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The EU in Armenia's Official and Public Eyes

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Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hopes Constrained by Hard Dilemmas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Public Takeaways from Wars Close and Far

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

About the Author

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

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

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

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Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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