



Parliamentary Update (AFET Committee 27 January 2010)

Following the meeting of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) on 27 January, this update includes the coverage of the public hearing on “The role of the EU in frozen conflicts (focused on South Caucasus and Transnistria)” and the presentation of report “An EU strategy for the South Caucasus”.

Public hearing on “The role of the EU in frozen conflicts (focused on South Caucasus and Transnistria)”¹

Dr. Sabine Fischer, Research fellow at EUISS, Dr. Sabine Freizer Gunes, Director of Europe Program at International Crisis Group and Dr. Johann Cohen, Director of Programmes at Conciliation Resources, participated at the hearing and gave presentations in regards to “The role of the EU in frozen conflicts”.

Dr. Fischer underlined the positive fact that the EU involvement in the Southern Caucasus has increased since 2003. In the past few years, she pointed out, the EU appointed an EU Special Representative to the region, set up bilateral relations with the three South Caucasian republics (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and played a key role in the conflict resolution in Georgia after August 2008 (with establishing the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM Georgia), ceasefire agreement and the Geneva Talks). However, she remarked that the EU had - and has to - do more. Indeed the EU failed to prevent the outbreak of the August 2008 conflict and consequently to pressure Russia to comply with the ceasefire. EUMM Georgia still does not have access to breakaway regions and the Geneva Talks did not produce any breakthrough. Fischer also listed a series of obstacles to positive outcomes in the regions. One example is the EU approach, exclusively development-oriented, which overlooks the ethno-political and identity dimension and in some cases exacerbated tensions. Other complications include the mediation role of the EU in Georgia (where it is perceived by the Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities as an ally of the Georgian government), the different perceptions of EU involvement in the affected countries (very positive in Georgia; much less in Armenia and Azerbaijan, which remain closer to Russia) and the lack of coherence (there are huge divisions between EU Member States on the relations with Moscow). In her final remarks, Fischer called for a reconsideration of the EU development centred approach, the involvement of non-state parties to conflict and the harmonisation of EU instruments – possibly facilitated by the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty.

Dr. Freizer illustrated the main difficulties that characterise the Southern Caucasus. In regards to the Georgian conflict, she pointed out that Russia has maintained troops in the breakaway regions and seem to have long term programmes such as the construction of military bases in Abkhazia and on the Black Sea. Furthermore she stressed that EUMM now is the only international presence after the closure of the UNOMIG and OSCE missions and the capacity of EUMM to fulfil its mandate is affected by the denied access to territories. She also explained how the situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan is interlinked to other political developments in the region. For instance, the stalled rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia (in spite of the recent signature of protocols for the normalisations of bilateral relations) could slow down the negotiations in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this context, she argued that the EU should strengthen its regional role (in particular with EU Special Representative) and be the convenor of multilateral regional platforms that are of crucial importance in the negotiations. In her opinion, the EU should also play a more relevant

¹ For analysis on CSDP missions as well as on related countries and thematics, see the CSDP Mission Analysis Partnership www.csdpmap.eu

role with non-recognised entities and consider the possibility of sending a CSDP mission that could cooperate with OSCE in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Dr. Cohen contested the use of term “frozen conflict” by arguing that this definition does not take into account the elements of transformation. He pointed out that the conflicts in the Southern Caucasus have their own specificities and consequently cannot be dealt with a “one size fits all” approach. He remarked that the common reference to Russia as the main culprit does not help. On the contrary he called for a constructive engagement with Moscow, which means that the EU has to understand Russian interests in the region to develop a more effective approach. In order to play a more relevant role, Cohen suggested that the EU should be more courageous in the use of soft power and put more “political edge” in it. He also recommended that the EU should take into account the perspectives of non-recognised entities and break their isolation. These policies, he concluded, should be assisted by civil society actors, which were said to be very efficient in building bridges and confidence in divided areas.

Responding to MEP Alojz Peterle (EPP), who asked which steps Baroness Ashton has to take in the Southern Caucasus, Dr. Fischer said that the new EU foreign policy chief should work to harmonise the EU instruments on the ground and send advisers to the region to talk and provide her with the full picture.

MEP Adrian Severin (S&D) demanded if the frozen conflict in the South Caucasus could be seen as part of a comprehensive crisis of the Russian post-imperial structure. In response, Dr. Cohen stated that these conflicts are not only an outcome of the collapse of the Soviet world. In his opinion, Russia is not the only problem and Northern Caucasus, for its spill-over effect, should not be ignored. Severin also raised the question of military neutrality to solve the crises. Cohen answered that the Southern Caucasus republics are not ready for this yet because they are still investing a lot in small arms. After specifying that Georgia spends 8% GDP in military expenditure, Armenia and Azerbaijan 3.2% and 2.6% respectively, Dr. Freizer underlined that these figures are high for countries which are still poor.

In response to MEP Hannes Swoboda (S&D), who by referring to Europe’s history did not discard the possibility of creating a regional association in the Southern Caucasus on the ashes of the current conflicts, Fischer maintained that this is not what the countries want. Freizer added that it is better to focus on the Eastern Partnership.

After pointing out that both Georgia and Russia appealed to the international Criminal Court for war crimes, MEP Heidi Hautala (Greens/EFA) raised the question in regards to possible developments. She also asked for clarifications on the Tagliavini Report and its validity to ascertain responsibilities. Cohen replied that the path towards justice and peace is extremely complex in an area where violence from both sides goes back a long time. For this reason, the report focusing on the events in August 2008 cannot be very useful in this regard.

MEP Tunne Kelam (EPP) argued that before establishing contacts with non-recognised entities, the EU should approach Russia and make more use of its leverage to make it abide by its commitments. Fischer responded that the EU cannot do this because it does not have much leverage on Moscow. Cohen disagreed with the first affirmation and replied that it is very important to engage with non-recognised actors.

The presentation of the report “An EU Strategy for the South Caucasus”.

The rapporteur MEP Evgeni Kirilov (S&D) gave a presentation of the report “An EU Strategy for the South Caucasus”. He called on the EU to be more active – “the EU cannot be a sleeping beauty in the region” – and agreed with Dr. Cohen on the need of more “political edge”. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the rapporteur explained, the EU should participate in the negotiations through the establishment of an EU mandate for the French Co-Chair of the Minsk Group. In Georgia, the EU should work to persuade Russia and local authorities to allow EUMM to enter the breakaway territories. Kirilov praised the Eastern Partnership initiatives and underlined the relevance of the work of the EU-European Neighbourhood Parliament Assembly (EURONEST) and civil society forums. He also asked for visa facilitations and stressed the importance of principles such as good governance and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as the basis for stable and democratic societies. In conclusion he highlighted the problem of energy security and called for a more robust support to energy projects in the region (in particular the completion of Nabucco pipeline).

The chair of the meeting, MEP Fiorenzo Provera (EFD), agreed with the rapporteur on the importance of the Eastern Partnership and wondered if the normalisation of the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a fundamental prerequisite for its success. After praising the work of Kirilov, MEP Anna Ibrisagic (EPP) added that his report could have been more critical in regards to human right abuses and freedom of press restrictions. On the contrary MEP Annemie Neyts (ALDE) wondered if the EU is entitled to make huge demands (respect for human rights and other liberties) on countries involved in conflicts and doubted that this attitude could be productive in encouraging Azerbaijan or Armenia to work for a resolution.

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