The aim of the Review is to consider the external posture of the European Union in its relations with the rest of the world. Therefore the Review will focus on the political, legal and economic aspects of the Union’s external relations. The Review will function as an interdisciplinary medium for the understanding and analysis of foreign affairs issues which are of relevance to the European Union and its Member States on the one hand and its international partners on the other. The Review will aim at meeting the needs of both the academic and the practitioner. In doing so the Review will provide a public forum for the discussion and development of European external policy interests and strategies, addressing issues from the points of view of political science and policy-making, law or economics. These issues should be discussed by authors drawn from around the world while maintaining a European focus.

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Email: a.blair@coventry.ac.uk

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Professor Sven Biscop
EGMONT, Royal Institute for International Relations (IRRI-KIIB), Rue de Namur 69, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 (0)2-213-40-23
Fax: +32 (0)2-223-41-16
Email: s.biscop@irri-kiib.be

EDITORIAL OFFICE
Said Hammamoun
Center for Research in Public Law, University of Montreal, C.P. 6128, Succursale Centre-ville, Montreal QC, Canada H3C 3J7
Phone: +1 514 343-6111 # 2661
Fax: +1 514 343-7508
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EU and the Eastern Neighbourhood: Reluctant Involvement in Conflict Resolution

Nicu Popescu*

Abstract. The article deals with the European Union (EU) policy toward the post-Soviet secessionist conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The article argues that, in order to understand the EU as a crisis management actor, one has to study not just the patterns of EU intervention in conflict resolution and the impact of its actions but also EU decision not to intervene. These have a huge explanatory potential for the understanding of the EU as a foreign policy actor. Thus the article analyses in detail not just what the EU does vis-à-vis the post-Soviet secessionist conflicts but also what it failed to do. It analyses EU decisions to appoint special envoys, send civilian crisis management operations and offer assistance to the conflict zones, but also draws lessons from EU’s refusal to consider the deployment of peacekeepers or the avoidance of conflict resolution strategies, which might upset Russia. The article concludes that EU intervention in conflict resolution is primarily driven by external constraints or opportunities rather than strategic design. When faced with a choice for possible intervention in conflict settlement, the EU tends to opt for the easier, rather than the necessary, foreign policy measures and tends to work around the hard issues of conflict resolution.

I Introduction

European integration was conceived in the 1950s largely as a conflict resolution exercise. Its means were economic, but the objective was political: to pacify Europe. As integration advanced and the potential for conflicts in Western Europe faded, the European Union’s (EU) concern with conflicts has became increasingly exteriorized. From the Balkans to the Middle East and from the South Caucasus to Western Sahara, the EU is encircled with conflicts that affect European security.1 The EU has little choice but to consider action. As one EU document puts it: ‘In its neighbourhood and beyond, the EU cannot confine itself to the economic and political spheres; it also needs to be able to guarantee stability, prevent conflicts and manage crises on its own doorstep.’2 But one can hardly dream of good governance

* Nicu Popescu is research fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, London office. He holds a doctorate in International relations from the Central European University in Budapest. The author thanks Compagnia di San Paolo for supporting this research project under the European Foreign and Security Policies Studies grant.
2 European Commission, ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European
and functioning state institutions in the European neighbourhood when the poorest
European states do not control significant parts of their borders, where smuggling
and corruption around the conflict zones flourishes, security tensions periodically
lead to shoot outs, neighbours such as Russia and Georgia engage in outright war,
publics become increasingly radicalized, military escalation is not off the cards,
and defence spending growth had been in double digits for most of the last decade.
There is little the EU can do in the Eastern neighbourhood without stumbling on
the secessionist conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-
Karabakh. Contrary to a wide-spread notion, these conflicts are not ‘frozen’. Their
settlement is. A better analogy of that of a frozen river: the ice on the surface may
be apparently immobile, but, underneath it, currents continue to run.3

It is not surprising that after the launch of the European neighbourhood policy
(ENP) in 2003, the EU has deployed an increasingly wide array of foreign policy
instruments aimed at influencing conflict resolution patterns in these conflict areas.
From the appointment of EU Special Representatives, the use of sanctions, and
the deployment of EU missions, the EU has been trying to play a bigger role in
post-Soviet conflicts. But the growing list of EU foreign policy actions is bal-
anced by a similar list of potential EU actions that were considered but failed
to materialize: on possible deployment of EU peacekeepers in Moldova and
Azerbaijan. Outstandingly, the EU could not do virtually anything in the diplo-
matic, security, or economic realm to contribute to conflict resolution in Nagorno-
Karabakh. Despite a fast-growing European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and
high-level declaratory commitment to a strong EU engagement in the neighbour-
hood, the level of EU engagement in conflict resolution in Moldova and the South
Caucasus does not stand out and sometimes even pales compared to EU com-
mitment to conflict resolution in sub-Saharan Africa, Indonesia, and the Greater
Middle-East, let alone the Balkans. The post-Soviet secessionist conflicts are close
enough to the EU to make it an interested actor, but far enough for them to become
an EU priority.

What is really puzzling in the politics of EU role in crisis management is the
dynamics between EU involvement and non-involvement, increased activism, and
sudden apathy. EU inaction or decisions not to intervene are fundamental char-
acteristics of the EU as a foreign policy actor; they have an untapped analytical
potential, yet they remain under-researched and under theorized. Hence the focus
of this article is on the dynamics of EU intervention and non-intervention in the
resolution of the secessionist conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood: Transnistria
in Moldova, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia in Georgia and the conflict between

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Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. I start by questioning the main determinants driving EU involvement or lack of it in conflict resolution processes: Why and under what conditions does the EU decide to get involved in conflict resolution? What determines the scope and form of EU involvement in conflict resolution efforts? In a conflict-prone world and competing security priorities, what determines EU involvement in particular conflicts? Given the global ambitions of EU foreign policy, why does the EU choose to get involved in some, but not other conflicts? Once a decision to intervene is taken, what defines the type of EU intervention into the conflict? Similarly important for the understanding of the EU is to answer the reverse questions: Why and under what conditions does the EU choose not to get involved in conflicts? Obviously, in real life the dilemma is not between full-scale involvement and or clear-cut lack of it, but rather of various degrees of reluctant involvement.

II The Literature

Despite the fact that EU foreign policy is one of the most popular topics in EU studies, it remains almost chronically under theorized. This is all the more so when it comes to analyzing EU involvement in conflict resolution. To begin with, most of the existing literature on the EU and conflict resolution is predominantly empirical. A number of authors use midrange concepts in trying to conceptualize EU roles in conflicts resolution but fall short of advancing an integrated theoretical framework in which EU involvement in conflicts could be understood.

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Second, with a few notable exceptions, most of the existing publications on EU and conflict resolution are single-area case studies. Such case studies are rich in empirical facts on the way the EU works, the policy instruments it uses, and the impact its actions have. However rich, such single-case studies do not allow for a comparative analysis of EU actions across various cases, thereby limiting the opportunities for valid generalizations across cases. There is an emerging literature comparing two or more cases of EU involvement, but they are also predominantly empirical or focus on specific EU policy instruments (such as civilian crisis management, or EU special representatives) across a number of conflicts.

Third, most of the literature theorizing EU and conflict resolution concern states were or are (potential) candidate states for EU membership: Cyprus, Central and Eastern Europe, Turkey and the Western Balkans. In all these cases, the EU has used its most potent external policy instrument so far: membership conditionality, supported by enormous amounts of funding into promoting conflict resolution, and broader political and economic reforms. These conditions are unlikely to be replicated in other conflict areas. The EU policy toward secessionist conflicts in EU Member States or candidate countries is a *sui generis* phenomenon. Existing studies on these aspects of EU and conflict resolution limit our capacity to understand what drives the EU in conflict resolution outside enlargement countries (and eventually on a global scale) and how EU foreign policy differs from enlargement policy.

But the most important limitation in virtually all the existing research on EU and conflict resolution is that much of it selects heavily on the dependent variable, as analysts focus almost entirely on conflicts where EU involvement already occurs. EU decisions to intervene in certain conflicts can be explained through

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6 Coppieters et al., *supra* n. 5; N. Tocci, *The EU and Conflict Resolution* (New York: Routledge, 2007).


a plethora of reasons such as humanitarian concerns (Sudan, DR Congo), geopolitics (Western Balkans, Moldova, the Middle East), commitment to alliance with the US (Iraq, Afghanistan), and external pressures and expectations for action (Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Chad, DR Congo, Moldova, Georgia). However, only few studies seek to explain why the EU chooses non-action in some cases.\textsuperscript{10} Virtually none of these explore non-events, that is, cases where the EU chose not to intervene. This creates a significant selection bias. What the EU does not do, is as important for understanding the EU as its actions. By studying only the impact of the EU on conflict settlements patterns important questions are missed, such as: Why and under what conditions does the EU decide to get involved in certain conflicts? What makes the EU choose not to intervene? Once a decision to intervene is taken, what determines the type of EU intervention into the conflict?

As I argue in this article decisions about non-involvement are as important and revealing about the nature of the EU as a foreign policy actor as the decisions to intervene. Therefore one should take a step back and study not just the results of EU interventions in conflict settlement processes but the very decisions to intervene, which too often are taken as given in existing research. By problematising the decision to intervene (or not) and the way the EU proceeds with that, one can advance further the existing understanding of the way the EU gets involved in conflict resolution worldwide.

III EU Involvement in Post-Soviet Conflicts

In the last few years there has been a pattern of increasing EU interest toward separatist conflicts in the former Soviet Union. The EU is not necessarily a central actor in conflict resolution process, but it has still developed an increasing profile in the conflict settlement efforts. Its involvement is highest in Transnistria and virtually inexistent in Nagorno-Karabakh, with Abkhazia and South Ossetia being in between. Looking at these four conflicts is a good way to start exploring not only EU involvement but also non-involvement in issues related to conflict resolution.

1. EU Policies on Transnistria

The conflict around Transnistria, a secessionist region in Moldova, has seen the greatest level of EU involvement in conflict settlement efforts in the post-Soviet space. Moldova has been a very active demandeur for a greater EU role in conflict settlement efforts for a number of years. Moldova has consistently requested EU support for the transformation of the Russian-dominated peace keeping format into

an international one and in the efforts to stop smuggling on the Transnistrian-controlled section of the Moldova-Ukraine border, which was a key sustaining factor for the secessionist authorities of Transnistria. Partly responding to these demands from 2002 the EU has deployed a growing range of foreign policy tools to help advance conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{11} To streamline its diplomatic efforts the EU appointed an EU Special Representative and got involved in conflict settlement negotiations as part of the 5 + 2 conflict settlement format in 2005. The same year the EU launched an EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM). EUBAM numbers some 120 EU border and customs experts monitoring the border between Moldova and Ukraine, with a special focus on the section of this border controlled by the secessionist region of Transnistria. The launch of EUBAM in 2005 was only possible because the post-Orange revolution administration in Ukraine was much more open to cooperation with the EU on Transnistria than Kuchma-led administration. Thus the launch of EUBAM was owed to a window of opportunity opened by Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, more than anything else.

The EU involvement is double-edged. First, the EU puts pressure on Transnistria to reduce the benefits of the secessionist status quo. In 2003 it introduced a travel ban against seventeen Transnistrian leaders. The deployment of EUBAM in the region significantly reduced smuggling opportunities around Transnistria.\textsuperscript{12} The secessionist authorities of Transnistria have ceased to receive substantial incomes from smuggling and trafficking activities, which was a key sustaining factor before 2005. This made the status quo less attractive and, more than ever before, exacerbated intraelite tensions in the region. Moreover, in 2006 the EU pressured Ukraine not to accept Transnistrian exports without Moldovan customs stamps. This forced more than 400 Transnistrian companies – virtually all the exporters from Transnistria – to register with the Moldovan government. This increased their dependence on the Moldovan government and the EU, not only contributing indirectly to a reintegration of Transnistrian businesses into the Moldovan economy but also making this economically attractive.\textsuperscript{13}

Second, the EU has supported Moldova’s Europeanization, in order to make it more attractive to the inhabitants of Transnistria. The EU offered Moldova a visa facilitation agreement entered into force in early 2008, made Moldova the second biggest recipient of EU assistance in the European neighbourhood (after Palestine), and promised a new association agreement between the EU and Moldova to replace the outdated Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Most importantly the EU liberalized trade with Moldova under the so-called generalized system of preferences plus and then extended autonomous trade preferences (a regime applied only to Moldova and the Western Balkans). The results of these measures can have

\textsuperscript{11} M. Vahl, ‘Europeanisation of the Transnistrian Conflict’, CEPS Policy Brief (Brussels, 2005); Popescu, supra n. 4.

\textsuperscript{12} Barbe & Kienzle, supra n. 5.

\textsuperscript{13} See infra.
far-reaching consequences. In November 2007 Transnistrian businessmen asked the EU Special Representative on Moldova to make it possible for them to benefit from visa facilitation to the EU as Moldovan citizens. Due to trade facilitation and registration of companies in Moldova, Transnistrian exports to the EU rose by 59% in 2006–2008. The global economic crisis drastically hit Transnistrian exports but also increased even more Transnistria’s dependence on the EU market. For most of 2009 some 60% of Transnistrian exports went to the EU (the rest to Ukraine and Russia), making the Transnistria the most economically dependent on the EU post-Soviet entity – secessionist or not. Should the EU move towards a visa-free regime with Moldova, this might prove the single biggest incentive for Transnistrians to seek reunification with Moldova.

But the EU has also been hesitant in its involvement. EUBAM might seem like a substantial mission, but 120 persons have to monitor 1200 km of the Moldova-Ukraine border. Just to compare, the EU border assistance mission in Rafah (Palestine) had seventy persons in only one Border-Crossing point until its operations were suspended in June 2007.

More importantly the EU failed twice to follow through discussions on EU peacekeeping involvement in Moldova. In 2003 the Dutch OSCE Chairmanship-in-office proposed the deployment of an OSCE peace support operation in Moldova, which would be conducted by the EU as the lead organization (with possible Russian and Ukrainian contributions). However, the Russian foreign ministry issued a statement in July 2003 explicitly opposing any change in the Russian-dominated peacekeeping format in Transnistria. Talks of EU peacekeeping in Moldova immediately faded after Russia opposed it.

A second episode of the EU failing to pursue the idea of a peacekeeping contribution in Moldova happened in 2006. The then EUSR Moldova Adriaan Jacobovits de Szeged started to promote inside the EU the idea of changing the peacekeeping format in Transnistria, whereby the EU would press Russia to accept a joint EU-Russia operation in Moldova, instead of the existing Russia-led operation. But a significant number of EU Member States opposed the initiative. There were two main reasons for that. One was the lack of a formal conflict settlement between the conflict parties in Moldova. Sending EU peacekeepers to Moldova without a conflict settlement agreement could have locked EU forces for many years in a conflict whose settlement has been frozen for over a decade. The EU would have no

17 It is worth noting that it was also Jacobovits de Szeged who promoted the same idea as a Dutch diplomat in 2003.
exit strategy in such a case and did not want to commit to an open-ended process, which could not be a success. It has been argued elsewhere that EU peacekeeping is indeed dominated by a desire for exit strategies and departure deadlines, and Moldova’s case only confirmed that.

But these reasons could not explain the outright refusal of some EU Member States to even discuss contingency planning for EU involvement in case a settlement would be achieved.

Another reason was the concern of a number of Russia-friendly EU Member States that such an EU initiative would complicate EU-Russia relations, since it was almost certain to provoke Russian irritation, especially after Russia rejected any possibility of EU involvement in peacekeeping earlier in 2003. The divisions in the EU highlighted very clearly the importance of the second reason. In 2006 EU planning for a peace support operation to Moldova was supported by eleven states: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Romania (not yet a Member State in 2006, but already present at all EU meetings and working groups as a state that signed an accession agreement). This group of states represented all Central and East European EU Member States (except Slovakia) and the old EU States, which have been rather critical of Russia’s assertive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. Against operational planning for EU peacekeeping in Moldova were nine states: Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Slovakia. These states were the most Russia-friendly states in the EU (Germany, Finland, Slovakia, Greece) or states that were sceptical of any significant EU involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood for fear of diverting limited EU foreign policy resources from the Southern neighbourhood of the EU (Portugal, Spain) or states that had both of these reasons (France, Italy, Cyprus). The fact that Germany and France were against also made the EU High Representative Javier Solana join the opposition to a peacekeeping operation in Moldova, interestingly enough putting EUSR Jacobovits at odds not only with some of his principals (the Member States) but also with his direct boss – the EU High Representative for CFSP.

Paradoxically, the EU was readier to send peacekeepers to Moldova in 2003 (when no EU state was openly against) than in 2006. In 2003 the EU plans to send peacekeepers to Moldova failed in the face of Russian opposition, while in 2006 they failed due to internal opposition in the EU. And all this despite the 2004 EU enlargement to the East, the much greater EU involvement in conflict resolution in Transnistria and the launch of the ENP in 2003. This showed that despite a strong EU interest on the ground in advancing conflict resolution in Moldova, many, though not all, Member States considered relations with Russia

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20 Interviews in Brussels with EU Member States officials in Oct. and Nov. 2007.
more important. Still the EU has been very active in those niches of the conflict settlement process where cooperation with Russia can been avoided: strengthening border controls, applying pressures and offering incentives to Transnistrian businesses, and strengthening the Moldovan state. This working on the ‘low politics’ of conflict resolution has made the EU increasingly influential on the economic, social aspects, and soft security dimensions of the Transnistrian conflict.

2. EU Policies on Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Before the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, the level of EU involvement in conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been more modest than in Transnistria. After the 2003 Rose Revolution the Georgian government led by president Mikheil Saakashvili engaged on an ambitious reform agenda that aimed at integration into NATO and the EU as well as the resolution of the secessionist conflicts. As part of these efforts Georgia has been actively seeking greater EU and US support for its efforts to reunify the country.

In response to persistent Georgian demands for greater EU intervention, since early 2004, the EU attempted to play a bigger role in Georgia’s conflicts with the EU, but it had many false starts. Probably one of the most telling characteristics of the EU approach to Georgia and its conflicts is not what the EU did but what it failed to do. At the end of 2004 Russia vetoed the continuation of the OSCE Border Monitoring Operation (BMO) in Georgia, which was monitoring the Russian-Georgian border. Georgia invited the EU to take over the terminated OSCE BMO and conduct a similar operation under the EU flag starting with 2005.

Taking over the OSCE BMO was quite feasible for the EU to do technically, but not politically, since this would have been seen as an affront to Russia. After Russia’s high-profile termination of the mission, few Member States were ready for a public affront to Russia. The failure to take over the OSCE border mission exposed clear-cut divisions within the EU. On the one hand there was a group of EU Member States that were in favour of greater EU involvement in Georgia, predominantly most of the new EU Member States, especially the Baltic States, pharmacy.

24 Interview with a former member of EUSR border support team, Brussels, June 2006.
Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands, Ireland, and a few other Member States. And a group of ‘brakemen’ – France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Italy, Austria, and a few others – acting like that either for fear of irritating Russia or for fear that the EU will divert its attention from the Southern neighbourhood. As one EU diplomat explained: ‘Georgia is the most obvious case where the intra-EU competition for political attention and resources between Southern versus Eastern neighbourhood is seen.’

In the end, having being asked by Georgia to take over a 150-person strong border mission, the EU deployed a three-person team of advisors on border issues who became known as the EUSR Border Support Team. Even though the team was later extended to twelve persons, the EU has tried to keep it as low profile as possible. Despite the fact the EUSR Border Support Team is comparable in size to some ESDP missions, such as EUJUST THEMIS in Georgia, EUPOL COPPS in Palestine (at early stages), or EUJUST Lex Iraq, it was suggestive that the ‘team’ was not a ‘mission’ and did not have the publicity (such as website, press-conferences or visits by High representative Solana) as most EU ESDP endeavours have.

Another way of EU involvement in conflict resolution issues was by offering financial assistance for postconflict rehabilitation and humanitarian needs. The European Commission spent some EUR 25 million for projects in Abkhazia and EUR 8 million in South Ossetia between 1997 and 2006. From 2006 the EU became the largest international donor to both regions. Most of these funds went into technical and humanitarian assistance projects such as infrastructure rehabilitation, the building of schools, or support for demining activities. Despite its technical nature, such assistance had political objectives such as decreasing the (financial) dependence of the secessionist entities on Russia, creating links between the secessionists and Tbilisi in order to promote reconciliation, and promoting knowledge about Europe and its values.

In any case the EU’s bet on financial assistance as a tool for future political influence was limited by realities on the ground. Financial assistance was less important for the region than ever before. An increasingly rich Russia offered the secessionist regions substantial financial, economic, and military support. Russia finances infrastructure projects (roads, electricity grids, gas pipelines, and railway rehabilitation), while the organization of the Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, in 2014, just a few kilometres from Abkhazia, provides Abkhazia with substantial

26 Interview with an EU official, Jan. 2008, Brussels.
30 Interview with an EU official, Brussels, 12 Jun. 2006.
business opportunities, reducing the potential political impact of EU financial assistance. Similarly, Georgia’s financial commitment to the rehabilitation of the parts of South Ossetia it controlled until August 2008 was higher.\textsuperscript{31}

Second, since 2003 the EU appointed an EU Special Representative for South Caucasus (covering the conflicts in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh). The first EUSR Heikki Talvitie kept a generally low profile, while Peter Semneby, the second EUSR appointed in 2006 has been more active in trying to make the EU a more visible actor. However, EU Member States’ involvement in conflict resolution formats limited EU’s ability to seek a greater role in Abkhazia where Germany, France and the United Kingdom were involved as part of an UN-led framework. As an EU official explained ‘the fact that some Member States were involved in conflict resolution since the 1990s means that they have rather established policies in the region. This narrows EU’s corridor for action’.\textsuperscript{32}

Third, until the August 2008 war EU institutions have been rather proactive in their attempts to enlarge the scope of EU action in a region where many EU Member States were reluctant to get involved, and Russia strongly opposes greater EU contribution to conflict resolution. In January 2007 the EU Council and the European Commission have sent a joint fact-finding mission to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some of the ideas the EU institutions wanted to promote in the aftermath of the mission was to offer greater support and financing for a civil society and youth support in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; support for institution building in Georgia’s customs service; colocate an EU expert with the Georgian ministry of conflict resolution, in charge of conflict settlement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and open European Information Centres in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. More controversially the EU proposed to colocate one EU police liaison officer with UNOMIG (the UN mission involved in conflict settlement in Abkhazia) and another with the OSCE, which in involved in South Ossetia, to start developing a dialogue with the secessionist entities on civilian aspects of peacekeeping in the conflict regions and promote joint police training between Georgia and the secessionist authorities.\textsuperscript{33}

Ultimately the most controversial idea was the extension of the mandate of the EUSR Border Support Team (and the addition of two additional experts) to make it possible to start developing a dialogue with the secessionist authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on border management issues. Given the de facto integration of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia entities into the economic and

\textsuperscript{31} Interviews with officials from the Georgian government in Tbilisi, 5–9 Apr. 2008; Dmitri Sanakoev, the head of pro-Georgian Administration of South Ossetia, Kurta, South Ossetia, 9 Apr. 2009; Murat Dzhoev, de facto (secessionist) minister of foreign affairs of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, 9 Apr. 2008; and OSCE officials in Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, 8 Apr. 2008.

\textsuperscript{32} Interview with an EU official, Berlin, 4 Nov. 2007.

\textsuperscript{33} Interviews with EU officials and EU Member States diplomats, Brussels, May 2007.
political space of the Russian federation, EU’s gradual involvement into border management was rather intrusive, as it could start internationalising some of the shadier aspects of cooperation between Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Russia. Such an explicit attempt by the EU institutions to increase their profile and influence in the conflict regions had a number of objectives: to gain a foothold in conflict settlement efforts and decrease the dependence of the secessionist regions on Russia. However, the proposal was blocked in the EU for over a year due to a Greek veto. The apparent explanation was that greater EU involvement in border management issues in Abkhazia and South Ossetia was almost certain to irritate Russia. As one senior Member State official said in an interview: ‘every possible EU step in the eastern neighbourhood that might even theoretically upset the Russians is opposed by Greece’. Ultimately in early 2008, Greece accepted the extension of the EUSR mandate but did not accept the deployment of two additional EU experts to deal with border issues in the two conflict zones.

The Greek veto exposed a phenomenon inside the EU that can be called carousel foot dragging. Many states are concerned that an EU, which is too proactive in the eastern neighbourhood, would irritate Russia or would divert EU foreign policy resources from other priorities. But none of these EU Member States wants to be perceived as systematically obstructionist, since no state wishes to be seen as playing only a negative game. It is not considered appropriate to be seen as a ‘bad European’, and consistent obstruction can lead to isolation of a Member State or even retaliation when other states can respond by vetoing the obstructionist’s policy priorities. Consequently, the bigger group of Russia-friendly EU Member States speak in turns. As one EU Member State official explained: ‘When we discuss post-Soviet affairs, you can often see EU countries speaking up against a too assertive EU. They do so in turns. Today it is Greece, tomorrow it is Germany.’ Moreover, such states often hide behind each other’s backs. This happens on many foreign policy issues, such as the Spanish-Moroccan conflict over the Perejil islands when many Member States unwilling to be involved in such a conflict were hiding behind France’s back. Given that any single EU Member State has veto on foreign policy it is relatively easy to block EU foreign policy initiatives. But carousel foot dragging makes it even easier, because it allows delaying and limiting

36 Interview with EU Member State official in Brussels, 5 Oct. 2007.
37 R. Van Schendelen, Machiavelli in Brussels. The Art of Lobbying the EU (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 103.
38 Interview with an EU Member State official, Brussels, May 2008.
39 Monar, supra n. 4, 252.
greater EU involvement role in conflict resolution without one EU country being seen as overtly obstructionist.

Years of policy of low-profile EU intervention in conflict resolution coupled with low-profile foot dragging have been disrupted on 8 August 2008 when an unsuccessful Georgian attempt to take over South Ossetia by force sparked a five-day war between Russia and Georgia.\(^40\) The EU, represented by Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of France holding the rotating chair of the EU, achieved to have mediated a ceasefire. Subsequently, the EU became involved in stabilizing Georgia by deploying an almost 300 strong EU Monitoring Mission on unarmed military observers and participation as a mediator in the ‘Geneva talks’ between Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

Both these actions revealed a few interesting patterns of EU as a conflict resolution actor. To begin with, even before the dust settled in Georgia and the EU was discussing possible ways to launch a peace support operation in Georgia, the option of a military peacekeeping operation was practically excluded, since it was clear that most EU Member States would not support it. The EU settled for a civilian mission. Operationally, it was a success. The EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia has been one of the fastest ever deployed EU operations.

However, the problem with a civilian mission is that its impact on the stabilization of the situation on the ground is purely psychological. After the war, I have been in the no man’s land between Georgian and Russian/South Ossetian forces just a few hundred metres from the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali and have not witnessed any physical barrier that could even theoretically prevent an escalation of hostilities at some point in the future.\(^41\) The EU civilian observers come to visit the Georgian military outposts once or twice a day, but their only effect in stabilizing the situation is to psychologically and politically dissuade the parties from any potential hostilities.\(^42\) But this is no long-term guarantee of peace. Moreover, just a few months after the launch of the mission, simmering pressures in the EU started to build for the termination of the mission.\(^43\) The mandate of the mission was eventually extended, but the risk that the EU will sooner rather than when the situation fully stabilized remains.

Moreover, in a highly unorthodox manner the EU appointed a second EU Special representative in charge of conflict resolution in Georgia. In September 2008, a French diplomat Pierre Morel (EUSR for Central Asia) as was appointed EUSR for the crisis in Georgia (while retaining his position on Central Asia). This clearly duplicated the activities of Peter Semneby who remained EUSR for South

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\(^{40}\) S. Cornell (ed.), *The Guns of August: Russia’s War in Georgia* (Mc Sharpe, 2009).


\(^{42}\) Interview with special forces of the Georgian Ministry of Interior, Nikozi and Ergneti, Georgia, March 2009.

\(^{43}\) Interviews with EU Member States officials, Brussels, February 2009.
Caucasus. Pierre Morel represented the EU in the Geneva talks. The explanation was that Georgia became too ‘explosive’ an issue for EU-Russia relations for the big EU Member States, primarily France and Germany not to be in full control of the dossier. Thus, France, holding the EU presidency promoted Pierre Morel to be the main diplomatic interlocutor for the conflict resolution talks in Georgia. At the same time, Peter Semneby who is Swedish (and Sweden was very vocally critical of the Russian military intervention in Georgia) was sidelined from the policy process by states like France, Germany, Italy, as well as by High Representative Solana and the EU Council secretariat.\(^{44}\)

Throughout the years, EU institutions have been trying to play a greater role in conflict resolution efforts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia through a number of ways, but many of these measures have been blocked by EU Member States for fear of irritating Russia, which is very involved politically and militarily in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Because Russia was much more sensitive about the EU role in Georgia than in Moldova, it was easier for the EU to be more active in Moldova than in Georgia. However, the August 2008 provided a huge shock to the European security system (and EU-Russia relations) which forced the EU into action. As a result the EU became a central conflict resolution as the main party that had brokered the ceasefire, spearheaded negotiations between the conflict parties and deployed a substantial peace support operation on the ground (Table 1).

\(^{44}\) Interviews with EU and EU Member States officials in Brussels, December 2008 and February, March and May 2009.

\(^{45}\) EUBAM in Ukraine and Moldova is not an ESDP mission but a Commission-led mission.

### Table 1. EU Actions on the Post-Soviet Conflicts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EU Actions on the Secessionist Regions</th>
<th>Transnistria</th>
<th>Abkhazia</th>
<th>South Ossetia</th>
<th>Nagorno-Karabakh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in negotiations</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointment of EU Special Representatives (for Moldova and South Caucasus)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funds for the rehabilitation of conflict zones</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for democracy and civil society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening the metropolitan states</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESDP/crisis management missions(^{45})</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted sanctions (travel restrictions)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic pressures on the secessionists</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeking to modify conflict settlement formats</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. EU Policy toward Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh could easily qualify as a first candidate for priority EU involvement in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. It is the only post-Soviet conflict where Russia is not a peacekeeper, is least involved in general, and therefore is less likely to oppose a greater EU role. At the same time Nagorno-Karabakh is the most serious obstacle to regional stability and cooperation since all regional projects are blocked by the state of de jure war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (which is supported by Armenia). Moreover, Azerbaijan has an energy partnership with the EU, is an oil and gas producing country, and is the only transit route for Caspian energy resources circumventing Russia or Iran. It is also the main source of oil for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the only guaranteed supplier of gas for the Nabucco gas pipeline, a priority energy project of the EU.

Despite that, Nagorno-Karabakh is also the conflict in which the EU is least involved and its position is most ambiguous. Unlike in the other post-Soviet conflicts, the EU is not involved in the rehabilitation of the conflict zone around Nagorno-Karabakh; it does not apply neither pressure nor incentives to push the conflict resolution process; it does not have a policy of strengthening neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan or Nagorno-Karabakh itself. In other words the EU has little, if any, policy toward the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

EU’s ambiguity is quite clear in the political realm. As one EU official explained: ‘Armenia’s occupation of a large part of Azerbaijan’s territory resulted from a military invasion and is clearly a violation of international law. But the EU never stated this publicly.’ For example, after the EU accepted a reference to Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity in the EU-Azerbaijan ENP Action Plan, it also accepted recognition of the principle of ‘self-determination’ of peoples in the EU-Armenia ENP Action Plan. Such an approach contrasted significantly with EU’s explicit and unambiguous support for Moldova and Georgia’s territorial integrity expressed on numerous occasions through unambiguous language. The EU had stakes in relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and avoided taking sides in the dispute. Because the contradictions between Armenia and Azerbaijan are so wide, the EU remained paralysed in the middle without having a clear-cut approach.

Such a policy of ambiguity significantly undermined trust in the EU inside Azerbaijan. As one Azeri official claimed:

During the negotiations on the action plan, Azerbaijan witnessed for the first time that the EU sees Nagorno-Karabakh differently from the conflicts in

46 Interview with an EU official, Brussels, April 2008.
Moldova and Georgia. In those countries the EU unambiguously supports their territorial integrity, while here in Azerbaijan EU claims that it supports ours, but at the same time says it does not preclude any status for the region.\(^49\)

Azerbaijan’s reluctance to see a greater EU role was clearly manifested in June 2007 when the Azeri foreign minister called off a visit by the Peter Semneby, the EU Special Representative for South Caucasus, to Nagorno-Karabakh. In more than three years as EU Special Representative Peter Semneby was not allowed by Azerbaijan to travel to Nagorno-Karabakh (via Armenia, which is the only possible logistical way to do it). The fact that most of the EU Member States supported the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo increased even further Azerbaijan’s scepticism toward a potential EU role in conflict settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh. As one Azeri diplomat argued: ‘We saw how Serbia let NATO peacekeepers into Kosovo in 1999 and later the same peacekeepers were used to separate Kosovo from Serbia. This makes us look differently at the issue of international peacekeepers.’\(^50\)

Armenia is also quite prudent in demanding a greater EU role in conflict resolution. Armenia and Azerbaijan have faced ‘mirror dilemmas’ regarding a possible EU involvement in the conflict resolution efforts. Azerbaijan dislikes the status quo around the conflict and the existing conflict settlement format called the OSCE Minsk Group (with the US, Russia, and France as co-mediators). Theoretically this should make Azerbaijan more supportive of an assertive EU policy seeking to offset the status quo through involvement in the OSCE Minsk Group and more projects in the conflict area. At the same time Azerbaijan fears that greater involvement of the EU in the conflict area would legitimize the secessionist authorities and erode the blockade around Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia’s ambiguity about the EU stemmed from an inverse dilemma. Armenia would like the EU to play a bigger role in the conflict resolution efforts if that helps it erode the blockade and confers greater legitimacy to the authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh, but on the other hand it is quite contempt with the OSCE Minsk Group and the status quo around the conflict, so it is very careful not to offset it.

Such ambivalence on the part of the conflict parties has drastically limited the scope for possible EU involvement in the rehabilitation of the conflict areas the way it has done in Georgia or Moldova’s conflicts. One EU diplomat in Baku explained: ‘The EU is more enthusiastic with playing a role in Transnistria. But Nagorno-Karabakh is too difficult. And unlike Georgia or Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan did not force the issue on the agenda.’\(^51\) The attitude was that ‘no one has allowed us to do anything in Nagorno-Karabakh… we would do something if

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\(^{49}\) Interview with Azeri official, Baku, 4 Apr. 2008.

\(^{50}\) Interview with an Azeri diplomat, Baku, 3 Apr. 2008.

\(^{51}\) Interview with an EU Member State diplomat, Baku, 3 Apr. 2008.
we were asked by the sides’. Such an approach on the part of the EU has been consistent with the claim that the ENP is a demand-driven policy, but it also went against the EU’s professed interest in stabilizing its neighbourhood. The EU’s lack of involvement in the conflict settlement process in Nagorno-Karabakh has also been limited by French opposition to seeing a greater EU role. France, which is a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, has been against a possible EU role in conflict mediation.

On Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU is in fact waiting for a peace that might never come. While the EU has done little to increase its contribution to the conflict settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh, it has declared its readiness to have a role in case the conflict is solved. In early 2006, there have been intra-EU discussions and some preparations for a possible EU peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh when Azerbaijan and Armenia were allegedly close to a deal on the settlement of the conflict. Peter Semneby, the EUSR South Caucasus stated in May 2006 that the EU ‘will be expected to make a major contribution when a solution is found, and we are looking into the possibilities we have, both in terms of post-conflict rehabilitation and also – if the parties should so desire – in terms of contributing peacekeepers. And possibly even leading a peacekeeping operation’. The failure of the talks meant that the EU did not consider any other further serious involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh. In other words the EU was waiting for peace to act rather than act to promote peace.

IV What Drives EU Involvement in Conflict Resolution?

The record of EU involvement and non-involvement in conflict resolution in the South Caucasus and Moldova suggest a number of things about the EU’s modus operandi in conflicts. To begin with, EU involvement in conflict resolution is externally driven, that is, EU action is determined by external constraints or opportunities more than by strategic design or EU interests.

First, the most substantial EU interventions in conflict resolution in the Eastern neighbourhood came after two big external shocks to the conflicts. First came the Orange Revolution, which opened the way for the EU to launch its border assistance operation in Moldova. Second came the August 2008 war which forced the EU to deploy a monitoring mission in order to stabilize the only ‘hot’ military conflict in Europe in over a decade. Such outbursts of EU activism and intervention

54 Ibid.
coincided with external shocks or windows of opportunity created by events external to the EU, rather than a calculated, gradual or ever-increasing process of greater EU intervention in conflict resolution or conflict prevention in Eastern Europe.

Even in more peaceful times, the EU tended to react to ‘local demand’ and ‘local opposition’ to EU actions in conflict zones more than its strategic interests. The EU is more involved in the conflicts in Moldova and Georgia partly because these states have been persistent demandeurs of EU involvement in the conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The fact that neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia have been asking for a greater EU role in Nagorno-Karabakh explains EU’s lack of involvement in this conflict, even though it is Nagorno-Karabakh that poses the greatest security challenges to EU interests in the South Caucasus.  

A second observation is that the EU is an arena that is very open to external influences, making it possible for external actors to affect EU decision-making by raising the controversiality of issues, lobbying EU Member States or business groups to promote a specific position. Non-EU Member States can initiate pressures for action or inaction via EU Member States. For example, Georgia has a group of friends inside the EU (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria) which lobby the EU to pursue more active policies on Georgia. Romania and Lithuania are constant lobbyist for greater EU support for Moldova. But such support is often insufficient, because blocking is almost always easier than pushing for EU actions. This makes it relatively easy for non-EU Member States to slow down the EU decision-making machinery on EU involvement in conflict resolution. For example, Russia lobbies friendly EU Member States, such as Greece or Cyprus, to prevent greater EU engagement with the post-Soviet states. This obviously competes with pressures to act from other EU Member States and Moldova and Georgia as demandeurs.

Caught in between cross-pressures for action versus inaction EU decisions tend to be biased in favour of those non-EU partners that are more important for crucial EU Member States. Because of high-level disputes between Russia and Georgia, the policy of EU involvement in conflict resolution in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is seen by most EU Member States through the prism of their relations with Russia. Hence, many Member States have been reluctant to play a bigger role in Georgia’s conflicts with Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, for fear of irritating Russia. This observation seems to apply to other conflict areas as well. If Morocco opposes

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56 At a broader scale lack of local demand and even opposition to EU involvement in conflict resolution is a possible explanation for EU’s non-involvement in the conflicts over Western Sahara or the Kurdish areas in Turkey. Certainly the EU has an interest to contribute to conflict resolution in all these conflicts, but it is more likely to get involved in those conflict areas where there is a strong local demand for EU actions.


a greater EU role in pushing for a solution over Western Sahara, the EU has little else than not do anything or risk worsening relations with Morocco.  

But external lobbying does not paralyse entirely the EU. When the EU can have a decisive impact on conflict resolution patterns it can get involved even in the face of the scepticism of a minority of EU Member States. Between 2003 and 2008 the EU got substantially involved in conflict resolution in Moldova, even against Russian opposition, because it perceived that its impact could have a decisive impact on the settlement process. This was possible because the success of the EU actions were not dependant on cooperation with Russia, but on cooperation with Ukraine, which borders Transnistria. Similarly, in Georgia, the preference of many EU Member States is not to do anything. But given that the EU’s consensual and problem solving nature, EU States preferred on a number of occasions to resolve crises of contradictions by expanding mutual obligations. Hence, the slowly expanding EU activities related to border management in Georgia rather than lowest common denominator policies that would have resulted in a total lack of action on Georgia. When in 2005 the EU was invited to launch a large border monitoring mission to Georgia and a majority of Member States opposed, the outcome of negotiations in Brussels did not result in a total lack of action, but in the launch of a three-person EU border support team in Georgia, which expanded over time in personnel and mandate.

Third, EU institutions and EU Member States are success driven in their approach to involvement in conflict resolution. EU foreign policy is a project in the making that can hardly afford policy failures. As one EU Member State officials put it ‘The EU needs not just successes. It needs shining successes.’ This makes the EU more risk averse than most international foreign policy actors. The choice between the easier and the necessary is almost always in favour of the easier (certainly even limited civilian peacekeeping operations are not ‘easy’ *stricto sensu*, but they are ‘easier’ than substantial military peacekeeping operations for example). Transnistria, the least violent and the most ‘solvable’ conflict was clearly at the forefront of EU pre-occupations until the August 2008 war in Georgia. The EU has also steered clear of Nagorno-Karabakh, a conflict too difficult to have an impact but considered sending peacekeepers when a possible solution was in sight. The EU has also avoided the tough, but necessary, push to change the Russian-dominated peacekeeping operations in Georgia (before the August 2008 war) and Moldova that have long ago become part of the problem. And after the 2008 war in Georgia, the EU also avoided to push Russia for a full implementation of the Sarkozy-Medvedev ceasefire agreement presupposing the return to the pre-war status quo, breached by the opening of new Russian military bases in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, the EU chose to get involved in the less controversial aspects of conflict

60 Interview with an EU Member State official, Brussels, 14 May 2008.
resolution by providing rehabilitation assistance. The EU seems more likely to get involved in conflicts which are easier to solve or where it can have a bigger impact. Even when it deployed the EU Monitoring Mission to Georgia, it took only a few months for some EU Member States to start pressures to phase the mission out.

Fourth, EU institutions are more likely to get involved in conflict resolution processes where EU Member States have not been previously involved. Thus EU institutions are more pro-active in taking the EU into new foreign policy areas, thereby complementing national foreign policies rather than compete against national foreign policies of EU Member States in the European neighbourhood. In the cases of conflicts analysed in this article, EU Member States have been involved in conflict resolution processes in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh under the aegis of the UN and the OSCE, but not in Transnistria and South Ossetia. Thus the EU has often been more active in trying to get involved in conflict resolution in South Ossetia and Transnistria than in the other two conflicts.

V Conclusions

With the launch of the ENP, the EU has tried to play a bigger role in conflict resolution efforts in the eastern neighbourhood. The EU appointed EU Special Representatives on the South Caucasus and Moldova, launched an EU rule of law mission to Georgia and a border assistance mission to Moldova and Ukraine. It also supported reform of the border management system in Georgia. The EU also became the single biggest international donor to post-conflict rehabilitation efforts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; promised to rebuild infrastructure in Transnistria in case the conflict is solved; gave Transnistrian companies facilitated access to the EU market if they to register with the Moldovan government, while also putting pressure on the Transnistrian leadership.

But the list of failures is not less extensive. The EU has avoided any talks at all about a possible contribution to peacekeeping in Georgia. It also failed to take over the OSCE Border Monitoring Mission because key EU Member States were reluctant to challenge Russia over Georgia. The EU decision-making has also been blocked for over a year over the launch of minimal dialogue on border management between the EU and Abkhazia and South Ossetia because a single EU Member State vetoed such a proposal. It also failed to push at a political level for the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia to be able to enter Abkhazia and South Ossetia or for Russia to stick to the Sarkozy-Medvedev ceasefire agreement on return to the status quo ante. The EU also discussed twice a possible contribution to peacekeeping mission in Moldova but failed to put its political weight behind the advancement of this objective in the face of Russian opposition but also the scepticism of some Russia-friendly EU Member States. In fact, the EU seemed readier to embark on such a project in 2003 than in 2006 despite the launch of the ENP and a professed commitment to play a bigger role in the settlement of post-Soviet secessionist conflicts. On Nagorno-Karabakh the EU has virtually failed to undertake any
substantial diplomatic, financial or security effort to promote conflict resolution because neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan demanded it.

EU’s hesitant involvement in these conflict resolution processes suggested the extent to which the EU was driven by local conditions, that is demand or opposition to EU action, rather than a consistent promotion of EU priorities. The EU is less involved in Nagorno-Karabakh than in other conflicts partly because Georgia and Moldova have been much more active demandeurs for EU involvement than Azerbaijan was. At the same time the realization of EU policy priorities was deeply constrained by Russian opposition to EU involvement in these conflicts often transmitted into the EU decision-making process through vetoes and lobbying of Russia-friendly EU Member States. In all these instances of EU involvement local demand for EU action or Russian opposition to EU involvement in conflict resolution mattered more than the pursuit of EU’s declared objectives in the neighbourhood. The EU is also quite success dependent in its approach to conflict resolution in the Eastern neighbourhood. The choice between the easier and the necessary was most often in favour of the relatively easier, hence a predilection for working around the hard issues of conflict resolution. Given that the security situation in the South Caucasus has been consistently worsening while the Russian opposition to EU actions is growing, the EU might be becoming less, not more, ready to play a bigger role in the secessionist conflicts of the eastern neighbourhood.
AIMS
The aim of the Review is to consider the external posture of the European Union in its relations with the rest of the world. Therefore the Review will focus on the political, legal and economic aspects of the Union’s external relations. The Review will function as an interdisciplinary medium for the understanding and analysis of foreign affairs issues which are of relevance to the European Union and its Member States on the one hand and its international partners on the other. The Review will aim at meeting the needs of both the academic and the practitioner. In doing so the Review will provide a public forum for the discussion and development of European external policy interests and strategies, addressing issues from the points of view of political science and policy-making, law or economics. These issues should be discussed by authors drawn from around the world while maintaining a European focus.

EDITORIAL POLICY
The editors will consider for publication unsolicited manuscripts in English as well as commissioned articles. Authors should ensure that their contributions will be apparent also to readers outside their specific expertise. Articles may deal with general policy questions as well as with more specialized topics. Articles will be subjected to a review procedure, and manuscripts will be edited, if necessary, to improve the effectiveness of communication. It is intended to establish and maintain a high standard in order to attain international recognition.

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