

SPRING 2022

Frozen conflicts: thawing tensions in the EU's eastern neighbourhood

EVENT REPORT



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Putin's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated once again that peace and stability in the EU's eastern neighbourhood are not only essential for preventing the suffering of millions of citizens but also for managing Europe's geopolitical balance.

Whilst recent events have rightly turned most of the focus on Ukraine, it is important to recall that Moscow is also involved to varying degrees and by various means in all four frozen conflicts in Europe's eastern neighbourhood, namely in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

With this backdrop, speakers during the policy insight event, organised by Friends of Europe on 31 March 2022 and entitled 'Frozen conflicts: thawing tensions in the EU's eastern neighbourhood', examined the current political and geopolitical context in various regions of the EU's southern neighbourhood.

The situation in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are "still far from stable", said **Jamie Shea**, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and the moderator for the event.

Shea added that the conflict in Ukraine has both diverted attention away from what is happening elsewhere, but also refocused attention "because everyone is waiting to see what the impact will be on Russia's designs in the Euro-Atlantic region".

The EU must be actively involved

Zeljana Zovko, Member of the European Parliament, explained that since the 2020 ceasefire following the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, regular skirmishes have continued to take place, and last week Russian peacekeepers accused Azerbaijan of breaking the ceasefire agreement.

"Both parties need to start negotiations on sustainable settlements with clear border demarcation and delimitation," she said, adding that the Ukraine war will "directly impact the situation".

"The EU should avoid Russia dominating the peace talks as happened in 2020, and the EU must be actively involved in the Southern Caucasus," she said, noting that there is increasing Russian and Turkish influence in the region.

"We have to be vigilant and make sure the war in Ukraine doesn't increase tensions within these frozen conflicts," she emphasised. "We cannot predict whether President Putin will want to reopen these frozen conflicts, either to divert attention away from Ukraine or to regain ground."

She concluded by welcoming the role of civil society and international bodies such as UNESCO "to help find a path and respect the shared heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh".

Destabilising for society

"This is a destabilising time for people in eastern partnership countries who have not known peace for many decades," said **Hamida Giyasbayli**, journalist and human rights defender.

“In the past month, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova have tried to balance the necessity for good relations with Russia and support Ukraine’s territorial integrity,” she said.

“Yet the population has shown discontent about these policies for neutrality, which are being driven by terror experienced in [the] previous century.”

“If war in Ukraine doesn’t stop soon, destabilisation in eastern partnership countries will be unavoidable”, she stated.

Giyasbayli highlighted that the EU, NATO and the OSCE have “lost their trust” among the local population, largely because of the failure of the EU’s monitoring missions in the regions, and also referenced the “shrinking space for civil society”.

“Frozen conflicts are not necessarily a major threat to EU stability,” she argued.

“It is the technocratic world order that is a threat to the whole world. Diplomatic efforts must be increased across the world, and finances spent on militarisation must be redirected into a global movement opposed to the concept of war itself.”

Disputed terminology

Noting that some people object to the term ‘frozen conflicts’ “because either they’re not conflicts or they’re not frozen because they keep flaring up”, Friends of Europe Senior Fellow **Paul Taylor** said he prefers to use the term “unresolved conflicts... but even this term is disputed”. Russia, for example, claims that its annexation of Crimea is “resolved”.

He said he understood the reasons why these countries have “policies for neutrality” as referenced above and asked Giyasbayli what she thought governments and civil society should do instead.

He added that he could sympathise with governments that “try to keep their head down when Russia is engaged in war” and argued that this reflects “practical problems that are faced by countries in the region”.

The EU’s approach has been to try and do whatever diplomacy it can, Taylor explained, but also to provide support for civil society and local economies for bottom-up engagement.

He did, however, issue a note of caution. “If Russia wants to dial these conflicts up, it will do so,” said Taylor, “and no amount of civil society engagement can prevent that.”

Another participant from the audience stressed how the role of civil society is “extremely important, but the elephant in the room is Russia”. He asked how international partners could “be coherent and elaborate a strategy to stop Russian aggression towards neighbouring countries”.

Esmira Jafarova, Board Member of the Center of Analysis of International Relations in Azerbaijan, focused her intervention on the need to implement the agreement reached in 2020 between Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia when it comes to Karabakh.

"This agreement is very important, but unfortunately skirmishes and border clashes are the result of the non-implementation of the November agreement on the part of Armenia," she said.

Common terminology was once more brought into question, as she argued that Nagorno-Karabakh is "not a disputed territory" since there are international documents which "recognise this region as being an integral part of Azerbaijan, so we don't want to use the word 'disputed'".

She stressed that Baku wants to sign a peace treaty with Yerevan, but the latter has yet to respond.

Turkey increasingly involved

Jafarova also explained how Turkey is becoming increasingly involved in the region, with Turkish firms participating in reconstruction work in liberated areas, as well as Turkish presence in the Joint Peacekeeping Monitoring Center.

The EU used to be inconsistent when it came to Azerbaijan and the Southern Caucasus, she explained, but after the 44-day war it started to play a constructive role, and there were meetings between the Azerbaijan leadership and European Council President Charles Michel.

"The EU has the potential to support the post-conflict rehabilitation process and the peace agenda in the region. It can play a constructive role," she said.

Develop civil society

"We have to condemn Russia's activities and claim our independence from Russia, starting from the economic sphere," concluded Giyasbayli.

She argued that there needs to be space to develop civil society but that there was no independent civil society in Azerbaijan. "There should be approaches to help civil society develop and be free," she said.

She ended by saying that "for many years we were sadly disappointed with how our independence is going because we are constantly involved in conflicts and our independence is under threat."

Emphasising that the EU has been re-engaged in the region, based on what had been said during the event, Shea asked how the EU should change this engagement through "short-term crisis management to long-term strategy building, encompassing reintegration, reconstruction and rehabilitation".

"Names matter," he concluded, wrapping up the event. "If we don't get the language right, we don't get the reality right," he said, adding that where peace agreements exist, they must be implemented.

Recommendations

- There needs to be a strengthened role for civil society across the regions where there are frozen conflicts. Currently civil society is stymied across the region, and this makes it hard, if not impossible, to create bottom-up engagement on the ground and for international bodies to find a partner with whom to work.
- The EU needs to be actively involved in the Southern Caucasus to prevent Russia and Turkey from dominating the narrative. Turkey is very involved in Azerbaijan and is providing Baku with significant funding, whilst Russia is seeking to expand its sphere of influence and thereby control the narrative. In parallel, the EU needs to build back the trust that it has lost from the civilian population in recent years and demonstrate that it is committed to finding a peaceful resolution.
- Terminology is sensitive, and using correct terminology goes hand-in-hand with a thorough understanding of the politics and culture of the region in question.

