

Peace-building in the South Caucasus through the Eastern Partnership: What is the new role for the EU?

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Acknowledging the increasing security challenges in Eastern Europe, this article aims to analyse the European Union's (EU) policy vis-à-vis the South Caucasus states in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. The author argues that the EU's external governance toolbox has had a limited overall impact on conflict resolution in the South Caucasus countries. Meanwhile, recent developments in Ukraine have increased the political responsibility and engagement of the EU and its Member states with respect to acting to protect its founding values as the Russian Federation irreversibly threatens regional and global security. This article concludes that the EU has revised its European integration framework towards Georgia, taking into consideration the increasing security challenges in the region, and has initiated a 'European membership perspective'. With regard to the normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the EU's expanded role as a mediator of this process is considered to be a contribution of the EU to peace-building.

Keywords: The EU, Eastern Partnership, Normative Power, European Integration, Russia, Peace, South Caucasus.



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Introduction

The aims of the EU's foreign and security policy across the world include a concern for the peace-building process in the South Caucasus, although the framework of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme has never contained a clear-cut goal for resolving conflicts in the countries of that region.¹ The ongoing war in Ukraine is irreversibly changing the security architecture of Europe and the foreign and security policy agenda of the EU. Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine is posing hybrid threats to Europe and Eastern European countries. This indefensible act of aggression of the Russian Federation also has implications for the security issues of the South Caucasus countries, and can open the door to unique and historic prospects for the EU to deepen and strengthen its relations with the countries of this region.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the increasing peace-building role of the EU in the South Caucasus. Thus, this article aims to respond to questions about the extent to which the EaP framework envisaged security threats in the South Caucasus, and how the EU currently sees and designs its role in the region as an actor in the peace-building process.

Methodologically, the article analyses the EU's strategic documents regarding the EaP, as well as bilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation between the EU and the South Caucasus countries since the introduction of the EaP initiative. The EU's 'normative' and 'civilizing' power explains the Union's limited capacity to engage with and impact on the conflicts in the region. However, this article shows the shift in responsibility of the EU from acting as a stabilizing actor to increasing its impact on the peace-building process. The aggressive war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine is analysed in the context of the EU's reconsideration of its security-providing and conflict-preventing power with respect to the EaP countries.

The EU's normative power in its foreign policy

Promoting the founding values of the EU and maintaining peace constitute the primary objectives of the Union according to Article 3.1.

¹ Treaty on European Union (2008) Consolidated Version of the Treaty of Lisbon, 9 May 2008, Official Journal of the European Communities L C 115/13, Article 21.

of the Treaty on the European Union. The legal basis for the Union's external action is provided by Article 21 of the Treaty on the European Union:

*The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.*²

Guided by its internal situation of peace, the EU, through different frameworks of cooperation approaches its neighbourhood and provides external governance as a projection of its internal policies.³

The nature of the EU, as a power in world politics, is controversial and debated in theoretical and practical discourses. In EU scholarship, it is mostly argued to be a 'civilian power', a 'civilizing power' and a 'normative power'.⁴ Although the EU expects to act as a 'normative' and 'civilizing' power beyond its borders, from an effectiveness perspective, this perception is a self-portrait by the EU.⁵

The unique nature of the EU provides extensive possibilities for interpreting the means and boundaries of its actions. It is evident that the EU, as a global actor, is seeking to be a presence in third countries and, through its 'Europeanisation' mechanisms, to achieve peace, prosperity and security.

The EU designed foreign policy instruments for approaching the Eastern European countries according to the objective of stimulating the process of security and stability while, in fact, providing only a modest actual impact concerning security.

2 Ibid.

3 Lavenex, S., "EU External Governance in 'Wider Europe'", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11 (4), 2004, pp. 680–700.

4 F. Duchêne, "Europe's Role in World Peace", in R. Mayne (ed.), *Europe Tomorrow: Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead*, London, Fontana, pp. 32–47; Hill, C., "European Foreign Policy: Power Bloc, Civilian Model – or Flop?" in R. Rummel (ed.), *The Evolution of an International Actor*, Boulder, CO, USA, Westview, 1990, pp. 31–55; Manners, I., "Normative Power: a contradiction in terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40 (2), 2002, pp. 235–258.

5 Schimmelfennig, F., "Europeanization beyond the member states", *ETH Zurich*, paper for Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften, Center for Comparative and International Studies, 2010; Schimmelfennig, F., 'Europeanization beyond Europe', *Living Reviews in European Governance*, Vol. 10 (5), 2015.

The responsibility of the EU to act as a value-based actor has increased due to the immense threats in its Eastern neighbourhood.

The responsibility of the EU to act as a value-based actor has increased due to the immense threats in its Eastern neighbourhood. These include the former territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine, and the Russian occupation of territories in Georgia. It is evident that the EU has revised and reconsidered its role and engagement in Eastern Europe. The EaP, the decisive tool of the EU, encompasses all Eastern European countries including those of the South Caucasus. The values of the EU are implicit in this instrument and through it have strengthened the bilateral and multilateral relations of the countries concerned. However, peace, a founding value of the EU, has not been achieved in Eastern Europe and a rapprochement of the vision of the EU and an upgraded framework of cooperation are required.

The Eastern Partnership: Efficiency of the EU’s strategic documents

The primary objective of the EaP was to extend and intensify relations with Eastern European countries that were initially developed through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).⁶ The EaP Joint Declaration of 2009 states that this partnership aims at accelerating ‘political association and further economic integration between the EU and interested [Eastern] partner countries’.⁷ The EaP aimed at upgrading the contractual relationships between the EU and Eastern countries through the introduction of cooperation with the objectives of (a) political association and (b) gradual economic integration into the internal market of the EU.⁸ Pursuant to this aim, the EaP sought to support political and socio-economic reforms in the partner countries, and to facilitate their alignment with the EU.⁹

Lavenex argues that the ENP could be defined as a process of ‘external projection of internal policies’.¹⁰ The EaP, as a logical continuation

6 Wolczuk, K., “Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries’ political elites”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

7 Council of the European Union, “Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit”, May 7, 2009, p. 6.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Lavenex, S., “EU External Governance in ‘Wider Europe’”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 11 (4), 2004, p. 689.

of the ENP, is methodologically similar to the previously existing discourse of external governance and the EU toolbox. However, it is the implication of increased differentiation and local ownership that is especially relevant for the South Caucasus countries. The EU approach is founded on a presumption of the value-based transformation of its neighbourhood, which it achieves by admitting states with financial and technical resources and pressuring governments to pursue reform-oriented, inclusive local processes.¹¹

The initial partner countries of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova) share common legacies. However, significant differences appear not only geopolitically, but also in their preferences vis-à-vis the EU, especially in the countries of the South Caucasus.¹² Belarus suspended its participation in the EaP in 2021 and the EU has progressively imposed restrictive measures against that country due to the election results. In addition, the EU imposed measures on Belarus due to its actions contrary to international law and called on it to stop collaborating in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.¹³ Belarus is an exceptional case of the EU's negative conditionality because of the use of sanctions against this neighbouring country. In contrast, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova benefited from being 'front runners' in this partnership framework and are considered 'associated trio' countries after signing Association Agreements (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreement (DCFTA) in 2014.¹⁴ The South Caucasus is not a homogeneous region, which is clear from the foreign policy priorities of the countries concerned. In addition, the EU's foreign policy tools, including those on security issues, reveal the existence of a common political framework with regard to Eastern Europe that, in itself, does not exclude differentiation

11 Börzel, T. A. and Pamuk, Y., "Europeanization subverted? The European Union's promotion of good governance and the fight against corruption in the Southern Caucasus", *Kolleg Forschergruppe (KFG) Working Papers Series The Transformative Power of Europe*, Vol. 26, April 2011.

12 Wolczuk, K., "Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries' political elites", *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

13 European Council, "EU relations with Belarus", August 9, 2022, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/> (Accessed: November 5, 2022).

14 "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part", Official Journal of the European Union L 261, Brussels, August 30, 2014.

and tailor-made solutions. Apparently, the common framework for partnership on security has not been developed due to the differentiated security perceptions.

In its strategic documents for the EaP, the EU recognised its role in the political and economic transformation of the Eastern European countries, including those of the South Caucasus, and established the objectives of (a) political association and (b) gradual economic integration into the internal market of the EU.¹⁵ However, neither bilateral arrangements (AA/DCFTA, institutional capacity building, visa facilitations agreement, and energy security) nor the multilateral track (Political Dialogue of the Heads of the States; four thematic platforms: democracy, good governance and stability, economic integration, and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and contacts between people) of the EaP considered a framework for dialogue on the security threats in the region. The EU did not take into consideration, within the EaP framework, the increasing imperialistic aspirations of Russia, thus neglecting its declared objective to reabsorb post-Soviet countries in its sphere of influence, although the EaP was initiated in response to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.

The EU prioritizes rule-based convergence, thus the EaP framework does not directly address conflict resolution.¹⁶ The EaP domain does not provide any specific item dedicated to conflict, no flagship initiative addresses this issue, and no panel has been dedicated to conflict resolution or post-conflict normalization topics.¹⁷ Indeed, the term ‘conflicts’ appears in the 2009 Declaration of the EaP only in the general context of ‘the need for their earliest peaceful settlement based on principles and norms of international law’.¹⁸ The EaP’s 2011 Warsaw

15 Council of the European Union, “Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit”, May 7, 2009.

16 Wolczuk, K, “Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries’ political elites”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

17 Council of the European Union (2011), “Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit, Warsaw, 29-30 September 2011”, available at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31798/2011_eap_warsaw_summit_declaration_en.pdf (accessed: November 10, 2022); Gogolashvili, K., “The conflicts in the South Caucasus and their impact on the Eastern Partnership”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, Vol. 9, December 2011, Tallin: Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership.

18 Council of the European Union, “Joint declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit”, May 7, 2009.

Declaration enshrines the EU's preferences regarding the security challenges in the Eastern neighbourhood and aims at supporting partner countries dealing with their security problems through good governance.¹⁹

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To sum up, the EaP initiative clarified the normative role of the EU in the South Caucasus. Despite the growing desire for political and economic cooperation, the EU did not express either its political willingness or the capability to deal with security issues and conflicts in the region. The EU has consistently supported the peaceful resolution of conflicts, but not to the extent of direct engagement.

Russia's stance

In contrast to the EU's peace-building objectives, the Russian Federation increased its claim to be presented in its neighbourhood as a major actor and a 'protector' and 'guarantor' of security. Initially, in the EaP initiative, the EU supported engagement with Russia as a partner. However, Russia was not included in the final document of the EaP 2009 through its own refusal. At the same time, the EU was accused by the Russian Foreign Minister of trying to widen its sphere of influence through the EaP.²⁰ The Russian Federation considered the introduction of the EaP unacceptable, while the EU was trying to convince Russia that the EaP was not a security project. Because no agreement was achieved between the EU and Russia regarding the prospective participation of the latter in the EaP project, that marked Russia's position as that of the 'out of the club' actor.

The territorial conflicts within the EaP countries are not only local challenges or issues on which the EU is providing help to its Eastern neighbours, but also an EU issue of how to deal with Russia.²¹ It is no longer in question that Russia's main foreign geopolitical objective is to restore governance over the post-Soviet countries and, with

19 Delcour, L., "The European Union, a security provider in the eastern neighbourhood?", *European Security*, Vol. 19 (4), 2010, pp. 535–549.

20 Schäffer, S. and Tolksdorf, D., "The Eastern Partnership – 'ENP plus' for the Europe's Eastern neighbours", *CAPerspectives*, No. 4, Center for Applied Policy Research, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, May 2009.

21 Popescu, N., 'Russia's Soft Power Ambitions', *Centre for European Policy Studies*, Policy Brief N. 11, Brussels, October 5, 2006.

respect to this objective, territorial conflicts have been found to be the most ‘effective tools’. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin declared that it was ‘certain that Russia should continue its civilizing mission on the Eurasian continent.’²² This explicitly, or at least implicitly, highlighted, more than a decade ago, the imperialistic ambitions of Russia. In supporting secessionist regions in its neighbourhood, the Russian Federation is hanging on to its decreasing influence in the region and resisting the increasing Euro-Atlantic aspirations of EaP countries.

The EU is coupled with NATO in the perception of Russia which, therefore, is coercively using mechanisms to block the further progress of EaP countries towards the EU. Russia believes that the instability of those countries would leave them no alternative but to

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join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).²³ Thus, Russia’s foreign policy agenda is based on giving strong impetus to its own integration project, the EEU, and, in a long-term perspective, aiming to establish unconditional ties with the post-Soviet countries.²⁴

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emphasise that the region has significant security concerns, which the soft measures offered by the EaP may not, by themselves, be capable of addressing.²⁶ There appears to be a mismatch in the agendas of the EU and its partner countries as, from the EU perspective, rule-based convergence is a *sine qua non* for progress in their relations, while partner countries desire to escape or weaken Russian dominance and

22 President of Russia, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation”, Moscow, April 25, 2005, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Boonstra, J., and Shapovalova, N., “The EU’s Eastern Partnership: One year backwards”, *Working Paper FRIDE*, Vol. 99, 2010.

26 Ibid.

restore territorial integrity through closer links with the EU.²⁷

To sum up, the EU was seeking to build bridges for peace in the region by promoting and exporting its internal values, economic prosperity, and democratic transitions to the countries of the South Caucasus by introducing the EaP as a regional cooperation framework. In contrast, Russia was ‘building walls’ between the territorial entities and peoples of the South Caucasus region.

What can the EU do for stabilization?

The geopolitically tense situation guided the EaP countries into a lose-lose situation that divided them between choosing European integration or engaging in the Russian-led EEU.²⁸ The EaP has been perceived in Moscow as a bold move, bearing the potential for a regional integration effect, as the AAs include sectorial chapters that, ultimately, imply a drastic shift towards the EU’s legal framework and integration into the internal market of the Union.²⁹

The EaP allows political flexibility, meaning that partners could avoid some actions and jointly agree on cooperation priorities. The concept of ‘joint ownership’, integrated early in the ENP, conceptualized a process in which shared values and common interests frame cooperation. However, the priorities and conditions for cooperation are determined bilaterally.³⁰ The EU incentives have influenced domestic changes in Georgia more than in Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the extent of the inclination and approaches towards the EU differs from that of Georgia.³¹

27 Wolczuk, K., “Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the Eastern Partnership amongst the partner countries’ political elites”, *Eastern Partnership Review*, No. 5, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, December 2011.

28 Delcour, L. and Kostanyan, H., “Towards a fragmented neighbourhood: Policies of the EU and Russia and their consequences for the area that lies between”, *Essay Thinking ahead for Europe*, Vol. 17, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, October 17, 2014.

29 Delcour, L. and Kostanyan, H., “Towards a fragmented neighbourhood: Policies of the EU and Russia and their consequences for the area that lies between”, *Essay Thinking ahead for Europe*, Vol. 17, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, October 17, 2014.

30 European Commission, *Communication from the Commission: European Neighbourhood Policy*, Strategy Paper, Brussels May 12, 2004.

31 Börzel, T. A. and Pamuk, Y., “Europeanization subverted? The European Union’s promotion of good governance and the fight against corruption in the Southern Caucasus”,

The ‘associated trio’: Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the EaP has proved to be a rather unsuitable instrument for the common neighbourhood of the EU and Russia. In the case of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the direct connection between security issues and European integration was affirmed by the European Union through its readiness to accept new member states in the Union. Counterbalancing the increasing security threat in EaP countries is the irreversible Euro-Atlantic integration and the European perspective of these countries. The opinions of the EU institutions make it clear that the European integration of this ‘associated trio’ of countries (those that signed the AA with the EU)

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is the EU’s response to Russian aggression, together with the waves of sanctions with which the Union is addressing the Kremlin.

The AAs will be the most important instrument for bringing reforms on the domestic levels of the ‘associated trio’ countries, including Georgia.³² The

AAs are the longest and most detailed agreements of their kind and contain detailed and binding provisions for partner countries to align their laws and policies with the EU *acquis*, thereby signalling a shift from soft law to hard law commitments and, in this manner, exporting the EU’s extensive regulatory framework to the EaP countries.³³ However, regarding candidate status, the conditionality of the EU is the new transformative path as it is the most successful leverage mechanism of the EU, one that is capable of changing the security architecture in the ‘associated trio’ countries, including Georgia.

Georgia applied for EU membership after Ukraine and Moldova, in March 2022.³⁴ The associated countries had aspired to European membership since the initiation of the EaP. It is evident that the idea of Europe is related to democratic governance and democratic institutions.

Kolleg Forschergruppe (KFG) Working Papers Series The Transformative Power of Europe, Vol. 26, Berlin, Freie Universität Berlin, April 2011.

32 Petrov, R., “Challenges of the EU -Ukraine AA’s effective implementation into the legal order of Ukraine”, *EU External Relations Law*, 2021, pp. 129–146.

33 Delcour, L. and Wolczuk, K., “Beyond the Vilnius Summit: challenges for deeper EU integration with Eastern Europe”, *European Policy Centre*, Policy Brief, 2013.

34 European Commission, “Opinion on Georgia’s application for membership of the European Union”, June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

It pivots the responsibility onto the EaP countries to correspond with the EU's rules, norms, and standards, and to implement domestic reforms for European membership. The EU will use the policy of differentiation without exception. This implies that the methodology of Europeanization will be an integral part of this wave of enlargement. The countries of the 'associated trio' will, within the framework of the EaP, have to fulfil the conditions set by the European Commission at the local level.³⁵ Conditionality remains a key tool for this expansion. It is important for Georgia not only to have a European perspective but also to be granted candidate status in 2023 and not to backslide from the EU accession process. As an EU candidate, Georgia will play an important role in promoting peace in the South Caucasus.

In contrast to the EU's peace-promoting role, Georgia has tense political and economic relations with the Russian Federation and considers its northern neighbour as an immediate threat to its stability and development. Georgia has had its territories occupied and sees Russia as a threat and unreliable partner in trade and economic relations, and has had further negative experiences with Russian economic 'sanctions'.³⁶

The South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia

The EU's mediating role in achieving normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is key to achieving peace in the

35 European Commission, "Opinion on Moldova's application for membership of the European Union, 16 June 2022", available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-moldovas-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022); European Commission, "Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union", June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022); European Commission, "Opinion on Ukraine's application for membership of the European Union", June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-ukraines-application-membership-european-union_en European Commission; "Opinion on Georgia's application for membership of the European Union", June 16, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/opinion-georgias-application-membership-european-union_en (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

36 Emerson, M. and Kostanyan, H., "Putin's grand design to destroy the EU's Eastern Partnership and replace it with a disastrous neighbourhood policy of his own", *Commentary Thinking ahead for Europe*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, September 17, 2013.

South Caucasus region, and more EU engagement is needed to advance the process. The EU has reshaped its relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan through different contractual bases.

After Armenia joined EAEU, the initiation of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was an impetus to EU–Armenia relations.³⁷ In Armenia, cooperation with the EU had already been weakened and questioned due to Russian influence. Therefore, Armenia, has an unpredictable perspective with regard to European integration, and the future of its cooperation is dependent on whether

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the country manages to effectively implement the EU and Armenia CEPA.³⁸ Legal convergence is the main track for Armenia’s Europeanisation if it is to stay on a positive track of cooperation with the EU. At the same time, Armenia’s deeply structured dependence on Russia imposes a threat to the relations of this country with the EU, including within the EaP. After a brief meeting with the President of Russia in September

2013,³⁹ Armenia’s President Serzh Sargsyan agreed to join the Russia-led EEU, despite the three years of negotiations on the conclusion of the AA and the DCFTA with the EU that were successful enough to initialize these agreements at the Vilnius Summit in November 2013.⁴⁰ The ‘Armenian case’ was part of a greater Russian campaign to dissuade Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine from signing AAs with the EU.⁴¹

The ongoing negotiations on a new EU–Azerbaijan comprehensive agreement result from several mutual economic and trade interests,

37 “The European Union–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), 2017”, entered into force on March 1, 2021; European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies, “In-depth analyses: EU relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan”, available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/133502/EU%20relations%20with%20Armenia%20and%20Azerbaijan.pdf> (Accessed: November 10, 2022).

38 “The European Union–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), 2017”, entered into force on March 1, 2021.

39 Gardner, A., “Armenia chooses Russia over EU”, September 3, 2013, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-chooses-russia-over-eu/> (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

40 Emerson, M. and Kostanyan, H., “Putin’s grand design to destroy the EU’s Eastern Partnership and replace it with a disastrous neighbourhood policy of his own”, *Commentary Thinking ahead for Europe*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, September 17, 2013.

41 Ibid.

including EU energy security and Azerbaijan's interest in increasing trade and transport relations with the EU.⁴² In July 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen signed a memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev as part of efforts to augment the gas supply to Europe and replace the restricted supplies coming from Russia.⁴³ This is a historic momentum for engaging in multiple contractual arrangements supporting the trade and economic interests of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Azerbaijan has a unique and historic possibility to lead the most important economic projects and initiatives in the region. Mutually beneficial economic projects of Azerbaijan with the EU and Georgia are capable of serving for common prosperity and stability.

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For this purpose, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev visited Tbilisi in October 2022.⁴⁴ Georgia's Prime Minister Garibashvili noted that he is welcoming the initiative announced by President Aliyev in Prague to create a tripartite (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) discussion format.⁴⁵ Emphasizing that Azerbaijan is the 'most important strategic partner' of Georgia, Prime Minister Garibashvili said that, during the meeting, the two also reviewed such jointly implemented projects as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, and the 'importance of the Middle Corridor' (aka the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route).⁴⁶

The role of Azerbaijan is increasing as a geopolitically important and pragmatic country.⁴⁷ Azerbaijan, as the leading economic actor in the

42 Brzozowski, A., "EU to mediate in Armenia – Azerbaijan hostilities as spectre of war looms", *EUROACTIV*, September 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/eu-to-mediate-in-armenia-azerbaijan-hostilities-as-spectre-of-war-looms/> (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

43 European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen with Azerbaijan President Aliyev", July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement_22_4583 (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

44 European Commission, "EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, including energy cooperation", press release, July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4550 (Accessed: November 20, 2022).

45 "President Aliyev visits Georgia", *Civil.ge*, October 24, 2022, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/512722>, (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

46 Ibid.

47 Dalakishvili, N., "Visit of Aliyev and its prospect results", *American Voice*, October 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/ilham-aliev-irakli-garibashvili-azerbaijan-georgia/6804042.html> (Accessed: November 15, 2022).

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Armenia's ambitions with regard to implementing CEPA increase the possibility of the country's modernisation, as the bilateral agreement between the EU and Armenia aims at legal convergence in many sectors, including the rule of law, human rights, the justice system, effectiveness of state institutions, etc.⁴⁹ Azerbaijan and the EU have increased their reciprocal trade and economic interests as, in July 2022, Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the EU on a 'Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy' that is considered by the EU as a 'new chapter' in bilateral relations.⁵⁰ In addition, the EU and Azerbaijan are negotiating a new comprehensive agreement that will facilitate enhanced cooperation in a wide range of areas including economic diversification, investment, trade, and making full use of the potential of civil society, while underscoring the importance of human rights and the rule of law.⁵¹

To sum up, the advancement of bilateral relations creates an opportunity to converge on security issues as a pillar of the multilateral track of the EaP that envisages the engagement of all South Caucasus countries and the EU.

Conclusions

With the initiation of the EaP by the EU, the Union once again emphasized its 'normative' and 'civilizing' role in Eastern Europe. In

48 Ibid.

49 European Commission, "The EU and Armenia Comprehensive Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force", February 28, 2021, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/ip_21_782 (Accessed November 15, 2022); Khvorostiankina, A., "Europeanisation through EU External Agreements and the issue of 'constitutional identity': The case of the EU-Armenia CEPA", *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, Vol. 4, 2018; Collective Monitoring by Civil Society, "Report on the Analytical Findings of Monitoring Activities: EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement", 2021.

50 European Commission, "EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, including energy cooperation", press release, July 18, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_4550 (Accessed: November 20, 2022).

51 Ibid.

employing this policy framework, the Union was seeking to balance Russian interests without emerging as a security guarantor and actor in its neighbourhood countries, including the countries of the South Caucasus. The intention of the EU's external policy can be explained from the perspective of the non-provocation of Russia. It could also be considered to have underestimated the Russian factor in the region. The potential for the collapse of this approach was signalled by the EaP partners, but was still not integrated by the EU into the initial framework.

Russia has been able to counter this process in Armenia, and remains an immense threat for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Armenia is more dependent on Russia, but Azerbaijan is rather more independent and its role in the region is emerging. Meanwhile, domestic processes and political polarization in Georgia obstruct it from receiving candidate status for EU membership and serve as a source for Russia to increase its influence in Georgia.

After the developments in Ukraine, it has become clear that the EU has revised and reconsidered its foreign security policy. The EU, in its European integration process, no longer sidesteps the security challenges in its Eastern neighbourhood. At the same time, the EU has demonstrated a capability to increase its role as a moderator in the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The bilateral relationship between the EU and Armenia continues with the aim of further deepening ties with this country. At the same time, Azerbaijan has close and growing economic and trade relations with the EU. In contrast, Georgia is an 'associated' country with a 'European perspective' that is striving for candidate status. The convergence of those perspectives serves as a resource for the stabilization and peace orientation of relations in the South Caucasus region through the multilateral track of the EaP. For this purpose, the EU should consider its decisive role as a security provider in the region and revise the framework of the EaP to integrate security issues as a new pillar of the partnership.