

The European Union's Approach to the Southern Caucasus

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Abstract: This article analyzes the behavior of the European Union towards to the South Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan. The research targets the European Parliament's members' perception to Azerbaijan, using a novel dataset of plenary speeches in the EP in the current 2019-2024 EP term. Based on a wide range of factors and reasons behind the EU actions, as well the consequences from certain diplomatic engagements, they are designed to highlight all hurdles and complexities which persist in international relations.

Keywords: South Caucasus, European Parliament, Azerbaijan

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) foreign policy direction has been continuously altering based on various aspects including the geographical proximity, economic conditions and cultural differences. According to Malovec (2023), the EU focuses its foreign policy direction based on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) which was created in 1993 by the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Indeed, many subsequent treaties including the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 have been instrumental to strengthen the CFSP directions (European Union External Action, 2020).

The CFSP was created as a tool to promote international cooperation and the interests of EU states in foreign policy by ensuring peace, security on an international level and creating democratic values including human rights. This policy is built on the basics of the UN Charter, which reflects

that European Union stays committed to international diplomacy and adheres by rules of international behavior. Importantly, the CFSP covers policy on Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), a core component in how the EU approaches crisis management through employment of both civilian and military assets (Kaskina, 2023). In real-life applications, the strategic orientation of CFSP encompasses emerging global political challenges, including conflicts in neighboring territories and aggressive aspirations on the part of great powers such as Russia or China (EUR-Lex., 2011). Over time, the CFSP has been increasingly integrated into other sectors of the EU external relations such as trade policy, association and policy development cooperation and internal security which are conducted via the Community Method (European Commission, n.d.).

It is important to note that common EU foreign policy is not existing. There are soft, iterate approaches based on liberal foundations, but these will not be enough in key regions. Consequently, member states will build pragmatic foreign policy and economic relations in the region according to their own interest, resulting in becoming each other's competitors. EU is still keeping its status and presence as a soft power, admitting its limited capacity to mobilise the member states to support an agenda more focused on hard power issues (Vasa, 2020).

The European Union's controversial attitude to the region

One of the foreign policy directions of the EU is dedicated to the South Caucasus region. The key goal of the European Union in its policy towards the Caucasus regarding socio-economic aspect is to promote progress of a market economy and creation of favorable conditions for business to attract investors from Europe. The EU provides considerable financial aid with a focus on the countries of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) through its technical assistance program, CIS (European Commission, 1992). So as to help in this aid, the EU has established Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program. This program has the following central goal to be

achieved – fostering of development in Central Asia-Caspian Sea-South Caucasus-Black sea transit line by using highways at maximum (Meister, 2022). The EU's increasing interest in the South Caucasus countries stems from the organization's expansion, which now encompasses the Black Sea.

There is an apparent inclination within the EU to treat the South Caucasus as a unified region, possibly driven by a strategy that, to some extent, surpasses individual states with shared geopolitical criteria (Deen et. al., 2023). Nevertheless, the practical experience has shown a certain extent of inconsistency between what EU advocacy holds and its behavior. The practice shows that double standards are used towards the Caucasian states, and it is not possible for the EU to have a great impact in the region if it continues to sustain it.

In the Ukraine case, therefore, European Union's approach emphasizes on its two-tier standards of striking a balance between self-determinism and territorial integrity. The support of the EU for Ukraine has been consistent, particularly after Russia occupied Crimea in 2014 and war began to explode on the east side (Matsaberidze, 2015). This support has increased especially after Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022.

The first premise lies in the considerations of a fundamental legal framework governing international relations as established by the UN Charter which accentuates on states, their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Any threat or use of force to the boundaries and territorial integrity of any state, or political independence is forbidden by the Charter of Article 2(4) in which the EU has taken it as a leading principle in Ukrainian case (Bellinger, 2022). The Russian take-over of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent invasion, which resulted thereafter, across eastern Ukraine have been widely considered as contraventions of this principle.

For the retaliation of these actions, EU together with other international communities have referred to several resolutions delivered by UN general assembly as well as Security Council to condemn Russia's acts and at the same time affirming that Ukraine is a sovereign country. In a noteworthy manner, UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 that was passed in the year 2014 reconfirmed Ukraine's sovereignty

and territorial integrity from within its borders as internationally recognized, and it underlined once again by invalidity of Crimea referendum in same year.

In addition, the position of EU on the matter is also driven by its international treaty obligations and its own legislative structure. A much important document in this connection is the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, effected in 2017 (Krasnodębska, 2021). It enhances political association and economic integration in the context of wider support for EU relations with Ukraine which is based on shared commitment to international law principals, the fundamental values such as democracy, rule of law and human right.

Economic sanctions have also been employed by the EU as a measure to reinforce international law. The US and the EU imposed sanctions on Russia with the objective to affect its policy in regard to support of separatist groups, which were created after they declared independence in Luhansk and Donetsk areas.

The EU's strategy towards Ukraine rests on three main pillars: the reinstating the territorial integrity of Ukraine, focusing on economic sanctions and isolation of Russia within international community and depending upon American support. The leaders of Europe said that they were committed to supporting Ukraine until Russia withdraws from all the territory it occupied. The EU reacted to the conflict with multiple sanctions against Russia and, simultaneously, offered Ukraine diverse kinds of support (Le Gloannec, 2015). Moreover, the EU has provided substantial financial assistance to Ukraine, including grants and loans as well as support in such issues like the green transition, economy, and education. However, the EU's strategy remains a debatable subject, including its efficiency and capability of keeping up in the long term. If the US political landscape changes and Europe needs to reduce its dependence on the United States, it would be unsustainable for them.

On the other hand, when the EU's foreign policy approach is analyzed from the different perspectives, it reveals that there is no unanimous approach. For instance, in the case of Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict over previously called Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU's stance is much more inclined toward the ideology of so called "self-determinism" rights of

the Armenians residing in the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. Although the invasion of the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan by the separatists of Armenia had been the same type of the violation of the territorial integrity principle, the EU's approach has been proving that there are double standards when it comes to the different scenarios (Saari et. al., 2021).

It is an obvious fact that the conflict that has its roots in the late Soviet era transformed into a major war both in early 1990s and again in 2020. The EU has officially stated that it respects international law on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the position becomes a little bit more complex if viewed through all those humanitarian aspects and rights of ethnic Armenians living in Karabakh region.

The EU has taken part in humanitarian assistance and calling for protection of all civilians within the region. It is an undeniable fact that self-determination approach is based on the historical context of decolonization, and this principle finds its legal support within both the UN Charter and a number of international documents drawn up during 1950's such as International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In general, it is not understood that provision supports the secession of regions from sovereign states without consent. Therefore, in conflicts over territories, the principle of territorial integrity usually surpasses others.

In contrast, it is much clearer that the EU adheres to principles of international law in its response to Ukraine crisis where Russia annexed Crimea 2014 and supported separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, the EU has given a very strong stand supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity as well as condemning Russia's actions on grounds that they violate international law. Hence, the principle of territorial integrity resonates with EU's strategic interests in relation to Ukraine comprising the stability aspect of its eastern borders and the wider European security architecture. The EU's support for Ukraine also mirrors its wider pursuit of the geopolitical contest with Russia and has avowed commitment to assisting post-Soviet states in their Euro-Atlantic integration. However, when it comes to the case of Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict and the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the EU's stance could be aligned as dual standards.

The Eastern Partnership program of the EU focuses on enhancing relations with countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, which also includes Armenia and Azerbaijan. This implies a balanced, mutual relationship-building without sharply advocating for either party in the Karabakh issue. There is a number of factors, which influence diplomacy of the EU in the region, such as its energy interests, the stability of the South Caucasus, and its relations with key regional players like Russia and Turkey. The difference in the policy approach by the EU concerning its support for territorial integrity regarding Ukraine and its more variegated support to other stakeholders within Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict showcase hurdles that may hinder the adoption of a coherent approach about these issues respectively, on a case-by-case basis.

Moreover, the EU's dual standard approaches are also visible from the application and promotion of human rights including minority rights (Griera, 2023). The position of the EU in relation to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, particularly throughout and following 2020 war, puts doubt on sustainability of its role as enforcer or promoter of international law towards ensuring a reign environment. The actions and statements of the EU have been viewed as less strong against Armenia for its military presence in Azerbaijani territory, despite calls to Azerbaijan to measure up with international human rights law standards especially related to human rights protection for minorities. Furthermore, attention has been drawn to the EU being less than willing to state openly that Armenian military forces should have left Azerbaijani territory and reproach provoking actions or statements (Tuminez, 2003). This, however stands against the EU'S resolution on territorial integrity in Ukraine's case with Russia thus showing a differential approach to similar issues of territory and self-determination.

Another important thing to consider about the circumstance is that of a diplomatic and humanitarian responsibility of the EU in relation with Karabakh region. As a result of the wars fought in 2020, European Union has tried to emerge as an important player to mediate negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The fact that the role of the EU increases can also be noticed in light of the loss of the power by OSCE Minsk Group, traditionally chaired by Russia, France and United States on one hand and changing geopolitical dynamics due to war in Ukraine.

The involvement of the EU is perceived to balance Russian influence within the region, and provides a platform for Azerbaijan and Armenia to engage in dialogue.

However, the allocation of financial aids and resources has been a cause for concern because it is regarded as unequal by many in EU. For instance, the EU provides much more aid to Armenia than Azerbaijan. This then questioned the discrepancy, especially with regard to destruction meted on Azerbaijani's territories from the conflict and humanitarian needs. These actions help to create and maintain the EU's perception of bias regarding their approach toward this particular conflict.

In addition, it was seen that the EU engaged representatives of previously called "Nagorno-Karabakh" primarily ethnic Armenians but made no parallel attempt to engage Azerbaijanis displaced from territories historically called Western Zangezur and now is under control of Armenia. This, this can be considered as double standard. This is very much relevant to the historical context of fighting, where ethnic Azerbaijanis were forced to flee from their lands in what is now Armenia, becoming refugees.

European Parliament and its controversial approaches

The Parliament's attitude towards Azerbaijan in especially the Karabakh conflict has shown a layered and complex perspective that is sometimes seen as biased or inconsistent by different actors. While intended to safeguard international law and human rights, the Parliament's resolutions and activities have also found themselves under severe criticism for double standards, especially when they are compared with Ukraine.

The European Parliament has also strongly spoken against Azerbaijan's local military activities in Karabakh region which were hypothetically considered as violations of international law and human rights. The condemnation has also gone as far as demanding targeted sanctions on Azerbaijani officials and the rethink of EU-Azerbaijan relations. The resolutions revolving around protecting the ethnic Armenians

in the said area and denunciation of what they call ethnic cleansing that has been taking place according to their Parliament (European Parliament, 2023). Although this position is a great dedication to the safeguard of human rights and the protection of minority groups, it is not applicable to the situation in internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan. It is due to the fact that Azerbaijani side has explicitly stated that it is local anti-terror actions targeting the remnants of the military groups aspiring to revive the secession activities.

On the contrary, this method differs significantly from how the Parliament has dealt with similar conflicts, like Ukraine crisis. Regarding Ukraine, the European Parliament has closely supported its territorial integrity and sovereignty amid Ukrainians' vigorous opposition of Russia as an aggressor. This unequivocal stand has been also defined by strong economic and political backing of Ukraine which complies with overall goals in the domain of the EU foreign policy as well as principles adopted under international law.

The difference of approach towards conflict over Karabakh and the Ukrainian crisis by European Parliament regarding to consistency concerns the foreign policy application. Critiques, including Azerbaijan's Milli Majlis have claimed that the Parliaments have been demonstrating the double standards (News.az, 2023). The very strong stance of the Parliament against Azerbaijan's actions in Karabakh and simultaneous support for Ukraine's integrity these complex issues on self-determination as well as territorial sovereignty, simply show that there are perceived inconsistencies.

In addition, the European Parliament's policy is shaped by a wide range of geopolitical and strategic interests. As for Karabakh, the Parliament resolutions and activities seem likely to be informed by broader EU concerns over stability in South Caucasus region relations with key regional powers such as Russia or Türkiye. Energy interests are also connected but it is not directly linked here. This dimension affords multiplicity to the Parliamentary method and can sometimes seem awkward or unbalanced when observed from various points.

Finally, it is important to take a look at what legislative data tells about the perception of the Members of the European Parliament to Azerbaijan. Using a novel dataset of plenary speeches in the EP in

the current 2019-2024 EP term, we quantified the number of speeches including relevant expressions to Azerbaijan. We also applied text emotion detection techniques to identify the attitudes of the speeches in a three-category scale: negative, neutral and positive. So far, there were 740 EP plenary speeches dealing with Azerbaijan. The results of the analyses were as follows.

As for the EP Group categorization we can see that the most negative group to Azerbaijan was the left-wing GUE/NGL and the Greens/EFA Group, 75% and 73,2% respectively. The most positive ones were the ID and non-instrict MEPs, with 24.7% and 24.2% respectively.

EP Group	negative	neutral	positive	total	negative	neutral	positive
ECR	40	39	13	92	43.5%	42.4%	14.1%
EPP	109	54	22	185	58.9%	29.2%	11.9%
GUE/NGL	39	11	2	52	75.0%	21.2%	3.8%
Greens/EFA	52	7	12	71	73.2%	9.9%	16.9%
ID	57	7	21	85	67.1%	8.2%	24.7%
NI	22	8	3	33	66.7%	24.2%	9.1%
RE	49	13	12	74	66.2%	17.6%	16.2%
S&D	101	32	15	148	68.2%	21.6%	10.1%

Source: European Parliament, Eulytix collection1

1 www.eulytix.eu

As for the Member States breakdown, the results are as follows:

Member State	negative	neutral	positive	total	negative	neutral	positive
Austria	8	5	0	13	61.5%	38.5%	0.0%
Belgium	9	1	0	10	90.0%	10.0%	0.0%
Bulgaria	23	23	4	50	46.0%	46.0%	8.0%
Croatia	9	11	11	31	29.0%	35.5%	35.5%
Cyprus	23	9	2	34	67.6%	26.5%	5.9%
Czechia	19	12	4	35	54.3%	34.3%	11.4%
Denmark	3	1	0	4	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%
Estonia	32	10	7	49	65.3%	20.4%	14.3%
Finland	1	1	0	2	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
France	76	4	20	100	76.0%	4.0%	20.0%
Germany	43	18	8	69	62.3%	26.1%	11.6%
Greece	9	11	1	21	42.9%	52.4%	4.8%
Hungary	2	2	0	4	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%
Ireland	5	1	1	7	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%
Italy	31	5	11	47	66.0%	10.6%	23.4%
Latvia	0	2	0	2	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Lithuania	11	3	3	17	64.7%	17.6%	17.6%
Netherlands	30	11	5	46	65.2%	23.9%	10.9%
Poland	10	21	7	38	26.3%	55.3%	18.4%
Portugal	11	0	2	13	84.6%	0.0%	15.4%
Romania	8	0	0	8	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Slovakia	22	6	3	31	71.0%	19.4%	9.7%
Slovenia	7	2	0	9	77.8%	22.2%	0.0%
Spain	46	7	5	58	79.3%	12.1%	8.6%
Sweden	31	5	6	42	73.8%	11.9%	14.3%

Source: European Parliament, Eulytix collection²

² www.eulytix.eu

Data show that relatively MEPs from Portugal, Belgium and Romania were the most negative to Azerbaijan, while on the positive side, there are Croatia and Italy.

Conclusion

To conclude, though the fact that the European Union is actively engaged in these regions there is a clear indication of the EU's dedication to peacebuilding and stability maintenance. However, at the same time it creates prepositions on double standards approach which poses as a challenge for consistent foreign policy. Based on a wide range of factors and reasons behind the EU actions, as well the consequences from certain diplomatic engagements, they are designed to highlight all hurdles and complexities which persist in international relations. Meanwhile, the promotion of international law and human rights have yet to be fully developed, but rather they continue with evolution in the manner typical of any project undertaken by pragmatist approaches with dual standards.

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