



PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

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The South Caucasus and Europe

Introduction by the Special Editor Jeronim Perović (University of Zurich)

Following the end of the Cold War, the demand to ‘return to Europe’ dominated the foreign policy agenda of the countries of Central Eastern Europe. All of these states have subsequently joined the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As for the former Soviet republics, the relationship with Europe and Western organisations was less straightforward. With the notable exception of the three Baltic states, none of the former Soviet states has formally become a member of either organisation, even though both the EU and NATO have established various institutional frameworks of cooperation with individual states of the region. With regard to the South Caucasus, the situation is especially complex. Even though Armenia is member of the Russian dominated Eurasian Economic Union and other Russian dominated post-Soviet organisations, it succeeded in concluding a Partnership Agreement with the EU. Azerbaijan maintains the most intensive trade relations with Europe: it opened its economy to Western investment already in the early 1990s, and built oil and gas pipelines circumventing Russian territory, but still managed to preserve good relations with Moscow. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 and is the only country in the South Caucasus that has officially sought NATO membership. Given Georgia’s complicated territorial situation, with the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and strained relations with Russia, which has officially recognised the two breakaway regions of Georgia, rapprochement with Europe and Western organisations has proven particularly difficult.

Drawing on the case studies of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the authors of this special issue analyse national and nationalist perspectives on Europe and the self-positioning strategies of the South Caucasian states from historical and/or contemporary perspectives. The focus is not only on Europe as an institutional structure, but also as an ‘idea’ discussed among societal actors, including the state and its representatives, civil society groups, the media as well as various political parties and groups. The aim of this special issue is thus to show the broad range of discourses in society and politics as they have developed over time, point out internal disputes and highlight distinctions in the perception of Europe with regard to the discussion of concepts such as liberal democracy, sovereignty, and human rights. Thereby, this special issue paints a nuanced picture of South Caucasian states’ and societies’ relations with Europe over time and across the region, as each author sets his or her own focus and uses his or her own methodology. While the case study on Armenia by Narek Sukiasyan is largely looking at how the official discourse on Europe at the level of the heads of state has changed since independence as well as investigating public narratives interpreting the role of the EU in the light of the recent wars in Karabakh (2020) and Ukraine (2022), Najmin Kamilsoy and Anna Zamejc’s case study on Azerbaijan takes a closer look at the perspective of civil society organisations and their growing disillusionment with the role of the EU as a normative power. Finally, Nino Gozalishvili looks at nationalist and far right political groups in Georgia since the late 1980s and provides insights into the ways in which the European idea has been used in the mobilisation strategies of these groups.

About the Special Editor

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The EU in Armenia's Official and Public Eyes

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Armenian perceptions of the European Union (EU) from official and public perspectives. The goal of study is to (a) reveal the official discourse on relations with the EU and the West from the perspective of the heads of the state since independence, with an emphasis on the transformations during the last two administrations beginning in 2008, and (b) to analyse public narratives interpreting the role of the EU in the light of the wars in Karabakh (2020) and Ukraine (2022), allowing us greater insight into the modes of public thinking on security, foreign policy and their ethics that feed both the pro-Western and pro-Russian domestic agendas.

Introduction

Armenia's official foreign policy orientation and popular sentiment have predominantly been informed by security considerations and historical conceptions of a nation threatened by Turkey and Azerbaijan since independence. Official discourse on Europe and the collective West was consistently positive and lagged behind institutional integration efforts, which speaks to a genuine political caution in Yerevan. However, the Armenian public has begun to question the predominantly positive narratives about the European Union (EU) due to the EU's policy towards Azerbaijan and during the Second Karabakh war, in which Armenians could see double standards, deprioritisation of human rights, and preference for material interests over the declared normative ones. In this article, I aim to reveal the perception of Armenia's heads of states of the EU and EU–Armenia relations amid security and integration dilemmas as well as Armenian public attitudes towards the same, with a special focus on their transformations after the 2020 Second Karabakh war and the 2022 war in Ukraine.

Positive but Cautious within Imposed Dilemmas: The Making of the Perception towards the EU and Europe

Armenia's ruling elites have been appreciative of Western and European efforts to offer assistance in modernising the country, while at the same time protecting its alliance with Russia set to balance the security threats from the neighbours to the east (Azerbaijan) and west (Turkey). Even at the dawn of independence, when the Western liberal-democratic enthusiasm to engage with post-Soviet states was rather high (though still informed by the 'Russia-first' approach) and Russia at that time was not particularly zealous towards what later became its 'zone of special interests', Armenia's leadership remained critical regarding the EU's and NATO's (North Atlan-

tic Treaty Organization) enlargement towards Russian borders (Ter-Petrosyan, 1997). Armenia's first president Levon Ter-Petrosyan was worried about contradictions between the (selfish) interests of Western actors and Russia as an obstacle in seeking a steady solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Ter-Petrosyan, 1994). Moreover, considering Azerbaijan's international importance because of its energy resources and Turkey's role as a close ally of Azerbaijan in the region, in Ter-Petrosyan's worldview, Western interests were opposed to Armenia's interests (Ter-Petrosyan, 1997).

During Robert Kocharyan's presidency (1998–2008), Armenia was accepted into Western-led international organisations such as the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organisation. Even though they are not related to the EU, these institutions are considered important pillars of the Western/European ('civilised') world, often referred to in popular discourses without much nuance, putting most Western institutions into one bucket. Economic growth, security stabilisation, and western conditionality led to important (albeit limited) modernisation efforts which inspired then-Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanian to state that '[...] Armenia, in 2008, will be at a completely different level. We will be ready to knock on the EU's door to begin membership negotiations if we are able to maintain this pace' (Oskanyan, 2003).

It was in this period that the foreign policy that all Armenian administrations have sought—multi-vector, non-exclusionary, diversified cooperation—was conceptualised under the term 'complementarity'. This meant that, while Russia's role as the primary security guarantor was not questioned, Armenia's security was to be complemented by NATO-led reforms (on the bases of the Partnership for Peace (1994) and Individual Partnership Plan (2005)) and the country would strive to adopt a European model of state-building—i.e., market economy, moderate liberalisation, and democratic

standards, albeit with inherent post-Soviet limitations. In the geopolitical and domestic circumstances of that era, in Kocharyan's foreign minister's vision, even Georgia and Azerbaijan were seeking to adopt this concept of foreign policy (Oskanyan, 2003). In Kocharyan's understanding, the country's relations with the West were seen also as an important way to reduce the threat from Turkey, considering also that this was Azerbaijan's closest ally, at a time when relations between Ankara and Brussels were difficult given Turkey's (unfulfilled) European aspirations.

Hopes Constrained by Hard Dilemmas

With Serzh Sargsyan's rule (2008–2018), Armenia's European goals reached a higher level for reasons accredited both to his administration's agency and the structure of international relations. Coming to power after a president who was known for his close ties to Vladimir Putin and favoured a pro-Russian foreign policy, Sargsyan's enthusiasm about European integration (short of membership) and emphasis on balanced multi-vector policies have put him geopolitically in contrast to his predecessor, especially during Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) negotiations and the EU-led reforms. Emphasising the strong involvement of the Council of Europe in the reform process in Armenia, in 2011 Sargsyan stated that 'in Armenia, some even joke that our political system has three components: the government, the opposition, and the Council of Europe' (Sargsyan, 2011a).

Sargsyan saw the partnership with the EU as a vehicle for institutional reforms, consolidation of a free-market economy, and raising living standards (Sargsyan, 2009b; 2011b; 2012). This partnership was to be realised through the signing of the AA and DCFTA in 2013. During Sargsyan's first term, Armenia passed through a period later coined as 'silent Europeanisation' (Delcour, 2015, p. 322), becoming a pioneer of EU-led reforms within the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP). Sargsyan's administration was also an ardent supporter of the 'more for more' principle, as they realised that Azerbaijan's reluctance towards liberal reforms would give Armenia a competitive advantage in the eyes of a Brussels that had declared its norms as a priority. For Sargsyan, there was also a security component. First, the failed AA and later the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership (CEPA) agreements were underlying the EU's support of the Minsk Group's mediation mandate on the unresolved Karabakh conflict, the non-use of force, the Madrid principles, and consideration of the

Helsinki Final Act (CEPA, 2017, p. 7). Second, the EU was seen as a key actor in facilitating the normalisation of Turkey–Armenia relations.

In the first phase of Sargsyan's presidency, the external factors were both positive (launch of EaP) and negative (intensification of Russia–West contradictions) in terms of Armenia's foreign policy opportunities and autonomy. However, in the early days of Sargsyan's second term, when Armenia was close to signing the AA and DCFTA, the structural factors dramatically deteriorated between the EU and Russia, culminating in the Ukraine crisis of 2013–2014. The polarisation of positions between Russia and the West had been systematically considered by the same ruling elite as an unfavourable development for Armenia—an established realisation especially after the Russian–Georgian 2008 war (Sargsyan, 2009a).

The ruling elite was aware of the negative effects of the intensifying integration dilemma unfolding between Russia and the EU, which increasingly narrowed Armenia's foreign policy manoeuvrability and eventually forced a U-turn when Armenia announced that it would join the Russia-led Customs Union in 2013. Sargsyan has been critical of the separation lines and confrontation in Europe, pushing for more cooperation and even sparing modest efforts for positing Armenia as a bridge between the two sides, especially after signing the CEPA in 2017 (Galstyan et al., 2021, pp. 5–6).

However, this pragmatic positivity of relations was accompanied by implicit unease between Brussels and Yerevan concerning the mediocre democratic standards and high level of corruption in Armenia—topics that both sides preferred to largely avoid in order to enable a pragmatic form of cooperation. However, at some points these issues came to the fore, exposing the discrepancies between the values of the two sides, for instance the heated exchanges between the EU ambassador and members of the ruling party after the former's criticism of democratic standards during the 2017 parliamentary elections (Panarmenian.net, 2017).¹ However, the tone set by those EU representatives reversed and became more supportive during and after the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

As the democratic change in Armenia received a warm welcome from European leaders, the new government formed by the revolutionary leader Nikol Pashinyan transmitted unexpectedly critical (anti-neocolonial) messages to Brussels. In his first visit to Brussels just a month after the revolution, Pashinyan criticised western reaction to the revolution, calling on the

1 'EU Delegation head VS Armenian authorities', Panarmenian.net, 17 June 2017, <https://www.panarmenian.net/eng/details/242123/> (accessed 19 February 2022).

West to 'either decrease the thrilled tone of [supportive] statements or significantly change the policies' because he believed that Armenia was getting only a minimal and insufficient increase of the financial aid, equal to an amount 'what we can get by shaking one oligarch' (Pashinyan, 2018).

Many believed that Armenia was set to receive western support akin to what Georgia had received after its Rose Revolution in 2003. However, it soon became clear that the decline of democracy as a global priority (and particularly as an American one, during Trump's term) and Armenia's hesitance to shift its foreign policy away from Russia had proved to be decisive, in contrast to Georgia, which had seized the moment when the promotion of democracy was a foreign policy priority for the George Bush administration.

It was also due to the lack of clear vision and basic political communication on the ruling party's side that hampered the instrumentalisation of the possible Western advantages that Yerevan could benefit from. Hence, it was only after the parliamentary elections at the end of 2018 that working relations were established with the EU and a common agenda was formed which concentrated on reforms in the sectors of justice, police, anti-corruption, and (especially after the Second Karabakh War) infrastructure-building and humanitarian assistance. On the bilateral level, Pashinyan went as far as stating that the CEPA 'completely overlaps with the agenda of our government' (Pashinyan, 2019a).

As stated, Armenia's revolutionary elite attempted to avoid geopolitical issues and preferences, however, various great power centres had different expectations. On the one hand, it found itself needing to justify its democratic aspirations to Moscow, emphasising their sole domestic purpose and lack of geopolitical agenda; on the other hand, Armenian policymakers also felt the need to take a defensive position with European partners, too, though, using an opposite logic, asking for them not to 'judge our democracy by our geopolitical [...] choices' (Mnatsakanyan, 2019).

Regarding Armenia's room to manoeuvre between Russia and the EU, Pashinyan has tried to communicate a lack of contradictions between the two agendas, stating that neither side has objections regarding Yerevan's cooperation with the other and affirming that these cooperations give Armenia competitive advantages (Pashinyan, 2019b). Pashinyan also tried to posit Armenia as a bridge between the EU and the Eurasian Union, but noticeably less than Sargsyan, and even less so after the 2020 Karabakh war. Since the war, the rhetoric of the ruling elite about the EU has been generally limited to technical and humanitarian fields with no high stakes involved.

Public Takeaways from Wars Close and Far

In the last decade, the attitude of Armenians regarding potential future EU membership has generally been on the decline. The enthusiasm for accession fell especially from 2013 through 2014, which was probably caused by the potential costs of such intentions by Ukraine and its media coverage. The war, territorial losses and destabilisation in Ukraine were seen as the results of its choice in the integration dilemma—a price Armenia could not afford to pay considering its vulnerable military-diplomatic positions in Karabakh and the key role Russia played in sustaining them.

Public endorsement of EU membership has non-decisively grown after the Velvet Revolution, but there was a rise in the number of Armenians who 'partially support and partially don't support' the membership in the 2021 surveys, speaking to the increased caution and understanding of the nuances of both choices (Caucasus Barometer, 2022). What seems to be clear is that the image of Europe among Armenians has declined in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war: the dataset of the International Republican Institute shows steady growth from 2018 in the already-high evaluation of Armenia's relationship with the EU, growing from 81% to 91% in a year, figures which however dropped dramatically after the war to 54% (in 2020) and 69% (in 2021) (IRI, 2018a; 2018b; 2019; 2021a; 2021b).

How can this be explained? The trends have to be read in the light of two wars—in Karabakh and Ukraine. In the wake of Azerbaijan's offensive against Armenians in Karabakh, with the deployment of mercenaries from the Middle East and reported war crimes, many Armenian institutions turned to Western capitals and organisations for value-based support in the face of blatant violations of human rights, and ethnic cleansing of the Armenian civilian population in Karabakh (Transparency International Anticorruption Center, 2022; Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, 2021a,b). While the liberal-minded segments expected condemnation of Azerbaijan's offensive and Western sanctions against the Baku regime, the anti-liberal or noticeably anti-Western circles used the lack of any substantial response from the West as an opportunity to support their anti-western criticism, pointing out Western 'double standards' and the self-interest of intervening only when the West's direct financial gains were at stake, covering such interventions under the declarative framing of freedom and democratisation.

While the anti-Western groups had a more propagandistic purpose, paradoxically, their arguments also matched with those of left-liberal, progressive activists and scholars who share European values who nonetheless condemned gaslighting both-sidism, primitive simplifications of the conflict, an equal treatment of

the self-declared initiator of the war and the defending side. The statements of concern of varying degrees coming from Western headquarters soon became subjects of mockery and fed into the sentiment that liberal (or even humanitarian) values cost less than Azerbaijan's energy resources despite its dire democratic and human rights standards.

At the same time, the opposition (and predominantly the former ruling Republican party) has been sharpening the tone of its criticism towards European 'neutrality' regarding Armenia's domestic democratic backsliding in recent years. The EU—with a huge emphasis on the figure of the Head of EU Delegation Andrea Wiktoria—is criticised for ignoring electoral violations, politically motivated arrests, limitation of free speech, and continued close cooperation with the government despite its democratic regression. However, they so far have been cautious not to adopt a Eurosceptic discourse, rather calling on the EU to act in accordance with its stated values (Hayeli.am, 2022).²

Since the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, the unprecedented western mobilisation to assist Kyiv and condemnation of Russia's actions triggered both empathy for the struggles of ordinary Ukrainians who share the hardships of war similar to those felt in Armenia two years ago, but also generated some (perhaps understandable) feelings of envy regarding the Western support and validation of Ukrainians' moral right-

eousness, something Armenians did not receive during Azerbaijan's offensive (Григорян, 2022) After the EU's energy deal with Azerbaijan amid its attacks on Armenia, the public perception of Brussels is not set to improve..

Conclusion

While the crystallisation of pro-/anti-Russian and pro-/anti-Western narratives will come after the end of the hot phase of the confrontation in Ukraine, it is safe to make some conclusions regarding geopolitical discourses in Armenia. The aggressively pro-western circles tend to handpick examples of European assistance to Ukraine while lobbying for Armenia's turn to the West (National-Democratic Pole, 2022). They also argue that Armenia lost the war because Russia left it alone. In the same methodological manner, the anti-western media emphasises the criticism towards the West for failing to provide the assistance that Kyiv has been requesting, thus arguing that Armenia cannot turn to and trust the West because it will be left alone like Ukraine.³ For now, the course of the war allows both narratives to cherry-pick the needed facts to sustain their initial arguments. On the official level, the discourse remains extremely cautious in its statements (or lack thereof) about the war in Ukraine or the EU's role. Now, it remains to be seen how the war will end and, accordingly, and whose narratives will become more persuasive.

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2 'Акция протеста перед делегацией ЕС в Армении: "You are not EU"', АрмИнфо, 10 February 2022, https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=67639&clang=1 (accessed 15 March 2022).

3 A number of publications and analysis echoing this line of thought can be found on republica.am, iravunk.am and republica.am.

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Perceptions of the EU in Azerbaijan: A Normative Power in Decline?

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Abstract

This article examines the European Union's (EU) image as a normative power in Azerbaijan. Among the five current participants of the Eastern Partnership Initiative, Azerbaijan is the only country where the EU's norm promotion efforts have been thwarted over the past decade. In the context of the ruling elite's shifting discourses on the EU, the latter is facing trust and visibility challenges, not only among ordinary Azerbaijanis, but also among pro-democracy civil society organisations. A closer look into the civil society perspectives indicates the EU's decline as a normative actor in the country, not least due to its continued pursuit of pragmatic energy interests that do not presuppose the institutionalisation of democratic norms.

Introduction

Due to its success in development based on the principles of peace, democracy, rule of law, and social justice, the European Union (EU) is often referred to as a 'normative power' in international politics in general and in its eastern neighbourhood, including the South Caucasus, in particular (Manners, 2012; Bengtsson/Elgström, 2012). Being seen as a normative or transformative power, the EU has proven itself capable of influencing the perceptions in other countries about what is 'normal' (Manners, 2002: 253) and undertaken a mission to diffuse the above-mentioned norms outside its borders. Apart from negotiations and agreements with political elites, development aid, and regional integration projects, one way in which the EU diffuses norms is by engaging with domestic civil societies for democratic reforms. However, in some neighbouring countries, such as Azerbaijan, the EU's capacity to act as a norm promoter has met significant challenges.

Over the past decade, the relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan has developed in a perplexing manner, entailing elements of burgeoning cooperation in the trade sphere and persisting discord on the normative aspect. Relying on its bargaining power, the political leadership in Baku has resisted undertaking reforms necessary for democratic development and closer engagement with the EU, despite Azerbaijan's participation in the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP)—a regional framework that envisages the development of market economies, the rule of law, and civil society in the region. At the stage of consolidating authoritarianism in the country, survey data (from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, CRRC, and EU Neighbours East) shows that perceptions of Europe have become ambivalent in Azerbaijan, with enfeebled interest in EU membership and limited trust in the EU compared to other EaP countries. This can be at least partially ascribed to the incoherencies of EU engagement in Azerbaijan, as

well as the framings of Europe in the country's dominant elite discourse—both political and cultural.

Against this background, pro-democracy civil society organisations (CSOs) in Azerbaijan have been vital societal advocates of European integration, promoting EU norms and visibility as well as pushing for a respective institutional reform agenda. Seen as domestic partners, the CSOs benefited from dynamic relations with the EU until 2013, when the authorities started to target civil society through increasingly restrictive legislation and repression (Pearce, 2015; Geybullayeva, 2015; Vincent, 2015). Contrary to normative expectations, the EU has shown restraint in publicly pressing for a value-driven policy in defence of domestic civil society and democratic institutions in Azerbaijan in light of its leadership's increasing authoritarianism. Instead of rendering the energy cooperation, development assistance and participation in regional projects conditional on enabling environment for civil society, rather, Brussels has continued to pursue pragmatic energy interests accommodating the ruling elite (Alieva et al., 2017). This behaviour has clearly left the remaining CSOs increasingly disillusioned and evidently diminished the EU's visibility as a normative power.

Based on original survey data collected from a variety of traditional NGOs and new civic initiatives in Azerbaijan, this article explores the EU in the discourses of civil society in the post-crackdown period. Taking into account the elite discourse and public opinion is important for studying the EU's external perceptions (Elgström/ Chaban, 2015); the article acknowledges that in the Azerbaijani context, the normative expectations from the EU on the part of the country's government and civil society vary significantly. Thus, the article firstly provides a background of elite framings of Europe and their impact on public opinion, and then presents the civil society perspectives. It concludes that 'conflicting role conceptions' (Bengtsson/ Elgström, 2012: 93) exist regarding the EU as a norm promoter due to the incoherence of its assumed role and existing practices in its relations with Azerbaijan.

Shifting Elite Discourse and Public Opinion

It has been 25 years since the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement which laid the foundation of EU–Azerbaijan relations in the economic and political spheres. At the time, the agenda of European integration was deeply embedded in the development orientation of Azerbaijan, as the EU was seen as an economic and normative great power. 'We see the future of our country in [European] integration', Ilham Aliyev affirmed one year after taking office as president in 2003 (Aliyev, 2011).

The attractiveness of Europeanisation in the region led Azerbaijan to join the EU's Neighbourhood Policy

in 2004, followed by the membership in the EaP in 2009. Associations in both initiatives meant that Azerbaijan committed to prioritising democratic norms in the country, along with market liberalisation and closer integration with Europe. Indeed, trade between Azerbaijan and the EU has proven the strongest dimension of cooperation: with 51% of Azerbaijan's export share in 2021, the EU has steadily turned into the country's biggest trading partner. Over 90% of Azerbaijan's exports to the EU are in the form of crude oil and natural gas, the main trading partners being Italy, Greece and Germany. In the meantime, ironically, Azerbaijan's ruling elite has sought to downgrade relations with the EU to an 'interest-based partnership' while broadly undermining Europeanisation (Simão, 2018).

The complex geopolitical neighbourhood of Azerbaijan, and especially the country's ambition to maintain a balanced foreign policy between Russia and the West for state and regime security and stability, is commonly acknowledged as the main reason for its restrained engagement with the EU. Particularly in the wake of the Russian–Georgian war in 2008, the EU—unable to serve as a guarantor of security in the region—had partially lost its political clout in the eyes of Azerbaijan's elites (Valiyev, 2009). Moreover, when it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan's key policy priority, the EU has not offered the support the government counted on. Although Brussels fully endorsed the principle of territorial integrity in the cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, it did not offer the same clear stance towards Azerbaijan and its issue with Nagorno-Karabakh (Simão, 2010).

Although geopolitical reasoning has played the largest role in the discussions of Azerbaijan's distancing from Europe from a foreign policy perspective, including the refusal to pursue the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, domestic reasons have been responsible for the authorities' reluctance to internalise European norms through bilateral agreements and the EaP framework. Emboldened by significant economic growth rates driven by export of oil resources (and the peak prices of the period 2004–2014), Aliyev's ruling elite saw the opportunity to take an authoritarian turn and consolidate the regime through seeking rents, bolstering patronage networks, and investing in its security infrastructure while withering independent societal actors (Guliyev, 2013). The willingness of the EU to continue energy cooperation despite the government's increased violations of fundamental political freedoms (including election-rigging) has been a major contributor to the emergence of a new vision in which democratic values have not been a necessary element of cooperation.

Although the EU has cemented its significance as a stable market for the export of fossil fuels as well as

an aid provider, it has failed to make these economic relations conditional on Azerbaijan's political reforms—especially in the judiciary (van Gils, 2017). Invigorated by this fact, Aliyev's elite started to frame the EU's norm promotion efforts—not only criticism of human rights violations, but also support for civil society—as an interference into the country's internal affairs (Umudiv, 2019). Moreover, in the official discourse, the EU was accused of double standards with regards to the Karabakh conflict, and this was used to target the EU as a normative actor and to justify Azerbaijan's non-democratic political system (Delcour/ Hoffmann, 2018).

Instead of focusing on developing direct cooperation with Brussels, the Azerbaijani leadership sought to build up or strengthen bilateral partnerships with individual EU members, such as Italy, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. However, it has remained important for the Aliyev regime to maintain a positive image and be accepted as a legitimate player in Europe. To secure such recognition, Azerbaijan put significant effort into its hosting of mega-events such as the Eurovision song contest in 2012 and the European Games in 2015 (Ismayilov, 2015). Furthermore, several corruption scandals have revealed that the Azerbaijani elite funnelled money to some European politicians to whitewash its image in European capitals.

In domestic politics, by contrast, anti-EU sentiment has grown and been reinforced by top officials, particularly targeting the normative image of Europe. 'Shall we integrate to a place where there is no difference being made between men and women? We definitely shall not [integrate to Europe]', Aliyev said in his address to students in Baku in 2019 (Samadov, 2019). The president's remarks gave rise to homophobic speech among officials asserting that homosexuality is an 'immoral political game' and a 'destructive force' imported by the West to undermine the traditional values of Azerbaijan (Rashidova, 2022). This was not only used to discredit the EU norms, but also to justify persecution of the LGBT community in the public eye.

The nation-building in Azerbaijan under the Aliyev family has been an 'elite-driven' process (Ismayilov 2015), hence the discursive framing of Europe for local citizens. This is also demonstrated in the finding of the EU Neighbourhood survey report in 2020, according to which 73% of Azerbaijanis who heard about the EU did so through national television (EU Neighbors East, 2020). Although this share is declining in light of the rise of online media, the television channels—all of which are controlled by the state—still have the far-reaching ability to manage the population's access to information about the EU. It is also important that official Baku has never painted a unified picture of Europe, and that sentiments tend to depend on the state of relations with the EU and its leading member states.

Data from an EU-supported opinion survey shows that, still, the three most attributed values to the EU are human rights, the rule of law, and economic prosperity (EU Neighbours East 2020). However, the ideals of Europeanisation, which were once embraced by almost all segments of society, are now deemed a failed venture due to the absence of progress in the elimination of systemic corruption, development of welfare as well as free-market economic opportunities, and provision of democratic rights in a country now independent for three decades. At the stage of authoritarian consolidation in Azerbaijan, the public trust in the EU and interest in being part of it clearly declined. For instance, support for the country's membership in the EU decreased from 50% in 2011 to 34% in 2013 (CRRC, 2011; CRRC, 2013). Meanwhile, trust in the EU among the Azerbaijani public was the lowest among South Caucasus states, with as few as 24% of respondents expressing full or partial trust in 2013 (CRRC, 2013). This period in Azerbaijan's history was marked by elevated state propaganda against Western values to the backdrop of pro-democracy mobilisations both in Azerbaijan and the wider region.

Furthermore, compellingly, there has been a sharp decline in the share of respondents who recently came across EU-related information, from 48% in 2016 to 26% in 2019, indicating a reduction in EU-related topics in the public narrative. Without causation being implied, the EU has been facing a visibility challenge in Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the government crackdown on civil society and the independent media—the key partners of the former in norm promotion (whose own perceptions of the EU have also worsened, as will be discussed in the next section).

Frustrated Civil Society

In spreading democratic norms in its Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU has attached crucial importance to civil society, which is also presented in official documents as 'a promoter of EU visibility' (Böttger/ Falkenhain, 2011; Luciani, 2021). The 2006 EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan, jointly adopted based on 'partnership, joint ownership and differentiation', emphasised strengthening civil society in order to improve and safeguard human rights and the rule of law in the country in line with Council of Europe standards.

Moreover, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) was created in 2009 with the intention to facilitate communication among non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the region and strengthen their dialogue—both with their respective governments and the EU. Under EaP CSF, a national platform consisting of domestic NGOs was established in Azerbaijan to coordinate and facilitate the implementation of the

EaP agenda at the domestic level. Despite the differences in political development trajectories among EaP states, in its updated regional policy ‘Beyond 2020’, an inclusive environment for CSOs remains one of the EU’s five priorities for helping to strengthen resilience in the region, including Azerbaijan (European Council, 2020).

Similarly to the other EaP member countries, Azerbaijan’s once lively civil society had been a vocal promoter of the idea of European integration (Alieva, 2014). In the past, non-governmental actors united around umbrella organisations to express European aspirations and continuously called on the government to sign an ambitious Association Agreement with the EU. Being part of Europe had been central in the narratives of Azerbaijan’s liberal and progressive civil society, albeit less so over the past decade. Before elaborating on the multiple reasons for this, it is essential to outline some caveats of EU–civil society engagement.

Firstly, since the beginning, the EU’s various forms of assistance for civil society has mainly been channelled to registered NGOs with the professional capacity and proficiency to deliver large project outcomes (Aliyev, 2016). Professionalisation of CSOs, driven by the bureaucratized relations with and financial dependence on the EU, in turn, resulted in further disengagement from the local society (Luciani, 2021). Additionally, although the EU developed several instruments for civil society support, its direct engagement mainly benefited NGOs with policy relevance, expertise, and channels of communication with the authorities, despite the closedness of the authoritarian regime to genuine dialogue with independent groups. Thus, the EU’s direct aid policy not only disregarded grassroots and community-based civil society development, but also strengthened a number of government-organised NGOs dominating the National Platform (van Gils, 2017). Moreover, although the EU emerged as a top funder of civil society in Azerbaijan with an allocation of EUR 13 million in direct assistance from 2007 to 2013, this was only 30% of its democracy support to the country: the remaining 70% went to the government (Shapovalova/ Youngs, 2012). These issues notwithstanding, independent CSOs had still enjoyed a relatively free operational environment and good connections with the EU, which allowed some of them to work on crucial areas such as media freedom, election observation, judicial reform, transparency, non-formal education, and more, until 2013.

Since 2013, however, the Azerbaijani government has targeted civil society by implementing restrictive NGO laws that curbed the ability of CSOs to register and receive Western funding on the one hand, and targeted known human rights NGO leaders on the other (Ismayil/ Remezaite, 2016). Western civil society support was not only curtailed — its non-governmental

recipients were also stigmatised in official discourse as ‘foreign agents.’ With its lacklustre response to the legislative changes that severely restricted basic operations of civil society, leading to the exodus of foreign donors, the EU started being perceived as a weak actor, failing to prevent domestic changes that directly contradicted its values. Azerbaijan’s civil society, decimated by politically motivated arrests and harassment by local law enforcement, increasingly began to lose trust in the EaP process. The situation has slightly improved since 2016, when imprisoned civil society leaders were released and new civic actors started to enter the stage, but there has been no major change to the institutional environment. To be sure, in recent years the EU has updated its civil society policy and has been increasingly supportive of independent community initiatives through third parties. However, these efforts remain low-profile and are not visibly linked to the EU in the public eye.

The sense of disillusionment with the EU has been pervasive among CSOs in Azerbaijan. The findings of the authors’ recent survey among a diversity of CSOs in Azerbaijan confirm that the latter’s view of the EU as a normative actor has plummeted in the post-crackdown period. Conducted online in July 2021 in Azerbaijani and English, the survey drew 53 responses from ‘traditional’ NGOs—both registered and unregistered—and new civic communities established after the crackdown (for details, see Zamejc, 2021). The areas of organisations’ activities vary from human rights and social rights to the arts, environment, gender, youth capacity-building, student activism, citizen journalism, research, and more. According to the respondents, the three most significant challenges of civil society in Azerbaijan are restrictive legislation (75%), limited funding (56%), and political discrimination (48%).

Although the awareness among civil society of the EaP framework is very high, one-third of the respondents said they have never participated in any EU-organised or supported activity. Interestingly, all respondents belonging to this group are CSOs that have been established after the crackdown, and the EU’s perceived ‘withdrawal’ from democracy promotion in the country. Especially in its time of crisis, at the point when civil society expected more explicit support from the EU, instead, the latter’s attention was diverted to the Association Trio: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, which the EU viewed as having a more promising environment (Zamejc, 2021). Overall, responses to the open-ended survey questions reflect a shared belief within civil society that the EU has scaled down norm promotion activities and is not using avenues of political conditionality to help overcome challenges of democracy in Azerbaijan:

‘At the time when restrictive legislation on freedom of assembly and association was enforced,

when limitations were imposed on the activities of political parties and funding of civil society, the EU acted more as an observer and failed to use any effective tools' (Respondent #5: unregistered NGO director, Baku).

'Because the European Union attaches great importance to oil and gas deals with Azerbaijan and it ignores its key goals.' (Respondent #7: Think tank director, Baku)

'The EU has the potential to influence; its role may be great, but it puts its interests above values. The EU has the power to influence the state of civil society. There must be a strategic approach not only at the level of expressing concern or recommendation, but also at the level of concrete steps' (Respondent #10: registered NGO director, Baku).

Asked to identify three major challenges facing Azerbaijan today, the CSO respondents pointed to increasing authoritarianism, corruption, and poverty. Accordingly, among its priority areas, Azerbaijani civic actors expect the EU to pay more attention to civil society participation (91%), democracy (83%), and economic sustainability (45%) in the country. Thus, despite recent disappointments, civic actors maintain normative expectations from the EU. In the common view of the respondents, the EU should level up pressure to change the NGO legislation, increase its visibility and seek alternative mechanisms to engage with Azerbaijani civil society.

'[The EU] must take a principled stand to influence the government and implement alternative mechanisms to support civil society' (Respondent #29: social entrepreneur, Baku).

'I think there is a need to increase the visibility of the EU in society. In addition, I believe that there is a need to improve the representation mechanisms of local NGOs in the National Platform [of EaP CSF] and to provide opportunities for independent and new NGOs to be represented there' (Respondent #38: representative of a new civic platform, Baku).

'I think in order to solve problems, one needs to understand them. It would be very good if the Baku office of the European Union first met with local initiative groups and identified their needs. [...] A clear strategic plan should then be developed in an inclusive manner' (Respondent #36: leader of a new civic initiative, Baku).

According to a recent report, apart from energy interests overshadowing democracy promotion and dysfunctionality of the National Platform of NGOs in Azerbaijan, another reason for the EU's diminished image, as seen

by civil society, lies in the EU's failure to demonstrate a consistent approach to the solution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Zamejc, 2021). Although this is an overlapping frustration of both the government and CSOs, in general, normative expectations from the EU at the levels of the autocratic elite and pro-democracy civil society in Azerbaijan are markedly different. These tensions in expectations have pushed the EU to move the democratic agenda to closed-door initiatives such as the Human Rights Dialogue with the government; starting in 2019, it however has not paved the way for any positive political development to date. This approach has added to the sense of being side-lined on the part of civil society, further contributing to the disillusionment of the latter about the significance attached to it.

Concluding Remarks

This article has presented civil society perspectives on the diminishing normative power of the EU in the broader context of shifting elite discourses shaping public opinion. Our findings are in line with Bengtsson/ Elgström (2012: 94), who argued that 'incoherence between self-perceptions and others' perceptions of EU actions may create tensions that influence the interaction between the parties and that hinder EU efforts to spread values and norms'. In the case of Azerbaijan, such incoherence is stemming from the EU's assumed role as a norm promoter and its actual performance in doing so—a gap between words and deeds.

While intending to promote its 'normalities'—namely, peace, democracy, and human rights—with bilateral agreements and regional integration frameworks (Bengtsson/ Elgström, 2012), the EU has over the past decade found itself tacitly supporting the authoritarian rule of the Azerbaijani government by prioritising energy cooperation despite systematic undemocratic developments. Thus—with the suspension of Belarus—Azerbaijan remains the only EaP country in which the situation for civil society has in fact worsened since joining the programme. As a result, available public opinion data and our civil society survey results show that the EU is facing a trust and visibility challenge, not only among ordinary Azerbaijanis, but also among members of CSOs.

Meanwhile, Baku has been engaged in closed-door negotiations with the EU since 2017 over a new partnership agreement. Delays in the adoption of the new framework may indicate difficulties in reaching mutually accepted priorities for cooperation. Notwithstanding the domestic anti-EU narrative, the government expects the new agreement to open pathways for further economic cooperation and investment—while local civil society hopes the partnership framework can help lift some restrictive policies and reopen Azerbai-

jan's civic space. Following the war in Ukraine and the Western sanctions on Russian oil and gas, the energy security agenda is certain to play a prominent role in EU–Azerbaijan ties. However, this approach risks further softening of the EU stance on the country's (un) democratic performance and the further decline of its image in the eyes of civil society.

In fact, as an attractive economic partner and increasingly important geopolitical player, the EU has significant bargaining power to merge its pragmatic interests with the norm promotion dimension. The EU's biggest

asset is its sizeable export market, strong development assistance and investment potential, as well as the policy know-how necessary to boost lagging reforms in key sectors such as education and healthcare. Last but not least, the war in Ukraine makes it even more important for Azerbaijan to strengthen its ties with Brussels to counterbalance Russian ambitions in the region. These strengths could be instrumentalised by the EU in the negotiations to regain its normative visibility in the country and overcome its hitherto restrained approach in terms of direct engagement with pro-democracy actors.

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Proving the ‘European Way’: The West in Georgian Far-Right Discourse

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Abstract

Analysing the broad far-right discourse in Georgia over two periods (the late 1980s and 2015–2020), the article draws on the main trends in articulating the idea of ‘Europe’ and offers the explanatory frameworks behind varying perceptions as well as their instrumental conceptualisations. The analysis argues that the somewhat idealised vision of ‘the West’, in earlier times representing the sole legitimate alternative to the Soviet system, has nowadays transformed into a novel construction concerning different, Manichean faces of Europe, only one of which is ‘acceptable’ for the contemporary far-right. Finally, the article offers several contextual schemata through which these similarities and transformations could be explained: expanded informational as well as relational engagement with European countries and structures, the resurgence of diffusing national-populist narratives across Europe, and the overarching positive connotation of the Occident in the country. Thus, the article offers a brief insight into the Georgian case, which displays the contested inclusion of the idea of Europe in far-right’s mobilisation strategies.

Introduction

‘To those who have been defining Europe for us, we are now responding by showing that this is not Europe that you have been trying to introduce to the people—Europe is diversity and it is returning to the nation-states, to its core ideology’ declares Respondent #16, the leading member of a contemporary national-populist political movement in Georgia. Meanwhile, one leading member of the nationalist political movements in the late 1980s recalls: ‘we were thinking that the West was an absolute freedom. But then we realised the rule of law, human rights, the protection of the minorities. These were some words that we would hear and did not know the meaning of.’ (Respondent #5)

The perspectives, anticipations, and even the interpretations of ‘the West’ have not been persistent in post-Communist Georgia’s political and social spectrum. While there have been growing societal fears over cultural intrusion fuelled by conservative groups, Georgian political elite discourses were almost wholly focused on a European future for the country, implying both institutional cooperation and cultural integration (Mestvirishvili/ Mestvirishvili, 2014).

As argued in this article, in the late Soviet period, the somewhat idealised notion of ‘the West’ represented the sole legitimate alternative to the Soviet system and an ultimate (positive) reference for the advocates of an independent Georgia back in the 1980s. Several decades into the transition, though, the newly expanding far-right discourse¹ in the country not only brings up

a EU-sceptic narrative, but also attempts at recontextualising the core associated concepts (liberal democracy, freedom of expression, etc.) by constructing a new narrative about different, Manichean faces of Europe. In this dualistic construction, one face of Europe is imagined as conservative, nationalist and (legitimately) exclusionary, while the other is liberal, self-destructive and intrusive in other state’s affairs. In this conception, the latter is artificial, with the former being the authentic face of Europe.

For the contemporary far-right, Europe has thus become a point of both positive and negative references. The rise of radical right in European states (for more on this, see Caiani/ Císar, 2019) has offered their Georgian counterparts the opportunity to articulate and provide a new interpretation of Europe vis-à-vis positive political elite narratives and societal scepticism on cultural grounds (Gilbreath, 2019). As discussed below, Georgia experienced a rise in radical right discourse by the late 1980s (see Reisner, 2009) as well as in the contemporary period since 2015² (Gelashvili, 2019; Stephan, 2018). Analysing the far-right discourse over the two periods, the article draws on the main trends in articulating the idea of ‘Europe’ and attempts at providing an explanatory context to it. Indeed, this comparison does not assume the institutional continuity between the two time periods, but rather the contribution to the broad far-right discourse as conceptually set out below. In this way, the article offers a brief insight in far-right mobilisation strategies in Georgia, which displays the

1 Discourse is understood as ‘the imbrication of speaking and writing in the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations, and in ideological processes and ideological struggle’ (Fairclough, 2013, p. 129).

2 The analysis mainly focuses on the period of 2015–2020.

contested inclusion of the idea of Europe in the far-right's mobilisation strategies.

The 'far-right', according to Mudde (2017), is used as an umbrella term in the article composing the categories of the radical and extreme right, to be further subcategorised as right-wing nationalism, national-populism, and nativism. The category therefore enables analysing a spectrum of the right-wing movements in the country. Using analytical tools offered by discourse analysis, the article examines the data retrieved from the author's semi-structured interviews³ with members of the far-right movement and media analysis.

Europe in Georgian Historical Consciousness

Before discussing the nuances of the transforming meaning of 'the West' across Georgian far-right discourses, 'the West's' historically positive connotation in Georgia in terms of progress and development has to be contextualised. Within the broad conception of 'the West', Georgian public perception traditionally held a combined symbolic vision on Europe and the United States (US) (Nodia, 1998). Hence, this analysis interchangeably refers to 'the West' or to Europe.

The first appearances and discussions regarding 'the West' in Georgia are usually traced back to the intellectuals of the 19th century who accessed European culture and literature via their Russian education. Precisely then, the idea of liberty acquired its place in the Georgian national consciousness through German literature translated into Russian (Brisku, 2017). Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907)—widely labelled as the founding father of Georgia's national project—spoke about the cultural and political civilisation of Europe having its influence on Georgia too. Thus, aligned with the measured scepticism regarding the Europeaness of Georgia, the authors of the 'first nationalist project' in the late 19th century established a positive 'European ideal' which in their minds was the path forward for Georgia (Zhordania, 2020). Georgian progressives are believed to have been inspired by models of liberation utilised in Greece or Italy (Jones, 2003, p. 91).

After Sovietisation and life under Communist rule for 70 years, Georgia's intended path towards 'the West' not only represented the starkest possible turn from Rus-

sia, but indeed its sole alternative for many (Rondeli 2001). Even for Zviad Gamsakhurdia (the first president of independent Georgia 1991–1992)—who was held responsible by some authors for the anti-Western turn of the country due to his governing style (Jones, 1994)—'the West' seemed like the natural home for Georgia (Brisku, 2017). Christian civilisation and associated values, together with cultural history and literature, began to dominate the argument about Georgia's legitimate place within Europe (Gamsakhurdia, 1990). Following independence, the later political elite in the 1990s not only took the positive connotation of Europe further, but also contributed to increasing optimism regarding Georgia's Western integration.⁴

Even though the discussions on 'the West' had established itself firmly across the Georgian political spectrum since the late 1980s, only a decade later, in October 2000, did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia publish its concept of the country's political direction. The document coined what has become the official policy for Georgia's recent history:

'the highest priority of Georgian foreign policy is to achieve full integration in the European political, economic and security structures, thus fulfilling the historical aspiration of the Georgian nation to participate fully in the European Community' (translated in Rondeli, 2001, p. 197).

Not only the documents, but also the prominent members of the political elite from the late 1990s have brought the narrative of "back to the Europe" to the fore in public discussions. So was the famous phrase first uttered in 1999 at the European Council General Assembly by then Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania—'I am Georgian, therefore I am European'.⁵ Such a narrative was furthered by former Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili when he declared in 2016: 'Georgia has returned to its European roots, and this is where we intend to stay',⁶ echoing the rhetoric of ex-president Saakashvili (2013): 'This is not, of course, a new path for Georgia, but rather a return to our European home and our European vocation, which is so deeply enshrined in our national identity and history'.⁷ Hence, the Western integration acquired not only strategic, but also a cultural legitimisation, finding its echo in the overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards European integration

3 The interview questions were categorised into the six following subjective blocks: (1) Reasons for establishing movement/party; (2) Ideas about Europe; (3) Georgia/Georgianness; (4) Christianity; (5) National Challenges; and (6) 'The West' and Russia.

4 'Address of H. E. Eduard Shevardnadze at the Inauguration of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement in Luxembourg, June 1999, Georgia's State Chancellery Archive (in English) quoted in Rondeli, 2001, p. 208.

5 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP83XGY7TZs> (accessed 22 April 2022).

6 'Georgia Celebrates a Quarter Century of Independence—Giorgi Kvirikashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia', Government of Georgia, 26 May 2016, http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=399&info_id=55760 (accessed 22 April 2022).

7 'Saakashvili's Speech at the UN General Assembly', *Civil.Ge* (blog), 27 September 2007, <https://civil.ge/archives/113121> (accessed 22 April 2022).

across the Georgian public.⁸ It is also worth mentioning that Western integration for Georgian society has first and foremost been defined by security and economic aspirations.⁹ Above all, though, ‘the West’ has been seen as ‘space created by an advanced civilisation, a model of modernity, and a geopolitical umbrella’ for Georgia (Lejava, 2021).

The discursive construction of Europe, following Vobruba (2012, p. 263), is a dynamic and at times contradictory process. Especially taking into account the daily (re)negotiation of the idea of Europe, media coverage and the increasing importance of discussions in social media on such subjects demonstrate the ‘open-endedness’ of this construction (Hepp et al., 2016, p. 231). In the Georgian case, even though it has mostly been perceived positively, Europe has been divergently constructed by different actors. This context assists those wishing to understand the context-dependence of the radical right’s discursive strategies in reference to the West.

The Far-Right Then

The years 1989–1991 represented the glory days of the fight for Georgia’s independence. Following Snyder (2000, p. 32), ‘popular nationalism typically arises during the earliest stages of democratisation, when elites use nationalist appeals to compete for popular support’. The discourses utilised throughout that period reinterpreted earlier forms of nationalist projects and provided new discursive frames. This period is considered in the literature as a classic example of post-Soviet nationalism due to the discourses that discounted ethnic minorities, propelled ethnic tensions, and deepened economic and cultural polarisation in the country, creating the fertile ground for the civil war (1991–1993) (Parts, 2015, p. 508).

The dynamics of the nationalist political spectrum were everchanging throughout the late 1980s, during the fall of the Soviet Union, catching the attention of the US.¹⁰ There were at least thirteen prominent political parties/movements with a nationalist or national-conservative agenda¹¹ within the broader National-Liberation Movement (NLM)¹² in the country active during this period (see Figure 1 on p. 22).

These actors would interchangeably cooperate and dissolve, create new organisations, or rename existing groups following different events. Their strategies were at times contradictory, as were their perspectives on specific policies (minority issues, relations with Russia, protest methods, etc.). Thus, keeping in mind the considerable intragroup differences (which cannot be addressed in the scope of this article), the movement falls under the category of far-right insofar as it largely constructed the nationalist and national-populist discourse of the period.

The Far-Right Now

A diverse selection of NLM organisations have fragmentally become points of positive reference and/or sources of declared inspiration for some of the contemporary far-right actors.

‘The national rhetoric of the 90s was really an expression of the soul, it was a very sincere national movement. It was very sincere, based on reality, very emotional.’ (Respondent # 18).

‘overthrowing him [Gamsakhurdia] was the biggest tragedy and probably the biggest crime in the history of Georgia... I cannot remember any other crime as horrible’ (Respondent #12).

However, notably, contemporary actors do not shy away from labelling the NLM as rather inexperienced and politically incompetent (Respondent #20). Hence, while there is a degree of a linkage (‘I was growing up in the circle of Gamsakhurdia’, as declared by Respondent #12), it would be wise not to overestimate the relation of the actors/movements and rather analyse the broad right-wing discourse over the two periods.

The renewed rise of contemporary far-right discourse in Georgia became rather obvious in 2015, when the ‘Alliance of Patriots of Georgia’ acquired its first electoral success and representation in the parliament. Since then, Georgia has observed a noticeable increase in far-right discourse on social and political platforms. Another movement, ‘Georgian March’, which appeared in 2017 and turned into a political party in 2020, became known by elevating issues of immigration, foreign cultural influence, and Orthodox Christianity vis-à-vis LGBT rights, as well as its anti-establishment positions. Accord-

8 Caucasus Research Resource Centers, ‘GEEUSUPP: Majority of Georgian citizens support Georgia becoming a EU member state’, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/GEEUSUPP/ (accessed 22 April 2022).

9 Caucasus Research Resource Centers, ‘EUECOABR: Agree/Disagree: The EU promotes the economic development of countries outside EU’, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/EUECOABR/ (accessed 22 April 2022).

10 ‘IDFI—Classified Document on Georgia’, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 27 May 2016, <https://idfi.ge:443/en/idfi-classified-document-on-georgia-s-independence> (accessed 18 June 2022).

11 Helsinki Union; Monarchist (Conservative) Party; Society of St. Iliia the Righteous; Merab Kostava Society; National-Democratic Party of Georgia; Party of National Independence; Iliia Chavchavadze Society—the Fourth Troupe; Democratic Party of Georgia; Rustaveli Society; Party of Georgian National Justice; Christian-Democratic Youth Association; The Union of Georgian National Pride; and People’s Front.

12 I deploy the commonly used (in Georgian historiography and public discussions) category to refer to the parties, social movements and organisations with the nationalist/national-conservative/national-populist agenda in the late 1980s.

ingly, the two actors' discourses and political strategies resemble each other mainly in their usage of national historical figures and associating the Orthodox church with Georgian identity.

Georgian March from its earliest appearances ascribed its formation to the 'rise of nationalism' in Europe and the US and shaped its mobilising strategies mainly around immigration, Turkophobic, homophobic and anti-establishment sentiment, appeals to direct democracy (via referenda and online polls) and socio-economic issues (Desatge, 2021; Gozalishvili, 2021a).

'Alt-Info', a media outlet with a clear anti-liberal and anti-LGBT rights agenda, which also appeared in Georgia around 2018, transformed in 2021 into the political party, 'Conservative Movement'. The latter runs one of the most extensive Georgian-language social media networks, a TV channel, and a website, all allegedly providing the political actor with increased popularity and mobilisation power (Gozalishvili, 2021b). 'Georgian Idea' (GI),¹³ another prominent far-right political party, was founded in 2014. GI has been connected with Georgian March and Alt-Info on several occasions.¹⁴

In considerable contrast to the far-right of the 1980s, contemporary actors are distinguished by their recently-increasing advocacy for 'restoring friendly relations' with Russia (European Values Center for Security Policy, 2021). For precisely such a stance, the contemporary far-right in Georgia has increasingly been labelled pro-Russian in the media. This highly relevant matter, however, exceeds the scope of this article.

'Europe' Then

By the late 1980s, idealist perceptions of the 'free West' defined the expectations and narratives of Georgia's National-Liberation Movement about Europe. Looking back, these actors explain the idealisation of 'the West' as 'a naïve perception' (Respondent #8). As one Respondent explained: 'then I was more excited about it, of course, it was a dream part of the world, a symbol of freedom, so to speak, a symbol of democracy' (Respondent #7). In this milieu, while the actors declared 'the West' to have been their main political role model, this does not seem to have been rationally decided, but rather an impulse to follow: 'for us, Europe was more of an emotional vision than it was in reality. We did not know what "the West" was' (Respondent #5). However, noticeably, other actors pre-emptively deny having had illusions about Europe and have attempted to rationalise their inclinations with the concepts such as human rights, freedom, and democracy that they imagined 'the West' through.

Even so, none deny a more 'realistic' and informed vision of Europe now.

For the NLM's discourse, the two leading concepts primarily associated with 'the West' were freedom (liberty) and Christian civilisation. At the backdrop of this construction were the hopes for security and a path to an alternative development of Georgia. Even in the local newspapers, the political movement at times used English text for addressing 'the West' on the opening page together with the homage text to the highly respected leader of the NLM, Merab Kostava (see Figure 2 on p. 23).

Indeed, 'the West', besides being an inspirational and resourceful (potential) partner, has carried both strategic and legitimising undertones for these actors. However, the attitudes towards and imagination of 'the West' in the late 80s–early 90s must be considered as informed by the strong opposition to the Soviet system at that time.

'The West' was often interpreted via conceptions of an antique civilisation, a tradition of Christianity and Roman law forming its bedrock. However, the idea of freedom—which also appeared as the locally most relevant issue by the time—seems to have prevailed in the actors' conception of 'the West', particularly when they located Georgia within it:

'we have this awareness that we are deeply rooted in our historical connection with "the West", Europe—we are freedom-loving people, Georgians cannot stand being in obedience to someone' (Respondent #6).

Georgia's place in 'the West' is primarily justified via the 'civilisational' narrative, through which Christianity provides an eternal bond. Interestingly, the meaning of Christianity was then tied to the ideas of freedom and democracy, creating a natural circle: ['"the West"'] is foremost a Christian and democratic world, a free world, based on Christian faith' (Respondent #3). Even the cultural, economic, and scientific achievements that the actors associate Europe with are contextualised within the narrative of Christian people and culture: 'because Christians created a huge culture, for some reason now they call it European, it's a Christian civilisation' (Respondent #5).

For these political movements, articulation of 'the West' thus provided the relevant frame to construct the face of Christian Georgia as well, allegedly belonging to the former. Values such as the rule of law, human rights, and protection of minorities were associated with 'the West'; however, the exact meaning of these, according to the respondents, was unclear for the majority of them (Respondent #5). Furthermore, Western culture seems

13 See <http://qartuliidea.ge/> (accessed 22 April 2022).

14 'Georgian Idea—Mythdetector.Ge', <https://mythdetector.ge/en/profiles/georgian-idea/> (accessed 22 April 2022).

to have become trendy by that time: ‘you were not considered as a cool person, if you were a supporter of the Soviet Union and if you did not like America’ (Respondent #6). Hence, the cultural acquaintance with ‘the West’ seems to have been deeper than the political. This has perhaps led the narratives to be focused mainly on cultural (and civilisational) factors.

Interpreting the events from Europe was also used for justifying the local political orientation:

‘As odd as it may sound, unhurried and patient Europeans—Czechs, Slovaks, Germans—showed such an “impetuousness” that they managed to overthrow the unwanted regime. What are we waiting for?’ (*Democrat Teacher’s Union*, 1989, Saba #2).

Thus, earlier construction of Europe ought to be summarised as overly positive, strategic, legitimising, informed by the opposition to the Soviet Union, and, in turn, used for mobilising purposes.

‘Europe’ Now

When looking at the contemporary far-right actors, it is necessary to establish the considerable differences in agenda and talking points as compared to those of the above-mentioned actors. The contemporary actors have not only taken advantage of the positive connotation of ‘the West’ developed within the Georgian political elite discourse, but also attempted at interpreting and recontextualising the idea of Europe in their mobilising strategies.

The contemporary far-right discourse makes use of cases such as Brexit to legitimise anti-EU and anti-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) sentiments in order not to openly oppose integration, but to do so more subtly by implication: ‘the EU has unfortunately disgusted so many countries with its liberal actions that England, the conservative country of Great Britain [...] refused to stay in the EU’ (Respondent #15). As opposed to expressing a desire to work within the existing European structures, the actors accentuate the ‘crisis of liberalism in Europe’ and the possibility to instead integrate into a sort of potential future ‘Christian-Democratic sphere’ (Respondent #19). The political actors also speak of the ‘excessive’ image of Europe in Georgia and stress that the public shall know of ‘the real situation there’.

This ‘real’ situation is articulated as two competing ‘Europes’, where one is preferred for its classical values (‘a continent of conservative, traditional values’, Respondent #12) and another is discarded as hijacked by its most destructive and intrusive liberal elements (‘Europeans wrap themselves around us with non-tradi-

tional liberal matters, but only the *liberast*¹⁵ wing. The conservatives will not dare doing so’, Respondent #15). Hence, the contemporary far-right has repeatedly (positively) referred to the policies of such leaders as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or the Italian Matteo Salvini in their activities and proposals for local changes (e.g., anti-LGBT laws, immigration regulation, etc.) since the former is seen as a ‘celebrated European leader’ (Gozalishvili, 2021a).

Christianity remains a defining aspect of Georgianness in the far-right discourse, defining the perspective of Europe too: ‘we are Christians and Christianity is a national ideology. Europe, which preaches marriage of men with men [...] Georgia will never go to that Europe, and if we go, we will perish’ (Respondent #11). Instead, the actors emphasise that Georgians have been provided with a wrong image of Europe and the ‘real Europe’ is turning to its roots and is indeed conservative, traditional, Christian unity of sovereign nation-states. Hence, the actors attempt to malign the liberal values of Europe and, at the same time, to create an image of Europe that adds to their self-legitimation:

‘the entire European political reality is based on a party tradition that pursues the interests of the Protestant or Catholic Church via Christian Democratic Parties. So those who preach to us, have churches with their political parties’ (Respondent #20).

In sum, the construction of Europe by contemporary far-right Georgian actors first, builds upon on a strategic recontextualisation of Europe’s wide-ranging positive connotation; second, is informed by the resurgence of counterpart powers in ‘the West’; third, is highly sceptical towards the existing integrational structure, but assumes its transformation; fourth, is strategically used for mobilisation purposes; and fifth, in comparison with the narratives from the 1980s, places less focus on the ideas of freedom, human rights, democracy, and Georgia’s security path. As a result, contemporary far-right movements/groups provide a new version of one ‘acceptable’ Europe out of two, that is defined by their ideological counterparts. In this way, the construction is meant to legitimise their own ‘Europeanness’.

Some Explanatory Frameworks

Continuities and transformations in the construction of Europe within the far-right discourse converge around the legitimising function of the West, omnipresent in the country. As discussed elsewhere, legitimation can be understood as ‘part of a far-reaching and contested process of constructing Europe communicatively’ (Hepp et al., 2016, p. 230). Below, the article offers interpretative frameworks that may help in comprehending the

15 A Georgian slur uniting liberal and homosexual (pejorative reference ‘pederast’, taken from the Russian) in one word.

similarities and differences in constructing the idea of Europe between the discussed groups.

For understanding this legitimising function that the right-wing radical nationalist groups attempt at reclaiming, the increasing positive connotation of Europe has to be contextualised. Compared to the late Soviet period, the contemporary understanding and construction of Europe in far-right discourse have to be analysed in the setting of the degree of structural integration that Georgia has gone through over the past three decades. Together with the degree of integration, the public perceptions about Europe have become more practical and realistic, having its reflection on the political narratives in the country.¹⁶

Vis-a-vis the illusion-based perceptions of the earlier right-wing radical groups, the contemporary far-right spectrum operates within a framework in which the relevance and frequency of public discussions about the West are amplified. However, this does not mean there has been a linear increase in familiarity with either the idea of Europe, or the EU as an institution. Above all, ambivalent attitudes towards Europe have become more common in the country, with 39% of the public believing in the EU's potential threat to Georgian traditions by 2020 (Lejava, 2021). The contemporary far-right instrumentalises this ambivalence and attempts to use the ready-made positive framework of the West for self-legitimisation (affiliating itself with the Western far-right), all the while maintaining its generally anti-Western outlook (denouncing 'the liberal part of Europe').

Secondly, the transformations can also be explained through the increased role of 'mediated politics' and access to providing recontextualised and reinterpreted information (primarily) online. The social network media plays a significant role in diffusing discursive

frames and constructing a collective identity for the contemporary far-right (Caiani/ Kroll, 2015). Such media not only provides a direct political platform for today's far-right actors, but also a space for mutual references, framing issues, and referring to the 'Western cases' later used for self-legitimisation and mutual identification. In comparison, the relevance of 'mediated' politics and discourses provides a new context for analysis as opposed to the traditionally appropriated spatial and temporal proximities when studying transnational linkages and perceptions. Reinterpreting the idea of Europe through the actions and narratives of the far-right serves as a tool in the hands of these actors to reinterpret the idea of Europe all while also maintaining its positive connotation to be used in their mobilising attempts.

Finally, the article aimed to analyse the broad far-right discourse in Georgia over the two periods (the late 1980s and the period 2015–2020) in terms of the articulation of the West as a symbolic space. Several observations are to be made. Firstly, the West has carried a legitimising undertone in the far-right discourse, with increasingly differentiated references from the contemporary groups. Secondly, while the West primarily meant a distant, Christian civilisation and culture for the actors who constructed the earlier right-wing nationalist narratives, nowadays the West, and particularly Europe, is constructed in two ways: a real, conservative Europe defined by the far-right counterparts there, and self-destructive, artificial liberal Europe. Finally, in contrast to the narratives from the 1980s, contemporary discourse places less focus on the ideas of freedom, human rights, democracy, and national security in reference to the West, preferring instead to enjoy the benefits of instrumentalising political ambivalence and the prospect of negotiating with Russia.

About the Author

Nino Gozlishvili is a PhD candidate at Central European University (CEU), Vienna, pursuing the Nationalism Studies and Comparative History joint doctoral program. This analysis is part of her dissertation project.

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¹⁶ Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 'Knowledge of and Attitudes toward the EU in Georgia Time-Series Dataset', https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/GEEUSUPP/ (accessed 16 June 2022).

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Figure 1: Political Parties/Movements with a Nationalist or National-Conservative Agenda within the Broader National-Liberation Movement (NLM) in Georgia Active during the Late 1980ies

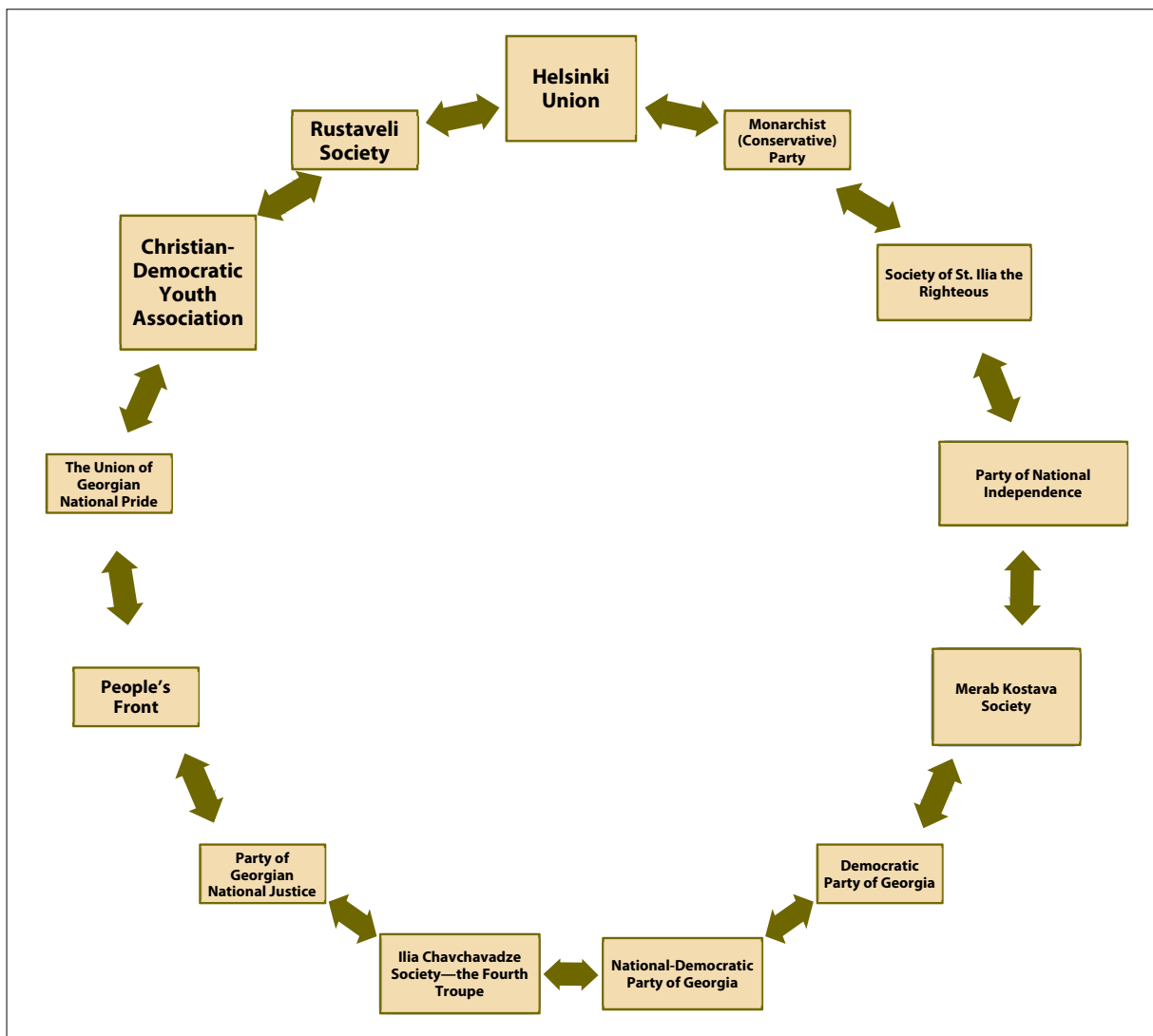
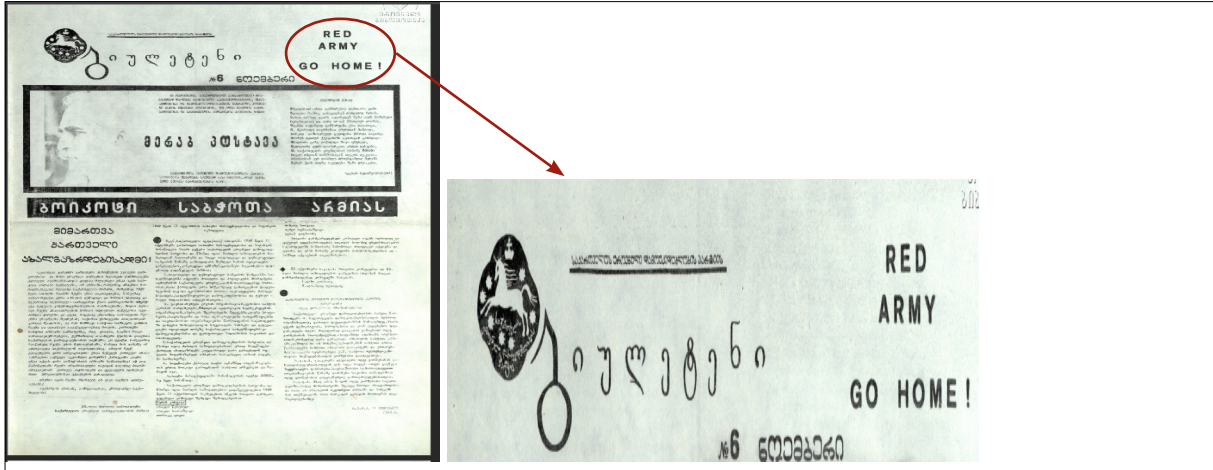


Figure 2: 'Biuletini [Bulletin] #6.' Georgian National Independence Party, November 1989, 6th edition. National Parliamentary Library of Georgia.



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