



WORK PACKAGE 9 – DELIVERABLE 1

PERCEPTIONS AND IMAGES OF THE EU IN THE CAUCASUS

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Introduction

Over the past decade or so, the EU has emerged as an ‘interventionist actor’ in its vicinity (Charillon, 2004). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) initiated in 2003-2004 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) launched in 2009 represent unprecedented attempts by the EU to shape developments in the post-Soviet space with a view to fostering stability, security and prosperity around the EU.

However, still little is known about ENP countries’ actual expectations and perceptions of the EU’s role in the region. So far the ENP has primarily been viewed as the external projection by the EU of internal solutions (Lavenex, 2004). In other words, research on the ENP has focused on the EU’s role as the ‘hub of the integration process on the whole continent’ (Kratochvíl, 2009:19). Yet, the apparent simplicity of the ENP’s objective belies considerable uncertainty about the process and end goal. In addition to the lack of a clear *finalité*, the vagueness of EU incentives and commitments under the ENP (Sasse, 2008), especially in the first years of implementation, has left a considerable room for interpretation by partner countries and for reorientations and shifts during policy implementation. Given that cooperation and integration with the EU are essentially voluntary for the partner countries, their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the EU are thus expected to play a key role in shaping their receptivity and openness to EU’s influence.

Thus, partner countries’ perceptions of the EU’s role do matter for the EU itself. Given that external actorness develops through a process of interaction between insiders and outsiders (Bretherton & Vogler, 1999), partner countries’ perceptions contribute to shaping the EU’s actorness (Elgström, 2007; Stumbaum, 2012; Lucarelli, 2014). In the case of Eastern neighbours, their perceptions of the EU’s role shape their positions vis-à-vis EU norms and therefore the way in which they implement EU policies in the framework of the ENP/EaP. In other words, role expectations define their receptivity to EU policies. Finally, as far as an actor’s effectiveness and ability to exert influence is connected to its perceived legitimacy (Elgström, 2007:5), perceptions also influence the impact of EU foreign policy.

In this paper, we focus on the perceptions amongst the partner countries. This focus is justified because the literature on the origins and evolution of the ENP and Eastern Partnership is already extensive, but much less has been written on the reception and impact of these policies in the target countries. As a result, there is little understanding of whether and how the EU’s own role conception (as reflected in the documents and/or academic literature) resonates with the partner countries. Starting the analysis from the EU’s own role conception thus enables us to map similarities and discrepancies with South Caucasus countries’ perceptions.¹

¹ However, we are aware of the fact that perceptions of the EU in the Caucasus may be shaped by other factors that have little, if anything to do with the EU’s role conception. These include in particular Russia’s policies, the impact of which will be examined as part of another paper under deliverable 9.2

Our paper analyses the perceptions of the EU's role in three partner countries and it explores the factors shaping these perceptions. Based upon the role theory presented in the first section, the paper briefly examines EU's own role conception and focuses on two dimensions, namely a promoter of democracy and values and a driver of modernisation.² For each of these dimensions, the paper then proceeds to examine partner countries' expectations vis-à-vis the EU and perceptions of its role performance.

Our analysis is based upon qualitative research conducted in all three countries between July 2015 and March 2016, including:

- in-depth interviews: Approximately 40 interviews were conducted in Armenia; 40 in Georgia; and 25 in Azerbaijan with state officials; opposition parties; representatives of the business sector and civil society.
- focus groups: three focus groups were conducted in Armenia and in Georgia (in each country with representatives of the youth; of civil society; and of the business sector) and one in Azerbaijan (with representatives of civil society);
- discourse analysis of the countries' leaders during 2012-2015;
- and an analysis of existing surveys on perceptions of the EU, e.g. Caucasus Barometer.

The analysis reveals multifaceted and shifting perceptions of the EU and its policies in the South Caucasus. It points to the domestic constellation of actors as well as political and economic preferences as the key factors shaping images of the EU.

Theoretical Framework: The EU's role conceptions in the Caucasus

It is often stated that enlargement has been one of the EU's most successful tools for promoting peace and stability in its close neighbourhood: 'The Union's most successful foreign policy instrument has been the promise of EU membership' (European Commission 2003: 6). Therein lies the contention that the EU is no ordinary international actor; it is a 'different great power' (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012: 93) founded on soft, rather than hard power. Given the EU's special and indeed unique way of 'construction' as a foreign policy actor, one might expect congruity between the kind of actor the EU perceives itself to be (role conception) and the EU's external 'behaviour' (role performance). In other words, role performance can be expected to be a manifestation of role conception.

However, the targets of this role performance are states who have their own conception of the EU (role expectations), which may or may not match the role conception the EU has of itself and/or may have different assessments of the EU's role performance. The perceptions of partner countries are especially important in a context where EU membership is precluded, as is the case in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Therefore, the key question underpinning this paper is: to what extent Caucasus countries' expectations match the EU's conception of its role as a normative power in its neighbourhood?

² A third (major) role, namely a contributor to conflict resolution, will be examined in a separate paper, focusing on the cases of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Using Role Theory, this section of the paper seeks to provide a theoretical framework within which to explore the interplay between the EU's role conception (and, correspondingly, role performance) on the one hand and neighbours' role expectation, on the other hand.

Role Theory: Role Conception, Role Performance and Role Expectation

A role conception is the view an actor adopts of and for itself in terms of its place, position and appropriate behaviours in relation to other actors in a particular social setting (Wendt, 1999). This conception therefore impacts on how the actor relates to others both in terms of the norms and values the actor adopts in its interactions with them, and the underpinning nature of this relationship. The actor's role performance (actual behaviour) tends to reflect this role conception, even though discrepancies may emerge between its narrative and actual deeds. In turn, others have certain role expectations of the actor. These have emerged over time and are based on experience, knowledge and belief.

Needless to say, there is considerable interplay between an actor's role conception and others' role expectations in any interaction: role conceptions change when faced with divergent expectations and vice-versa. So for example, while the foreign policy of an actor at first may reflect its role conception, it is likely to come to be shaped – at least to some extent – by the role expectation of others. This socialisation is an ongoing process in which the interplay between the two lead to changes in the role conception of the actor and the role expectation of the others.

The EU: The Role Conception of a Normative Great Power

The use of the term 'normative' refers to the values of peace, rule of law, human rights and democracy, which the EU 'stands for' and seeks to propagate. Therefore, the EU is an actor which seeks to influence other actors in the international system through the promotion of core values and through framing actors and processes in certain ways, and crucially, gain their acceptance. This process of persuasion has long-term, ideational implications: it aims at the internalisation of these ideas, meanings and values. The EU's approach is noteworthy for its non-coercive, non-militarised nature. This role conception reflects the views of EU representatives themselves and academic analysts (Bengtsson and Elgström, 2012: 94) and closely resembles Nye's conception of soft power (Nye, 2005) as a model of persuasion and not coercion. However, depending on the prism through which one is viewing the EU, it has also been conceptualised as a 'balancer of power, a regional pacifier, a global intervenor, mediator of conflicts, bridge between the rich and the poor, and a joint supervisor of the world economy' (Hill, 1998). For the purpose of this analysis, the role-set (the general role which represents the sum total of an actor's roles) allocated to the EU, is that of a normative great power.

The EU: The Role Performance of a Normative Great Power

The process of influencing (the role performance of a normative power³) takes place via a range of policy instruments. Bengtsson (2008, 2009) points out that these instruments tend to focus on the normative agenda that the normative power seeks to propagate, namely peace, democracy, rule of law, though this does not preclude the use of civilian (i.e. diplomatic or economic) or military instruments. Indeed, the EU's emphasis on civilian power and multilateral co-operations distinguishes the EU from the US, as the 'EU not only encourages regional co-operation in other parts of the world, it also relies on multilateralism to resolve conflicts rather than on unilateral measures' (Elgström and Smith, 2006: 3).

Implicit within the conception of an actor as a normative power is the leadership role it adopts or assumes. This stems from the fact that a normative power by definition seeks to get others to adopt its vision (as reflected in the values and ideas it requires others to accept), a vision which may be underpinned with constructive formulations of problems and solutions (Young, 1991). Needless to say, for such a vision to gain acceptance amongst followers it needs to be not only acknowledged (Nabers, 2008) but also perceived as legitimate, i.e. 'desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definition' and fair ('as judged by the values and norms a certain actors is associated with' (Hurd, 1999: 379). As was demonstrated above, this leadership role, and the acceptance of the leadership role by candidates aspiring for membership, was abundantly evident in the 2004/7 enlargements. Bengtsson and Elgström contend that there is a link between the EU's potential leadership role and its role as a normative power because

[w]hile EU legitimacy in international negotiations may partly be due to outputs produced (linking favourable outcomes to the Union's contribution of resources or to its prominence in the decision-making process), we posit that its reputation as a normative power may be an equally valuable asset. EU leadership may thus be based on external expectations that associate EU action with fairness and the promotion of noble goals (2012, p.97).

This role performance in turn has a powerful impact on role conception:

the 2004 enlargement has dragged the EU into a more active position on the global stage...as the EU has started to play a more active role internationally, the demands from the EU also increased accordingly. Thus the EU initiated the new neighbourhood policy to overcome two foreign policy challenges: enlargement fatigue and the management of external borders. Put another way, the ENP was

³ Introduced by Ian Manners (2002), the concept of 'normative power Europe' has stimulated and, to a great extent, structured academic debates on the international identity of the EU (see also Sijrsen 2006; Diez 2013); we do not, however, enter this debate as our paper focuses on how the EU is perceived by outsiders.

designed to address the EU's inclusion-exclusion dilemma (Senyucel *et al.* 2006)

In other words, the EU's success as a leader, and the 2004 enlargement, drew in more followers, attracted as they were by vision, norms and values of the EU.

Role Expectations vis-à-vis the EU

Role expectations relate to the expectations of other actors vis-à-vis the role holder (i.e. the normative great power). Role conceptions are shaped by and in turn shape the expectations others have of the actor, as signalled through language and action (Holsti, 1970). In this regard, the process is a socialisation game (Thies, 2010), a two-way process in which the role conception of the actor and the role expectations of others are malleable and change according to the nature of the interaction.

The framework adopted here proposed to explore the relations between the EU and Caucasian states through the prism of role theory. More specifically, it seeks to examine the degree of congruence, or incongruence between the role conception of the EU (how the EU sees itself) and the role expectations the South Caucasian states have of the EU. The next section therefore seeks to explore the nature of the role conception the EU has of itself in relation to the South Caucasian states. This will then be followed by an empirical analysis of the role expectation of the three South Caucasian states of the EU.

II. The EU's role conception in the neighbourhood

The neighbourhood context has seen the most deliberate, concerted process of developing a foreign policy for the EU. The analysis of the EU documents reveals that the ENP has defined the EU role in a number of dimensions.

The most developed and articulated conception has been that of a ***promoter of values and democratisation***. The closer relations with the EU under the ENP are to be based on 'shared values', i.e. democracy, human rights and the rule of law (European Commission 2003: 3). In fact, the EU's role conception as democracy is premised on two key underpinnings. First, 'shared values' are diffused on the basis of EU's and other international organisations' (e.g. the Council of Europe's) key treaties, conventions and other documents (European Commission 2003:3; European Commission 2004). Second, partner countries' commitment to 'shared values' is seen as a prerequisite to progress in concrete relations with the EU, in particular economic integration (European Commission 2003:3). Therefore, the EU's role conception as promoter of values is tightly connected to the use of conditionality.

Despite this emphasis on 'shared values' as the cornerstone of the relationship between the EU and its neighbours, the EU's role performance as a democracy promoter has been fraught with tensions. These were clearly exposed during the so-called 'Arab spring' in 2011, when the eruption of massive protests in Southern Mediterranean countries and the ousting of long-lasting rulers highlighted the failure of EU democracy promotion policies. This resulted in a comprehensive review of the ENP, and in fact a reinforcement of the EU's role conception as a democracy promoter. The 2011 ENP review introduced the concept of 'deep democracy'

(that should not only include free and fair elections, but also freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media; the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial; fighting against corruption; and security and law enforcement sector reform, European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy 2011) as well as mechanisms aimed at giving flesh to this concept in EU-ENP countries' relations. In particular, the 'more-for-more' principle and increased incentives for those countries reforming in line with shared values mirrored a shift toward increased conditionality. Conversely, the EU pledged to:

uphold its policy of curtailing relations with governments engaged in violations of human rights and democracy standards, including by making use of targeted sanctions and other policy measures (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy 2011: 3)

However, while stressing that the EU would continue to promote 'universal values' (which it sees as a pillar of its own stability), the 2015 ENP Review acknowledged the mixed results of the approach adopted in 2011 (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy 2015: 2):

The incentive-based approach ('More for More') has been successful in supporting reforms in the fields of good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, where there is a commitment by partners to such reforms. However, it has not proven a sufficiently strong incentive to create a commitment to reform, where there is not the political will (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy 2015: 5).

In fact, by reinforcing the role of differentiation in the ENP the 2015 Review *de facto* downsized the EU's ambitions to act as a promoter of democracy. In essence, following the review the EU will take this role whenever 'a partner wishes to pursue deeper relations with the EU based on shared values' (ibidem: 4). Therefore, the 2015 ENP Review is a major shift as it suggests that the EU's role conception is contingent upon partner countries' role expectations.

The **second role conception** is that of a *promoter of socio-economic modernisation and economic growth*. This role was formulated upon the ENP inception, drawing inspiration from the enlargement process during which institutional reforms and regulatory alignment were accompanied by rapid economic development. The essence of this logic is to prompt the harmonisation of partner countries' policies with those of the EU. The modelling of the ENP on enlargement was conditioned by human resources within the Commission and the time pressure under which the policy was devised (Kelley, 2006). At the same time, the ENP was firmly envisaged as an alternative to enlargement, aimed at deflating membership aspirations of neighbouring states by offering credible and effective integration without accession.

The main justification for regulatory approximation is a functional one - related to the level of economic integration offered to the ENP partners: 'a stake in the internal market' (European Commission, 2004) requires 'progressive convergence with internal market rules, coupled with stepped-up consultation and co-operation, as well as adaptation of institutional practices to EU standards' (Dodini and Fantini, 2006: 511). Access to the EU market pre-

supposes adopting relevant parts of the *acquis*, including institutional harmonisation in the economic domain, which is wide in scope and encompasses all major horizontal policy areas.

However, the EU goes beyond this immediate functional justification in emphasising the broad developmental benefits in regulatory approximation. The beneficial effects of rule transfer are not limited to increased trade with the EU but include further investment, enhanced competition and reduced corruption, which lead to better governance, higher economic efficiency, growth and welfare in partner countries. From the EU's perspective, the process of alignment with EU regulatory templates is to transform the public policies of the neighbouring states, resulting in growth, stability and prosperity. According to Commission officials, the EU model is superior to that of other international actors in terms of the quality and density of its regulation, the comprehensiveness of reform it entails, and the degree to which it avoids controversies surrounding the activities of some international institutions (Dodini and Fantini, 2006: 517).

The thrust in the EU as a force for modernisation is most explicit in the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Launched in 2009, the EaP entails an enhanced modernisation offer for the South Caucasus: an enhanced contractual framework (Association Agreements combined with Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Areas, DCFTAs), the prospect of visa liberalisation and increased sectoral cooperation. It offers an unprecedented scale and intensity of linkages. The Eastern Partnership establishes direct links between sectoral reforms and an enhanced relationship with partner countries. From the EU's perspective, a closer relationship with neighbouring countries depends on their convergence with EU's technical rules and political norms. Regulatory approximation is expected to 'contribute to the modernisation of the economies of the partner countries and anchor the necessary economic reforms' (European Commission, 2008: 3). Therefore, the Eastern Partnership expands the intensity and depth of EU's engagement with countries to speed up their alignment with the *acquis*.

While reflecting a shift in the EU's approach toward greater inclusiveness of partner countries' aspirations and needs, the 2015 ENP Review explicitly re-affirmed the EU's role in the economic development and growth of ENP countries:

The EU will support partners to modernise their economies for smart and sustainable growth by engaging in economic dialogue, policy advice and the mobilisation of financial assistance. It will promote a better business environment and reforms that allow greater investment, and more and better jobs (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy 2015).

As will be seen in our subsequent analysis, this powerful and wide-ranging role conception creates a considerable expectations vis-à-vis the EU.

Summing up, notwithstanding the observable shifts and unresolved tensions, there has been continuity in the way in which the EU has defined its roles as a driver of democratisation and modernisation in the neighbourhood. We will now interrogate how this role conception has been viewed in partner countries.

III. Empirical analysis of role expectation and performance of the EU in the South Caucasus

A promoter of values/democratisation

This is the EU's role conception which is most tangibly acknowledged in South Caucasus countries. But it also attracts the most striking differences in role expectations amongst the three countries and domestic actors within them. Hardly unexpectedly, it is the nature of the political regime – democratic versus authoritarian – as well as individual attitudes towards democracy that shape the perceptions of the EU as a promoter of democracy and human rights.

Georgia

Georgia is the country which enjoys the closest ties with the EU. It signed the Association Agreement and DCFTA in 2014, thereby committing itself to implementing 'the common values on which the EU is built' (Preamble of the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia, 2014).

The image of the EU in the country has persistently been positive. As indicated by a 2016 survey, 77% of respondents support the Georgian government's goal to join the EU (National Democratic Institute, 2016). As also illustrated by both in-depth interviews and focus groups, the EU is mainly associated with a community of values shared by Georgia, primarily democracy, human rights and individual freedoms. As indicated by President Margvelashvili upon the signing of the Association Agreement:

Georgia is the part of the European culture naturally: the European values are naturally acceptable for us and we share them (quoted in Emukhvary, 2016 : 50)

This sense of belonging to Europe (epitomised by the former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's famous words 'I am Georgian and therefore I am European', 1999) has prompted the selection of European Integration as the one and only irreversible choice for the country:

We do not have other alternative except for approximation with the EU, adopting the European Values and construction of constitutional democracy in the country- (Prime Minister George Kvirikashvili, Munich Security Forum, 14/02/2016, quoted in Emukhvary, 2016)

Even those political parties that are more sceptical regarding EU integration do not question this choice:

There is no alternative to the European vector, because it means progress. Choosing the European vector does not mean we should directly copy everything, but these are nuances which we criticize, it does not influence the overall direction we are going. (Chair of the party Free Georgia, quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 19).

In fact, adopting and implementing the democratic values promoted by the EU is widely perceived as a choice for progress for Georgia. In particular, in-depth interviews conducted with government officials and opposition parties indicate that democratic reforms are carried

out not only for the sake of deeper integration with the EU, but primarily for Georgia's own development. Democracy (with which the EU is associated) is regarded as a major strength for a country, not least because it entails governmental accountability before the society. These perceptions have guided the political reforms in line with EU demands in the past few years, including the adoption of a Strategy for Human Rights in 2014. EU monitoring and assistance are considered pivotal by government officials as they trigger changes in mentality and thereby contribute to entrenching democratic values in the Georgian society.

Nonetheless, this positive assessment of the EU's role performance as a value promoter encounters limitations. First, as indicated by some interviewees EU assistance in the area of democracy and human rights is insufficiently visible, especially outside the capital city. Second, the EU's role as a democracy promoter is at odds with the EU's weaker involvement in conflict resolution: in particular, several respondents regretted the EU's inability to introduce initiatives supporting democracy and human rights in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Third, in the past three years controversies and reservations have emerged as to the values actually promoted by the EU. In the framework of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan granted to Georgia in early 2013, the EU required the country to adopt an anti-discrimination law including also 'sexual orientation' and 'gender identity' as possible causes of discrimination to be fought. Despite the fact that the law was passed and entered into force in May 2014, it triggered a wave of protests (especially by the Church) and altered the perceptions of the EU as a value promoter in Georgia. As indicated by a survey conducted in 2015 among young people across Georgia, as many as 30% of respondents fear that EU integration may threaten Georgian national identity and traditions (quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 11). As pointed out by some interviewees, this perception of a threat stems from a misunderstanding of EU requirements:

Liberalism is misunderstood in Georgian society. It does not necessarily mean you should accept everything, for example gay marriages. At this stage it is very complicated for the Georgian population to accept everyone as equal including LGBTQ representatives. (Interview with the Head of Local Assembly, Shida Kartli Region, quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 14).

In contrast, those supporting the adoption of the EU-demanded anti-discrimination law, such as the Parliament's speaker, Davit Usupashvili, discursively framed the debate in terms of a choice between Europe and Russia:

It is about the following issue: either we go towards Europe and we recognise that we should not chase people with sticks, we should not fire people from job if we do not share their opinions and their way of life, or else we stay in Russia, where it is possible to expel from a city those people, whom you dislike, to ban from entry to shops those people, whom you do not like, and simply to go and invade a territory of others if you like that territory. (Civil Georgia, 2014)

This perception of a civilisation choice is tightly connected to the media campaign allegedly organised with the help of Russia to undermine support for EU integration in Georgia, especially in the regions, by highlighting the risks that closer relations with the EU may entail for the country's identity.

In fact, the latest surveys conducted in Georgia suggest that concrete progress in relations with the EU (or lack thereof) plays a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of the general public. The progress in the visa liberalisation process is a key factor behind the recent surge in support for EU integration (77% of respondents in favour of EU integration, up from 61% in 2014; National Democratic Institute, 2016). This survey was conducted after the European Commission recommended that the obligation of Schengen visas be lifted for Georgian citizens in late 2015; 86% of respondents were aware of the EC's report. However, in mid-2016 Germany objected to the introduction of a visa-free regime with Georgia, which resulted in deferring the abolition of Schengen visas. While no surveys have been conducted after this move, it is likely that this delay will affect perceptions of the EU (Emukhvar, 2016).

Therefore, Georgia illustrates the tight connection between Georgia's role expectation vis-à-vis the EU and the EU's role performance as a promoter of values. In fact, the implementation of EU policies contributes to altering pre-existing perceptions of, and expectations vis-à-vis the EU. In the case of democracy promotion, it has reinforced the image of the EU as a model that Georgia should eventually join. However, the adoption and application of EU-recommended reforms under the visa liberalisation process has highlighted a discrepancy between the expectations of the general public and the EU's demands, thereby resulting in the growing perception of the EU as a possible threat to Georgian identity. Yet this perception is also fuelled by Russia's informal diplomacy in the country, e.g. the media campaigns allegedly organised with Russia's support (especially in the regions).

Armenia

While the EU is clearly associated with democracy in the eyes of the Armenian public, the perceptions of its role as an anchor for democratisation in the country are more complex and shifting.

In the framework of our research, all interviewees, irrespective of their position, refer to democracy, the rule of law and human rights as major EU values. As summarised by a member of the Parliament:

We consider democracy as a European value, because the EU is the one who promotes it.
(Sargsyan, 2016: 21)

Therefore, this image matches the EU's own role conception. It has not significantly changed over years, even after Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, the research conducted in the country also highlights a substantial deterioration of the EU's role as a value promoter. This is because of three factors.

First, in addition to democracy and human rights, in recent years the EU has also been associated with other values that carry a negative connotation in Armenia as in Georgia, namely the defence of LGBT rights. In fact, Armenia will only be required to adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation (including discrimination against sexual minorities) as part of the visa liberalisation process that has not yet started; however, over the past two years media campaigns (allegedly organised with Russian support, like in Georgia) have harshly criticised the EU's attempts to promote values that go against Armenian

traditions. In the framework of our research, interviews conducted in Armenian regions highlighted stronger resistance to the EU's values regarding minorities as compared to the capital city; nonetheless, all the interviewees, even those fully supporting EU policies, stressed the need for a careful and gradual diffusion of these values to Armenia in order not to antagonise a conservative society (Sargsyan, 2016: 21-22). As indicated by a CSO representative in Vanadzor:

We might share some of the values, but our perceptions of these values are culturally, rather than legally bound. So, we may still be resistant to attempts to push these values. For instance, when within an EU-supported project an NGO starts a training on women's or LGBTQ rights in a small village, which is in a daily struggle for a respectful livelihood, this training will backfire and negative perceptions of the EU will prevail. Integration should mean closer ties with one's daily life. (quoted in Sargsyan, 2016: 23)

Second, the perception of the EU as a democratic actor does not systematically translate into strong role expectations as a democracy promoter. In Armenia, overall support to democracy decreased to roughly 50% between 2011 and 2013, whereas the percentage of people who did not seem to care about the form of governance increased from approximately 23% to about 30%. Likewise, the percentage of people who thought that the EU should have a more critical role in Armenia's democratisation decreased by 20% in 2009-2010 (75% in 2009 and 55% by 2010); the figures have not significantly changed in 2012-14. Those Armenians favouring democracy over other modes of governance tend to assign a greater role to the EU in their country's democratisation; however, in contrast to economic development and security, they do not tend to prioritise democratisation as a dominant area for the EU support (Sargsyan, 2016: 13-14).

Third, the EU itself is regarded as a model in crisis. In the viewpoint of the Armenian elite, the rise of Eurosceptic parties and the breach to democratic values in some EU member states undermine the EU's capacity to promote democratisation abroad, especially in its neighbourhood. According to a member of the Armenian Parliament:

Today the EU is one of the foundations of democracy globally. However, it should be noted that the rigorous discourse on democracy, and political debate per se have disappeared among the European nations. Modern Europe faces a crisis of democratic values. Most political parties serve corporate interests, rather than promoting ideologies (quoted in Sargsyan, 2016: 20).

In sum, while broad perceptions of the EU endorse the EU's own role conception as a normative power, the research conducted in Armenia points to two important gaps: first, between the various values with which the EU is associated; and second, between what the EU is (i.e. a democratic organisation) and what it should do in Armenia (i.e. prioritise security and economic development over democracy promotion), in other words between Armenia's role conception of the EU and role expectation.

Azerbaijan

Among the three South Caucasus countries, Azerbaijan provides the best illustration of the discrepancies between domestic actors in expectations regarding the EU's role as a promoter of values. The respondents' position and attitude towards the Azerbaijani political regime emerge as the key factors shaping these expectations.

In recent years, while offered the same prospect of an enhanced legal framework as other South Caucasus countries under the Eastern Partnership, the Azerbaijani ruling elite has eschewed any regular dialogue with the EU on political and human rights issues. In 2013, it formally requested to replace the Association Agreement under negotiation since 2010 by a lighter Strategic Partnership for Modernisation modelled after the Partnership for Modernisation launched with Russia in 2010. The parallel with Russia is no coincidence. Like their Russian counterparts, the Azerbaijani authorities reject what they regard as an EU interference in the country's domestic affairs. Within the ruling elite, perceptions of the EU's role have sharply deteriorated since the European Parliament issued (in September 2015) a resolution condemning the violent crackdown on human rights and civil society activists since 2014. According to the deputy foreign minister Mahmud Mammadgulyev, this resolution was a clear signal that 'human rights issues are used as a tool of political pressure'.⁴ The chair of the Azerbaijan Milli Majlis (Parliament) Delegation to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly (who left the Assembly after the European Parliament's resolution was adopted), Elkhan Suleymanov, indicated that Azerbaijan is a fully functioning democracy with free and fair elections and asked Brussels to care about Azerbaijan's actual concerns, including the regional security situation.⁵ Therefore, while the EU's role as a democracy promoter has in fact been limited since the EU has not taken any measure to condemn the growing authoritarianism in Azerbaijan, the EU's narrative is regarded as patronising and threatening by the ruling elite.

In contrast, Azerbaijani civil society raised substantial concerns as to the weakness of EU involvement in support of human rights and democratisation. For many civil society activists, the EU's role performance as a promoter of values has been much weaker in Azerbaijan as compared to the two other South Caucasus countries, as also evidenced by the limited EU assistance dedicated to human rights and good governance in the country. This is despite the fact that windows of opportunity opened up for the EU to push for political change, especially under the presidency of Heydar Aliyev when the ruling elite was more vulnerable owing to economic insecurity.⁶ Yet in the view of Azerbaijani civil society, the EU prioritised stability over democratisation in Azerbaijan. This is because according to many activists, the EU 'sold its values' for the sake of energy resources. Nonetheless, according to a

⁴“Azerbaijan cancels EU delegation visit after criticism of rights record” (September, 2015). Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-azerbaijan-europe-idUSKCN0RB1U920150911> on January 29, 2016.

⁵“Elkhan Suleymanov: Azerbaijan is in Europe Already” (November, 2015). Retrieved from <http://azerbaijanfoundation.az/en/news/5708-elkhan-suleymanov-azerbaijan-is-in-europe-already.html> on February 1, 2016.

⁶Shirinov, R. (2011). “A Pragmatic Area for Cooperation: Azerbaijan and the EU”, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, No. 3: 74. Retrieved from http://www.fes.de/ipg/arc_11_d/03-11_arc_d.html on January 30, 2016

representative of civil society: ‘Even if Azerbaijan provides the EU with energy over the long-term, it is not a reason for the EU to sacrifice its principles and values’. More specifically, the civil society representative criticised the EU for continuing cooperation with Azerbaijan after the 2013 presidential elections, even though the report of the Election Monitoring Mission of the OSCE highlighted grave concerns over the level of fraud. As mentioned during the focus group held in Baku, the EU was especially criticised in the wake of the 2014-2015 crackdown on human rights activists and CSOs.

Therefore, the deep rift within the country regarding role expectations vis-à-vis the EU contrasts with the congruence in perceptions of its role performance in Azerbaijan. Both the ruling elite and civil society criticise the EU’s engagement as a value promoter, even if for opposite reasons. Our findings are corroborated by the surveys conducted among Azerbaijani general public over the past decade, which highlight a growing dissatisfaction with the EU’s involvement in the country. According to the Caucasus Barometer, in 2008 41 percent of the respondents trusted the EU,⁷ and over 50 percent agreed that EU should promote human rights worldwide, irrespective of the resistance of some countries’ authorities. Five years later, trust towards the EU decreased to 24 percent and distrust rose to 27 percent.⁸

A driver for economic growth & modernisation

While South Caucasus countries deeply differ in terms of their legal frameworks and prospects for integration with the European Union, they share similarly strong expectations regarding economic cooperation with the EU. However, this convergence applies only to broad perceptions of the EU. In fact, the EU is perceived from a normative viewpoint in Georgia and (in the long-term) in Armenia: in both countries it is regarded as a driving force for modernisation, which matches its own role conception. In contrast, the Azerbaijani ruling elite perceive the EU through realist lenses, i.e. as a necessary partner to balance Russian influence and a major client for the country’s energy resources.

Georgia

While it enjoys the prospect of deep economic integration with the EU, of all the countries in the South Caucasus, Georgia in fact has the most bifurcated perceptions of the EU.

As noted above, at first glance the EU is perceived in highly positive terms in Georgia. Society would like the EU to play an even greater role in Georgia, in a wide range of areas, according to the data of ENPI Barometer (2013). As high as 92% of population support a greater EU role in economic development and 87% in trade; this level of support is consistently higher than the average across the region.

Business actors regard European integration primarily as an avenue for economic cooperation with EU countries and a set of reforms and procedures in line with the legal harmonisation

⁷Caucasus Barometer (2008). Azerbaijan. The Caucasian Research Resource Centre. Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2008az/TRUSTEU/> on February 1, 2016.

⁸Caucasus Barometer (2013). Azerbaijan. The Caucasian Research Resource Centre. Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013az/TRUSTEU/> on February 1, 2016.

process of Georgian legislation with the *acquis*. In many respects, European integration is viewed as a long-term process consisting of fulfilling obligations by candidate countries:

Euro integration means coming closer to European standards, more protected rights of consumers, a higher quality of goods and services. In general it is 500 million people market, and a chance to enter this market for Georgian producers. The meaning of Euro integration did not change, it became more realistic, and many steps have been taken to get closer. Representative of Business Association (quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 16).

Overall, among Georgian actors civil society has the most positive view of the EU in the economic domain and argues that complying with EU rules and regulations is pivotal to improving the quality of Georgian products and making them more competitive on the global market. They perceive it as crucial for Georgia to implement EU regulations and directives and expect more effort from the government and a greater involvement from the parliament.

However, the perception of the EU as a force for modernisation is tinted by of the neo-liberal perspective advocating a deregulated economic system as optimal for Georgia's economic growth. This perspective was personified by the former Minister of Economy and Coordinator for reforms Kakha Bendukidze, who departed from power in 2009. The salience of this perspective has certainly decreased since then, but remains influential in Georgia. This is particularly evident in the frequent perception of the EU as excessively bureaucratic, regulated and slow-moving. Over-regulation is seen as a risk to Georgia's economic development and growth. This view is especially prevalent amongst opposition parties and businesses:

The EU is a developed economy and has different rules of play; for the Georgian economy it might create barriers for development. We should apply these rules and regulations but we should adopt them to our economy (Georgian Representative of Parliamentary Opposition quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 21).

So while the economic integration with the EU, up to and including membership is regarded as desirable, the EU's regulations are regarded as outdated and not necessarily conducive to economic development. Many officials and experts argue that a developing country like Georgia, with economic problems, should seek for investors in the first place, and should not scare them away with cumbersome regulations, too complicated labour code and so forth:

When it comes to economic policies, I think we need those rules of EU market which were adopted decades ago, when the economies were fast-growing, regulations were less numerous, government spending was low. I do not agree that we should copy all EU regulations, because I think it would be harmful for our economy. Within the existing framework we should pick those policies and practices which are good for our economy and beneficial. (Interview with the Chair of the New Political Centre "Girchi", quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 16)

While there is a general consensus that in the long-term economic integration with the EU is beneficial to Georgia, this is accompanied by recognition that in short term adopting the new standards would be painful, especially to developing businesses and to the agricultural sector.

For example, the Deputy Head of the National Food Agency explained that the EU legislation and trade demand very high standards. This involves not only legal harmonisation, but also establishing a sustainable system of official control, which should be equivalent to the ones in EU.

A similar bifurcation of views is evident amongst the political elites. According to the conducted interviews, the elites perceive the EU's role in Georgian economy as positive and long-lasting. The majority of respondents named European market as the most stable, reliable and important market for Georgian products; but at the same time most of them emphasised that despite a significant engagement, there is a lack of awareness of all the opportunities which the DCFTA means for the Georgian economy. In the view of respondents, 'the EU's framework is similar for all, but it does not mean that within this framework things do not differ from country to country' (Emukhvary, 2016: 23-24).

For the majority of respondents, the degree of cooperation is not sufficient and while claiming that they understand that the EU cannot directly support Georgian economy, the participants expect a stronger support from the EU:

We have taken responsibility to conduct sensitive important and costly reforms, it is important that the EU continues to support us in this context. We especially need support in the SME sector; businesses will have to spend a lot in order to modernise (Deputy Head of Free-Trade Department, Ministry of Economy quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 24)

When comparing the EU market with the Russian market, the majority emphasised that the EU market is definitely more attractive. However, some business entities or businessmen still prefer Russian market, which is more familiar.

For Georgia it is important to diversify the markets, Russia is not a stable market, in the view of government bodies. Plus everyone wants to develop the economy which is directly linked to improving standards. The EU market is the most attractive one because it is stable and it has high buying capacities (Director of Georgian Chamber of Commerce quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 24).

Nevertheless, European integration is regarded as a choice of the elites which has not provided any tangible results for the population so far. Among the vast majority of citizens, EU integration is neither considered as a realistic perspective nor as something which helps them address their immediate economic problems:

There is a consensus among the elites on EU integration, but this consensus should also spread to the lower layers of population. I think the problem is not only the ongoing reinforcement of Russian soft power. Georgians must experience the benefits of AA and DCFTA. We need more and more arguments to persuade Georgian citizens, not only with values but also with tangible economic benefits and success stories (Director of an NGO quoted in Emukhvary, 2016: 16).

Therefore, somewhat perplexingly, the general, declarative demand for integration in Georgia is accompanied by a sceptical view of the EU as the right model to emulate and/or by criticisms on the scope of EU engagement in the country.

Armenia

The research conducted in Armenia points to a similar discrepancy between role expectations and role performance. The EU's role in the economic sphere is seen as highly positive and desirable in Armenia; but perhaps surprisingly, there is also a greater consensus on this role in Armenia than in Georgia. Yet as is the case in Georgia, the EU is perceived as weakly engaged in Armenia.

Most respondents regard the EU's economic policies as a model, and therefore, policy and practice borrowing is welcome and encouraged. Several high-ranking officials specify certain areas where economic policy borrowing would be more beneficial for Armenia, such as SME and agro-business development:

The EU can offer effective functional models in different sectors of economy. European integration could start with the prioritisation of economic reforms. It means aligning the respective legislation with the European policies, specifically in the field of development of small and medium businesses (quoted in Sargsyan, 2016: 27-28)

Regardless of the rigorous discourse about huge economic benefits that Armenia is expected to enjoy following its accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, many Armenians still believe that the EU is a key partner to support their country's economic development (Sargsyan, 2016: 18).

However, the EU's role is mitigated by three shortcomings: first, the unsuitability/unfeasibility of adopting EU rules and policies in Armenia; second, the EU's lack of attention to outcomes in target countries; and third, the EU's low visibility in the economic domain (in comparison to other regional actors, such as Russia).

First, while the EU is regarded as superior in institutional development, there are limits to emulation as noted by a governmental official in Armenia:

The EU institutions are better than ours or those of Russia. However, when we look at the possibilities of borrowing from EU institutions, we realise these are limited for several reasons. (...) There are cultural limitations, which do not refer only to national idiosyncrasies, but to the political culture and lifestyle of the whole region, which significantly differs from the EU's. And there are limitations of resources. Being countries with absolutely different levels of income, we simply cannot afford certain institutions (Sargsyan, 2016: 25).

During focus groups, the participants debated whether missing on the DCFTA was a lost opportunity for Armenia with the views diverging whether being a part of this market would have been actually beneficial for the country. Half of the participants argued that even though EU standards are quite high and do guarantee the quality of products and services, as well as fair business transactions, the EU's insistence on Armenia adopting these standards is too far-stretched. A participant summarised the challenge as the following:

To access the EU market Armenian businesses need to invest resources they do not have. Too much and too quick a change is needed to secure this access, and this may ruin our business (quoted in Sargsyan, 2016: 42)

Ultimately, the dispute is over short and long-term development goals, and even though all agree that from a long-term perspective the adoption of the EU standards will indeed be beneficial for the Armenian private sector, the challenge is not to harm it in a short run. Such a perspective seems to corroborate with the opinions of the majority of interviewees during the research, who also tend to see the EU as a viable alternative for the future. As almost all the participants in this research agree, this vision may be compromised at present, given pressing *realpolitik* factors such as security challenges and Russia's role as a security guarantee. That the EU business standards are worth striving for, was elaborated by one of the participants:

The EU at least has a specific set of rules, a functional legislation that regulates the market. It may not be perfect, but it is working, whereas we don't have one. (Sargsyan, 2016: 42).

Secondly, the EU's role as a modernising force is tinted by its acceptance and tolerance of 'shallow' reforms in Armenia. This applies in particular to those areas which were not regarded by the EU as crucial during the DCFTA negotiations in 2012-2013. According to civil society representatives and opposition MPs, EU policies and practices do not foster accountability of Armenian politicians. In particular, they claim that the Armenian government has not been accountable both to the EU and the Armenian public for the financial assistance it has got from the EU:

Most EU support ended up with reforming the existing forms and not the content. For instance, we have a reformed tax system, where many procedures have formally changed, but the bad practices have persisted. One of the targets in the reform was to decrease the number of tax inspections. Which they did, but they replaced this with 'study visits', which entails fines, whereas the previous practice of inspections did not. Thus, the EU has to push for more substantial use of its financial support (quoted in Sargsyan, 2016: 26).

Ultimately, notwithstanding its own role conception, the EU does not seem to factor in its inability to deal with barriers to reforms. It is evident for Armenian actors that the EU is not able to overcome domestic obstacles to reforms, primarily the close connection between the political elites and oligarchic clans. In the view of civil society, internal commitment to economic reforms and elimination of monopolies is a serious hindrance to economic development and needs to be tackled first before discussing further cooperation with the EU.

As a result, there is a mismatch between role conception, expectation and performance, as noted by many interviewees, who claim that the EU assistance has had a marginal impact, especially outside the capital city:

In Vanadzor I do not see any results of cooperation with the EU. Perhaps some NGOs get financial and technical support from the EU, but their activities have a marginal impact. I know that the EU has supported some projects on local governance and reforms in police,

but even if there are changes, these are formal only, with no substantial impact on the quality and content of these institutions (Sargsyan, 2016: 26)

Many interviewees agree that EU's economic presence is rather meagre in Armenia. Though welcoming the EU's institutional support to economic reforms, they think that actual investment is what Armenia needs most. In that respect, Russia's presence in the Armenian economy is massive. And yet, regardless of the highly visible Russian presence, many think that European standards are more effective, and regard them as benchmarks to which Armenia needs to strive for its economic development. Overall, there is a lack of consensus on the impact of the EU. Some believe that the EU has almost no presence in the Armenia economy, while Russia seems to be perceived as a major investor. In contrast, others think that the EU has had a significant impact in terms of economic reforms, especially regarding legislation. However, some believe that Armenia has limited capacity to benefit from economic cooperation with the EU, noting that

the Association Agreement gave Armenia an opportunity to offer more than 7000 types of goods to the EU, but it was able to introduce only 60. We have very little to offer to the Europeans (Sargsyan, 2016: 28).

Third, the EU's visibility is a key issue, highlighted by many:

The EU plays quite an important role in Armenia's economy. Here, the problem of visibility is evident. Very often, I get information about the EU's activities in Armenia from non-formal sources and social networks. I have recently learnt that the EU has made investments in Armenia's Nuclear Power Plant. There have also been investments by the Austrian Development Agency in the field of agriculture. However, this kind of endeavours should be considered fruitful only if the results are visible at the grassroots level (civil society representative, Armenia, quoted in Sargsyan, 2016: 28).

Almost everyone underlined Armenia's challenge to conduct its economic reforms while being a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. The major expectation in terms of economic cooperation with the EU seems to be increased European investment in Armenia. As to the institutional support, possible cooperation is still vague because of Armenia's EEU membership, and details are to be clarified in the negotiations for a new EU-Armenia agreement that started in late 2015. Participants emphasised the role of different European donors as well, such as GIZ and the Austrian Development Agency, which continually make a significant contribution to changing Armenia's business environment.

Therefore, research conducted in Armenia points to a major paradox: notwithstanding membership of the EEU, it is actually the EU which is perceived as a key partner in the country's modernisation. This is despite the criticisms of the EU's limited visibility and lack of engagement with key obstacles hindering the reform process in Armenia, as well as the mismatch between EU policies and the country's current level of development. In fact, this paradox derives from the perception of different time horizons: while Armenia cannot engage into deeper integration with the EU for security reasons for the time being, the EU is regarded as a model that the country should aim to follow in the future.

Azerbaijan

Both the analysis of sources and interviews conducted in Baku indicate that economic cooperation is regarded as the cornerstone of EU-Azerbaijani relations. However, two features stand out with regard to Azerbaijan's expectations vis-à-vis the EU: selectivity and partnership.

First, Azerbaijan is interested in cooperating with the EU in specific economic issues: energy, energy security and transportation⁹. President Ilham Aliyev hailed the important role of Azerbaijan in ensuring Europe's energy security for the coming decades and underlined the critical role of the TANAP project in this respect.¹⁰ Presidential statements focus exclusively on the EU-Azerbaijan strategic partnership in the sphere of energy, while dismissing the importance of the political reforms and demanding from the EU a 'fair stance' on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Azerbaijani ambassador to the EU also stressed that neither the European Neighbourhood Policy nor Eastern Partnership can and should define the relations between Azerbaijan and the EU and EU member states, since the government of Azerbaijan has its own approach, which is to deepen the partnership in energy and energy security, by completing the TANAP gas pipeline project.¹¹

Second, from the Azeri perspective cooperation with the EU in these fields is to be based on mutual interest and partnership, i.e. being on an equal footing. One of the two MPs who were interviewed for this study indicated that 'Azerbaijan does not need a big brother to follow as it is used to have big brothers, but nowadays it is an independent country'. In those remarks it is noticeable that from the Azerbaijan perspective the EU needs Azerbaijan more than *vice versa*; therefore, it is Azerbaijan's *choice* to engage in the partnership with the EU. In addition, the ruling elite's narrative suggests that without Azerbaijan's cooperation in the sphere of energy, the EU would be in a serious trouble. The Azerbaijani ruling elite's discourse actually seems to find strong resonance among the political elites in some EU member states, who regard Azerbaijan's energy resources as a critical factor in the energy security of the European countries. Most of the interviewees also converged on the desirability of the partnership in the sphere of energy and energy security.

However, the perceptions of the EU in the economic domain considerably vary depending on the position of the interviewees. Amongst the political elites, the strong interest in an economic partnership with the EU is underpinned by Azerbaijan's overarching concern over security independence. From the political elites' point of view, Moscow has always tried to

⁹"Joint press statements of Ilham Aliyev and President of the European Council Donald Tusk (August, 2015). Retrieved from <http://en.president.az/articles/16009> on February 1, 2016.

¹⁰President Aliyev in a meeting with Herman van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, "Trend: President Aliyev: Azerbaijan considered an important partner in energy security by European Institutions" (June, 2013). Retrieved from <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/azerbaijan-important-partner-eu-energy-security> on January 25, 2016.

¹¹"Azeri Ambassador: Azerbaijan and EU need to build a perspective" (November, 2015). Retrieved from <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/europes-east/azeri-ambassador-azerbaijan-and-eu-need-build-perspective-319909> on February 1, 2016.

keep Azerbaijan in Russia's orbit, and deepening the relations with West has been viewed as a way to become stronger in economic terms. Thus, the role of the West is seen as a pivotal factor for both the economic development of the country and its independence vis-à-vis regional players. However, in stark contrast to Georgia and Armenia, it is not the EU as a whole which is perceived as a partner but individual EU member states. The economic partnership is pursued with the EU member states, or even more specifically their energy companies, rather than the EU as such. In particular, Great-Britain is singled out as the biggest investor in Azerbaijan. Seemingly, the interviewees who hold pro-government opinions feel very proud of, and positive towards, the partnership between EU member states and Azerbaijan. However, in the case of Azerbaijan expectations vis-à-vis the EU in the economic domain are accompanied by a strong rejection of its role as a promoter of political reforms. The same interviewees who favoured a strong economic partnership with the EU condemn the EU for interfering in Azerbaijani domestic affairs and displaying political biases. They also criticise the EU for not taking a clear side in the conflict with Armenia, something which regarded as an example of double standards: As pointed out by a Member of the Parliament, 'Azerbaijan would be happy if the EU is more actively involved in the energy partnership by making financial investments instead of "advising" the government' (Veliyev, 2016: 29).

An almost opposite view is expressed by the Azerbaijani civil society: from their perspective the EU places too much value on economic relations with Azerbaijan at the expense of other domains. In fact, most of the interviewees from civil society stressed the direct relationship between the human rights situation and the energy partnership: in their view, the economic partnership between Azerbaijan and the EU results in increased political repressions against civil society. This is another decisive matter which significantly reduces the trust towards the EU as civil society activists see disparity in the EU's tight business dealings with the ruling elite and its weak efforts on political reforms.

Therefore, while the Azerbaijani elites do not embrace the EU's overall conception as a modernising force and reject the wholesale adoption of EU standards, civil society regards the EU as 'selling itself' to the ruling elites in Azerbaijan in a pursuit of profit under the disguise of 'energy partnership'.

CONCLUSIONS

As analysed in the literature, in its neighbourhood, the EU projects itself as a force for good, offering 'a benign face to its neighbours' (Kratochvíl 2009: 5). It also acts as a 'power centre' which defines the agenda of its relationship with neighbours. However, the EU's role conception – ambitious and multi-faceted – is subjected to a severe test in the South Caucasus.

It is clear that there is a strong demand for engagement with the EU but only on the terms and in the specific domains that are relevant and acceptable to domestic actors in the target countries. Moreover, the EU's own multi-faceted and explicit role conception as 'normative power' makes it vulnerable to criticism and disappointment, when it is not willing and/or

capable to deliver on key aspects of its own role conception, especially those for which there is a strong demand in the target countries.

The analysis reveals that in the South Caucasus, the EU's conception as a 'normative power' only resonates with specific categories of actors, i.e. amongst the political elites in Georgia and Armenia and civil society in Azerbaijan. However, this resonance mainly builds upon what the EU is – a community of democratic states – rather than upon what the EU does. In addition, it is combined (especially amongst the political elites) with a desire to balance Russia's influence. Therefore, in the Caucasus images of the EU are not only informed by normative considerations, but also by realist accounts (e.g. balancing with Russia). This is in contrast with the EU's conception of its own role. In fact, while regarding itself as a normative power, the EU eschews the issue of confrontation or cooperation with other great powers, in that case Russia.

While viewed positively, the EU's own policies weaken its image in the South Caucasus. The more the EU proclaims its ambitious policy goals, the more it is criticised for either proclaiming them (e.g. by the ruling elites in Azerbaijan) or not living up to expectations, that is weak role performance (e.g. civil society in Azerbaijan and elites in Armenia and Georgia on specific issues). Interestingly, this disappointment and frustration with the EU applies to all three countries despite the fact that they have different policies and expectations vis-à-vis the EU. All three South Caucasus countries are eager for increased differentiation and greater EU responsiveness to their particular circumstances. As it is, however, they regard the EU's policy as designed for the region as a whole and not tailored to the individual countries as such

Overall, the self-conception of the EU as a 'benevolent power' promoting democratization and modernisation receives a very mixed reception. Where there is demand for engagement, the EU role is perceived as too weak; where there is no demand, the policies of the EU are perceived as imposition. The resulting mismatch between role conception, expectations and performance weakens the standing of the EU in the South Caucasus to the detriment of the EU itself. This implies that while offering 'more for more' to the partner countries, the EU itself may be well advised that 'less is more' in the sense of the need to avoid creating excessive expectations, especially if and when EU's own capacity and willingness to deliver on its proclamations is limited. Yet by substantially downsizing the EU's transformative ambitions, the 2015 ENP Review also alters the EU's conception of its own role as a normative power. This, in turn, may affect the EU's image amongst those partner countries and, within them, amongst societal groups who have strong expectations vis-à-vis the EU and envisage it as a model.

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