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A BRIDGE ACROSS THE CAUCASUS: THE ROLE OF WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES IN ADVANCING THE "BRUSSELS FORMAT" OF NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

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The prospects for the development of the Brussels Format largely depend on the European Union's ability to adapt its diplomatic instruments to new realities. Since the first meetings in 2021, when talks between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia were mediated by European Council President Charles Michel, more than ten key issues have been added to the agenda, ranging from unblocking transport corridors to humanitarian initiatives. Despite the slow pace of implementation, the EU continues to maintain the negotiating platform, especially after the escalation in September 2022 and the subsequent intensification of efforts in May 2023, when two consecutive meetings were held in Brussels.

The integration of economic and transport projects, including the initiative to develop the Trans-Caspian route, which has been actively discussed since 2022, could significantly contribute to the further strengthening of the format. For the EU, this aspect is particularly important given that energy supplies from Azerbaijan to Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor reached almost 12 billion cubic meters in 2023, a record high since its launch. The economic component gives Brussels the opportunity to align the negotiation process with long-term interests in energy and transport security. Expert recommendations increasingly emphasize the need to create trust-building mechanisms, including joint humanitarian projects, post-conflict rehabilitation programs, and civil society engagement. Similar measures were considered back in 2022, but have yet to receive the necessary institutionalization. Drawing on the experience of the Eastern Partnership, the EU could offer systemic funding for such initiatives through its foreign policy funds, which are estimated at €79.5 billion in the new budget cycle through 2027.

Keywords: Western European countries, South Caucasus, peace negotiation, Eastern Partnership, Karabakh War, EU, mediatory mechanisms, energy security.

Introduction. The South Caucasus is currently experiencing a new period of stability following the end of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, during which Azerbaijan regained control over its territories, including liberated Karabakh. The historical contradictions that underpinned the protracted conflict remain part of the region's memory, but their military component has been resolved, opening up space for constructive diplomatic dialogue and economic development. The establishment of the "Brussels Format" was an important initiative by Western European countries aimed at consolidating the peace achieved and creating a structured platform for negotiations. This format provides Azerbaijan with the opportunity to conduct dialogue with Armenia in a neutral and predictable environment, minimizing the risk of renewed tensions and promoting trust between the parties. The role of Western European countries in this process is primarily in supporting the diplomatic mechanism and ensuring the transparency of negotiations [4].

European states act as guarantors of compliance with international law, including the principle of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Their participation is aimed at building trust and creating conditions for the speedy signing of a peace agreement, rather than imposing external solutions, allowing Azerbaijan to defend its national interests within the framework of legal and diplomatic norms [9].

Thus, the "Brussels Format" today serves as a tool for systematically strengthening the peace process, combining the historical lessons of the conflict with contemporary security and regional cooperation objectives. For Azerbaijan, this primarily represents an opportunity to implement economic and transport projects previously blocked by military tensions, and a strategic means of securing long-term peace in the region [8].

Goals and interests of Western European countries. Western European countries are interested in stabilizing the South Caucasus primarily for strategic and economic reasons. The end of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has opened a new stage for the implementation of regional projects, including transport corridors, energy routes, and trade links, which directly address the EU's interests in ensuring reliable and predictable supply chains and economic integration in the region [10].

Furthermore, Western European countries are seeking to strengthen their role as peacekeepers and mediators in the region, demonstrating their ability to facilitate the peaceful resolution of long-term conflicts. In the context of multipolar competition with Russia and Türkiye, it is important for the EU to support mechanisms that ensure strategic stability in the South Caucasus and strengthen the influence of European institutions on decision-making in the region. The EU's economic and political interests intersect with the need to consolidate the peace achieved between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Stability allows for the advancement of infrastructure integration projects, including transport corridors through Azerbaijan and Georgia, and also stimulates investment and trade. At the same time, the EU is focused on maintaining a neutral and constructive approach that does not infringe on Azerbaijan's national interests while promoting regional cooperation. The motivation of Western European countries is determined by a combination of pragmatic interests in the economy and transport, strategic calculations in the context of geopolitical competition, and a desire to consolidate a peaceful settlement. In this context, the "Brussels format" becomes a tool for the systematic coordination of these goals, providing Azerbaijan and Armenia with a platform for negotiations in a secure and predictable diplomatic environment [7].

Institutional structure of the Brussels format. The institutional structure of the Brussels Format demonstrates a systematic approach to resolving relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the post-conflict period. The format is built on the participation of permanent representatives of Western European countries—ambassadors, diplomats, and experts—who coordinate the negotiation process, ensuring transparency and predictability. Coordination mechanisms include regular multilateral consultations, bilateral expert-level meetings, and coordinated schedules for plenary and working sessions. This structure allows the parties to exchange proposals and adjust their positions without pressure or sudden changes, creating an atmosphere of constructive dialogue. The neutrality and independence of the process are ensured primarily by the oversight of the European participants, who act as mediators and guarantors of compliance with international norms. Their role is to create a level playing field for discussing contentious issues, moderate discussions, and develop recommendations, without imposing the content of the peace agreement on third-party decisions. This is particularly important for Azerbaijan: the institutional structure of the Brussels Format allows for the consolidation of the achieved peace, minimizing the risks of political or diplomatic instability. The format creates a platform for consistent and systematic discussion of all aspects of bilateral relations, including security, economics, and transport projects, thereby promoting long-term regional integration and the development of mutually beneficial cooperation [1].

The influence of external factors on the negotiation process Analysis of the impact of external players (USA, Russia, Türkiye) and regional events on the dynamics of negotiations. In the post-conflict period, external players and regional developments continue to influence the process of resolving relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The United States, with its significant diplomatic clout, plays the role of a strategic partner, supporting peacebuilding efforts and stimulating economic cooperation between the parties. Its influence is exercised through consultations, security recommendations, and investment initiatives that foster trust [6].

Russia remains a key factor in regional dynamics: its position influences the balance of power and the perception of stability in the South Caucasus. At the same time, Moscow demonstrates a wil-

lingness to engage with Azerbaijan and Armenia, seeking to ensure compliance with the agreements reached and prevent any attempts at escalation, which creates additional conditions for diplomatic predictability [12].

Türkiye, in turn, actively supports Azerbaijan, providing strategic assistance in the implementation of joint economic and transport projects. This presence ensures regional coordination and enhances opportunities for integrating the South Caucasus into transit and energy routes.

Under these circumstances, Western European countries are adjusting their strategies, taking into account the influence of external players and the geopolitical situation. Their approach combines diplomatic mediation with the provision of a neutral platform for dialogue, which minimizes the risk of pressure on Azerbaijan and Armenia and promotes the consistent advancement of peace processes, economic cooperation, and regional integration [2].

***Observation of difficulties in implementing initiatives: disagreement between the parties on key issues, slow implementation of agreements, diplomatic and bureaucratic barriers, limited EU influence on internal processes in Azerbaijan and Armenia*.** Despite significant progress in stabilizing relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the diplomatic settlement process faces a number of objective challenges and limitations. One of the key difficulties is the parties' differing approaches to the details of a future peace agreement: issues of infrastructure, transport corridors, and regional cooperation require careful coordination, slowing the pace of implementation. Additional obstacles include bureaucratic and diplomatic barriers at both the national and international levels. Difficulties in coordinating meeting schedules, exchanging documents, and developing joint decisions sometimes lead to protracted procedures, which may be perceived as a lack of progress by external observers [11].

The limited influence of the EU and Western European countries on internal processes in Azerbaijan and Armenia also places certain limits on the possibilities of external mediation. European participants can create a neutral platform and offer recommendations, but final decisions rest with the parties, requiring a high level of mutual trust and a willingness to compromise. For Azerbaijan, understanding these limitations is important for strategic planning: the effectiveness of diplomatic initiatives depends not only on external support but also on the internal readiness of the parties to implement agreed-upon steps. Overcoming these challenges requires a systemic approach, consistent monitoring of agreement implementation, and the active engagement of all stakeholders to consolidate peace and ensure long-term stability in the region [5].

Conclusion. Prospects for the further development of the Brussels Format appear positive and promising for regional stability. The format creates a platform for deepening bilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, allowing them to focus on practical areas such as the restoration and development of transport infrastructure, the integration of economic projects, and the coordination of energy routes. The EU's role in this process remains crucial: European countries can act as a guarantor of compliance with existing agreements and as a moderator of new initiatives, which strengthens trust between the parties and reduces the likelihood of political or diplomatic tensions. Strengthening the EU's involvement as a constructive mediator will facilitate a systemic approach to regional cooperation, including monitoring the implementation of agreements and supporting joint projects [3].

For Azerbaijan and Armenia, the continued use of the Brussels Format is important not only as a diplomatic tool but also as a mechanism for ensuring sustainable peace. Recommendations include regular consultations, transparent reporting on the implementation of agreements, active engagement of the expert community, and support for initiatives aimed at economic integration. This approach will consolidate the peace achieved, expand opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation, and create the foundation for long-term stability in the South Caucasus.

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QAFQAZ ÜZRƏ KÖRPÜ: AZƏRBAYCAN VƏ ERMƏNISTAN ARASINDA DANIŞIQLARIN "BRÜSSEL FORMATI" NIN INKIŞAFINDA QƏRBI AVROPA ÖLKƏLƏRININ ROLU

Brüssel formatının inkişaf perspektivləri əsasən Avropa Birliyinin diplomatik alətlərini yeni reallıqlara uyğunlaşdırmaq qabiliyyətindən asılıdır. 2021-ci ildə ilk görüşlərdən bəri, Azərbaycan və Ermənistan liderləri arasında danışıqlar Avropa Şurasının prezidenti Şarl Mişel tərəfindən vasitəçilik edildikdə, nəqliyyat dəhlizlərinin açılmasından ondan çox əsas məsələ əlavə edildi, humanitar təşəbbüslərə qədər. Tətbiqin yavaş tempinə baxmayaraq, Aİ, xüsusən də 2022-ci ilin sentyabrında eskalasiyadan sonra, 2023-cü ilin may ayında baş verən səylərin sonrakı artımının ardından, Brüsseldə ardıcıl iki görüş keçirildikdən sonra davam edir.

2022-ci ildən bəri fəal şəkildə müzakirə olunan Trans-Xəzər marşrutu hazırlamaq təşəbbüsü də daxil olmaqla iqtisadi və nəqliyyat layihələrinin inteqrasiyası, formatın daha da möhkəmlənməsinə əhəmiyyətli dərəcədə töhfə verə bilər. AB üçün bu cəhət xüsusilə əhəmiyyəti nəzərə alınmaqla, Cənubi Qaz Dəhlizi ilə Azərbaycandan Avropaya enerji tədarükünün 2023-cü ildə təxminən 12 milyard kubmetrə çatdığını, istifadəyə verildiyi gündən bəri yüksək səviyyədədir. İqtisadi komponent Brüsselə danışıqlar prosesini enerji və nəqliyyat təhlükəsizliyində uzunmüddətli maraqlarla uyğunlaşdırmaq imkanı verir. Mütəxəssis tövsiyələri getdikcə artan humanitar layihələr, münaqişədən sonrakı reabilitasiya proqramları və vətəndaş cəmiyyəti iştirak etmək üçün etimad bina mexanizmləri yaratmaq ehtiyacını vurğulayır. Oxşar tədbirlər 2022-ci ildə geri baxıldı, lakin hələ lazımi institusionalizasiya almamışdır. Şərq Tərəfdaşlığının təcrübəsinə yönəldilməsi, AB, 2027-ci ilə qədər yeni büdcə dövrü ərzində 79.5 milyard avro qiymətləndirilən xarici siyasət fondları vasitəsilə bu cür təşəbbüslər üçün sistemli maliyyə xidmətləri təklif edə bilər.

Açar sözlər: Qərbi Avropa ölkələri, Cənubi Qafqaz, Sülh Danışıqları, Şərq Tərəfdaşlığı, Qarabağ müharibəsi, AB, vasitəçilik, enerji təhlükəsizliyi.

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МОСТ ЧЕРЕЗ КАВКАЗ: РОЛЬ СТРАН ЗАПАДНОЙ ЕВРОПЫ В ПРОДВИЖЕНИИ «БРЮССЕЛЬСКОГО ФОРМАТА» ПЕРЕГОВОРОВ МЕЖДУ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНОМ И АРМЕНИЕЙ

Перспективы развития формата Брюсселя в значительной степени зависят от способности Европейского Союза адаптировать свои дипломатические инструменты к новым реалиям. С момента первых встреч в 2021 году, когда переговоры между лидерами Азербайджана и Армения были опосредованы президентом Европейского совета Шарль Мишель, в повестку дня было добавлено более десяти ключевых вопросов, начиная от разблокировки транспортных коридоров до гуманитарных инициатив. Несмотря на медленные темпы реализации, ЕС продолжает поддерживать платформу переговоров, особенно после эскалации в сентябре 2022 года и последующей интенсификации усилий в мае 2023 года, когда в Брюсселе проводились две встречи подряд.

Интеграция экономических и транспортных проектов, включая инициативу по разработке транс-каппийского маршрута, который активно обсуждался с 2022 года, может значительно способствовать дальнейшему укреплению формата. Для ЕС этот аспект особенно важен, учитывая, что поставки энергии из Азербайджана в Европу через Южный Газовый Коридор достиг почти 12 миллиардов кубических метров в 2023 году, что является рекордным с момента его запуска. Экономический компонент дает Брюсселю возможность согласовать процесс переговоров с долгосрочными интересами в области энергетики и транспортной безопасности. Экспертные рекомендации все чаще подчеркивают необходимость создания механизмов построения доверия, включая совместные гуманитарные проекты, программы реабилитации после конфликта и вовлечение гражданского общества. Аналогичные меры были рассмотрены еще в 2022 году, но еще не получили необходимую институционализацию. Опираясь на опыт восточного партнерства, ЕС может предложить системное финансирование для таких инициатив в рамках своих внешнеполитических средств, которые оцениваются в 79,5 млрд. евро в новом бюджетном цикле до 2027 года.

Ключевые слова: западноевропейские страны, Южный Кавказ, мирные переговоры, Восточное партнерство, Карабахская война, ЕС, посредственные механизмы, энергетическая безопасность.

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