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## European Union in the south Caucasus

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European interest in the Caucasus dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the British tried to establish some type of influence in the southern region to have control over Caspian resources, such as oil. There was a minor interest from Germany as well. However, all these ended with the invasion of the red army of the newly independent southern Caucasus states Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The area was forcefully absorbed into the Soviet Union. The region was no more of an interest for western powers as they had their problems to deal with, such as World War II. Nevertheless, while Hitler was advancing into the Soviet Union, it was part of his plan to get hands-on the Caspian oil, but he failed to do so. Up until 1991 region was no longer on the radars for the western powers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia declared their independence.

The beginning of the new independence for these three countries was cruel, ravaged with internal conflicts and wars. This was seen as an opportunity for the EU to enter the Caucasian scene. But the big actor, such as Russia was already present and acting according to its interests in the region. The EU still managed to be noticeable in the area by financing war-ravaged countries to rebuild certain infrastructures. In 2003 the Rose revolution happened in Georgia, where a pro-western politician, Mikheil Saakashvili came to power. Right from the start, he defined foreign policy priorities, one of them being the Euro-Atlantic integration of his country. This was an open invitation for the West to Georgia. Nevertheless, it took two years for the West to act upon the invitation. In May 2005 George W. Bush visited the Georgian capital and delivered a strong message, calling Georgia a “beacon of liberty”.<sup>1</sup> The same year the EU included the south Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the European activity remained pretty low both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, the EU-Armenian relationship developed positively with time. As it is stated in the recommendations for the European Neighbourhood policy given by the Commission of the European Communities in 2005, the EU was focusing more on the

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<sup>1</sup> Salukvadze, Khatuna, 2005, “BUSH VISITS GEORGIA TO SUPPORT “THE BEACON OF LIBERTY””, THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/9960-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2005-5-18-art-9960.html> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Commission of the European Communities, 2005, “COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL - European Neighbourhood Policy - Recommendations for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and for Egypt and Lebanon”, COM(2005) 72 final, COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0072:FIN:EN:PDF> (accessed 14 July 2021).

humanitarian aspect of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the very beginning of the independence of Armenia.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1999 is described as an important step in EU-Armenian relations.<sup>4</sup> The relations with Azerbaijan started with the same approach as Armenia, humanitarian aspect amid the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Nevertheless, there was an important aspect in Baku-Brussels relations, such as energy and transport.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the current situation in the region is different. Russia remains an important player in the Caucasus by occupying and effectively controlling Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Also having a deep bilateral relation with Armenia which includes joint control of the Armenian border with Turkey and Iran, as well as hosting the 102<sup>nd</sup> Russian military base in Gyumri.<sup>6</sup> Recently, in aftermath of the Nagorno Karabakh war, Russia managed to get the role of the mediator and deployed 2,000 peacekeepers, thanks to the agreement brokered by Moscow.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Russia is present militarily in every country in the south Caucasus. This war was an opportunity for Turkey to increase its role and influence in the region as well.

The geopolitical situation is differing from country to country in the Caucasus. Georgia strives for the west, while Armenia is stuck with Russia. Azerbaijan on the other hand is ditching both Russia and the West for the alliance with Turkey.

The current geopolitical setting leaves little room for the European Union. Therefore, it is logical to ask whether the current engagement from them is enough to secure their influence and interests in the region, competing with other actors. Some can argue that the EU should engage

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Commission of the European Communities, 2005, “COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL - European Neighbourhood Policy - Recommendations for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and for Egypt and Lebanon”, COM(2005) 72 final, COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0072:FIN:EN:PDF> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, updated 2019, “Bilateral Relations-Russia”. <https://www.mfa.am/en/bilateral-relations/ru> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>7</sup> President of Russia, 2020, “Заявление Президента Азербайджанской Республики, Премьер-министра Республики Армения и Президента Российской Федерации” (Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation). <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (accessed 14 July 2021).

even more in the region. However, the question one could ask is: why should the European Union be more active in the South Caucasus?

The European Union should be more active in the region to secure its interests in the wider region. To answer the question more in-depth, one needs to understand the history of the EU engagement in the south Caucasus. Finally, politicians in Brussels have to understand that being active in the south Caucasus will ensure power balance in the wider region and the Black Sea area.

## I. The European Union in the South Caucasus: the past and present

Since the independence of the South Caucasian states, the EU launched some financial aids aiming to send humanitarian help in the conflict zones in the 1990s. However, the EU policy was little adapted to these states and was too general, addressing some major humanitarian and economic issues.<sup>8</sup> The first document that was signed between all three states in the region and the EU was Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1996 that entered into force in 1999.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup> Those three documents are almost identical. For instance, article 1 of the agreement outlines the basic cooperation areas for two parties. This same article is identical to each agreement concerning Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. It is worth mentioning however that in the agreement for Azerbaijan, energy and transport areas are included as a possible cooperation field.

Yet, this agreement was a sign of a limited engagement in the region from the EU. Currently, the South Caucasus trio is part of the European Neighborhood policy. However, all three of them were initially not included in the framework as the EU was not that interested in the region.<sup>12</sup><sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the increase in pro-western attitudes contributed to shifting the opinion in Brussels. That is one of the reasons why the Caucasian trio is part of the European Neighborhood policy since 2004. However, the lack of clarity that was present already in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in the 1990s was transferred onto the ENP framework as well. The EU started slowly to see the South Caucasus as an important place. Today, the EU is more engaged in the region than ever. Examples of this are plenty, such as

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<sup>8</sup> Commission of the European Communities, 2005, “COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL - European Neighbourhood Policy - Recommendations for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and for Egypt and Lebanon”, COM(2005) 72 final, COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0072:FIN:EN:PDF> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (European Communities –Armenia) (22 April 1996) (Date of effect: 1 July 1999) PCA 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (European Communities –Azerbaijan) (22 April 1996) (Date of effect: 1 July 1999) PCA 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (European Communities – Georgia) (22 April 1996) (Date of effect: 1 July 1999) PCA 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Delcour Laure, Hoffmann Katharina, 2018 “The EU’s Policy in the South Caucasus”, *L’Europe en Formation*, 2018/1 (n° 385), p. 9. DOI : 10.3917/eufor.385.0007, CAIRN. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2018-1-page-7.htm> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Cornell E., Svante and Starr, Frederick S., “The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe”, p.13, Central Asia- Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, 2006, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30287/12\\_Caucasus\\_Challenge\\_Europe.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30287/12_Caucasus_Challenge_Europe.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2021).

individualizing the approach towards the south Caucasus by inviting Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to the Eastern Partnership initiative launched in 2009. One of the reasons for this initiative was perhaps the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 where Brussels started to realize that their policy in the region was not enough to answer the existing complex reality on the ground. Later, the EU signed the Association agreement with Tbilisi and made Georgia part of the Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Also, Brussels decided to give Georgian citizens Visa-liberalisation.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Armenia got the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement at the beginning of this year (2021).<sup>15</sup> Azerbaijan on the other hand first agreed to negotiate Association Agreement, however, later on, declined the offer.

Meanwhile, a fixed policy approach might not be enough sometimes. Different possibilities emerged for the EU to take up an important role in the south Caucasus very recently.

### ***The EU mediation of the political crisis in Georgia***

The political crisis unfolded in Georgia in the aftermath of the 2020 parliamentary elections, after which the opposition parties rejected and boycotted the results. Therefore, the political parties protesting the outcome decided not to enter the parliament to take up the mandates, while “*alleging widespread electoral fraud*”.<sup>16</sup> The governing party rejected the reaction and the accusations of the opposition. The political deadlock was therefore created. Moreover, during this crisis, the leader of the United National Movement (biggest opposition party), Nikanur Melia was arrested by the police, resulting in the bigger political turbulence for Georgia.<sup>17</sup>

In this context, the European Union decided to launch the mediation efforts in Georgia. At first, Charles Michel in the rank of the president of

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<sup>14</sup> “FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT EU-GEORGIA RELATIONS”, European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eap\\_factsheet\\_georgia.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eap_factsheet_georgia.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2021).

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, 2021, “The EU and Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement enters into force”, Press Release, EUROPEAN COMMISSION. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_782](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_782) (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>16</sup> OSCE, 2021, “Georgia – Parliamentary Elections 31 October 2020 – ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report”, p. 30-33, OSCE – OFFICE FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/4/480500.pdf> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>17</sup> De Waal, Thomas, 2021, “In Georgia, a New Crisis That No One Needs”, CARNEGIE EUROPE. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/83935> (accessed 14 July 2021).

the European Council travelled to Georgia to discuss the current crisis with all participants.<sup>18</sup> Thereafter, Christian Danielsson was sent with the mandate from Charles Michel to mediate the crisis in Georgia.<sup>19</sup> However, the mandated representative was not able to successfully convince political parties in Georgia to solve the crisis. Therefore, Charles Michel himself once again travelled to Tbilisi and put an EU brokered agreement on the table. The “EU deal” was signed by the majority of the political parties, including the governing political party, Georgian Dream. Nevertheless, the biggest opposition party in Georgia, United National Movement did not sign the document.<sup>2021</sup>

This is a crucial signal to the actors that are present in the south Caucasus, such as Russia and Turkey. To summarize, to regulate the crisis in Georgia, politicians from Brussels are coming to mediate instead of traditional Kremlin politicians. It is worth mentioning that the USA participated in this mediation process as well. Nonetheless, the EU was the one who initiated and drove forward the mediation. As result, we saw an engaged European Union solve the political crisis in Georgia. With that Brussels demonstrated that they are present in the region and acting.

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<sup>18</sup> European Council, 2021, “Remarks by President Charles Michel after his meeting in Georgia with Prime Minister Garibashvili and representatives of opposition political parties”, EUROPEAN COUNCIL – COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/01/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-in-georgia-with-prime-minister-garibashvili-and-representatives-of-opposition-political-parties/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>19</sup> European Council, 2021, “President Michel mandates Christian Danielsson to engage as personal envoy, in EU-mediated political dialogue in Georgia”, EUROPEAN COUNCIL – COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/03/08/president-michel-mandates-christian-danielsson-to-engage-as-personal-envoy-in-eu-mediated-political-dialogue-in-georgia/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Panchulidze, Elene and Youngs Richard, 2021, “Defusing Georgia’s Political Crisis: An EU Foreign Policy Success?”, CARNEGIE EUROPE. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Mikhelidze, Nona, 2020, “What Role for Europe as Georgia Heads Toward Political Turmoil?”, CARNEGIE EUROPE. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/83300> (accessed 14 July 2021).

The EU did not stop there. More engagement was necessary throughout the region. Therefore, Charles Michel travelled to all three South Caucasian states in July 2021.<sup>222324</sup>

### ***Charles Michel's tour in the region in July 2021***

The first visit of Charles Michel in a rang of the president of the EU Council was during the mediation process of the Georgian political crisis at the beginning of 2021. However, the president visited Batumi in Georgia once again recently in July 2021 to talk about the progress that was made. He also addressed events concerning the violence against the LGBTQ+ community and journalists in Georgia. In addition, the south Caucasian tour continued in Yerevan to meet Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan. Finally, Charles Michel ended his tour with the visit to Baku, meeting Azerbaijan's President, Ilham Aliyev. This tour is crucial as it demonstrates the will from the EU to be present in the regional dynamics. This is a stronger signal than before from Brussels, as the high-rank official of the EU visits Caucasian states.

### ***POW exchange between Azerbaijan and Armenia<sup>25</sup>***

Meanwhile, the EU alongside with USA and Georgia participated in the POW exchange between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where Baku transferred Armenian POWs in exchange for mining maps. The negotiations were facilitated by Georgia, which sees both countries as friendly states, alongside the EU and USA. Even though the EU pretty much failed to involve itself in the conflict resolution between Armenia and Azerbaijan, this was a small contribution to show that the EU wants to be more active in that regard. How much activity and what way the EU wishes to do so

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<sup>22</sup> European Council, 2021, "Remarks by President Charles Michel after his meeting in Baku with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.", EUROPEAN COUNCIL – COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/18/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-with-azerbaijan-president-ilham-aliyev-in-baku/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>23</sup> European Council, 2021, "Speech by President Charles Michel after his meeting with Acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Yerevan", EUROPEAN COUNCIL – COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/17/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-with-the-acting-prime-minister-nikol-pachinyan-in-yerevan/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>24</sup> European Council, 2021, "Speech by President Charles Michel at the Batumi International Conference", EUROPEAN COUNCIL – COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/07/19/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-batumi-international-conference/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>25</sup> France 24, 2021, "Azerbaijan releases 15 Armenian POWs", FRANCE 24. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210612-azerbaijan-releases-15-armenian-pows> (Accessed 18 July 2021).

remains to be seen. It is fair to say that as a gesture it was important to demonstrate a willingness to contribute to the peace in the region.

All of the mentioned above is what the EU did and is doing currently in the Caucasus generally speaking. However, the geopolitical situation is very complex in the region. Therefore, it is crucial to understand this situation to assess if what the EU is doing is enough. In other words, one has to understand the geopolitical landscape and compare what the EU is doing vis-à-vis the current power balance in the region.

## **II. The need for a power balance: security challenges for the EU**

Securing the South Caucasus for the European Union is of big importance. The region is not only a transportation hub between the West and the East but also an important geographic zone when it comes to the Black Sea region. The security aspect of this zone is essential for the EU as it provides the route for Caspian energy to the west European states. Meanwhile, several important factors could decide why the European Union should do more to protect its interest in the Southern Caucasus.

### ***Russian factor: the increasing confidence in the Black Sea region***

The first one has to do with the wider Black Sea region where Russia is trying to increase its influence. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian *de facto* naval coast increased in size, destabilizing the wider Black Sea region. Meanwhile, since 2008, Russian military presence in Georgia's Abkhazia created room for a naval presence there as well. In other words, Russia has already secured big parts of the Black Sea coast.

This is problematic for the EU as it has to deal with the instability caused by Russia. At the same time, recent military events in the Black Sea directed towards British HMS Defender and Dutch Evertsen by Russian forces show that Kremlin is willing to be provocative and even aggressive when it comes to the protection of their interests in the area. Furthermore, the EU should ask themselves if the transportation and energy route they are willing to develop through the Black Sea Synergy project will be secure, under the circumstances of the Russian approach.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> European Commission, 2010, "Black Sea Synergy", MEMO/10/78, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_10\\_78](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_10_78) (accessed 14 July 2021).

Another crucial point is the fact that Kremlin has an interest in destabilizing and potentially making it impossible for the EU to secure alternative energy links to increase unions dependence on Russian gas through Nord Stream 2.

In addition, Moscow is planning to change geopolitical balance not only in the Black Sea but in a far wider region of the Caspian Sea. Talks about an almost a century-old project, Eurasian Canal was restarted in Russia. This project aims to connect the Caspian Sea with the sea of Azov and the Black Sea, just above the Caucasus region.<sup>27</sup> This will have numerous geopolitical and economic implications if successfully finalized. It will permit to connect landlocked central Asian states to new markets through this canal, connecting the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Because China is the EU's biggest importing partner, the Eurasian Canal will have big consequences for the EU.<sup>28</sup> In other words, most of the Chinese goods designated for the EU might pass through Russia. This will increase dependence on the Russian route.

It is crucial for the EU to be proactive, to look for alternative routes and secure them to lessen the energy dependence on Russia. One of those alternatives is the South Caucasus, where an energy route takes the place. However, one can argue that the amount of energy coming from Azerbaijan is not sufficient for the EU. This might be the case, but it is one of the alternatives.

Meanwhile, another crucial factor for why the EU should be more active in the region is China. The latter perhaps does not have the South Caucasus as a top priority, but still uses active diplomacy and different sets of tools to increase its influence in the region.

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<sup>27</sup> Goble, Paul, 2021, “‘Canal War’ Breaking Out in Greater Caspian Region”, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 69, THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION – GLOBAL RESEARCH & ANALYSIS. <https://jamestown.org/program/canal-war-breaking-out-in-greater-caspian-region/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Eurostat, 2021, “China-EU – International trade in goods statistics”, EUROSTAT - STATISTICS EXPLAINED. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU\\_-\\_international\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics) (accessed 14 July 2021).

### *China: vaccine diplomacy and economic route*

Chinese diplomacy has shown to be efficient in different parts of the world as it manages to adapt to the modern-day and use diverse “soft power” mechanisms.<sup>29</sup> The “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy is one of the many examples of Chinese diplomatic approaches. However, vaccine diplomacy became crucial during the global pandemic and China did not hesitate to use its industrial power to produce vaccines against the COVID-19 and deliver them to the third world countries. The South Caucasus became a part of this campaign as well.

Armenia received Sputnik, Sinovac, AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines, since the beginning of their vaccination campaign in April. However, the quantity of those vaccines is important considering their origin. Chinese jabs account for 100,000 doses, while Russian Sputnik accounts for 89,000 doses since May. At the same time, COVAX, the European platform for vaccine delivery provided 50,000 doses of AstraZeneca to Armenia.<sup>30</sup>

Azerbaijan also received the same type of vaccines but in a slightly different amount. Since the start of the campaign, China has donated 150,000 doses of Sinovac. Russia on the other hand shipped 40,000 doses, while Azerbaijan requested 300,000 doses. Meanwhile, 218,000 doses of Pfizer were available in the country, however unknown where it came from.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of Georgia 43,200 doses of AstraZeneca were delivered through the Covax platform. 129,600 doses of AstraZeneca and 29,250 doses of Pfizer were allocated through this platform.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, one million doses of Sinovac and Sinopharm arrived from China in July.<sup>33</sup>

One can conclude with a single glance over the quantities of the vaccines and realize how active China is with vaccine diplomacy in the

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<sup>29</sup> E. Juncos, Ana, 2021, “Vaccine Geopolitics and the EU’s Ailing Credibility in the Western Balkans”, CARNEGIE EUROPE. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/08/vaccine-geopolitics-and-eu-s-ailing-credibility-in-western-balkans-pub-84900> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Eurasianet, 2021, “Dashboard: Vaccinating Eurasia - July”, EURASIANET. <https://eurasianet.org/dashboard-vaccinating-eurasia-july> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Gavi, “COVAX vaccine rollout GEORGIA”, GAVI – THE VACCINE ALLIANCE. <https://www.gavi.org/covax-vaccine-roll-out/georgia> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>33</sup> Eurasianet, 2021, “Dashboard: Vaccinating Eurasia - July”, EURASIANET. <https://eurasianet.org/dashboard-vaccinating-eurasia-july> (accessed 14 July 2021).

South Caucasus. This is a loss not only for Brussels but also for Moscow. Nevertheless, this is not the only aspect where China is actively promoting itself in the region.

The economic ties of all three Caucasian states with China have deepened since their independence. For instance, Beijing and Tbilisi signed a Free Trade agreement in 2017.<sup>34</sup> The intensive diplomatic exchange is taking place with Armenia. The Confucius Institute is present both in Armenia and Georgia.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is developing economic ties with China. According to the governmental sources in China, “Azerbaijan has become China's biggest trading partner in Transcaucasia, and China is the fifth biggest importer of Azerbaijani goods.”<sup>36</sup> Another important factor is the participation of these three states, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>37,38,39,40</sup>

To conclude, Russia is perhaps an important player in the region, but China is slowly increasing its soft power and influence in Transcaucasian states. Meanwhile, Beijing does not necessarily want to collide with Moscow’s interests in the region, as Kremlin is seen as a close partner for Beijing. Therefore, damaging this relationship for China will be costly. However, it will not bother to compete with Western interests and especially American ones, because since the Trump administration the relations are tense. Also, the traditional “Russia vs West” creates a space for China to act and emerge as an important player in the region.<sup>41</sup> The EU has to respond to this new dynamic introduced by increasing Chinese activities in the region. Unfortunately for the EU though, there is another geopolitical player who pushes its agenda upon the region, Turkey.

<sup>34</sup> Agenda.ge, 2017, “Georgia, China sign historic Free Trade Agreement”, AGENDA.GE. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2017/931> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Aliyev, Nurlan, 2020, “China's Soft Power in the South Caucasus”, THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST. <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13604-chinas-soft-power-in-the-south-caucasus.html> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Fanjunmei, 2017, “Azerbaijan”, BELT AND ROAD PORTAL – ENG.YIDAIYILU.GOV.CN. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/gbjg/gbgk/5638.htm> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> Fanjunmei, 2017, “Armenia”, BELT AND ROAD PORTAL – ENG.YIDAIYILU.GOV.CN. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/gbjg/gbgk/5581.htm> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>39</sup> Fanjunmei, 2017, “Georgia”, BELT AND ROAD PORTAL – ENG.YIDAIYILU.GOV.CN. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/gbjg/gbgk/5575.htm> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Belt and Road Initiative, “Belt and Road Initiative” <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Popescu, Nicu and Secrieru Stanislav, 2018, “Who Wins From Russia-West Tensions in the Post-Soviet Space?”, CARNEGIE EUROPE. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76040> (accessed 14 July 2021).

***Turkey: increasing role in the south Caucasus and the Black Sea region***

Recently Turkey decided to re-emerge as an important actor in different parts of the world to match big geopolitical players such as the USA, Russia, Iran and the EU. There are different examples of this, such as Erdogan's "preach" of democracy and secularism in Egypt during and after the "Arab Spring". Also, military support campaign in Libya and very recently, the aid to Azerbaijan in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war.

When it comes to the Southern Caucasus since the war with the Soviet Union in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Turkish presence in the region remained low. However, since the independence of the Transcaucasian nations in the 1990s, Turkey started to develop economic and diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Both of these countries currently have intense trade relations with Ankara.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it is possible to say that Turkey was economically present in the South Caucasus since the 1990s, excluding Armenia. However, the Turkish military presence was close to zero.

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war changed the geopolitical scene in the region. The Russian brokered deal meant that Moscow would deploy 2,000 peacekeepers in the disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh inhabited by the ethnical Armenians.<sup>43</sup> Even if the document signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia did not mention a word about the possible Turkish involvement, the aftermath of the conflict, Ankara achieved its goals outside of this agreement. The Shusha agreement which was signed in aftermath of the war outlined aspects of closer cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, this document emphasised the importance of deep cooperation in the military sphere between two countries. This is rather alarming for Moscow as it sees the NATO alliance (which Turkey is part of) as a threat to Russia's national security. The

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<sup>42</sup> Müftüleri-Baç, Meltem, 2014, "Turkey as an emerging power : an analysis of its role in global and regional security governance constellations", p. 7, Table 4, EUI Working Paper RSCAS2014/52, EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE/ ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/31325> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>43</sup> President of Russia, 2020, "Заявление Президента Азербайджанской Республики, Премьер-министра Республики Армения и Президента Российской Федерации" (Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation). <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Shahbazov, Fuad, 2021, "Shusha Declaration Cements Azerbaijani-Turkish Alliance", Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 100, THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION – GLOBAL RESEARCH & ANALYSIS. <https://jamestown.org/program/shusha-declaration-cements-azerbaijani-turkish-alliance/> (accessed 14 July 2021).

reason why this military cooperation is important for Ankara is perhaps the possibility to gain certain leverage to be used later on vis-à-vis Moscow. Meanwhile, the Russian brokered agreement establishes a transit route secured by Russian forces through Armenia proper, connecting the Nakhichevan exclave to mainland Azerbaijan. This route is crucial for Ankara as it connects Turkey to the Caspian Sea.

Nevertheless, the Turkish Prime Minister did not hesitate to promote his old idea of a regional platform for dialogue during his visit to Baku.<sup>45</sup> The platform of six would include Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, Georgia and Iran. This is significant as it demonstrates the will from Ankara to establish itself as an important actor in the region. However, unfortunately for the EU, they are not seen as a part of this platform, therefore being excluded from the candidacy of an actor in the South Caucasus. The European Union has to continue establishing itself as a regional power and increase its influence while utilizing every opportunity to do so.

Not only has Turkey become an important competitor to the EU in the South Caucasus but also remains such in the Black Sea region. The fact that Erdogan renewed talks about the new canal project, west of Istanbul to avoid the Montreux Convention of 1936, demonstrates the will from Ankara to get better control over the doors of the Black Sea.<sup>46</sup>

Considering all of the above, it is possible to conclude that the competition is getting tougher for the EU. Different actors emerge and will certainly emerge in the future (such as Iran for example). This will challenge the slowly developing foreign policy of the EU concerning the southern Caucasus. For the moment, European Union has a more or less friendly environment in Georgia and a pro-western prime minister in Armenia. This has to be utilized and developed. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan seems to be giving priority to its relationships with Turkey and Russia.

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<sup>45</sup> Seskuria, Natia, 2021, “Challenges of a Six-Country Regional Cooperation Platform for Georgia”, MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/challenges-six-country-regional-cooperation-platform-georgia> (Accessed 20 July 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Bhattacharyya, Shona, 2021, “Turkey's 'crazy' and controversial Istanbul Canal project”, FRANCE 24. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210629-turkey-s-crazy-and-controversial-istanbul-canal-project> (Accessed 20 July 2021).

***Geopolitical configuration: the challenge for the EU policy in the region***

As one might understand, South Caucasus is a complex region, where several big powers act upon their interests. The fact that the EU policy in the Caucasus has evolved from a “one-size-fits-all” to a more individual approach demonstrates well the complexity of the region. Moreover, the region has a specific geopolitical configuration that the EU needs to take into consideration while adapting its policies.

***Armenia – Russian duo***

When it comes to elaborating a policy for Armenia in general, one shall consider the Russian factor. As mentioned earlier, the two countries have deep bilateral relations that stretch over the economic and military sphere. Moscow has a Russian military base in its possession in Armenia proper, to assure the security of its ally in case of invasion. Russian influence is significant generally speaking. Armenia is also part of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In other words, Yerevan remains close to Moscow. All of this reduces the spaces that can be exploited by the EU to build a stronger relationship with Armenia. However, Brussels shall understand that the Moscow vector was not chosen because of pure pleasure by the leaders of Armenia. The country is sandwiched between Azerbaijan and Turkey, which are seen as historical enemies for Armenia. Ankara remains loyal to its non-recognition policy of the Armenian Genocide, which took place during the Ottoman empire. This fact alone (and many other factors) is feeding the historical and current hostilities between the two nations. When it comes to Azerbaijan things are slightly different, it is more of an add-on. The long going Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been devastating for both nations. However, the recent developments, what some would call a second Nagorno-Karabakh war, led to the victory for Baku and huge casualties for Yerevan. Therefore, the latter has the only alternative to assure its survival in this setting, the Kremlin. Meanwhile, the EU can emerge as a strong partner to Armenia. This is possible because Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia’s current prime minister is a pro-western, pro-democracy figure.

Also, the opinion of the general public about the EU is looking good. For instance, finding to a poll conducted by the EU Neighbours in 2020, 53% of Armenians consider to have a good image of the European Union.

Meantime, 86% of the general public in Armenia thinks that relations with the EU are at a good level.<sup>47</sup> This sentiment towards the EU is a positive factor that can be seen as a good ground to multiply different projects both in civil society, government institutions and for the public.

### *Azerbaijan – Turkish duo*

Two countries have close relationships in all fields. The approach of “one nation two states” initiated by the former president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev is still inspiring current relations. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan seeks to deepen its ties with Turkey even more. Baku seems to have chosen the Ankara vector over the Russian and the Western one. However, Azerbaijan remains an important energy partner for some of the EU countries. Unfortunately, the EU does not have big opportunities at the moment to increase its influence in Azerbaijan. This can be partly due to some ‘big’ EU states position towards Erdogan, such as France and Germany. For instance, during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war France’s Emmanuel Macron condemned the usage of Syrian mercenaries against Armenia, hinting at Turkish involvement.

### *Georgia – EU – USA trio*

Georgia can be considered a hub for western powers in the south Caucasus. The reason for that is the conflictual and tense relationship with Moscow. Since Mikheil Saakashvili became the leader of Georgia, Tbilisi chose the pro-western course. However, Moscow did not appreciate the Georgian choice. In 2008 Russia and Georgia fought a war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, which ended in the victory of the separatists and Russian military.

Tbilisi has a deep comprehensive relationship with the EU, NATO and the USA. The EU is one of the most important import and export partners, standing for 23% of the imports of Georgia and 17% of the exports as of January to June 2021.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, NATO countries and especially the USA conduct systematic military exercises to increase the defensive capabilities of Georgian defence forces. Georgia participates in the EU's

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<sup>47</sup> EU neighbours east, 2020, “PERCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION Public Opinion in Armenia” Annual Survey 2020, EU NEIGHBOURS EAST. [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EU\\_NEIGHBOURS\\_east\\_AS2020\\_Factsheet\\_ARMENIA\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EU_NEIGHBOURS_east_AS2020_Factsheet_ARMENIA_ENG.pdf) (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Geostat, 2021, “Import”, NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE OF GEORGIA. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/638/import> (accessed 14 July 2021).

Common Security and Defence Policy operations since 2014. Georgian citizens benefit from a Visa-free regime with the Schengen countries. European Union's Monitoring Mission is fully operating in Georgia.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the country's leadership announced that Georgia will submit a formal membership application in 2024.<sup>50</sup> In short, the EU is well established as a foreign power in Georgia that it can exploit to increase its influence in the wider region. Furthermore, the EU is pretty much respected when it comes to political crisis mediations, which was demonstrated during the political crisis that unfolded after the recent parliamentary elections. Meantime, the Georgian public overwhelmingly supports the EU, judging from the National Democratic Institute poll published in 2017. According to the institute's findings, 80 % of the respondents approve official Tbilisi's goal to join the EU.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

It is fair to say that the EU has come a long way in the south Caucasus. Since the independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, Brussels managed to understand the complexity of the region. However, acting upon the new understanding of the region took quite a while for the EU. Slowly and steadily relations between the EU and the South Caucasian states improved and got stronger in different ways. Meanwhile, Georgia remains the most EU-friendly state in the region. Also, Armenia remains committed to its positive western attitudes and tries to navigate through its complex geopolitical situation. On the other hand, Azerbaijan does not seem to be sharing the same ambitions and attitudes towards the EU as Armenia and Georgia do. Baku prefers to do a balancing act between the West and Moscow while striving to have very tight relations with Ankara. Yet, this complex geopolitical setting should not be the biggest concern for Brussels. Russian increasing dominance in the Black Sea, Turkish increasing activity to act as a regional leader, alongside the Chinese slowly increasing economic influence shall constitute the EU's main concerns.

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<sup>49</sup> European Commission, "FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT EU-GEORGIA RELATIONS", EUROPEAN COMMISSION, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eap\\_factsheet\\_georgia.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/eap_factsheet_georgia.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Lavrelashvili, Teona and Van Hecke, Steven, 2021, "Georgia is ready to apply for membership by 2024 – Is the EU ready too?", EURACTIV. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/opinion/georgia-is-ready-to-apply-for-membership-by-2024-is-the-eu-ready-too-2/> (Accessed 20 July 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Thornton, Laura and Turmanidze, Koba, 2017, "Public attitudes in Georgia Results of a April 2017 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia", NDI GEORGIA and CRRC GEORGIA. [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll\\_April%202017\\_Foreign%20Affairs\\_ENG\\_vf\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_April%202017_Foreign%20Affairs_ENG_vf_0.pdf) (accessed 14 July 2021).

Besides, Brussels already shifted the attitude towards the region and its foreign policy approach from ‘it is far away from us’ to ‘it is important’. The EU decided to be more active and more strategic to protect its interests in the near neighbourhood. Perhaps, what Charles Michel stated in an editorial recently is a reflection of this shift as well:

*“The world we live in is completely different from the one that the founding fathers of the European Union knew. The fragmentation of today’s geopolitics and the multiplication of frozen conflicts at our doorstep – coupled with global phenomena like climate change, migration and pandemics – generate instability. This compels us to consider Europe’s place in the world order and how best to stand up for our interests and values.”* <sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Michel, Charles, “WE MUST TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR OWN SECURITY”, Exclusive opinion editorial, Issue 21, OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE AGENCY. <https://eda.europa.eu/webzine/issue21/exclusive-opinion-editorial/we-must-take-more-responsibility-for-our-own-security> (accessed 14 July 2021).

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