

The European Union's promotion of good governance norms and standards in the South Caucasus

Case study of human rights promotion

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Margot Puelinckx

Student number: 01915934

Supervisor: Dr. Karolina Kluczewska

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Abstract

This thesis study takes a closer look at the European Union's (EU) human rights promotion within the three South Caucasian countries and feeds into their individual relationship with the European Union. The analysis provides an overview of EU involvement since the independence of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in 1991. The EU invests many resources into the region which makes it an important case to analyze the processes and outcomes of development assistance. Why the EU is showing interest in this region relates to economic benefits, the creation of a buffer zone in the context of geopolitical interests, but also because the EU strives towards security at its borders. The EU, therefore, promotes norms and standards, and related policies, to reform countries into stable democracies. This thesis focuses specifically on the 'human rights promotion' aspect of good governance. Primary official documents and secondary academic research is used for content analysis. This research concludes that a concrete, country-specific approach is lacking in EU external policy and little attention is paid to the specific dynamics in individual countries in promoting good governance standards. And that the rapprochement towards the EU does not directly translate into better human rights performance.

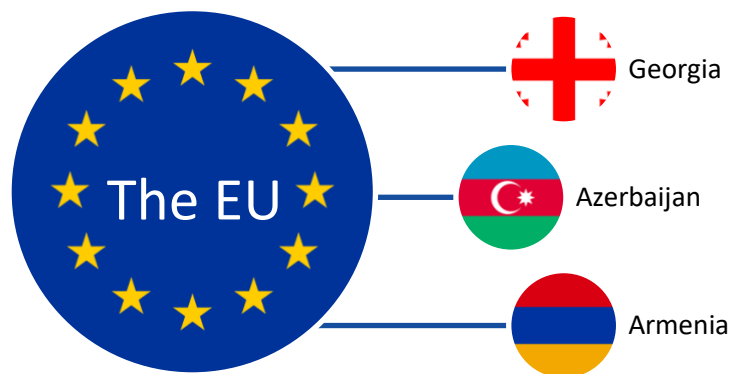
In deze studie wordt de promotie van mensenrechten door de Europese Unie (EU) in de drie Zuid-Kaukasische landen nader bekeken en wordt ingegaan op hun individuele relatie met de Europese Unie. De analyse geeft een overzicht van de Europese betrokkenheid sinds de onafhankelijkheid van Georgië, Armenië en Azerbeïdjan in 1991. De Europese Unie investeert veel middelen in de regio, waardoor het een belangrijke case is om te analyseren. Waarom de Europese Unie belangstelling toont voor deze regio heeft te maken met economische voordelen, het creëren van een bufferzone in de context van geopolitieke belangen, maar ook omdat de Unie streeft naar veiligheid aan haar grenzen. De EU bevordert daarom Europees beleid, normen en standaarden om landen te hervormen tot stabiele democratieën. Dit document zal zich toespitsen op het aspect 'bevordering van de mensenrechten' van goed bestuur. Voor de inhoudsanalyse wordt gebruik gemaakt van primaire officiële documenten en secundair academisch onderzoek. De conclusie van dit onderzoek is dat een concrete, land-specifieke aanpak ontbreekt in het Europese externe beleid en dat er weinig aandacht wordt besteed aan de specifieke dynamiek in individuele landen bij het bevorderen van normen voor goed bestuur. En dat de toenadering tot de EU geen garantie biedt op betere condities van mensenrechten.

“Economic liberalization and the establishment of free markets – which are also crucial EU values – seem to come before human rights and democratic principles.” (Panebianco, 2006)

1. Introduction

This research paper focuses on the strategic European policy towards the South Caucasus (SC) countries considering human rights. It will discuss why and how the European Union (EU) promotes human rights standards in this region. The perspective of academics on the EU's policy will be considered along with the EU's vision on the differentiation between the three SC countries within its current policy. In order to understand the EU's initiatives and involvement in this area, the background of the geopolitical situation is required. This context will be briefly discussed by taking into account some of the internal developments in the region.

The SC is a neighboring region of the EU including Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, situated on the border between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. They were Soviet socialist republics until the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. The SC states are currently not members of the EU but they do have certain diplomatic, trade, and partnership relations with the EU.



Current international relations of the EU are influenced by ongoing dynamics in the SC. Some of these factors, among others, are first, the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This brought along concern about political instability in the region and has been monitored by the EU. Secondly, many have been questioning Russian influences over the region, worrying western partners in particular. Finally, there is the countries' mixture of ethnic groups that creates unrest and make it more challenging to implement an unwavering regime. A lot is to be taken into consideration which makes nuances of this complexity an important determining factor in studying the EU's relations with the SC. This paper takes some of the dynamics into account, additional research is however recommended.

The three SC countries receive various kinds of aid from the EU such as direct financial aid, support from interest groups, and funding from local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This has been implemented by bilateral and multilateral agreements and treaties as described further. The EU is involved in the area because it aspires to create a secured area around its borders in its neighborhood policy. This so-called 'neighborhood', includes the Transcaucasian territory. Some of the EU's tools to achieve this secure neighborhood will be researched further in this paper.

1.1 Conceptual lens

The concepts of 'good governance' 'human rights' and 'EU values' will be used throughout this paper. These concepts will be introduced before addressing the concrete research questions.

The EU is committed to supporting democracy and implementing human rights within its external relationships. During 2015 to 2017 the EU signed the Partnership for Good Governance with, among others, the three countries of the SC. The Council of Europe (n.d.) states that the following objectives were targeted:

Incorporating best practices and implementing policy recommendations, increasing leadership capacities of local elected representatives, strengthening the capacities of local authorities by promoting good governance, transparency, accountability, ethical behavior, and ways to prevent and combat corruption, fostering citizens' participation as a means of reinforcing the accountability of local authorities.

Generally stated this also implies the optimization of the public administration. This paper will use these concrete principles as the base of the concept of 'good governance'. The European values as by the official website of the European Commission are 'inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination (European Commission, n.d.). This is implemented in a broader framework composed of various treaties such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) these will be discussed further.

Good governance can be interpreted as a narrow concept of output or as a broader connotation of political implementation and correlated input (Börzel et al., 2009). Focusing on output-related factors such as increasing efficiency could mean the installation of a stable public financial management or the fight against corruption in order to make policies more predictable and effective. By focusing on input, on the other hand, broader concepts can be included in the creation of good governance, such as democratization and respect for human rights (Börzel et al., 2009). In order to specify and narrow down the research on good governance, the focus of this paper lies in the specific field of human rights.

The promotion of democracy and human rights are aspects of the field of good governance. The concrete substance of human rights is interpreted in various ways; as it is constantly contested and debated it can be seen as a discourse. Academically there is generally a broader understanding of human rights than the EU's definition, including women's rights, refugee rights, LGBTQI rights, and so on. In this paper, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (1950) is used to illustrate the EU's perception. The ECHR states the following rights and freedoms in section 1:

Right to life, prohibition of torture, prohibition of slavery and forced labor, right to liberty and security, right to a fair trial, no punishment without law, rights to respect for private and family life, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, right to marry, right to an effective remedy, prohibition of discrimination, derogation in time of emergency, restrictions on political activity of foreigners, prohibition of abuse of rights and limitation on use of restrictions on rights¹.

This theoretical framework presents the concrete rights used by the EU as a basis for implementing human rights in policy making.

1.2 Research question

¹ Council of Europe. (1950). *European Convention on Human Rights*. www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf

The overarching question is to find out how the EU is promoting its good governance norm and related governance standards in the SC in the prospect of human rights promotion. Certain tools the EU uses and what their goal implies for the future are discussed. There is however need for the attentiveness to the divergence of these three countries in the construction of foreign policy. An important factor is the three individual states and their unique domestic situations. There must not be forgotten to look from a different perspective, which is why the receptiveness of these norms by the SC countries should be considered combined with this research. There are two aspects to how the EU promotes, in this case, human rights. First of all the official EU statement on why they are involved. And secondly the unspoken reason for their involvement.

Overarching question:

How does the EU promote its norms concerning human rights in the SC?

Sub-questions:

Why is the EU involved in the Southern Caucasus countries?

This sub-question is explored by differentiating the reason according to the EU itself and according to academics.

What is the domestic political situation with respect to human rights in the South Caucasian countries?

This sub-question involves a closer look at the contemporary situation concerning good governance in general and specifically human rights, considering the impact of the EU and also domestic developments, as well as the influence of other international actors (states and international organizations).

Addressing these questions is important because of the support and resources provided by the EU to these countries. There is a need for effective financial and constructive aid in the SC countries to ensure prosperity, legitimacy, and independence and thus reach the EU's goals. According to the European Commission, the political stability in adjacent countries is crucial for sustainable economic relations and insured security within the EU (*European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)*, 2021). The functioning of this policy should be carefully considered in the context of effectiveness. The EU strives for power, security, legitimacy, and prosperity as an international actor and a strong reputation in this multipolar world. Careful research of the actual perception of other countries or perspectives towards the EU and its policy is therefore required.

2. Research Design

This case study research is based on a review of primary sources including EU documents, treaty reports, and official statistics. This content analysis will be combined with a review of existing academic secondary literature to obtain a more critical approach. By comparing opinions and critical essays about the current course of events, new insights may be created. The complexity of the current situation will be laid out by first introducing general concepts and the countries' present state of affairs in light of these notions with short tables of information. Moving further, the EU's point of view will be addressed and their official future goals in the SC. The take on these goals and critique on its implementation of academics will be summarized. As a final part of the study, each country will be introduced by its current governance context and the EU's interventions in it is involved with.

It is important to note the possible limitations of this paper. Thorough research of the Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian views on the European relations could not be conducted in this paper due to, among other factors, the author's lack of knowledge of their domestic languages. This

results in a lack of nuance on the matter and an unfathomable approach to SC perspectives. As sources are never fully neutral and objective, this literature-based paper could be influenced by the point of view of referenced authors and the selective availability of literature on the used databases.

3. Literature Review

After the Cold war, the Copenhagen criteria established the foundation for the focus of human rights promotion within the EU. As Evgeny Romanovskiy argues in her thesis, after 1991 the SC countries managed to disintegrate from the Soviet Union which the EU saw as an opportunity to expand its influence in the region (2021, p.108). The EU expanded its technical assistance to the SC in the early 90s into a more comprehensive foreign policy toolkit in the 2000s and is recently growing its demand for the improvement of governance and the fight against corruption (Börzel et al., 2009, p.156). It wanted to formalize the relations with the newly independent states of the SC which was translated into nine bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PAC) established in the period between 1997 and 1999 (Börzel et al., 2009, p.156).

The Euro-Atlantic community became more active in the region in the early 2000s which created a shifting context of the ongoing regional conflicts (Romanovskiy, 2021, p. 108). But according to Amanda Paul (2016), the EU is a late-comer in the SC region. Russia has had a significant interest in the region ever since its independence (Gvelesiani & Mölder, 2018). The Russian influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan can not only be significantly felt in the economic domain. In a variety of fields, such as conflict resolution, Russian political influence dominates the region (Gvelesiani & Mölder, 2018).

The SC has been divided by conflicts, blockades, and trade restrictions over the past decades, an example of this is that for over ten years Armenia has been living under Azerbaijani and Turkish trade blockades (Romanovskiy, 2021, p. 108). This shows that the SC is in a complex geostrategic position as many actors wish to influence the region, especially Russia and the EU. Some argue that the EU and Russia compete over the integration of the SC in their respective spheres of influence. In light of the risks that Russian energy dependence might imply for the EU, the SC is becoming more important for global economic and energy security (Romanovskiy, 2021, p. 108). So it would be in the EU's interest if the SC had closer trade relations with them, especially oil-rich Azerbaijan.

In the first years of the ENP, which entered into force in 2004, it was implemented through individual action plans which were so similar that it indicated that the SC was perceived as one geopolitical unit by the EU (Gafarlı et al., 2016, p.8). The EU's enhanced its relations with the SC in 2007 which led to the 2009 split of the ENP in two regional parts; the Southern Partnership and the EaP (Gafarlı et al., 2016, p.9). The SC countries became part of the EaP and soon negotiations with Armenia and Georgia began with the EU to form the Association agreement (Gafarlı et al., 2016, p.9). Russia was unhappy with this extended involvement of the EU and used its influence in Armenia to restrain it from signing the Association Agreement (Gafarlı et al., 2016, p.9).

The current governance of the EU in their external policy is contested. Academics are trying to open up debate on the hegemonic liberal order, the 'ruling' manner in which western societies are governed. They say that the EU's goal for homogenization in the SC should be reconsidered. Alternative options for the Caucasian future are currently not negotiated in the way policy is conducted with and towards them. Laura Luciani (2021) argues that in light of the EU's human rights work, a relinkage from de- and geo-politicized 'development' goals should be introduced. This argument can be drawn into the broader discussion of whether the liberal order threatens the regional government in post-Communist countries such as the SC countries, or not (Cooley, 2019).

More recent development in the region contribute to the geopolitical situation of the SC. The disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh led to another war in 2020 where Azerbaijan regained control over much of the territory it lost to Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh forces in the violent conflict of the 1990s. Russia mediated a ceasefire and sent 2000 force troops into the contested area to create a security zone between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (Welt & Bowen, 2021).

4. The Promotion of Human Rights in the SC

4.1 The EU's initiatives on human rights

The EU, as considered under EU Normative Power theories, has considerable influence over its neighboring region (Manners, 2002). The aspirations of the EU are to influence its neighborhood into more democratic states with western normative standards towards good governance and human rights. In order to achieve a normative base within the society of a country, it is important to create an open and democratic civil society where the people have civil liberties. Helping the civil society evolve is thus crucial in the promotion for human rights. The funding or creation of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is therefore in this paper considered as human rights initiatives.

According to the charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the EU takes human rights very seriously and argues that it is at the core of their domestic policy. Art 52 pt. 3 clearly states that these rights correspond to rights guaranteed by the Rome Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 1950. The Charter further states that it is in line with the 'universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality, and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law'. The EU's perception of human rights is however influenced by a political process. These written laws have been negotiated by officials and are therefore a more narrow definition than the academic idea of human rights (Freedman & Houghton, 2017).

Besides the normative and theoretical aspects of the EU values, the concrete measures applied by the EU in order to retain, promote and improve the human rights situation in the SC region are analyzed in this section.

4.1.1 The European Parliament

The European Parliament subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) is a subcommittee of the Committee of Foreign Affairs responsible for ensuring and opening up dialogue on human rights among the EU members and outside of the EU. They mostly form a platform for human rights analysis and frequently invite representatives of civil society to speak about their findings. In light of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, the EU funded the European Partnership for the Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) since 2010 and has taken multiple actions in the recent developments of the conflict in 2020. On the 20th of May 2021, the European Parliament voted a resolution condemning the fact that Armenian prisoners were captivated after and during the most recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, by Azerbaijani officers. The resolution called for urgent humanitarian aid and the support of civil society organizations that work in favour of reconciliation. It furthermore called for the addressing of the then-upcoming Eastern Partnership event of autumn 2021. Even though the resolution did not pass, some months later, in February 2022, Charles Michel tweeted that eight Armenian prisoners were released after mediation with Azerbaijani officials by French president Emanuel Macron. This implies that there is ongoing dialogue within the European Parliament about the developments and situations concerning human

rights in the SC. The efforts made by Emanuel Macron can partially be seen within the supportive environment created in the European Parliamentary institution.

4.1.2 The European Commission

The European Commission Directorate General of International Partnerships is competent for, among other fields, the promotion of human rights. This Directorate General also includes the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). It is an action program that aims to support human rights promotion and Democracy in non-member states by forming an annual agenda on their objectives and expected results. Currently, it is funding over 1200 initiatives in 100 different countries². The EIDHR supports the SC countries through CSO funding, the funding of independent political foundations, and non-profit organizations².

4.2 The EU's interests in the SC

In order to develop an idea of why the EU has been involved in the SC region, the EU's foreign policy aspirations should be taken into account. The EU wants to strengthen its political and economic ties and integration with neighboring countries with the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), Eastern Partnership (EaP), and other treaties to pursue cooperation. Apart from these multilateral partnerships, the European Parliament provides a permanent Delegation for Relations with the South Caucasus (DSCA). These relations are based on bilateral agreements with each of the three countries. Their Georgian relationship of which is the closest according to Marina Kaljurand, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia³. The delegation serves the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC) which includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) striving toward deeper political and economic ties which officially relate Georgia to the EU. The European Parliament supports furthermore the EU-Armenia Parliamentary Partnership Committee (PPC) and the EU-Azerbaijan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC). The bilateral agreements may show an effort to enhance the diplomatic relationships and pursue more individual tailored agreements with each of the SC countries. For example, considering Azerbaijan's direct relations with the EU, the focus lays more on energy policy than on the agreements with the other countries.

4.2.1 The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)

The ENP, launched in 2004, provides a framework for the EU's regional, bilateral and multilateral relations with its Northern and Southern Neighboring countries (*European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)*, 2021). Apart from the three SC countries, Algeria, Belarus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, Tunisia, and Ukraine are also partners in the ENP. This partnership consists of various forms of aid, bilateral cooperation, and the promotion of 'EU norms' such as good governance, democracy, and the implementation of human rights (Smith, 2005). It is a European effort to create a 'ring of friends' around its borders where they help increase prosperity and security according to Smith (2005).

The ENP contains a political instrument, the action plans, and a financial instrument, the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) (Gavasso, 2021). The action plans are grafted on the country's

² Heinrich Böll Stiftung. (n.d.). *The European Instrument for Democracy Human Rights*. Retrieved November 23, 2021, from eu.boell.org

³ M. Kaljurand. (n.d.). *DSCA*. Retrieved November 23, 2021, from www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/dsca

needs while taking into account what the EU's interests are⁴. Their goals are structured with short to medium-term targets from three to five years. The action plan documents firstly map out the priority needs for the concerning country and further focuses on the concrete action areas that will ensure a closer correlation with the EU (Gavasso, 2021). The financial instrument, the ENI, has six specific objectives, one of them being: the promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the core values of the EU (Official Journal of the European Union, 2014). An example of the ENI programs is the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), which entered into force in June 2021. The NDICI focuses mainly on human rights promotion in the neighboring region in respect of the sustainable development goals of the United Nations (UN). €6 358 million is allocated between 2021 and 2027 in the form of funding to CSOs. The ENP may show an effort of the EU to take their human rights principles into action in their neighboring region, the main concern is whether this is efficiently executed or not. The negotiations on how the ENP will be implemented in the three SC countries include high-level meetings between members of the European Commission and the SC individual governments (*European Neighborhood policy (ENP)*, 2021).

4.2.2 The Eastern Partnership

In 2009 a regional project came out of the existing framework of the ENP. The neighborhood was divided into a southern project, the Southern Partnership, and an eastern division, the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The SC countries became part of the EaP and negotiated integration on a higher level (Gafarlı et al., 2016, p.9). According to the EU, the Promotion of human rights and rule of law is at the core of the EaP (Shyrokykh, 2017). In 2017 with the launch of the 20 Deliverables for 2020, the European Commission states that four objectives were targeted; a stronger economy, stronger governance, stronger connectivity, and stronger society⁵. In July 2021 a post-2020 EaP was launched which contains €2.3 billion of Economic and Investment plan in grants and guarantees and a potential €17 billion in public and private investment⁶.

The EaP raises the same question as mentioned by the ENP; is this executed efficiently? The EU's point of view on their approach differs from some academic's view on the situation. Some academic literature stresses that the EU strives for internal security and external security (Nuriyev, 2007). The former by maintaining or implementing a stable and consistent domestic regime and the latter by securing a strong geopolitical position. The ENP, as mentioned above, is a tool to conduct foreign policy and develop influence in the region bordering the EU. The concrete impact and effectiveness of the ENP will not be researched in this paper, however, the incoherent implementation of policy and lack of sense of direction within the EU towards external relations in general over the past years should be considered (Lehne, 2014). Different treaties and multilateral agreements have been implemented over the past couple of decades. They have been functioning as channels of economic aid flows, energy supply policy, and the EU's promotion of how these countries should be governed.

Many authors are agree on the inefficiency of the EU's policy in the promotion of democracy and human rights. There are however divided visions on why this is the case. According to Anna-Sophie Maass (2019), the level of normative appeal toward Russia or the EU can partially explain why

⁴ European External Action Service. (2021, August 8). *About the European External Action Service*. Retrieved November 23, 2021 from www.eeas.europa.eu

⁵ The European Commission. (n.d.). *Eastern Partnership*. Retrieved November 25, 2021 from ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership_en

⁶ European External Action Service. (n.d.). *Joint Staff Working Document, Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities*. Retrieved November 25, 2021 from eeas.europa.eu

Georgia and Armenia have different levels of willingness toward the adoption of good governance norms. Georgia’s war with Russia in 2008 may have pushed Georgia more towards the West. While Armenia has economic advantages to gain from its closer relations with Russia as will be mentioned in section 4.5. It is in that aspect also the countries’ internal decision whether they accept the EU’s influence or not. Luciani’s research on CSOs in the SC shows that the EU’s hegemony on funding in the region can be contradictory to its initial idea of from below considered legitimate organs since they have to be formally organized to process the EU’s funding bureaucratic procedures (2021, p.6). She states that the EU created a discursive idea around the civil society initiatives as being a benevolent sidekick of the EU with liberal-democratic consensus, political neutrality, and representativeness which do not correspond to local realities as she concluded from interviews with local CSO co-operators (Luciani, 2021, p.21).

4.3 Governance in the South Caucasian Neighborhood Countries

As a way of indicating good governance in the SC countries on a macro-level, three parameters are provided with official statistics as measurement. These indexes are; democracy, corruption, and human rights. They provide an overview of the current state of affairs in the SC countries and a comparison to the European average and their recent developments. The main focus remains human rights moving further in this research, where each individual country is analyzed with quantitative data and more specific cases.

The Economist Intelligence Unit commits to publishing the democracy index every year, their measures are based on “electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. The five categories are interrelated and form a coherent conceptual whole” (EIT, 2022, p.66). The Democracy index shows that the SC countries have been scoring generally low over the past ten years compared to the Western European average. As shown in Table 1, Azerbaijan has a low score, having received the status of “Authoritarian Regime” which can be explained by public discontent and remaining repressive policies (EIT, 2021, p.46). Georgia’s recent decline, however still scoring best of the three countries, could be attributed to the strain between the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic party and the United National Movement as is described further below. Armenia’s score has been on the rise as a result of a more stable period allowing the current government to continue its democratic reform programme (EIT, 2021, p.46). The considerable difference in scores of the SC countries implies the need for an individual take on the promotion of democracy. Every one of the SC countries has a different history and various individual bilateral relations to the EU. The region cannot be seen as a homogenous entity in the aspect of democracy by the EU, and neither can the take on the policy be seen as such.

Democracy Index	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Armenia	Western Europe (region)
2012	5.53	3.15	4.09	8.44
2017	5.93	2.65	4.11	8.38
2021	5.12	2.68	5.49	8.23

Note: scores from 0-10 with 10 as best possible score
 Source: Economist Intelligence Unit

Table 1

According to Arthur Atanesyan (2016, p. 264), post-Soviet local societies interpret democracy too much as a political phenomenon with formal political institutions. He argues that even though some nations, such as Armenia, have adopted all necessary formalities to become a “national model of democracy”, that does not make them a democratic country. Countries such as Ukraine or Georgia may have adopted the “child of democracy”, but as long as it is not firstly accepted by society as a

system, it cannot be properly implemented (Atanesyan, 2016, p. 265). This may partially contribute to the explanation of why it is a struggle for post-Soviet countries to become liberal democracies in western perception. Atanesyan linked this to short-term rationality considering corruption in the SC, a crucial factor that diminishes fair elections and thus democracy (2016).

Each citizen accepting a bribe knows that he or she gets minimal benefit, while paying the ultimate price with regard to his or her individual political rights. People behave in such a way, and do so consciously, because sometimes having five or ten dollars today is perceived as being more important (and even more perceptible) than waiting for a stable income tomorrow. (Atanesyan, 2016, p. 266)

The corruption scores of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have been relatively low over the past ten years (Table 2). Georgia's corruption score is notably higher and thus less corrupt than Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to Transparency International (2015), this is attributed to reforms and their enforcement that took place since 2003. Examples of these reforms are; the "criminalization of active and passive bribery, the strengthening of money laundering legislation, the introduction of a general code of ethics for civil servants, and asset disclosure and whistleblower protection provisions for public officials" (Transparency International, 2015, p.19).

Corruption score	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Armenia	EU
2012	52	27	34	63
2017	56	31	35	63
2021	55	30	49	64

Note: scores from 0-100 with 0= extremely corrupt and 100= clean
 Source: Transparency International

Table 2

As a final demonstration and crucial indicator for this paper, the human rights index is provided. The used indicator by the Freedom house called "Civil liberties" is based on "freedom of expression and belief", "associational and organizational rights", "rule of law" and "personal autonomy and individual rights" (Freedom house, 2022). Georgia's Civil liberties score 36/60 in 2021 with a remarkable 3/4 on the subcategory of Academic Freedom and Freedom for Human Rights' related NGOs. Free and independent media, freedom of expression of religion, freedom of political expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of trade union, independence of the judiciary, equality of opportunity, and freedom from economic exploitation all got a score of 2 out of 4 (Freedom house, 2022). Azerbaijan's scores are extremely low in all categories receiving a 'not free' status. The only 2/4 the country received in 2020 is in the category of personal social freedoms (Freedom house, 2022). Armenia's results are similar to the Georgia situation, scoring best on freedom of political expression, freedom of assembly, freedom for human rights NGOs, and freedom of the right to own property (Freedom house, 2022).

The categories mentioned are some of the parameters analyzed by the Freedom House based on a narrow definition of freedom or human rights, it is however a useful tool to compare the SC countries to each other and to the EU in light of their civil freedom status quo. There can be concluded that the reason for Azerbaijan's recent decline in human rights score is a crucial factor to keep in mind while searching for a way to promote human rights improvement. It should be determined what the exact cause is so the source can be determined and tackled. Remarkably, Azerbaijan's democracy score has improved while corruption and human rights indexes have worsened. For Armenia on the other hand, many improvements have been made as can be seen in all three tables. To maintain this tendency, an overview of changes in the recent years in the Armenian civil society and governance should be mapped out so that international actors, such as the EU can efficiently assist in this process. Georgia has, like Azerbaijan, known a significant

decline in the mentioned fields. Not just corruption and human rights, but also their democracy index have gotten worse over the most recent period. This issues an interesting within-case for our research: what has caused this decline? Possible factors could be the COVID 19 pandemic, the 2020 elections, social changes, Russia’s influence, etc. This is important to keep into consideration while enacting external policy toward Georgia.

Civil liberties	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Armenia	EU
2012	3	5	4	1
2017	38	9	30	54
2021	36	7	32	53

Note: scores in 2012 from 1-7 with 1= completely free and 7= the least free, scores in 2018 and 2022 reports out of 60 with 0= not free and 60= completely free
Source: Freedom house

The scores of all three indicators clearly differ from the EU’s averages. As mentioned before, the EU considers itself a normative power which is demonstrated here, the EU scores better and higher on these parameters, giving it the opportunity to function as an example role on this field. This is shown in the EU’s external relations policy such as the relations with Georgia where “EU support is directed towards transparency and inclusiveness of the electoral process, independence and impartiality of the judiciary, gender equality and LGBTI rights, rights of persons belonging to minorities, rights of persons with disabilities and labour rights” (The delegation of the EU to Georgia, 2021). Examples of this support are the EU4gender equality, Erasmus+ programme for young women⁷ and the support of civil society NGOs.

4.4 Georgia

4.4.1 Governance context

Georgia is a representative democracy with a unitary parliamentary government. The republic’s current president is Salome Zourabichvili. The Georgian state has experienced several challenges in the last three decades. The two regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been resistant to government involvement since the Georgian independence. Abkhazia declared independence in 1999. Georgia has a history of corruption especially since Eduard Shevardnadze became president, a former Soviet minister, in 1995 (Russel, 2021, p. 2). The parliamentary elections of 2003 were widely considered fraudulent which led to the Rose Revolution in 2004. This caused insurrection in the whole of Georgia (Hewitt, 2013, p. 202). The 2004-2008 period was turbulent particularly for the South-Ossetian and Abkhazia regions as the Georgian government tried to tighten its grip over the regions (Hewitt, 2013, p. 207). In 2008 this resulted in a war in which Russia supported the side of the separatists in South Ossetia (Hewitt, 2013, p. 231). After the war, Russia including Syria, Nicaragua, and Venezuela recognized the two territories as independent. They are now politically and financially supported by Moscow (Russel, 2021) they are not under the control of the Georgian government. This could be a possible contribution to the strong motivation of Georgia to become closer to the West, and more specifically the EU, and thus further from Russia. This does however not imply a smooth and uncontested transition towards EU candidacy.

More recently, the 2020 elections in Georgia caused unrest in Tbilisi as the opposition party suspected fraud with regard to the election results (De Standaard, 2020). In a briefing of May 2021 of the European Parliament, Martin Russel calls the situation a “political crisis” and writes: “The crisis reflects the longer-standing issue of excessive concentration of power, weakening many of

⁷EU Neighbours East. (2021, August 19). *Stronger women: stronger Armenia – factsheet*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from euneighbourseast.eu/news-and-stories/publications/stronger-women-stronger-armenia-factsheet/

the checks and balances that are necessary for a healthy democracy.” (Russel, 2021) European mediation is helping to resolve the polarized situation according to this briefing. This could be a bump on the road for the EU-Georgian affairs, although other factors such as ongoing investment in existing treaties from both parties do imply an approximating evolution in their relations.

4.4.2 EU governance related interventions

It should be noted that Georgia is, compared to the other two, the most involved country to the EU. They have clear aspirations to live up to European integration as stated in their constitution: “Article 78: Integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures: The constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.” (Georgian constitutional law, 1995). Their ties to the EU, presented here in the form of agreements and treaties, are tighter and more numerous compared to Azerbaijan and Armenia. They also score best on the democracy index, corruption score, and civil liberties as seen in section 4.3 which means that their scores are closest to the EU’s average which is an important aspect considering the EU’s ‘be more like us’ mentality in external relations (Averre, 2009, p. 1707) when funding CSOs. Georgia is also a member of the Association Agreement since 2010⁸ which is an outcome of the ENP and includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), Political Cooperation and sectoral cooperation. This can be considered a close and tight agreement by the EU with Georgia, especially because the EU has very strict and protective regulations on trade. It lets Georgia, with certain limitations, be a part of its market, which it does not have with Armenia or Azerbaijan. Under the Association Agreement, there has also been a Free Visa policy implemented where it is for example easier for students to obtain an education in EU countries than before.

The EU conducts indirect Human Rights policy by funding CSOs and human rights organizations such as Women Engage for Common Future, Georgia (WECF Georgia). The EU has founded the Child Rights Code, Juvenile Justice Code⁹, and training sessions for parliamentary representatives¹⁰.

The EU is not the only actor concerned by Georgia’s human rights status. By the Georgian state, an official is appointed to oversee the human rights situation in the country, called the Public Defender or Ombudsman¹¹. It is their responsibility to advise the government on human rights issues, but also to monitor the law, institutions, and practices in accordance to international human rights standards. Furthermore is also the UN active in Georgia in the human rights field with their Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) to oversee the ongoing dynamics. Georgia is furthermore part of the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI), an organization dedicated to providing a platform for over 40 European initiatives in the promotion and safeguarding of human rights¹². This shows that the EU’s initiatives on human rights contain more than just direct actions labeled ‘Human Rights Promotion’. Funding women’s rights CSOs or organizations protecting children are indirect initiatives affecting the human rights conditions of the people.

⁸ Ministry of Internal Affairs. (n.d.). *Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union*. Retrieved February 20, 2022, from police.ge/en/ministry

⁹ EU Neighbours East. (2022, April 14). *EU-UNICEF juvenile justice programme in Georgia: over 5,600 children and young people diverted from prosecution*. Retrieved April 22, 2022, from euneighbourseast.eu

¹⁰ EU for Georgia. (2021, December 3). *Human Rights Week 2021*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from eu4georgia.eu/human-rights-week-2021/

¹¹ ENNHRI. (n.d.). *Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from ennhri.org

¹² ENNHRI. (2022, March 12). *About*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from ennhri.org/about-us/

Nevertheless, the Georgian government has work to do in the human rights field according to academic Sanjana Shah of the University of Toronto (2019). She concludes that the media freedom is still directly interfered with by the Georgian government, however, a considerable dedication of the civil society and a young population exposed to the EU (by the visa-free regime) to democratize give hope (Shah, 2019, p. 221). Shah implies here that the visa regime has an impact on the young Georgians in the context of transforming the state into a more democratic country, an example of EU initiatives to tighten their relations with Georgia.

The Georgia-EU relations do know their difficulties as some Georgian political divisions feel more attracted to Russia than the EU and therefore try to counter the closer EU initiatives, such as the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia¹³ for example. A possible result of this is that Georgia did not manage to meet reform conditions attached to a second part of loan installments they would have received in September 2021. This is a symptom of struggles in the relationship between Georgia and Brussels over the past year according to several observers of the EU-Georgia relations (Makszimov, 2021). The 'EU Neighbours East' (2021) reports in December 2021 of the EU's disapproval of the latest appointment of Georgian supreme court judges since they were not in line with OSCE and ODIHR recommendations. The lead spokesperson for external affairs of the EU, Peter Stano (2021), tweeted of the disapproval and added a link to an official statement saying the appointment goes against the April 19 agreement which said all appointments would be paused. This could be a small inconvenience in an already difficult time to communicate rectilinearly or a disturbance in the Georgian climb towards a more EU-related future. This may suggest that although Georgia is taking certain steps to strengthen its relations with the EU, there are definitely some tensions in their way.

4.5 Armenia

4.5.1 Governance context

Armenia gained independence from the USSR in 1991 and is a multiparty representative republic with president Vahagn Khachaturyan as ceremonial head of state since 2022 and Nicol Pashinyan¹⁴ as prime minister since 2021. Armenia was captivated by the Velvet Revolution in 2018. This sequence of anti-government protests was a relatively surprising event for the international community as Armenia's geopolitical position seemed rather secure (Simão, 2018, p. 2). But domestic political issues caused turbulence in Armenia's relations towards Russia and the EU (Sammut, 2020). The revolution was initiated by a movement of students that had received western education, for fighting authoritarian aspects of the regime that was led by a kleptocratic elite (Mkrtchyan, 2021, p.133). The Armenian civil society had transformed more towards western values which clashed with the third consecutive and thus illegal term of the in 2018 elected prime minister, Serzh Sargsyan (Mkrtchyan, 2021, p.133). This resulted in riot and uprising against the state (Mkrtchyan, 2021, p.133). Consequently, reforms were made toward a more self-reliant state according to the US Agency for International Development¹⁵.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war also had serious political consequences for Armenia. The Armenian civil society did not only condemn the Azerbaijani's aggressive regime, it had trouble digesting the international silence as well (Manusyan et al., 2020). This had an effect on the

¹³ Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. (2020, October 3). *Our Actions*. Retrieved April 26, 2022, from patriots.ge

¹⁴ Deutsche Welle. (2021, June 21). *Armenia: Pashinyan proclaims election win*. DW.COM. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from www.dw.com/en/armenia-pashinyan-wins-election-with-over-half-the-votes

¹⁵ USAID. (2020). *On the Path of Reform Armenia's Journey from Revolution towards Self-Reliance*. USAID.GOV. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1863/Armenia_Newsletter_J2SR_Blog_2020.pdf

domestic regime, especially when the ceasefire with Azerbaijan felt like humiliation to many Armenians. Armenian groups put pressure on their government with a series of protests called “the March of Dignity” because they did not agree with the president’s ceding of Armenian occupied territory (Kocharyan, 2020). As the post-war Government wanted to have the society’s support, snap elections were organized (Iskandaryan, 2021). This resulted in a more stabilized government which created space to resolve the postwar political crisis¹⁶. According to Freedom House¹⁶, Armenia’s global democracy percentages have improved past ten years. The improvement of the electoral polls and professional administration is a concrete example of this¹⁶. As is also suggested by the analysis in section 4.3, Armenia has been improving their democratic character. The corruption rate has decreased over the last decade and civil liberties have improved.

The Armenian human rights have been monitored by Reporters Without Borders who have stated that the Armenian media is still confronted with misinformation on the Nagorno-Karabakh war and that there is still no legal framework to sufficiently protect freedom of press¹⁷.

4.5.2 EU governance related interventions

Armenia has multiple official relations with the EU but holds close military and economic relations with Russia. Many seasonal and more permanent workers from Armenia find jobs in Russia which contributes to 5% of the Armenian GDP (Mejlumyan, 2022). It joined the Russian led Eurasian economic union (EAEU) in 2014¹⁸. This worried the EU and resulted in a long debate between Armenia and the EU on the mode of their future cooperation which ultimately resulted in initiatives for a new framework in 2015 (Gafarlı et al., 2016, p.9). There is a Russian military base situated in Armenia and it has a defense agreement with Russia as is written in an online article of National Interest by Caucasus policy experts Denis Corboy, William Courtney and Kenneth Yalowitz (2019). Armenia also receives Russian military weapons and utilities according to Corboy et al. (2019). This is important in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Being economically and military-connected to Russia, this gives a delicate position to Armenia as it does seem to keep ties with the EU through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) for example (Corboy et al., 2019). In recent events, the Armenian GDP growth has dropped 4.1% since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia and many Armenian labor migrants lost their job in Russia due to its decreasing economic situation (Mejlumyan, 2022). In light of these events, it is unclear how the Armenian state will react toward its asymmetrical dependence on Russia in light of the current war in Ukraine and if that will imply a closer transition toward the EU.

The EU has multiple human rights-related programs in Armenia which are most prominently the EIDHR and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED), which are closely associated to the EU. The EIDHR’s mission in Armenia consists of “supporting civil society in promoting and protecting human rights, access to justice, labour rights, civic participation, and wider democratic reform in Armenia, particularly for more vulnerable population groups”¹⁹. A new project has been launched on January 25th in 2022 called the Accountable Institutions and Human Rights Protection in Armenia. It is a 2-year support mechanism to help the reform agenda of the government of

¹⁶ Freedom House. (n.d.). *Armenia*. Retrieved April 3, 2022, from freedomhouse.org/country/armenia/nations-transit/2019

¹⁷ Reporters Without Borders. (2021, June 8). *Armenia*. Rsf.Org. Retrieved May 8, 2022, from <https://rsf.org/en/country/armenia>

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia. (2022). *International organisations Eurasian Economic Union*. www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/6

¹⁹ Welcomeurope. (2020, April 9). *EIDHR - Human Rights and Democracy Promotion through Civil Society in Armenia - 2020*. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from www.welcomeurope.com/en/calls-projects/eidhr-human-rights-and-democracy-promotion-through-civil-society-in-armenia-2020/

Armenia to build effective institutions based on the EU's principles of good governance and the rule of law²⁰. It is completely funded by the EU but the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation Europe (OSCE) are working together to make the concrete implementation happen²⁰. The UN stated on January 25th, 2022, with regard to this project:

The key areas of engagement include enhancing the rights-based approaches in public service delivery, promoting security sector governance and reform, as well as fostering the process of constitutional reform. The project objectives will be implemented through three components that are defined on the basis of the national reform priorities in the fields of human rights protection, police reform and constitutional reform²⁰.

This tells us that Armenia is in a geostrategic delicate position. The Armenian approach towards the Russian economic integration union, EAEU in 2014 did however not necessarily result in a decrease in their human rights conditions. As described above, some authors do believe that Yerevan would like to step away from its Russian ties, this cannot be confirmed. What should be closely monitored now is how Armenia will react toward Russia considering the war in Ukraine. And if that would have consequences toward the democratic state of affairs. The increased commitment to the EU's good governance promotion and human rights protection has had impact on Armenia. Students with Western education have had a significant impact during the velvet revolution, this is a sign of EU impact as they provide visas and educational programs in Armenia (Grigoryan, 2019). Having passed Georgia on the democracy index of 2021 (Table 1) Armenia is showing consistent growth in their transition towards a free and open society, especially compared to Azerbaijan with its recent decreasing human rights performance.

4.6 Azerbaijan

4.6.1 Governance context

Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1991 from the USSR, making it a post-Soviet unitary multiparty republic with a president, Ilham Aliyev, as head of state and the government, assisted by the prime minister. It is in the context of this research important to note that Ilham Aliyev has been president since 2003 by the succession of his father, Heydar Aliyev. This raised many questions not just domestically. As we have seen in Table 2, the corruption in Azerbaijan is relatively high and the democracy index low, making it eligible for the status of an 'authoritarian' regime (EIT, 2021, p.46). This could possibly affect the policy towards local and international NGOs and CSOs. Azerbaijan has, however, just like Georgia and Armenia, an ombudsman to keep track of the human rights situation in the country²¹. According to Gunay Kurbanali Melikli, an academic from the Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani government is indeed aiming to build the civil society's capacity and the political dialogue in the prospect of building the country's foreign policy position stronger (2017). He does however emphasize that the initiatives don't always have the desired impact and the rule of law is often compromised by local contradictions, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh war (Melikli, 2017).

²⁰ Sarajyan, H. (2022, January 25). *Launching event of EU funded "Accountable Institutions and Human Rights Protection in Armenia" project*. United Nations Armenia. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from armenia.un.org/en/169548-launching-event-eu-funded-accountable-institutions-and-human-rights-protection-armenia

²¹ ENNHRI. (2021, January 13). *Azerbaijan Ombudsman Institute*. Retrieved May 4, 2022, from <https://ennhri.org/our-members/azerbaijan/>

Azerbaijan has been a hot topic in recent years, especially in the field of human rights. More than once have political prisoners been locked up causing demonstrations and contempt abroad²². Since CSOs is one of the most important organizations contributing to the promotion of human rights, strong and numerous CSOs will have a positive effect on human rights and democratization. A strengthening in the establishment of CSOs and policy towards CSOs in a local context is thus needed according to Meliki (2017). This suggests difficulties in the process of the democratization of Azerbaijan as is desired by the EU neighborhood policy. An authoritarian leader possibly denies EU influences if they are contradictory to his own interests.

4.6.2 EU governance related interventions

The EU and Azerbaijan are legally bound since Azerbaijan is an EaP country, with the EU as their main trading partner. The EU and Azerbaijan had a partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA) since 1999 and Azerbaijan is part of the ENP and EaP (Perchoc, 2019). It is often implied that energy export such as gas and oil are at the base of the Azerbaijani relations with the EU, emphasis is however needed as many more aspects are involved in these multilateral relations (Van Gils, 2020). One of which is the promotion on democracy and human rights. The EU uses two instruments to support CSOs in Azerbaijan, namely the EIDHR for mainly electoral observation and recommendations and the Program for Non-state Actors and Local Authorities in Development which provides a platform for cooperation between CSOs and local authorities (Lavrina, 2018, p. 90). Further initiatives by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) are also human rights related, such as the support of Meydan TV, an alternative media channel in an environment mainly controlled by the state (Perchoc, 2019). Sabina Islamzade argues in her thesis on Human Rights and EU-Azerbaijan relations that the EU has altered its human rights policy in recent years since 2016 towards Azerbaijan because previous policies did not produce the desired outcome (2018). These new policies are less based on hard power and more on soft strategies but may gain more favorable results in the long term as they take circumstances more into consideration (Islamzade, 2018). He further states that even though the EU's take on human rights is rather soft, there is no valuable alternative especially in dealing with Azerbaijan as it has no desire to join the EU and has considerable natural resources (Islamzade, 2018)

There are however nuances in the practical course of events. A report by the European Parliamentary Research Service (2019) states that in recent years a new legal framework against foreign-funded NGOs makes it difficult for the EU to support CSOs in Azerbaijan (Perchoc, 2019). In a 2016 human rights watch report is stated that it takes many bureaucratic steps and difficulties to successfully operate an NGO or function as a foreign donor in Azerbaijan²² as explained in image 1.

²² Human Rights Watch. (2016, October 20). *Harassed, Imprisoned, Exiled* [Press release]. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/20/harassed-imprisoned-exiled/azerbaijans-continuing-crackdown-government-critics>

NEW GOVERNMENT RULES BREAK THE LINK BETWEEN NGOs AND FOREIGN DONORS IN AZERBAIJAN

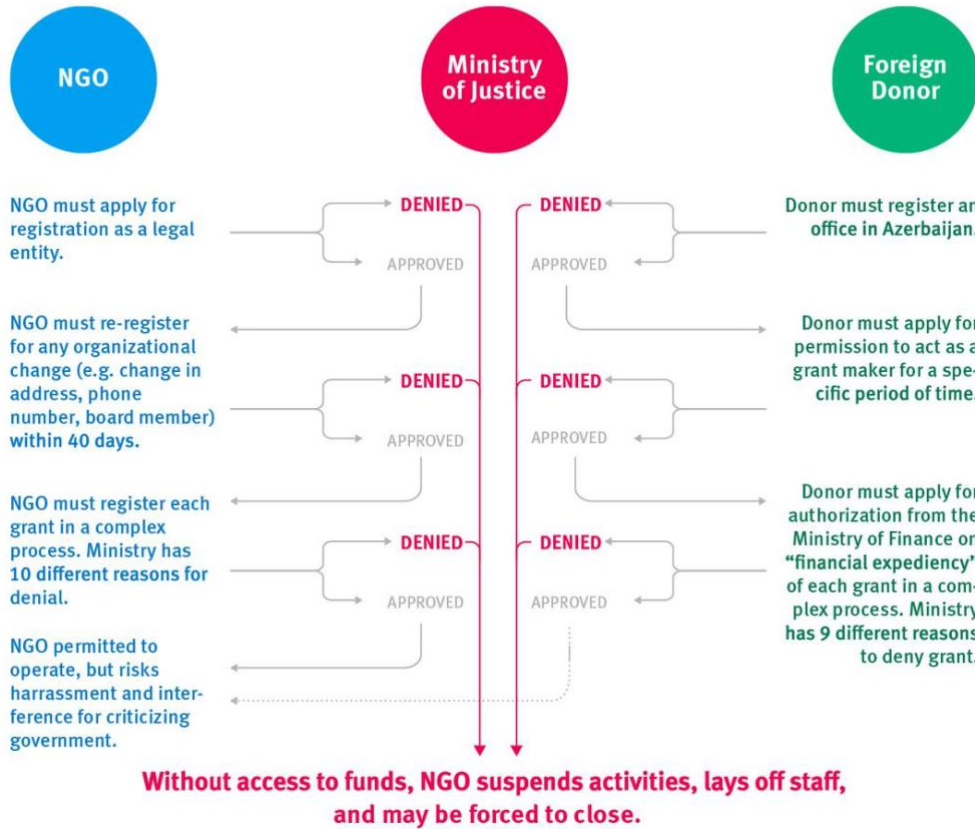


Image 1
Source: Human Rights Watch²²

This legal framework is based on a 'single window' principle according to academic researcher Anastasia Lavrina (2018). She argues that it aims to improve relations with foreign countries and grant them access to civil society actors and that the liberalization of the civil society improves the Azerbaijani image in the world (Lavrina, 2018, p. 89). Lavrina also concludes that the EU's criticism, as we see in the report of 2019, is one of three main challenges currently playing a part in the lagging EU-Azerbaijan bilateral relations. She states that the EU's strong criticism of Azerbaijan's human rights policy, the insufficient cooperation beyond the energy sector, and the weak involvement of the civil society as a partner are the three main factors in need of tackling for a closer EU-Azerbaijan integration (Lavrina, 2018). This tells us that there are divided opinions on Azerbaijan's policy towards NGOs, but is most likely disadvantageous for EU-funded projects and CSOs as it implies bureaucratic hassles and causes delay.

More recent developments in the human rights-related field in Azerbaijan is the Council of Europe's Action Plan for Azerbaijan 2022-2025. The Council is not an institution of the EU but works together with 46 member states including all 27 of the EU. The Council of Europe²³ states that:

The new Action Plan aims at strengthening democratic security in Azerbaijan by developing and effectively implementing policies and legislation in a number of areas where the Council of Europe provides added value: reforms to improve the implementation of the ECtHR case law and judgements at the national level, improve the criminal justice system and ensure fundamental freedoms, strengthen the capacities of the media, enhance data protection, promote gender equality and combat violence against women and domestic violence, promote children's rights, ensure social rights, further increase the effectiveness, accountability and transparency of the judiciary, step up the fight against corruption and money laundering, combat cybercrime, further support reform of the prison system, conduct electoral reform, enhance dialogue between the national authorities and civil society organizations, promote human rights education for young people and develop a democratic and inclusive climate in schools.

With a budget of €9.6 million, the council adds to the promotion of human rights with help from all EU member states. This implies that multiple international organizations are active in funding CSOs and promoting good governance in Azerbaijan. The UN is another active multilateral institute monitoring the SC human rights with the OHCHR²⁴. This means that Azerbaijan, but also Armenia and, Georgia are kept an eye on by the international community.

The will to promote human rights and the realization that improvement on the current situation in Azerbaijan is needed are crucial in the road towards a more democratic country with better rights for its people. Important steps are already made to keep Azerbaijan on the right track in this aspect as can be concluded from the slight improvement as seen in the tables and indexes in section 4.3. The EU makes its aspirations to help Azerbaijan very clear but might not have enough ongoing projects or initiatives with sufficient impact. It is however difficult for any foreign or international organization to penetrate the law framework around the NGO environment compared to Georgia for example. Azerbaijan keeps the EU and Russia at a distance compared to Georgia which is seeking closer relations with the EU and Armenia which moves closer to Russia (Paul, 2016). This raises the question of what could effectively get Azerbaijan out of authoritarianism and into a democracy with decreased corruption if they are resistant to external aid. Effective reform should start from within the country's regime and by accepting and receiving initiatives lifting its human rights standards.

5. Conclusion

The EU promotes human rights in the South Caucasus by the use of different policies, partnerships, and agreements such as the ENP, EaP, and CEPA. These work as frameworks for different objectives of the EU such as the promotion of human rights and democracy next to existing institutions of the European parliament such as DROI and EPNK and the European commission such as EIDHR. The concrete implementation and support of human rights mainly happens through the funding of CSOs and (local) NGOs. This research paper has shown that the domestic status quo in the three SC countries differs in aspects of human rights. And the EU has three very different

²³ Council of Europe. (2022, February). *Council of Europe Action Plan 2022–2025* (CM(2022)21). Office of the Directorate General of Programmes. rm.coe.int/action-plan-azerbaijan-2022-2025-eng/1680a59aa3

²⁴ OHCHR. (n.d.). *OHCHR | Azerbaijan*. Retrieved May 3, 2022, from www.ohchr.org/en/countries/azerbaijan

relations with the three SC countries. It has the least relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, these are more closed countries toward the West compared to Georgia which has the closest ties with the EU.

Although Georgia's recent decline in human rights conditions has shown that there are flaws in the current framework between Georgia and the EU. The EU keeps underlining that human rights promotion is at the core of their external policy, especially within the ENP, and pumps lots of money into donor projects in Georgia. And yet we see a decline in corruption, civil liberties, and democracy scores since 2021. It seems Georgia has a growing dynamic with the EU, but not a growing human rights position.

Azerbaijan's low score on the researched criteria indicates that the country has much work to do in order to improve its human rights conditions. The EU does not and has not had close ties in this area with Azerbaijan, which could be endorsed by Azerbaijan's strict framework for NGOs and CSOs making it difficult for the EU to access the country. The EU's efforts in Azerbaijan are clearly different from those in Georgia where they do maintain diplomatic efforts in a closer relationship and almost yearly update their funding policy, place open calls for proposals, etc. The human rights situation in Azerbaijan could also be attributed to internal affairs such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the authoritarian regime, and the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Surprisingly, Armenia has shown by its recent revolutionary atmosphere and approach towards Russia that this does not necessarily imply a decrease in human rights conditions. On the contrary; Armenia is showing the most growth of all three South Caucasian countries in democracy, human rights, and corruption. This is most likely not a direct consequence of EU influence since Georgia did not know of this growth while having tighter relations with the EU. Especially since Armenia's civil society has had a growing impact on the Armenian government and the Velvet revolution formed the base of a more open society with respect to human rights.

The EU is involved in the Southern Caucasus because it aims to spread its normative values in its neighboring region. According to the EU, a more western, liberal governance in the SC is desirable in their mission to create a secure zone around their borders. There can be concluded from this research that the EU's current policy and funding did however not guarantee major improvements in human rights conditions and democracy. The provided evidence has suggested that human rights performance is not solely a donor interference issue. There are many factors, which are most likely internal domestic affairs, that open the pathway towards democracy and better human rights.

In conclusion, it is clear that the EU has many ongoing human rights initiatives in the SC directly and indirectly. Their consistency in the SC region is however questionable. A more tailored policy is needed in order to achieve the aimed results as the EU calls are so-called in the core of their external policy. Solely relying on donor-funded projects, is not how human rights and democracy are effectively increasing. The Russian influence in the region clearly causes turbulence for the EU's interest in the region. But that does not necessarily imply a decrease in human rights, democracy, and worse corruption scores.

The future dynamics with regard to good governance, and especially human rights in the SC countries cannot be predicted. The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine will undeniably have consequences for the South Caucasian ties with Russia. Further monitoring of how Armenia and Azerbaijan react to this issue is needed. And more thorough research on why Azerbaijan and Georgia have known the very recent decline in their human rights performance is suggested. Finally, as a form of policy note, this paper concludes that the EU should rethink its strategy toward

the promotion of good governance and human rights before providing money in an insufficient manner. The author's opinion on how policy should be conducted in the future consists of a more individual approach where the 'tools' are provided to build an open civil society democracy, but no handbook on how to do it the 'EU way'. Democracy and the base for human rights are built from within, not imposed upon from the outside.

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