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

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Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Shifting Elite Discourse and Public Opinion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frustrated Civil Society

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding Remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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