

The EU vs. Russia in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia: the fragility of normative power or the power of Russian coercion?

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Abstract

Constructivist-driven conventional wisdom posits that ideas and beliefs are pivotal to shaping foreign policy trajectories. Thus, the explanatory power ascribed to material forces falls back on ideas and cultural practices (Wendt, 1999). Whereas the case of Armenia, characterized by the co-existence of European foreign policy identity with Russia-led foreign policy preferences suggests that identity and beliefs may well be outweighed by material forces. This paper seeks to explain the evolution of how the European Union (EU) and Russia have been conceptualised within the foreign policy discourse of Armenia. The study relies on the critical discourse analysis of relevant speeches and statements of Armenia's foreign policy-makers and, particularly, on those of the President. It scrutinizes the core notions and discursive structures, employed in the Armenian foreign policy discourse for justifying the choice of the Russia-led path. It suggests that Armenia's deviation from the identity driven path towards the EU has been broadly justified in terms of the country's economic and, particularly, security needs, which prompted to treat Russia as an indispensable ally. Yet, a closer scrutiny of external constraints indicates that Russian coercive policy left little room for Armenia to achieve a Russian-European balance.

Keywords: Armenia, EU, Russia, Eurasian Economic Union, security ally

Introduction

Armenia's abrupt U-turn - the shift from the Association Agreement with the EU to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has produced puzzle and

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incomprehension particularly among EU officials, desperately looking for clarifications regarding the country's perplexing decision¹.

There is a tendency in existing studies to attribute Armenia's U-turn to Russia's increasing assertiveness towards the EU, with ensuing coercive measures designed to block its further advancement in the sphere of Russian privileged interests (Emerson and Kostanyan, 2013; Giragosian, 2015). Thus, Armenia's Eurasian trajectory is broadly viewed as 'no choice option' given its vast political and economic dependence on Russia (Popescu, 2013, Delcour and Wolczuk, 2015, Terzyan, 2016a, Terzyan, 2016b).

This study scrutinizes the evolution of how the European Union and Russia have been conceptualized in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia. It seeks to assess the impact of ideational factors and external constraints on Armenia's foreign policy outputs within the EU – Russia dichotomy.

The study employs critical discourse analysis to scrutinize the conceptions of the EU and Russia, as well as the discursive structures related to the justification of Armenia's U-turn in its foreign policy discourse. It draws on the insights gained from the studies of legitimization strategies in political discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011). More specifically, it shows how the legitimization strategy of a 'hypothetical future' has been frequently employed to justify the choice of the Russia-led path in Armenian foreign policy discourse. This strategy aims at justifying a political decision and an action through the idea of a future that can be depicted as negative if one does not take action (Reyes, 2011, p.793).

Additionally, interviewing relevant policy-makers from May to September 2015 provides insights into the principal causes behind Armenia's Russia vs. the EU policy choice.

The study suggests that contrary to widely held beliefs about Armenia's consistent adherence to Russia, the latter's conception has experienced dramatic ups and downs in Armenian political thinking, shifting from chauvinistic empire to indispensable ally. Thus, despite the assumptions that one might make from Armenia's dependence on Russia, it shows a sometimes surprisingly critical stance.

Notably, Russia has been mostly framed as a strategic partner and pivotal security ally during President Serzh Sargsyan's presidency beginning in 2008. Yet, he markedly hardened his position on Russia in the wake of the heavy fighting eruption between the Azerbaijani and Armenian armed forces in April 2016, which exposed the devastating consequences of Russian military hardware supply to Azerbaijan. Even though Sargsyan initially admitted that 'Russia never played for Armenia the role that Turkey plays for Azerbaijan', and openly opposed to Russian weapon supply to Azerbaijan, he quickly came to terms with the incapability of influencing Russia's policy (President.am, 2016). Shortly afterwards, he reiterated

¹ Asbarez.com (2013), *EU Wants Clarification from Armenia* (retrieved from <http://asbarez.com/113548/eu-wants-clarification-from-armenia/>).

his vast support for Russia's growing involvement in the region (President.am, 2016b), leading to the conclusion that, above all, there is no alternative to the alliance with Moscow.

Essentially, the EU has been widely framed as Armenia's historic, civilizational choice, and, most importantly, the path to democracy, peace and prosperity in the Sargsyan-led discourse (Presidnet.am, 2011). Meanwhile, a bunch of constraints, ranging from the weakness of the EU's market power, in terms of increasing Armenia's resilience against Russia, to the latter's increasing assertiveness towards Armenia – EU rapprochement, have made the latter rather complicated.

Notably, Sargsyan became increasingly critical of the EU's policy after the U-turn, with the explicit intent to justify the Russia-led choice. The portrayal of the EU shifted from overly positive to critical notions in the President's discourse. The EU was implicitly regarded as an inappropriate actor in terms of offering a powerful alternative to strategic security partnership with Russia (Terzyan, 2016 c).

1. The evolution of Russia's identity in Armenian foreign policy discourse

As a small and fragile state, experiencing dire constraints of Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade and devastating Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia has been framed as a 'friend in need' – a security partner and indispensable ally. Put simply, in Armenian political and public consciousness, Russia and Armenia-Russia security partnership is broadly viewed as a powerful counterweight to Azerbaijan – Turkey alliance, with acute threats posed to Armenia (Terzyan, 2016b, pp. 158-162). A question arises of whether and to what extent the conception of Russia has changed and how it has influenced Armenia's foreign policy during Sargsyan's presidency since 2008.

A close scrutiny of Armenia's foreign policy discourse leads to distinguishing the following core notions, around which the overall conception of Russia has revolved particularly since 2008: pivotal security partner², strategic ally³, major great power, 'a greater involvement of which in the region will benefit Armenia'⁴, etc.

² President.am. (2013). *Statement by President SerzhSargsyan at the Extended Meeting Held at the RA Ministry of Defense* (retrieved from <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2013/01/15/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-speech-session-Ministry-of-Defense/>. accessed 14 May 2017).

³ MFA of Armenia, Bilateral Relations: Russia (available at: <http://www.mfa.am/en/country-by-country/ru>, accessed 20 June 2017).

⁴ President.am. (2016). *Statement of President SerzhSargsyan for the Mass Media on the Results of the Meeting with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin*. (available at: <http://www.president.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2016/08/10/President-Serzh-Sargsyan-statement-in-Russia-10-08/>, accessed 13 Apr. 2017).

It is worth noting that the conception of Russia has experienced major ups and downs in Armenian foreign policy discourse. More specifically, Russia's deep-rooted portrayal in Armenian strategic thinking as Armenia's indispensable 'saviour' was questioned profoundly in the wake of the Soviet Union's gradual dissolution. Armenia's 'big brother', Russia, suddenly degenerated into its most dangerous enemy, which tremendously strangles independent, free and democratic development of Armenian statehood (Mirzoyan, 2010, pp. 25-28). This occurred gradually, and intensified in the later stages of the Nagorno-Karabakh movement (Terzyan, 2016b, pp. 145-146). One of the prominent leaders of the national movement, Levon Ter-Petrosyan regarded centuries-long reliance on Russia as delusional and self-destructive. Therefore, in early 1990, attached critical importance to standing up for national interests and fiercely opposed any encroachment motivated by imperial chauvinistic policies of Russification (Ter-Petrosyan, 2006, p. 34).

Nevertheless, the outright anti-Russian propaganda started to decline shortly after the restoration of independent statehood. Azerbaijani and Turkish menace prompted Armenia's leadership to rethink its initial anti-Russian attitudes. Ter-Petrosyan started to advocate for strengthening Armenian-Russian ties, drawing on the two countries' backgrounds:

The break-up of the Soviet Union does not blunt the unity, which has emerged as a means of coexistence over centuries... it is no secret that for a long time, Russian culture was the only way of interacting with world civilizations for all the nations in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union (Ter-Petrosyan 2006, p. 401).

The biggest 'impediment' to Armenia's development evolved into a 'model' friend, which has an important role in enhancing stability in the turbulent Caucasus region. The fluctuations of Russia's perplexing and ambivalent conceptions lead to the following conclusion: from the outset it has been chiefly conceived as a security partner, whose role is indispensable in Armenia's double blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Therefore, Armenia's adherence to Russia has been determined by regional level constraints and challenges, rather than identity-related drivers. Research suggests that the enemy images of Azerbaijan and Turkey have been pivotal to changing the perception of Russia in Armenian political thinking. In essence, alliance with powerful Russia and loyalty to the ally has been deemed instrumental in tackling traditional security threats facing the country.

Put simply, Armenia's political elite and society have tended to attach critical importance to Russia as a 'hard power' actor, which holds the potential to enhance small and vulnerable Armenia's resilience against Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Consistent with this rhetoric, second President Robert Kocharyan tended to give great weight to Russia and its strategic partnership with Armenia, chiefly in terms of its security-related implications and military build-up during his presidency

from 1998 to 2008. “Russia is the most powerful state across the post-Soviet space in economic and military terms. Russia is our pivotal partner...” (Kocharyan, 2011, p. 272). In Armenia’s foreign policy discourse, security-related references are unequivocally linked to the “Russia-first” approach. All other European and EuroAtlantic security actors, whether the European Union or NATO, take a back seat to Russia and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The National Security Strategy of Armenia (2007) notes:

The importance of Russia’s role for the security of Armenia, the traditional friendly links between the two nations, the level of trade and economic relations, Russia’s role in the Nagorno Karabakh mediation effort, as well as the presence of a significant Armenian community in Russia, all contribute to a strategic partnership (MFA.am, 2007).

The concept of strategic partnership in Kocharyan’s discourse was not full of identity-related or cultural references. Rather, it focused chiefly on shared economic, political and military interests. Consistent with his predecessor, Sargsyan has never questioned the vital importance of the Armenian-Russian strategic partnership, which is viewed as fundamental to enhancing national security. Moreover, Sargsyan framed Russia as ‘the core player in our region in security issues’⁵.

Even though no identity-related reference has been attributed to the Armenian-Russian partnership, it has been viewed as the most important and indispensable factor for the maintenance of stability and security in the South Caucasus: “The Armenian-Russian strategic partnership will remain the pivot of Armenia’s security, which through the twenty years of independence has proved its viability. Within this context, we attach the utmost importance to our membership to the Collective Security Treaty Organization” (President.am, 2013).

Nevertheless, the Armenian president, along with other leading officials, repeatedly reiterated Armenia’s commitment to the European path of development, despite close ties with Russia.

Today, the issue of becoming a full member of the European Union is not yet on our foreign policy agenda. However, I would like to repeat that the European rules of the game and European standards must take root in our country because these are high and time-tested standards... There is no discrepancy between this reality and Armenia’s being a CIS and CSTO member, and Russia’s strategic partner. Our close and multifaceted, I would say in many instances, exemplary cooperation with the Russian Federation does not contradict these values, which are proclaimed by Russia itself.

⁵ Armenpress.am (2011), *SerzhSargsyan: Russia is a core player in our region* (retrieved from <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/652530/serzh-sargsyan-russia-is-a-core-player-in-our-region.html>).

Furthermore, I am confident that our friends – Russia, the West, and all others, will be only happy for our success (President.am, 2010).

Thus, Sargsyan believed that the strategic security partnership with Russia could not interfere with Armenia's long-desired pursuit of European integration.

Nevertheless, relations with Russia were posing formidable challenges to Armenia's EU Association aspirations. At a certain point – in the face of Armenia's profound advancement towards the Association Agreement in 2013, Russia started to view Armenia's closer relations with the EU as hostile to its own interests, and resorted to blocking the Armenia-EU association perspective by forcing the country to join the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union (Emerson and Kostanyan, 2013).

In essence, Armenia's European identity and the pursuit of European integration have been outweighed by the "Russia-first" approach. The strong emphasis on the Armenia – Russia security alliance has precluded Armenian political parties from opposing the country's membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union; rather they tended to defend the decision by asserting that the acute regional challenges facing the country prompt to boost Armenia's strategic partnership with its indispensable security partner, Russia, in all possible spheres (Armenianow.com)⁶. Unsurprisingly, Sargsyan, along with other high-ranking officials, justifies Armenia's membership in the EAEU chiefly in terms of its security concerns. This is particularly important, given the Armenia-Russia comprehensive security partnership and, more specifically, Armenia's membership in Russia-led CSTO. A former member of Parliament of the party "Rule of law", Hovhannes Margaryan has flatly stated in the interview that since security is the top priority for Armenia, it is impossible to downgrade the importance of the Armenia-Russia security partnership and the fact that Russian troops, located across the Armenian-Turkish border, give Armenia a sense of security (Margaryan, 2015).

Ironically, shortly before Armenia's U-turn, Russia set out to intensify military cooperation with Armenia's fiercest foe, Azerbaijan, in the form of supplying Russian military hardware worth \$4 billion (Eurasianet.org)⁷. The nightmare scenario of the Azerbaijan-Russia boosting military cooperation produced worries through Armenia and significantly influenced its choice of the EAEU.

Above all, it is highly unlikely to underestimate Armenia's vast energy dependence on Russia and the fact that only Russia is endowed with the capacity of alleviating energy-related hardships (Margaryan, 2015).

It is worth noting that, prior to Armenia's move towards the EAEU, Russia played its energy card by increasing gas prices for Armenia by 50 percent in April

⁶ Armenianow.com (2013), *Ruling Party Says Customs Union Decision Meets Armenia's National Interests* (retrieved from http://www.armenianow.com/news/48249/armenia_ruling_party_customs_union_russia).

⁷ Eurasianet.org (2013), *In Baku, Putin Brings Gunboats Along With Diplomacy*, (retrieved from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67392>).

2013, thus alarming possible economic repercussions of Armenia's European aspirations. Ironically, gas price was reduced as Armenia decided to sign up to the EAEU. Armenia's energy minister, Armen Movsisyan stated outright that the Eurasian choice shields Armenia from gas price hikes⁸. The above-mentioned ironies lead to the conclusion that Russia used all the hard and soft tools at its disposal to reinforce its 'indispensability' in Armenian political thinking and public consciousness.

Remarkably, there has been a tendency in President Sargsyan's discourse to emphasize the hypothetical economic and political hardships that Armenia would suffer in case of deviating from strategic partnership with Russia. In legitimizing Armenia's decision to join the EAEU, Sargsyan used the strategy of a 'hypothetical future'. More specifically, given Armenia's huge economic and energy dependence on Russia, he particularly noted that the choice of the EAEU would shield Armenia from unwelcome surprises and economic repercussions: "our choice is not civilizational. It corresponds to the economic interests of our nation. We cannot sign the Free trade agreement [DCFTA] and increase gas price and electricity fee three times?" (Ter-Matevosyan *et al.*, 2017, p. 350).

Notably, as a single country, Russia is the main external trade partner of Armenia, being the destination for 20 per cent of Armenian exports and source of 70 per cent of remittances (Worldbank.org, 2015). Russia also maintains lead in the realm of foreign investments in Armenia. According to official information, there are about 1,400 enterprises with Russian capital, which is over one fourth of all economic entities with involvement of foreign capital (President.am, 2017). Last but not least, Russia is home to more than 2.5 million Armenian migrants, who would be subject to harsh mistreatment in case of Armenia's 'non-Russian' foreign policy options. This assumption is based on the Russian authorities' massive crackdown on the Georgian population in Russia, following Tbilisi's determination to sign up to the Association Agreement with the EU (Emerson and Kostanyan, 2013).

It follows that Armenia's foreign policy is extremely malleable with the constraints determined by Kremlin. As a small state, Armenia has proved tremendously constrained to go down its identity driven path and commit itself to the Association Agreement with the EU. Given all these, a question may arise of how it was possible for Armenia to even begin negotiations with the EU over the Association Agreement. One could argue that Russia's relative 'tolerance' towards the EU and, particularly, the Eastern Partnership in earlier stages enabled Armenia to navigate between these two powers. Whereas Russia's mounting resentment towards Armenia-EU rapprochement posed acute challenges to the Association perspective.

⁸ Asbarez.com (2013), *Gas Price Reduced as Armenia Joins Customs Union* (retrieved from <http://asbarez.com/114797/gas-price-reduced-as-armenia-joins-customs-union/>).

Essentially, the notion of the small state and the acknowledgement of dire constraints of “smallness” in the turbulent South Caucasus region significantly affects the perception of friends and foes:

Just take a look on what’s going on around our country, in the region and in the constantly shrinking world. Armenia, like a small boat, has again found itself in the very midpoint of turbulence. A war right next door, closed borders, problems with external communications, convoluted regional relations, clashing interests of great powers – this is the world Armenia faces today (President.am, 2008).

It is in this context that Russia is broadly perceived as a pivotal security ally in Armenian political thinking given Russian-Armenian security relations.

Overall, there is a broad consensus among the representatives of Armenian political elite⁹ that the acute threats posed to Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey prompt to put heavy reliance on Russia. Thus, despite some resentment that Russian policy may generate, Armenia has to abstain from ‘provoking’ Russia’. Otherwise, the latter would ‘hit where it hurts’, by arming Azerbaijan, increasing gas prices or even mistreating the Armenian community in Russia (A1plus.am)¹⁰. It follows that Armenia has no choice but to abide by the rules determined by Kremlin.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the heavy fighting eruption between the Azerbaijani and Armenian armed forces in April 2016, President Sargsyan expressed his discontent with Russian military hardware supply to Azerbaijan and implicitly questioned the depth of the Armenian-Russian alliance. He particularly noted that: “Russia never played for Armenia the role that Turkey plays for Azerbaijan.” (Mediamax.am)¹¹.

Furthermore, in his subsequent statements, Sargsyan markedly hardened his position on the security ally, asserting that there could be no peacekeeping role for Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh (Bloomberg.com)¹².

Remarkably, in a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on April 6, 2016, Sargsyan exposed the severe pain caused by Russia, and Armenia’s vulnerability to Moscow’s coercion:

⁹ Note: several officials provided valuable insights, but asked not to be cited in an attributable way.

¹⁰ A1plus.am (2014), *We mustn’t play tricks with Russia: S. Saroyan* (retrieved from <http://en.a1plus.am/1201812.html>)

¹¹ Mediamax.am (2016), *Armenian President: “Russia is our ally, not patron”* (retrieved from http://www.mediamax.am/en/news/karabakh/17631/?fb_comment_id=1079724282091415_1079933415403835).

¹² Bloomberg.com (2016), *Caucasus war may resume at any moment* (retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-24/caucasus-war-may-resume-at-any-moment-armenian-president-says>).

Russia is our strategic partner indeed and we are in the same security structure – Collective Security Treaty Organization, and it is naturally painful for us when Russia sells arms to Azerbaijan. But, as you understand, our abilities to influence the process are limited (President.am, 2016).

Obviously, Sargsyan's 'updated' position towards Russia indicated the disillusionment with its coercive policy. Rather than aiding its friend in need, Moscow added fuel to the fire by equipping Azerbaijan with ample weaponry and ammunition to 'wreck' Armenia. Understandably, Sargsyan's disillusionment and criticism extended to both Russia and Russian-back CSTO, with its 'fair-weather' members. Well acknowledging Armenia's incapability of influencing the unfriendly behaviour of its strategic partner, Sargsyan concluded that the country could, in fact, rely only on its courageous army rather than its allies¹³.

Nevertheless, Sargsyan's critical position on Russia proved to have stemmed from temporary discontent, rather than from an in-depth review.

He even subsequently expressed his vast support for the most disputable and ambivalent aspects of Russian foreign policy, ranging from issues such as the Ukrainian crisis to that in Syria, etc.:

We highly value Russia's role in the world and particularly in our region where numerous processes, which have their impact on stability and security, are going on. Armenia has been watching closely the intensive foreign policy contacts of the President of Russia. I am confident that Armenia only benefits from a greater involvement of Russia in our region (President.am, 2016b).

Overall, the portrayal of Russia as Armenia's irreplaceable security ally in the face of regional hostilities, along with the above - mentioned scenarios of a hypothetical future prompted the Armenian political leadership to treat the Russia-led path as a rational and inevitable decision.

To sum up, in President Sargsyan-led discourse, Russia has been broadly framed as a pivotal security partner, security ally and even the core security actor in the region. Yet, along with Russia-related perceptions and beliefs, it is impossible to downgrade the importance of Russian coercive policy towards Armenia, which arguably left little room for advancing towards the EU.

2. The evolution of the EU's identity in the foreign policy discourse of Armenia

Under Sargsyan's presidency, Armenia's pursuit of European integration entered into a new-rhetorically promising and irreversible phase.

¹³ Armenpress.am (2016), *SerzhSargsyan: Power is not about modern weapons or number of tanks* (retrieved from <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/842457/serzh-sargsyan-power-is-not-about-modern-weapons-or-number-of-tanks.html>).

The Eastern Partnership, which opened up an EU Association perspective for the EU's Eastern partners, was welcomed by the Armenian political leadership. Sargsyan hailed it as a new impetus to Armenia's European integration, largely regarded as a recipe for peaceful, sustainable and democratic development (President.am, 2009).

A closer scrutiny of the President's discourse reveals the propensity to view European integration as Armenia's civilizational choice: "The people of Armenia have made their historic and irreversible choice. Our road to becoming closer to Europe has been unique in a natural way..." (President.am, 2011). Moreover, he invariably stated that Armenia's heritage, values, culture and identity make the Armenian nation an indivisible part of Europe, constituting the cornerstone of Armenia's policy of European integration (President.am, 2012). In essence, there has been a tendency in Armenia's foreign policy discourse to regard the EU as a normative and liberal actor, which has ample 'soft' tools to challenge the hard power politics in the South Caucasus region.

Most Armenian political parties, the government and parliament shared Sargsyan's position on Armenia's European foreign policy identity and the necessity to adhere to the path of European integration. Namely, former Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamyan has consistently supported the European path of development as Armenia's civilizational choice.

Armenia's European policy is a result of realized choice, which is anchored on our general value system, rich cultural and Christian heritage. Yes, Armenia is an inseparable part of European civilization with its past, as well as with its present, by assuming its commitment to the establishment of democracy, rule of law, fundamental freedoms and protection of human rights (Parliament.am, 2013).

Even Sargsyan's staunch opponent – Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who was Armenia's former president and leader of the opposition Armenian National Congress (ANC) - did not question the path to European integration. He agreed with it provided the best chance at free and democratic development (Armeniandiaspora.com)¹⁴.

Remarkably, President Sargsyan has tended to regard the EU as a normative and peace promoting actor, capable of fostering peace and development in the South Caucasus:

Nowadays, Europe has become a synonym of tolerance, constructive approaches, and peaceful resolutions. We aspire for the Eastern Partnership to enforce that perception of Europe. We want the initiative to be successful and

¹⁴ Armeniandiaspora.com (2008), *Ter-Petrosian Appeals For Western Support* (retrieved from <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/showthread.php?123782-Ter-Petrosian-Appeals-For-Western-Support>).

to prove that policies based on the system of values are able to bring exceptional and unexpected results (President.am, 2009).

In Armenia's foreign policy discourse, the EU's uniqueness is inextricably linked to its commitment to extending its values to its neighbourhood, with the vision of transforming it into an area of security, prosperity and stability.

The notion of peace promoter is inherently linked to that of normative actor. Sargsyan has tended to attach critical importance to the EU's mounting engagement with its turbulent neighbour, the South Caucasus region. As a powerful actor, the EU's ground-breaking mission would have a crucial role in breaking the deadlock in the Armenian-Azerbaijani troubled relations and particularly in the Nagorno – Karabakh conflict settlement (Terzyan 2016c, pp. 168-169). This would occur gradually, acquiring salience due to the successful implementation of the EU's ENP and EaP initiatives.

In President's words, the EU could significantly contribute to conflict resolution by promoting democracy and laying ground for democratic interstate dialogue; advancing trust-building measures through people-to-people contact and joint undertakings aimed at expanding the areas of common interests, and most importantly, intensifying its engagement with Azerbaijan and ensuring that the latter complies with 'European rules'. Therefore, policies of rapprochement with Europe are not only an axis of internal reforms, but also a pivot of the foreign policy agenda':

We attach importance to the EU's involvement in Armenia and South Caucasus not only because the EU is a global player, but primarily because it is the best model of nations' peaceful, secure and sustainable development. Our vision of the South Caucasus's fully-fledged development is anchored in the values and understanding which made Europe's success possible (President.am, 2012).

It follows that the EU has been conceived as a superior and normative actor, which, owing to its success story, has a historic mission to 'civilize' its fragile neighbours, suffering severe constraints of acute self-destructive interstate conflicts.

The National Security Strategy of Armenia stresses the necessity of boosting partnership with the EU, given that the latter is resolutely committed to promoting democracy, enhancing the rule of law and protecting human rights in Armenia and beyond. Besides, as a major global economic and political power, the EU's regional initiatives are deemed crucial for mitigating volatility in the South Caucasus and preparing ground for lasting stability and intensifying cooperation (MFA.am, 2007).

In fact, in the early stages of the EU's external policy intensification in its neighbourhood, Armenia's foreign policy - makers tended to conceive the EU as a global power, powerful enough to promote peace and stability region (President.am, 2012).

The President has placed great weight on the EaP, regarding it as an ambitious and mutually obligating initiative, designed to translate the EU's lofty

neighbourhood policy goals into tangible outcomes in the South Caucasus and beyond:

We enter this process with the aspiration to make our markets more accessible for each other, to foster dialogue between our peoples and our societies, to jointly shape our future, and to mutually enrich our cultures. I am confident, we will succeed (President.am, 2009).

As noted earlier, peace promotion has been closely linked to democracy promotion in the region and particularly to putting the dictatorial regime of Azerbaijan on the path to democracy. The latter, as noted earlier, has been regarded as indispensable by Sargsyan to conflict settlement. Nevertheless, despite its positive image, EU-related expectations considerably narrowed down in Armenian political thinking chiefly because of its heightened emphasis on energy diversification-related projects and ensuing enhancement of the bilateral energy partnership with Azerbaijan, particularly since 2011. Evidence indicates that the EU-Azerbaijan tailor-made intensifying bilateral energy partnership has been negatively correlated with the fulfilment of Azerbaijan's commitments namely in the spheres of democracy, human rights protection, good governance, market liberalization reforms, etc. (Terzyan, 2014, pp. 213-218). Remarkably, the ENP reports stressed acute shortcomings in Azerbaijan with regard to the deficit of democratic reforms, alarming that "No legislation was adopted to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms... Only limited progress was reached in the fight against corruption and there was a lack of coherence in initiatives and continuing actions" (EEAS, 2015).

This leads to the conclusion that the EU proved incapable to convey its liberal spirit to Azerbaijan and to rekindle energy interests with its broader development policy agenda with the view to democracy promotion and conflict settlement.

Ironically, in 2009, shortly after the intensification of the EU-Azerbaijan negotiations, contrary to its commitments assumed within the Eastern Partnership, Azerbaijan embarked on constitutional reforms which abolished presidential term limits. According to Kostanyan, Azerbaijan's increasing assertiveness is a challenge to the EU, which has a difficulty in bringing the energy partnership in line with the EU's broader development policy agenda. Moreover, he noted that the search for an appropriate strategy for dealing with Azerbaijan is one of the most divisive issues among member states, External Action Service (EAS) and DG Energy (Kostanyan, 2015). Admittedly, while the latter would emphasize the priority of the energy partnership, asserting that other policy areas, whether pertaining to democracy promotion or market liberalization, have got to take a back seat to energy interests, EAS would stress the necessity of an energy policy, consistent with the EU's broader development policy (Terzyan, 2016c, p. 170).

Essentially, the challenge for the EU is how to deal with Azerbaijan which, emboldened by the growing relevance of its energy potential, breaches its democracy promotion-related commitments, intensifying massive crackdown on fundamental

human rights and freedoms (Freedomhouse, 2014). The lack of coherence among the EU, compounded by its limited toolbox vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, inevitably militates against the EU's development policy.

Not surprisingly, President Sargsyan started to express deep concerns on the possible dire consequences of the shift in the EU-Azerbaijan bilateral energy partnership.

We do comprehend the imperative for the EU member states to ensure energy security and diversification of supply sources. At the same time, we have the right to anticipate the same comprehension of the issue related to the security of our country, regarding the stability and even development of our region (President.am, 2011b).

He particularly focused on the imbalance produced by deepening the bilateral energy partnership, which further increases Azerbaijan's assertiveness and leads it to translate energy revenues into military build-up. Deeming this detrimental to regional stability, Sargsyan expressed hope that "the EU is fully aware of the fragile situation in the region. The South corridor must not become a new source for nourishing war" (President.am, 2011). A close scrutiny of Sargsyan's discourse suggests that the shift in the EU-Azerbaijan energy partnership negatively influenced his conception of the EU. The latter was implicitly blamed for incoherence and inconsistency, say inability to reconcile energy interests with its broader development policy, as well as low regard for Armenia's security needs. Namely, at the third Summit of the European People's Party (EPP) Eastern Partnership Leaders in July, 2013 he touched upon the dire consequences of energy partnership, and particularly Azerbaijan's penchant for 'translating energy cooperation into energy dictate' with the obvious intent to hurt Armenia (President, 2013).

Sargsyan's position on the EU markedly hardened after Armenia's membership in the EAEU. In an attempt to justify the U-turn, Sargsyan explicitly questioned the effectiveness of the EaP, pointing to its three core shortcomings: the unclear criterion of grouping partners; lack of powerful incentives for Azerbaijan to move beyond the energy partnership and comply with the EU policies as well as its irrelevance to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement. The President particularly pointed to huge differences between Eastern partners, their goals and approaches, which ultimately rendered the regional cooperation component of the EaP infeasible: "I still do not understand the criterion of grouping Armenia and Azerbaijan into one partnership – different opportunities, different approaches, different goals – and this is the reason that component did not work" (President.am, 2014a).

He concluded that the EU's incapability of softening the hostile policies of Azerbaijan and Turkey towards Armenia tremendously obstructed the latter's European integration. Thus, the EaP proved largely unfit for translating its vision of united Europe, free of dividing lines, stable and prosperous into reality (President.am, 2014b).

Furthermore, Sargsyan's statements lead to the conclusion that the EU's lack of strategic foresight about the repercussions of its 'interference' in the sphere of Russia's privileged interests has further fuelled instability in the volatile Eastern neighbourhood (Terzyan, 2016c, p.171).

Remarkably, Sargsyan used the strategy of a 'hypothetical future' to legitimize Armenia's U-turn, by citing the unwillingness to encounter the acute consequences facing Ukraine due to its pursuit of the Association Agreement with the EU:

The Ukrainian crisis has indicated that misperception of the root causes of the current situation can call further proceeding of the Eastern Partnership into question. Armenia joined the Eastern Partnership with a deep conviction that it is not directed against any third country. It is necessary to find solutions by means of a dialogue that takes into account the interests of all regional beneficiaries (President.am, 2014 a).

It follows that by joining the EAEU, Armenia did not advocate for the 'destabilizing' policy of the EU and abstained from 'provoking' Russia. Meanwhile, the EU was implicitly regarded as anti-Russian actor.

Moreover, Armenia's foreign minister, Edward Nalbandian, went as far as to blame the EU for putting constraints on bilateral partnership and inducing Armenia to choose between the Association Agreement with the DCFTA provisions and the EAEU:

We were told we had to make a choice, even a civilizational choice. Armenia made its civilization choice centuries ago and did not need to make another one. We wanted to sign the Association Agreement, but without the DCFTA provisions, but we were told this was not possible and that the Association Agreement was incompatible with the EAEU membership¹⁵.

Clearly, in an attempt to justify U-turn, Armenia's foreign policy - makers started to overstress the shortcomings of the EaP and the frailty of the EU's neighbourhood policy tools.

Overall, by citing the inconsistencies and shortcomings of the EU policy, Sargsyan consistently strived to depict the choice of the Russia-led path as a rational decision. The portrayal of Russia as Armenia's irreplaceable security ally with simultaneous magnification of the shortcomings of the EU policy was placed at the heart of the legitimization strategy.

Consistent with the official discourse, public opinion surveys across the Armenian population suggest that positive attitudes towards the EU considerably changed from 2012 to 2014. More precisely, the positive image of the EU across the

¹⁵ Commonsplace.eu (2015), Nalbandian Blames EU for Armenia Not Signing Association Agreement in 2013 (retrieved from <http://commonsplace.eu/eng/news/6/id3299>).

Armenian population dropped from 49% percent in 2012 to 40% percent in 2014 while the negative attitudes towards the EU rose by 8 % and reached 25% within the given timeframe (Galstyan, 2015, pp. 214-216). Nevertheless, the latest survey conducted by EU NEIGHBOURS east project suggests that the positive attitudes towards the EU have been on the rise and reached 48% in 2016. In the meantime, the positive image of the EAEU across the Armenian population dropped from 67% in 2013 to 43% in 2016 (Panarmenian.net, 2017). Admittedly, the inactivity of security allies - Russia and other members of the EAEU and CSTO throughout the heavy fighting between Azerbaijani and Armenian armed forces in April 2016 negatively influenced the perception of Russia-led unions.

Clearly, public support is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of the EU's development policy and boosting the EU-Armenia partnership. Meanwhile, public opinion surveys conducted in 2014-2015 suggest that around 30 percent of respondents were fully ignorant of the EU and even deemed Armenia to be a EU member state (Galstyan, 2015, p. 215). Obviously, they did not distinguish the EU from the Council of Europe. One could argue that notwithstanding the EU's effort to foster development and promote reforms in Armenia, its activities do not get sufficient visibility. When asked whether the EU is capable to address the widespread ignorance prevalent about itself and its activities across the Armenian population, a EU official from the External Action Service noted that the EU focuses on substance rather than style. Besides, highlighting the EU-backed reforms and its transformative power may well provoke pro-Russian circles resolutely striving to portray Russia as Armenia's best friend and indispensable ally (Interview with official 2, 2016)¹⁶. Arguably, this line of thinking seems to candidly admit the fragility of the EU 'normative' policy tools in the face of the Russian coercive policy particularly towards Armenia.

Overall, one might conclude that the EU's 'normative agenda' proved impracticable in its volatile neighbourhood. The EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, aptly noted that the most arduous challenge for the EU is to mitigate volatility in the EU's neighbourhood and stabilize it, given that it has degenerated from a ring of friends to one of fire or volcano (Hahn, 2015).

Not surprisingly, the reviewed ENP places great weight on stabilization as its main political priority, striving to extend the EU's model of stability, built on democracy, human rights and the rule of law and economic openness to its troublesome neighbourhood. Therefore, it commits the EU to do more in terms of promoting democratic reforms in its neighbourhood, deeming vibrant civil society and independent justice system essential for economic and social stability (European Commission, 2015). A EU official from the External Action Service pointed out in the interview that democracy promotion and related democratic reforms are pivotal

¹⁶ Interview with an EEAS official 2, Brussels, 15 January 2016.

to elevating a neighbour's status for the EU and boosting the partnership. Moreover, the lack of democratic reforms is viewed as a red-line for the EU, namely, it interferes with all other areas of cooperation (Interview with official 1, 2015)¹⁷.

The question remains of whether and to what extent the constraints determined by the Russia-led EAEU would enable Armenia to comply with the provisions of the reviewed ENP and boost the prospects of further partnership with the EU.

Conclusion

The conceptions of the EU's and Russia's identities have experienced considerable ups and downs in Armenian foreign policy discourse. During President Sargsyan's presidency, Russia has been chiefly framed as a strategic partner, security ally, as well as the core security actor, whose involvement in the region benefits Armenia. On the contrary, before and especially after the U-turn the conception of the EU shifted from overly positive frames, such as – normative power and peace promoter to critical ones – alluding chiefly to its inconsistent, incoherent and anti-Russian policy. Essentially, in an attempt to justify Armenia's U-turn, Sargsyan markedly hardened his position on the EU by citing the inconsistencies and shortcomings of its policy and regarding the EaP as irrelevant to the country's security needs. Moreover, he implicitly blamed the EU for provoking Russia, by exemplifying the devastation unleashed on Ukraine.

Yet, in the official discourse, Armenia has been invariably framed as an indivisible part of Europe, with the EU regarded as the country's historic and civilizational choice. While no identity-related reference has been made to Russia, the membership in the Russia-led EAEU was hailed as a 'rational' rather than a civilizational choice.

Essentially, Russia has been largely portrayed as an irreplaceable security ally in the face of hostile policies of Azerbaijan and Turkey towards Armenia. President Sargsyan frequently employed the strategy of a 'hypothetical future' to legitimize the choice of the Russia-led path. More precisely, there has been a strong emphasis on the security implications of the decision, coupled with the unwillingness to 'incite Russia's ire'. The latter would take devastating forms, such as increasing gas prices for Armenia, arming its enemy, Azerbaijan, mistreating Armenian community in Russia or even staging a Ukraine-style nightmare scenario. It is for these reasons that the decision of joining the EAEA was widely conceived as a rational one in Armenian political thinking.

Overall, Armenia's deviation from the identity driven path to the EU has been broadly justified in terms of the country's economic and, particularly, security needs, which led to treat Russia as an indispensable ally. Moreover, even though the uninterrupted supply of Russian military hardware to Armenia's fiercest foe,

¹⁷ Interview with an External Action Service (EEAS) official 1, Brussels, 3.12.2015.

Azerbaijan, has at times prompted President Sargsyan to adopt a critical stance on the ally's 'stab in the back'; he would not go as far as to question the irreplaceability of the security alliance. Essentially, the ruling elite's and particularly President's conception of Armenia as a 'small boat', an extremely vulnerable and fragile country in the face of Turkish – Azerbaijani belligerence, in many ways explains the frame of Russia as a pivotal security ally.

Yet, it is impossible to downgrade the importance of Russian coercive policy, which arguably left little room for Armenia to achieve a Russian-European balance.

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