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EU-Azerbaijan relations

European Parliament resolution of 15 March 2023 on EU-Azerbaijan relations (2021/2231(INI))

(C/2023/405)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950, ratified by Azerbaijan in 2002,
- having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,
- having regard to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 1984,
- having regard to the United Nations Security Council resolutions Nos. 822 of 30 April 1993, 853 of 29 July 1993, 874 of 14 October 1993, and 884 of 12 November 1993,
- having regard to the United Nations resolutions on the ongoing war in Ukraine, namely ES-11/1 and ES-11/2 of March 2022, ES-11/3 of April 2022 and ES-11/4 of October 2022,
- having regard to the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of 7 December 2021,
- having regard to the activities of the Co-Chairs of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group,
- having regard to its resolutions of 16 February 2006 on cultural heritage in Azerbaijan ⁽¹⁾, of 20 May 2021 on prisoners of war in the aftermath of the most recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan ⁽²⁾, of 17 February 2022 on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy — annual report 2021 ⁽³⁾, of 10 March 2022 on the destruction of cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh ⁽⁴⁾, of 8 June 2022 on security in the Eastern Partnership area and the role of the common security and defence policy ⁽⁵⁾ and of 19 January 2023 on the humanitarian consequences of the blockade in Nagorno-Karabakh ⁽⁶⁾,
- having regard to the Orders of the International Court of Justice of 22 February 2023 on the application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan and Azerbaijan v. Armenia),
- having regard to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement of 22 April 1996, between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Azerbaijan, of the other part ⁽⁷⁾,
- having regard to Recommendation No 1/2018 of the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council of 28 September 2018 on the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership Priorities ⁽⁸⁾,
- having regard to its recommendation of 4 July 2018 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR) on the negotiations on the EU-Azerbaijan Comprehensive Agreement ⁽⁹⁾,
- having regard to its recommendation of 15 November 2017 on the Eastern Partnership, in the run-up to the November 2017 Summit ⁽¹⁰⁾,

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 290 E, 29.11.2006, p. 421.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 15, 12.1.2022, p. 156.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 342, 6.9.2022, p. 148.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 198.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 493, 27.12.2022, p. 70.

⁽⁶⁾ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2023)0012.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ L 246, 17.9.1999, p. 3.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ L 265, 24.10.2018, p. 18.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 118, 8.4.2020, p. 158.

⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ C 356, 4.10.2018, p. 130.

- having regard to the joint communication from the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 18 March 2020 entitled 'Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience — an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all' (JOIN(2020)0007),
- having regard to the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council of 19 July 2022 and to the joint staff working document of 14 July 2022 entitled 'Cooperation Implementation Report on Azerbaijan' (SWD(2022)0197),
- having regard to the joint opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGL) of the Council of Europe on the Law on Media, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 131st plenary session on 17-18 June 2022,
- having regard to its resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation ⁽¹¹⁾,
- having regard to the statements of European Council President Charles Michel of 14 December 2021 and of 6 April 2022 and to his press statements of 22 May 2022, of 31 August 2022 following the trilateral meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and of 6 October 2022 following the quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel,
- having regard to the Declaration by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on behalf of the European Union of 19 November 2020 on Nagorno-Karabakh,
- having regard to the report of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe following her visit to Azerbaijan from 8 to 12 July 2019 ⁽¹²⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 17 January 2019 on Azerbaijan, notably the case of Mehman Huseynov ⁽¹³⁾ and to other resolutions on Azerbaijan, in particular those concerning the human rights situation and the rule of law,
- having regard to the Interim Resolution of the Council of Europe on the execution of the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, Mammadli group against Azerbaijan, of 22 September 2022,
- having regard to the report of the Independent Investigation Body on the allegations of corruption within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 15 April 2018,
- having regard to the ICJ Order on the Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (*Armenia v Azerbaijan*) of 7 December 2021,
- having regard to the reports of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance of the Council of Europe, in particular the 2016 country monitoring report on Azerbaijan,
- having regard to the report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) entitled 'Alleged violations of the rights of LGBTI people in the Southern Caucasus' ⁽¹⁴⁾,
- having regard to the opinion on Azerbaijan by the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities published on 4 February 2019,
- having regard to Freedom House's 2022 Freedom in the World report and its 2022 Nations in Transit report,
- having regard to the Commission's multi-annual indicative programme (2021-2027) for Azerbaijan,
- having regard to the joint staff working document of 2 July 2021, entitled 'Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities' (SWD(2021)0186),
- having regard to the Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy signed between the EU and Azerbaijan on 18 July 2022,
- having regard to the joint communication from the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of 8 June 2016 entitled 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations' (JOIN(2016)0029),
- having regard to the regular bilateral high-level dialogues on security, energy and transport between the EU and Azerbaijan,
- having regard to the Eastern Partnership Index 2021,

⁽¹¹⁾ OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 61.

⁽¹²⁾ <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-azerbaijan-from-8-to-12-july-2019-by-dunja-mija/168098e108>

⁽¹³⁾ OJ C 411, 27.11.2020, p. 107.

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29711/html>

- having regard to the Economic and Investment Plan published on 2 July 2021,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0037/2023),
- A. whereas for more than three decades and still ongoing, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well as the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan have resulted in tens of thousands of casualties, immense destruction, including of cultural and religious sites, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people;
- B. whereas deadly military confrontations between Azerbaijan and Armenia continue to erupt periodically; whereas the ceasefire statement of 9 November 2020, introduced following the 44-day war waged by Azerbaijan in 2020, has not been fully implemented; whereas, furthermore, the ceasefire has been violated several times resulting in hundreds of casualties and the occupation of Armenian sovereign territory in the east and south-east of the country by Azerbaijani troops; whereas since December 2022, civilian traffic between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh on the Lachin corridor has been blocked, which has a negative impact on deliveries of food and other essential supplies to the region;
- C. whereas in the aftermath of clashes in September 2022, allegations emerged regarding the subjection of numerous Armenian prisoners of war to physical abuse and acts of humiliation; whereas other allegations have emerged concerning cases of torture and other abuse by Azerbaijani forces against Armenian civilians, including against older people, as well as a case of extrajudicial execution in early 2021; whereas allegations have also come to light of at least a dozen other extrajudicial executions of Armenian troops and civilians in 2020 and early 2021;
- D. whereas Russian peacekeepers deployed in the region have been unwilling and unable to prevent further attacks from Azerbaijan and their presence has been steadily decreasing, especially since the beginning of the criminal Russian war of aggression against Ukraine;
- E. whereas Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has had implications for the South Caucasus and has further complicated the security situation in the region;
- F. whereas the EU is committed to actively promoting a South Caucasus region that is secure, stable, peaceful and prosperous, with strong economic, political and cultural ties with the EU; whereas the EU is ready to play an active role as a reliable trade partner and honest broker in mediating a sustainable peace settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, basing its action on the promotion of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights;
- G. whereas the EU supports peaceful conflict resolution in any unresolved regional conflicts through diplomatic means;
- H. whereas high-level meetings were held in Brussels between President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan, mediated by President Charles Michel, which resulted in commitments being made;
- I. whereas following the quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel on 6 October 2022 in Prague, the EU has deployed a temporary monitoring capacity along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan with the objective of monitoring, analysing and reporting on the situation in the region;
- J. whereas in March 2022, Azerbaijan proposed five basic principles for the normalisation of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which included the mutual recognition of territorial integrity, inviolability of borders and political independence, mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other, the obligation to refrain from threatening each other's national security, the delimitation and demarcation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border and the opening of transport communications; whereas while Armenia had expressed its preliminary agreement to those principles, it later responded with additional principles, which included security and the rights of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, determining the final status of the region, the return of detainees and the restoration of communications;
- K. whereas a sustainable normalisation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and a foundation for a lasting and just peace require that all violence ceases, that all the root causes of conflict are addressed and that the agreements reached between the two parties are fully implemented in order to ensure the development of both countries; whereas such a goal can only be achieved if the authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan guarantee peaceful coexistence, security and the respect of minority rights;

- L. whereas the armed conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan have had a catastrophic impact on the cultural, religious and historical heritage of the whole region;
- M. whereas serious allegations were made in the ICJ Order of 7 December 2021 regarding the involvement of the Azerbaijani authorities in the destruction of cemeteries, churches and historical monuments in Nagorno-Karabakh; whereas under that order Armenia is obliged to take all necessary measures to prevent the incitement and promotion of racial hatred targeted at persons of Azerbaijani national or ethnic origin;
- N. whereas Azerbaijan's record in terms of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is still very negative and needs to be improved before the EU further deepens its political and energy partnership with the country;
- O. whereas the EU and Azerbaijan have jointly agreed, through the 1996 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, on the general principle of respect for democracy and principles of international law and human rights; whereas the parties pledged to cooperate on the respect and promotion of human rights, particularly those of minorities;
- P. whereas in defiance of the Azerbaijani Constitution, which provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, the Azerbaijani authorities consistently and severely restrict those freedoms, creating conditions leading to a de facto ban on assembly; whereas in Azerbaijan, space for independent activism, critical journalism and opposition political activity has been severely restricted; whereas many activists, human rights defenders and journalists have been arrested and jailed under laws and regulations that restrict the activities of independent groups;
- Q. whereas an independent judiciary still does not exist in Azerbaijan and interference in the work and independence of lawyers is pervasive; whereas ill treatment in police custody is rampant, allegedly to coerce confessions, while detainees are denied access to family, independent lawyers and independent medical care; whereas authorities typically dismiss complaints of torture and other ill treatment in custody and the practice continues with impunity;
- R. whereas the Azerbaijani authorities are continuously restricting the plurality of media and freedom of expression; whereas the Government's political opponents, human rights activists and journalists are the target of hate speech and politically motivated violence and are arbitrarily imprisoned; whereas their cases are not sufficiently investigated; whereas in July 2021, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project reported that Azerbaijani journalists were being targeted with the NSO's Pegasus spyware tool;
- S. whereas the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's Rainbow Europe Index shows Azerbaijan as having the worst deficit in legislation and policy aimed at protecting LGBTIQ people, ranking it the worst among all Council of Europe countries; whereas hate speech and hate crime against LGBTIQ people in Azerbaijan persist and, due to lack of trust in law enforcement and their inaction, usually go unreported and unsanctioned; whereas in 2022 PACE adopted a resolution on violations of the rights of LGBTI people in the Southern Caucasus and has made a number of requests to authorities to reform legislation in order to address these violations;
- T. whereas Azerbaijan has been failing to meet its due diligence obligation to prevent, investigate and punish violence against women and to provide effective legal measures; whereas gender-based violence remains pervasive but underreported in Azerbaijan; whereas femicide rates have grown and femicide is often premeditated by family members; whereas serious gaps continue to exist in the official response to femicide, including a lack of protection and recourse to support for survivors;
- U. whereas women human rights defenders are systematically targeted and face threats, coercion, police beatings, violations of their right to privacy and smear campaigns that are gender-specific in order to discredit and silence them; whereas women journalists and other women media actors face specific gender-related dangers, including sexist, misogynist and degrading abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment and sexual aggression and violence;
- V. whereas corruption is pervasive in Azerbaijan; whereas a report of the Independent Investigation Body on the allegations of corruption within PACE of 15 April 2018 established that 'a number of former PACE MPs ... had acted contrary to the PACE code of conduct' and that 'certain current and former members of PACE had engaged in activity of a corruptive nature' in favour of Azerbaijan;

- W. whereas the South Caucasus is strategically placed in the global energy market and Azerbaijan is a strategic supplier of energy (especially oil and gas) to the EU; whereas it is becoming increasingly important in this role given the need for the EU to diversify its energy supplies;
- X. whereas the EU supports closer economic integration with Azerbaijan through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership Initiative; whereas the EU is Azerbaijan's main trading partner and supports Azerbaijan's WTO accession as well as the diversification, digitalisation and de-carbonisation of the Azerbaijani economy;
- Y. whereas it is necessary to ensure connectivity between Europe and Asia that avoids crossing Russian territory; whereas Azerbaijan occupies a strategic position for the promotion of Eurasian connectivity; whereas the EU has a strong interest in developing efficient trade and energy corridors between Europe and Asia, as demonstrated by the conference on connectivity between the EU and Central Asia held in Samarkand on 18 November 2022;
- Z. whereas negotiations on a new partnership agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan have been ongoing since 2017; whereas the new agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan should advance the interests of the EU in the region as well as promote human rights, democratic standards and principles, growth and economic development;

Conflict resolution and normalisation of Armenia-Azerbaijan relations

1. Considers that the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which over the years has caused immense suffering and destruction, has significantly hampered the development and stability of the whole South Caucasus region and impacts wider European stability; is convinced that sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot be achieved through military means and the threat of use of force, but requires a comprehensive political settlement in accordance with international law, including the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the 1975 OSCE Helsinki Final Act, in particular the three principles of non-use of force, territorial integrity and self-determination, the OSCE Minsk Group's 2009 Basic Principles, as well as the agreements reached between the parties, including the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration; reaffirms that, in order to be effective, a comprehensive peace treaty must include provisions that guarantee the integrity of Armenian sovereign territory, the rights and security of the Armenian population residing in Nagorno-Karabakh and other conflict-afflicted areas and the prompt and safe return of all refugees and internally displaced people to their homes; calls on the international community to remain seized of this conflict, which concerns the stability and security of the whole region;

2. Welcomes the numerous steps undertaken by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaderships to overcome their differences and achieve lasting and sustainable peace in the region and commends their sustained engagement in ongoing negotiations; denounces, in this regard, the behaviour of Azerbaijani leaders undermining these efforts, in particular through explicit threats of further attacks, frequent border violations, territorial claims on so-called Western Azerbaijan, or the spread of hate speech against the Armenian population, especially in education; calls on the Azerbaijani leadership to put an end to this behaviour, and on both parties not to lose momentum, to agree on concrete steps forward and to ensure a safe, secure and prosperous environment for the benefit of all ethnic populations in the region;

3. Strongly condemns the latest large-scale military aggression by Azerbaijan in September 2022 against multiple targets in the sovereign territory of Armenia, which constituted a serious breach of the November 2020 ceasefire statement and contradicted earlier commitments, including those made in the framework of EU-mediated talks; condemns the military incursions made across the non-delimited border since May 2021; urges the return of all forces to their initial positions; condemns any attempts to undermine the peace process and urges all parties to the conflict to refrain from further use of force; reiterates that the territorial integrity of Armenia and Azerbaijan must be fully respected by all parties; underlines the EU's readiness to be more actively involved in settling the region's protracted conflicts; is seriously concerned about the ongoing blockade of the Lachin corridor; urges the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure freedom and security of movement along that corridor as prescribed by the trilateral statement of 9 November 2020; stresses Azerbaijan's obligations under the ICJ order of 22 February 2023, which requires Azerbaijan to take all measures at its disposal to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles and cargo along the Lachin corridor in both directions; calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to address all concerns relating to the functioning of the Lachin corridor through dialogue and consultations with all the parties involved; welcomes the recent meeting between an Azerbaijani official delegation and Armenian residents of Nagorno-Karabakh to discuss matters including issues related to the reopening of the Lachin corridor; calls on the Council, if the International Court of Justice's order of 22 February 2023 is not immediately implemented, to impose targeted sanctions against Azerbaijani government officials;

4. Urges Armenia and Azerbaijan to fully implement the tripartite ceasefire statement of 9 November 2020 in all its aspects; stresses the need to move forward with discussions on the future peace treaty, address the root causes of the conflict and refrain from any steps that could lead to further escalations; insists on the urgent need to refrain from any hostile rhetoric or actions that may be perceived as inciting hatred or outright violence or as supporting impunity, or from actions that risk undermining efforts to establish and promote an atmosphere conducive to trust, reconciliation, cooperation and sustainable peace, including people-to-people contact; emphasises the urgent need for increased and credible confidence-building measures in order to counter polarisation, lack of trust and hate speech and other inflammatory rhetoric; is of the opinion that the consequences of these hostilities and the presence of Russian peacekeepers are also affecting political developments in the region; expresses concern about the presence of so-called Russian peacekeepers and their potential impact on political developments in the South Caucasus and the future of the region's reform agenda;
5. Welcomes Azerbaijan's commitment to normalising relations with Armenia, including the proposal in March 2022 of five principles, and calls on both sides to find a viable solution to link the Nakhchivan region with the rest of Azerbaijan; recalls the commitment of Armenia to withdraw its armed forces and to guarantee the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in order to ensure the unimpeded movement of citizens, vehicles and goods in both directions; notes with concern the low level of accuracy of landmine maps provided; calls on the Commission to mobilise assistance to humanitarian demining operations in Nagorno-Karabakh;
6. Calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to achieve lasting peace and reconciliation by setting up a transitional justice mechanism as a confidence-building step towards acknowledging the suffering on both sides and to work towards reconciliation based on a factual assessment of events that have occurred during the armed conflict, starting in 1988; recommends that EU support and help facilitate this work in conjunction with other bodies such as the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other relevant international organisations;
7. Recalls that the EU's passive stance during and immediately after the 2020 war gave other regional actors, such as Russia, Iran and Türkiye, the opportunity to continue exerting their influence in the region; recalls that more active European preventive diplomacy could have prevented such an outcome;
8. Emphasises that since the February 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the context in the Caucasus region has been changing as Russia's credibility and capacity as a mediator and honest broker have been damaged; underlines that Russia plays a dishonest and damaging role in the region and has no interest in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, as its prolongation gives Moscow important leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan; warns therefore against any strategic agreements with Russia, which should be treated as an international pariah since the invasion of Ukraine;
9. Condemns Türkiye's expansionist and destabilising role in the South Caucasus, including through sending Syrian mercenaries to fight on the side of Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020; believes that for Türkiye to play a constructive role in the region it should reconsider its unconditional support for Azerbaijan and take tangible steps towards normalising relations with Armenia;
10. Strongly supports, therefore, the initiative taken by President Charles Michel to convene and mediate bilateral meetings of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan and encourages the work on the ground of the EU's special representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia;
11. Calls on the VP/HR and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to step up efforts to revitalise and effectively contribute to the peaceful resolution of this conflict, including through support for stabilisation, post-conflict rehabilitation, reconstruction and confidence-building measures;
12. Urges the governments of both countries to fully engage in drafting a comprehensive and mutually acceptable peace treaty that should address the rights and security of the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh, the return of internally displaced persons and refugees and the protection of cultural, religious and historical heritage; welcomes in this regard the meetings of the foreign affairs ministers of both countries on 30 September 2022 in Geneva and on 8 November 2022 in Washington D.C.; stresses that a viable legal solution concerning the rights and security of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh should be found in order to secure the lasting settlement of the conflict;
13. Calls on Azerbaijan to ensure the safety and respect of the rights of all minorities in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, as this is an essential prerequisite for the creation of conditions conducive to post-war rehabilitation and genuine reconciliation;

14. Welcomes the establishment of the Azerbaijan and Armenia border delimitation commissions and takes note of the progress made on the process of border delimitation; stresses the importance of holding border commission meetings more regularly in order to address all border-related issues, improve the security situation and achieve progress on delimitation; calls for the demarcation process to be internationally facilitated by the EU in order to ensure credibility, fairness and sustainability;

15. Welcomes the work of the EU Monitoring Capacity in Armenia, which completed its activities on 19 December 2022; welcomes the deployment on 20 February 2023 of a civilian EU mission in Armenia under the common security and defence policy along the Armenian side of the international border with Azerbaijan in order to contribute to stability in the border areas of Armenia, build trust, promote confidence-building, strengthen resilience and establish dialogue between the two sides; welcomes Armenia's willingness to facilitate the mission on its territory and calls on Azerbaijan to allow the presence of EU monitors on its side of the border as well;

16. Welcomes the humanitarian assistance provided by the EU to the conflict-affected population in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and its leading role in providing assistance for humanitarian demining operations in the areas affected by the conflict; calls on the Commission to ensure additional funding and assistance for demining efforts, including equipment, training and risk education; calls for additional demining cooperation with experts from the Member States and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); calls on Armenia to provide accurate maps of landmines in the de-occupied regions of Azerbaijan;

17. Calls on the Commission to increase EU assistance to people in need, including in Nagorno-Karabakh, facilitate the implementation of more ambitious confidence-building measures, promote interreligious and interethnic dialogue, protect minority rights and enhance people-to-people contacts between citizens on both sides of the border in order to build the foundations for a sustainable and peaceful coexistence; calls for finding mutually acceptable solutions for the safe return of displaced populations;

18. Calls for granting access to international humanitarian organisations, especially the United Nations, to Nagorno-Karabakh and recalls that currently only the ICRC is allowed access to the region, which is insufficient to be able to accurately assess the conditions and needs of the population residing there;

19. Continues to be concerned about the fate of Armenian prisoners, both military and civilian, detained during and after the conflict and still held by Azerbaijan and welcomes the release of some of them; recalls that both Armenia and Azerbaijan are parties to the Geneva Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, which stipulates that prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated and must be unconditionally released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities; calls on all sides to clarify the fate and location of the disappeared and to treat dead bodies with dignity; calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all the remaining detainees, including those captured during the recent military confrontations, and for them to be treated in accordance with international humanitarian law;

20. Is appalled by the footage that has appeared depicting the torture, mutilation and killing of an Armenian servicewoman and unarmed Armenian prisoners of war by Azerbaijani armed forces and condemns its public dissemination; calls for a full and impartial investigation of the videos to identify those responsible and hold them accountable for their actions; condemns all instances of torture and enforced disappearances, including when perpetrated in an armed conflict, as well as the ill treatment and desecration of bodies; stresses that these acts are in violation of the Geneva conventions which were ratified by Azerbaijan and may constitute war crimes;

21. Deplores the opening of the so-called Trophy Park in Baku, inaugurated on 12 April 2021, as it undermines the building of mutual trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan; acknowledges the decision to remove the dehumanising wax figures and the helmets from the Trophy Park after the international outcry and the lawsuit filed by Armenia at the ICJ;

22. Insists that both states are under international obligations to conduct independent, prompt, public and effective investigations and prosecute all credible allegations of grave breaches of the Geneva conventions and other violations of international law and war crimes, in order to ensure the accountability of those responsible and redress for the victims;

23. Deplores the destruction of Armenian and Azerbaijani cultural, religious and historical heritage since the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; demands that Azerbaijan and Armenia refrain from the further destruction and alteration of heritage and guarantee that citizens are not prevented from exercising their freedom of religion or belief in this regard; urges both countries to genuinely commit to preserving, protecting and promoting this rich diversity regardless of its origin and without misappropriation or miscategorisation; calls for accountability regarding all crimes of destruction and alteration and for the preservation and restoration of damaged sites in accordance with UNESCO standards and indications, as well as for the greater involvement of the international community in the preservation of cultural, religious and historical heritage in the region; calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to urgently allow and facilitate a UNESCO mission to both countries without preconditions;

24. Underlines in this respect Azerbaijan's and Armenia's obligations under the ICJ's decision of 7 December 2021 on the application of urgent measures which require Azerbaijan to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artefacts; insists that Azerbaijan and Armenia comply fully with UNESCO's 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, commonly referred to as the 1954 Hague Convention, which requires parties to a conflict to refrain from all acts of hostility directed against cultural property;

25. Encourages increased bilateral contacts between the political authorities of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as initiatives promoting people-to-people contacts between both countries, especially at the level of civil society, universities, youth organisations and NGOs; stresses the need to consult and cooperate with civil society and human rights defenders, in particular on the issues of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, reconciliation and humanitarian assistance, as well as the importance of sustainable funding and the freedom of such organisations to conduct their work without restrictions; calls therefore on the Commission to support civil society organisations in Armenia and Azerbaijan that genuinely contribute to reconciliation;

26. Highlights the particular effect of the conflict on women and marginalised groups, including the rise in domestic violence in the aftermath of the recent war, as well as the exclusion of women from the official peace process; calls on the Azerbaijani Government, as well as international mediators, to remove barriers to women's participation in all areas and systematically include women experts and women human rights defenders in all consultations;

27. Recalls that the ENP underscores the need to reinforce relations among neighbours and to promote regional cooperation;

Human rights and fundamental freedoms

28. Recalls that the 1996 EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement is based on respect for democracy and the principles of international law and human rights and that these have not been systematically upheld in Azerbaijan; stresses that the EU's external action, including its agreements with non-EU countries, should be based on EU core values, in particular respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights; emphasises the need to make any further cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan conditional on the country's effective and tangible progress towards respect for international standards and international commitments, in particular those related to democracy, human rights, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression and association, good governance, the rights of minorities, freedom of the media and gender equality;

29. Notes the multicultural and multi-religious character of Azerbaijan and therefore calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to step up their efforts to ensure the non-discriminatory treatment of national minorities and to actively pursue investigations of and convictions for hate-motivated crimes based on religious, gender-related or ethnic grounds; calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure that all minority groups receive an education in their national languages and have equal opportunities, adequate representation in political and cultural life and a public media and administration; calls on Azerbaijan to protect and promote the tangible and intangible cultural heritage, languages and traditions of its national minorities;

30. Highlights the concluding observations on the tenth to twelfth reports on Azerbaijan by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination of 30 August 2022 that expressed concerns over incitement to racial hatred and the propagation of racist stereotypes against persons of Armenian national or ethnic origin, including on the internet and social media, as well as by public figures and governmental officials, and the lack of detailed information on investigations, prosecutions, convictions and sanctions concerning such acts;

31. Calls on the Azerbaijani Government and authorities to urgently uphold fundamental freedoms and human rights and to refrain from any unjustified application of criminal law to limit those rights and freedoms; expresses deep concern that violations of fundamental human rights in Azerbaijan follow a systemic and widespread pattern and affect citizens' rights to liberty and security;

32. Deeply regrets the current state of media freedom in Azerbaijan; expresses its concern about the new law on media adopted in December 2021 which effectively bans all forms of independent journalism and the work of Azerbaijani journalists in exile; underlines the fundamental importance of freedom of expression and freedom of the media in democratic societies; calls on Azerbaijan to increase its efforts in enabling an independent and pluralistic media environment in accordance with the recommendations included in the opinion of the Venice Commission of 17 and 18 June 2022; urges Azerbaijan to stop persecuting bloggers, editors, journalists and media organisations, who are regularly detained or imprisoned on a variety of charges, and to ensure they have a safe working environment; calls on Azerbaijan to release all journalists and bloggers currently detained on the basis of the opinions they have expressed;

33. Calls on the Azerbaijani Government to decriminalise defamation and to implement the recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists and other media actors;

34. Condemns the censorship on access to information in Azerbaijan and calls on the authorities to improve access to the internet and communications coverage; calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to bring legislation and practice affecting internet freedom in line with European standards;

35. Recommends that the EEAS, the Commission and the Member States increase their support for and cooperation with civil society and human rights defenders, in particular in relation to restrictions on their work; calls on the Government of Azerbaijan to establish a regular and in-depth political dialogue with civil society in order to encourage ambitious and widely shared reforms aimed at making institutions more democratic and independent, promote human rights and media freedom and develop a regulatory environment in which civil society can operate without undue interference;

36. Strongly condemns the persecution and repression, both domestically and abroad, of political activists, journalists, students, human rights defenders and civil society organisations' representatives, including those arrested for making public calls for peace during the September 2022 clashes, through intimidation, arrests, torture, detentions, slander campaigns, abductions, travel bans without informing those targeted and lawsuits; urges Azerbaijan to cease these practices and to release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience currently detained; regrets the fact that Azerbaijan has not fully complied with the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights; calls on Azerbaijan to fully implement those decisions and to clear its backlog of unimplemented cases; urges Azerbaijan to continue taking all necessary measures to prevent the politically motivated arbitrary application of its legislation; reiterates its position that the release of all political prisoners is an indispensable condition for a new partnership agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan;

37. Calls on the Council to explore targeted, individual sanctions under the EU's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime against Azerbaijani officials who have committed grave human rights violations, such as law-enforcement officers, especially taking into account the widespread police violence against political activists, human rights defenders and journalists;

38. Calls on the EU delegation and Member States' representations in Azerbaijan to increase their support for human rights defenders' work, and, where appropriate, to facilitate the issuance of emergency visas and provide temporary shelter in the Member States; urges Azerbaijan to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance of the United Nations;

39. Strongly condemns the intimidation, death threats and assassination attempts against opponents of the Azerbaijani Government, including in European countries and against Azerbaijani citizens who have been granted political asylum by Member States, such as Mahammad Mirzali in France; stresses that for the Member States, preventing any act of retaliation on their territory is a matter of democracy, human rights, security and sovereignty; insists that Europol should closely monitor this matter;

40. Insists that Azerbaijan ensure the right to peaceful assembly and calls on Azerbaijan to stop preventing the International Women's Day march;

41. Underlines the importance of gender equality and the representation of women at all levels of social and political life; calls on the Azerbaijani Government to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, to adopt the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, to implement the UN Development Programme's Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2025 and to adopt and implement policies to combat domestic and gender-based violence; strongly insists that the Azerbaijani authorities conduct a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into every reported incident of violence, discrimination and harassment of women and fight impunity; calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to stop the systemic harassment of women human rights defenders, women journalists and other women media actors and to stop gender-specific smear campaigns, detention and arbitrary and unlawful breaches of privacy, correspondence and other private communications;

42. Recalls that Parliament's position has been clear on non-discrimination with regard to LGBTIQ people, their protection against discrimination in law and practice and the prosecution of all acts of abuse, hate speech and physical violence perpetrated against them; urges the Azerbaijani authorities therefore to adopt anti-discrimination legislation, adding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics as prohibited grounds for discrimination;

urges Azerbaijan to adopt civil, administrative and/or criminal proceedings to protect people from hate speech and hate crimes; calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to reform criminal legislation by adding the abovementioned grounds as aggravating circumstances and to combat LGBTIQ-phobic violence; reiterates the call by PACE on the authorities of Azerbaijan to investigate cases of wrongful arrest of LGBTIQ people and to prevent and combat police violence against these people;

43. Condemns the disinformation emanating from Azerbaijan targeting the West, in particular in the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine; notes that the narratives used against the West are copy-pasted from Russian propaganda, including attacks on LGBTIQ rights and alleged threats to traditional values;

44. Deeply regrets Azerbaijan's failure to fully implement the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, ratified by Azerbaijan, which is a violation of Azerbaijan's commitment to protect the rights of ethnic minorities such as Lezgins, Talysh, Armenians and Kurds;

45. Calls on Azerbaijan to eliminate current restrictions, alleviate the administrative burden on NGOs and change restrictive legislation concerning the registration, operation and funding of NGOs; calls on Azerbaijan to also eliminate restrictions on religious communities, particularly as far as their registration and financing are concerned; calls on Azerbaijan to eliminate current legislative restrictions for donor institutions and international organisations supporting the work of civil society; calls on the Commission to accelerate its efforts in Azerbaijan to lift the restrictions on civil society activities, foster the adoption of new laws and provide for the more extensive involvement of independent NGOs in EU-funded projects and in monitoring the implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement;

46. Is deeply concerned that the draft law on political parties may further limit the freedom of association of Azerbaijanis by making it more difficult to register political parties; urges Azerbaijan to reform its electoral legal framework in order to align it with international standards and obligations, guarantee constitutionally protected rights and freedoms and address pending recommendations by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Venice Commission; calls for elections in accordance with international standards and in respect of Azerbaijan's commitments as an OSCE-participating state;

Good governance, justice, rule of law and the fight against corruption

47. Expresses its concern about the persistent lack of independence, impartiality and effectiveness of the judiciary as well as of transparency in its decisions and about systemic procedural shortcomings; urges Azerbaijan to reform the judiciary and the prosecution system in order to ensure the complete independence of the judiciary, including the Judicial-Legal Council, which must be free from interventions by law-enforcement agencies in order to increase people's trust in the justice system; urges, further, Azerbaijan to cease restricting access to the bar for lawyers engaging in human rights cases and to stop using disciplinary procedures as a means to put pressure on those lawyers; urges the authorities to bring the Code of Conduct in line with international standards on freedom of expression; calls on Azerbaijan to ensure and enforce the right to legal services provided by independent lawyers; notes the measures taken to strengthen judicial independence in compliance with the Presidential Decree of 3 April 2019 entitled 'On deepening reforms in the judicial-legal system', including legislative and administrative actions implemented to ensure the independence of the judiciary and judges; encourages Azerbaijan to continue its efforts to implement the relevant recommendations of the Group of States against Corruption in relation to strengthening judicial independence;

48. Regrets the limited progress that has been made by Azerbaijan on preventing and fighting against corruption; notes the adoption of the comprehensive National Action Plan to Strengthen the Fight Against Corruption aimed at consolidating and reinforcing the anti-corruption efforts of the authorities; calls on Azerbaijan to address the lack of an effective system of asset disclosure for members of parliament, judges and prosecutors to strengthen the role of the judiciary within the Judicial-Legal Council and to eliminate the government's undue influence over the Prosecutor's Office; regrets that Azerbaijan is lacking a transparent public finance system, including for public procurement and tenders;

49. Condemns Azerbaijan's elite capture activities in several international organisations aiming at watering down international criticism of the regime, in particular in the area of human rights, as demonstrated by the case of certain current and former members of PACE who 'had engaged in activity of a corruptive nature' in favour of Azerbaijan;

Security and geopolitical challenges

50. Welcomes Azerbaijan's official support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as well as the humanitarian aid provided to Ukraine during the ongoing war; is, however, strongly concerned by the Declaration on Allied Interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation signed in February 2022 in Moscow; notes, furthermore, the lack of support from Azerbaijan for the resolutions voted on in the UN General Assembly on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and urges Azerbaijan to ensure that sanctions against Russia are not circumvented;

51. Expresses concern about destabilising and terrorist actions in the South Caucasus; strongly condemns any acts of terrorism; welcomes the security cooperation between the EU, its Member States and Azerbaijan and fully supports the further deepening of counter-terrorism cooperation; calls, in particular, for stronger cooperation on counter-terrorism and countering radicalisation and Islamist extremism;

52. Condemns the illicit and massively widespread use of the NSO Group's Pegasus surveillance software and repressive cybersecurity employed by Azerbaijan against journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, lawyers and politicians and calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to refrain from using it; urges again, further, the Commission to draw up a list of illicit surveillance software and to update this list continuously; calls for the EU and the Member States to use this list in order to ensure full human rights due diligence and proper vetting of exports of European surveillance technology and technical assistance and imports to Member States which pose a clear risk to the rule of law; reiterates its calls for the establishment of an EU citizens' lab, comprising journalists, human rights experts and reverse malware engineering experts, which would work to detect and expose the unlawful use of software for illicit surveillance purposes;

53. Recalls the important coordination role played by Azerbaijan in multilateral organisations in relation to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic;

54. Strongly condemns Iran's military exercises along the Azerbaijan-Iran border based on aggressive scenarios; calls on the Islamic Republic of Iran to cease any provocations and respect Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty;

Energy, trade, environment, economic cooperation and connectivity

55. Acknowledges the completion of the Southern Gas Corridor between Azerbaijan and Europe and the first dispatch of gas in December 2020; recognises the strategic role played by Azerbaijan as a provider of fossil fuel energy to the EU and welcomes its willingness to contribute even more to the EU's objectives in terms of security and diversification of energy supply and climate neutrality, as set out in the European Green Deal; regrets that Azerbaijan's ambition to be a strategic energy partner is not matched by its efforts on democratic reforms and respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights; calls on the Commission to support foreign investments from international partners aimed at increasing connectivity between the EU and Azerbaijan; asks the Commission to guarantee that no gas imports from non-EU countries could be whitewashing Russian gas under European sanctions; calls on Azerbaijan to implement reforms in line with the country's international commitments;

56. Notes the new Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Azerbaijan on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy signed by President Aliyev and Commission President von der Leyen in Baku on 18 July 2022, which lays the groundwork for future cooperation on green energy and includes a commitment to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor to deliver at least 20 billion cubic metres of gas to the EU annually by 2027; regrets, however, that the memorandum only focuses on energy cooperation and is not subject to any conditionality; welcomes Azerbaijan's participation in the EU4Energy programme and urges the country to make more progress on energy efficiency;

57. Emphasises Azerbaijan's potential as a producer and future exporter of renewable energy, in particular offshore wind and green hydrogen, and calls on the Commission and the Member States to enhance EU-Azerbaijan cooperation in this area in support of Azerbaijan's efforts in evolving from an oil and natural gas supplier to a renewable energy partner of the EU; highlights that the use of fossil fuel will only aggravate the current climate emergency in which we are living; stresses that the EU should invest in renewable energy in order to achieve its climate pledge; calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to undertake crucial steps to accelerate the development of renewables and increase energy efficiency;

58. Calls on Azerbaijan to further enhance its engagement in the fight against climate change and the protection of the environment; encourages Azerbaijan to increase its emissions reduction targets under its nationally determined contribution and to seriously commit to cutting emissions;

59. Takes note of the progress made on the negotiation of a new bilateral comprehensive EU-Azerbaijan agreement and calls on the negotiating parties to consider enhanced cooperation outside the energy sector in the new agreement; insists that human rights, the rule of law, democracy and good governance must be prioritised; encourages increased inter-parliamentary cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan with a broad agenda of issues of mutual interest; underlines that good governance and respect for international law and standards are paramount to achieving long-lasting peace with Azerbaijan's neighbours and in the wider region;

60. Welcomes the significant trade flows between the EU and Azerbaijan and the high level of EU investment in Azerbaijan; underscores that the Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership could mobilise up to EUR 2 billion in additional investments towards building a dynamic and resilient economy, which will deliver tangible benefits for the people of Azerbaijan and support the country's green and digital transitions; calls for the EU to continue supporting regional development in Azerbaijan, including rural development, agriculture and food safety and welcomes the flagship initiatives aimed at supporting economic sustainability and resilience in Azerbaijan; takes note of the potential for future cooperation with European companies and investors in the context of rehabilitation and reconstruction projects in Azerbaijan;

61. Regrets that Azerbaijan has made minimal progress in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, sexual exploitation and forced begging;

62. Notes that the unblocking of regional transport and communication links will provide a significant opportunity for socio-economic development in the South Caucasus; stresses that this needs to be done in full respect of the sovereignty of all countries in the region and based on the principle of reciprocity; underlines that, as part of the November 2020 trilateral ceasefire statement, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to unblock connections between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic and to secure connections between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh;

63. Welcomes the initiative to establish a new Azerbaijan-Georgia-Armenia regional platform and calls for the EU to support regional cooperation in order to foster peace, security and prosperity in the region;

64. Recognises Azerbaijan's strategic geographical position as a potential gateway between Europe and Central Asia and beyond, within the so-called 'Middle Corridor', which will require EU investment and funding in order to become fully operational; underlines that the 'Middle Corridor' could play an important role in the search for alternatives to trade routes through Russia;

65. Urges, therefore, the EU to support Azerbaijan and its neighbouring countries in their efforts to establish trans-Caspian and trans-Caucasian connections and to maintain close contact with Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries with a view to developing connectivity projects between Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia; calls for decisive progress in the study for the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, which would contribute to the security of energy supply and the diversification of suppliers, sources and routes to the European Union, avoiding transit through Russian territory; calls on the Commission to intensify bilateral exchanges in the framework of the High-Level Dialogue on Transport;

66. Calls on Azerbaijan's Government to make better use of programmes and projects available in the Eastern Partnership framework, particularly those promoting people-to-people contacts between the EU and Azerbaijan, such as easier travel and academic exchanges;

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67. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Government of Azerbaijan.