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Mind the Gap: Role Expectations and Perceived Performance of the EU in the South Caucasus

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Abstract:

This article focuses on how the European neighborhood policy is viewed in the three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan). We explore perceptions of the EU's role in the region and compare these perceptions with the EU's own role conceptions in the neighborhood. We use role theory as a theoretical framework, within which these perceptions can be analyzed and compared. We scrutinize the partner countries' perception of the EU as a driver of democratization and modernization, as well as their assessment of the degree to which the EU fulfills the role. Our findings indicate that the EU's role conception is indeed recognized and accepted by a majority of key actors in the South Caucasian countries. However, in the perceptions of South Caucasus actors the EU's role as a promoter of democratization and modernization is not mirrored by its role performance, as EU policies do not adequately address the domestic and regional contexts.

Keywords: South Caucasus; European Union; European Neighbourhood Policy; perceptions; democratization; modernization

Introduction

The European Union (EU) stepped up the engagement with its eastern neighbors with the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in mid-2000s and, especially, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) launched in 2009. These policies endeavour to shape developments in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus by fostering stability, security and prosperity in the EU's vicinity. Yet the ENP and the EaP are not implemented in a vacuum: indeed, post-Soviet states have their own expectations vis-à-vis the EU. They have often enthusiastically engaged with the EU to promote political and economic reforms and/or as means of (at least

partially) balancing the might of Russia, following the latter's renewed assertiveness in the post-Soviet space.

In practice, however, little is known about neighboring countries' actual perceptions of the EU's role in the post-Soviet space. This is because research on the ENP has focused on the 'institutional underpinnings and intentions' of the EU's external action rather than on the recipients (Keuleers et al. 2016, 360). This dearth is problematic for two key reasons. First, there is little understanding of whether and how the way the EU sees its own role in neighbouring countries actually resonates with the target countries. This matters as neighbors' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the EU will play a key role in shaping their receptivity and openness to the EU's influence. Indeed, it may also impact on any subsequent policy developments, such as a decision to pursue or eschew closer relations with the EU. Second, neighbors' perceptions of the EU shape their expectations of the kind of action they await from the EU, which if not satisfied, may lead to a failure of EU policy. Simply speaking, the EU's engagement with those countries' needs – at least to certain extent –to reflect what they want from the EU. Therefore, the relevance of EU policy and, ultimately, its effectiveness, are contingent upon the degree to which the EU grasps what its neighbors' expectations are.

In this article, we depart from prevailing mainstream analyses of the ENP, which tend to be either inward-oriented (e.g. Lavenex 2004; Kelley 2006) or driven by an inside-out approach (e.g. Langbein and Börzel 2013). While inward-oriented analyses focus on the EU's agenda-setting and decision-making, inside-out approaches shift attention to the implementation of EU policies and their outcomes in partner countries (Keuleers et al. 2016: 351). By contrast, outside-in approaches examine EU policies from the perspective of the partner countries (Keuleers et al. 2016; see also Elgström 2007; Lucarelli 2014). We adopt an outside-in approach (see also Buzogány 2019) by exploring perceptions of the EU amongst the EaP South Caucasus countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and comparing them with the EU's own conceptions of its role in the eastern neighborhood.

Despite their diversity and individual complexity, the countries are often "lumped" together. This is not only for geographical and historical reasons — but also because Russia's massive influence in the region. Indeed, in the South Caucasus, perceptions of the EU are also shaped to a considerable degree by perceptions of Russia's aims and strategies. This is because these countries regard relations with the EU as a means of complementing their links to Russia or counterbalancing Russia. Therefore, we incorporate the role of Russia in the analysis if and when it helps illuminate congruence or gaps with the EU's own role conception.

We will use role theory as the conceptual basis for exploring the extent to which perceptions diverge, as it provides a framework within which contrasting perceptions can be analysed. This will involve an outline of the EU's own role conception, followed by an empirically-based exploration of partner countries' expectations. In particular, we focus on two particular dimensions – namely, democratization and socio-economic modernization – where we scrutinize the partner countries' perception of the EU role performance as well as their assessment of the degree to which that role is perceived as fulfilled.

Our article draws on research conducted in all three South Caucasus countries between January 2015 and January 2016. While quantitative surveys tend to capture the evolution of attitudes to the EU over time, our qualitative investigation enables us to identify and explore the shapers of these attitudes. We conducted 91 semi-structured interviews,¹ which explored the perceptions of the EU among government officials, politicians (e.g. members of the parliament, political parties), civil society experts (NGOs, think-tanks and academia) across all three countries. We also held five focus group sessions with businesses, civil society and students across Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (both in capital cities and in the regions). Focus groups allow us to map differences of interpretation between state and non-state actors, which is of particular importance in non-democratic countries, such as Azerbaijan. The participants in these focus groups were selected because of their EU-related expertise, and their role in shaping domestic policy and/or being able to influence domestic opinion about the EU. Therefore, while our sample is not statistically representative, it is purposive. Our deep-dive approach enables us to make comparisons both between countries as well as domestic actors within those countries. It also allows us to explore the complexity of perceptions and generate a deep understanding of how the EU's role conception meets outsiders' expectations.

Theoretical Framework: Role Theory

It has been long noted that the EU is a “different” great power, founded on soft, rather than hard power. Given the EU's distinctiveness and indeed uniqueness as a foreign policy actor, the degree of congruity between what kind of actor the EU views itself to be (role conception) and perceptions of EU's external “behaviour” (role performance) is of more than academic interest.

However, the targets (or recipients) of this role performance are states who have their own conception of the EU (role expectations), which may or may not match the role conception the EU has of itself, as indeed may their assessments of the EU's role performance. The perceptions of partner countries are especially important in a context where EU membership is precluded, as is the case in the EU's eastern neighborhood. It is the perceived attractiveness of the EU - rather than the membership perspective – that shapes those countries' inclination to be influenced by EU policies, at least in the short- to medium-term. Therefore, our core research question is: to what extent do South Caucasus countries' expectations match the EU's conception of its role as a normative power in its neighborhood?

Role theory offers a useful framework within which the interplay between the EU's role conception on the one hand and neighbors' role expectation, on the other hand can be explored (Harnisch et al. 2011). A role conception encompasses two intertwined dimensions. First, it refers to the view an actor adopts of and for itself in terms of its position in relation to other actors (in other words, the “ego part of a role” Harnisch [2011]). This conception impacts on how the actor relates to others in terms of the norms and values which the actor adopts in its interactions with them. Second, a role conception refers to how an actor perceives others' expectations vis-à-vis its own role (the “alter part of a role”). An actor's

role performance (actual behaviour) tends to reflect its role conception, even though discrepancies may emerge between its narrative and actual deeds. This may or may not be in line with the expectation of others. This is not only because perceptions of the latter are inherently part of the former. In fact, role conceptions change when faced with divergent expectations. As a result, the expectations of others can shift depending upon their perceptions of the actor's role performance.

We deploy this framework to, first, examine the EU's own role conception and then to see how it resonates in the South Caucasus. In particular, we examine what kind of role expectation domestic actors have and how they perceive EU's role conception and performance with regard to democracy/human rights and socio-economic modernization, which lay at the core of the EU's policy in the eastern neighborhood, as we outline in the next section.

The EU's Role Conception: a Normative Power

The term "normative" refers to the values of peace, rule of law, human rights and democracy, which the EU stands for and seeks to propagate. Therefore, the EU is an actor which aims to influence other actors in the international system through the promotion of core values and through framing actors and processes in certain ways, thereby gaining their acceptance. This process of persuasion aims to lead to the internalization of these ideas, meanings and values. The EU's approach is non-coercive and non-militarized in nature. This role conception (Manners 2002; Bengtsson and Elgström 2012 94) closely resembles Nye's conception of soft power as a model of persuasion and not coercion (Nye 2005).

The process of influencing (the role performance of a normative power) takes place via a range of policy instruments, which focus on the normative agenda of peace, democracy and rule of law. This agenda distinguishes the EU from the US, as the 'EU not only encourages regional co-operation in other parts of the world, it also relies on multilateralism to resolve conflicts rather than on unilateral measures' (Elgström and Smith 2006, 3).

Implicit within the conception of a normative power is the *leadership role* the actor adopts or assumes. This stems from the fact that a normative power by definition seeks to get others to adopt its vision (as reflected in the values and ideas it requires others to accept), a vision which may be underpinned with constructive formulations of problems and solutions (Young 1991). For such a vision to gain acceptance amongst followers it needs to be not only acknowledged, but also perceived as legitimate, that is "desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definition" and fair "as judged by the values and norms a certain actors is associated with" (Hurd 1999 , 379). EU leadership can be based on "external expectations that associate EU action with fairness and the promotion of noble goals" (Bengtsson and Elgström 2012, 97).

As a normative power, the EU does not subscribe to the logic of spheres of influence, adopted by 'hard' powers such as the US and Russia:

Some of you call on me to be more robust to promote strategic games. This I will not do. Others call on me to promote the values more robustly. Yes, that is the business I am in – to promote the values in the Eastern Partnership. I have problems to participate in the zero-sum game, as I am a believer in win-win games, particularly in dealing with such a strategic partner as Russia (Füle 2013).

However, this focus on norms – rather than military power – has resulted in the EU’s failure to anticipate the geopolitical implications of its own policies in its neighborhood (Lavenex 2017). While the EU has regarded itself as a *post*-geopolitical actor, its leaders have (even if belatedly) recognized the growing salience of geopolitics as a result of other actors’ policies across the continent:

First in Georgia back in 2008 and now in the heart of Europe, in Ukraine, we are witnessing a conflict about spheres of influence and territorial claims of the kind we know from the 19th and 20th century that we thought we had put behind us (Chancellor Merkel 2014, quoted in Ferguson and Hast 2018, 277).

Certain authors, however, have instead argued that the EaP project was since its very beginning framed in geopolitical terms from within the European policy community as a project meant to “roll back” Russia’s influence in the region. The “geopoliticization” of the EaP was said to be not merely a reactive move *vis-à-vis* Russia’s growing assertiveness but underpinned EU’s initiative in the first place (for example, see Sakwa 2014).

To provide some evidence-based analysis, in our empirical research we explicitly asked about the role of the EU (see below). Our findings indicate that in the South Caucasus the EU is regarded as a *post*-geopolitical actor, and yet there is a demand from some actors in the region that the EU assume a geopolitical role. Therefore, we argue that the challenging context within which the small states in South Caucasus find themselves – above all, facing an overbearing Russia – directly fuels very specific expectations *vis-a-vis* the EU, that jar with EU’s own role conception. In particular, the expectations that the EU – in addition to supporting democracy and modernization – should also provide security diverge from the role the EU sees for itself in its wider neighbourhood (Delcour and Wolczuk 2018).

Role Expectations vis-à-vis the EU

Role expectations relate to the expectations of other actors *vis-à-vis* the role holder. As noted by Harnisch (2011), the perception of these expectations as signalled through language and action - contributes to shaping the role conception of the role holder. This is because external actorship develops through a process of interaction between insiders and outsiders (Bretherton and Vogler 1999). However, actual expectations of others may differ, and even conflict with the perceptions of the role holder. Crucially, other actors may develop expectations, which are not included in the role conception of the actor, and yet the role holder overlooks them or regards them as unimportant or not legitimate. Therefore, apart from outlining the EU’s role conception, the article examines the partner countries’ expectations *vis-à-vis* the EU and the degree to which these are aligned. The extent to which

there is a disjuncture between the EU's role conception of itself as a normative actor, and the expectations of South Caucasus states is likely to affect the degree to which the EU is perceived as an influential power.

Therefore, crucially we seek to provide a thorough picture of South Caucasus countries' expectations, including those which are not embraced by the EU as part of its own role conception. This enables us to examine the degree of (in)congruence between the role conception of the EU (how the EU sees itself) and the role expectations the neighboring states have of the EU.

Critically, this is an ongoing process: others' expectations and perceptions are malleable and change through a constant process of interaction and adaption. Therefore, we also ask whether the EU has become more aware of South Caucasus countries' expectations, and, if this is the case, whether the EU's own role conception incorporates partner states' expectations. We recognize that EU's increased awareness of target countries' perceptions may not necessarily translate into an adjustment of the EU's role conception to reflect external expectations.

The EU's role conception as articulated in the ENP

The ENP reflects the EU's conception of itself as a *promoter of values and democratization*. Under the ENP, closer relations with the EU are to be based on "shared values", i.e. democracy, human rights and the rule of law (European Commission 2003 , 3). Partner countries' commitment to "shared values" is seen as a prerequisite to progress in concrete relations with the EU, in particular economic integration (European Commission 2003, 3). Therefore, in the ENP the EU's role conception as promoter of values relies on the use of conditionality.

Despite this emphasis on "shared values" as the cornerstone of the relationship between the EU and its neighbors, the EU's role performance as a democracy promoter has been fraught with tensions and inconsistencies. In particular, these were exposed during the "Arab spring" in 2011, which highlighted the ineffectiveness of EU democracy promotion policies (Noutcheva 2015). This resulted in a comprehensive review of the ENP, and in fact a reinforcement of the EU's role conception as a democracy promoter. The 2011 ENP review introduced the concept of "deep democracy" (as well as mechanisms aimed at giving flesh to this concept in EU-ENP countries' relations (European Commission and High Representative 2011). In particular, with the "more-for-more" principle the EU sought to offer increased incentives for those countries reforming in line with shared values. Yet soon, the subsequent ENP Review of 2015 acknowledged the mixed results of this approach:

The incentive-based approach ("More for More") has been successful in supporting reforms (...) where there is a commitment by partners to such reforms. However, it has not proven a sufficiently strong incentive to create a commitment to reform, where there is not the political will (European Commission and High Representative 2015, 5).

In fact, by stressing differentiation within the ENP, the 2015 Review *de facto* downsized the EU's ambitions to act as a promoter of democracy. In essence, following the review the EU is expected to take this role whenever "a partner wishes to pursue deeper relations with the EU based on shared values" (ibidem, 4). Therefore, the 2015 ENP Review represents a major shift: it implies that the EU's role conception is contingent upon partner countries' role expectations. This shift from "one size fits all" underscores the need to tap into the actual expectations of the target countries. In case of authoritarian states, such as Azerbaijan, it also raises the question of whose expectations within these countries, the EU ought to engage with.

The second element of the EU's role conception is that of a *promoter of socio-economic modernization and economic growth*. This role was formulated upon the ENP inception, drawing inspiration from the enlargement process during which institutional reforms and regulatory alignment were accompanied by rapid economic development. The essence of this logic is to prompt the harmonization of partner countries' legal and institutional templates with those of the EU. At the same time, the ENP was envisaged as an alternative to enlargement, aimed at deflating membership aspirations of neighboring states by offering a credible and effective pathway to integration without accession. The main justification for regulatory approximation is a functional one related to the level of economic integration offered to the ENP partners: access to the EU's internal market pre-supposes the adoption of relevant parts of the *acquis*, including institutional harmonization in the economic domain, which is wide in scope and encompasses all major horizontal policy areas (Lavenex 2014).

However, the EU goes beyond this immediate functional justification in emphasising the broad developmental benefits in regulatory approximation. The beneficial effects of rule transfer go beyond trade with the EU to include further investment, enhanced competition and reduced corruption, leading to better governance, higher economic efficiency, growth and welfare in partner countries. From the EU's perspective, the process of alignment with EU regulatory templates is to transform the public policies of the neighboring states. According to Commission officials, the EU's model is superior to that of other international actors in terms of the quality and density of its regulation, the comprehensiveness of reform it entails, and avoidance of controversies associated with other international institutions, such as the IMF (Dodini and Fantini 2006, 517).

The role of the EU as a force for modernization underpins the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Launched in 2009, the EaP provides an enhanced modernization offer for the South Caucasus: an upgraded contractual framework (Association Agreements combined with Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Areas, DCFTAs), the prospect of visa liberalization and increased sectoral cooperation. It offers an unprecedented scale and intensity of linkages. The EaP establishes direct links between sectoral reforms – premised upon convergence with the EU's rules – and an enhanced relationship with the partner countries. Increased regulatory approximation is expected to 'contribute to the modernization of the economies of the partner countries and anchor the necessary economic reforms' (European Commission 2008, 3). This is clearly articulated in the "2020 Deliverables" initiative, which promotes a wide-ranging modernization agenda within the EaP (European Commission 2017). As will be seen, this role conception creates considerable expectations vis-à-vis the EU in target countries.

Summing up, notwithstanding unresolved tensions, the EU has continuously and consistently defined itself as a driver of democratization and modernization in the neighborhood. We will now explore how these role conceptions have been viewed in the South Caucasus countries and whether they have developed expectations beyond these two roles.

Role expectation and perceived performance of the EU in the South Caucasus

A promoter of values/democratization

The EU's role as a promoter of values and democratization is explicitly and strongly acknowledged in South Caucasus countries, while at the same time triggering marked differences in role expectations amongst the three countries and domestic actors within them.

Georgia

Georgia is one of the three Eastern partners which signed an AA/DCFTA (together with Moldova and Ukraine), and one where the EU's role as a promoter of values resonates most strongly. The image of the EU in Georgia has persistently been positive. As illustrated by both in-depth interviews and focus groups, the EU is mainly associated with a community of values shared by Georgia (primarily democracy, human rights and individual freedoms). Georgia's adherence to these values has prompted support for European integration as the one and only irreversible choice for the country. Even those political parties that are more sceptical regarding EU integration do not question this choice:

There is no alternative to the European vector, because it means progress. Choosing the European vector does not mean we should directly copy everything, but these are nuances which we criticize, it does not influence the overall direction we are going (Interview 7 with the chair of an opposition party).

In 2014, Georgia committed itself to complying with these values as part of the Association Agreement. Democracy, as embodied in the EU and relations with it, is a major attraction for Georgia, not least because it entails governmental accountability to society (Minesashvili 2016, 21). These perceptions have driven political reforms in line with EU demands in the past few years, including the adoption of a Strategy for Human Rights in 2014. EU monitoring and assistance are vital as they lead to attitudinal change and contribute to the entrenchment of democratic values in Georgia (Focus group 1).

However, even though Georgians support democratic principles, they are suspicious and even hostile towards some values promoted by the EU. For instance, in the framework of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) granted to Georgia in early 2013, the EU required the country to adopt an anti-discrimination law including also "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" as possible causes of discrimination. While the law was passed and entered into force in May 2014, it triggered a wave of protests (especially by the Church) and clouded the perceptions of the EU as a value promoter in Georgia. By 2015, almost half

(45%) of respondents agreed with the statement that the EU threatens Georgian traditions – an increase of 15% compared to 2013 (Eurasia Partnership Foundation 2016, 8). Supporters of the adoption of the anti-discrimination law, such as the Parliament’s speaker, Davit Usupashvili, discursively framed the debate in terms of a choice between Europe and Russia:

It is about the following issue: either we go towards Europe and we recognize that we should not chase people with sticks, we should not fire people from jobs if we do not share their opinions and their way of life, or else we stay in Russia, where it is possible to expel from a city those people, whom you dislike, to ban from entry to shops those people, whom you do not like, and simply to go and invade a territory of others if you like that territory (Civil Georgia 2014).

Hence, the adoption of specific EU-recommended reforms (during the visa liberalization process has highlighted the growing perception of the EU as a possible threat to Georgian identity, particularly by the Georgian Church, which regards Russia as a more attractive civilizational model to promote the traditional Georgian values and way of life. However, while it strongly opposes the EU’s broad approach to anti-discrimination, the Georgian Church is generally more ambivalent vis-à-vis the country’s integration with the EU, not least because of its own internal divisions (Margvelashvili 2018).

In Georgia, perceptions of the EU are highly sensitive to concrete progress in EU-Georgia relations (or lack thereof). For instance, the recommendation of the European Commission to lift the obligation of Schengen visas for Georgian citizens explains the surge in support for EU integration in 2016, increasing to 77% from 61% in 2014 (National Democratic Institute 2016). This surge, however, has not been bolstered by new milestones in EU-Georgia relations. The Georgians want to see progress and “upgrades” in relations in recognition of Georgia’s commitments to the “European pathway” (Interview 8). The lack of them explains the subsequent decrease in positive views of the EU from 59% in 2017 to 49% in 2018 (EUNeighboursEast 2018c). In Georgia, the EU faces strong public expectations of “political association” as a dynamic and fast-moving relationship, whereas the EU sees the Association Agreement as a more static, long-term framework for engagement.

Overall, notwithstanding resistance to specific EU-promoted values, there is a strong congruence between Georgia’s role expectation and the EU’s role performance as a promoter of values, which reinforces the view that the EU is a political union that Georgia should eventually join. However, this integration choice is not exempt from ambiguities. Whereas integration with the EU is framed by the Georgian elites to be exclusive, large swathes of the population support integration with both the EU and Russia (Buzogány 2019, 100). In addition, recent developments in Georgian politics (e.g. attempts at vote-buying in the context of the 2018 presidential elections, the reluctance of the ruling party to amend electoral procedures after promising to do so) reflect a growing gap between Georgia’s declared integration choice and shifting elite perceptions of both the country’s political reforms and the EU’s role therein.

Armenia

In Armenia too, the EU is clearly associated with democracy, yet until the 2018 Velvet Revolution the perceptions of its democracy-promoting role were more complex and ambiguous, as noted elsewhere (Petrova and Ayzazyan 2018, 76).

Tellingly, virtually all interviewees, irrespective of their position, referred to democracy, the rule of law and human rights as major EU values. Therefore, this image matched the EU's own role conception. This congruence did not change after Armenia's accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In fact, surveys indicate that Armenians trust the EU to a much larger extent than the EAEU: 70% compared to 48% (EUNeighboursEast 2018a).

However, our research also highlights three caveats in Armenian pre-2018 perceptions. First, as in Georgia, the EU has also become associated with the unpopular promotion of LGBT rights deemed alien to Armenian traditions. While resistance was greatest in the regions, all the interviewees, even those fully supporting EU policies, stressed the need for a careful and gradual diffusion of these values in Armenia in order not to antagonize the more conservative sections of Armenian society, especially outside the capital. As indicated by a civil society representative in Vanadzor:

We might share some of the values, but our perceptions of these values are culturally, rather than legally bound. So, we may still be resistant to attempts to push these values. For instance, when within an EU-supported project an NGO starts a training on women's or LGBT rights in a small village, which is in a daily struggle for a respectful livelihood, this training will backfire and negative perceptions of the EU will prevail.

Second, prior to 2018 the perception of the EU as a democratic actor did not systematically translate into strong role expectations as a democracy promoter. Surveys indicate that the EU's role as a promoter of democracy tended to be less valued than in security and economic development (EU Neighbours East 2018a). However, this changed after the peaceful "Velvet Revolution" in spring 2018, which brought to power a new political elite with a much stronger demand for democracy and desire to root out corruption. Thus, surveys point to a better appreciation of the EU's role as a promoter of democracy (40% in 2017, 59% in 2019) and increased expectations vis-à-vis the EU in terms of support to democratization after the revolution (EUNeighboursEast 2017 and 2019).²

Thirdly, it transpires from the interviews conducted with the Armenian elites prior to the Velvet Revolution that the EU itself is regarded as a "model in crisis". For the Armenian elite, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and the breach of democratic values in some EU member states undermine the EU's capacity to promote democratization abroad, especially in its neighbourhood:

Today the EU is one of the foundations of democracy globally. However, modern Europe faces a crisis of democratic values. (Interview 2 with a member of the Parliament in Armenia)

In sum, Armenians endorse the EU's own role conception as a normative power, and the values with which the EU is associated are a cornerstone of EU-Armenian relations. These values are reflected in the EU-Armenia Comprehensive Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in 2017, which is largely modelled on the Association Agreement, which Armenia turned down in 2013.

However, our research points to a disjuncture between Armenia's perceptions and expectations vis-à-vis the EU. While endorsing the EU's role as a promoter of values, prior to 2018 our respondents did not expect greater involvement from the EU in democratization, perhaps in recognition of domestic impediments.³ However, as these findings reflect the views of the former Armenian political elite, expectations vis-à-vis the EU are likely to have changed since 2018 and more research is needed to gauge them.⁴

Azerbaijan

The case of Azerbaijan illuminates the gulf between the expectations of domestic actors regarding the EU, and the EU's role conception of itself as a promoter of values. The respondents' position within, or attitude towards, the Azerbaijani political regime help explain actors' specific expectations.

The EU offered Azerbaijan the same prospect of an enhanced legal framework as Georgia and Armenia. However, the Azerbaijani ruling elite has persistently eschewed any regular dialogue with the EU on political and human rights issues. In 2013, its government asked for the Association Agreement (under negotiation since 2010) to be replaced with a "lighter" Strategic Partnership Agreement, modelled on the Partnership for Modernization launched with Russia in 2010, which makes no reference to democracy. Within the ruling elite, perceptions of the EU's role sharply deteriorated after in September 2015 the European Parliament issued a resolution condemning the violent crackdown on human rights and civil society activists since 2014 (Interview 4). This resolution was a clear signal that "human rights issues are used as a tool of political pressure", according to the deputy foreign minister Mahmud Mammadgulyev (Reuters 2015). This is despite the fact that the EU's role as a democracy promoter has been highly circumscribed. Indeed, negotiations on the new EU-Azerbaijan agreement resumed in 2017 without any actual measures (e.g. sanctions) being taken by the EU to counter deepening authoritarianism in Azerbaijan.

In contrast, civil society in Azerbaijan has voiced concerns about the EU's inadequate support for democracy and human rights. For many activists, the EU's role performance as a promoter of values has been much weaker in Azerbaijan compared to the two other South Caucasus countries, even though there were numerous opportunities for the EU to push for political change, especially under the presidency of Heydar Aliyev, when the ruling elite was more vulnerable owing to economic insecurity (Shirinov 2011). In the eyes of Azerbaijani civil society, the EU prioritized stability over democratization in Azerbaijan, suggesting that the EU had "sold out" in exchange for energy resources. According to a representative of civil society, "even if Azerbaijan provides the EU with energy, it is not a reason for the EU to sacrifice its principles and values" (Focus group 3).

Civil society criticized the EU for continuing cooperation with Azerbaijan after the 2013 presidential elections, even though the Election Monitoring Mission of the OSCE expressed grave concerns over the level of electoral fraud. The EU was further condemned for its passivity in the wake of the crackdown on human rights activists and CSOs in 2014-15.

In sum, in Azerbaijan, there is a deep rift regarding role expectations vis-à-vis the EU between the ruling elite and civil society. Yet both the ruling elite and civil society are critical of the EU's role as a value promoter, though for different reasons: for the ruling elites, the EU "imposes" its democracy agenda, for civil society – by "selling out" the EU does not live up to its role conception. Azerbaijan exemplifies most vividly the perils of "value promotion" to authoritarian states and the wrath it attracts from domestic actors.⁵

A driver for economic modernization

The South Caucasus countries deeply differ in terms of their legal frameworks and prospects for integration with the EU. Yet, they share similar expectations regarding economic cooperation with the EU. However, this convergence applies only to broad perceptions of the EU. In fact, the EU is perceived from a highly normative viewpoint in Georgia and, over a longer term, in Armenia: in both countries the EU is regarded as a driving force for modernization, which matches EU's own role conception. By contrast, the Azerbaijani ruling elite primarily perceives the EU as a partner to balance Russian influence and as a major client for the country's energy resources.

Georgia

Georgia pursues deep economic integration with the EU and to this effect has concluded the Association Agreement with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU. Yet, of all the countries in the South Caucasus, Georgia has in fact the most bifurcated perceptions of the EU.

At first glance, the EU is perceived in highly positive terms in Georgia. Among Georgian actors, civil society has the most positive view of the EU in the economic domain and argues that complying with EU rules and regulations is pivotal to improving the quality of Georgian products and making them more competitive on the global market. Business actors regard European integration primarily as an avenue for economic cooperation with EU countries, which offers a guide for the legal harmonization process of Georgian legislation with the *acquis*.

However, the perception of the EU as a force for modernization is at odds with the neo-liberal preference for deregulation in Georgia where the EU is viewed as excessively bureaucratic, regulated and slow-moving. Overregulation is deemed a risk to Georgia's economic development amongst opposition parties and businesses:

The EU is a developed economy and has different rules of play; for the Georgian economy it might create barriers for development. We should apply these rules and

regulations but we should adapt them to our economy (Interview 9 with a Member of the Georgian Parliament)

Such bifurcated views are also evident amongst the ruling political elites. The interviews indicate that the elites perceive the EU's role in Georgian economy as positive and durable. The majority of respondents named the European market as the most reliable and important market for Georgian products. The majority emphasized that the EU market is definitely more attractive than the Russian market.

Yet, at the same time, most of them pointed out that despite significant engagement, there is a lack of awareness of all the opportunities which the DCFTA offers for the Georgian economy. A general consensus that in the long-term economic integration with the EU is beneficial to Georgia is accompanied by the recognition that in short term adopting the new standards will be painful, especially to emerging businesses and to the agricultural sector. As a result, European integration is regarded as a "choice of the elites", which has not (yet) provided tangible results for the population so far. This is because since the early 2010s, legal approximation in key trade sectors has taken precedence over support for socio-economic development in EU policies. Yet in light of the country's lingering poverty and socio-economic inequalities, support to healthcare, education and employment are key priorities that would require a greater EU involvement according to the Georgian population (EUNeighboursEast 2018c).

Therefore, somewhat perplexingly, the general, declarative demand for European integration in Georgia is accompanied by a sceptical view of the EU as the right model to emulate and/or by criticisms on the limited scope of EU engagement in the country.

Armenia

The research in Armenia points to a similar discrepancy between role expectations and perceived role performance. The EU's role in the economic sphere is seen as highly positive and desirable in Armenia and, somewhat surprisingly, there is also a greater consensus on this than in Georgia. Yet - as in Georgia - the EU is perceived as insufficiently engaged in Armenia.

Most respondents regard the EU's economic policies as a model to be emulated. Despite accession to the Russia-led EAEU many Armenians view the EU as a key partner to support their country's socio-economic development (Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015). This is evidenced in the eagerness of the Armenian elites to conclude the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU, which was signed in 2017.

At the same time, however, the EU's role as a force for modernization is mitigated by three shortcomings: first, the unfeasibility of adopting EU rules and policies in the current situation; second, the EU's lack of attention to tangible outcomes in target countries; and third, the EU's low visibility in the economic domain (in comparison to other external actors, such as Russia).

While the EU is regarded as superior in terms of its institutional development, there are limits to the extent to which it can be emulated, as noted by a member of the government in Armenia:

The EU institutions are better than ours or those of Russia. However, when we look at the possibilities of borrowing from EU institutions, we realize these are limited for several reasons. (...) There are cultural limitations, which do not refer only to national idiosyncrasies, but to the political culture and lifestyle of the whole region, which significantly differs from the EU's. And there are limitations of resources. Being countries with absolutely different levels of income, we simply cannot afford certain institutions. (Interview 3 with a member of the Armenian government)

The concern is over short- versus long-term development goals: even though all agree that from a long-term perspective the adoption of the EU standards will indeed be beneficial for the Armenian private sector, the challenge will be to limit the extent of the harm in the short term:

To access the EU market Armenian businesses need to invest resources they do not have. Too much and too quick a change is needed to secure this access, and this may ruin our business. (Focus group 2)

Furthermore, almost all the participants in this research agree that this prospect may be compromised by *realpolitik* - namely Russia's role as a security guarantor for Armenia.

In addition, the EU's role as a modernising force in Armenia is damaged by its acceptance and tolerance of "shallow" reforms, namely legal change not followed by effective implementation. This applies specifically to those areas which were not regarded by the EU as crucial during the DCFTA negotiations in 2010-2013. According to civil society representatives and opposition MPs, EU policies and practices do not lead to an increase in the accountability of Armenian politicians. In particular, they claimed that under the presidency of Serzh Sargsyan, the Armenian government was not accountable either to the EU or the Armenian public for the financial assistance it received from the EU. They also pointed out that the EU does not pay attention to the effectiveness of its assistance, being satisfied with "shallow" reforms:

Most EU support ended up with reforming the existing forms and not the content. For instance, we have a reformed tax system, where many procedures have formally changed, but the bad practices have persisted. (Interview 4)

Ultimately, notwithstanding its own role conception, the EU seems oblivious to actual barriers to reforms. Armenian actors note that the EU is not able to overcome domestic obstacles to reforms, particularly the close connection between the former political elites and oligarchic clans.

Moreover, EU assistance is regarded as ineffective as it has had a marginal impact, especially outside the capital city:

In Vanadzor I do not see any results of cooperation with the EU. Perhaps some NGOs get financial and technical support from the EU, but their activities have a marginal impact. I

know that the EU has supported some projects on local governance and reforms in police, but even if there are changes, these are formal only, with no substantial impact on the quality and content of these institutions (Interview 1)

Therefore, research conducted in Armenia points to a major paradox: notwithstanding membership of the EAEU and increasing economic dependence on Russia, it is actually the EU which is perceived as a key partner in the country's modernization. Yet, there is a mismatch between EU role conception, Armenian expectations and perceived performance of the EU. This is because the EU is hardly visible in the public domain and/or engaged in tackling key obstacles hindering the reform process. The key challenge facing Armenia is how to pursue deeper integration with the EU in the light of the country's involvement in the Eurasian project.

Azerbaijan

Economic cooperation is the cornerstone of EU-Azerbaijani relations. This point comes across in all interviews in Baku (Interviews 4, 5). At the same time, Azerbaijan expects the partnership with the EU to develop, first, on an equal footing and, second, to be limited to those areas of common interests (Van Gils 2017).

First, from the Azerbaijani perspective cooperation with the EU is to be based on equality and partnership. A member of parliament interviewed for this research indicated that "Azerbaijan does not need a big brother to follow as it is used to have big brothers, but nowadays it is an independent country". The subtext to these remarks is that (especially in the energy area) the EU needs Azerbaijan more than *vice versa*; therefore, it is Azerbaijan's *choice* to engage in partnership with the EU.

Second, Azerbaijan is interested in cooperating with the EU on specific economic issues of common interest: energy, energy security and transportation (Joint Press Statement, 2015). President Ilham Aliyev hailed the important role of Azerbaijan in ensuring Europe's energy security for the coming decades and underlined the critical role of the TANAP project in this respect (Trend.az 2013). Presidential statements focus exclusively on the EU-Azerbaijan strategic partnership in the sphere of energy, while dismissing the importance of political reforms and demanding from the EU a "fair stance" on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Azerbaijani ambassador to the EU also stressed that neither the ENP nor Eastern Partnership can nor should define relations between Azerbaijan and the EU, since the government of Azerbaijan has its own approach, which is focused on energy and energy security (Euractiv 2015).

However, the perceptions of the EU in the economic domain vary depending on the political and economic position of the interviewees in the hierarchy of power. Amongst the political elites, the strong interest in an economic partnership with the EU is underpinned by Azerbaijan's overarching concern over security and independence. The role of the West is seen as a pivotal for both the economic development of the country and its independence vis-à-vis the regional hegemon – Russia. From the political elites' point of view, Moscow has always tried to keep Azerbaijan in Russia's orbit, and deepening the relations with West has

been viewed as a way to become stronger in economic terms. However, there are two important caveats. First, in stark contrast to Georgia and Armenia, it is not the EU as a whole, which is perceived as a partner but individual member states. The economic partnership is pursued with the EU's member states, and - even more specifically - with their large energy companies, rather than the EU as a whole. Second, as was pointed out above, the elites' expectations vis-à-vis the EU in the economic domain are accompanied by a strong rejection of its role as a promoter of political reforms. The same interviewees who favored a strong economic partnership with the EU condemn it for interfering in Azerbaijani domestic affairs and displaying "political bias".

An almost opposite view is expressed by the Azerbaijani civil society: from their perspective the EU places too much value on economic relations with Azerbaijan at the expense of other domains. In fact, many interviewees from civil society stressed the direct relationship between the human rights situation and the energy partnership: in their view, the economic partnership between Azerbaijan and the EU results in increased political repressions against civil society. This is a decisive matter which significantly reduces the trust towards the EU as civil society activists see a disparity between the EU's intensive business dealings with the ruling elite and its weak efforts on political reforms.

Therefore, as noted by respondents from civil society, Azerbaijan exemplifies the "values versus economic interests" dilemmas in EU's foreign policy. Whereas the Azerbaijani elites reject the EU's overall conception as a modernising force and oppose the wholesale adoption of EU values and rules, civil society regards the EU as selling out to the ruling elites in Azerbaijan in a pursuit of profit under the disguise of "energy partnership".

Conclusions

Our research suggests that the EU faces a conundrum in the South Caucasus. In broad terms, how the EU is perceived is how it sees itself – as a benevolent actor, seeking to promote democratic values and the rule of law, without seeking to establish a sphere of influence with "hard" power. Yet, our findings identify three major gaps with partner countries' perceptions.

First, the EU is indeed associated with democratization and modernization by the majority of actors within South Caucasus countries (thereby matching the EU's own role conception). However, some of its norms and policies are regarded as unsuitable to the partner countries' needs and expectations. In particular, non-discrimination vis-à-vis LGBT (demanded by the EU as part of the visa liberalization process) was perceived by our respondents as being alien and hence imposed by the EU. Likewise, the EU's focus on regulation and a trade-related *acquis* within the Eastern Partnership is unsuitable for the partner countries' current level of development. This gap is despite the fact that the EU explicitly recognized in 2015 that not all ENP partners aspire to EU norms, standards and values (European Commission/High Representative, 2015). Therefore, our findings highlight the EU's lack of adaptation to partner countries' expectations and their weak involvement in devising EU policies in the neighborhood (see also Korosteleva 2017).

Second, although the EU's own conception is accepted by the majority of actors within South Caucasus countries, the EU is actually not seen as a driver of change in the South Caucasus – with the exception of Georgia. It transpires that EU's role conception is not bolstered by EU's perceived role performance in the region. The more the EU proclaims ambitious policy goals, the more it is criticized for either proclaiming them (e.g. by the ruling elites in Azerbaijan) or not living up to expectations, that is for its weak perceived role performance (e.g. civil society in Azerbaijan and former elites in Armenia). This mismatch between role expectations and perceived performance significantly weakens the standing of the EU in the region. The lack of response to the demand for stronger engagement of the partners frustrates the partners and fuels the perception of the EU being weak and ineffective.

Finally, our research indicates that the discrepancy between the expectations of states in the South Caucasus and EU role performance does not derive only from the EU's policies. Closer scrutiny of partner countries' perceptions demonstrates that this gap is a corollary of *what the EU is*, rather than *what it does*. Even though there is an interest in EU's own role conception, there are also strong expectations that the EU ought to combine its democracy and modernization roles with being a security provider in the region. Yet security is an area in which the EU's role conception and perceived performance has significantly diverged from the expectations of the target countries in the eastern neighborhood (Delcour and Wolczuk 2018). The lack of response to the demand for engagement of the partners has resulted in the perception of the EU as ineffective.

In this article, by adopting an “outside-in” perspective, as advocated by Keuleers et al. (2016), we seek to enrich understanding of the EU's foreign policy by complementing the well-developed analysis of EU policy-making with how these policies resonate in the target countries. Our findings indicate that the EU is indeed perceived as a normative power. However, this role perception raises considerable expectations. Therefore, the inherent risks of EU's policy stems from raising excessive and/or misaligned expectations in target countries, which are not matched by role expectations and performance. Therefore, policy implications of our findings are that either the role conception of the EU has to change or the role expectations of the partners' countries have to be managed downwards either by the EU or the partners themselves, leading to a reassessment of what the nature of relations are to be. In the absence of either, relations are likely to drift towards routinized interactions – merely masking rather than addressing the incongruence – with neither side accruing the hoped-for benefits.

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List of interviews and focus groups

Armenia

1. NGO representative, Vanadzor, 2015.
2. Member of the Armenian arliament, Yerevan, 2015
3. Member of the Armenian government, Yerevan, 2015.
4. NGO representative, Yerevan, 2015.

Azerbaijan

5. Official, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Baku, 2015.
6. Official, Ministry of Economy, Baku, 2015.

Georgia

7. Chair of a political party (opposition) Tbilisi, 2015.
8. Official, Ministry of Economic Development, Tbilisi, 2015.
9. Member of the Georgian Parliament, Tbilisi, 2015.

Focus groups

1. With representatives of Georgian civil society, Tbilisi, January 2016.
2. With representatives of Armenian business sector, Yerevan, November 2015.
3. With representatives of Azerbaijani civil society, Baku, October 2015.

¹ The main interviews used throughout the text are listed at the end of the article.

² The Velvet Revolution of 2018 is undoubtedly the most substantial political change in Armenia’s post-Soviet existence. As such, it bears important implications on relations with the EU, not least because of the new congruence between the EU’s and the current Armenian authorities’ reform agenda. However, we do not delve into these implications as we focus on perceptions of the EU rather than relations with the EU *per se*.

³ Instead, as we argue elsewhere, Armenians expected the EU to increase its involvement in security issues (Delcour and Wolczuk 2018).

⁴ The current expectations cannot be covered in-depth as part of this article, as additional interviews and focus groups would need to be conducted to ascertain the degree to which Armenian perceptions of the EU have changed.

⁵ Our findings are corroborated by the surveys conducted among Azerbaijani general public over the past decade, which highlight a growing dissatisfaction with the EU's involvement in the country. According to the Caucasus Barometer, in 2008 41 percent of the respondents trusted the EU. Five years later, trust towards the EU decreased to 24 percent and distrust rose to 27 percent (Caucasus Barometer, 2008, 2013). The percentage of Azerbaijani citizens having a positive image of the EU is not only much weaker than in the two other South Caucasus countries (39% in 2018); it is also decreasing (by 8% as compared to 2017, EUneighbourseast 2018a). While structural factors (such as the EU's low visibility in the country, especially outside the capital city) explain the lack of a positive image, the deteriorating trends points to the regime's ability to shape perceptions of the EU and the diffusion of a negative image of the EU via the state-controlled media.

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