunctionality as a mediation mechanism. Employing a methodological framework that integrates document analysis and discourse analysis, the study draws on a range of primary and secondary sources, including the OSCE’s official statements and the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) four resolutions (822, 853, 874, and 884) of 1993. The aforementioned UNSC resolutions, enacted in 1993 in response to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, reiterated the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of the internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan.¹ Document analysis enables a systematic evaluation of key texts – such as the 1994 Bishkek Protocol, the 1996 Lisbon Summit principles, and the 2007 Madrid Principles – to assess the Minsk

1 Mammadyarov, E., “Towards peace in the Nagorny Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan through reintegration and cooperation”, *Conciliation Resources Accord*, London: 2005, Issue 17, p. 18, Available at: https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/The_limits_of_leadership_Elites_and_societies_in_the_Nagorny_Karabakh_peace_process_Accord_Issue_17.pdf (Accessed: May 22, 2025).

Group's mediation strategies and their alignment with international law. Discourse analysis, meanwhile, is utilized to interrogate the narratives and rhetorical strategies employed by the Minsk Group's co-chairs, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and regional actors like Türkiye, revealing how competing geopolitical agendas and biases shaped mediation outcomes. These methods collectively illuminate the interplay of historical developments, geopolitical shifts, and structural deficiencies – particularly the conflicting interests among the co-chairs – that have undermined the Group's ability to resolve the [now former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict.

The analysis further narrates Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's critiques of the Minsk Group's perceived biases and ineffectiveness, as well as Armenia's evolving perspective, which has transitioned from reliance on the Group to advance its territorial claims under the 'self-determination' agenda for Karabakh Armenians to a pragmatic acknowledgment of its post-2020 irrelevance. Situating the Minsk Group's failures within the broader context of regional power dynamics and the ascendance of alternative mediation frameworks, this study addresses the central research question: *What are the primary factors contributing to the OSCE Minsk Group's failure to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and how do these factors reflect the limitations of multilateral mediation in the face of evolving geopolitical realities?* By answering this question, the article aims to elucidate the Minsk Group's shortcomings, evaluate its impact on regional stability, and advocate for a regionally anchored peace framework grounded in the principles of international law and territorial integrity.

Historical Background

The Minsk Group, established on March 24, 1992, within the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was intended to be a mediation mechanism to resolve the [now former] Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and ensure stability in the South Caucasus. Co-chaired by Russia, the U.S., and France, this group emerged as a product of efforts to find solutions to this conflict that erupted in the former Soviet geography in the post-Cold War period. However, its failure to achieve its goals for almost thirty years can be explained by historical developments and changes in geopolitical

dynamics. This section will address in detail the challenges that existed within the Minsk Group since its establishment, significant historical turning points, and the signals indicating its loss of functionality.

The foundation of the Minsk Group rests on the decision of the OSCE Council, convened in Helsinki on March 24, 1992, to hold a conference in Minsk to peacefully resolve the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. This decision was positioned as an international effort towards resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which began in 1988 and escalated into a full-scale war by 1992. On May 5, 1994, within the framework of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Vladimir Kazimirov, the Russian representative to the OSCE Minsk Group at the time, proposed a ceasefire protocol² (a.k.a. Bishkek Protocol) in the presence of the principal and interested parties of the conflict; this was followed by a ceasefire agreement between the warring parties. However, this ceasefire agreement did not transform into a permanent peace agreement and merely consolidated the *status quo*, leaving the conflict to remain ‘frozen’ for years. The Group’s perception as a neutral mediator during this period encouraged negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but it failed to bring solutions to fundamental issues.³ This situation provided the initial signs of the structural problems the Minsk Group would face in the years ahead. The dysfunction of the Minsk Group was accelerated by a number of factors, such as conflicts of interest among its co-chairs, changes in regional dynamics, and the weakening of its mediation capacity. Significant historical events and developments clearly illustrate this process.

On December 3, 1996, at the OSCE’s Lisbon Summit, the Minsk Group’s co-chairs recommended three fundamental principles to facilitate a resolution of the conflict, which were endorsed by all member states of the Minsk Group. These principles are as follows: territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan; granting self-determination status based on the principle of autonomy and self-governance to the Karabakh region within the Republic of Azerbaijan; and a guarantee of security to all people of this region. This position

2 T. Jafarov, “An Evaluation on Invalidity of International Treaties In The Case of Bishkek Protocol” (translation from Turkish), September 25, 2023, p. 384, DOI: 10.34246/ahbvuhfd.1270390, Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3032998> (Accessed: March 25, 2025)

3 T. De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, New York: NYU Press, 2013, p.6.

was explicitly articulated by Azerbaijan's founding leader, Heydar Aliyev, following the Lisbon Summit in 1996.

According to H. Aliyev, although Azerbaijan was not completely satisfied with this draft proposal, it was entirely rejected by the Armenian side at the meeting of Minsk Group held in Lisbon on December 3, 1996. This draft proposal was included in the draft statement of the OSCE Lisbon summit. However, the Armenian side, in defiance of the OSCE main principles, did not give consent to this proposal. Consequently, the Republic of Azerbaijan was compelled to withhold its consensus on the entirety of the Lisbon Summit Declaration throughout all meetings and discussions held prior to and during the Summit.⁴

However, this initiative remained inconclusive due to Armenia's rejection. Following the 1996 Lisbon Summit, the OSCE Minsk Group underwent significant changes in its co-chair structure. In early January 1997, a French representative was appointed as a co-chair to the Minsk Group. Subsequently, alongside the Russian and French co-chairs, a U.S. representative was also appointed. On February 14, 1997, Niels Helveg Petersen, the Danish Foreign Minister and OSCE's then Chairman-in-Office, formally approved the new co-chairs for the Minsk Group. This established a tripartite co-chair system, which effectively concentrated the conflict resolution process under the leadership of these three co-chairs – Russia, France, and the United States – a structure that tried to preserve its relevance until September 2020 (the start of the Second Karabakh War).⁵

Similarly, the Key West talks, which took place on April 3, 2001, also ended in failure.⁶ It became evident that the Minsk Group lacked the capacity to propose an acceptable solution to the principal parties of the conflict.⁷ This period demonstrated that the Group was confined

4 Aliyev Heritage, *Statement of Heydar Aliyev, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan at the press-conference, held soon after the OSCE Lisbon Summit*, December 3, 1996, Available at: <https://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/6988519.html> (Accessed: March 22, 2025)

5 Aslanlı, A., "How was the OSCE Minsk Group established, what was its purpose?" (translation from Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, October 16, 2020, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/-agit-minsk-grubu-nasil-olustu-ne-ise-yaradi/2008339> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

6 "Key West Talks: For a Peaceful Resolution to the Karabakh Conflict," *Azerbaijan International* (9.1) Spring 2001, Available at: https://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/91_folder/91_articles/91_keywest.html (Accessed: March 22, 2025)

7 De Waal, T., *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*, New York: NYU Press, 2013, p.6.

to a passive role of merely facilitating negotiations and managing the conflict, rather than resolving it.

Russia's military intervention in Georgia on August 8, 2008, altered the power balance in the South Caucasus and reinforced Russia's military hegemony in the region. Moreover, Russia's strategic alliance with Armenia cast a shadow over the neutrality of one of the Group members. Azerbaijan then began to perceive this Group as "a tool protecting Russia's interests".⁸ This development underscored the Minsk Group's diminished capacity to serve as an impartial and effective mediator in resolving this issue.

The first ever intense clashes (since 1994) between Azerbaijan and Armenia that took place from April 2 to 5, 2016, exposed the Minsk Group's inadequacy in crisis management. The group issued ceasefire calls but failed to take concrete steps to halt the fighting. The cessation of hostilities was achieved through Russia's unilateral intervention.⁹ This event demonstrated that the Minsk Group's mediation capacity had eroded and that it had become dependent on the initiatives of a single country.

The Second Karabakh War, which began on September 27, 2020, and ended with the Trilateral Statement signed among the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on November 10, 2020, under Russia's mediation, was the most striking evidence of the Minsk Group's dysfunctionality. In this process, where Azerbaijan liberated its formerly occupied territories, and Türkiye from the very beginning actively expressed its full political backing to the former's just cause, the Minsk Group was entirely sidelined, and the co-chairs were limited to symbolic statements only.¹⁰ This war confirmed that the Group was no longer a tool for resolution and cemented its inability to be effective in the future.

8 Jafarova, E., *Conflict Resolution in South Caucasus: Challenges to International Efforts*, London: Lexington Books, 2014, s. 88.

9 International Crisis Group, *Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds - Report No:244*, June 1, 2017, Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan/244-nagorno-karabakhs-gathering-war-clouds> (Accessed: April 2, 2025)

10 Rauf, S., "The Paradoxical Role of Mediators in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: Prospects and Concerns", *Insight Turkey*, December 8, 2023, Available at: <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1623/the-paradoxical-role-of-mediators-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-prospects-and-concerns> (Accessed: March 23, 2025)

The fundamental elements challenging the Minsk Group are the conflicts of interest among its three co-chairs and geopolitical shifts in the region. Russia's policies supporting Armenia, France's bias against Azerbaijan due to the factor of the Armenian diaspora in that country, and the U.S.'s shrinking interest in the region have rendered the Group's neutrality questionable. These examples demonstrate that the OSCE Minsk Group can be defined as "a mechanism preserving deadlock". Furthermore, Türkiye's increasing authority in the region and Azerbaijan's military successes following 2020 have rendered the Minsk Group's traditional mediation model obsolete,¹¹ highlighting the necessity of a new peace process led by regional actors.

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CSCE/OSCE Framework and the Minsk Process

The first meeting of the foreign ministers of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), organized in 1973 for East–West dialogue, was held in Helsinki from July 3–7, 1973. Two years later, in August 1975, the Helsinki Process culminated in the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act at the first CSCE Summit of Heads of State and Government.¹² By the early 1990s, this had evolved into a platform to address post-Soviet security threats.¹³ At an additional CSCE Council meeting held in Helsinki on March 24, 1992, participating states identified the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict as an urgent issue and proposed organizing a peace conference in Minsk, Belarus. The ministers expressed deep concern over the ongoing escalation of armed conflict between these two nations and the resulting increasing suffering and loss of life among the region's population. The additional meeting

11 Öztüğ, L. İ., "A Comparative Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Conflicts (1988-2020)", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (2023): 139-162, Available at: <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1571/a-comparative-analysis-of-turkish-foreign-policy-on-the-azerbaijan-armenia-conflicts-1988-2020> (Accessed: March 23, 2025)

12 OSCE, *Ministerial Councils*, Available at: <https://www.osce.org/ministerial-councils> (Accessed: March 23, 2025)

13 P. T. Hopmann, "The OSCE's Role in Conflict Management: What Happened to Co-operative Security?", *OSCE Year Book 2016, Baden-Baden 2017*, pp.63-80., p. 66, Available at: https://ifsh.de/file/publication/OSCE_Yearbook_en/2016/Hopmann-en.pdf (Accessed: March 20, 2025)

of the Council noted that they conducted a comprehensive discussion on ways and means to end the conflict, emphasizing the potential impacts on regional and international security should the conflict persist and spread further.¹⁴

The imperative to establish a specialized institution for mediation became increasingly urgent during 1991–1992, driven by the escalating intensity of the war and its potential to destabilize the broader South Caucasus, a strategically critical region serving as a nexus between Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. By the end of the war in 1993, over 800,000 Azerbaijanis had been displaced.¹⁵

Geopolitical Rationale and International Involvement

The establishment of the Minsk Group reflected a broad geopolitical consensus on the importance of collective action to prevent post-Soviet conflicts. In its resolutions adopted in 1993, the UNSC called for an end to the fighting and the withdrawal of Armenian occupying forces. However, all these resolutions lacked practical enforcement power to compel Armenia to fulfil their provisions.¹⁶ These resolutions notably demanded the withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the [formerly] occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Armenia refused to withdraw from those Azerbaijani territories, citing the ambiguity of the phrase “Armenian armed forces” in those resolutions to avoid responsibility, yet in vain. All four resolutions’ preambular paragraphs cited “the Republic of Armenia”, proving this country was a principal side in the conflict. Armenia did not comply with the UN Security Council resolutions until Azerbaijan was induced to unilaterally enforce them in 2020 to compel Armenia to withdraw from those territories. Still, with its broad membership including the U.S., Russia, and European states, the CSCE sought to provide an ostensibly balanced platform to reconcile conflicting interests.

The Minsk Group’s role was formalized at the CSCE Budapest Summit on December 5–6, 1994, where the co-chair structure was solidified, and

14 OSCE, *First Additional Meeting of the Council Helsinki*, March 24, 1992, Available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/29121.pdf> (Accessed: March 20, 2025)

15 M. H. Yavuz and M. M. Gunter, p. 97.

16 Aliyev Heritage, *Azerbaijan – BM*, Available at: <https://lib.aliyevheritage.org/tk/9646663.html> (Accessed: March 20, 2025)

the task of developing a political solution through continuous dialogue was defined.¹⁷ This development followed the 1994 Bishkek Protocol (ceasefire agreement) mediated by Russia, which ended active hostilities but left unresolved the core issue – the territories of Azerbaijan under the occupation of Armenia.¹⁸ The group’s establishment was supposed to be a resilient mechanism for transition from temporary ceasefires to a comprehensive agreement.

Late 1990s and Early 2000s: Cementing The Status Quo

At the OSCE’s Lisbon Summit on December 3, 1996, the Minsk Group presented three principles: territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, granting the self-determination status based on the principle of autonomy and self-governance to the Karabakh region within the Republic of Azerbaijan, and a guarantee of security to all people of this region.¹⁹ However, Armenia’s firm rejection led to the initiative’s failure. The Armenians objected to the inclusion of these principles in the Lisbon Summit’s final declaration.²⁰

In 1995, a secondary negotiation channel was established between the special advisers to the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, Gerard Libaridian and Vafa Guluzade. They met informally on a monthly basis to address, in particular, the outstanding issues related to the [former] conflict.

The Lisbon Summit effectively terminated the Guluzade–Libaridian negotiation track.²¹ Armenia’s objection and the discord among the co-chairs because of their differing interests laid bare the Minsk Group’s lack of resolve and implementation capacity, reinforcing Azerbaijan and Türkiye’s legitimate criticisms of the Group’s inability to convince

17 De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 266.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

19 Virtual Karabakh, *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Summit (1996)* (translation from Turkish), Available at: <https://www.virtualkarabakh.az/tr/new-item/32/126/avrupa-guvenlik-ve-isbirligi-teskilati-zirve-toplantisi-1996.html> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

20 Aliyev Heritage, *Statement of Heydar Aliyev, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan at the press-conference, held soon after the OSCE Lisbon Summit*, December 3, 1996, Available at: <https://lib.aliyev-heritage.org/en/6988519.html> (Accessed: May 10, 2025)

21 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Azerbaijan always felt a degree of unease with this arrangement, as the three co-chairs host relatively large and politically influential Armenian diasporas, which could potentially influence their stance on the end result of the negotiations in favour of the Armenians.

Armenia to end its occupation of Azerbaijan's territories.

Naturally, the complexity of the co-chair selection process was also a source of discomfort for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan always felt a degree of unease with this arrangement, as the three co-chairs host relatively large and politically influential Armenian diasporas, which could potentially influence their stance on the end result of the negotiations in favour of the Armenians. Several other states, including Belarus, Finland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Türkiye, and, of course, Armenia and Azerbaijan, have, at times, participated in the Minsk Group in less decisive roles.²²

The Key West talks, held in Florida from April 3–7, 2001, again highlighted the Minsk Group's ineffectiveness. Held between Azerbaijan's then President Heydar Aliyev and Armenia's then President Robert Kocharyan and mediated by the co-chairs, these talks aimed to present a comprehensive solution based on prior negotiations but concluded without a concrete agreement. Moreover, the failure of the Key West talks demonstrated that the Minsk Group's role was reduced to merely a dialogue facilitator, rather than a conflict resolver.²³ Azerbaijan and Türkiye argued that this failure clearly demonstrated the Minsk Group's lack of authority and ability to come up with an acceptable proposal for a solution. In light of the Minsk Group's lack of authority to enable it to contribute to the implementation of the UNSC's four resolutions by Armenia, this situation further highlighted the Group's inability to ensure the immediate withdrawal of Armenian forces from the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan, as demanded by the resolutions.²⁴ While Resolution 822 is often highlighted as pivotal, Resolutions 853, 874, and 884 also held significant importance in addressing the issue of the occupation. Resolution 822 distinguishes itself as the first UNSC response to the occupation of Kalbajar district by Armenia in April 1993, establishing a critical precedent by unequivocally affirming Azerbai-

22 M. H. Yavuz and Michael M. Gunter, p. 118.

23 De Waal, *Black Garden*, p. 278.

24 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 822 (1993)*, adopted April 30, 1993, Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/165604?v=pdf> (Accessed: March 21, 2025)

jan's territorial integrity and demanding the immediate withdrawal of the occupying forces with exceptional clarity. The unanimous adoption of these resolutions by the UNSC testified to the prevailing importance of territorial integrity and positioned it as a cornerstone of Azerbaijan's international advocacy. The failure to contribute to the implementation of the UNSC's resolutions serves as a reminder of the Minsk Group's lack of authority to persuade Armenia to comply with the Council's mandates, exposing the inherent shortcomings of its mediation efforts in resolving the conflict.

This period clearly demonstrated that the Minsk Group was confined to a passive role and contributed to freezing the conflict rather than resolving it. By sustaining a *status quo* that preserved Armenia's occupation rather than upholding the fundamental principle of territorial integrity under international law, the Group drew criticism from Türkiye and Azerbaijan for its failure.²⁵ Svante Cornell argues that the Minsk Group, through its apparent neutrality, indirectly tolerated Armenia's occupation, and its inability to enforce decisions hindered effective steps to end the occupation.²⁶ From Azerbaijan and Türkiye's perspective, this passive approach not only violated Azerbaijan's sovereignty but also encouraged Armenia's intransigent stance, prolonging the suffering of displaced Azerbaijanis.

The Minsk Group's ineffectiveness during this period can be attributed to the conflicting geopolitical interests of the co-chairs – i.e. Russia's support for Armenia versus the more balanced yet indecisive stances of the U.S. (albeit the latest democrat administration demonstrated a position rather favouring Armenia's sentiments) and France (the latter's position gradually changed and turned out to be overtly pro-Armenian following 2020). Azerbaijan and Türkiye have justifiably argued that this ineffectiveness necessitated alternative solutions. This view was validated by Azerbaijan's reclamation of its occupied territories outside the Minsk Group's influence during the 2020 Second Karabakh War.²⁷

25 S. E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 88-89.

26 S. E. Cornell, "Can America Stop a Wider War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan?", *The National Interest*, October 5, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-america-stop-wider-war-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-170182> (Accessed: March 20, 2025).

27 Abay, E. G., "The OSCE Minsk Group Has Failed to Produce a Resolution for Nagorno-Karabakh in 28 Years" (translation from Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, October 2, 2020, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/azerbaycan-cephe-hatti/agit-minsk-grubu>

Defenders of the Minsk Group might claim it maintained a fragile peace. However, for Azerbaijan and Türkiye, this process remained a failure, unable to deliver the justice and territorial restoration required by international law.

2016 Four-Day War: The First Major Fracture

The Four-Day War between Azerbaijan and Armenia from April 2–5, 2016, clearly exposed the Minsk Group’s profound inadequacies in crisis management regarding this conflict. As clashes erupted, Azerbaijan exercised its legitimate right to self-defence over its occupied territories, while the Minsk Group limited itself to routine ceasefire calls²⁸ but was unable to back these with concrete diplomatic or practical intervention. The failure of the Group’s co-chairs (Russia, the U.S., and France) to develop an effective initiative to halt the fighting and push for a genuine resolution reinforced long-standing distrust in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the resolution efforts demonstrated through Russia’s, rather than the Minsk Group’s, de facto role as the primary mediator²⁹ raised serious doubts about the Group’s capacity to act as a neutral and effective mediator. Azerbaijan’s resolve during the war proved to the international community its determination to reclaim its occupied territories and once again highlighted the legitimacy of its criticisms of the Minsk Group’s ineffectiveness.³⁰

The Four-Day War starkly demonstrated that the Minsk Group’s mediation capacity had eroded and that it had become dependent on the initiatives of regional actors. This war further shook Azerbaijan’s confidence in the Minsk Group, justifying Baku’s strategy in subsequent years – particularly in the 2020 Second Karabakh War – of reliance on its own military capacity and strategic allies. The Minsk Group’s failure in 2016 was not merely a crisis management shortfall but also

daglik-karabag-icin-28-yildir-cozum-uretemiyor/1993262 (Accessed: March 20, 2025)

28 OSCE, *OSCE participating States discuss recent escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone*, April 5, 2016, Available at: <https://www.osce.org/cio/231431> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

29 Jarosiewicz, A. and Falkowski M., “The Four-Day War in Nagorno – Karabakh”, *Centre for Eastern Studies*, April 6, 2016, Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/four-day-war-nagorno-karabakh> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

30 Broers, L., “The Nagorny Karabakh Conflict – Defaulting to War”, *Chatham House*, July 2016, Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/NK%20paper%2024082016%20WEB.pdf> (Accessed: April 3, 2025)

an indicator that the Group had lost its ability to play a meaningful role in the mediation of the conflict.

2020 Second Karabakh War and the Proclamation of the OSCE's Failure

The Second Karabakh War, which began on September 27, 2020, with Armenia's military provocations against Azerbaijan that led the start of the latter's counter-offensive and ended on November 10, 2020, with signing of the Trilateral Statement mediated by Russia, marked a milestone that clearly exposed the Minsk Group's dysfunctionality in resolving the conflict. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan exercised its legitimate right to self-defence to reclaim its occupied territories and achieved an absolute victory. Beyond the Minsk Group's failure to produce a concrete solution in its 28 years of mediation, it was unable to play any effective role in this war. Azerbaijan's success proved that the Minsk Group had lost its capacity to respond to regional conflicts and that its mediation mission had effectively collapsed.³¹

Throughout the war, the Minsk Group's complete exclusion demonstrated that its co-chairs (Russia, the U.S., and France) were limited to symbolic statements and unable to take concrete steps to halt the conflict. Ceasefire calls issued during the height of the fighting neither impeded Azerbaijan's legitimate advance nor exerted effective pressure on Armenia. Russia's securing of the ceasefire, not as part of the Minsk Group but through its own initiative, once again showed that the Group's mediation competence was overshadowed by one of its own members. This situation reinforced the legitimacy of Azerbaijan's long-standing criticisms that the Minsk Group had lost its neutrality and had become a tool protecting, in particular, Russia's strategic interests.³²

Azerbaijan's success proved that the Minsk Group had lost its capacity to respond to regional conflicts and that its mediation mission had effectively collapsed.

31 Shafiyev, F. and Huseynov, V., "Peace Negotiations Cannot Be Held Forever: Breaking the Deadlock in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict", *Insight Turkey*, Fall 2020, Volume 22, Number 4, DOI: 10.25253/99.2020224.07, Available at: <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/peace-negotiations-cannot-be-held-forever-breaking-the-deadlock-in-the-armenia-azerbaijan-conflict> (Accessed: April 3, 2025)

32 Şihaliyev, E. A., "The South Caucasus in the Grand Chessboard: Armenia-Azerbaijan War and Geopolitical Attacks" (translation from Turkish), *Orta Doğu ve Orta Asya – Kafkaslar Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi Dergisi*, 2021, Issue:1, May 30, 2021, Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2565935> (Accessed: April 3, 2025)

The Second Karabakh War cemented that the Minsk Group was no longer a tool for resolution and had lost its potential to play an effective role in conflict resolution. Azerbaijan's military victory confirmed the Minsk Group's dysfunctionality and showcased the success of Baku's pursuit of a solution based on its own means. This war also strengthened the legitimacy of Azerbaijan's diplomatic stance, bringing into question the Minsk Group's structural deficiencies and highlighting Russia's dominant influence over the Group. Thus, the 2020 Second Karabakh War can be evaluated as a historical turning point proclaiming the failure of the OSCE Minsk Group's mediation mission.³³

Armenia's Perspective on the OSCE Minsk Group

Armenia's stance towards the OSCE Minsk Group generally reflects a tendency to view this mechanism as the primary mediation platform endowed with international legitimacy for resolving the conflict. Armenia ostensibly regarded the Minsk Group as the central framework for negotiations aimed at achieving a resolution to the conflict, perceiving its co-chair structure – comprising Russia, the U.S., and France – as a balancing factor. Armenian foreign policy has seen the Minsk Group's mediation efforts as an opportunity to elevate key demands – particularly the determination of the Karabakh region's status and the right to self-determination for Armenians living therein – onto the international agenda. Official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia have frequently underscored support for the foundational principles proposed by the Minsk Group, such as the 2007 Madrid Principles, which themselves included controversial content that tried somehow to, on the one hand, favour territorial integrity, and on the other to uphold the right to self-determination.³⁴ Nevertheless, this support has periodically been overshadowed by Armenia's ridiculing criticism that the Minsk Group was failing to exert sufficient 'pressure' on Azerbaijan.

33 Kınık, H. and Çelik, S., "The Role of Turkish Drones in Azerbaijan's Increasing Military Effectiveness: An Assessment of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War", *Insight Turkey*, 23, No.4, Fall 2021, p. 173, DOI: 10.25253/99.2021234.10, Available at: <https://search.trdizin.gov.tr/en/yayin/detay/511023/the-role-of-turkish-drones-in-azerbaijans-increasing-military-effectiveness-an-assessment-of-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-wa> (Accessed: April 3, 2025)

34 OSCE, *Statement by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Countries*, July 10, 2009, Available at: <https://www.osce.org/mg/51152> (Accessed: April 2, 2025)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia previously regarded the Minsk process as potentially relevant within the context of a comprehensive resolution. However, in light of Azerbaijan’s proposal for the dissolution of the Minsk Group and the progress achieved in the peace process, Armenia now appears receptive to the dissolution of the Minsk Group, contingent upon its synchronization with the signing of a peace agreement. Robert Ghevondyan, political analyst at the Research Center on Security Policy, asserts that the Minsk Group, rendered ineffective since the 2020 Second Karabakh War and Armenia’s subsequent withdrawal from ‘Nagorno-Karabakh’³⁵ in 2023, holds no practical value for Armenia. In contrast, opposition figures in Armenia defend the Minsk Group’s legal status as vital for safeguarding Karabakh Armenians’ rights.³⁶ Armenia’s approach to the Minsk Group can be characterized as a blend of pragmatism and ideological commitment. Armenia has leveraged the group’s mediation to legitimize the demands for status of Karabakh Armenians, yet it has found itself powerless in the face of the Group’s inability to deliver tangible solutions. On April 15, 2025, Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan proposed that Armenia and Azerbaijan simultaneously sign a peace agreement and jointly request the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, framing it as a symbolic move to close the page on the conflict and a necessary step towards an enduring peace in the South Caucasus. Pashinyan highlighted that the peace agreement’s text was finalized in March 2025 and acknowledged Azerbaijan’s insistence on constitutional amendments in Armenia to eliminate references to Karabakh, which underscore the diminished relevance of the Minsk Group following the 2020 war and Azerbaijan’s 2023 military offensive.³⁷

As Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev stated during a meeting with the OSCE’s then Chairman-in-Office, Ian Borg, in 2024, “The negotiation process conducted by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs for years served

35 The name of “Nagorno-Karabakh” was put in inverted commas, as there is no such territorial or administrative unit within Azerbaijan since 2021 as per the decree of the President of Azerbaijan.

36 Jam News, ‘*Dissolution of Minsk Group aligns with Yerevan’s interests*’ – *Armenian political scientist*,” August 16, 2024, <https://jam-news.net/armenia-on-dissolving-the-minsk-group> (Accessed: April 3, 2025)

37 AGOS, Pashinyan: Let’s Dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group (translation from Turkish), Available at: <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/32393/pasinyan-agit-minsk-grubu-nufeshedelim> (Accessed: May 13, 2025)

to perpetuate the occupation of Azerbaijani territories,”³⁸ providing the most concrete evidence of the Group’s dysfunctionality.

In his meeting with Ian Borg, Aliyev’s statement that “Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity by ending the occupation; there is no longer a need for the Minsk Group” legitimized the view that the Group should be disbanded.³⁹ On the other hand, examination of the OSCE Minsk Group’s official statements reveals a discrepancy between Borg’s remarks regarding the need to “support and complement efforts between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, to alleviate human suffering and help build a better future for all people”⁴⁰ and those of President Ilham

Aliyev.⁴¹ During the meeting, Aliyev noted that there is no reason for Armenia to oppose the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group in 2025, implying that this structure has no role in peace efforts in the region and emphasizing the necessity of a new peace architecture. In this context, the future of the Minsk Group appears to be shaped by Azerbaijan’s legitimate demands and the initiatives of regional actors.

In the current context, President Aliyev has emphasized that the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia hinges on two critical conditions: the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group and amendments to the Armenian Constitution to drop the clauses containing claims against Azerbaijan’s sovereign territory. President Aliyev has

asserted that fulfilling these conditions would remove all obstacles to signing a peace agreement. Under the present circumstances, Armenia’s demonstration of responsibility – moving beyond mere rhetorical commitments to actively initiate constitutional amendments – represents one of Azerbaijan’s two primary prerequisites for transitioning to a normalization process. It is the OSCE Minsk Group’s activities that

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38 President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Ilham Aliyev Received OSCE Delegation Led by Its Chair-in-Office*, May 14, 2025, Available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/65841> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

39 *Ibid.*

40 OSCE Chairpersonship, “OSCE Chair-in-Office Borg Commits to Enhanced Support for Peace and Stability During Azerbaijan Visit”, May 14, 2024, Available at: <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/568522> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

41 *Ibid.*

have effectively stalled in recent years, rendering it a mere formality with no substantive impact. President Aliyev has underscored that Azerbaijan has resolved the conflict independently, asserting that the absence of an ongoing conflict rules out the need for an international mediation group.⁴²

Meanwhile, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has publicly expressed readiness to meet these demands. In a departure from traditional Armenian perspectives, Pashinyan has made bold statements that have provoked criticism from the Armenian diaspora and domestic opposition. However, these statements have yet to translate into concrete action. While Pashinyan's expressed support for dissolving the Minsk Group is noteworthy, the Group's dissolution requires the approval of Russia, France, and the United States. Furthermore, the decision of the OSCE Ministerial Council, which is not scheduled to convene until December, will play a pivotal role in this process.⁴³ Moreover, the Armenian government insists on moving for the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group only after the signing of the peace treaty, generating new doubts regarding the true intentions of this country.

The proposed amendment of the Armenian Constitution, which is a clear source of concern for Türkiye and Azerbaijan, is not scheduled for discussion until 2026, representing a distinct issue on the agenda. The conclusion of the negotiations on a draft peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia is fundamentally contingent upon this matter. While Armenia's Prime Minister Pashinyan's rhetoric on the constitutional amendment has been forthright, Armenia's history of retreating from pivotal moments is well documented. To provide an example, on March 1, 2018, Vladimir Akopyan, spokesperson for the President's Office of Armenia at the time, announced that then President Serzh Sargsyan had declared the annulment of the 2009 Zurich Protocols during a meeting of the National Security Council. Signed on October 10, 2009, under Swiss mediation, the "Protocol on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations" and the "Protocol on the Development of Bilateral Relations" aimed to provide a framework for normalizing Türkiye–Armenia relations. The protocols were submitted

42 Atanesyan, G. and Zeynalov M., "Why Have Armenia and Azerbaijan Still Not Signed a Peace Agreement?" (translation from Turkish), *BBC News*, April 15, 2025, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/czx4y2xen25o> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

43 Atanesyan, and Zeynalov, *BBC News*, *op.cit.*

to the Turkish Grand National Assembly for approval and to the Armenian Constitutional Court for constitutional review. On January 12, 2010, the Armenian Constitutional Court deemed the protocols consistent with the constitution, but its reasoned decision on January 18, 2010, introduced preconditions and restrictive provisions contrary to the protocols' spirit and letter. Consequently, Armenia suspended the ratification process and, in February 2015, former President S. Sargsyan withdrew the protocols from the Parliament of Armenia.⁴⁴

Underlying Causes of Dysfunction and Signals Regarding Its Future Role

The fundamental reasons for the Minsk Group's dysfunction are closely tied to conflicts of interest among its co-chairs and geopolitical transformations in the South Caucasus. Russia's policies supporting Armenia, notably the 2010 agreement extending the presence of its 102nd Military Base in Armenia until 2044, have cast a shadow over the Minsk Group's neutrality. Similarly, France's pro-Armenian stance and anti-Azerbaijan bias due to the influence of the Armenian diaspora within this country, and the U.S.'s limited engagement in the region and occasional Armenia-centric positions and steps, have rendered the Group's mediation mission questionable. Azerbaijan has long criticized this situation, justifiably arguing that the Minsk Group has become a mechanism preserving deadlock.⁴⁵ Indeed, Azerbaijan's reclamation of its occupied territories in the 2020 Second Karabakh War clearly demonstrated the group's failure over 28 years to enforce the UN Security Council resolutions recognizing Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and demanding the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from the former's occupied territories.⁴⁶

44 Rehimov, R., "Armenia Annuls Zurich Protocols" (translation from Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, March 1, 2018, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/ermenistan-zurih-protokollerini-feshetti/1077406> (Accessed: May 10, 2025)

45 Abay, E. G., "The OSCE Minsk Group has failed to produce a solution for Nagorno-Karabakh for 28 years" (translation from Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, October 2, 2020, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/azerbaycan-cephe-hatti/agit-minsk-grubu-daglik-karabag-icin-28-yildir-cozum-uretemiyor/1993262> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

46 Rehimov, R., "Azerbaijani President Aliyev: It is time to dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group" (translation from Turkish), *Anadolu Agency*, May 15, 2024, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/azerbaycan-cumhurbaskani-aliev-agit-minsk-grubunun-feshedilmesinin-zamani-geldi/3218786> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

Post-2020 developments have laid bare the geopolitical shifts that rendered the Minsk Group's old mediation role obsolete and the increasing influence of regional actors. Azerbaijan's military victory and Türkiye's rising role in the region confirmed that the Minsk Group was no longer a tool for resolution. The Trilateral Statement signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia on November 10, 2020, under Russia's mediation completely sidelined the Minsk Group, demonstrating that the peace process had shifted to the leadership of a sole actor. In his 2024 statement, President Aliyev emphasized this new reality, saying, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict is a thing of the past; therefore, it is time to dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group and all its affiliated institutions.⁴⁷

Furthermore, Azerbaijan and Armenia recently concluded negotiations on the text of the draft Agreement on Peace and the Establishment of Interstate Relations between the two countries. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has conditions, as a prerequisite to allow the signing of the negotiated text, that Armenia's constitution should be amended to eliminate the claims against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and to send a joint appeal to abolish the obsolete and dysfunctional Minsk Group and related structures of the OSCE.⁴⁸ Azerbaijan's demand for the dissolution of the Minsk Group in order to sign the draft peace agreement was conditioned on its distrust of the Group's ineffectiveness, and that on the removal of references to Azerbaijan's territories in Armenia's constitution is linked to nationalist sentiments within the latter's society.⁴⁹

The reality that the Minsk Group will completely lose its functionality in the future became evident with Russia's dominance of regional dynamics since the 2008 Georgia War and Türkiye's increasing influence in the post-2020 period.

47 APA News, *President of Azerbaijan: It is time to dissolve the OSCE Minsk Group and all associated institutions*, May 14, 2024, Available at: <https://en.apa.az/official-news/president-of-azerbaijan-it-is-time-to-dissolve-the-osce-minsk-group-and-all-associated-institutions-436884> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

48 Mfa.gov.az, *Statement on conclusion of the negotiations on the text of the draft Agreement on Peace and the Establishment of Interstate Relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia*, March 13, 2025, Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no10525> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

49 Shiriyev, Z., "In the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Deal, Russia May Try to Play Spoiler", *Carnegie Endowment*, March 28, 2025, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/03/armenia-azerbaijan-peace-deal-russia-spoiler?lang=en> (Accessed: April 22, 2025)

Conclusion

This study has systematically traced the trajectory of the OSCE Minsk Group, from its inception in 1992 as a multilateral mechanism to mediate the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict to its gradual decline into a dysfunctional entity incapable of fostering peace or stability in the South Caucasus. This article concludes by restating the guiding question that this article has sought to address: *What are the key drivers behind the OSCE Minsk Group’s inability to resolve the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict and enhance stability in the South Caucasus, and how do these drivers illuminate the constraints of multilateral mediation amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics?*

The analysis reveals a persistent pattern of inefficacy, rooted in structural deficiencies – most notably the conflicting interests among the co-chairs (Russia, the United States, and France) – and the Group’s failure to adapt to evolving regional realities. Historical turning points, including the unsuccessful 1996 Lisbon Summit, the 2001 Key West talks, the Group’s marginalization during the 2016 Four-Day War, and its complete sidelining during and after the 2020 Second Karabakh War, collectively underscore the Minsk Group’s transformation into a passive bystander rather than an effective mediator.

Azerbaijan and Türkiye’s criticism of the Minsk Group’s perceived biases, particularly its failure to enforce UN Security Council resolutions demanding Armenia’s withdrawal from the [formerly] occupied territories, are validated by the events, culminating in Azerbaijan’s decisive military success in 2020, achieved outside the Minsk process. Conversely, Armenia’s perspective reflects a complex duality: an initial reliance on the Group to legitimize its territorial claims under the pretext of the principles of ‘self-determination’, juxtaposed against a pragmatic acknowledgement of its post-2020 irrelevance following Azerbaijan’s reclamation of its territories. While Armenian foreign policy once championed the Group’s efforts, such as the 2007 Madrid Principles, the shift toward regionally brokered solutions – exemplified by the Russia-mediated Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020 – signals a tacit recognition of the Minsk Group’s obsolescence, despite opposition voices clinging to its symbolic legal status.

The Minsk Group’s mission, once grounded in the post-Cold War optimism of multilateral diplomacy, has been rendered anachronistic

by the rise of regional agency and the reassertion of state sovereignty. Azerbaijan's military victories and Türkiye's increasing influence in the South Caucasus highlight the necessity of a new peace process, led by regional actors, capable of addressing contemporary power dynamics. The Group's dissolution, as advocated by Azerbaijan and tentatively considered by Armenia within the context of a prospective peace agreement, represents not merely the end of an outdated mechanism but a critical recalibration of conflict resolution strategies. This study contends that moving beyond the Minsk Group is essential for establishing a sustainable framework for peace and stability in the South Caucasus, one that prioritizes regional leadership and aligns with the imperatives of international law and territorial integrity.