

Territorial Conflict, Domestic Crisis, and the Covid-19 Pandemic in the South Caucasus. Explaining Variegated EU Responses

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Introduction

For the three countries of the South Caucasus region, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, linked to the EU through its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and a diverse set of Association, Cooperation and Partnership Agreements (Simão, 2018; van Gils, 2020), 2020 brought about three developments of supposedly seismic magnitude. The most significant event, affecting the region's geopolitical order, was the outbreak of the 44-day war between Armenia and Armenia-supported forces of the breakaway region of Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan, aided by its brotherly ally Turkey. Preceded by skirmishes and small-scale military confrontations that had erupted intermittently since 1994 when Armenia and Azerbaijan had signed the Bishkek Protocol (Freizer, 2014, p. 110) that terminated the first war (1991–94), the 2020 war broke out on 27 September and ended on 9 November, following a Russia-mediated ceasefire agreement.¹ Throughout the six weeks of armed conflict, 5,970 combatants were killed² and thousands of Armenian settlers displaced. As de Waal (2021) noted, the military conflict and the ensuing agreement resulted in 'reversed roles of victor and defeated' as Azerbaijan regained approximately one third of Armenia-occupied Nagorno Karabakh and the seven territories adjacent to it, held by Armenia since 1994.

The second major development in 2020 was the outbreak of domestic political crises in Armenia and Georgia. Their origins differed but effectively revolved around questions of legitimacy of, and alleged abuse of power by, the incumbent governments. In Armenia, in response to military defeat and the loss of territory, two multi-party alliances stoked nationalist sentiments and mobilized thousands of Armenians to engage in weeks-long protests against Prime Minister Pashinyan's war management, calling for his resignation.³ In contrast, Georgia's crisis centered around contentious electoral reforms. Allegations of voting fraud in the parliamentary elections, held on 31 October, incited mass protests in Tbilisi against the ruling Georgian Dream Party, and on 8 November, leaders of the united opposition declared to boycott the second round of elections on 21 November and participation in future parliamentary sessions.⁴

¹<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/11/12/a-peace-deal-ends-a-bloody-war-over-nagorno-karabakh>

²<https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-conflict-visual-explainer#1>

³<https://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-opposition-names-joint-candidate-in-bid-to-pressure-pm/30982610.html>

⁴<https://jam-news.net/georgian-opposition-calls-on-public-to-boycott-the-second-round-of-elections/>

The third development that compounded events on the local and regional level was the outbreak and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the first wave could be contained by authorities in the three countries rather quickly, the number of new daily infections and deaths peaked in late 2020.⁵ Regimes resorted to different measures such as limiting public life intermittently and forcing economies into temporary shutdowns. These, in conjunction with the global fallouts of the pandemic, have led to steep economic contractions of 5 per cent (Azerbaijan), 6 per cent (Georgia) and 8 per cent (Armenia)⁶ and, according to the UNDP (2021), a deterioration of already strained public finances and exchange-rate instabilities. Also, unemployment has soared in all three countries,⁷ reinforcing endemic poverty, inequality, and poor micro-economic development.

How has the EU responded to these developments and how have they impacted EU-South Caucasus relations? After all, the ENP Review of 2015 had promised active involvement in the region. It pledged to ‘offer a tailor-made approach to cooperating on security-related matters’ [and to] ‘actively ensure that our overall engagement is conflict-sensitive’ (European Commission and HR/VP, 2015, p. 4). It declared that ‘all means available will be used [...] to support the management of crises and the settlement of protracted conflicts in the neighbourhood’ (ibid., p. 13). The EU also committed itself to continue ‘to work with partner governments, civil society and citizens on human rights and democracy related issues, including electoral processes’ (ibid., p. 6). Lastly, the ENP heralded to ‘put stronger emphasis on health security aspects by strengthening country capacities to respond effectively to health threats including communicable diseases.’ (ibid., p. 14).

As will be discussed by this article, EU relations with the three countries of the South Caucasus remained largely unaffected by domestic crises and regional conflict, whereas EU responses variegated considerably. It is argued that variance is due to a mix of factors. On one hand, local and regional scope conditions and the role of other extra-regional actors provided differentiated opportunity structures for EU engagement. On the other hand, variegated responses are the result of intra-EU dynamics that oscillated between passivity, disinterest, go-alone attitudes of individual Member States, and consensus when action seemed needed and possible.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the relevance of the Armenia–Azerbaijan war for EU relations with the two countries and examines EU (in)action. The subsequent section analyses and explains EU engagement in the domestic political crises in Armenia and Georgia, whereas the last section explains the reasons for, and nature of, EU responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in the three countries. The article will conclude by offering reflections on the future of EU policies towards the South Caucasus in a post-pandemic setting.

I. The EU and the Armenia–Azerbaijan War

Almost one and a half decades ago, German (2007) argued that the EU was ‘visibly invisible’ in what regards conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. Some 15 years later, and

⁵ Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, 7 May 2021.

⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/armenia/poverty-and-welfare-impacts-covid-19-and-mitigation-policies-armenia>

⁷ <https://jam-news.net/50-of-working-age-adults-are-unemployed-in-georgia/>; <https://tradingeconomics.com/azerbaijan/unemployment-rate>; <https://tradingeconomics.com/armenia/unemployment-rate>

after 44 days of military conflict in and around Nagorny Karabakh, this sobering assessment remains largely valid. Virtually all observers who commented on the EU's role in the 2020 war share the view that the EU acted as a mere 'bystander' (de Waal, 2020), that it was 'sidelined' (Broers, 2021) or even 'paralyzed'.⁸ When judged against the European Commission's much-noticed communication of December 2006, which claimed that the EU needs to proactively address protracted conflicts in the Southern Caucasus to prevent the further undermining of regional stability (European Commission, 2006, p. 9), one observer even went so far as to argue that the EU 'failed, yet again, and in a spectacular fashion, to be a relevant player and a peace broker on its eastern periphery' (Grgic, 2020).

The EU's inability to adopt a proactive role, exert power and act as a conflict mediator can be explained through regional power shifts and intra-EU-related factors. After years of strategic large-scale investment in its military capabilities (Schumacher, 2016), and growing public dissatisfaction with the status quo (Schumacher, 2020), Azerbaijan was increasingly determined to seek a military solution to the conflict and re-conquer territory. Resorting to high-tech, precision-guided drone systems of Israeli and Turkish origin, and the deployment of foreign mercenaries,⁹ Azerbaijan quickly advanced into, and rapidly recaptured, Armenia-occupied territories, sensing military victory from the outset. These territorial gains, accompanied by inflammatory regime propaganda and domestic 'war euphoria', decreased Azerbaijan's interest in peace negotiations or potential mediation efforts by the EU which is not even part of the OSCE Minsk Group, established in 1994 and co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States with the task of finding a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Similarly, also Armenia's post-revolutionary government of Prime Minister Pashinyan had adopted a more confrontational course. Over the course of time, it abandoned the OSCE Minsk Group's 'Basic Principles' for the phased and peaceful settlement of the conflict (agreed upon in November 2007),¹⁰ and embraced 'an agenda of territorial aggrandizement far beyond the original goal of self-determination and security for Upper Karabakh' (Socor, 2021). Moreover, the government made highly confrontational statements that 'Artsakh [Nagorny Karabakh] is Armenia',¹¹ or that even 'new territories would [be seized] in the 'event of a new war' (cited in Socor, 2021). De facto, the Armenian government seemed no longer willing to consider previously discussed land-for-peace options or make these subjects of any deliberations with the EU.

Changes in the two parties' approach to the conflict were not the only developments on the regional level that hampered EU engagement. Most importantly, Russia had no interest in involving other international actors in the resolution of the conflict. Although, in its capacity as co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, it had called in October and November repeatedly upon the conflict parties to cease hostilities and agree on a ceasefire, it did nothing to empower the Minsk Group and let it play any mediation role. Instead, Russia viewed the conflict as an opportunity to pursue its own geopolitical objectives to strengthen its role in the region by playing the two conflict parties off against one

⁸<https://www.tert.am/en/news/2021/03/19/amanda-paul/3556167>

⁹<https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-backed-syrian-fighters-join-armenian-azeri-conflict-11602625885>; <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26494>

¹⁰<https://www.osce.org/mg/51152>

¹¹<https://oc-media.org/pashinyan-calls-for-unification-between-nagorno-karabakh-and-armenia/>

another further than it had already done in the past. From this perspective, the conflict allowed Russia to make itself an indispensable and dominant party of any future post-war arrangement, to expand its military footprint in the region through the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Nagorny Karabakh,¹² to increase Armenia's security dependency, and to weaken the pro-democratic government of Prime Minister Pashinyan, which it had eyed with suspicion ever since it came to power in the Velvet Revolution of 2018.¹³ This predominant role was facilitated by the strategic retreat of the United States from the South Caucasus.

By the same token, Turkey's provision of military hardware, intelligence support and military advisors to Azerbaijan¹⁴ tipped the military balance in favour of the latter and expanded its political and military presence in the region, thereby challenging Russia's quest for regional hegemony. Turkish President Erdoğan questioned the legitimacy of established international conflict resolution mechanisms and claimed Turkey's active involvement in the reshaping of the post-war regional order.¹⁵ This demand was reinforced by Russia's and Turkey's decision to establish a 'Joint Russian-Turkish Centre for Monitoring the Ceasefire in Karabakh' in the Aghdam district of Azerbaijan and the decision to create a land corridor connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhchivan. Such a corridor, to be controlled by the Russian Federal Security Service, is in Turkey's interest as it will help facilitating Turkish trade with Azerbaijan and Central Asia. All in all, these developments serve as powerful examples of how altered regional scope conditions have further diminished the already limited opportunity structures for the EU in 2020.

As far as intra-EU factors hampering EU action in the conflict are concerned, it is noteworthy that the Nagorny Karabakh war was in the periphery of EU interests. On one hand, this can be explained by the absence of influential policy entrepreneurship on the part of EU Member States and the limited salience of both the region and the conflict on their respective foreign policy agendas. While the German EU Council Presidency and various Member States' governments condemned the hostilities and called for an immediate ceasefire, they did not become active.¹⁶ Only France pursued a more active role, though outside the EU framework. Already shortly after the outbreak of the war, French President Macron attacked President Erdoğan, arguing that his war-related statements were 'reckless and dangerous'¹⁷ and that France would not accept the violent acquisition of territory by Azerbaijan. Also, by remarking 'I say to Armenia and to the Armenians, France will play its role',¹⁸ Macron did not just signal France's support for Armenia –

¹²Russia has two military bases in Armenia. According to the ceasefire agreement, Russia deploys for a period of at least five years in Nagorny Karabakh and along the so-called Lachin corridor, linking the former with mainland Armenia, 1,960 Russian peacekeepers, 90 armoured personnel carriers and 380 military vehicles.

¹³<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/the-velvet-revolution-is-affecting-armenias-ties-with-russia/>

¹⁴<https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/policy-briefs/nagorno-karabakh-war-new-balance-power-southern-caucasus>

¹⁵<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-russia-france-involvement-for-ceasefire-in-karabakh-unacceptable-erdogan-158761>

¹⁶<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/2/469719.pdf>; <https://www.osce.org/permanent-council/471552>; <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-under-pressure-to-take-sides-in-nagorno-karabakh-conflict/a-55364432>; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/konflikten-i-nagorno-karabach_H811154

¹⁷<https://www.france24.com/en/20200930-macron-condemns-turkey-s-bellucose-statements-on-nagorno-karabakh-fighting>

¹⁸<https://www.france24.com/en/20200930-macron-condemns-turkey-s-bellucose-statements-on-nagorno-karabakh-fighting>

which eventually materialized in the form of humanitarian flights and the establishment of a ‘mechanism to assist Armenians affected by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh’.¹⁹ He also put France in opposition to other Member States that favoured a more balanced approach. France’s pro-Armenian bias – the French Senate had even called for the recognition of Nagorno Karabakh²⁰ – not only undermined the Minsk Group’s legitimacy and eliminated its chances of becoming active as a mediator, but also harmed the EU’s image as a potentially neutral power broker in the eyes of Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, following the fraudulent presidential elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus and the subsequent use of state-sponsored violence by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, and considering energy disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, EU Member States’ governments in the second half of the year were predominantly occupied by other crises. This was further accentuated by the ongoing negotiations over a Brexit agreement, negotiations on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework with the European Parliament, and the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. European Council President Michel, determined to carve out a role for himself as regards representing the EU globally, repeatedly spoke on the phone with the Azerbaijani President and the Armenian Prime Minister, hosted Armenian President Sarkissian, and resorted to his personal Twitter account to express his condemnation of the violence and support for renewed negotiations. Uncoordinated with Member States, these efforts, though, blatantly underestimated conflict developments in and around Nagorno Karabakh and the fact that the conflict parties – and their respective societies – were neither interested in finding compromise solutions nor requesting EU mediation.

The EU’s little interest in the conflict and its holding on to an outdated ‘negotiations-for-peace’ narrative was also demonstrated by the few occasions the 27 Heads of States and Governments addressed the issue. Of the three European Council summits that took place between October and December 2020, only the Special European Council, held on 1–2 October, touched upon the war. The relevant paragraph in the Summit Conclusions – seven lines long – was a repetition of past uninspiring EU discourses, calling for a ‘cessation of hostilities’, [urging] the parties to recommit to a lasting ceasefire and the peaceful settlement’, arguing that there ‘can be no military solution’, [expressing continuous] support for the OSCE Minsk Group’, and requesting the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, ‘to examine further EU support’ (European Council, 2020, p. 11).

This call for peace and negotiations equally dominated the ensuing discourse of the two Foreign Affairs Council meetings on 12 October and 19 November and formed the cornerstone of subsequent declarations by Borrell (Council of the EU, 2020a; Council of the EU, 2020b). Concrete EU support did materialize, though in the form of announced humanitarian aid packages, totaling 3.9 million EUR for conflict-affected civilians in and around Nagorno Karabakh.²¹ On the occasion of the EU-Armenia Partnership Council and the subsequent EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council, held on 17 and 18 December, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Várhelyi made a commitment to ‘contribute €10 million to further humanitarian assistance and to work towards more

¹⁹<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/armenia/news/article/armenia-france-establishing-a-mechanism-to-assist-armenians-affected-by-the>

²⁰<https://jam-news.net/french-senate-adopted-a-resolution-on-the-recognition-of-nagorno-karabakh/>

²¹https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2161

comprehensive conflict transformation and longer-term socio-economic development'.²² However, the European Commission, tasked with the provision of emergency aid, failed to specify how it aimed to disburse aid in Russia-controlled areas in Nagorny Karabakh, and Várhelyi's two announcements regarding DGNEAR's financial assistance were particularly striking as their wording was identical, even though 'comprehensive conflict transformation' has distinctively different connotations and de facto implications for Armenia and Azerbaijan in the new regional post-war configuration.

Finally, these developments occurred after EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia (EUSR), Toivo Klaar, was received by Azerbaijani President Aliyev in Baku just two days before the start of the hostilities.²³ During the meeting, Aliyev – in a humiliating show of force – kept Klaar in the dark regarding Azerbaijan's true intentions of waging full-scale war, thus giving the EU's presumptive 'conflict sensitivity' and ambition to develop a 'tailor-made approach to cooperating on security-related matters' (European Commission and HR/VP, 2015, p. 4), which the 2015 ENP Review had ambitiously spoken of, a rather cynical touch.

II. The EU and Domestic Political Crisis in Armenia and Georgia

EU responses to the domestic political crises in Armenia and Georgia variegated, and, in both cases, it was a set of extra- and intra-EU-related factors that explain variance. Whereas these precluded the EU from adopting an active and tangible role in Armenia, they enabled the EU to actively involve itself in Georgia and contribute to a partial defusing of a crisis that overshadowed much of Georgian domestic politics in 2020.

In Armenia, the signing of the ceasefire accord by Prime Minister Pashinyan, entailing de facto recognition of Armenia's defeat and Azerbaijan's reconquest of Armenia-held territories, plunged the country into serious domestic political turmoil. Shortly after news broke that Pashinyan had signed the agreement, which he referred to as 'unfavourable',²⁴ protesters seized government buildings in Yerevan, stormed the parliament, assaulted the Speaker of the National Assembly, and accused Pashinyan of high treason for single-handedly accepting the terms of the armistice agreement and surrendering supposedly Armenian lands to Azerbaijan. Fueled by the aggressive rhetoric of two multiple party alliances, composed of former ruling and marginalized opposition parties, protests and nationalist sentiments grew until late December 2020. Pashinyan's pre-war popularity decreased dramatically, and his legitimacy was put even more in question when President Sarkissian, leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church and former presidents called on him to resign, hand over to a government of national accord, and call for early legislative elections.²⁵ Opposition forces nominated in early December Vazgen Manukian, a former Prime Minister and ex-Defense Minister, as head of an interim government. But Pashinyan refused to step down and also rejected the idea of early elections, putting on public display the deep polarization between his pro-democratic movement and old regime forces that has been predating the 2020 crisis.

²²Council of the EU, Meeting Information, 17 December 2020, and Council of the EU, Meeting Information, 18 December 2020.

²³<https://www.commonspace.eu/index.php/news/eu-special-envoy-meets-azerbaijani-president-0>

²⁴<https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2020/11/12/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>

²⁵<https://oc-media.org/live-updates-armenian-president-calls-on-pashinyan-to-resign/>

Although the EU had committed itself ‘to contribute to the strengthening of democracy and of political, economic and institutional stability in the Republic of Armenia’ (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, 2018), it did nothing to safeguard Armenia’s endangered democratization process. The EU–Armenia Partnership Council of December and the preceding meeting between HR/VP Borrell and Armenian Foreign Minister Ayvazyan touched upon Armenia’s crisis in passing. However, neither the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council nor the HR/VP issued a single declaration on the issue or offered their services to mediate between opposition forces and the government. Only Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations Varhelyi tweeted on 17 December that ‘we stand ready to explore how to further support Armenia under the current challenging circumstances’.²⁶ This tweet, though, left much room for interpretation as to whether he referred to Armenia and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, Armenia’s exposure to the Covid-19 pandemic, or in fact the country’s domestic crisis. The EU’s passive attitude towards Armenia’s domestic crisis was due to the widespread notion among the EU-27 that Armenia needed to be regarded as a country that is highly exposed to Russian influence and viewed through the lens of its territorial conflict and thus concerns that hostilities may resume. Therefore, it was no surprise that also the Partnership Implementation Report on Armenia (European Commission and HR/VP, 2020), published one day before the Partnership Council for the purposes of internal use, entirely ignored the domestic crisis. On the other hand, passivity was also a function of a deliberate decision on the part of the Council to exercise self-restraint. It refrained from openly supporting the democratically elected pro-democracy government out of fear that such expressions may offer Russia a pretext to interfere in Armenia’s domestic affairs and re-enact the illegal and interventionist practices it has been pursuing in Ukraine since 2013. Undoubtedly, this ‘strategic silence’ has undermined the EU’s image as a credible normative power in the eyes of Armenia’s considerably large pro-democracy supporters²⁷ and demonstrated, once more, the EU’s limited geopolitical agency.

In contrast, and with regards to Georgia, local and regional scope conditions, as well as intra-EU dynamics differed significantly, offering the EU a conducive opportunity structure to involve itself and contribute to defusing the domestic crisis that had erupted already in mid-2019. At the time, the Georgian Dream-led government, primarily in an attempt to end mass protests and meet public demands for electoral system reform, had pledged to hold legislative elections in 2020 based on a fully proportional electoral system. However, on 14 November 2019 it reneged and stopped the constitutional amendments in parliament. In response and concerned about the continuous application of the mixed electoral system that had benefited the ruling Georgian Dream party, opposition parties and civil rights activists orchestrated new protests in the capital of Tbilisi which culminated in violent clashes between riot police and protesters and countless arrests some two weeks later.²⁸ The EU, and outgoing HR/VP Mogherini, left it to the EU Delegation in Tbilisi to respond. Already on 17 November, in a joint statement with the US Embassy to Georgia, the Delegation recognized ‘the deep disappointment of a wide segment of Georgian society at the failure of Parliament to pass the constitutional

²⁶Twitter Oliver Varhelyi, 17 December 2020.

²⁷<https://euobserver.com/foreign/150051>

²⁸<https://eurasianet.org/georgia-protests-resume-election-reforms-firewood-and-beans>

amendments'. It pointed to the 'increased mistrust and heightened tensions between the ruling party and other political parties and civil society' and called on them 'to restore trust through a calm and respectful dialogue'.²⁹ The EU's Head of Delegation and the US Ambassador to Georgia then jointly initiated and mediated a multi-party dialogue which started on 30 November 2019. After five rounds of deliberations, the process was finalized on 8 March 2020 with the adoption of a memorandum of understanding, defining electoral reform-related constitutional amendments that were signed by Georgian Dream and opposition party representatives (Memorandum of Understanding, 2020).³⁰

These mediation efforts proved decisive for the passing of a new law, amending the Georgian constitution to change the electoral system, which entered into force on 29 June. While the new law was welcomed by the EU's Head of Delegation,³¹ it did not, however, and in spite of the release of three straightforward statements the Delegation had jointly issued with the other facilitators of the political dialogue,³² preclude Georgian Dream from diluting the law regarding aspects such as voter intimidation, electoral commission compositions, and dispute resolutions.³³ Likewise, the EU could neither guarantee a smooth conduct of the first round of legislative elections, held on 31 October,³⁴ nor could it convince the defeated opposition parties which claimed systematic election fraud, to refrain from boycotting the second round of elections on 21 November and organizing new mass protests. Yet, mirroring the previous multi-party talks, the EU succeeded in facilitating in November/December a new dialogue between opposition forces and Georgian Dream, during which a general understanding was reached that further electoral reforms were needed.

What made EU action in Georgia possible? Firstly, as far as extra-EU factors are concerned, Georgia has been one of the few ENP partner countries where local support for the EU and European integration has been continuously high (Lejava, 2021). This applies to societal actors as well as political parties, all of which share Georgia's aspiration to integrate with Euro-Atlantic structures. Against the backdrop of Russia's territorial occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the absence of a potentially popular alternative norms provider, the EU, like the United States, enjoys high degrees of external legitimacy which has bestowed upon it significant leverage. Over the years, these factors have provided the EU with a favourable opportunity structure to increase its physical and ideational presence across the country – a process that has been aided by a pro-active EU Delegation which closely follows and regularly contributes to the national public discourse. Secondly, against the backdrop of the nationwide consensus that European integration is the country's ultimate foreign policy priority, both Georgian Dream and the opposition parties, despite their profound aversion for one another, understood that a rejection of EU mediation efforts and continuous discord over electoral reform and the conduct of elections could seriously damage Georgia's prospect of being provided with further EU integration offers. Thirdly, and as regards intra-EU factors,

²⁹https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/70557/statement-eu-delegation-and-us-embassy-georgia-regarding-going-events-tbilisi_en

³⁰<https://civil.ge/archives/341385>

³¹<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2108>

³²EEAS, 11 May, 15 May, and 19 June 2020.

³³Constitutional Law, No. 6500-RS, On the Amendments to the Constitution of Georgia.

³⁴<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/480494>

Georgia, ever since it had signed its Association Agreement in June 2014, has been viewed by the EU as a frontrunner as far as legal approximation with, and adoption of, the internal market *acquis* is concerned. Therefore, and motivated by concerns that passivity on the part of the EU or openly voiced critique of the Georgian authorities may undermine the country's status as a presumptive 'success story' and negatively affect the EaP, Georgia's political crisis offered an opportunity to demonstrate agency and score a foreign policy success that was within easy reach.

III. The EU and the Covid-19 Pandemic in the South Caucasus

In contrast to the EU's handling of the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the political crisis in Armenia, the EU's response to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the region was characterized by determination and responsiveness. This was facilitated by intra-EU developments, most notably the launch of Team Europe, which represents a multilateral effort to pool contributions of EU Member States, EU institutions, implementing agencies, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and development finance institutions. Externally, local scope conditions in the region, such as weak healthcare systems and local elites' recognition that external support was urgently needed, in conjunction with the absence of local and regional veto-players, potentially hampering politically insensitive EU aid provision, enabled the EU to support Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia soon after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Covid-19 reached the region relatively early. The first confirmed case was reported on 26 February in Georgia,³⁵ to be followed by Azerbaijan on 28 February³⁶ and Armenia on 1 March.³⁷ While the immediate closure of borders, the imposition of partial lockdowns and restrictions on movement contained the first wave of the pandemic, infections and deaths peaked in all three countries towards the end of 2020, leading to some of the world's worst Covid-19 outbreaks in Armenia and Georgia.³⁸

Pandemic management has brought about an extensive growth in executive powers, newly imposed restrictions for the media and opposition forces, and violations of citizen rights. For example, the Armenian government tried to monitor media coverage and pushed through parliament a law that allowed the tracing of citizens' contacts and whereabouts through cellular phones (Stronski, 2020).³⁹ In Azerbaijan, the regime used the pandemic as a pretext to crack down on activists and journalists, leading to the arrest of dozens of civil activists on the grounds of alleged violations of quarantine rules (Samadov, 2020).

The pandemic has not only exposed authoritarian practices and deepened polarization, but it also laid open the socio-economic weaknesses of the three countries of the South Caucasus, as their economies are heavily dependent on external income sources. Whereas Azerbaijan, whose oil and gas sector account for 45 per cent of the economy,⁴⁰ was

³⁵<https://www.reuters.com/article/china-health-georgia-idUSL5N2AQ7LC>

³⁶Tass-Russian News Agency, 30 June 2020.

³⁷Tass- Russian News Agency, 1 March 2020.

³⁸<https://eurasianet.org/georgias-covid-outbreak-grows-from-molehill-to-everest>

³⁹<https://eurasianet.org/armenia-seeks-to-stem-coronavirus-spread-by-tracking-phones>

⁴⁰<https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-azerbaijan-economy-idUSL8N2BV2PI>

suddenly faced with sharp oil price drops and declining international demand for its hydrocarbon goods, Armenia and Georgia have both suffered from the disruption of remittances of migrant workers and the collapse of tourism and corresponding revenues.⁴¹ Moreover, as more than a quarter of workers in the region are employed in sectors that are most affected by the pandemic, such as retail, construction and tourism, the closure of borders and lockdowns have induced a significant rise in unemployment rates.⁴²

Team Europe, which had originated in DG DEVCO, was established rather unbureaucratically and with the support of Member States and operated in defiance of comitology practices. Since early April 2020, it has been focusing on three main areas: (a) responding to the Covid-19 crisis and humanitarian needs; (b) strengthening health, water and sanitation systems, and (c) mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. As argued elsewhere (Jones and Teevan, 2021), mainly due to the absence of established intra-EU rules and the urgency of a rapidly deteriorating public health situation, EU support in the three priority areas was conducted in an ad-hoc, flexible and even bottom-up fashion and – in the South Caucasus and beyond – differed according to the country and local scope conditions in question. Within the EU, the Commission, and in particular DG DEVCO, has harnessed the pandemic and strengthened its position vis-à-vis other Directorates and the European External Action Service by taking the lead and deepening its work with the Delegations in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as far as delivery and communication were concerned. This swiftness and readiness on the part of both the Commission and the Member States led to the mobilization of more than 1 billion EUR in emergency aid for health systems in the Eastern neighbourhood and countries' short and medium-term socio-economic recovery, as well as 58 million EUR for immediate aid (European Commission, 2021). Of the latter, 11.3 million EUR were earmarked for grants and sub-grants for the most vulnerable groups in society, while the former entailed over 700 million EUR in the form of grants and credit lines through the EU4Business initiative and the European Fund for Sustainable Development (European Commission, 2021). Out of these, Team Europe mobilized 96 million EUR for Armenia, 31 million EUR for Azerbaijan and 183 million EUR for Georgia (*ibid.*). It is noteworthy, though, that the aid-per capita ratio was the highest for Georgia, even though Armenia was arguably in even greater need of EU assistance. Also, as was discussed elsewhere,⁴³ most of the mobilized financial aid was reshuffled and redirected from existing funds and financing instruments, putting the EU's self-portrayed generosity into question.

Conclusions

If crisis is the best test of friendship, developments in the countries of the South Caucasus in 2020 seem to demonstrate that the EU – when seen from a larger perspective – is indeed a friend mainly the political elites in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia rely on. EU responses were characterized by mainly four behavioural features, all of which reinforced friendly relations: (a) The EU did not interfere in regional and domestic affairs

⁴¹Remittances account for 12 percent of Georgia's and 11 percent of Armenia's GDP, according to the UNDP (21 March 2021).

⁴²OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus 13 October 2020.

⁴³ecdpm, 26 June 2020.

(unless this was requested and deemed possible); (b) it did not hold regimes accountable for potential violations of international (humanitarian) law; (c) it invested political leverage (to the extent it exists) only when asked, and (d) provided quick and unconditional aid in an emergency situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Positive as such an assessment may appear from the angle of local elites, though, it cannot conceal that EU foreign policy towards the region – throughout 2020 and in fact already before – is primarily dependent on external scope conditions and the opportunity structures regional and local stakeholders offer. This finding calls for greater consideration of outside-in perspectives and is grist to the mills of those who have long been calling for a decentred approach to EU foreign policy analysis (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis, 2013; Keuleers *et al.*, 2016). At the same time, this dependency, in conjunction with the lack of geopolitical clout, the continuous absence of hard power resources, and most Member States' ongoing tendency to turn a blind eye to the EU's neighbourhood, bereaves the EU of agency. It renders many of the ENP's core objectives null and void and is a major blow to peace- and reform-minded actors in the region who have been looking towards 'EUrope' for support.

Against this backdrop, it is rather likely that EU agency vis-à-vis the South Caucasus countries will continue to remain tangible in areas and contexts where capabilities, resources and willingness to act exist and where conducive local and regional scope conditions, allowing for such agency to come to the fore, are in place. This surely applies to healthcare, as well as to the EU's role as a facilitator of domestic political dialogue in a highly pro-EU setting such as Georgia. However, as far as the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is concerned, and in what regards reconciliation, opportunity structures continue to be unfavourable. While the fate of the entire region has fallen prey to the geopolitical and hegemonic ambitions of Russia and Turkey, societies in Armenia and Azerbaijan – after decades of socialization into nationalist thinking and the emergence of new grievances after the 2020 war – remain stuck in unforgiving narratives of enmity and hatred. For the EU, all these limitations may be difficult to accept. But sooner or later they might serve as powerful lessons for it to eventually embark on a transformative path towards becoming what could be called a capable power – if it intends to maintain some relevance in the eyes of others in the South Caucasus and beyond.

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