

# The EU's Niche in the New South Caucasus: Old Partners, New Challenges

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## INTRODUCTION

The South Caucasus region has gone through a dramatic change over the last year. Armenia's unexpected u-turn in joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union after the completion of the three years successful negotiation rounds with the EU on Association Agreement (AA) with its essential component, namely Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and Georgia's initiative in the ratification of the Association Agreement with the EU, have all affected the current political situation in the region. The Association Agreements were supposed to deepen the framework of bilateral relations between the European Union and its partner countries of the Eastern Partnership Program, aiming to increase the level of political and economic cooperation. The Eastern Partnership Program was the one to openly demonstrate the EU's interests in the South Caucasus as well as Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. It further developed the idea of creating a new framework for bilateral relations with each country of the region. However, among the three countries in the South Caucasus only Georgia has managed to sign the aforementioned agreement, whereas Armenia has changed its decision to initial the agreement and Azerbaijan has not fulfilled the provisions of the document and has not finalized the negotiations on signing it. One thing is clear: The South Caucasus is not the

same region anymore and there are many issues that one should take into account. In the face of these issues, the EU should devise new strategies to address the changes in the region. In this regard, the newly emerged situation has outlined the necessity of the EU to revisit and reformulate the relations with its neighboring countries in the South Caucasus.

Armenia's sudden shift in foreign policy and the decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union has weakened its credibility among its European partners. However, despite that radical decision, the Armenian government has reconfirmed its willingness to continue cooperation and further reform-implementation in the political sphere. Moreover, Armenia has its own interests for keeping good relations with the EU, taking into consideration the importance of abiding by the complementarity principle, the EU's financial assistance, the Armenian Diaspora issue, and last but not least, the EU's further engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Regarding these delicate policy issues, the EU-Armenia relations within the scope of the current geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe remains an important question for both sides.

Georgia has always been a frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership Program and set a goal of obtaining the EU membership in the future. As the only country to sign the Association Agreement in the region, Georgia faces a paradigm shift in its relations with the EU

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following the Vilnius Summit of the EU and Eastern Partnership countries. The summit increased the level of expectation for strengthening the integration with the EU, which would bring both financial and reform-based institutional benefits. However, the recent crisis in the Georgian government, namely the sudden dismissal of the defense minister and other high-ranking officials from the Georgian Dream coalition cast doubt on the strength of democratic institutions in the country. Moreover, all those officials have been accused of being engaged in corruption. The foregoing events have challenged Georgia's capability to meet the EU requirements for the foreseeable future and called Georgian democracy into question. Hence, the main question for Georgia is the prospects of bilateral relations with the EU, keeping in mind the political instability at the domestic level.

Finally, Azerbaijan, as the slowest partner in the region in reform implementation presents a curious case. The political component of the cooperation, which is largely elaborated in the Association Agreement, stipulates the country's commitment towards reform-implementation on good governance, democracy and human rights protection. However, the major obstacle that blocks Azerbaijan's EU integration is the Aliyev regime's reluctance to follow through with the Association Agreement on the grounds of human rights issues. Even the country's presidency in the Council of Europe did not alleviate the situation of human rights violations and political prisoners. However, Azerbaijan as a major energy exporter presents incentives to the EU, something neither Armenia nor Georgia can offer. In the aftermath of the crisis in Ukraine, the EU had to rethink its energy dependence on Russia, and Azerbaijan presents an intriguing energy project as an alternative to the Russian gas and oil.

## ARMENIA

The EU-Armenia relations traces back to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), which put the bilateral relations in a legal framework. Further developments in the bilateral cooperation were followed by Armenia's inclusion in the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership Program. In terms of creating a new legal framework between Armenia and the EU, the initiation of the Association Agreement was considered to be the final step by the EU, following the completion of negotiations on the agreement. The Association Agreement itself proposed to Armenia deeper and closer collaboration perspectives with the EU, embracing political and economic components. In particular, it envisaged a wide range of reform implementation tools on institutional level, which would gradually lead towards sectorial development in the areas of democracy, human rights, transparency as well as competitive market economy. In fact, it should be noted that Armenia performed well in the reform-implementation phase.<sup>1</sup> In the progress reports of 2013, the European Commission highlighted the country's satisfactory progress, specifically in Sectorial Policies.<sup>2</sup> Also, the progress was notable in the areas of human rights and democracy, macroeconomic policy, poverty reduction and social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 See A. Izotov, K. Raik, A. Sekarev, *The Post-Vilnius Challenges of the Eastern Partnership*, *Eastern Partnership Review*, N. 15, December 2013, p. 30, [http://eceap.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Review\\_No15.pdf](http://eceap.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Review_No15.pdf)
  - 2 See *Joint Staff Working Document, SWD 2013 (85), 20.3.2013*, [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/docs/2013\\_enp\\_pack/2013\\_eastern\\_pship\\_regional\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/docs/2013_enp_pack/2013_eastern_pship_regional_report_en.pdf)
  - 3 See *Joint Staff Working Document, SWD(2014) 69 final, Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Armenia Progress in 2013 and recommendations for action*, p. 2-3, [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2014/country-reports/armenia\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2014/country-reports/armenia_en.pdf)

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Being the integral part of the Association Agreement, the Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area (DCFTA) set a goal to strengthen the trade and investment performances of both the EU and Armenia. According to the provisions of the DCFTA, the majority of customs duties on goods were supposed to be removed following the legal implication of the agreement. Based on the estimations of financial gains for Armenia and the EU, Armenia's national income would increase by 146 million Euros, whereas the EU would gain 74 million Euros respectively.<sup>4</sup> Although the negotiations for the DCFTA were successfully finalized prior to the Vilnius summit, the Association Agreement eventually was not signed by Armenia. In a move that surprised the EU officials, the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan announced his decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union during his visit in Moscow on September 3, 2013. Nevertheless, before returning to Armenia the president reconfirmed his statement, by adding that Armenia intended to continue reforms with the EU and the aforementioned decision did not imply the rejection of dialogue with the EU.<sup>5</sup>

The announcement of the Armenian head of state has cast doubts and concerns regarding the future of the EU-Armenia relations. As a matter of fact, Armenia attempts to explain the sudden shift in the foreign policy from a geopolitical point of view by underscoring the necessity of maintaining a strategic partnership with Russia for security reasons. At the same time, the country is still interested in maintaining the cooperation with the European Union. This is why government

representatives often tried to justify Armenia's unexpected u-turn by stating that the decision itself did not indicate a step back from the Armenia-EU relations development. Indeed, in a press conference, the Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandyan officially confirmed Armenia's commitment in taking partnership with the EU in different directions further, but to the extent that there would not be a contradiction concerning Armenia's decision to join the Eurasian Economic Union. In his words Armenia is ready to deepen and expand relations with the EU but not at the expense of the allied relations with Russia.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Joint Statement between the EU and Armenia, both sides reconfirmed their intentions to develop and strengthen cooperation. Moreover, the EU and Armenia acknowledged the completion of the negotiations on the Association Agreement, including the DCFTA. However, taking into consideration Armenia's new international commitments, both sides agreed on revisiting the scope of their relations.<sup>7</sup>

In this breath, one can argue about the possible format of the relationship between Armenia and the EU in accordance with the newly created geopolitical reality in Eastern Europe in terms of the Ukraine crisis and Russia's tough Foreign Policy approach towards the post-Soviet countries. Obviously, the economic aspect of cooperation in the framework of the DCFTA is no longer valid,

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4 See European Commission, EU-Armenia Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-13-728\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-728_en.htm)

5 See A. Rettman, Armenia to join Russia trade bloc, surprises EU, <http://euobserver.com/foreign/121304>

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6 See Press conference, Minister Nalbandian's Statement during the Press Conference following EaP informal Ministerial dialogue, 13.09.2013, [http://www.mfa.am/en/press-conference/item/2013/09/13/eap\\_yer\\_st/](http://www.mfa.am/en/press-conference/item/2013/09/13/eap_yer_st/)

7 See European External Action Service, Joint Statement between the European Union and the Republic of Armenia as agreed by High Representative Catherine Ashton and Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, Vilnius, 29 November, 2013, [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131129\\_03\\_en.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131129_03_en.pdf)

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taking into account Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Nevertheless, as seen in the official statements, the Armenian government is willing to preserve its achievements with the EU and continue bilateral collaboration, even if it is solely limited to the political aspect.

There are several reasons behind Armenia's interests to maintain closer ties with the EU. First and foremost, the principle of complementarity has always been a foreign policy priority for Armenia since its independence, meaning that it is in its interest to have balanced relations with global political actors.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the importance of keeping a strong alliance with Russia should not lead to total dependency and submission. This, in turn, can be a real threat for the country, as a result of isolation from the West.

From the political perspective, Armenia should consider the EU's general engagement in the conflict resolution process of Nagorno-Karabakh. Notwithstanding France's special role in the OSCE Minsk Group as one of the co-chairs along with the Russian Federation and the United States,<sup>9</sup> one should notice the EU's high aspirations to increase its involvement in conflict resolution and even upgrade the French chair in the Minsk Group to the European Union level.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the EU has already established the position of the Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, aiming to increase its role in the region as well as consolidate peace,

stability and the rule of law.<sup>11</sup> One of the policy objectives of the EUSR, determined by the mandate, envisages conflict prevention and contribution to a peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region. However, the current activities undertaken by the Special Representative are in accordance with the existing mechanisms under the OSCE Minsk Group.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, one cannot overlook the EU's financial assistance to Armenia with the purpose to develop public and private sectors, and civil society, as well as justice and domestic affairs. Under the European Neighborhood Policy Instrument (ENPI), the EU envisioned to allocate 252 to 308 million Euros to Armenia for the period between 2014 and 2020.<sup>13</sup> The EU assistance to Armenia in the scope of the National Indicative Program (NIP) is 157.3 million Euros for the priority areas, such as deeper political cooperation, trade and economic relations, covering the years 2011-2013.<sup>14</sup> In the same manner, the financial assistance to Armenia for the years 2007-2010 was 94.8 million Euros, including the priorities as follows: strengthening of

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8 See National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, 2007, p. 10, [http://www.mfa.am/u\\_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf](http://www.mfa.am/u_files/file/doctrine/Doctrineeng.pdf)

9 See OSCE Minsk Group, <http://www.osce.org/mg>

10 See M. Siddi, *Engaging external actors: The EU in the geopolitics of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*, IEP Policy Briefs on Enlargement and Neighborhood, No. 7 | 2012, p. 4, [http://iep-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/SIDDI\\_Engaging\\_external\\_actors\\_Sep2012.pdf](http://iep-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/SIDDI_Engaging_external_actors_Sep2012.pdf)

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11 See EU Special Representatives, [http://eeas.europa.eu/policies/eu-special-representatives/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/policies/eu-special-representatives/index_en.htm)

12 See Official Journal of the European Union, COUNCIL DECISION 2011/518/CFSP of 25 August 2011 appointing the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, [http://www.mfa.gov.ge/files/459-15580-961771\\_appointingtheEUSRfortheSouthCaucasusandthecrisisinGeorgia.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/files/459-15580-961771_appointingtheEUSRfortheSouthCaucasusandthecrisisinGeorgia.pdf)

13 See Information note on the work of the delegation to the EU-Armenia, EU-Azerbaijan, and EU-Georgia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, Directorate-General for the External Policies of the Union, 5 June 2014/rev.030714, p. 2, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201409/20140908ATT88771/20140908ATT88771EN.pdf>

14 See European Friends of Armenia, *EU-Armenia Relations: future developments and prospects*, p. 9, <http://eufoa.org/uploads/FutureofEUAMRelations.pdf>

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democratic structures and good governance, support for regulatory reform and administrative capacity building and support for poverty reduction efforts.<sup>15</sup>

Being landlocked puts Armenia at a fragile financial situation; overcoming the challenges that arise from the closed borders with two of its neighbors can only be achieved by accessing new markets. Thus, the EU's ongoing financial support has a complementary role for Armenia. Apart from the direct benefits of financial assistance, Armenia could gain access to the EU market consisting of more than 500 million inhabitants.

Another factor in favor of keeping good relations with the EU is by virtue of the significance of the Armenian Diaspora in many member states of the Union. The list of the EU states with major Armenian communities includes France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, Germany, Sweden, Italy, Austria, Britain, Romania, Bulgaria etc. France is at the front of the list, with as much as five hundred thousand French-Armenian citizens.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the essence of having strong relations with the Armenian Diaspora is vital for Armenia as they provide valuable financial assistance and lobbying power.

Finally, in the scope of this analysis we should recall the positive outcome of the bilateral cooperation between Armenia and the EU as well. The EU-Armenia Agreement on Visa Facilitation was a vital step towards easing the process of obtaining visa for Armenian citizens. In fact, it gives an opportunity to certain categories of frequent travelers, such as

members of official delegations, children below the age of twelve, pensioners, researchers, and students to benefit from the exemption of visa handling fee.<sup>17</sup> According to the rapporteur and member of the European Parliament Edit Bauer, "the simplified visa regime can bring a new impetus to cooperation, mainly to mobility of citizens, which is essential in building people-to-people contacts".<sup>18</sup>

Based on the aforementioned arguments related to the EU-Armenia relations, we can conclude that despite Armenia's decision of joining the Eurasian Economic Union, the country will attempt to maintain and develop its relations with the EU. The increasing dependence on Russia, the EU's decisive role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, financial benefits from the EU, and the existence of the Armenian Diaspora in the Union are the main factors reasoning such a move. In turn, the EU is more likely to continue cooperation with Armenia, taking into account both its financial and professional contribution to the country, especially over the last ten years. It is worth mentioning that due to various European backed programs, there is a high number of pro-Europeans among the Armenian civil society. By lowering assistance and decreasing cooperation, the EU might gradually lose its support and credibility from the Armenian CSOs. Consequently, the threat of having a solely pro-Russian Armenia, isolated from the EU-led regional programs, is not the scenario one can entertain. Keeping in mind the EU's

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15 See European External Action Service, Summary on EU-Armenia relations, [http://eeas.europa.eu/armenia/eu\\_armenia\\_summary/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/armenia/eu_armenia_summary/index_en.htm)

16 See K.Tölölyan, Elites and Institutions in the Armenian Transnation, WPTC-01-21, 2001, <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/WPTC-01-21%20Tololyan.doc.pdf>

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17 See Council of the European Union, EU-Armenia agreement on facilitating the issuing of visas, Brussels, 17 December 2012, p. 1-2, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/134402.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/134402.pdf)

18 See Visas: European Parliament gives green light to EU-Armenia visa facilitation agreement, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20131004IPR21533/html/Visas-Parliament-gives-green-light-to-EU-Armenia-visa-facilitation-agreement>

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attitude towards its neighboring countries, in all probability, it might reduce its assistance to Armenia but not completely diminish it. As a result, it is upon the interests of both the EU and Armenia to keep and develop their relations, but the main question is “how.” The solution will be to construct a new agreement/ legal framework which will focus only on improving and further strengthening the political framework of the relationship. The new political agreement could be based on previous accomplishments and may include the best practices achieved in the past ten years.

## GEORGIA

Georgia has launched the formalization process of relations with the EU right after its independence. The bilateral relations gained pace after the Rose Revolution in 2003, bringing a wave of change in the Georgian foreign policy. From the very first days of his presidency, Mikheil Saakashvili announced that Georgia’s political course will move towards the Euro-Atlantic and European integration even at the expense of weakening relations with Russia.<sup>19</sup> With the goal to deepen Georgia’s cooperation with the EU and NATO, and facilitating an integration in the political, legal, military, economic and cultural realms, the Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration was established in 2004.<sup>20</sup>

The events following the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 caused an even more serious shift in Georgian foreign policy towards the West, resulting in increased financial flows and political assistance from the EU to Georgia.

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19 See T. Khidasheli, *Georgia’s European way*, p. 1-2, [http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/09\\_khidasheli.pdf](http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/2011-3/09_khidasheli.pdf)

20 See Office of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, [www.eu-nato.gov.ge](http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge)

The EU demonstrated its capacity to stop the military activities, led by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who at that time was in charge of the EU presidency. By deploying an unarmed monitoring mission to the conflict zone, namely the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the EU largely contributed to the establishment of a ceasefire.<sup>21</sup> Following the ceasefire, the EU initiated humanitarian and economic assistance programs for supporting internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as engaging in reconciliation process of the conflict. Within the ENPI, 61 million Euros has been allocated for the economic rehabilitation programs.<sup>22</sup>

Unequivocally, Georgia has aspired for European integration after the Rose Revolution. According to the Foreign Policy Strategy published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the years 2006-09, its primary aim is “turning Georgia into a European State with strong institutions, fully integrated into European and Euro-Atlantic structures.”<sup>23</sup> At that point, Georgia planned to increase relations with the EU institutions and deepen political dialogue, adopt and implement the ENP Action Plan as well as strengthen mutually beneficial relations with the EU.<sup>23</sup> Talking about the Georgian foreign policy ambitions, Davit Zalkaliani, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia stated that the main priority of the recent Georgian government is to join the family of European nations. In his

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21 See I. Chkhikvadze, *EU-Georgia Relations: Where it Starts and Where it Goes*, *Georgian Foreign Policy, The Quest for sustainable security*, 2013, p. 60-61, [www.kas.de](http://www.kas.de)

22 See Richard G. Whitman, S. Wolff, *The EU as a conflict manager? The case of Georgia and its implications*, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/224467/evidence-stefan-wolff-richard-whitman-the-eu-as-a-conflict-manager.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224467/evidence-stefan-wolff-richard-whitman-the-eu-as-a-conflict-manager.pdf)

23 See Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Policy Strategy 2006-2009*, [http://usa.mfa.gov.ge/files/-Documents/strategy2006\\_2009.pdf](http://usa.mfa.gov.ge/files/-Documents/strategy2006_2009.pdf)

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words, it is ‘irreversible Europeanization’, a new chapter in bilateral relations supported by the major political parties of the state.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike its neighbors in the South Caucasus region, Georgia has managed to sign the Association Agreement, including the DCFTA, in 2014. Following the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), the Association Agreement itself created a new legal foundation for bilateral cooperation. At the same time, the EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan of 2006 has been replaced by the current EU-Georgia Association Agenda.<sup>25</sup>

Both Georgia and the EU had greater hopes and aspirations from the Association Agreement. However, it is crucial to understand what this Agreement can offer to Georgia in the scope of relations with the EU.

Despite Georgia’s efforts to obtain membership in the European Union, neither the Eastern Partnership program nor the EU-Georgia Association Agreement implies future membership. The overall aim of the Association Agreement is to promote political association and economic integration between the parties.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it does not mention anything regarding further “membership status”.

Even though the Association Agreement does not directly entail membership in the future, it

certainly brings significant benefits to Georgia. Foremost, the Agreement stipulates concrete benefits for Georgian citizens, such as better protection of consumers by setting standards for higher quality and improved safety of locally-grown agricultural products, better opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, easier access to health services, strengthening the rule of law in terms of reform implementation in the judiciary system and higher level of transparency and accountability.<sup>27</sup> Alongside the above-mentioned benefits, the EU is to significantly increase its financial assistance to Georgia towards reform implementation.

As long as for the economic benefits from the DCFTA are concerned, various calculations have been made in exports and imports between Georgia and the EU. According to the estimated growth, the exports from Georgia to the EU will increase by 12% and imports from the EU to Georgia will rise by 7.5% respectively. In total, Georgia will gain 4.3% growth in GDP per annum, which is approximately 292 million Euros contribution to the state budget.<sup>28</sup>

Georgia’s financial assistance for reforms under the ENPI has always been higher in comparison with its neighbors in the region. For the period of 2011–2013, in the scope of the ENPI National Indicative Program, 180.29 million Euros have been allocated to Georgia.<sup>29</sup>

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24 See D. Zalkaliani, *Georgian Foreign Policy in a New Era*, 2014, Chatham House, p. 2, [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public\\_html/sites/default/files/20140318GeorgianForeignPolicyZalkaliani.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140318GeorgianForeignPolicyZalkaliani.pdf)

25 See European External Action Service, *EU-Georgia relations*, [http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/index_en.htm)

26 See *Official Journal of the European Union, Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part*, 2014, p. 7, [www.eeas.europa.eu](http://www.eeas.europa.eu)

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27 See EU-Georgia Association Agreement, “What does the Agreement offer?”, p. 2, [http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/pdf/quick\\_guide\\_eu\\_ge\\_aa\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/pdf/quick_guide_eu_ge_aa_en.pdf)

28 See *Myths about the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), Setting the facts straight*, European External Action Service, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/eap\\_aa/mythbuster\\_2\\_2014\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/eap_aa/mythbuster_2_2014_en.pdf)

29 See *EU supporting Georgia’s reforms with €180.29 million in 2011 – 2013*, <http://www.enpi-info.eu/files/publications/Georgia%20NIP%202010.pdf>

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This amount is almost three times more than what Georgia has received for the previous three years. For the years 2014-20, an estimated amount between 610 to 746 million Euros will be allocated to Georgia under the ENPI.<sup>30</sup>

Although obtaining the EU membership status is on the political agenda of the Georgian foreign policy, one can question the country's capabilities in terms of meeting the requirements of joining the European family. In spite of its political will to be closer to Europe and fulfill its obligations on the path of reform implementation, Georgia still has a long way to go to strengthen its democratic institutions.

The Georgian political crisis of November 2014 has caused a real threat for the country's Euro-Atlantic course and raised concerns for its democratic potential at the institutional level. In order to understand the major causes of this crisis, one should date it back to Ivanishvili's political course. In contrary to his predecessor Saakashvili who was a strong supporter of Georgian pro-Western policy, Ivanishvili was in favor of applying a more balanced conciliatory approach with Russia, while continuing Georgia's further progress towards the EU and NATO membership. In his view, the aforementioned approach with Russia would attempt to normalize economic relations –at a minimum– between two countries.<sup>31</sup> Taking into account

the negative consequences of the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, his political course has sounded reasonable for many Georgians.

Ivanishvili's intentions were suspicious for many; both in Georgia and abroad. It increased general concerns about the Euro-Atlantic prospects of Georgia. However, the very fact that he appointed Atlanticists for the crucial posts in the government after winning the elections ensured the pro-Western political course of Georgia. Nevertheless, Ivanishvili's political successor Irakli Garibashvili dismissed the Defense Minister Alasania on 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2014. In the meantime, the Foreign Minister Panjikidze and the Minister for Integration with the EU and NATO Petriashvili also unexpectedly left the office.<sup>32</sup> Obviously, the current political situation in Georgia recalls also the prosecution case of the Former President Mikheil Saakashvili who was accused of abuse of power and corruption. Prior to this crisis Saakashvili expressed his concerns, stating that "making former officials to be the target of the Georgian Dream, ruling coalition's political "revenge" would strain Georgia's relations with its Western allies."<sup>33</sup>

All in all, analyzing the development of the EU-Georgia relations one could conclude that Georgia has demonstrated considerable progress towards European integration. Georgia remains the only country in the region of the South Caucasus to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. Meanwhile, it is clear that the major reason of the Euro-Atlantic

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30 See Information note on the work of the delegation to the EU-Armenia, EU-Azerbaijan, and EU-Georgia Parliamentary Cooperation Committees, Directorate-General for the External Policies of the Union, 5 June 2014/rev.030714, p. 2, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201409/20140908ATT88771/20140908ATT88771EN.pdf>

31 See Svante E. Cornell, *Georgia's new crisis: Is Georgia Slipping Away?*, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/11/13/is-georgia-slipping-away/>

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32 See M. Matusiak, *The political crisis in Georgia: which way next?*, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-11-05/political-crisis-georgia-which-way-next>

33 See M. Antidze, *Georgian prosecutors charge ex-president Saakashvili*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/28/us-georgia-saakashvili-charges-idUSKBNofX15M20140728>



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course of Georgia and its membership aspirations to the EU has several reasons behind. The Georgian government largely benefits from financial and professional assistance from the EU and realizes that more quality-based institutional reforms will lead to an increased money flow to the state budget. Furthermore, the estimated calculations have demonstrated that Georgia's economy would benefit immensely from the Association Agreement implementation, taking into account the economic advantages from the DCFTA being an integral part of the Agreement. However, the recent Georgian political crisis cast a doubt on the country's democratic capabilities at the institutional level and increased concerns about the country's European future. Does it mean that the country is going to step back from its European path? In all likelihood, this "worst case scenario" is not going to happen for several reasons. Even though Russia could attempt to put pressure by using its own channels of influence, it would not be able to stop the Europeanization process of Georgia. The Rose Revolution, the Russian-Georgian war and efforts of recent years in the Euro-Atlantic course have had a significant impact on the mindset of Georgian citizens, taking into consideration that the majority of population favors the country's European path. In this regard, attempts to weaken the pro-Western political supporters will more likely raise strong opposition from the public. Finally, the EU would not want to consider losing Georgia, a reliable partner and frontrunner of the EaP in the region to Russian influence. The EU is often criticized on domestic level regarding the inefficiency of the Eastern Partnership program. This is why Georgia's step back will mean the complete failure of the above-mentioned program which would decrease the credibility of the EU's institutional capabilities in the European realm.

## AZERBAIJAN

The EU's regional initiatives have had a direct impact on Azerbaijan as well, fostering the necessity to enhance closer cooperation in the context of bilateral relations. In fact, since its independence Azerbaijan has attempted to maintain balanced relations between Europe and Asia, taking into consideration its geographic location and cultural linkage with Central Asia. However, Azerbaijan demonstrated its willingness to participate in the European-led regional initiatives in order to be engaged in regional programs alongside the neighboring countries.

In comparison to its neighbors in the region, Azerbaijan has always been reluctant to European integration. Similarly with other partners in its neighborhood, the EU launched the basis of creating legal relations with Azerbaijan by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PSA). Following that, Azerbaijan was included in the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership Program.<sup>34</sup> However, in the past decade, Azerbaijan has not shown essential progress towards the implementation of reforms envisaged by the Action Plan and the PCA in general. The ENP progress report on Azerbaijan outlined the slow mode of negotiations on the Association Agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan, covering the political aspect of the Agreement. The negotiations on the economic direction, meaning the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) could not be launched because of Azerbaijan's non-membership to the WTO, which is a prerequisite for the DCFTA.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Summary on EU- Azerbaijan Relations, [http://eeas.europa.eu/azerbaijan/eu\\_azerbaijan\\_summary/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/azerbaijan/eu_azerbaijan_summary/index_en.htm)

<sup>35</sup> See ENP Package, Country Progress Report – Azerbaijan, Brussels, 2012, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-12-331\\_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-331_en.htm?locale=en)

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Based on the data of European integration index of 2013 for Eastern Partnership countries, Azerbaijan is the second worst performer in the dimensions of elections, fighting corruption, accountability and democratic control over security and law enforcement institutions. At the same time, it demonstrated relatively good results in terms of trade and economic integration with the EU. In addition, there is a decline in civil society participation, which in turn led to the overall decline in management of European integration processes.<sup>36</sup>

The start of Azerbaijan's presidency in the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on 14 May, 2014 raised hopes that the country's situation on the political prisoners issue would be resolved, or at least the conditions of the prisoners be improved. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for human rights defenders to speak up and call attention to the problems they faced. Contrary to those expectations, the number of political prisoners has ironically increased after the presidency. The case study on the issue revealed that there were approximately 98 political prisoners by 10 August, 2014.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, one of the positive developments in the EU-Azerbaijani relations has been the signing of Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements in November 2013. Following the completion of four official rounds of negotiations between Baku and Brussels, the foregoing agreements entered into force on 1st

September, 2014.<sup>38</sup> According to the provisions enshrined in the agreements, citizens of Azerbaijan, particularly frequent travelers, would have a possibility to easily acquire short-stay visas to travel throughout the EU.<sup>39</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the EU's financial assistance is not attractive for Azerbaijan, taking into consideration its reluctance to sign the financial assistance agreements under the European Neighborhood Partnership Initiative (ENPI) amounting to 122.5 million Euros, covering the years of 2011-2013. Compared to the gas and oil revenues that Azerbaijan gets annually, the EU's contribution more likely seems insignificant for the country.<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding Azerbaijan's in compliance regarding the political aspect of the European cooperation -massive violations of human rights and democratic deficiency- the EU highly values the necessity to enhance strong ties on the economic level. The aforementioned interests on economic aspects are closely connected to Azerbaijan's energy resources which are crucial for the EU. The recent Ukraine crisis has radically increased the EU's concerns about its energy dependency on Russia. One can state that this factor will largely influence the EU's decision to reconsider its relations with Azerbaijan and intensify bilateral relations, specifically on the energy sector.

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36 See European integration index 2013, for Eastern Partnership countries, p. 26, [http://www.eap-index.eu/images/Index\\_2013.pdf](http://www.eap-index.eu/images/Index_2013.pdf)

37 See L. Yunus, R. Jafarov, The list of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, 2014, [http://eap-csf.eu/assets/files/List\\_of\\_Political\\_Prisoners\\_AZ-\(2\)-\(1\).pdf](http://eap-csf.eu/assets/files/List_of_Political_Prisoners_AZ-(2)-(1).pdf)

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38 See The EU - Azerbaijan Visa Facilitation and the Readmission agreements enter into force today, European External Action Service, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/press\\_corner/all\\_news/news/2014/20140901\\_visafacilitation\\_enters\\_into\\_force\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/press_corner/all_news/news/2014/20140901_visafacilitation_enters_into_force_en.htm)

39 See Council of the European Union, EU-Azerbaijan agreement on facilitating the issuing of visas, Brussels, 29 November 2013, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/139759.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/jha/139759.pdf)

40 See Open Society Institute-Brussels, EU relations with Azerbaijan: More for Less?, Discussion Paper, 2012, p. 4, <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/eu-relations-azerbaijan-20120606.pdf>

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As an energy supplier and a transit country, Azerbaijan has significantly promoted its strategic importance both in the region and the international arena. Recently, Azerbaijan has become attractive for European companies in terms of investments in the energy sector. It has already managed to sign partnership agreements with several oil giants such as the British Petroleum and the Statoil.<sup>41</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the EU's estimated energy dependency from Russia will reach up to 70%, compelling the European consumers to purchase more than 125 bcm of gas in 2020 and around 70 bcm in 2030.<sup>42</sup> Under these circumstances, the EU will more likely put efforts for finding an alternative to the Russian gas and oil, by supporting the energy projects with an alternative gas corridor, which will bridge the EU to Central Asia. In this sense, Azerbaijan will have a pivotal role in carrying out the alternative energy projects and connecting Europe to Asia.

So far, several attempts have been made to create new energy projects and solve the EU's issues of energy dependency. On this occasion, Nabucco was a promising project with the goal to bring Azerbaijani gas to Europe. Despite being the result of a decade of planning, Nabucco was not selected by the gas field operators and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)

project was given a priority instead.<sup>43</sup> However, Nabucco's failure did not stop Azerbaijan's high-level ambitions to be an independent player in the energy market. Turkey and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2011, giving a birth to the Trans Anatolia Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP).<sup>44</sup> Compared to other energy initiatives, the TANAP envisages tangible progress in the development of the Southern Corridor since 2009. According to the initial project, 10% of Shah Deniz 2 gas will be delivered to the EU-Turkey border. Azerbaijan volunteered to invest the majority of finances needed for the successful flow of the project, but in return, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) is to control 51 percent stake raises.<sup>45</sup>

The overall assessment of the EU-Azerbaijani relations demonstrates the ambiguity of bilateral cooperation. On one hand, Azerbaijan does not comply with the EU standards on the political level, on the other hand, the country's energy resources and geographic location is an impetus for strengthening cooperation in the economic field. Interestingly, Azerbaijan has never pursued political ambitions in terms of obtaining the EU membership or deepening European integration. In this respect, Azerbaijan has always prioritized the cooperation on the interest-based level with the EU, mainly covering the economic dimension. Could one assume that energy interests prevail against the political

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41 See H. Efe, *Foreign Policy of the European Union Towards the South Caucasus*, *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, Vol. 3 No. 17; September 2012, p. 195 [http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol.3\\_No.17.September.2012/21.pdf](http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol.3_No.17.September.2012/21.pdf)

42 See R. Dickel, E. Hassanzadeh, J. Henderson, A. Honoré, L. El-Katiri, S. Pirani, H. Rogers, J. Stern and K. Yafimava, *Reducing European dependence on Russian gas: distinguishing natural gas security from geopolitics*, 2014, p. 4-5, <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NG-92.pdf>

43 See EU-backed Nabucco project 'over' after rival pipeline wins Azeri gas bid, <http://www.euractiv.com/energy/eu-favoured-nabucco-project-history-528919>

44 See What is TANAP, <http://www.tanap.com/en/what-is-tanap>

45 See Energy and Security from the Caspian to Europe, A minority staff report prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, 2012, p. 3-4, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Energy%20and%20Security%20from%20the%20Caspian%20to%20Europe.pdf>

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component of the relations? In parallel with the EU's increased demand on finding an alternative to the Russian energy supply, Azerbaijan has managed to come up with a pragmatic project, namely the TANAP, which creates a possibility to connect the pipeline also to Central Asia. In the case that this project succeeds, the EU could prefer economic cooperation at the expense of tarnishing its political agenda.

## CONCLUSION

It should be acknowledged that the South Caucasus went through serious transformations in 2014. The radical shift in the political landscape in the international domain has significantly affected three countries in the South Caucasus region, questioning the integrity of the regional development. The fluctuations in international politics and the threat of the continuation of the post-Cold War era were notable with regards to the "zero sum game" between Brussels and Moscow. As a consequence, the countries of the South Caucasus were under pressure, standing between the EU line of the Eastern Partnership and the Russian line of the "near abroad" zone. These developments necessitate a very important question. How will the EU reformulate its relations with its partners in the South Caucasus in accordance with the current paradigm?

Obviously, the EU can't put all three countries in the same basket anymore and should adjust its priorities with the new political situation. In this case, the EU should demonstrate a tailor-made approach with every state in the region. This means diversifying the interests and priorities of individual countries and proposing mutually beneficial frameworks for further cooperation.

Regarding the relations with Armenia, the EU should continue further progress in reform-

implementation even if it includes only the political component. Therefore stopping the progress for several years will not be the correct move from the EU side, as it will ruin all the efforts and political influence it has reached in the recent decade. Both sides are to certainly understand that the Association Agreement is off the agenda in bilateral relations and it is illogical to have some hopes for the possibility of working in the previous formats. What the EU can do is to elaborate a new legal frame based solely on the necessity of pushing forward the progress of political reforms.

Despite the political crisis in Georgia in the recent two months, the EU will continue intensifying political and economic integration with Georgia. The latter will remain the most reliable partner and the strongest EU aspirant in the region, thus, the EU will increase financial assistance and provide expertise for the sake of the country's further progress towards the Euro-Atlantic integration. Although Georgia will gain much support and will hugely benefit from the financial flow from the implementation of the DCFTA, the country's membership expectations will most likely not be fulfilled in the near future.

Insofar the political framework of the EU-Azerbaijan relations and the EU's pressure on human rights issues might hinder the economic aspect of bilateral cooperation. However, Azerbaijan will not be welcomed in the European family any time soon. Reflecting on negative consequences of the Ukraine crisis, the EU will enhance the cooperation with Azerbaijan and support the idea of the TANAP as an alternative to the Russian energy resources. Thus, the cooperation is foreseen to be limited with bilateral agreements on exclusively economic issues.

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