DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 21.02.2023 | Olesya Vartanyan

The EU's new role in mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan

The EU has sent civilian observers to Armenia. For the mission to succeed it needs a flexible mandate, diplomatic support and resources

The first unarmed civilian observers of a ground-breaking European Union mission have just arrived in Armenia to keep tabs on worsening tensions with Azerbaijan. They will patrol the border to ensure Brussels knows of any flareups immediately, giving it a better chance of intervening fast enough to keep the peace. The mission must tread carefully in an area that also hosts Russian military and border guards. To help it succeed, the EU must provide the mission full funding and as much freedom of manoeuvre as possible.

In theory, this deployment should significantly shorten the time it takes the EU or member states to react if any new fighting flares up at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The neighbours fought their last war in 2020 over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-populated region that declared independence from Azerbaijan, and since then their long state border has seen several clashes, each bloodier than the last. Yerevan lost ground in 2020 and has been unable to restock its weapons, as its traditional supplier and security partner, Russia, has stockpiled armaments for its own war in Ukraine. In contrast, Baku is growing militarily stronger and more confident, bolstered by revenues from its oil and gas and supported by its strategic ally, Turkey.

The risk of new hostilities is real. In last September's latest escalation, Azerbaijan's soldiers took over important mountain positions deep inside Armenia. One front line area in the south of Armenia now poses a particular threat. If there is a new flareup, troops there could advance and cut Armenia in two, with severe humanitarian consequences for over 200,000 people living in the southern border areas who could find themselves isolated. Azerbaijani soldiers could also control the only passable road to Nagorno-Karabakh, the so-called Lachin corridor, which Baku-backed activists have already blocked for over two months with catastrophic humanitarian implications as local residents lost access to

food and medical supplies. Baku could make a push to take more territory and put Armenia's leaders under enormous pressure to make concessions in peace talks which plod along despite the hostile atmosphere, but this is unlikely to promote a stable and longer-term settlement in the region.

Difficult conditions

Armenia's decision to invite EU observers shows it no longer considers it can rely solely on its decades-long strategic ally, Russia. Since Russia invaded Ukraine a year ago, Azerbaijan – sensing Moscow was distracted - has initiated three major attacks, each of which has strengthened its hand militarily. Neither Russian peacekeepers present in Nagorno-Karabakh, nor Russian soldiers and guards along Armenia's borders elsewhere, did anything to curb these advances. This is why Armenia declined an autumn offer by the Russian-dominated military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to deploy more troops on its border with Azerbaijan, and instead, invited the European mission.

By sending its observers, the EU is strengthening a mediatory role, which only began a year ago, between Armenia and Azerbaijan over their core problem of Nagorno-Karabakh. Both countries have been part of the European Union's Eastern Partnership since 2009, but until very recently Moscow was the chief outside party in the region. It had close bilateral ties with both Caucasian countries and championed the CSTO in Europe's Minsk Group that it co-chaired with France and the United States since the mid-1990s. Now, Russia can no longer set the agenda alone but will have to consider Brussels' role in its diplomatic engagements with Baku and Yerevan.

Formally the Russian forces are subordinated into Armenian structures, which should help cooperation with the EU observers at least at a technical level.

Brussels still needs to work out many operational details for the two-year mission — its first full-fledged and long-term civilian presence to a country in a formal security alliance with Russia. EU member states have to announce how many people they will each send, and whether the total strength will be around 100 observers, as is being discussed. Much is at stake, and the mission could fail if it is poorly funded or undermanned, or confined by too narrow a mandate.

It must also try to improve cooperation with Azerbaijan. Armenia is offering the observers unrestricted access, but to report accurately on security incidents, they need the same from Azerbaijan. Baku remains unconvinced and would prefer not to let EU observers cross onto its

territory. If this stance remains, the EU will have to find other ways to ensure its observers stay safe near dangerous areas where gunfire is common.

Working with Russia

The observers must pay heed to the other important party in the region — Russia, which has military and border guards along Armenia's border with Azerbaijan. The war in Ukraine makes it harder, but all the more important, for the EU to find a way to cooperate with them. Mutual contacts on the ground could provide a useful information exchange, avoid tensions and prevent misunderstandings. Formally the Russian forces are subordinated into Armenian structures, which should help cooperation with the EU observers at least at a technical level.

The EU should give its mission the tools to facilitate dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani military and border guards posted along the border if that might help prevent or damp down violence. This has been tried successfully elsewhere, for example with the EU civilian mission in Georgia. Helping Tbilisi, its breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Russian security personnel based in these regions to talk to each other. It aided the setup of a 'hotline' connecting officials responsible for security along the lines of separation in conflict zones, and arranged face-to-face meetings between them. Similar efforts could be useful at the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

With Russia focused on Ukraine, the EU has been taking over its role in mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan. But these diplomatic efforts will come to naught if the two countries keep falling back into ever deadlier armed confrontations. By deploying the mission to Armenia, Brussels has shown it has the political willto take on a new and crucial role in steering them away from conflict. But now it must give its observers the flexible mandate, diplomatic support and resources they will need to succeed.



Olesya Vartanyan
Tbilisi

Olesya Vartanyan is a conflict analyst in the South Caucasus, specialising in security, foreign policy and peace processes.