

The Changing Role of the European Union in Conflict Resolution



International
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A new actor: an entry from the stage?

Many of the post-Soviet developing countries have not yet resolved the conflicts that had started in the early stages of the transition period. For the last decades the representatives of the conflict parties and negotiators have changed several times, the stage of military actions has been covered with the curtain of negotiation and diplomats have come to replace military commanders exhausted by war.

Still, the God of war would not have dozed simply accepting the sacrifices of black and azure gold and commissioning the artful Hermes to replace him, were not for the traditional players in the process of conflict resolution, namely the regional giants and heavyweights – Russia, the US, Turkey, Iran, China, NATO and EU. Each of them is unique, often contradicting and occasionally changeable, but in any process of conflict resolution they have always and everywhere acted out of their own vital interests.

Among them there is one the values of which seem to be accepted by all; one, the living standards, business rules and the political culture of which are an indicator for each and every one, one that instead of military power offers the power of its institutions and the economic power of which is capable of moving the political and economic center of gravity of any country.

The European Union is a new player, which perhaps unnoticeably, but quite steadily enters the stage of conflict resolution. Initially taking up the passive and secondary role of humanitarian aid provider, locally supporting the development of civil society and assisting business practices, the EU gradually enlarges its influence spheres and leverages in Moldova, Transdnestria, Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Keeping to the current political framework of conflict resolution, i.e. OSCE Minsk Group, UNOMIG and using its major influence instrument – the new European Neighborhood Policy – the EU gradually gains stronger and more central positions on the stage of conflict resolution.

Entering from behind the scenes, avoiding the painful issues of the conflict and acting as an atmosphere player who mostly acts around and not about the conflict issues, the EU regards conflict resolution in this region in the prospect of establishing sustainable peace. Without touching the wound, and instead trying to support the healthy tissues around it, Europe essentially regards the conflicting countries as the continuation of its own body. It does not hurry to intervene; it is reluctant and unable to cause pain to its own body, even if it's just the limbs, especially if this is a surgical intervention. The old man in his 50s, Europe, examines the previously unknown parts of its own body with the curiosity, revelation and admiration of a teenager, trying to understand their functions.

A reactive or a reflective role?

This approach of European institutions is actually easy to confuse with indecisiveness and inconsistency. Indeed, such a conclusion lies on the surface, when one just observes the external factors of the EU behavior in conflict resolution. On appearance the EU is just a reactive player. It seems that the EU does not put new ideas and approaches on the table and its actions are

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sometimes explained with the personal approaches and agendas of officials representing the EU in the conflict zone. Moreover, often each of the conflicting parties perceives European institutions in the context of hard power, trying to ally with an official or a whole section of this or that European organization.

Actually, this is the most fatal perception of the European player, which seems to push the EU into a reactive role, stagnation of ideas and confusion in perception of priorities. This means that the EU role is largely conditioned with the perception of the conflicting parties of the EU role and their expectations from the new player. Whereas the old man Europe seems to keep exploring phenomena and cultures that are new to him, weigh the new challenges and opportunities without drawing a clear distinction line between the peculiarities of these new “limbs”. Let’s confess, we also do not distinguish much between the middle and ring fingers, though these two are essentially very different.

This means that in order to make a good use of the opportunities granted by the process of Europeanization in conflict resolution, it is first necessary to review one’s own perceptions of the EU role, take the initiative and act deftly. Is it possible to give the European institutions a chance to gradually access the spheres and fields of conflicts, where these positions can slowly but surely become stronger and justify both their role and our perceptions? Quite probably.

Who decides on roles and the cast?

Alas, the conflicting parties measure their losses and victories with the losses and victories of the other, expecting the world to use the same measurement system, as well. However, the world has its own scales and weights. Europeanization is the key to the box which hides the desirable weight of our development and achievements; a familiar weight for the world actually. Europeanization contributes to the development of trust between the conflicting parties and establishment of a healthy environment for negotiations and a common value system for the societies. However, the process of Europeanization is conditioned with the logic of conflict resolution, as well as a strong will to refuse the use of hard power and to stay on the track of mutual understanding and compromise. Perhaps there is no impediment for the process of Europeanization that is more dangerous than the militarization of the societies, the sound and the fury of belligerent rhetoric and the horrible clatter of the arms. By refusing to address an unresolved conflict through the power of arms the conflicting parties weaken their own dependence on hard power players.

Do we understand though that through our approaches and orientations we either give power or take it away from one or the other player in the resolution process, thus defining the rules of the game and strengthening ourselves?

Eventually, sacrifices to the immortals are offered by the mortals and which immortals specifically, is decided by mortals. Whether consciously...?

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion “The Possible Role of the EU in Conflict Resolution”, which took place on June 19, 2008. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

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