

## **JOINT POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER**

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**An eventful year has left many confused on the  
prospect of Armenia-Azerbaijan peace and more  
hard work is needed**

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In April 2022 a group of Armenian and Azerbaijani experts published their report “The South Caucasus from war to peace: 30 measures between now and 2030” in which they outlined their vision for the process of building trust and confidence between Armenia and Azerbaijan and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, in order to contribute to lasting peace in the South Caucasus. One year later, in this joint paper, Ahmad Alili and Benyamin Poghosyan, joint rapporteurs of the group, reflect on events and developments over the eventful past twelve months. They say peace remains within reach, but more hard work is needed.

## I. Peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan is possible, but more hard work is needed.

On 6 April 2022 at the building of the European Council in Brussels, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia met together with European Council president Charles Michel. It was the second in a series of meetings between the three leaders that culminated in the Prague Summit and declaration of 6 October 2022. The meetings raised hopes for Armenia-Azerbaijan peace.

As the leaders met in Brussels, a few hundred meters away at a building on the Ronde Schuman, Armenian and Azerbaijani experts presented to an audience of EU officials and other stakeholders their report “The South Caucasus from war to peace; 30 measures between now and 2030”. The report was the result of six months of diligent work between Armenian and Azerbaijani experts working with the support of European colleagues in a Joint Liaison Group, known in short as JOLIG.

The fact the two meetings were taking place at the same time in the same place was a coincidence, but the two events were the best example ever, in the long history of efforts to resolve the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, of track 1 and track 2 initiatives working in tandem. It was a significant and positive moment.

In the twelve months that have followed we have seen a rollercoaster of events, with the mood about the prospects for peace in the region swinging from the very optimistic to the very pessimistic.

The occurrence of “incidents”, “events” and “developments”, in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in the diplomatic sphere, compounded by continued toxic content on social media, have tested to the limits the willingness of the two sides to continue to negotiate. Thus, whilst one can criticise the two leaders for not bringing their negotiations to an early successful conclusion, one needs also to recognise and applaud that they have maintained their willingness to negotiate even in very testing circumstances.

The concern that the present state of contradictions cannot be sustained indefinitely is however legitimate, and both sides are well aware of the risks of procrastination. It is therefore likely that the next few months will see important developments, which again raises the essential need for the process of building trust and confidence between Armenia and Azerbaijan and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis to be accelerated.



## Building on the results of the Prague Declaration

The 6 October 2022 Prague declaration states:

“Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma Ata 1991 Declaration through which both recognize each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.” This statement defines the next steps.

This position is supported by the entire international community. Its adoption by the two sides in the context of the Prague discussions was a significant step. Translating this declaration to actions on the ground is proving more challenging. Events in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border prove this. Different visions of the future of the region and its people remain contentious.

The two sides have not had substantial face-to-face negotiations since October 2022 – although there have been some meetings facilitated by the US, including in Washington and in Munich. Most of the negotiations are being done by email, a mechanism which leaves much to be desired. It is important that the two sides return to substantial face-to-face negotiations as soon as possible.

At this moment it is unlikely that either side wants to return to largescale warfare. But as events on the ground in the past twelve months have shown, this does not prevent that actions, planned or unplanned, provoked or not provoked, can easily turn into very ugly developments, leaving many dead and wounded on both sides. This on its own should be enough to focus minds on the need to end this tragic situation.

It is also impossible to separate events on the ground completely from the complex current international situation, that has deteriorated substantially since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The international engagement with the South Caucasus is also evolving and this has implications that need to be properly estimated.

## II. The need for a realistic understanding of the role of the international community

The role of international community in mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan is often overestimated. The role – be it that of Russia, the European Union, or the United States – has often been helpful, and on many occasions necessary. But in the end, it is Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Armenian and Azerbaijani political leaderships, that will need to make the crucial moves for the process of normalising relations and restoring peace can be achieved and completed.

Related to this is the role of international presence on the ground in support of initiating, maintaining and sustaining a peace process. Until November 2020 the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was distinguished by the fact that there was no international presence to monitor the 1994 cease fire. A small team of less than ten persons, under the auspices of the OSCE Chairmanship made some occasional field trips, but their presence was not permanent. The situation has changed since the end of the 2nd Karabakh War.

Under the provisions of the 10 November 2020 trilateral declaration Russia deployed a military force of just under 2000 troops in the conflict zone, with a mandate for five years (expiring in November 2025). In a separate development, in October 2022, the European Union deployed a short-term mission on the Armenian side of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, a development to which the Azerbaijani side acquiesced in the Prague declaration of October 2022. This temporary mission was replaced by a more permanent mission in February 2023 for a period of two years. Once it reaches full capacity in June, the mission will consist of around hundred persons, including unarmed monitors, and support international staff. Azerbaijan formally objected to the deployment of this mission.

The two missions are very separate and very different, but the fact that they exist, now creates a new situation. The fact that their mandates end in 2025 means that the discussion about their future has already started.

It is up to Armenia and Azerbaijan to decide the level of international involvement in support of whichever peace deal may emerge in the coming months. Any international presence must have a very clear objective spelled out in a very precise mandate.

Armenia, as well as many in the international community, believes that a temporary international presence can contribute to the trust of the Armenian population of Karabakh/Nagorno-Karabakh as the process of establishing peace between the two countries, and defining the future of the territory under Azerbaijani jurisdiction unfolds. This view is not shared by Azerbaijan. Baku cites inaction on the part of the international community prior to 2020 to uphold its territorial integrity as a reason. An international presence can also be useful in a time of border demarcation and delimitation to help diffuse incidents on the ground and create a transparent process which will make it difficult for any of the sides to abuse. An international presence will also give confidence to the international community in the sustainability of a peace deal – an important factor if there is going to be a significant financial contribution by the international community to post-war reconstruction. But no one wants an indefinite international presence, and this should be avoided.

It is therefore time to start a proper discussion on the future of an international presence in support of the Armenian-Azerbaijani normalisation process, to articulate a vision that can be mutually acceptable, and re-enforcing of ongoing peace efforts.

### **III. Building trust and confidence**

In the current state-of-play, the process of building trust and confidence between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis remains fragile.

The JOLIG report “30 Measures between now and 2030” published one year ago articulated 30 precise measures that can be implemented in the short, medium, and long term, and in tandem with developments in the peace process. 4

Overall, we regret that the level of trust between the sides has improved only marginally in the past twelve months. Positive steps were very often quickly neutralised by negative steps. There were not enough positive steps to neutralise all negative steps.

### **Turning the JOLIG report into pragmatic action**

The process of turning the ideas contained in the JOLIG report from a wish list into an action plan has started slowly. The members of JOLIG have made efforts to communicate the contents of the report to relevant stakeholders and constituencies. They held outreach meetings in Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan, and elsewhere. We appreciate that this work needs to be accelerated.

Overall, the reaction of the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan to the April 2022 JOLIG report has been positive. In the international community one can say that the reaction was even enthusiastic. However, from both the local stakeholders and from the international community the process of picking up ideas in the JOLIG report and turning them into tangible action has been sluggish. But through the efforts of LINKS Europe and the consistent engagement of the Armenian and Azerbaijani experts of the Joint Liaison Group, JOLIG maintained the momentum of its work throughout this difficult past year, navigating around periods of tension, escalations which often claimed lives, and a very negative overall political discourse. Consistency and persistency is starting to give some results, and we are pleased to note some positive developments:

- (a) Whilst the idea of holding an South Caucasus Youth Peace summer School in 2022 could not be realised, we are pleased to note that the process for holding this school in 2023 is now well under way, thanks to the support of the Government of Norway.
- (b) The European Union has agreed to continue to support the work of the Joint Liaison Group in the framework of the EU4

Peace 2 programme. The programme also offers numerous other opportunities for dialogue and interaction at the track 2 level.

- (c) A number of other initiatives, including a Russia-Armenia-Azerbaijan expert dialogue facilitated by Russia's MGIMO and the Russian International Affairs Council, and an expert dialogue facilitated by the centre for Humanitarian Dialogue with the support of the Swiss government, have taken place with varied degrees of impact and sustainability.
- (d) The regional campaign Landmine Free South Caucasus has maintained a focus on the need for a regional and collaborative approach for the issue of landmine clearance across the South Caucasus despite inconsistent engagement by different stakeholders
- (e) There have been some useful efforts to launch Armenia - Azerbaijan economic dialogue by gathering experts to discuss issues such as transport, water and energy, through an initiative facilitated by Berlin Hertie School and Restart Initiative.

These are some examples, and there are others.

But we also note that a number of good ideas remain untapped, and windows of opportunity have been missed. Local stakeholders are often too absorbed by immediate episodes and fail to see the big picture. The international community is too risk averse, and mobilising funding for rapid response to positive or negative developments is too slow. The initiative of JOLIG to establish a small "windows of opportunity fund" should be supported.

There is also a need to keep a focus on the transformational processes that are necessary and which will require longer, more sustainable efforts. Emphasis on youth and women should remain a priority.

JOLIG's policy of engaging Georgian partners in a lot of its work adds an important and vital component, and contributes to long term regional understanding.

Increasingly, over the last year we have seen the consequences of the military of Armenia and Azerbaijan operating in close proximity to each other in border areas. This raises an urgent need to initiate small confidence-building measures that will facilitate communication, and raise possibility of contact in non-combat situations that will help avoid incidents. In this context, the re-establishment of hot line and efforts to create an incident prevention and response mechanism can be useful.

The participation of the people of Karabakh/Nagorno-Karabakh in the process of building trust and confidence in the region going forward is essential.

#### **IV. Bringing the peace process to an early successful conclusion**

The prospects for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis remain dependant on a strong political will and commitment on the part of the leadership of the two countries, a shift to a more positive approach on the part of Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, and a commitment by the international community to support the process through, patient, flexible, and serious engagement.

The last year has been a rollercoaster year, with the mood shifting between extreme positive and negative moments. It is likely that we are entering a more stable period which will allow the peace process to consolidate and for the Armenian and Azerbaijani leadership to bring it to a successful timely conclusion. But this will require hard work on all sides and from all concerned.

# About JOLIG - Joint Liaison Group on Confidence-Building Measures in support of lasting peace in the South Caucasus

The Joint Armenian-Azerbaijani Liaison Group on Confidence-Building Measures in support of lasting peace in the South Caucasus (JOLIG) was constituted after a series of consultation meetings in Yerevan, Baku and Kachreti (Georgia) in 2021, with the specific objective of looking at the role of confidence-building measures in the current situation in the South Caucasus. From October 2021 to 31 March 2022 members of the liaison group met in numerous formats, and consulted widely with stakeholders in their respective countries and societies and beyond. These conversations helped inform the work of the group, and particularly the conceptualisation and elaboration of proposals for future action.

On 2 April 2022 JOLIG published its report, **"The South Caucasus from war to peace: 30 measures between now and 2030"** in which it proposes 30 short-, medium- and long-term measures in support of ongoing efforts to establish peace in the region. In their report the members of the Liaison Group say that Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Armenians and Azerbaijanis, need to build the future based on mutual trust and confidence.

In their report the group says that "all the ingredients for peace exist in the South Caucasus. All the ingredients for war exist too. What is in front of us is a choice." The group says that the proposed measures are a building block in the quest for peace but if the ideas being proposed are implemented the objective of building a peaceful, secure and prosperous South Caucasus will be much closer to being achieved.

The JOLIG report focuses on relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but the scope of the report is in many respects regional, i.e. it envisages arrangements that often include Georgia too. In this regard, the group holds regular formal and informal meetings with Georgian officials and non-governmental stakeholders to discuss its work.

The work of the Joint Liaison Group so far has taken place in the framework of the EU4Peace project, and the broader European Union engagement with the process of building peace and prosperity in the South Caucasus. The support of the European Union for the work of the group was instrumental in enabling it to conduct its work.

## Background information

The Joint Armenian-Azerbaijani Liaison Group on confidence-building measures in support of lasting peace in the South Caucasus (JOLIG), is made up of 11 Armenian and Azerbaijani independent experts and opinion-shapers. Currently the members of the group are: Ahmad Alili, Mehman Aliyev, Stepan Grigoryan, Taron Hovhannissyan (from June 2022), Shahla Ismayil, Gevorg Melikian (from June 2022), Johnny Melikian, Benyamin Poghosyan, Ramazan Samadov and Anar Valiyev.

The co-rapporteurs of the group are Ahmad Alili from Azerbaijan and Benyamin Poghosyan from Armenia, together with Dennis Sammut on behalf of LINKS Europe.

LINKS Europe, an independent foundation based in The Hague in The Netherlands was the initiator of the JOLIG process in 2021, based on its long experience of work in the South Caucasus and on confidence-building measures in support of peace processes. In June 2022 the role of LINKS Europe was re-defined to a more supportive and advisory role, through a Secretariat and a Special Advisor. More information on JOLIG is available on the commonspace.eu website, or by contacting the Secretariat at [office@links-europe.eu](mailto:office@links-europe.eu).

## About LINKS Europe

LINKS Europe is a foundation based in The Hague promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts and a secure and prosperous Europe, in friendship and solidarity with its neighbourhood. Our work is organised around five thematic areas:

### **1. Peace through dialogue and confidence-building**

LINKS Europe is a peace-building organisation. We support the quest for peace through track 2 and track 1.5 initiatives, including through dialogue and confidence-building. Our work is currently primarily focused on areas in the EU's neighbourhood, with a particular emphasis on the South Caucasus.

### **2. A European Union in friendship and in solidarity with its neighbourhood**

LINKS Europe firmly believes that peace and prosperity in Europe are strongly dependent on peace and prosperity in Europe's neighbourhood. It supports an extensive EU commitment to the future of neighbouring regions, including through political and economic cooperation, support for peace initiatives, and extensive people-to-people contacts. We group the EU's neighbourhood into six clusters: North Africa and the Sahel; Turkey, the Balkans and the Levant; Russia and Eastern Europe; The South Caucasus; The Gulf and Red Sea Regions; and Central Asia. Whilst each cluster has its own unique characteristics, there are also a number of common features resulting from geographic proximity, and common historical experiences and connections.

### **3. A Global Europe that provides safety, security and prosperity for its people and is a force for good**

Europe's increasing ambition to become a global geopolitical player is a result of necessity. We believe this will happen despite the reluctance of some and the shortcomings of others. It is therefore important to engage with this debate and help forge a new global Europe that can provide safety, security and prosperity for its citizens and be a force for good in the world. The EU's 'Conference on the Future of Europe' provides us with an excellent focus and platform to do this in a structured way.

### **4. Connectivity as a tool for peace and prosperity**

In an increasingly interdependent world, isolation is not the solution. Developing proper connectivity that works well for all concerned is one of the biggest challenges of our time. Connectivity, in areas such as transport and communications, is also a potential tool for peace, improving trade and business, facilitating people-to-people contacts, and enabling countries and communities to develop shared interests. LINKS Europe is contributing towards the debate on how connectivity can contribute to peace and prosperity.

### **5. Understanding radicalisation, and developing responses to it**

Globalisation and connectivity have their negative sides too. Radicalisation has shown a capacity to spread quickly, often leading to violence. Vulnerable groups – be they whole communities and tribes in the Sahel, or disenfranchised sons of migrants in the slums of Paris – are prone to fall victim to radicalisation. No religious or ethnic group is immune. White communities impacted by economic downturns are equally likely to succumb to extreme ideas, leading some to see violence as a solution. LINKS Europe works to understand the phenomenon, including the connection between radicalisation and violent conflicts, and on ways of fighting back against this dangerous trend.

LINKS Europe disseminates its research through its websites, [www.links-europe.eu](http://www.links-europe.eu) and [www.commonspace.eu](http://www.commonspace.eu), as well as through its fortnightly newsletters: Caucasus Concise, Central Asia Concise, Karabakh Concise and Arabia Concise, as well as its quarterly newsletter South Caucasus Landmine Observer.

For more information about LINKS Europe and its work please contact [office@links-europe.eu](mailto:office@links-europe.eu).



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