

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratisation
A.Y. 2015/2016

QUESTIONING THE EU'S NORMATIVE POWER IN AZERBAIJAN

An assessment of the EU's democracy promotion programmes from the
recipients' perspective

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ABSTRACT

Although the academic literature has already largely dealt with the EU democracy promotion, notably towards its Neighbourhood, little attention has been granted to laggard countries in terms of human rights and democracy, including Azerbaijan. The country's human rights record is worrisome and worsening, especially since the 2014 crackdown on the civil society. Drawing on the concept of Normative Power Europe and relying on qualitative interviews, this thesis questions the extent to which the EU remains a normative power in Azerbaijan, considering both the concrete achievements of the EU on the ground and their assessment by representatives of the Azerbaijani civil society. The present contribution underlines the importance of taking into account the recipients' perspective(s) for the analysis of democracy promotion programmes. This research reveals that the EU's democracy promotion agenda does not follow a unique approach but that the different EU institutions favour distinct instruments to foster democratisation in Azerbaijan. It also appears that EU institutions have not consistently enforced their democracy promotion programmes. The local civil society, while praising the EU's narrative, awaits more commitment and more implementation from the regional organisation. Local democracy promoters advocate for a tougher stance from the EU, involving stronger conditionality mechanisms and sanctions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Time has now come to express my thanks to the many people who have helped me along the way and contributed to the realisation of this thesis, which has certainly been, on the academic as well as on the human level, a very enriching experience.

I first would like to warmly thank my supervisor, Dr. Maria Malksöo, for her advice, continual availability, and support. My gratefulness goes likewise to the many people who took time to exchange and share their views with me: Avaz Hasanov, Turgut Gambar, Ilyas Safarli, Celia Davies, Zaur Akbar, Jeyhun Veliyev, Elvin Yusifli, as well as the EU officials and NGOs representatives who agreed to take part in this research.

Many thanks also to my family (brothers included), and especially to my parents, without which I would probably not have developed such an acute interest for human rights nor would I have been able to study this programme. Thank you for your continuous support to my projects, also when they take me far away from home.

I also thank the fellow students I had the privilege and pleasure to study with during those two semesters: my very soul sisters, Herman and Vaclav, for sharing puzzle (un)competence and knowledge about cottage cheese. I also thank Lili for feeding me with food and sometimes thoughts, and Georgie for pretending to laugh at my jokes without understanding my very Essex English pronunciation. The writing process of this thesis has been much easier at your side!

A huge hug to all the friends I cannot name here and who have been of constant support, also when I would need weeks to send some signs of life. And a special thank to Paul, for being at my side while living thousands of kilometres away, and for providing me with some thoughtful advice (for change ;)) for this thesis.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AP	Action Plan
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSF	Civil Society Forum
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DG	Directorate-General
DG NEAR	Directorate-General Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
EEAS	European External Action Service
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
EUSR	European Union Special Representative
FPI	service for Foreign Policy Instruments
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
HRD	Human Rights Defender
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPE	Normative Power Europe
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
TEU	Treaty on the European Union
USA	United states of America

INTRODUCTION

I. Rationale for research on EU democracy promotion in Azerbaijan

Despite the “third wave of democratization” identified by Huntington,¹ democracy has until today not become the “only game in town”² worldwide. Admittedly, Huntington already warned in 1991 that “the third wave, the 'global democratic revolution' of the late twentieth century, will not last forever. It may be followed by a new surge of authoritarianism.”³ And as Carothers indeed pointed out, “by far the majority of third-wave countries have not achieved relatively well-functioning democracy or do not seem to be deepening or advancing whatever democratic progress they have made. In a small number of countries, initial political openings have clearly failed and authoritarian regimes have resolidified”.⁴ He adds that some “countries have hardly democratized at all”.⁵ Azerbaijan appears to fall under this last category: after a short period of political liberalisation following the 1991 independence of the country, authoritarian practices have dismantled the democratic progress achieved, and a transition to democracy has not happened. Today, the human rights record and democratic situation in Azerbaijan remain far from shiny and have even worsened in the last decade, despite the release of fifteen prominent Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and journalists in Spring 2016. Seventy-six other HRDs, members of the political opposition and civic movements' leaders are still behind bars, and democratic standards are continuously largely violated in Azerbaijan.⁶ Whereas the civil society is impeded from developing due to a restrictive legal framework, suffering under a heavy crackdown conducted by the authorities, the flawed 2015 parliamentary elections have consolidated President Ilham Aliyev's grip on power at the head of a regime qualified

1 Huntington, 1991, p. 12.

2 Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 15.

3 Huntington, 1991, p. 33.

4 Carothers, 2002, p. 9.

5 Carothers, 2002, p. 14.

6 Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2016.

as authoritarian by international reports.⁷ For Zaur Akbar, Azerbaijani human rights defender: “there is [neither] democracy nor human rights in my country”.⁸

In his 1991 well-known article, Huntington underlined the role of external actors, notably the European Community and the United States of America (USA) in accompanying and supporting the third wave of democratisation.⁹ The European Community, first pushing for democratisation in Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Greece), has extended its democratisation programmes to the Eastern European countries formerly belonging to the USSR. Affirming its adhesion and attachment to democratic norms and human rights principles in the 1973 Copenhagen declaration on European identity, the European Community, and then its successor the European Union (EU) have repeatedly proclaimed their will to promote human rights within the Member States, but also beyond their boundaries – leading Manners to qualify the EU as a “normative power”.¹⁰ The Treaty of Lisbon has furthermore reaffirmed the centrality of democracy and human rights in the EU's policies. Article 21(2) indicates that “the Union shall define and pursue common policies and actions [...] in order to: (b) consolidate and support democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law”.

Considering the proclaimed will of the EU to promote democracy and human rights both in its internal and external policies, it is of interest to analyse the extent to which this will is reflected in the EU's policy towards the Azerbaijani authoritarian regime. The cooperation with Azerbaijan's authorities, ongoing since the independence of the country from the Soviet Union in 1991, encompasses many areas, including democracy and human rights.¹¹ Without assigning the responsibility of the lack of democratic progress in Azerbaijan to the EU, which is only one of the many actors taking part in the complex process of democratisation, it appears relevant, against the background of the alarming and worsening human rights situation in Azerbaijan, to go back to the basics of the EU democracy promotion in the country and to question

7 Center for Systemic Peace, 2014; Freedom House, 2016.

8 Interview conducted with Zaur Akbar over Skype, Baku, 18 May 2016.

9 Huntington, 1991, p. 14.

10 Manners, 2002.

11 European Union, Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999; European Commission, 2006.

whether the EU's approach is likely to push for a democratic transformation in Azerbaijan. The study of the Azerbaijani situation will furthermore enable to address more general issues related to the EU actorness. According to Bridoux and Kurki, “The EU is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a normative power in its democracy promotion”.¹² The present contribution verifies this assumption from several perspectives: first, this case-study assesses the relevance of the concept of normative power to qualify the EU in the Azerbaijani context, hence enriching the research on the nature of the EU as a foreign policy actor; second, the perception of the EU will be addressed in this paper, as the opinion(s) of representatives of local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) on the EU democracy promotion will be considered; third, this analysis contributes to further analyse the dilemma between the promotion of values and the pursuit of economic and energy interests, reflecting on the contradictions of the EU's self-description as an organisation committed to the defence of human rights and democratic values.

II. State of the literature

A. Review of the literature on democracy promotion and EU's normative power

The literature elaborating on external democracy promotion is directly related to the literature on transitions towards democracy. Emerging in the second half of the 20th century, the transitology literature has nonetheless first mainly concentrated on the internal dynamics of the transition process, elaborating upon diverse models: Lipset's modernisation approaches linking socio-economic development and democratisation,¹³ the agent-based approach to democratisation developed by O'Donnell and Schmitter,¹⁴ etc. The first generation of democratisation studies has thus only granted scarce attention to international actors' influence on the domestic transformation processes. Only in the late 1990's and 2000's, the academia has begun to consider the external

12 Bridoux & Kurki, 2014, p. 6.

13 Lipset, 1959.

14 O'Donnell, Schmitter, Whitehead, 1986.

actors' impact and importance, through concepts such as “contagion, control, consent”,¹⁵ or along Jacoby's typology “inspiration, coalition, substitution”.¹⁶ Those different approaches, underlying internal and/or external factors of democratisation, contradict the assertion of Przeworski and Limongi that “democracy appears exogenously as a *deus ex machina*”.¹⁷

The influence of both internal and external (f)actors in the democratisation process being recognised by the literature, scholars have elaborated from the 2000's onwards on the European Communities as a democracy promoter, along different perspectives. Only the main trends will here be evoked, so as to give an overview of the research angles adopted to analyse democracy and human rights promotion by the EU. The Academia has first focused on the democracy promotion programmes developed by the EU towards its Southern and Eastern Neighbours in the context of the EU enlargement – so Schimmelfennig, Engert and Knobel for instance, elaborating on the socialisation power of the EU towards the so-called accession countries.¹⁸ Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier,¹⁹ as well as Grabbe,²⁰ have also analysed the transformative power of the EU in Central and Eastern Europe. Concurrent with the EU expansion and the development of its foreign policy, scholars have extended their spheres of interest to the potential of EU's association programmes, like the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), to promote democracy and human rights.²¹ To the difference of the enlargement process, those new association programmes do not aim at preparing the entry of the partner countries into the EU, and they raise the question whether the EU has the capacity to trigger democratic transformation without its main “carrot”, the membership perspective.

15 Whitehead, 2001, p. 4.

16 Jacoby, 2006, p. 623.

17 Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 159.

18 Schimmelfennig, Engert, Knobl, 2006.

19 Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005.

20 Grabbe, 2006.

21 See among others: Bosse, 2007; Beichelt, 2007; Ghazaryan, 2014.

The literature has also dealt with questions pertaining to the essence of the EU's democracy and human rights promotion programmes, encompassing the motives of the EU to promote democracy, the type of democracy promoted, the results achieved, etc. Investigating the EU democracy promotion is also related to the characterisation of the EU as an international actor: Manners has thus elaborated on the Normative Power Europe theory, asserting that the EU's specificity is to promote norms and values on the world stage.²² The view of the EU as a norm-driven and norm-promoter actor has however been challenged. If “democracy promotion is a value-driven agenda” for Bridoux and Kurki, “democracy promotion is never a policy agenda pursued on its own, in isolation or without wider considerations in mind.”²³ Other foreign policy interests, as stability, commercial or economic concerns, may affect the EU's promotion of democratic norms. The discrepancy between the EU's democracy promotion discourse and its actual policies towards third countries has also been demonstrated in several contexts: Pace has shown “the limits of EU normative power” in the Mediterranean countries;²⁴ similarly, Balfour has identified a lack of coherence in the EU's democracy promotion programmes in Ukraine and Egypt.²⁵ This thesis will further investigate the concrete operationalisation of the EU's normative power, concentrating on the Azerbaijani context.

B. Existing research on the EU human rights and democracy promotion in Azerbaijan

Case studies approaching the EU democracy promotion have so far mainly dealt with accession countries or countries closely linked with the EU, such as the frontrunners of the ENP or of its regional variations, the ENP South and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Böttger and Falkenheim thus deplore that “the potential of the European Neighbourhood Policy to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Eastern Europe has so far mainly been analysed by the example of *most likely cases*, Ukraine and Moldova being the most prominent ones in the EU's Eastern

22 Manners, 2002.

23 Bridoux & Kurki, 2014, p. 41-42.

24 Pace, 2009.

25 Balfour, 2012.

Neighbourhood”, letting aside the “*least likely cases*”²⁶ corresponding to the authoritarian neighbours of the EU, among with Azerbaijan. Indeed, if Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and think tanks have produced – critical – analyses of the EU's foreign policy towards Azerbaijan and its democracy promotion programmes, often underlining its deficiencies and double standards,²⁷ academic research has been rather scarce.

Gahramanova has identified both domestic and international factors explaining the absence of democratisation in Azerbaijan, elaborating on the restricted political space, on the poor resources of the civil society, as well as on the insufficient political pressure exerted by Western actors, who have “prioritized economic interests with regard to Azerbaijan’s energy resources, rather than long-term civil society development and democratization.”²⁸ The prioritisation of economic and energy policies as well as the bias in favour of stability over democracy have also been identified by Börzel, Pamuk and Stahn in their article analysing the US and EU democracy promotion approaches in the Southern Caucasus.²⁹ Shirinov has come to a similar conclusion in his overview of the Azerbaijan-EU relations, stating that “the EU has lowered its expectations with regard to Azerbaijan, and political stability inside the country is becoming a higher priority.”³⁰ Boonstra, reviewing the EU-Azerbaijani cooperation, argues on his side that “so far, the ENP in Azerbaijan has been strong on democracy and human rights rhetoric but woefully weak on substance. The EU risks losing credibility over its supposedly core values, its best means of ‘attraction’ in Azerbaijan.”³¹ Other scholars have concentrated on the achievements due to the EU's democracy promotion programmes: Babayan suggests an explanation for the limited results reached by the EU and the US in regard to democratic and human rights' progress in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia along a post-constructivist approach.³² A similar approach is followed by Alieva, who

26 Böttger & Falkenhain, 2011, p. 7.

27 See Hale, 2012; Merabishvili, 2015; Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety, 2013; Alieva, 2016.

28 Gahramanova, 2009, p. 796.

29 Börzel, Pamuk, Stahn, 2009, p. 177.

30 Shirinov, 2011, p. 80.

31 Boonstra, 2008, p. 142.

32 Babayan, 2015.

analyses the factors for the “EU's uneven soft power influence on the Eastern Neighbourhood”, notably focusing on Azerbaijan.³³ Additionally, Tartes argues that, as the incentives proposed by the EU are too weak, Azerbaijani elites consider the process of democratisation too costly.³⁴

While being valuable and welcomed contributions, those publications generally fall short of analysing the EU's democracy programmes in great details. The findings of Boonstra, as well as of Börzel, Pamuk and Stahn also need to be updated. Further gaps can be identified in the academic literature dealing with EU democracy promotion in Azerbaijan. First, in most of the works mentioned, the EU democracy promotion is approached through the angle of the ENP or EaP, hence overlooking the democracy and human rights promotion activities led outside of those frameworks. The existing research, concentrating on the analysis of the 2006 EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan or on the allocations granted to Azerbaijan under the Eastern Partnership initiative, largely omits important aspects of the EU's democracy promotion activities in the Azerbaijani Republic, such as the European Parliament resolutions on Azerbaijan. This thesis however argues that those resolutions are of great importance and should be considered in order to issue an as comprehensive overview as possible. The European Parliament remains an important actor, referred to as a “champion of human rights and democracy promotion”³⁵ within the EU institutional framework, notably playing an important role in the public diplomacy of the EU. Several resolutions adopted by the European Parliament on Azerbaijan, condemning the human rights violations and the democratic shortcomings of the regime, have moreover been welcomed by the Azerbaijani civil society and perceived as an important stance.³⁶ The first gap in the existing literature is therefore a lack of exhaustiveness in the analysis of the EU's democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan. Second, the literature on democracy promotion – also beyond the Azerbaijani case – often concentrates on an EU-centred perspective, letting

33 Alieva, 2016.

34 Tartes, 2015.

35 Wouters, Beke, Chané, D'Hollander, Raube, 2014, p. 23.

36 See chapter 4, III, A, 2.

aside the recipients' side. Jonasson thus indicates in her analysis of the EU democracy promotion in the Mediterranean countries that “several articles and books discuss why democracy promoters act, how they act, what they do etc. while less focus has generally been bestowed on the recipient countries and the prerequisites for success of democracy promotion policies within a specific country.”³⁷ Certainly, Böttger and Falkenhain focus on the Azerbaijani civil society actors in their analysis of the implementation of the ENP.³⁸ However, the frame of their research has been limited to the democracy assistance targeting the civil society and does not take into account the entire democracy promotion agenda of the EU.

The present paper will try to address those gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the EU's overt democracy promotion activities in Azerbaijan and by granting to local civil society organisations representatives a say, not to consider them only as subjects of the analysis but also as participating actors in the assessment of the EU's democracy promotion activities in Azerbaijan. The methodological framework will further elaborate on the importance of taking into consideration local actors' views.

III. Research questions and methodological framework

A. Research questions and scope of the analysis

The main research question which will guide the analysis is as follows:

How do local democracy promoters assess the EU's normative power in Azerbaijan and its capacity to foster democratic transformation in the country?

The aim of this thesis is therefore to identify the substance of the EU's democracy promotion programmes and to assess its potential in fostering democratisation in Azerbaijan.

37 Jonasson, 2013, p. 9.

38 Böttger & Falkenhain, 2011.

Following the presentation of the concept of Normative Power Europe, underpinned by the EU democracy promotion's legal background as well as of by the different EU mechanisms to promote democracy and human rights abroad, this contribution will identify the tools and channels mobilised by the EU to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan. Their relevance within the Azerbaijani context, understood as their impact on democratic transformation, will then be assessed from the perspective(s) of local human rights activists and civil society organisations – gathered through interviews. This paper will therefore link the question of the EU as a normative player in Azerbaijan with the perception of local democracy and human rights promoters.

This research concentrates on the democracy promotion policies such as elaborated by the EU institutions. The present paper will not primarily deal with the motives of the EU to promote democracy in general and in that particular region. Neither will its other foreign policy orientations be thoroughly investigated, but merely incidentally dealt with when serving the purposes of the analysis. Along the same approach as followed by Balfour, this thesis “takes as its starting point the EU's declared policy of promoting human rights and democracy in its neighbourhood.”³⁹

Democracy and human rights have widely discussed definitions and this thesis does not aim at entering into the debate. Both concepts will therefore be considered from the EU definitions' perspective, which will be discussed in the first chapter. Within this thesis, will be meant under the EU democracy and human rights promotion solely the EU institutions' “explicit attempt to directly establish or advance democracy as a regime type in a target country.”⁴⁰ The analysis will therefore only covers the overt and so-labelled democracy promotion activities. Policies promoting economical development, health or education, although they may indirectly contribute to democratisation, will not be taken into account in the analysis. Similarly, unofficial, covert or behind closed doors activities of the EU, per definition uneasy to investigate, will be let out of the scope of this contribution.

39 Balfour, 2007, p. 8.

40 Van Hüllen & Stahn, 2007, p. 2.

This thesis will only focus on the EU institutions, leaving out the particular strategies, actions and interests of the individual member states or of other regional and international organisations such as the Council of Europe. The analysis will specifically concentrate over the time period 2006-mid-2016. Even if the scope of the analysis is centred neither on the ENP nor on the EaP, the 2006 Action Plan (AP) remains the legal basis for EU-Azerbaijan relationships and is therefore taken as the benchmark for the beginning of the analysis. The period 1991-2006 will also be addressed to the extent it enriches the understanding of the current situation.

Both the case-study format chosen and the interview-based method question the validity of a generalisation of the findings. The ambition of this thesis does not exceed Azerbaijan's particular context and its findings only apply for the country, even if the present research may include relevant elements for the study of the EU's democracy promotion programmes in other countries, notably in the five other states participating in the Eastern Partnership framework. Therefore, any generalisation beyond the Azerbaijan's context would not be grounded; further research would have to show the extent to which the results collected for Azerbaijan reflect a similar situation in other countries.

The present research underlines the importance of taking into account the perspective(s) of recipients and local actors: this paper argues that recipients' views should be considered when analysing the relevance of democracy and human rights promotion programmes, all the more so as local actors are often excluded from the elaboration of those programmes. Jonasson quotes Schmitter and Brouwer to deplore the lack of involvement of the recipients in the conception of democracy promotion programmes, stating that “[t]he donor [...] has to decide which [...] transition to democracy it prefers to take place”.⁴¹ Such an approach is nonetheless problematic: it often renders the conception of country-sensitive democracy promotion policies more difficult, leading to so-called and so-criticised “one-size-fits-all” approaches.⁴²

41 Schmitter & Brouwer, quoted in Jonasson, 2013, p. 10.

42 Börzel & Risse, 2004.

Moreover, Jonasson, drawing on the principle of ownership, asserts that:

For democracy promotion to have a lasting effect, i.e. true (as opposed to pseudo) democratisation of the country, it needs to have at least some support in the recipient country (in the state, the political society, the civil society and/or among individual citizens, depending on strategy).⁴³

This idea is supported by Jacoby, who has introduced the “coalition approach”⁴⁴: Analysing the literature on democracy promotion, he asserts that “external influences can almost never have any real purchase unless they operate in tandem with domestic influences.”⁴⁵ The resonance with local actors' opinions and orientations – whether in the government or within the civil society – is indeed crucial for external democracy promotion to play a tangible role in the target country: “External influences matter precisely where they best connect with domestic processes, not where they act independently.”⁴⁶ Solonenko draws similar conclusions:

[I]n order to succeed, the external pressure has to be matched by strong reform coalitions inside a partner country. The external actors, including the EU, can at best support domestic actors, structures and processes that already have a potential to foster reforms, but not replace them.⁴⁷

In that perspective, assessing the extent to which internal democracy promoters from the Azerbaijani civil society do support the EU's programmes seems essential. Considering Azerbaijan's specificities through the lens of some of its civil society organisations will also give to the present work a more clearer “appreciation of complex variations in the structure of third countries' domestic policies”, which Youngs has identified as “the key starting point”.⁴⁸ Finally, this paper will contribute to further investigate what Larsen deplored as the “missing link” between the analysis of the “EU as a normative power” and the “research on external perceptions”⁴⁹. Larsen notably argues that for the EU to be labelled as a normative power, the organisation should be recognised as such by third actors.

43 Jonasson, 2009, p. 6.

44 Jacoby, 2006, p. 625.

45 Jacoby, 2006, p. 626.

46 Jacoby, 2006, pp. 639-640.

47 Solonenko, 2010, p. 5.

48 Youngs, 2009, p. 913.

49 Larsen, 2014, p. 896.

The present paper will combine two perspectives: on the one hand the identification of the substance of the EU's democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan, and on the other hand the assessment of its resonance for local actors. The analysis will therefore be divided into two groups of sub-research questions:

- What are the tools and channels mobilised by the different EU bodies to foster democratisation in Azerbaijan?
- Can a common and unique EU's approach on democracy promotion in Azerbaijan be identified?
- Has the EU consistently enforced its democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan?

The purpose here is to investigate whether a common EU's approach can be identified from the analysis of the activities conducted by the diverse EU institutions and actors. The actual achievements of the EU institutions on the ground will also be assessed, so as to evaluate to which extent the EU is indeed acting as a normative power in Azerbaijan.

- How do local civil society representatives assess the EU democracy promotion in Azerbaijan and their relevance for an improvement of the Azerbaijani human rights record and democratic situation?
- Does an informal coalition exist between the EU and local democracy promoters?

The democracy promotion approach(es) of the EU in Azerbaijan will be assessed through the lens of local democracy promoters. This assessment will also allow to conclude on the existence of an informal coalition between the EU and Azerbaijani civil society organisations.

B. Methodological framework

To answer the research questions, the following approach has been adopted: the first chapter will reflect on the concept of Normative Power Europe as elaborated by Manners, introducing the EU's democracy promotion structures and instruments. Chapter 2 will analyse the Azerbaijan's human rights record and democratic situation, clarifying the context in which the EU's democracy promotion activities take place. Chapter 3 will then focus on the EU's instruments and channels to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan and identify whether the EU is pursuing along a common and unique approach. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the analysis of the recipients' perspective(s) on the EU democracy promotion in Azerbaijan. The methodology for the chapters 3 and 4 is presented hereunder.

1. Analysis of the EU's approach of Azerbaijan's democratisation

There exists a Human Rights Country Strategy for Azerbaijan, developed by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU delegation in Baku, which elaborates on the EU's strategy to promote democracy and human rights in the country, as confirmed by EU officials.⁵⁰ Since this document is however not public, the present thesis will attempt to reconstruct the EU's strategy from the available public documents as well as from interviews with EU officials, which will enrich the written sources.

The analysis thus includes the close examination of the cooperation agreements between the EU and Azerbaijan, notably the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the 2006 Action Plan and the related strategy papers issued by the Commission and the EEAS, as well as communications issued by EU institutions. The 2007-2013 Country Strategy Paper on Azerbaijan, the 2007-2011 as well as the 2011-2013 National Indicative Programmes, and the 2014-2017 Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan will notably be analysed. Strategy papers related to the bilateral and regional dimensions of the ENP and the EaP will also be reviewed, as well as communications from various EU bodies, including the EEAS, the High-Representative, the EU Parliament and the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for

⁵⁰ Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype, Brussels, 27 April 2016.

Human Rights.

Six interviews⁵¹ have been conducted on a confidential basis with officials from the following EU institutions and services: the EEAS, the EU Parliament, the EUSR for Human Rights and the EU delegation in Baku.⁵² While recognising the self-criticism operated by EU actors, five interviews with experts from international NGOs have also been conducted in order to complement and nuance the EU's perspective.⁵³

To analyse the data thus gathered on the EU's democracy promotion activities, the analytical framework developed by Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, considering democracy promotion policies from the perspective of three models, namely leverage, linkage and governance, will be mobilised.⁵⁴ Chapter 1 will elaborate on that framework in greater details.

2. Assessment of the EU's democracy promotion programmes by local civil society organisations' representatives

a. General challenges raising from qualitative interviews

The methodological framework, conceived to give a voice to recipients of the EU's democracy and human rights promotion programmes and to local democracy promoters, has been developed around a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews. Eight interviews conducted with Azerbaijani HRDs or members of civil society organisations have been analysed. They will be presented in greater details under chapter 4.

Interviews are, according to Mosley, a “distinct empirical tool” involving, unlike surveys, a “small sample of participants”.⁵⁵ While reckoning the weaknesses of proceeding through interviews, such as “length and cost consideration, as well as problems of nonreponse to certain types of questions”,⁵⁶ interviews are judged as an appropriate investigation tool provided the aim of this research, focused on the

51 Interviews conducted over Skype or per phone on 15 April 2016, Brussels; 25 April 2016, Skopje; 27 April 2016, Brussels; 2 May 2016, Brussels; 4 May 2016, Brussels; 2 June 2016, Brussels.

52 In that case, the participant is not in charge in Azerbaijan any more.

53 Interviews conducted over Skype on 14 April 2016, Brussels; 25 April 2016, Brussels; 28 April 2016, Brussels; 2 May 2016, London; 24 May 2016, Brussels.

54 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, pp. 885–909.

55 Mosley, 2013, p. 6.

56 Mosley, 2013, p. 6.

perception(s) of local actors. Punch thus stresses that interviewing “is a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situation and constructions of reality”.⁵⁷ Along a qualitative perspective, interviews allow for in-depth exchanges between the interviewer and the interlocutor, especially in the format of individual interviews chosen for this research.

Conceiving the interview sample is an important step of the research: the focus is here oriented on discussions with key informants,⁵⁸ i.e. the selection of the participants is operated on the basis of their expertise and understanding of the human rights' and democratic environment in Azerbaijan. Beyond their expertise, the locality of the expert is an essential criteria. The interview sample is compound by local human rights and democracy defenders and not by international NGOs active in the country: without questioning the expertise of international experts, this contribution aims at presenting the point(s) of view of local democracy promoters, who furthermore may have a higher legitimacy in regard to the appreciation of the country's specificities.

A semi-structured frame has been chosen to conduct the interviews: according to Diccio-Bloom and Crabtree, “semi-structured interviews are often the sole data source for a qualitative research project”,⁵⁹ which they defined as “generally organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee/s.”⁶⁰

b. Interviewing in the Azerbaijani context with limited resources

Specific challenges for the conduct of interviews arise from the Azerbaijani current context. The interviews were conducted over Skype. This precision is not benign, as internet communications are often under surveillance in Azerbaijan.⁶¹ The sample for this research is however composed of respondents overtly conducting democracy

57 Punch, 2005, p. 168.

58 McNabb, 2010, p. 99.

59 Diccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315.

60 Diccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315.

61 Interview with a NGO representative conducted over Skype, Brussels, 28 April 2016.

promotion activities in Azerbaijan, which reduces the risks of self-censorship during the interviews. They were moreover not primarily asked about the human rights' and democratic environment in their country but to express their views on the EU's policies.

Furthermore, language barriers do constitute an obstacle to the communication. The interviews had to be conducted in English, which was the mother tongue of neither the interviewer nor of the participants. Beyond the question of whether the words chosen by the participants entirely reflect their opinion, it limits the scope of organisations and activists eligible for the study and leads the sample to be mainly compound of professionalised and rather large scale NGOs, excluding from the scope smaller organisations.

Finally, in the context of the crackdown on civil society organisations, intensified since the summer 2014, few associations overly promoting human rights and democracy remain active in the country at the time of writing (mid-2016). Many have closed their doors in the last two years, also as their leaders and members were taken to prison or impeded through various ways – such as the freezing of financial resources – to exert their activities. According to an international expert, “Practically almost no genuinely civil society [organisation] working in the country [subsist]. There are a few groups that have been able to continue to work but [they are] really marginal.”⁶² Some NGOs, which had been shut down in the last years, have also resumed some activity while reorientating their action on less controversial topics.⁶³ This factor complicates the identification of interview partners. An interview-based method certainly raises the question of the representativeness of the interview sample. The number of NGOs still actively promoting democracy and human rights in the country is nonetheless difficult to assess. Böttger and Falkenhain reckon that “out of 5.000-6.000 officially registered NGOs in Azerbaijan only around 20 are said to be active in challenging governmental

62 Interview with a NGO representative conducted over Skype, Brussels, 14 April 2016.

63 Interview with Participant A, head of an Azerbaijani women's rights organisation, conducted over Skype, Baku, 12 April 2016.

decisions.”⁶⁴ Concerning NGOs in general, Avaz Hasanov, head of an Azerbaijani NGO, reckons that “If you look to the size of registered civil societies in Azerbaijan, we have more than 3.000 civil society organisations in Azerbaijan, but not 500 active.”⁶⁵ In that restrictive context, the score of eight interviewed NGO representatives seems acceptable for a qualitative research.

64 Böttger & Falkenhain, 2011, p. 14.

65 Interview with Avaz Hasanov, conducted over Skype, Baku, 10 May 2016.

CHAPTER 1 – THE EUROPEAN UNION AS SELF-PROCLAIMED NORMATIVE POWER

“ [T]he EU considers itself an actor that is driven by norms and values.”⁶⁶

Before entering into the details of the EU's democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan, the first chapter will clarify the European context in which those policies are anchored. This chapter therefore introduces the EU's democracy promotion activities and main actors, against the concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE).

I. Normative Power Europe

The Normative Power Europe is a theoretical concept developed by Manners, who elaborated on the theory of “civilian power” developed by Duchêne in the 1970s to qualify the European Community. Manners however aimed at escaping the dichotomous opposition between civilian power and military power and chose to concentrate on the “power of ideas and norms”,⁶⁷ on the normative power of the EU.

The concept of NPE consists of several complementary facets: first, the normative basis, i.e. the content of the norms promoted; second, the transformative power, i.e. “the ability to shape conceptions of 'normal'”⁶⁸; third, the channels of norm diffusion. For Manners, NPE enables to comprehend the specificity – if not uniqueness – of the EU's power on the world stage.

Manners has identified five core norms building the normative basis of the EU: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights.⁶⁹ The EU has committed itself to their respect and promotion in its own legal order, as well within its boundaries as in its relations with third countries. In Manners' words, the uniqueness of the EU stems from its “commitment to placing universal norms and principles at the center of its relations with its member states and the world.”⁷⁰ The EU's external policies

66 Brummer, 2009, p. 206.

67 Manners, 2002, p. 238.

68 Manners, 2002, p. 240.

69 Manners, 2002, p. 242.

70 Manners, 2002, p. 241.

are thus “informed by, and conditional on, a catalogue of norms”.⁷¹ Those norms, according to Manners, come close to the provisions included in international human rights documents such as the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms or the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The EU has indeed gradually adopted a number of democracy and human rights related provisions on which its policies shall be based. The EU's democracy and human rights external promotion programmes gained importance mostly after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR, and the first conditionality mechanism was introduced in the 1989 fourth Lomé-agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group, as its article 5 elaborated on the cooperation with third countries as a means to promote human rights, and foresaw the disbursement of funding to this end.⁷² In 1991, a resolution on Human rights, democracy and development of the Council affirmed “that respecting, promoting and safeguarding human rights is an essential part of international relations and one of the cornerstones of European cooperation”.⁷³ This Council decision was strengthened by the Treaty of Maastricht, which provides in its article J.1(2) that “to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” is one of the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the Union. Article 130u(2) furthermore states that “Community policy [in the sphere of development cooperation] shall contribute to the general objective of developing and consolidating democracy and the rule of law, and to that of respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Since 1992, agreements negotiated between the EU and third partners consequently shall include a clause related to human rights and democratic principles, referred to as essential elements of the cooperation with the EU; the “Human Rights and Democracy Clause” included in 1995 in the European Mediterranean Partnership has formally introduced the possibility of suspending cooperation with third states on the ground of democratic shortcomings.⁷⁴ The EU framework to promote democracy and human rights was further developed with

71 Ibid.

72 Balfour, 2012, p. 31.

73 Council, 1991.

74 Huber, 2015, p. 101.

the creation in 1994 of a democracy assistance fund, under the responsibility of the European Commission: named the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights, this mechanism has aimed at supporting democratisation, the rule of law, and the development of civil societies.⁷⁵ Various guidelines have since then backed up the expansion of the EU's democracy and human rights promotion programmes: on the fight against torture, on the human rights dialogue, etc. A further important step has been taken as regards with democracy and human rights promotion under the Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Article 21 of the TEU recalls that

The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.

Article 2 of the TEU additionally states that the EU “is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights” and Article 3(5) asserts that “in its relations with the wider world, the Union shall uphold and promote its values” and “shall contribute to [...] protection of human rights”. In a 2011 joint communication, the European Commission and the High Representative moreover proclaim “human rights and democracy at the heart of EU external action”, what was then completed by the launching of the “EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy” in 2012, setting principles and strategies for the EU institutions to promote democracy and human rights in “all EU external policies”.⁷⁶

In addition to the normative basis the EU has built itself on, Manners adds another crucial facet of the NPE: the “ability to shape conceptions of 'normal'”.⁷⁷ The transformative power of the EU, its capacity to project norms beyond its boundaries and make third countries' regimes enhance their respect of democratic standards and human

75 Börzel & Risse, 2004, p. 1.

76 Council of the European Union, 2012a, p. 2. [In the absence of pagination on the document, the page number refers to the PDF pagination.]

77 Manners, 2002, p. 240.

rights are therefore also constitutive features of a normative power. Different degrees and targets of norm diffusion and internalisation can be identified: a first step is usually the diffusion of norms via the elites (on the authorities' side as well as in the civil society), before they reach the broader population and are then completely embedded in the “social and cultural life of a third country”⁷⁸. The internalisation of norms appears maximised when their compliance is regulated by internal, “intrasocietal sanctioning” to the difference of sanctions coming from international actors.⁷⁹

Finally, Manners is also interested in the way the EU diffuses its norms, what constitutes the third facet of NPE. He differentiates between six factors for norm diffusion: contagion, resulting “from the unintentional diffusion of ideas from the EU to other political actors”; informational diffusion, stemming from the communication efforts and statements of EU bodies and representatives; procedural diffusion, involving agreements formalising dialogue and the diffusion of norms; transference, associated with financial and commercial rewards or sanctions; overt diffusion, resulting from the presence of the EU on the ground, for instance through its delegations; and finally the cultural filter, which may affect the acceptance of norms by the target regimes and societies.⁸⁰

NPE has not been exempt from criticism: Hyde-Price thus considers NPE as a “liberal-idealism's reductionist [...] approach.”⁸¹ For him, realist factors, not normative considerations, are driving the EU's foreign policy. In Babayan and Risse's opinion, the fact that the EU's foreign policy pursues democracy and human rights purposes while securing stability concerns or economic interests does not mean the EU is not a normative power. They assert that “democracy and human rights are constitutive parts of the foreign policy identity of both the US and the EU and, therefore, explicit promotion of these values forms part of their foreign policy strategies (in contrast to

78 Wekker & Nieman, 2009, p. 11.

79 Schimmelfennig, 2002, p. 10-11.

80 Manners, 2002, p. 244-245.

81 Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 217.

other states or organizations)”.⁸² Moreover, the EU clearly perceives itself as a normative power, promoting human rights and democracy and possessing a transformative power. Indeed, a 2001 communication of the European Commission asserted that:

The European Union is well placed to promote democracy and human rights. [...] Uniquely amongst international actors, all fifteen Member states of the Union are democracies espousing the same Treaty-based principles in their internal and external policies. This gives the EU substantial political and moral weight. Furthermore, as an economic and political player with global diplomatic reach, and with a substantial budget for external assistance, the EU has both influence and leverage, which it can deploy on behalf of democratisation and human rights.⁸³

This thesis will analyse the extent to which the EU can be described as a normative power in Azerbaijan, considering the EU's goals in the country, the means mobilised, as well as the implementation of its democracy promotion programmes, added to the perception through target society's representatives. The three main dimensions of the EU's normative power will be considered: first, the content of the norms promoted; second, the ways the EU tries to influence Azerbaijan's regime and society through the diffusion of its norms; and finally, the transformative power and impact the EU has in Azerbaijan. Chapters 3 and 4 will elaborate on those three dimensions. The following sub-chapter will first specify the EU's normative power by determining more precisely its substance, focusing on the EU's democracy promotion model.

II. Specifying NPE: towards a EU's definition of democracy promotion

The present section concentrates on one particular and crucial aspect of the NPE, which remains the core of this thesis: democratic principles and democracy promotion. Generally speaking, democracy promotion refers to “all those activities which aim at fostering the transition to, consolidation of, or improvements of democracy in other states and their societies”.⁸⁴ As Huber further details, such a definition implies that

82 Babayan & Risse, 2015, p. 387.

83 European Commission, 2001, pp. 3-4. [In the absence of pagination on the document, the page number refers to the PDF pagination.]

84 Huber, 2015, p. 23.

“democracy is a subjective, rather than objective, category: democracy is in the eye of the beholder; it is what the democracy promoters believes it to be”.⁸⁵ It is therefore well needed to specify the EU's interpretation of democracy and the kind of democracy the EU seeks to foster beyond its boundaries.

Many scholars however underline the poor conceptual background underpinning the EU democracy promotion. Wetzel thus considers the 2009 European Parliament resolution demanding the EU to “publicly endorse the UN General Assembly's 2005 definition of democracy as the reference point for its own democratisation work” as an illustrative reflection of the “thin conceptual basis of EU democracy promotion”.⁸⁶ A 2006 report of the EU Council’s Political and Security Committee certainly states that democracy promotion “encompass[es] the full range of external relations and development cooperation activities which contribute to the development and consolidation of democracy in third countries” namely “all measures designed to facilitate democratic development”,⁸⁷ but such a definition is of little help to qualify the type of democracy supported and promoted by the European Union.

If there is no consensus within the scholars community to characterise the EU democracy promotion, the majority still considers the EU as promoting liberal democracy. Even if the EU's democracy promotion model, qualified as “fuzzy liberalism”⁸⁸ by Kurki, remains rather imprecisely defined and vague, substantial directions or pillars can nevertheless be identified.⁸⁹ The first one is human rights, which are closely associated with democracy in EU documents.⁹⁰ Balfour confirms this analysis, stating that the “EU external policies treat human rights and democracy within the same ‘package’”.⁹¹ In its strategic framework on Human Rights and Democracy, the Council of the EU furthermore “reaffirms its commitment to the promotion and protection of all human rights, whether civil and political, or economic, social and

85 Huber, 2015, p. 23.

86 Wetzel, 2015, p. 1.

87 Quoted in Burnell, 2007, p. 1.

88 Kurki, 2015, p. 35.

89 Huber, 2015, p. 105-107.

90 Huber, 2015, p. 105.

91 Balfour, 2008, p. 27.

cultural.”⁹² The EU's human rights understanding is therefore comprehensive and is underpinned by references to international declarations, conventions and covenants. The second dimension of the EU democracy promotion is the rule of law: the 2012 EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy thus underlines that “throughout the world, women and men demand to live lives of liberty, dignity and security in open and democratic societies underpinned by human rights and the rule of law.”⁹³ The concept of rule of law is nevertheless rarely defined. “Participation” is identified by Huber as the third pillar of the EU democracy promotion's goals, including election support as well as assistance for the civil society. The EU's model of democracy is therefore composed of several elements of the NPE such as theorised by Manners, encompassing human rights, the rule of law and democratic participation. Those three dimensions are reflected in the “deep democracy” concept introduced in 2009 by the High Representative Ashton in an attempt to specify further the democratic model supported by the EU and to react to the criticism of inaction in the context of the Arab Spring. In Ashton's words, deep democracy focuses on “political reform, elections, institution building, fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society.”⁹⁴ Another effort to further specify the EU's democracy and human rights programmes is to read in the 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, which, if they remain quite vague, still try to fill the gap identified by van Hüllen and Stahn who deplored that “notwithstanding the legal commitment, no comprehensive policy or strategy for democracy promotion ha[d] been established”.⁹⁵

92 Council of the European Union, 2012a, p. 1.

93 Council of the European Union, 2012a, p. 1.

94 Ashton, 2011.

95 Van Hüllen & Stahn, 2007, p. 7.

III. EU's approaches to foster democracy: Lavenex and Schimmelfennig's models of democracy promotion

Manners has identified several channels of norm diffusion, as presented in the first section of this chapter. His conceptualisation of norm diffusion remains however insufficiently detailed. This thesis will therefore elaborate on the three models identified by Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, who more specifically address the EU's democracy promotion approaches: linkage, leverage and governance. They have built on the notions of linkage and leverage previously developed by Levitsky and Way.⁹⁶ Each model includes four specific dimensions: the targets, the envisaged outcome, the channels and finally the instruments of democracy promotion. The following table summarises the main characteristics of each model:

Table 1. Three models of democracy promotion.

	Linkage	Leverage	Governance
Target	Society	Polity	Sector
Outcome	Democratic culture	Democratic institutions	Democratic governance
Channel	Transnational	Intergovernmental	Transgovernmental
Instruments	Socialization	Conditionality	Socialization

Source: Lavenex, Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 890.

The leverage model plays on exploiting “authoritarian government's vulnerability to external democratizing pressure”,⁹⁷ following a top-down approach. Strategies falling under the leverage model thus seek to encourage democracy by achieving pro-democratic attitudes within the state institutions. Democracy promotion is under that model realised through an intergovernmental channel, targeting the regime itself, the state actors. The instruments mobilised rely on the exercise of pressure and incentives on the government – in one word, on conditionality. Conditionality is based on the following principle: the allocation of rewards or penalties depends on the respect of

⁹⁶ Levitsky & Way, 2006, pp. 379-400.

⁹⁷ Levitsky & Way, 2005, p. 21.

specific democratic standards and practices.⁹⁸ Through human rights clauses, treaties provisions can be suspended if human rights and democracy are not respected by one of the party to the treaty. This amounts to negative conditionality. Positive conditionality refers to the allocation of new resources or to the opening of new cooperation possibilities as progress regarding human rights and democracy is achieved. The perspective of the membership into the EU was one crucial incentive to promote the respect of democratic and human rights standards in Eastern European countries in the 1990's; in the frame of the ENP and the EaP, this mechanism is no longer available, as the ENP aims at regulating the relationships with the EU's neighbours, not at paving the way for their entry into the Union. Sasse has therefore coined the term of “conditionality-lite” to qualify the conditionality under the ENP.⁹⁹ Both positive and negative variants of conditionality can apply, even if analysts agree that the EU has a tendency to favour positive conditionality and cooperation over a “conflictive approach”¹⁰⁰ when it comes to democracy promotion. To Börzel, Pamuk and Stahn, if the EU “choose[s] to invoke conditionality”, it prefers “rewards over sanctions”.¹⁰¹ Beyond tangible rewards (financial assistance, opening of the access to the market, etc.), Lavenex and Schimmelfennig also mention intangible pendants, referring to social and symbolic rewards, i.e. international recognition, whereas social and symbolic punishments mainly refer to public criticism, through diplomatic statements for instance.¹⁰² Leverage thus relies on the mechanism of raising “the cost of repression, electoral fraud, and other government abuses”¹⁰³ for authoritarian regimes, encouraging them to conduct democratic reforms and to improve the human rights' environment.

Unlike the leverage model, the linkage model relies more on soft-power and focuses on improving societal preconditions for democracy by mainly targeting the Non-state actors, namely civil society organisations and the political – democratic –

98 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 893.

99 Sasse, 2008, p. 295.

100 Van Hüllen & Stahn, 2007, p. 8.

101 Börzel, Pamuk, Stahn, 2009, p. 151.

102 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 893.

103 Levitsky & Way, 2005, p. 22.

opposition. The idea is to encourage those actors who can promote democracy on the cultural, educational or economical levels to foster the development of a “democratic, civil culture and meso-level institutions”¹⁰⁴ in the target country. Democracy promotion instruments under the linkage model circumvent the official and institutional bodies to directly support grass-roots actors on a bottom-up perspective – and are therefore labelled as a transnational channel. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig identify direct and indirect channels for democracy promotion under the linkage model: the direct channel involves the provision of training, capacity building or financial support to civil society organisations, whereas the indirect channel tackles more generally modernisation, through economic development¹⁰⁵ and improvements of education standards in the target country. The present analysis will focus on the direct channel, as only democracy promotion activities labelled as such fall within the scope of this research, consequently excluding policies that do not directly aim at promoting democratisation. The linkage models aims at strengthening the ties between the EU and the society of the target countries and functions by socialisation. So Levitsky and Way, it “shapes the preferences of domestic actors, [...] creat[ing] important constituencies for adherence to international norms”,¹⁰⁶ especially democratic values. Linkage strategies thus attempt to reinforce civil society organisations so that they can make their voice heard in their country. Such strategies indeed “reshape the domestic balance of power”¹⁰⁷ through two mechanisms. First, it protects the civil society actors and political opponents against repression, through a medial high profile strategy emphasizing their support by influential countries or organisations – in this thesis, the EU. Second, those groups receive resources from donor organisations, allowing them to be more active, to reach a broader audience and to contribute to shape the society's orientations.

104 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 889.

105 This approach assumes that economic development, increased trade and investment are preconditions for the development of a democracy, associating transition to market economy and transition to democracy.

106 Levitsky & Way, 2005, p. 24.

107 Levitsky & Way, 2005, p. 25.

Additionally to the two main models of democracy promotion identified by Levitsky and Way, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig distinguish a third one: the governance model. It targets, beyond the civil society and the states officials, the sectoral workers. It seems to be a more indirect democracy promotion mechanism, as it focuses “less on specific democratic institutions [...] but rather on the principles underlying democracy”.¹⁰⁸ Cooperation in any domain may lead to the sharing and the transfer of democracy oriented practices and norms like transparency, accountability or participation. This transfer of norms occurs at the occasion of exchanges between “EU actors and their sectoral counterparts in a third country's administration.”¹⁰⁹ EU actors and their colleagues from the target country cooperate in a given field – which may not related in the first place to democracy – through institutionalised exchange platforms and initiatives. The transfer of democratic norms and practices then occur by the socialisation of all the actors. The channel used under this model of democracy promotion is neither intergovernmental nor transnational, but transgovernmental.

The general approaches of the EU as regards with democracy promotion have here been identified. The next section will more specifically present the different tools the EU has at its disposal to exercise its normative power and to promote human rights and democracy in its neighbourhood, and classify them along Lavenex and Schimmelfennig's framework. Chapter 3 will then analyse which of those tools are mobilised in the EU's democratisation approach towards Azerbaijan.

108 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 895.

109 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 897.

IV. The execution of the EU's democracy promotion programmes: overview of a complex institutional framework

Democracy promotion beyond the European Union's borders belongs to the foreign and development policy agenda of the EU, which is not conducted by a single actor or institution but disseminated among a myriad of EU policy makers. According to Keukeleire and Delreux, EU's foreign policy is “single in name, dual in policy-making method, multiple in nature”.¹¹⁰ Thus, many policy makers do have a say in the conception and the conduct of the EU's external action – and of its democracy promotion programmes. As Börzel and Risse put it:

The EU is not a state, but a multi-level governance system [...]. As a result, both decision-making and implementation of democracy promotion programmes are located at various levels and involve a variety of actors. There is no “ministry for democracy promotion” in the EU (it would be a General Directorate in the EU Commission), but these programmes are part of the EU's general foreign policy, on the one hand, and of development and foreign assistance policies, on the other.¹¹¹

The European Council identifies the general orientations of the CFSP, therefore also the ones related to human rights and democracy promotion. Also competent under the CFSP, the Council has different instruments at its disposal to promote democracy abroad, as it is competent to adopt the cooperation agreements with third states and to decide on sanctions against a country (suspension of cooperation on the economic, political, military level) or individuals (targeted or smart sanctions) notably on the ground of “consolidating and supporting democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law”.¹¹² The Council can furthermore issue common positions, as a diplomatic tool.

The European Commission also has a important role to play, through several of its Directorate-Generals (DG):

- the *DG for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)* is dealing with the relations with third countries – either part of the Neighbourhood policy (ENP, EaP) or candidates to the EU membership. In charge of negotiating the cooperation

110 Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014, p. 61.

111 Börzel & Risse, 2004, p. 20.

112 European Council, Council of the EU, 2016.

agreements, the Commission can push for the inclusion of human rights and democracy provisions: suspension clauses, introduction of dialogue platforms, etc. In cooperation with the EEAS, DG NEAR also provides financial and technical assistance for supporting democratic reforms in the EU (Southern and Eastern) Neighbourhood under the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI).¹¹³ The ENI includes for instance the Governance Facility, which aims at financially rewarding countries that have made progress regarding democracy and human rights.¹¹⁴ Until the 2015 ENP review, the Commission also released yearly progress reports on the countries of the ENP, notably monitoring the respect of human rights and democratic standards.

- the *Service for Foreign policy instruments (FPI)*, in cooperation with the EEAS, is competent for the implementation of the CFSP budget as well as for Election Observation Missions. The FPI also prepares and implements the sanctions decided by the Council.

- the *DG International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO)*, is responsible for the international cooperation and development assistance and provides for democracy and human rights assistance through the funding of projects under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

- the *DG trade* is not directly related to democracy promotion policies: it nonetheless has a role in negotiating the trade agreements, in which democracy and human rights conditionality clauses can be included.

The 2009 Lisbon treaty has introduced new mechanisms within the EU's democracy promotion framework. It has notably reinforced the position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, currently Frederica Mogherini who shall represent the voice of the EU on the international stage. She mainly possesses diplomatic tools; such as open statements, meetings with representatives of the government or of the civil society, to promote democracy and human rights. The High representative is helped in her tasks by the European External

113 The European Neighbourhood Instrument has replaced the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, which was the successor of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Initiative.

114 European Commission, 2008, p. 5.

Action Services, acting as the EU's diplomatic service and compound by worldwide spread EU delegations working on the ground. The EEAS also has important prerogatives regarding human rights and democracy abroad – “the most direct responsibility for dealing with democracy in third countries”¹¹⁵ to Bridoux and Kurki. EU delegations, and more precisely their human rights focal points, execute the EU's policy and conduct the practical work of democracy promotion. They have a large range of democracy promotion activities at their disposal: calls for projects, meetings with both the authorities and civil society organisations, statements, etc. They are supported by a directorate on Human Rights and Democracy within the EEAS.

The position of EUSR for Human Rights has been created by a 2012 Council decision. The position is currently occupied by Stavros Lambrinidis, who shall pursue several objectives: enhancing the “effectiveness, presence and visibility in protecting and promoting human rights” of the EU, as well as “deepening Union cooperation and political dialogue with third countries”, including the authorities as well as non-governmental organisations, business partners, etc., and also “improving the coherence of Union action on human rights and the integration of human rights in all areas of the Union’s external action”.¹¹⁶ The mandate of the EUSR for human rights therefore encompasses the relations with all non-EU countries, including Azerbaijan.

Not to forget is the European Parliament: even if the only directly elected European body has limited institutional competences regarding the CFSP, its role has been progressively strengthened by the European treaties. The European Parliament thus has a co-decision power on international agreements with third countries: if it is not entitled to modify them, it has in the past exerted “ex-ante control”, for instance through the release of resolutions clearly stating the conditions under which the Parliament would consent to further cooperation agreements. The Parliament can in that regard push for human rights conditionality. Resolutions are likewise an important diplomatic tool for the European Parliament to express concerns over human rights and democracy issues. Furthermore, the Parliament co-decides in budgetary matters, including

115 Bridoux & Kurki, 2014, p. 26.

116 Council of the European Union, 2012b, Article 2.

democracy assistance. Among its attributions belongs also liaising with civil society actors and parliamentarians of third countries¹¹⁷.

Both members states and EU institutions (the European Commission, the High Representative and the European Parliament) have contributed to the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) in 2012, which objective is to “foster and encourage democratization and deep and sustainable democracy in countries in political transition and in societies struggling for democratisation, with initial, although not exclusive focus, on the European Neighbourhood.”¹¹⁸ Even if funded by some of its member states and the Commission, the EED is a private law organisation independent from the EU and is therefore not a EU institution.¹¹⁹

117 Bajtay, 2015.

118 European Endowment for democracy, 2012, Article 2.

119 Babayan, 2015, p. 80.

Main EU tools to promote human rights and democracy in third countries	Democracy promotion model	Institutions and bodies in charge of their operationalisation
Human Rights and Democracy clauses in political and trade agreements	Leverage	Council (decision) European Parliament (co-decision) Commission (negotiations of the agreements)
Formal and informal political dialogue with the authorities	Leverage	Council Commission High Representative & EEAS EU delegation on the ground EUSR for Human Rights
Financial assistance for the authorities to conduct reforms	Leverage	Commission EEAS EU delegation on the ground
ENP Monitoring reports (until 2015)	Leverage	Commission
Diplomatic statements, joint communiqués, resolutions	Leverage	Council Commission High Representative & EEAS EU delegation on the ground EUSR for Human Rights European Parliament
Suspension of cooperation – Targeted sanctions	Leverage	Council (decision) Commission (implementation)
Electoral observation missions	Leverage	Commission (FPI) Possible participation of Members of the European Parliament
Financial assistance towards the civil society	Linkage	Commission EU delegation on the ground <i>EED</i>
Direct contacts with HRD and civil society actors	Linkage	Council Commission High Representative & EEAS EU delegation on the ground EUSR for Human Rights European Parliament

CHAPTER 2 – AZERBAIJAN'S POOR STATE OF DEMOCRATIC AFFAIRS AND WEAK HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

This section provides background information on Azerbaijan's current state of affairs – a necessary clarification to show why EU's democracy promotion activities are relevant in the country and which challenges internal and external democracy promoters face.

I. Short historical perspective since Azerbaijan's independence

Azerbaijan gained its independence from the USSR in 1991. Despite the heritage of the first independent and short-lived Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), considered as the first Muslim democracy in the world before Turkey,¹²⁰ the second independence has not led to a re-establishment of democracy.

After the resign of Ayaz Mutallibov, first president of the anew independent Republic of Azerbaijan, presidential elections were hold in December 1992. A period of democratic development followed, prompting observers to think a transition towards democracy was engaged. The first elections, which were considered free, brought the Popular Front led by Abulfaz Elchibey to power. Freedom of the press and opinion flourished while the civil society developed, so that “the year the Popular Front was in power was one of political freedoms that Azerbaijan had never previously known”.¹²¹ This experience only lasted for a year, though. As Azerbaijan lost control over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1993, the Popular Front was ousted from power after a military coup conducted by Colonel Huseynov.¹²² President Elchibey was deposed. Following the coup, elections granted Heydar Aliyev a five-year term, with a large support of the population.¹²³ Centralisation of power and antidemocratic practices nevertheless characterised his regime, as President Aliyev consolidated his grip on power using intimidation, as well as corruption and fraud: he was confirmed at the head

120 Hale, 2012, p. 70.

121 Sultanova, 2014, p. 17.

122 Filetti, 2012, p. 75.

123 98,8% Filetti, 2012, p. 77.

of the State by the 1998 presidential elections, however boycotted by the opposition and labelled as seriously flawed by observers.¹²⁴ In order to ensure the handover of power to his son, Heydar Aliyev then undertook a constitutional reform, notably enabling the President to designate the Prime minister, henceforth also head of state.¹²⁵ The referendum held to adopt the reformed constitution, resulting in 97% of the votes in favour of the reform, was however again heavily criticised as flawed and triggered street demonstrations. Notwithstanding the protests, Illham Aliyev was designated Prime minister in August 2003 and confirmed in power by the following – once again flawed – elections. Protests resumed but failed to introduce a change in the country's political environment. The Illham Aliyev Presidency did not turn out to be more democratic nor more human rights oriented than the preceding regime, and Illham Aliyev was re-elected in 2008 and 2013, in the context of massive fraud and electoral boycott by the main opposition parties.¹²⁶

II. Current state of (un)democratic affairs

The Azerbaijani human rights record and democratic environment remain today far from shiny. Although the 1995 Constitution of Azerbaijan establishes a democratic political system, theoretically protecting individual freedoms and liberties, and despite Azerbaijan's international commitments, reality largely differs.

A. A democratic constitutional framework

The first article of the Constitution clearly states that “the sole source of state power in the Azerbaijan Republic is the people of Azerbaijan” and that the people's representatives shall be elected by “universal, equal and direct suffrage by way of free, secret and personal ballot” (Article 2). Besides, the Constitution provides with a large range of rights, formulated under its Chapter III entitled “Basic rights and liberties of a person and citizen”, from the right to equality (Article 25) to the right for political refuge (Article 70).

124 Center for Systemic Peace, 2010, p. 1.

125 Center for Systemic Peace, 2010, p. 2.

126 Babayan, 2015, p. 116.

Article 47 states that:

- I. Everyone may enjoy freedom of thought and speech.
- II. Nobody should be forced to promulgate his/her thoughts and convictions or to renounce his/her thoughts and convictions.

Article 48 of the Constitution adds to the freedom of speech the freedom of conscience. Article 49 affirms the freedom “of meetings”. Article 50 furthermore asserts the importance of the freedom of information:

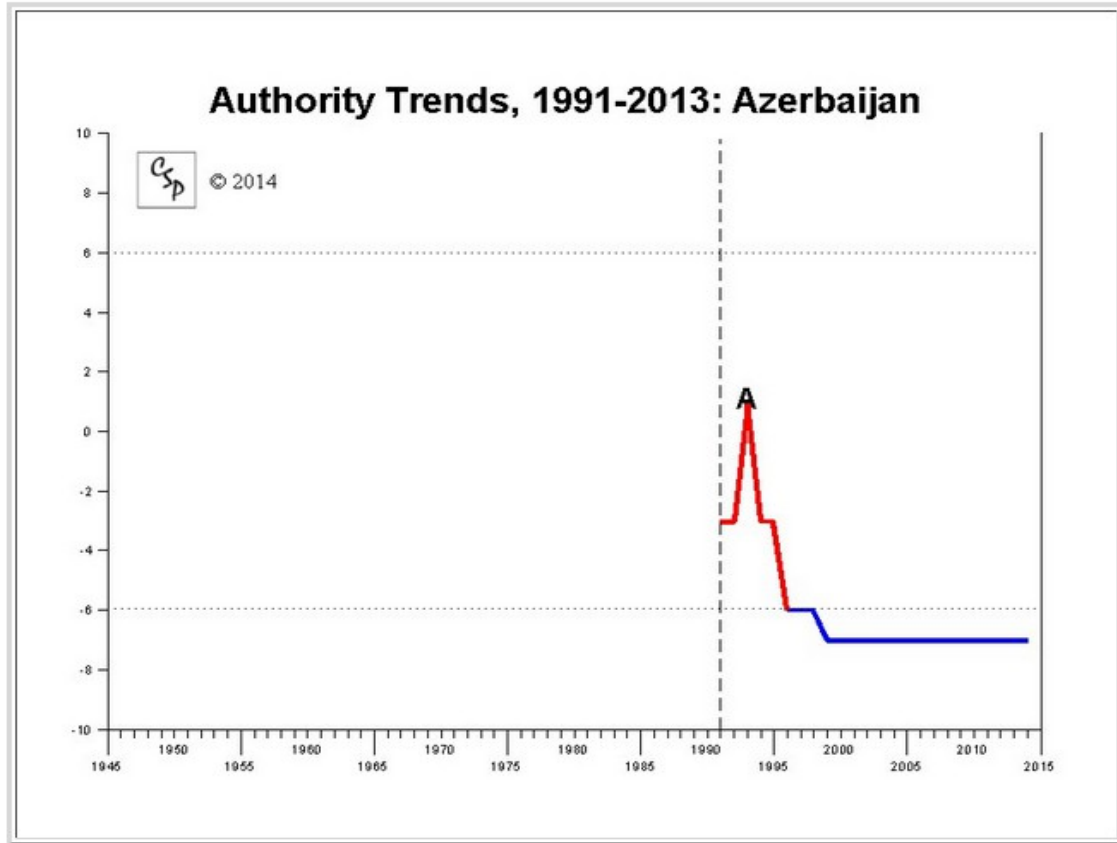
- I. Everyone is free to look for, acquire, transfer, prepare and distribute information
- II. Freedom of mass media is guaranteed. state censorship in mass media, including press is prohibited.

The right to participation in the political life of the society is ensured “without restrictions” (Article 54), supplemented by the “right to take part in the government of the state” (Article 55), and the “electoral right” (Article 56).

Beyond its national constitutional framework, Azerbaijan is also responsible under the international conventions it has ratified: the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the two covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The regime of the Azerbaijani Republic is therefore based on a democratic framework, ensuring in theory civil liberties and political rights to its citizens and inhabitants. Nevertheless, the practice does clearly not correspond to the constitutional frame.

B. A different reality: the Azerbaijani autocratic regime

The 2014 Polity IV Country report on Azerbaijan shows the evolution of the regime since its independence:



Source: Center for Systemic Peace, 2014.

The red line is associated with period of “factionalism”, challenging an autocratic structure. “A” stands for autogolpe, or auto-coup (“change in regime authority initiated by a ruling executive”) and the blue line testifies to the stability of the regime on an autocratic level. Along the analysis of Polity IV, the regime can be characterised as a stable autocracy.¹²⁷

Similarly, Freedom House assigns the status “not free” to the country for 2016. On the freedom rating, Azerbaijan reaches the score of 6.5 out of 7, and on the level of civil

¹²⁷ Center for Systemic Peace, 2014.

liberties and political rights, 7 out of 7.¹²⁸

Nations in Transit Category and Democracy Scores										
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
National Democratic Governance	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Electoral Process	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Civil Society	5.25	5.25	5.50	5.75	5.75	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.75	7.00
Independent Media	6.25	6.25	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00
Local Democratic Governance	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	5.75	5.75	5.75	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	7.00
Corruption	6.25	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Democracy Score	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.39	6.46	6.57	6.64	6.68	6.75	6.86

Source: Freedom House, 2016.

The electoral process in Azerbaijan is described as neither free nor fair, which was anew demonstrated at the occasion of the 2010 and 2015 parliamentary elections as well as at the 2013 presidential elections. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights even cancelled its observation mission for the 2015 parliamentary elections because of restrictions imposed by the Azerbaijani government.¹²⁹ This event reflects the weak commitment of the authorities to ensure democratic elections in the country. Moreover, a 2012 constitutional reform has abolished the presidential terms limits and has extended the electoral cycles, allowing President Aliyev's “reelection” in 2013 and virtually removing all limitations to the power of the Aliyev family.¹³⁰

128 Freedom House rates from 1 (best) to 7 (worst). Freedom House, 2016.

129 ODIHR, 2015.

130 Babayan, 2015, p. 111.

Political pluralism is barely existing: restriction of the freedom of assembly shrinks the space available for political expression, and opposition candidates struggle to get access to public funding of campaigns, as well as to media coverage. Leaders of the opposition have been imprisoned. In March 2014, Tofiq Yaqublu, from the Musavat party, as well as Ilqar Mammadov, from the Republican Alternative movement, were respectively condemned to five- and seven-year prison sentences. Furthermore, the opposition, discredited and split, does not seem to be considered as an important player by locals.¹³¹ If some opposition remained represented in the National Assembly by five to ten deputies (out of 125) in the first three parliaments since 1993,¹³² the two main opposition parties (the Azerbaijani Popular Front and Musavat) did not win a single seat at the 2010 Parliamentary elections. Moreover, the so-labelled independent elected candidates (42 seats out of 125) are said to be loyal to President Aliyev, whose party (the New Azerbaijan Party) won 56% of the seats. The 2010 Polity IV report states that “Azerbaijan’s parliament functions like an addition to the presidential cabinet”¹³³ and the 2015 Parliamentary elections have not modified power relations, as only one seat was won by the Azerbaijani Popular Front. Many of the MPs furthermore come from the native region of the Aliyev family (Nakhicheva region), building up a system mixing personal and political allegiance. Similarly to the legislative branch, the judicial branch of power has little independence from the executive leader.¹³⁴

The 2016 BTI index indicates that “Azerbaijan's social awakening” however “posed a serious challenge to the ruling regime's hold on power”, as civic engagement increased, notably in 2013, and led to mass protests in January of the same year.¹³⁵ Even if protests did not expand nor resulted in a bigger scale movement, as the government cracked down on the demonstrators, they reflected the dissatisfaction of a part of the population.

131 Interview with Ilyas Safarli conducted over Skype on 16 April 2016, Sheki.

132 Amani, 2013.

133 Center for Systemic Peace, 2010, p. 2.

134 Ibid.

135 Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016, p. 2.

NGOs have recently been suffering under a very harsh crackdown. First, a restrictive legislative framework has been introduced, as a 2013 legislation made the registration of all grants and donations perceived by NGOs compulsory. A further February 2014 amendment introduced higher penalties for the NGOs breaching the requirements of the law – what, even in case of minor infractions, can lead to the denial of registration or the closure of the association.¹³⁶ In November 2014, a new law was introduced, restricting the access of NGOs to foreign funding: each project financed from abroad shall henceforth be registered and approved by the authorities. Foreign funding constituted the main source of income for many independent organisations and due to the de facto impossibility to perceive this financial assistance, many NGOs have closed down or drastically reduced their activities.¹³⁷ Besides that restrictive legal framework, many activists and HRD, as well as independent journalists, have been imprisoned since the summer 2014. Despite the release of some political prisoners in March and June 2016, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee still tallies 76 political prisoners currently in Azerbaijan.¹³⁸ Even if the releases were welcomed by the international community, they do not amount to a profound change in the regime's structure. The freedom of movement of the remaining free activists is for instance regularly infringed upon by travel bans or restrictions.¹³⁹

The Azerbaijani regime has often been qualified as an hybrid regime over the last ten years, belonging to the “grey zone” between democracies and autocracies. Gulyiev has thus labelled the regime as “sultanic semi-authoritarian”.¹⁴⁰ However, the recent developments indicate the country has evolved towards a consolidated authoritarian regime, according to the classification of Freedom House.¹⁴¹ Filetti's analysis follows

136 Human Rights Watch, 2015, p. 9.

137 Interview with Participant A, head of an Azerbaijani women's rights organisation, conducted over Skype on 12 April 2016, Baku; Interview with Avaz Hasanov, conducted over Skype on 10 May 2016, Baku.

138 Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2016.

139 Interview with Participant A, head of an Azerbaijani women's rights organisation, conducted over Skype on 12 April 2016, Baku.

140 Gulyiev, 2005, p. 1.

141 Freedom House, 2016.

the same direction, qualifying the regime as an “hegemonic authoritarian regime”,¹⁴² recalling the definition of an authoritarian regime by Linz:

Political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.¹⁴³

As indicators of the authoritarian character of the Azerbaijani regime, Filetti identifies: “the scarce transparency, the electoral frauds, the censorship and the arrest of many activists”, “the entrance barriers to political competition for opposition parties and an electoral system that systematically discriminates them”, as well as limitation on the freedom of assembly.¹⁴⁴ The hegemonic character of the regime is visible when looking at the composition of the Parliament, overwhelmingly composed of pro-Alyiev representatives since 1993, and at the omnipresence of the leader and his party, repeatedly denying the existence of a strong enough opposition to engage into dialogue with.¹⁴⁵ The Aliyev family has also won all presidential elections since 1993 with scores ranging between 77% and 99%.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, Filetti reconsiders the classification of Azerbaijan as a sultanic regime. For him, even if the “father-to-son” succession may be reminiscent of the structure of a sultanic regime, the political landscape of Azerbaijan rather builds on larger loyalty networks and clans, as “a significant portion of the society depend[s] on the regime’s political patronage and ha[s] interest in keeping that regime in power”.¹⁴⁷

142 Filetti, 2012, p. 83.

143 Linz, quoted in Filetti, 2012, p. 83.

144 Filetti, 2012, p. 83.

145 Ibid.

146 Amani, 2013.

147 Filetti, 2012, p. 85.

III. Azerbaijan's specific challenges: contextualising the EU democracy promotion

Besides the worsening of the democratic situation in the recent years, the EU, as external democracy promoter, faces several challenges which might impede or render difficult its efforts. Even if the focus of the thesis is particularly centred on the EU's approach to Azerbaijan's democratisation, this paper stresses the need to consider the context in which it takes place in order to perceive its underlying challenges.

Azerbaijan has specific geographic characteristics and is an energy-rich country, notably in oil and gas. The country has very much relied on those resources to back its high economic growth in the last decade (reaching 26.5% in 2005 and 34% in 2006): incomes from oil contribute to 80% of the total state budget.¹⁴⁸ The Azerbaijani economic structure has given a certain independence to the country. Providing the country with a large and growing income, energy resources have indeed allowed Azerbaijan's government not to be dependent on third countries' or international organisations' loans or financial assistance, and has also concurrently enabled the Aliyev family to strengthen its position in power.¹⁴⁹ The EU, seeking to diversify its energy supplies and to find alternatives to its Russian partner, has progressively developed interest in Azerbaijan both as an energy provider and as a transit route for energy supplies. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which has been constructed after “the contract of the century”¹⁵⁰ on oil supply was signed between Western companies and the Azerbaijani government in 1994, thus enables oil transportation from the Caspian Sea to Western Europe. Due to the Ukrainian crisis and the cooling of EU-Russia relations, the Commission has also recently increased its support for the Southern Gas Corridor, viewed as an opportunity for diversification.¹⁵¹ However, the importance of Azerbaijan for the EU's energy supplies is to put in perspective, as the Azerbaijani supplies should not exceed 2% of the EU's gas demand.¹⁵² Nevertheless, as Bötter and Falkenhain

148 Natig, 2016.

149 Kobzová ; Alieva, 2012, p. 2.

150 Alieva, 2006, p. 15.

151 The EU has so far mainly imported its gas from the Eastern Gas Corridor (Russia), the Northern Gas Corridor (Norway) and the Western Gas Corridor (North Africa). Meister, Viëtor, 2011, p. 336.

152 Ismayilov & Zasztowt, 2015, p. 2.

summarise it:

The 'uniqueness' of this energy-rich country not only affects the EU's policy but also the demand for cooperation on the part of national elites. High oil revenues, coupled with the growing self-confidence of the political elites in Azerbaijan and resistance to influence from the West, reduce the potential for transformation and democratic reform and thus have implications for the achievement of EU foreign policy goals set by the ENP and the EaP.¹⁵³

The country has however recently suffered from the fall of the oil prices on the global scale and from currency devaluations, and the economic growth has been stagnant for the two last years.¹⁵⁴ This is considered by international NGOs, as well as by local democracy promoters, as a window of opportunity for loans-granting third states and international financial organisations to gain leverage on Azerbaijan, as they assess that the regime is now seeking for financial support.¹⁵⁵

Beyond its energy resources, the country is also of interest for the EU from both geopolitical and security perspectives. Alieva is of the opinion that “the convenient geographic location on the cross roads of major East-West transportation routes is making the Caucasus attractive in trade, military and communication terms.”¹⁵⁶ Azerbaijan is thus considered as an important partner for the fight against terrorism and trafficking. However, the country is engaged in a frozen conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh since 1988. Representing 13,5% of Azerbaijan's territory, Nagorno-Karabakh declared its independence in 1991 with the support of Armenia. A cease-fire was agreed upon in 1994, but no peace agreement was signed and the conflict is still not settled today. Besides the 22.000 to 25.000 deaths between 1992 and 1994, 3.000 people have died since the 1994 ceasefire,¹⁵⁷ and an escalation remains possible, as the recent fighting in April 2016 showed it.

Azerbaijan has since 1991 tried to balance its international policy, especially between the “West” and Russia, with the purpose of affirming its sovereignty and

153 Böttger & Falkenhain, 2011, p. 7.

154 Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016, p. 20.

155 Interview with Participant A, head of an Azerbaijani women's rights organisation, conducted over Skype on 12 April 2016, Baku; Interview with Turgut Gambar conducted over Skype on the 30 April 2016, Baku.; Interview with an international NGO's representative conducted over Skype on 25 April 2016, Brussels; Interview with an international NGO's representative conducted over Skype on 24 May 2016, Brussels.

156 Alieva, 2006, p. 1.

157 International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 2.

independence towards third countries. After the country showed its interest in entering European and international organisations, which it notably realised through its accession to the OSCE and the Council of Europe, it seems Azerbaijan has in the recent years reoriented its policy towards more cooperation with its Russian neighbour, despite the ambiguous position of Russia towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹⁵⁸ Russian influence is moreover very high in the governmental circles.¹⁵⁹

Azerbaijan is therefore a complex case for external actors, as energy, economic, as well as security issues may influence international actors' interests, commitment and influence.

158 Sahakyan, 2016.

159 Interview with Ilyas Safarli, conducted over Skype on 16 April 2016, Sheki; Interview with Avaz Asanov, conducted over Skype on 10 May 2016, Baku.

CHAPTER 3 – THE EU'S HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION ACTIVITIES IN AZERBAIJAN

This chapter aims at identifying the activities pursued by the different EU institutions to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan.

I. Overview of the EU-Azerbaijan relations since 1991: energy, security and democracy?

The relations of the EU with the Azerbaijani Republic trace back to the independence of the country from the Soviet Union in 1991, as the back then European Community provided assistance to the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent states – among which Azerbaijan – under the “Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States” programme. This programme first aimed at providing basic assistance, namely food aid, humanitarian assistance and reparation of the damages consequent to the war, and contained few democracy related provisions.¹⁶⁰

The European Community upgraded its relations with Azerbaijan in 1999, with the signature of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which still constitutes the legal framework for EU-Azerbaijan bilateral relations today. Under this agreement, the creation of cooperation bodies was decided, namely a cooperation council, a cooperation committee, a subcommittee on trade, economic and legal affairs, a parliamentary cooperation committee as well as a subcommittee on justice, freedom and security, human rights, and democracy. Relations between Azerbaijan and the EU were further intensified between 2004 and 2006, when Azerbaijan joined the newly launched European Neighbourhood Policy. The ENP was elaborated to formalise the relations between the EU and its new neighbours, and to turn them into a “ring of friends”,¹⁶¹ so the words of Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission. This new cooperation framework namely aimed at “achieving the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration”, providing to the

160 Boonstra, 2008, p. 131.

161 Prodi, 2002.

sixteen southern and eastern participating countries financial support, economic integration, technical and policy support and easier travel to the EU in return for political reforms and collaboration with the EU.¹⁶² Azerbaijan was integrated in the ENP framework despite several obstacles: the geographical distance of the country, as well as the ambivalences of the government regarding its engagement and identification with the EU's values.¹⁶³ A new agreement was then reached between Azerbaijan and the EU, namely the 2006 Action Plan, addressing those different dimensions. To deepen the ENP framework, the Eastern Partnership was launched in 2009 towards Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The partnership takes the form of bilateral agreements (negotiations of Action Plans, Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas or visa liberalisation) and multilateral platforms dedicated to democracy, economic integration, energy and contact between people. However, the implication of Azerbaijan's Republic in the ENP and EaP has been judged very limited by observers. Hale maintains that “the EU-Azerbaijan relationship is a tale of mismatched objectives and ambitions.”¹⁶⁴ Azerbaijan is indeed said to be willing to cherry-pick areas of cooperation, whereas the EU would seek a more comprehensive cooperation framework. Azerbaijan has thus been resisting the EU's wishes to discuss political issues, including human rights issues as well as democratic standards, preferring to focus on economic and energy cooperation. This latter domain is the only area in which the cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan has been steadily ongoing and effective. Thus, a separate Memorandum of Understanding on Energy was signed in 2006 with Azerbaijan. Many projects are ongoing in this domain, the biggest of them being the oil (the Baku-Tbilisi-Cehan channel) and gas (the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum channel) pipelines connecting Azerbaijan and Europe, offering the EU an alternative to Russian energy supplies. Many European-based multinational companies are also directly involved in Azerbaijan, such as British Petroleum or Total¹⁶⁵.

162 EEAS, 2015a.

163 Hale, 2012, p. 70.

164 Hale, 2012, p. 70.

165 Meister & Viëtor, 2011, p. 347.

Besides those energy related partnerships, the EU is – however very limitedly – involved in conflict resolution around the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The EU has not been directly engaged in the Minsk group for a conflict settlement, headed by the OSCE, Russia, France and the US. According to several analysts, the persistence of the conflict has affected the EU democracy promotion in Azerbaijan, on multiple grounds. According to Mkrtchyan, war rhetoric is indeed a way for the Azerbaijani government to secure its legitimacy towards the people and its grip on power.¹⁶⁶ Simão underlines that the limited efforts of the EU to contribute to a conflict settlement have negatively affected its image, displaying it as a “reluctant partner, undermining its normative credentials”¹⁶⁷ and its capacity to be a transformative power in the country. The EU has nonetheless been involved through its Special Representative for the Southern Caucasus, who has been working in collaboration with the OSCE Minsk Group on conflict resolution – with however few results so far.¹⁶⁸

In 2013, Azerbaijan's authorities have signed several bilateral agreements with the EU: a Visa facilitation Agreement, a Readmission Agreement and a Mobility Partnership, aiming at facilitating travels between Azerbaijan and the EU as well as dealing with migration flows.¹⁶⁹ However, despite negotiations launched in 2010, no Association Agreement has so far been adopted. After a suspension of the negotiations following the 2014 European Parliament's resolution on the persecution of human rights defenders in Azerbaijan, they have resumed in the last months, heading towards a Strategic Modernisation Partnership Agreement rather than towards an Association Agreement, although the denomination of the final agreement remains unknown so far. Azerbaijan has submitted its proposal for an agreement, what constitutes a unique situation and shows the interest of the Azerbaijani authorities in concluding this agreement.¹⁷⁰ Pending a potential agreement, the 1999 PCA and the 2006 AP are still the relevant legal basis for EU-Azerbaijan relations.

166 Mkrtchyan, 2007, p. 84.

167 Simao, 2012, 193.

168 EEAS, 2016.

169 Ibid.

170 Interview conducted over Skype on 24 May 2016, Brussels.

II. Analysis of the EU's democracy promotion activities in Azerbaijan

Chapter 1 has shown that the EU's general democracy promotion goals are fuzzy and not clearly defined. The following section will specify the particular goals the EU pursues in Azerbaijan by reviewing the provisions of the 1999 PCA and of the 2006 AP. The second section will then analyse the concrete instruments the different EU institutions have mobilised to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan through the lens of Lavenex and Schimmelfennig's framework. The chapter's conclusion will assess the extent to which the EU's instruments to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan can be gathered under one common EU's approach.

The following questions will lead the analysis:

- Do the tools and channels mobilised by the EU institutions to foster democratisation in Azerbaijan fall under a monolithic approach corresponding to one of the ideal types identified by Lavenex and Schimmelfennig?
- Or is the EU's democracy promotion model in Azerbaijan rather building a “democracy promotion policy mix”, combining both leverage and linkage approaches?
- Has the EU consistently enforced its democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan?

A. Overarching goals of the EU regarding democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan

The 1999 PCA and the 2006 AP regulate the EU-Azerbaijan relations “in the areas of political dialogue, trade, investment, and economic, legislative, and cultural cooperation”¹⁷¹ and comprehend specific goals and objectives regarding human rights and democracy.

171 EEAS, 2016.

The cooperation agreements insist on the importance of democracy and human rights in the collaborative relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan. The 1999 PCA thus explicitly states in its first article that among the “objectives of this partnership” belongs “to support the Republic of Azerbaijan's efforts to consolidate its democracy [...]”. Article 71 further specifies that the cooperation shall be devoted to the “establishment or reinforcement of democratic institutions, including those required in order to strengthen the rule of law, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms”. Besides, the priority area n°2 of the 2006 AP refers to “democracy in the country, including through fair and transparent electoral process” and the priority area n°3 encompasses the “protection of human rights and of fundamental freedoms and the rule of law”. The general features of the EU democracy promotion, i.e. human rights, rule of law and participation,¹⁷² are thus reflected in the EU's agenda for democracy promotion in Azerbaijan. Official documents operationalising – notably in its financial dimension – the legal framework of the ENP reaffirm and specify further the goals pursued by the EU in Azerbaijan. The 2007-2013 Country Strategy Paper reaffirms that one of the goals of the partnership is to “promote Azerbaijan's transition to a fully fledged democracy [...]”¹⁷³ and underlines the commitment of the EU to pursue “complementary aims of promoting good governance and respect for human rights”.¹⁷⁴ More detailed provisions insist on the development of the Azerbaijani civil society as well as on the freedom of assembly and media, applying for the printed press, the radio, the television and the internet. They are repeated in the 2007-2010 National Indicative Programme, which also insists on the promotion of the “public participation in the political, economic and social spheres”, as well as on the “participation [of] citizens in the control of institutional bodies and law enforcement agencies and services”.¹⁷⁵ The 2011-2013 National Indicative Programme reaffirms the consistency and the continuity of the goals pursued in Azerbaijan, asserting that “the political, economic and social developments in Azerbaijan since 2007 and the development of new EU's policies have

172 See Chapter 1, Titel II.

173 European Commission, 2007b, p. 4.

174 European Commission, 2007b, p. 5.

175 European Commission, 2007a, p. 6.

changed the dimensions but not the substance of the main priorities identified in the [Country Strategy Paper]”.¹⁷⁶ The National Indicative Programme thus sets under the first priority area democratic structures, good governance, rule of law and respect for human rights, “at the core of the EU-Azerbaijani relations.”¹⁷⁷ The 2014-2017 Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan comprehends however much more narrowly defined human rights and democracy provisions, concentrating on the local and regional dimensions of democracy and on the rule of law. Objective 2 of the cooperation is there “to enhance democratic participation, institutional capacity and efficiency in the field of local governance and regional development“ and to encourage a “participatory and democratic approach to local development“.¹⁷⁸ Besides, human rights are only alluded to when it comes to the strengthening of the rule of law, the “independence, impartiality, integrity and transparency of the judiciary” and the improvement of the “citizens' access to justice”.¹⁷⁹ The objective of making Azerbaijan a full-fledged democracy therefore disappears in that document. This narrowing down of the objectives of democracy promotion in Azerbaijan may find its roots in the ENP review conducted in Autumn 2015. If the Commission and the High Representative assert in this review that “the EU will pursue its interests which include the promotion of universal values”,¹⁸⁰ they also repeat the need to pursue further differentiation among the ENP countries. The EU recognises that it “cannot alone solve the many challenges of the region” and commits to take more into account the aspirations of the partner countries – which in practice means to constrict the EU's cooperation on “a more limited number of strategic priorities”¹⁸¹ agreed upon with the partner country. Human rights and democratisation are however clearly not a priority for the Azerbaijani government, which would largely prefer the topic not to be addressed by the EU institutions. The present interpretation of the 2014-2017 Single Support Framework is

176 European Commission, 2010, p. 5.

177 European Commission, 2010, p. 9.

178 European Commission, 2014a, p. 9-10.

179 European Commission, 2014a, p. 12.

180 European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2015, p. 2.

181 European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2015, p. 5.

nonetheless contested by the EU representatives interviewed for this research, who claim that “human rights will always be there”,¹⁸² “we will continue to raise human rights and democracy issues with all our partners, regardless if they are interested or not.”¹⁸³ A EU official has however recognised that the focus and the substance of the human rights promoted may evolve towards rights which are more “consensual”: “It could be that before we have worked on justice reform, women's rights. It might be that the countries will say: we are more interested in working on rural development; and then we will focus more on that. But that does not mean that human rights would not be raised at all.”¹⁸⁴ A similar answer was given by another EU official stating that the EU is perhaps “assessing its own means to be able to influence the situation in a positive way and according to a realistic approach knowing that Azerbaijan's leadership is only moderately responsive to external criticism.”¹⁸⁵

Despite the absence of clear assertions concerning the EU's objectives to encourage Azerbaijan to become a fully-fledged democracy in the latest Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan, the goal of establishing democratic institutions, promoting civil and political rights and encouraging civic participation in the political processes is still in force as part of the 1999 PCA and 2006 AP, which remain the legal framework for EU-Azerbaijan relations. Moreover, democratic achievements are still part of the objectives of the multilateral initiatives of the Eastern Partnership, to which Azerbaijan also belongs. The 2014-2020 Regional East Strategy Paper thus indicates that “the consolidation of deep and sustainable democracy and respect for human rights is still to be achieved” among Eastern Partnership's countries, notably “constitutional and electoral reforms” as well as “democratic law enforcement”.¹⁸⁶

182 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

183 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 27 April 2016, Brussels.

184 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 27 April 2016, Brussels.

185 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 15 April 2016, Brussels.

186 EEAS & European Commission, 2014, p. 3-4.

B. Instruments of the EU democracy promotion in Azerbaijan

In this section, both the narrative of the EU – through the analysis of the strategy papers and legal framework regulating EU-Azerbaijan relations – as well as the concrete actions carried out by EU institutions will be considered and thus give answers' elements to the question whether the EU is effectively, beyond its rhetoric, a normative actor in Azerbaijan. The time frame of the analysis focuses on the period 2006-2016.

1. EU instruments falling under the leverage model

This first subsection identifies the democracy and human rights promotion instruments put in place by EU institutions that target the polity, that is to say the state or other official authorities, playing on conditionality mechanisms and on political dialogue. For Börzel et al, the 2006 Action plan is “mostly state-centered”¹⁸⁷: most of its provisions fall therefore under the leverage model.

a. Political dialogue with the authorities

Narrative

Political dialogue is a crucial dimension of the EU's democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan, notably under the ENP and EaP. Besides, both the 1999 PCA and the 2006 AP are agreements focusing on the cooperation between the Azerbaijani authorities and the EU. They therefore grant a large place to political dialogue and communication on an intergovernmental level, which the EU has tried to institutionalise through dialogue platforms, and which notably aim at discussing and monitoring the implementation of the AP.¹⁸⁸ The need for cooperation on human rights and democracy issues is underlined in both documents. The PCA establishes “a regular political dialogue” which:

shall foresee that the Parties endeavour to cooperate on matters pertaining to the strengthening of stability and security in Europe, the observance of the principles of democracy, and the respect and promotion of human rights, particularly those of persons belonging to minorities and shall hold consultations, if necessary, on relevant matters.¹⁸⁹

187 Börzel, Pamuk, Stahn, 2009, p. 164.

188 Börzel, Pamuk, Stahn, 2009, p. 157.

189 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member states, of the one part, and the Republic of Azerbaijan, of the other part, 1999, article 5.

Enforcement

The political dialogue, as inferred from interviews with EU officials, appears to be one of the main focus of the Commission and the EEAS, and has been operationalised by the creation (as foreseen in the 1990 PCA) of a subcommittee on justice, freedom and security, human rights, and democracy. This sub-committee has however only been appointed in 2009, twenty years after the signature of the PCA and largely after other committees have been put in place, like the cooperation council (which held its first meeting in 1999) or the subcommittee on trade and economic issues (which has been meeting since 2000). This platform was further completed by the establishment of a Human Rights Dialogue. However, Azerbaijan has withdrawn its participation from the Human Rights Dialogue after the 2014 European Parliament's resolution on Azerbaijan, and the platform's activities have been suspended since then.¹⁹⁰ All EU representatives interviewed nonetheless reckon the dialogue as a very valuable tool in the EU's democracy promotion strategy towards Azerbaijan and insist on the necessity to maintain dialogue platforms. Beyond those official dialogue platforms, the EEAS, the EUSR for Human Rights as well as the High Representative of the EU also assert that human rights issues are systematically raised up during bilateral meetings with governmental officials. Several high level EU representatives have thus conducted country visits in Azerbaijan in the last years: so the EU Special Representative on Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis in February 2015, as well as the European Council's President Donald Tusk in July 2015 and the High Representative Frederica Mogherini in February 2016. EU representatives are keen to argue that human rights and democracy related issues are raised behind closed door – a silent diplomacy¹⁹¹. However, bilateral meetings are not always followed by official statements elaborating explicitly on their content and it remains difficult to assess the extent to which human rights and democracy related topics are effectively raised during such meetings. This channel will here not be further investigated as it does not fall under the overt democracy promotion activities conducted by the EU.

190 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

191 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

Besides the political dialogue, election observation missions can be sent by the EU: the last electoral mission in Azerbaijan was set up in 1999, and the European Parliament has clearly stated its refusal to send an election observation missions for the 2015 Parliamentary elections, considering that the conditions for free and fair elections were not met, notably impeded by “limitations on the freedoms of expression, assembly and association”.¹⁹²

b. Financial conditionality: positive and negative mechanisms

Narrative

The 2007-2013 Strategy Paper for Azerbaijan granted Azerbaijan funding under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. Three priority areas had then been identified: “support for democratic development and good governance” (Priority Area 1), “support for socio-economic reform, fight against poverty and administrative capacity building” (Priority Area 2), and finally “support for legislative and economic reforms in the transport, energy and environment sectors” (Priority Area 3).¹⁹³ The Strategy Paper thus foresaw the allocation of funds for the government in order to provide the authorities with financial means to carry out reforms in those three sectors. The Priority area 1, corresponding to democracy promotion by the EU, is divided into further sub-priorities, encompassing public administration reforms, rule of law and judicial reforms, human rights, civil society development and local government, as well as education and people-to-people exchanges.¹⁹⁴ €30 million were allocated for the financing of the Priority area 1 between 2007 and 2010; and the budget was roughly the same for the time period 2011-2013, with between €30.5 and 37 million foreseen.¹⁹⁵ The European Neighbourhood Instrument¹⁹⁶ is still included in the 2014-2017 Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan, but the objectives regarding democracy promotion and human rights have been significantly lowered. The three

192 European Parliament, 2015.

193 European Commission, 2007b, p. 25.

194 European Commission, 2007b, p. 25.

195 European Commission, 2010, p. 7.

196 The European Neighbourhood Instrument replaces the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument for the time period 2014-2020.

priority areas are henceforth regional and rural development (sector of intervention 1), justice sector reform (sector of intervention 2), education and skills development (sector of intervention 3). Complementary – but more limited – support is foreseen for capacity development and institution building as well as for supporting the civil society. If the document recognises that “more has to be done in the areas of business environment, democratic participation, respect of the rule of law and overall good governance”, the democracy and human rights related objectives and allocations are much weaker than in the previous Strategy Paper (2007-2013). Democracy promotion through the allocation of funds to the government henceforth concentrates on the improvement of the rule of law through a justice sector reform and on “democratic participation, institutional capacity and efficiency in the field of local governance”, the latter being a sub-objective of the regional and rural development sector. For the time period 2014-2017, between €15,4 and 18,8 million shall be allocated for the justice reform, whereas between €30,8 and 37,6 million shall be allocated for the regional and rural development sector, without further specification between the different sub-objectives.¹⁹⁷

Beyond the funds aiming at financing democratic reforms and improvements of the human rights situation, EN(P)I allocations are subject to the respect of democratic principles. In case of non-respect, the Council, after a proposition of the Commission, may reduce or suspend the financial assistance to the partner country.¹⁹⁸ This negative conditionality mechanism is completed by positive conditionality provisions, also known under the “more for more” principle. The Governance Facility was thus created under the ENP framework, rewarding countries particularly committed in improving their “democratic practice, respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law” and having realised the most progress in that regard.¹⁹⁹ The 2014-2017 Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan also provides that:

In addition to programmed bilateral allocations, Azerbaijan may benefit from supplementary allocations provided under the multi-country umbrella programmes referred to in the Neighbourhood-wide programming documents. Such supplementary allocations

197 European Commission, 2014a, pp. 4-8.

198 Babayan, 2015, p. 78.

199 European Commission, 2008. p. 5.

will be granted on the basis of progress towards deep and sustainable democracy and implementation of agreed reform objectives contributing to the attainment of that goal.²⁰⁰

Those umbrella programmes are, among others: the Non-state Actors and Local Authorities in Development, the Instrument Contributing to Peace and Stability, humanitarian aid, the Partnership Instrument, the EIDHR, the Instrument for Nuclear Safety Co-operation, Macro-Financial Assistance, Development Co-operation Instrument, Erasmus +, Creative Europe, etc.

Enforcement

In general, financial assistance towards Azerbaijan remains low, in comparison with other EaP countries, as the following table, which summarises the foreseen financial allocations under the ENP, shows it:

Assisting the neighbourhood: Comparison of the EU's Eastern neighbours.

	Bilateral ENP assistance (Million EUR) ¹				Democracy score ²	Population (in millions) ³
	2004–2006	2007–2010	2011–2013 (total)	2011–2013 (per capita per year)		
Moldova	42	209.7	273.1	21.17	6.33	4.3
Ukraine	258	494	470.1	3.47	6.30	45.1
Georgia	45	120.4	180.3	13.06	4.59	4.6
Armenia	27	98.4	157.3	17.48	4.09	3.0
Belarus	8	30	80.3	2.79	3.34	9.6
Azerbaijan	30	92	122.5	4.86	3.15	8.4
Total	410	1044.5	1283.6	average: 5.7	average: 4.63	75.0

Sources:

1) European Commission (ENP National Indicative Programmes 2007–2010, 2011–2013; Implementation of the Eastern Partnership: Report to the meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers, December 13, 2010)

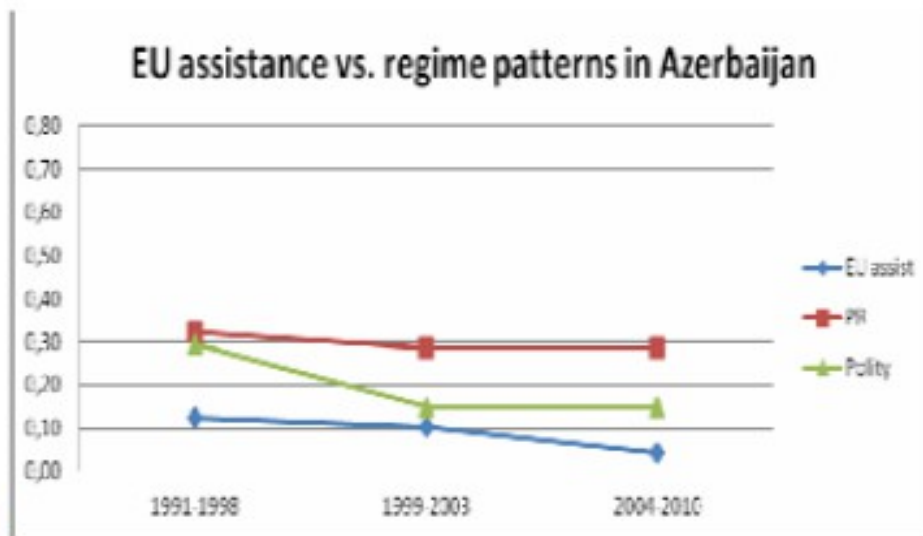
2) Economist Intelligence Unit: Democracy Index 2010

3) CIA World Factbook (2011 estimates)

Source: Raik, 2011, p. 6.

Buşcaneanu has realised a study analysing the consistency of the enforcement of the ENP and EaP in the six EaP partner countries until 2010. He notably compares the financial allocations granted to each partner country with their democratic and human rights performances. Here is the graph he conceived for Azerbaijan:

²⁰⁰ European Commission, 2014a, p. 8.



Source: Buşcaneanu, 2013, p. 15.

Judging from the graphs, the principle of “less for less” seems to have been enforced. However, the EU's assistance actually already decreased before the launching of the ENP, which questions the causal link between the ENP framework and the decreasing assistance. Moreover, such a graph does not allow to draw conclusion on human rights and democracy conditionality: indeed, Zasztowt indicates that some funds of the 2007-2013 budget support have not been disbursed due to the failure of the Azerbaijani government to meet financial management requirements, which is therefore unrelated to human rights and democracy indicators.²⁰¹ It thus remains difficult to assess the extent to which negative financial conditionality has been enforced. An interview with an EEAS official moreover revealed that no financial assistance had been cut due to human rights abuses.²⁰²

Concerning the financial positive conditionality mechanisms, a EU official indicated that Azerbaijan has not been eligible under the “more for more” principle, unlike other countries like Georgia, which has already benefited from it.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Zasztowt, 2014, p. 41.

²⁰² Interview with a EU official conducted per phone on 2 June 2016, Brussels.

²⁰³ Interview with a EU official conducted per phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

c. Political and economic incentives and the threat of sanctions

Narrative

Conditionality mechanisms do not only cover financial aspects, but also the political cooperation and the intensity of the exchanges between the EU and Azerbaijan. The 2006 AP clearly states that a breach of the “international and European norms and principles”, to which democracy and human rights standards belong, “will result in the immediate suspension of [the] implementation [of the ENP]”.²⁰⁴ This clear negative conditionality clause, allowing for the suspension of the relations, is not present in the action plans regulating the relations of the EU with its other Eastern neighbours.²⁰⁵ However, regarding the bilateral agreements in the field of energy, no human rights clause has been included in the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding on Energy negotiated between the EU and the Republic of Azerbaijan. The 2013 agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan on visa issuance facilitation does not either embrace such a clause,²⁰⁶ and neither does the Mobility Partnership signed the same year.²⁰⁷ Along the possibility for the EU to decide on the suspension of cooperation agreements, the EU also has the possibility to enforce targeted sanctions against individuals or entities on the ground of human rights violations.

Beyond the negative conditionality, the “more for more” principle also applies for the political sphere of EU-Azerbaijan cooperation, notably under the EaP. To incite the Azerbaijani government to progress in the democracy and human rights area, consolidation and upgrading of the relations between the EU and Azerbaijan is promised. Thus, the 2011-2013 Indicative Programme indicates that:

sufficient progress towards the principles and values of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights is an important precondition for upgrading the contractual relations between the EU and Azerbaijan within the framework of the Eastern Partnership.²⁰⁸

204 European Commission, 2006, p. 1.

205 Buşcaneanu, 2013, p.7.

206 European Union, Republic of Azerbaijan, 2013a.

207 European Union, Republic of Azerbaijan, 2013b.

208 European Commission, 2010, p. 13.

Enforcement

The credibility of the political incentives displayed by the EU in the frame of the ENP and EaP has been questioned by scholars. As regards negative conditionality clauses, Börzel et al. underline that it “has never been strengthened nor specified”²⁰⁹ within the Eastern Partnership. Interviews conducted with EU officials reveal that sanctions have not been considered as an appropriate reaction to the degradation of the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. A representative of the EU said vis-à-vis sanctions that they “should always be the last resort. We are not excluding [them] but until you come to that point, you have to be sure you have tried everything else or be very sure that it would work. In my view, keeping the door open for dialogue and working through dialogue for change is a better way to go”, arguing that “I find there are very few cases when applying sanctions have actually helped”.²¹⁰ Sanctions constitute a major diverging point among the EU institutions, as interviews with Brussel-based NGOs and EU institutions' officials have revealed it.²¹¹ Resolutions from the European Parliament thus called for targeted sanctions against Azerbaijani officials involved in the crackdown against the civil society. A step which was not very appreciated by the Commission, which estimates that it closed many negotiation's channels with Azerbaijan: according to a EU official, “the Parliament calling for sanctions did not facilitate our efforts” as “after the Parliamentary resolution in October 2014, Azerbaijan closed down all the committees under the Partnership Agreement”.²¹² Others see the Parliament resolution as one of the factor which led the Azerbaijani authorities to loose their policy towards HRDs and civil society activists and to release some of them in March 2016.²¹³

Regarding positive conditionality, communications from the Commission first assessed that “a sufficient level of progress in terms of democracy” would be “a precondition for starting negotiations on the new Association Agreements and for

209 Börzel, Pamuk, Stahn, 2009, p. 157.

210 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

211 Interviews conducted over Skype or the phone on 15 April 2016, Brussels; 2 May 2016, Brussels; 2 May 2016, London; 4 May 2016, Brussels.

212 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

213 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 4 May 2016, Brussels.

deepening relations thereafter”.²¹⁴ Notwithstanding a clear lack of democratic progresses, underlined in the ENP country reports on Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan was still accepted among the EaP countries.²¹⁵ The EU and Azerbaijan have then upgraded their political relations through the signature in 2013 of a Visa facilitation Agreement, a Readmission Agreement and a Mobility Partnership, despite a continuously degraded human rights and democratic situation in the country. In that case, it appears that a principle “more [cooperation] for less [democratic reforms]” was substituted to the “more for more” conditionality principle foreseen in the cooperation framework. More recently, and despite the heavy crackdown affecting the civil society and the donor organisations, the EU has pursued the discussions with Azerbaijan on the Southern Gas corridor and the deepening of the energy cooperation. A resolution signed by EU officials in February 2015 has thus recognised “the leading role of Azerbaijan Republic as the real major hydrocarbon producer in the Caspian region”.²¹⁶

d. Political pressure through diplomatic statements and resolutions

Narrative

Issuing diplomatic statements is the prerogative of each EU institution. This tool is particularly relevant for the High Representative of the EU and for the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, as diplomacy is the main instrument they have to promote democracy and human rights. The 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy has also recognised a special place for the European Parliament, acknowledging that “the Parliament [...] plays a leading role in the promotion of human rights, in particular through its resolutions”.²¹⁷

214 Buşcaneanu, 2013, p. 8.

215 Commission of the European Communities, 2008; Commission of the European Communities, 2009.

216 Alieva, 2016, p. 20.

217 Council of the European Union, 2012a, p. 1.

Enforcement

This channel is difficult to investigate, due to the huge amount of statements dealing with Azerbaijan issued by EU officials or institutions. If EU officials underline the High Representative has been very regularly raising human rights issues and political prisoners' cases in her public statements, international NGOs are more reserved. They namely regret that the language employed in those communications has often been too soft. A representative of a Brussels-based NGO thus indicated that the first reactions of the EEAS and of the High Representative to the 2013-2014 crackdown and the imprisonment of prominent HRDs had been too weak, as they did not explicitly demanded the release of the HRDs.²¹⁸ A statement was finally issued by the High Representative in August 2015 to condemn the “seriously flawed” processes of the human rights activists Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunus and to ask for their release.²¹⁹ Human Rights Watch also criticised the lack of public diplomacy at the occasion of the 2015 country visits of the EUSR for Human Rights and of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, which were not accompanied by the expression of any public “concern about the crackdown and call for the release of unjustly imprisoned human rights defenders, journalists and activists.”²²⁰ This rather shy diplomacy can be explained by the fact that, as an EU official explained, “Azerbaijan has stressed they would accept criticism in close discussions, but not through public channels”.²²¹

The Parliament is identified by the interviewed international NGOs and also by the EU officials as the most vocal institution regarding the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. Several resolutions on that matter have been adopted in the last years: the latest one, adopted on the 10th of September 2015, “expresses its serious concern over the continuing deterioration of the human rights situation in the country”, “calls for the immediate and unconditional release from jail of all political prisoners, human rights defenders, journalists and other civil society activists”, “strongly condemns the

218 Interview with a NGO representative conducted over Skype on 25 April 2016, Brussels.

219 Mogherini, 2015.

220 Human Rights Watch, 2015, p. 14.

221 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

unprecedented repression against civil society in Azerbaijan” and “calls on the government of Azerbaijan to immediately end its crackdown on civil society and human rights work”.²²² This resolution also calls on the other EU institutions – Council, Commission and EEAS – to adopt a stronger stance vis-à-vis Azerbaijan's authorities, namely to suspend the negotiations for a Strategic Partnership Agreement “as long the government fails to take concrete steps in advancing respect for universal human rights”, to “strictly apply the ‘more for more’ principle”, but also to consider the suspension of the ENI financial allocations to the government on the ground of human rights abuses, as well as targeted sanctions against politicians and officials “involved in the political persecutions”. This resolution reaffirms provisions already expressed in the 2014 resolution on the persecution of human rights defenders in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, neither was followed by concrete actions from the EU's side.

2. EU instruments falling under the linkage model

A EU official has stated that the EU's approach towards democracy promotion in Azerbaijan was “a mix of political dialogue and assistance to the civil society”.²²³ The present section focuses on the latter. Falling under the linkage model, civil society assistance directs at fostering democratically oriented mindsets in the country and at reinforcing the links between the EU and the local civil society.

a. The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Civil Society Facility

Narrative

Along mechanisms providing the Azerbaijani authorities with funding to conduct democratic reforms, the ENP and EaP also comprise financial tools targeting the civil society, such as the Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which has been put in place in Azerbaijan under the 2007-2013 Country Strategy Paper. The EIDHR allocates grants to civil society organisations and projects aiming at fostering democracy and human rights, including justice, rule of law, equality, tolerance or peace

²²² European Parliament, 2015.

²²³ Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

encouraging projects.²²⁴ Some of its funds are specifically made available for HRDs in danger, from which Azerbaijani HRDs can also benefit.

Along the EIDHR, the EU also developed the Non-state Actors in Local Development, a funding programme targeting CSOs. This programme however mainly aims at “poverty reduction in the context of sustainable development”.²²⁵ Similar to the Non-state Actors in Local Development, the Civil Society Facility, an initiative belonging to the multilateral track of the EaP, is not limited to democracy promotion programmes but encompasses it. This initiative directs at supporting the civil society, in the goal of “building credible and inclusive policy processes, stronger democratic processes and accountability systems”.²²⁶ The Civil Society Facility shall bring support to the civil society under diverse forms: capacity-building activities (including “trainings, seminars, workshops, exchange of good practices, ad-hoc support”²²⁷ to develop the civil society “internal professionalism and capacities”²²⁸) but also organising multi-stakeholder meetings involving CSOs along with governmental representatives and EU representatives so as to foster political dialogue. This mechanism therefore aims at enhancing the political institutions' democratic functioning, but also at building up a democratic culture within the country.

Enforcement

Between 2007 and 2010, EIDHR has supported nineteen projects in Azerbaijan, as reported by the EU delegation in Baku: for the calls launched in 2007 and 2008, €0.7 million have been mobilised under EIDHR each year. For 2010 (the projects were realised in 2012), €1.2 million was disbursed by the EU.²²⁹ Regarding the Civil Society Facility, a communication from DG NEAR stated that “from 2011 to 2013 it supported more than 100 organisations in all 6 Eastern Partnership countries” without further specification. However, due to the restrictive legislation adopted on foreign funding, the

224 Babayan, 2015, p. 76.

225 European Commission, 2012, p. 17.

226 European Commission, 2014a, p. 16.

227 EU Neighbourhood Info Centre, 2015.

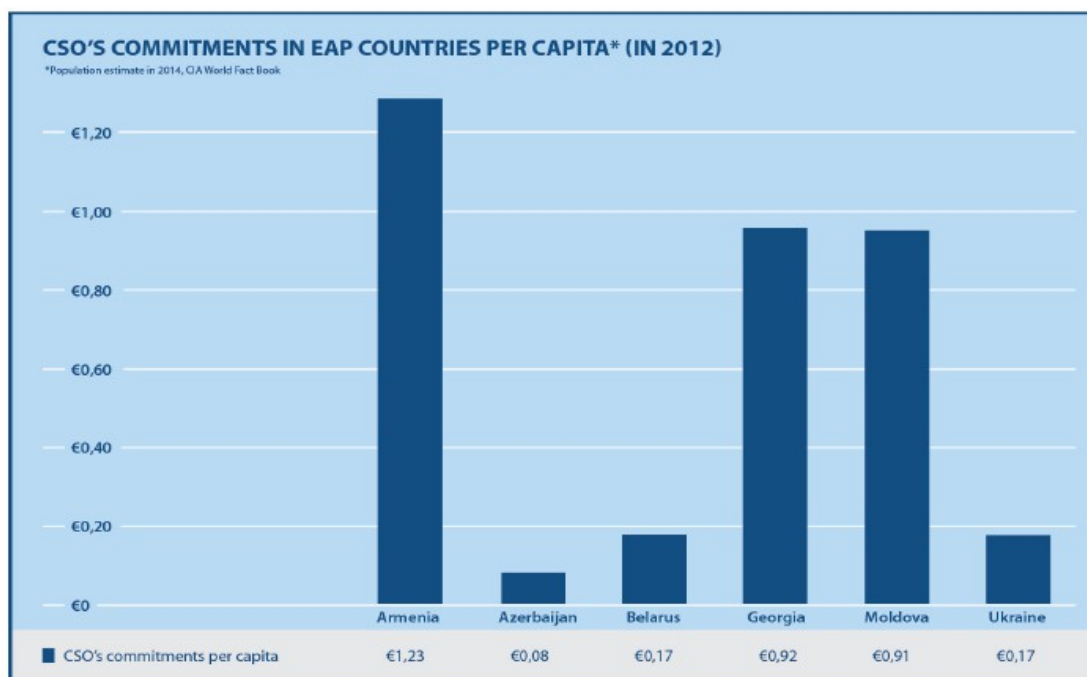
228 European Commission, 2014a, p. 16.

229 European Commission, 2012, p. 7.

EU is meeting large difficulties to disburse the funds to CSOs. According to a representative of an international NGO based in Brussels, the EU has not been able to disburse any of its funding over the last 2 years in Azerbaijan.²³⁰

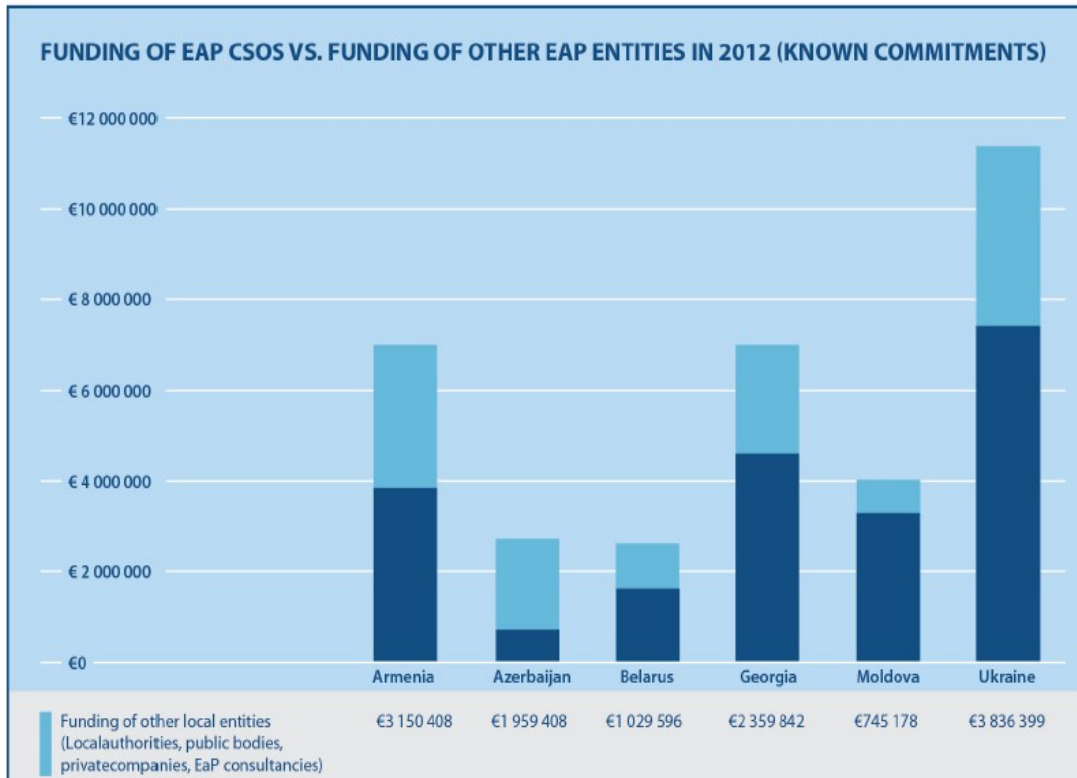
Interestingly, Rihackova observes two trends in her analysis of the 2012 EU civil society funding in Azerbaijan: first, the lowest EU funds were made available for the Azerbaijani civil society among the civil societies of the six EaP partners, in absolute and relative terms. Second, the civil society organisations in Azerbaijan have received less funding than other local entities (i.e. local authorities, public bodies, private companies or EaP consultancies), a unique situation among the six EaP partners, as the two following graphs show it.

Chart 1.2.



Source: Rihackova, 2014, p. 9.

230 Interview conducted over Skype on 14 April 2016, Brussels.



Source: Rihackova, 2014, p. 8.

b. Direct contacts and partnerships with the Azerbaijani civil society

Narrative

The support the EU provides to CSOs is not solely of a financial nature. The 2012 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy thus indicates that the EU delegation on the ground should pursue “a genuine partnership with civil society, including at the local level.”²³¹ To this end, the heads of EU delegation shall “work closely with human rights NGOs active in the countries of their posting.”

²³¹ Council of the European Union, 2012a, p. 6.

Enforcement

The interviews with local civil society organisations as well as with EU officials have revealed that the EU delegation in Baku is actively involved with local NGOs, through different means. Meetings with CSO representative are held, on a regular basis, and also when EU officials from Brussels undertake country visits, as it was for instance the case when the High Representative visited Azerbaijan in February-March 2016. To show the support of the EU delegation, some of its representatives attend the events or press conferences organised by civil society organisations. Members of the EU delegation have also monitored the court trials of some HRDs and visited them in prison.²³²

c. The Civil Society Forum

Narrative

The Civil Society Forum (CSF) was created under the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Launched by the EU, the CSF aims at promoting contacts between civil society organisations active in the six countries taking part in the EaP. Beyond the establishment of links between CSOs, the CSF strives for “the sharing of information and experience on the partner countries' paths towards transition, reform and modernisation”.²³³ The scope of the targeted organisations is wide, from trade unions to NGOs, think-tanks, foundations, professional associations, etc. The Forum is organised in five working groups: Democracy and Human Rights (WG1), Economic integration (WG2), Environment and Energy (WG3), Contacts between People (WG4), Social and Labor Policies (WG5). The Working Group on Democracy and Human Rights is subdivided into 9 groups: Local Government and Public Administration Reform, Fight against Corruption, Visa Facilitation, Media Freedom, Human Rights, Election Monitoring, Judiciary Reform, Gender Equality and Regional Cooperation and Confidence Building.²³⁴ The CSF also allocates grants to projects that cover at least three EaP countries.

232 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 27 April 2016, Brussels.

233 Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2016a.

234 Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2016b.

Enforcement

The first EaP CSF General Assembly took place in November 2009 in Brussels and has since then met on a yearly basis. The working groups meet as well once a year and shall continuously conduct projects in their home countries throughout the year. None of the projects financed under the CSF in 2015 was covering Azerbaijan.²³⁵

d. The European Endowment for Democracy

Narrative

Despite its independent statute from the EU, the EED is here also taken into consideration, as it is mainly funded by the European Commission and the voluntary contributions of EU Member States and works in cooperation with the EU institutions. According to Giusti and Fassi, “it is not a European instrument but [it is] intended to complement existing EU cooperation instruments”, notably the EIDHR.²³⁶ The idea behind the launching of the EED was the creation of a more flexible mechanism to provide direct financial help to CSOs and HRDs, notably those who are not eligible under the assistance programmes of other donor organisations (like national states programmes, EIDHR, international NGO programmes).

Enforcement

The EED has funded worldwide 247 projects by June 2016. Its website presents four Azerbaijani initiatives that have benefited from its funding. However, due to security reasons, all the funded projects are not made public. It is therefore difficult to assess the extent to which the EED has been financing projects in Azerbaijan. Among the four projects made public, two of them focused on the media, aiming at developing alternative sources of information, one on local youth associations organising trainings and workshops on human rights and democratic values, and the last one focused on awareness raising campaigns on transparency.²³⁷

235 Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2015.

236 Giusti & Fassi, 2014, p. 120.

237 European Endowment for Democracy, 2015.

3. EU instruments falling under the governance model

Narrative

Even if the governance model catches a growing attention in the academic literature EU actors do not identify this channel as part of their democracy promotion programmes, as it was mentioned by none of the EU officials interviewed. Nevertheless, some EU programmes in Azerbaijan can be directly related to the governance model.

The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, constituted in 2011, gathers European Parliament's members and Parliamentarians from the six EaP countries. One of its objectives is to cover “questions related to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms [...]”.²³⁸

Besides this interparliamentary cooperation, technical cooperation also takes place between the EU and Azerbaijan, through various programmes like Twinning, “which involves transfer of know-how directly from EU Member State institutions to Azerbaijani institutions through a peer-to-peer approach” and aims at “introduc[ing] EU best practices and standards.”²³⁹ Beyond the institutions, TRACECA involves the transport sector, and both TEMPUS and ERASMUS MUNDUS tackle youth and education. Since the mandate of the latter programmes do not include democracy related clauses, they will however not be part of this analysis.

Enforcement

Contrary to Belarus, Azerbaijan has not been excluded from participating into the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly on the ground of human rights abuses and democratic shortcomings. However, Azerbaijan has unilaterally withdrawn its participation into the Assembly since the 2014 European Parliament's resolution on human rights defenders in Azerbaijan.²⁴⁰

If Azerbaijan has participated quite intensively in the Twinning programmes, with more than 20 ongoing or completed projects for the time period 2004-2013, further study to assess its impact on fostering democratically oriented mindsets among the

238 Constituent Act of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, Article 2.

239 EEAS, 2015b, p. 2.

240 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

participants would be required.²⁴¹

III. Interim conclusion: the EU's democracy promotion mixed approach in Azerbaijan

The analysis of the mechanisms mobilised in Azerbaijan by the diverse EU institutions with the aim of fostering democratisation in the country confirms Levenex and Schimmelfennig's assertion that “from its beginnings, EU democracy promotion has been a multifaceted policy”.²⁴² As several EU officials explained, the approach of the EU mixes political dialogue with the authorities with concurrent assistance to the civil society:

You can't do one without the other [...] With Azerbaijan so far we have tried to keep the dialogue on all channels we have and at the same time to support civil society, through different means.²⁴³

I think there is not one silver bullet that will solve all the problems. I think we will continue to use all the different tools that we have: some public tools, some private tools, some tools related to aid, some tools related to politics. We have to be also patient. We have seen positive steps recently but there was also a long time when we did not see a lot of positive signs.²⁴⁴

The EU's democracy and human rights promotion activities thus draw both on leverage and linkage mechanisms in Azerbaijan: Under the leverage model, political dialogue and financial assistance, conditionality – of financial and political nature –, as well as political pressure are presented as means to promote democracy along an intergovernmental channel. Under the linkage model, EU officials argue that assistance is provided to local CSOs through financial mechanisms, as the EIDHR, and through direct help, cooperation and networking provided by the EU delegation in Baku or within the Civil Society Forum of the EaP. The governance model is also represented through programmes like Twinning or the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly.

241 European Commission, 2014b.

242 Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011, p. 886.

243 Interview with a EU official conducted over the phone on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

244 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 27 April 2016, Brussels.

If the actions of the EU are differentiated, so are the orientations and methods of the different EU institutions. It seems that there is no overarching unity on one democracy promotion approach towards Azerbaijan among the EU institutions, especially considering the Azerbaijani government. The European Parliament has chosen a quite confrontational approach by voting several resolutions strongly calling the Azerbaijani authorities to respect their human rights obligations and to release the political prisoners, also demanding targeted sanctions against officials of the regime. On the contrary, the EEAS and the High Representative of the EU have chosen a softer approach, emphasising the need to maintain political dialogue and to promote democratisation through collaboration and dialogue with the government.

This thesis argues that there is a certain discrepancy between the EU's rhetoric on democracy and human rights promotion and the actual implementation of the EU's narrative. Beyond the Azerbaijani withdrawal from several cooperation frameworks, which has impeded the EU-Azerbaijan human rights dialogue, several provisions of the agreements between Azerbaijan and the EU have not been implemented consistently by the EU. The enforcement of the conditionality mechanisms has been differentiated. On the financial level, Azerbaijan has on the one hand not benefited from the supplementary funding of the Governance facility due to its lack of progress concerning human rights and democratisation. On the other hand, the country allocations under the ENI have not been cut or lowered despite the worsening of the human rights and democratic situation in the country and notwithstanding the EU Parliament's demands. The preference of the EU towards positive rather than negative conditionality is here confirmed. On the level of political conditionality, however, further integration has been achieved, through agreements on visa facilitation, despite the degradation of the human rights record of Azerbaijan. Further cooperation in the energy sector is moreover ongoing, regardless of the 2014 crackdown of Azerbaijani authorities on the civil society and HRDs. Positive political conditionality has therefore not been enforced. Neither has been negative political conditionality, as both the EEAS and the Commission remain reluctant to consider the suspension of the cooperation or targeted

sanctions against officials of the regime, despite the repeated demands formulated by the European Parliament in 2014 and 2015. As Alieva deplors it, “the EU not only did not apply sanctions, but continued the policy of constructive engagement with Azerbaijan after the 2014 crackdown.”²⁴⁵ The political pressure, through statements, is also differentiated among EU institutions: if all EU bodies have expressed concerns and condemned the human rights abuses in Azerbaijan, the strength and tone of their statements have remained uneven. Whereas the European Parliament has adopted strong wording, the High Representative – according to international NGOs' experts – has adopted a less controversial stance, nevertheless still calling for human rights improvements in Azerbaijan. Concerning the assistance provided to the civil society, the EU delegation in Baku has since 2008 engaged contacts with and supported actions of local HRDs and CSOs. Funding has also been provided through the EIDHR and the Non-State Actors programmes, but its scope and results remain limited. Besides its moderate extent, the EU funding has been blocked since the adoption of a new donor-registration law by Azerbaijan's government in 2014, thus strongly limiting the EU's action in that regard.

245 Alieva, 2016, p. 24.

CHAPTER 4 – THE EU AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY PROMOTERS: AN INFORMAL COALITION ?

Chapter 3 has identified the policy-mix approach of the EU institutions in their human rights and democracy promotion activities in Azerbaijan. The present chapter provides an assessment of the EU's approach through the lens of Azerbaijani democracy promoters and civil society representatives.

This paper argues that the perspective of the recipients of democracy promotion assistance should be taken into account, and that local actors should have a say in the assessment of the programmes their country is the target of. A first argument states that a genuine democracy promotion programme should be in itself democratic, and thus consider the opinions of the ones impacted by it – through consultation, if not co-decision mechanisms. The inclusion of local civil society actors also refers to a logic of local ownership of the democracy promotion programmes. If the latter are neither accepted nor welcomed by the recipients, their impact may not be tangible, which is the argument of Jacoby's “coalition approach”: In order to have a transformative impact, an external democracy promoter must be supported by local actors sharing its views and supporting its efforts.²⁴⁶ Yet, according to Youngs, “Western donors have been criticised for designing policies that are insufficiently driven by local demands for political reform.”²⁴⁷ Taking into account Azerbaijani authorities' reluctance to any democracy promotion project, local CSOs appear as the sole internal actor potentially supporting EU's exogenous efforts. The Azerbaijani civil society has indeed developed even prior to the 1991 independence and has supported the diffusion of democratic norms, pushing for the democratisation of the regime over the years.²⁴⁸

246 Jacoby, 2006.

247 Youngs, 2010, p. 2.

248 Ergun, 2005, p. 105.

The present section will first determine whether the EU is seen as a normative power promoting democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan. Second, the extent to which local experts in democracy and human rights deem the EU's approach as relevant and likely to foster democratic transformation will be analysed. The chapter's conclusion will go back to the question whether the EU can count on an informal coalition in Azerbaijan to support its efforts, what remains an important pre-requisite for effective democracy promotion programmes. The interview participants were more specifically asked on democracy promotion mechanisms falling under the two main channels of the EU democracy promotion, the linkage and the leverage models.

I. Interview sample: profile of the participants

Different organisations, of different sizes and with different missions, are part of the interview sample. This paper considers that representatives of the Azerbaijani civil society do possess an expertise of their country's situation and are therefore considered as key informants on human rights and democracy related issues in Azerbaijan. The common ground between all the participants is their present or past participation into a local NGO, which is or has been active in Azerbaijan. The sample thus includes HRDs who, notably after the 2014 crackdown on the Azerbaijani civil society, have stopped their activities or have chosen to pursue their missions from abroad. Both NGOs, civic movements and think tanks with democratically oriented mindsets and pursuing democracy or/and human rights promotion activities are part of this study. All the organisations are genuine CSOs independent from the Azerbaijani government, as they do not receive any governmental funding. They are either financed by international donors, private companies, membership fees or individual donations. The sample comprises organisations having closely worked with the EU and NGOs with looser links with the regional organisation, serving the purpose of diversifying the sources and points of view on the EU's activities so as to improve the validity of the findings.

Interviews have been conducted with the following key informants:

- Participant A, head of a women's rights association. Interview conducted over Skype on the 12th of April 2016 (Baku, Azerbaijan).
- Ilyas Safarli, board member of “Uluchay” Social-Economic Innovation Center. Interview conducted over Skype on the 16th of April 2016 (Sheki, Azerbaijan).
- Turgut Gambar, co-founder and board member of the civic movement N!DA. Interview conducted over Skype on the 30th of April 2016 (Baku, Azerbaijan).
- Celia Davies, Strategy & Communications Manager of Meydan TV, an independent media, currently operating from outside of the country. Interview conducted over Skype on the 4th of May 2016 (London, United Kingdom).
- Avaz Hasanov, head of the Humanitarian Research Public Union and national coordinator of the Civil Society Forum. Interview conducted over Skype on the 10th of May 2016 (Baku, Azerbaijan).
- Zaur Akbar, former chief deputy of the opposition party Musavat, former executive director of the Youth Club Public Union, board member of EITI Azerbaijan. Interview conducted over Skype on the 18th of May 2016 (Baku, Azerbaijan).
- Jeyhun Veliyev, Atlas Corps fellow and former researcher in an Azerbaijani think tank. Interview conducted over Skype on the 8th of June 2016 (Washington DC, USA).
- Elvin Yusifli, project director at Transparency Azerbaijan. Interview conducted over Skype on the 11th of June 2016 (Baku, Azerbaijan).

Participating NGOs and HRD	Projects directly financed by the EU (EED excluded)	Past or present membership in the CSF National Platform of the Eastern Partnership
Participant A	Yes	Yes
Ilyas Safarli, Uluchay	Yes	Yes
Avaz Hasanov, Humanitarian Research Public Union	Yes	Yes (national coordinator)
Elvin Yusifli	Yes	Yes
Jeyhun Veliyev	Yes	Yes
Zaur Akbar	No	Yes
Turgut Gambar, N!DA	No	No
Celia Davies, Meydan TV	No	No

II. The EU: a normative power in Azerbaijan? General perceptions of the EU's involvement and results

A. The EU: a normative agenda along with economic and energy interests ?

Analysing local democracy promoters' assessment of the EU activities in Azerbaijan first implies to analyse their perception of the EU. Do they see the EU as the normative player it claims to be?

The picture is contrasted: if four out of the eight interviewed Azerbaijani NGO representatives reckon that the EU is indeed promoting democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan, while being conscious that the EU also pursues economic and energy interests in the country, four other respondents are reserved or critical. The opinion of Turgut Gambar is quite representative of the views of the first group of participants:

I believe that the international community in general, EU countries, USA, are the sides that raise those [democracy and human rights related] issues. [...] I'm pretty sure that energy is a higher priority than human rights and political opposition but they still raise these issues.

Avaz Hasanov considers on his side that, even if the “human rights and democracy issues are a main topic of EU officials in Azerbaijan”, it is still subsidiary to the “cooperation on energy security”. Ilyas Safarli expresses the same reservation, wondering about “the priorities of the EU right now” while deeming that the EU is doing “enough” to promote human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan. Participant A is especially positive about the EU's human rights and democracy programmes, stating that the “EU delegation in Azerbaijan is one of the most active and most open and available delegations among all the diplomatic corpse as such”. Zaur Akbar is more reserved, stating that the EU “wants” to promote human rights and democracy, but that the EU “could do a lot more”. He reckons that the EU has “double standards” when dealing with its partner countries, which are related to energy and economic interests. Celia Davies is even more critical towards EU's commitment to promote democracy and human rights: “The EU's engagement in Azerbairiian is somewhat disappointing for us.”

To Elvin Yusifli, while the EU “has some efforts to support democratisation”, the “civil society and democratic forces in the country feel a little left out of the EU's consideration in Azerbaijan”, as “pragmatic interests” have been prioritised over democracy and human rights. Jeyhun Veliyev expresses a similar “very negative view” on the EU's engagement for democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan, questioning both the capacity and the will of the EU to promote those values.

In general, the responses given by the NGOs representatives corroborate the conclusions drawn by Böttger and Falkenhain in 2011, who reported that “most [of the civil society actors] see cooperation in the energy sector as the main focus of attention for both the EU and Azerbaijan.”²⁴⁹

B. The EU: a transformative power?

The assessment of the EU's capacity act as a transformative power in Azerbaijan will here focus on the capacity of the EU to influence the Azerbaijani authorities. Chapter 2 has indeed shown that democratisation was mostly hampered by the reluctance of the state authorities to carry out political reforms and liberalisation. This section recalls the spiral model elaborated by Risse, Ropp and Sikkink from “commitment to compliance”²⁵⁰: if Azerbaijan has adopted international conventions and covenants on human rights and democracy, compliance is still to come.

Seven out of eight respondents expressed themselves on the transformative power of the EU in Azerbaijan: they are rather sceptical over its impact on democratic transformation. Indeed, poor progress has been achieved by Azerbaijan regarding the respect of individual freedoms and liberties in recent years. Turgut Gambar is thus very critical towards the results achieved: “[The EU] has been doing what it has been doing until last year for 15 years and the results have been bad.” Participant A similarly reckons that “at the result level we don't have any changes yet“. Zaur Akbar is alike disappointed with the results: “Unfortunately the EU has been in negotiations with my

249 Böttger & Falkenhain, 2011, p. 18.

250 Risse, Roppe, Sikkink, 2013.

government for more than two years and nothing changed. Some things changed but nothing changed considerably.“ Jeyhun Veliyev is likewise not seeing any “visible outcome” of the EU's action, the releases of political prisoners in March 2016 excepted: for him, “EU has failed to promote democratisation in Azerbaijan.” Turgut Gambar nonetheless stresses that, despite limited improvements, the EU's pressure and more generally the international community's commitment in Azerbaijan has prevented the situation to get even worse:

If not these countries and if not the pressure that is coming from them, I am pretty sure that the human rights and democracy situation would have been even worse, the government would have crushed the opposition and the civil society totally, without leaving anything. [...] Just the fact that it exists checks the power of the government and doesn't allow the government to cross the red line too much.

Similarly, Avaz Hasanov explains that “the EU is our last supporter”, the last institution the civil society can rely on. Therefore, even if the results may be weak, he still values the EU's presence and engagement.

The participants also consider that the release of several political prisoners in March 2016 was due to the pressure of the international community. They however often do not differentiate further, stating it remains difficult to identify which particular action or actor within the international community was the most influential in that particular issue. If Avaz Hasanov clearly links the visit of the High Representative Mogherini in February-March 2016 with the release of the prisoners, this interpretation is nuanced by Elvin Yusifli, who assesses that overall the US influence was the overriding factor in the government’s decision to set the prisoners free.

The question of the results reached by the EU is closely linked with the question whether the EU actually possesses leverage to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan. Participant A is very positive regarding the leverage the EU has: “If there is any side which is able to influence the decision of the government, that side will be the EU. It's one of the biggest stakeholders in the international community as such and in Azerbaijan it has especially a very very strong role.” The same discourse is adopted by Avaz Hasanov: “EU is one of the key institutions in Azerbaijan [...] and EU has big

chances to be able to help the civil society forces [...] I think the EU is one main institution in Azerbaijan to make the government change its policy.” For Elvin Yusifli, the dependence of the oil-and-gas-based Azerbaijani economy on the European markets gives important leverage to the EU to champion political and economic reforms in the country. NIDA's representative reckons that the EU's leverage on Azerbaijan's authorities is dependent on the general situation of the country, stating that when “oil prices were pretty high” and when “Russia was stronger than it is now”, the authorities were “very confident in their human rights abuses”. The evolution of the economic situation of the country may however encourage an evolution of the government's orientations towards more liberalisation: “[the] economic and financial crisis in Azerbaijan [has] changed the attitude of the government. They became less confident. [...] Now they are looking for financial help from the World Bank, the IMF, but in order to receive this assistance, they need to be friendly with the West.” Participant A, like Avaz Hasanov, Zaur Akbar, Jeyhun Veliyev and Elvin Yusifli similarly stress that the context of economic crisis the country is going through creates more possibilities for the EU to be heard by the government, as it increases the authorities' dependence towards their European partners. As Elvin Yusifli expresses it, to “tie democratisation agenda to any economic support would be an effective way to leverage Azerbaijan's government right now”. Along the same line, Jeyhun Veliyev thinks that the economic crisis is an important factor determining the government's attitude. He asserts that “the impact of EU institutions [...] is minor unless there is another change that affects the general situation like the price fall” without however being convinced that the EU institutions will be “capable to use this opportunity”.

III. Assessment of the EU tools to promote democracy and human rights

The participating NGOs and activists have a split appreciation of the EU's efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the country. The following section assesses in greater details whether the main tools mobilised by EU institutions in Brussels and in Baku are likely to trigger democratisation in their views.

A. EU instruments falling under the leverage model

1. Dialogue platforms

One key strategic orientation of the Commission, the EEAS and the High Representative is to keep the dialogue with the Azerbaijani authorities open, believing it to be one of the most appropriate tools to influence the government so as to push the authorities to open up and improve the democratic standards of the country. All participants to the survey have confirmed that dialogue platforms between Azerbaijani authorities and EU institutions are crucial. Ilyas Safarli thus “believe[s] that further consultations and dialogue between EU and Azerbaijan can bring positive changes in overall civil society environment, as well as promotion of human rights and democracy in the country“, even if the latest consultations on the donor registration procedures have not resulted in any concrete evolution, “due to the absence of willingness of the government to provide an exception to some of the donors”. The answer of Participant A to the question whether the EU should continue to talk with Azerbaijani authorities was also clear-cut: “Absolutely.” Avaz Hasanov estimates that after Mogherini's visit to Azerbaijan “the message was very clear for the government”. For him, the release of civil society activists in March 2016 was directly linked with the meeting between Mogherini and the authorities at the occasion of that visit. Jeyhun Veliyev is much more critical on the EU's cooperation with the Azerbaijani government, deploring that the EU is “ready to do compromises with the government of Azerbaijan, [and] always prefers to collaborate with the government instead of involving civil society NGOs.” He also thinks that the EU should not be too enthusiastic about the recent releases, indicating that “the government plays a carrot and stick policy, [taking] somebody out of prison and [putting] somebody else in prison”. Along the dialogue platforms, Jeyhun Veliyev and Zaur Akbar criticise the allocation of direct funding to the government in order to pursue reforms, what will not, in their view, bring any change except supporting a repressive system. Turgut Gambar and Celia Davies are also very sceptical regarding this funding, as they assess that the Azerbaijani government is in any case not interested in pursuing democratisation reforms.

2. Positive conditionality of further political and economic cooperation

The conditionality of further political and economic cooperation – the “more for more” approach – is preferred by the EEAS and the Commission over negative conditionality (suspension of the cooperation in case of human rights abuses), which, even if present in EU-Azerbaijan agreements, has never been enforced. The Parliament seems to be more attached to the latter, as it called to the partial suspension of the financial assistance to Azerbaijan in its 2014 and 2015 resolutions on the country.

Seven respondents have expressed themselves on the question of the conditionality of the cooperation as a tool to promote democracy. In overall, they stress the need for the EU to strengthen its conditionality: they assess that Azerbaijan's government would be responsive to a conditional approach. They therefore wish they would see the conditionality principles such as included in EU-Azerbaijan agreements enforced. Participant A thus values the positive conditionality approach while regretting its lack of enforcement: “[EU institutions] have the policy more for more, which is unfortunately more on paper than in practice so far but I hope it will come to the reality soon. And I believe that [...] if the government wants to get more EU support, it should provide more support, more opportunity for the civil society to operate.” N!DA's board member Turgut Gambar also speaks in favour of more positive conditionality:

I think the deepening of relations between the EU and the US with Azerbaijan should depend on the human rights situation, should depend on whether the government releases all the political prisoners or not, should depend on whether the government is going to hold free and fair elections, to hold a judicial reform or not. Otherwise it shouldn't, the West shouldn't improve relations with the government here. [...] The international community should continue putting HR as a preconditions for the relations to become better. [...] I understand how Europe is trying to diversify and increase its energy security, but it shouldn't do any energy deals with regimes like the one in Azerbaijan without having preconditions of human rights.

Most of the interview participants refute an argument often brought up by EU officials: the risk that Azerbaijan's authorities would isolate or turn to Russia if the EU would apply stronger conditionality or even freeze its relations with Azerbaijan on the ground of human rights abuses and democratic shortcomings. The participants draw a clear difference between the 2014-2016 situation and the situation a few years before,

asserting the economic and financial situation of Azerbaijan has drastically changed and has modified the power balance between the EU and its South-Caucasian partner. Turgut Gamber judges that the EU is “afraid that Azeri government would go to cooperate with Russia” but does not hold it for a “good justification”. Along the same line, according to Participant A, a more conditional policy by the EU

would not lead to further isolation because Azerbaijan is not in the situation to afford the isolation any more. A few years ago we had a lot of oil resources and the oil prices were quite high. They could manage economically and even at some terms politically not even to isolate but somehow separate – be a little bit apart. Now they don't have this luxury, now they entered the economic crisis with a drop of oil prices and also the lack of economic diversification for all these years. [...] I think if EU presses a little bit and if they really push on more for more, they can reach out very good results. Really good results. There is no other way out. Especially we can recall that Azerbaijan is open to financial loans from different EU institutions. They need the political support of EU.

Avaz Hasanov confirms this analysis, stating that “the geopolitical situation changed: it is not like three years ago. Azerbaijan cannot be alone facing the pressure of Russia. Azerbaijan needs political and sometimes economical support from EU”. For him, the government has tried “to change some elements” in its policy to please the EU as the authorities are seeking for cooperation. More pressure and conditionality from the EU's side to push for an improvement of the human rights and democratic situation would not drastically endanger the EU-Azerbaijan relations: “Azerbaijan will not run from the EU criticism and will change some policies.” Jeyhun Veliyev also judges that the EU should understand that “Azerbaijan cannot completely take off from the EU and go to Russia.”

Conversely, Ilyas Safarli puts that “stopping cooperation with the authorities will give a good chance for pro-Russian players in the country to promote Russia's interest.” For him, it would lead to further difficulties for the NGOs and civil society in Azerbaijan, as “one of [Russia's] interests is not to have an independent civil society sector, as well as human rights and democracy in the country.”

3. Silent diplomacy or public criticism ?

The opinions of the participants on the public criticism expressed by EU institutions towards Azerbaijan's violations of human rights and democratic standards differ. This strategy is the core of the European Parliament resolutions as well as the tool of the EU representatives on the international scene (High Representative, Commission), even if the latter are more reserved on its use.

Ilyas Safarli, Elvin Yusifli, Celia Davies and Participant A all grant value to the European Parliament's resolutions and the open criticism they comprehend. In the opinion of Participant A:

[The EU] should be as critical as possible, they should use adequate language to what is happening in the country. For example if we are having a crisis, it is all to respond in the language of crisis but not in the language of concern; we are not at the stage of concern anymore, we are in a deep crisis, as NGOs, that's why we need not just “concerns” but some harsher language, some tougher language. And by the way, EU parliament last year, with the resolution on Azerbaijan on September 10th, that was the correct language I think. It made their relations temporarily not very comfortable, not very good, but that's inevitable, and that should be forwarded out.

For Elvin Yusifli, it may also “make the Azerbaijani government think about the costs of jailing journalists or civic activists” even if he remains pessimistic about the capacity of the EU to issue a “very coherent, strong and jointly supported position on Azerbaijan”. The respondents are aware that such criticism may trigger a cooling of the EU-Azerbaijan relationships, which they deem as a necessary evil. For Celia Davies, it is also a question of respect and solidarity towards the HRDs and local democracy promoters who have been suffering under the repression of Azerbaijan's government: “It is a way of showing solidarity from the European parliament with the people who sacrifice their freedom. The cost might be economic or political relationships.”

Avaz Hasanov is more reserved on the public criticism, maintaining that “the character of our government shows they are not able to receive critics”, reflecting the opinion expressed by an EU official asserting that “Azerbaijan has stressed they would accept criticism in closed discussion, but not through public channels.”²⁵¹

For Celia Davies as for Zaur Akbar, public statements should be accompanied by concrete actions. As maintained by Celia Davies, “statements are statements. If they are

251 Interview with a EU official conducted over Skype on 2 May 2016, Brussels.

not gonna back them up with actual assistance to people on the ground, then it does not really make much difference.” Zaur Akbar does not grant a high value to statements: “The government refuses all petitions conducted by the EU. Statements are not the solution way.” Jeyhun Veliyev is likewise very critical towards the statements: “Until [the recent releases], the statements of the EU Parliament or of the individuals representing different EU institutions never made any impact or influenced the Azerbaijani government”, adding that “nothing comes from this kind of statements, they are statements and they are not binding.” He further regrets that “in critical moments, the EU was satisfied making statements”, which is not “the right approach”.

4. Suspension of the cooperation and targeted sanctions

Targeted sanctions, which the EEAS considers as the last resort solution whereas the European parliament repeatedly called for their enforcement in its 2014 and 2015 resolutions, are - contrary to the EEAS approach - highly valued by the civil society organisations representatives who took part in this study. Most of them thus estimate that the bill passed by the US Congress in December 2014, calling for sanctions against Azerbaijani officials, has played a major role in the recent steps undertaken by the regime towards some liberalisation and in the releases of political prisoners. Sanctions are seen as the most efficient tool to make Azerbaijan's government operating a shift in its policy, having a much bigger influence than statements. According to Turgut Gambar, “real actions, like threatening with sanctions, travel bans, arrest on the bank accounts, made the government do some actions. [...] The fact that the bill was presented to the Congress made the government act. [...] I think this was the main trigger of government releasing some political prisoners.” Similarly, for Celia Davies, “sanctions are the best leverage, it is what the government listens to. [...] The government only listens to money”. Identically, Zaur Akbar says that sanctions are “the sole way to push the government“. He is at the same time quite pessimistic about the actual use of sanctions by the EU, like his co-respondents: “I don't expect any sanctions from the EU.” Elvin Yusifli is more reserved about the positive impact of sanctions,

expressing himself as “very sceptical”, thinking that the sanctioned individuals would still be enjoying the support of the President. He also fears that the civil society would carry the costs of the sanctions.

If most of the respondents value targeted sanctions, they however speak in favour of the pursuit of EU-Azerbaijan cooperation and do not support the suspension of the relations or of the economic and political cooperation. According to Celia Davies, “I don't think refusing to engage is a solution. But what they need to do is engage broadly, including the civil society, not only the government.” For Ilyas Safarli, “the cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan should be continued and developed.”

B. EU instruments falling under the linkage model

The instruments of the EU falling under the leverage model are based on contacts with CSOs and democratically-minded actors that shall promote human rights and democratisation from a grass-roots perspective. When assessing the leverage mechanisms, the respondents have based their answers on their external observation of the EU's action and of the government's responsiveness: in the regard of linkage mechanisms, they are directly concerned, as actual or potential recipients of the EU's assistance.

1. Financial assistance for CSOs

Financial assistance to civil society organisations has constituted, besides the political dialogue and the cooperation with Azerbaijan's authorities, the main tool that the Commission and the EEAS use in Azerbaijan to promote democracy and human rights. The payment of grants and the allocation of funds by the EU has however been suspended for the last two years, due to the restrictive legislation on NGOs and donor organisations. Several of the interviewed organisations have thus been eligible under calls for proposals launched by the EU delegation in Azerbaijan to receive grants, without however being able to sign the contracts because of the toughening of the legislation. The participants have testified to the frustration resulting from this situation.

To Participant A, “we have the total financial envelope untouched for the last two years. [...] The entire work of ours, submitting the project concepts and theirs evaluating them was in vain.” The legislation has dramatic consequences for the NGOs in Azerbaijan, as many of them were dependent on international funding: as a result, many closed their doors or drastically reduced their activities. The respondents therefore stress how crucial EU's financial help has been in the last years, regretting its current inability to keep providing it.

While stressing the EU funding is necessary to the pursuit of their activities, the civil society activists still address several critics to the EU funding. First, the technical requirements and the complicated procedure to apply for EU funding are criticised: the interviewed NGOs reckon that the requirements are too high to be fulfilled by small-scale NGOs but recognise the relevance of the co-application procedure, enabling a smaller NGO to apply together with a bigger organisation possessing more resources and capacities. Second, the lack of flexibility of the European Union facing the restrictions imposed by the Azerbaijani government is deplored. For Participant A,

There are lots of methods of flexible funding for the human rights activists at risk and human rights defenders and organisations, there are methods to support these organisations financially. It is a little bit risky to some of them but sometimes there is no other way out. Unfortunately, EU is not that flexible in this regard. They don't have this mechanism to substitute for instance the grant agreement with something else.

One of the reasons behind the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy was to respond to this lack of flexibility on the EU's side. Celia Davies recognises that the application procedure is indeed much more easier for that organisation than for the EU funding. She however considers that this solution is not entirely satisfactory: “The problem now is that it provides gap funding or funding for start-ups. But what happens where you are an established organisation still dependent on grants? The EED is no longer an option for you so that's one solution but not the solution to all of the problems.” Another criticism is formulated by Jeyhun Veliyev on the amount of money made available for the Azerbaijani civil society, which he deems as inferior to the funds allocated to other EaP civil societies. Besides, he criticises the narrow scope of the EU funding and the EU's tendency to continuously fund the same organisations. Elvin

Yusifli also regrets the EU's trend – when the political conditions allowed civil society organisations to work – to favour the same established NGOs and not to open EU's support enough to new or smaller-scale NGOs. Celia Davies nonetheless recognises the difficult position in which the EU institutions are, as “they don't want to upset the government but at the same time they are willing to use money [...] to promote democracy.” As her organisation's application for EU funding was rejected, she tells that:

We felt that their rejection of our project was not well founded and that it was politicised. I think the EU knows that the government very much does not like us because we are an independent media that exposes government's corruption and they didn't want to publicly fund us because they did not want to upset the government.

N!DA's representative, whose movement has never perceived EU funding, questions the relevance of funding civil society organisations as a means to foster democratisation in the current Azerbaijani context:

Building capacity and training people are things that can help in a very small cosmetic way. It doesn't change the general picture. It would help if the country is on the path to democratisation, if the country is already taking steps, has already hold free and fair elections, at least have electoral democracy. But in the situation where we are right now, it is not very helpful. The aim is very noble, people trying to help. But it does not change a lot.

Conversely, Elvin Yusifli speaks in favour of more capacity building assistance from the EU.

2. The accessibility of the EU delegation in Baku to local CSOs

In the assessment of the EU's concrete support to CSOs, the question of the accessibility and availability of the EU delegation in Baku for local democracy promoters is central. All respondents except two have assessed the EU as an accessible and available structure. All Baku-based organisations have indicated meeting EU delegation members regularly, including the Ambassador, as well as high level Brussels-based officials coming to Azerbaijan for country visits, as the EUSR for Human Rights, the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy or the High Representative of the EU. Turgut Gambar estimates that “it is a good thing that they are

meeting us, because sometimes the government demands that they have no meeting with the opposition or civil society at all”. Participant A even assesses that:

The EU delegation is the most active one, I can strongly tell it, the one we always have access to, which is always inviting to different initiatives [...] in the form of round tables, meetings, closed discussions, even individual meetings with certain delegation people [...], which is a very rare phenomenon in Azerbaijan in the last two years.

She adds appreciating the (moral) support given to HRD under investigation or under restriction of liberty as well as to their families. Elvin Yusifli reports on his side that the EU delegation is “relatively accessible”. The meetings are scarcer with the organisations based outside of Baku: Ilyas Safarli thus reckons that they do not meet “that frequently, as we are based out of the capital and not able to travel to Baku as often as needed. But local EU delegation representatives are organizing meetings with local civil society sector representatives in order to discuss challenges and perspectives.” For the organisations operating from the regions, the accessibility of physical meetings with the EU delegation is therefore reduced.

Jeyhun Veliyev and Celia Davies are more critical on the EU delegation's availability and assistance: the latter indicates that the EU delegation has not responded to her organisation's requests of financial assistance. Meydan TV's headquarters and main staff (citizen journalists excluded) are however not based in Azerbaijan any more.

3. The Civil Society Forum

The Civil Society Forum is viewed by the EU institutions as an important tool to foster democratisation by engaging local NGOs to collaborate and to unite their efforts.

The opinions regarding that platform are divided. N!DA's representative has for instance no knowledge about the CSF, and adds that “if it would have been effective, we would have known.” Meydan TV applied again for the membership into the forum after its application had been rejected once. Uluchay Social-Economic Innovation Center, the women's rights organisation, as well as the Humanitarian Research Public Union – whose director, Avaz Hasanov, is also national coordinator – are part of the national (Azerbaijani) CSF platform. Avaz Hasanov is in overall positive about this platform

gathering 55 Azerbaijani civil society organisations. He still recognises that it suffers a lack of resources and visibility in the Azerbaijani society, which he reckons as very disabling. Zaur Akbar also stresses the lack of financial resources of the Forum and estimates its utility reduced against the background of the restrictive environment in which NGOs operate in Azerbaijan. Jeyhun Veliyev judges the platform “ineffective” so far. For Elvin Yusifli, the impact of the CSF Azerbaijani platform has not been noticeable. Ilyas Safarli “think[s] the CSF is not an effective platform for creation of partnerships and empowering civil society sector in Eastern Partnership countries”, due to the absence of tangible collaboration within the structure, as “each country [is] just working on lobbying for their own interests and this creates more troubles for further cooperation.” He also regrets that “pro-governmental CSOs”, the so-called Governmentally Organised NGOs (GONGOs) are part of this platform, affecting negatively, in his opinion, the work of the forum.

IV. Interim conclusion: an informal coalition awaiting more commitment from the EU

The EU's engagement to promote democracy and human rights in Azerbaijan is both recognised and criticised by the participating CSO representatives, who value some efforts of the EU while stressing its shortcomings. They support the democracy and human rights' related objectives the EU has established in the 1999 PCA and 2006 AP: an informal coalition therefore exists between the EU and local democracy promoters. Nonetheless, the interviewed civil society representatives await more engagement from the EU. Almost all participants assess the international community and especially the EU as crucial actors for democracy and human rights promotion in Azerbaijan. According to Participant A,

The international community, despite the rude language of Azerbaijan's government, despite the oil resources that we used to have – should still be present and still support us. Because the changes are inevitable, they will come sooner or later [...] But with EU support, it will be less painful and less bloody [...]. We don't want to have [the Syrian] scenario; therefore, EU support is crucial.

In line with Participant A, Avaz Hasanov reports on the importance of EU's assistance: "Only the cooperation, including this of Azerbaijan with the EU, will help our country and citizens to get support. [...] The cooperation with the EU will help us to get new possibilities." Zaur Akbar thinks that the transformation of Azerbaijan towards a more democratic state and society equally depends on Azerbaijan's population and on the engagement of international actors, notably highlighting the importance of the EU's support to local activists. For Jeyhun Veliyev, the Azerbaijani society should not expect the EU to realise alone the democratisation of Azerbaijan. He nonetheless thinks that the Azerbaijani population is not concerned enough by the democratic shortcomings of its government and he remains pessimistic about a mass mobilisation.

The importance of the EU in the democratisation process of Azerbaijan being recognised, local HRDs and NGOs have identified ways the EU could improve the efficiency of its action and reach more results in Azerbaijan. If the action of the EU delegation on the ground is largely valued by the local activists, their assessment of the Brussels-driven policy is more balanced. One major criticism points out the EU's priorities in its cooperation with Azerbaijan: For Turgut Gambar, the EU "should be more principled" and "should put human rights and democracy as a precondition for all major deals like energy and security deals". He further insists on the risk of disappointing the Azerbaijani population if the "West continues to support regimes like [Azerbaijan] and to cooperate with them no matter what". For him, if people "see that Western countries are acting hypocritically, they will turn away from them. It has happened a lot of times in Azerbaijan that the people got very disillusioned with the West and this increases the level of people who support political Islam." Participant A also recommends to pay attention to the double standards of the EU, perceiving Azerbaijan was not granted the same attention than neighbouring countries, due to – in her eyes – the fact that the country has a Muslim majority. Zaur Akbar also criticises the double standards of the EU, which he however links with the energy and economic interests of the EU. Besides, Jeyhun Veliyev wishes that the EU officials who benefit from the so-called "caviar diplomacy" conducted by the Azerbaijani government were

evicted from the EU institutions, as they impede an assertive EU's policy which would exert more pressure on the Azerbaijani government. Most of the NGOs representatives speak in favour of sanctions against officials and government members, judging that it remains an effective tool to foster democratisation in Azerbaijan, what the Commission and the EEAS however do not consider for the time being. More precisely, civil society organisations report that the EU should focus on pushing for the reform of the current legislation regulating NGO and donor organisations, which is perceived as a major blockade impeding the local civil society's efforts to develop and promote democracy and human rights. The opinion is also widespread that the EU should discriminate more among its partners in the civil society, notably by excluding GONGOs. It should – from the participants' view – keep financing the independent civil society organisations, notably on the ground. As Celia Davies makes explicit, “those organisations are the one who know best what their country needs and the efforts towards change are going to be better if it is led from inside the country, if it's an indigenous effort rather than politicians from Brussels telling them what to do.” For her and most of the interviewed NGO representatives, the EU should be more creative in its channels to provide funding to internal democracy promoters. Jeyhun Veliyev speaks in favour of a reorientation of the funds allocated by the EU, from the intergovernmental channels to the funding of genuine CSOs. For Celia Davies, the EU should also consider the Azerbaijani HRDs in exile operating from abroad: “funding their efforts is still funding indigenous efforts but without being subject to the restrictive legislation.” Avaz Hasanov would furthermore wish more non-monetary engagement from the EU, notably in providing very concrete help to the CSOs. He advocates for a conference room or centre in Baku made available to NGOs to enable them to organise events and reach the public – what they currently hardly can, due to their shrinking resources. He also pushes for the creation of an information centre for NGOs.

Overall, local democracy promoters await the EU to apply the approach it has elaborated in the 1999 PCA, 2006 AP and its own general human rights and democracy provisions. They wish the EU were more principled in its actions and tougher on the Azerbaijani authorities, notably by conditioning more its cooperation, while keeping funding the grass-roots initiatives and the genuine civil society organisations. The criticism of the CSOs does not lie in the (theoretical) approach developed by the EU institutions, but in its lack of consistent implementation.

CONCLUSION: TO BE OR NOT TO BE A NORMATIVE POWER ?

This thesis has aimed at identifying the extent to which the EU does – or does not – exist as a normative power in Azerbaijan, and whether it is likely to foster democratisation in the country. The statute of normative power, as defined by Manners, indeed implies a commitment to promote peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights but also to act as a transformative power.²⁵² As Larsen has stressed it, a normative power must also be recognised as such by third parties.²⁵³

The analysis of the goals that the EU has set in its cooperation with Azerbaijan testifies to the EU's will to contribute to the democratisation of the country, even if the human rights- and democracy-related goals lose significance in the latest 2014-2017 Single Support Framework for EU support to Azerbaijan. A closer analysis of the means mobilised by the diverse EU institutions to promote those norms and foster democracy in Azerbaijan has revealed that the EU does not follow one overarching approach in that regard: whereas the EEAS and the Commission do favour a consensual approach, based on dialogue, the European Parliament has followed a more confrontational strategy in recent years. All EU bodies however equally value the assistance provided to the civil society as a fundamental feature of the EU democracy promotion. The review of the implementation of the EU's provisions and programmes for democracy and human rights promotion has however shown that, beyond the rhetorical commitments, the EU institutions have lacked consistency. Concerning the transformative power of the EU, the poor progress of Azerbaijan on democracy and human rights matters does not speak in favour of the EU's power to foster democratisation in the country. It is however important to recall that the EU remains solely one of the actors involved in the process of democratisation and acts from an external perspective.

252 Manners, 2002, pp. 240-245.

253 Larsen, 2014, p. 897.

This thesis has granted a large importance to the recipients' perspective, assessing that the latter, although remaining a crucial actor both for Azerbaijan's democratisation as well as for the assessment of the EU's efforts in that regard, has often been omitted in previous studies. Considering the recipients' view(s) is moreover crucial to determine whether the EU can be depicted as a normative power in Azerbaijan. It appears that the assessment of the EU democracy promotion by the local civil society representatives is not unified: for half of the respondents, the EU is indeed promoting human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, four respondents out of eight are very critical towards the EU's action. In general, the appreciation of the participants can be divided along two lines: first, the assessment of the efforts undertaken by the EU delegation on the ground to directly assist NGOs; second, the evaluation of the policies driven by Brussels-based institutions to encourage Azerbaijan's democratisation. The EU delegation is overall perceived as active and committed towards the civil society. The opinions regarding the approaches of the Brussels-based institutions are much more balanced and critical: the civil society representatives indeed criticise the lack of consistency and implementation in the EU's democracy promotion agenda. If they agree with the narrative developed by the European Union, which includes strong conditionality mechanisms based on human rights and democratic principles, they regret that such provisions are not implemented in practice. They also praise the commitment of the EU to financially support the efforts of CSOs through high medial strategies, meetings and funding, but regret at the same time that the EU has been unable to respond to the toughening of the NGO and donor legislation adopted by Azerbaijan, resulting in the incapacity to disburse the funding. Besides, the limited amount of funding made available by the EU for the civil society has been deplored. Finally, the participants testify to a lack of tangible results regarding the overall human rights and democratic situation in Azerbaijan. Although they think that the EU possesses leverage over the authorities, it has in their eyes not succeeded in triggering democratic transformation in Azerbaijan.

Even if the European Union institutions and delegation pursue democracy and human rights promotion activities in Azerbaijan, it remains difficult to attribute the statute of normative power to the EU in the Azerbaijani context. Indeed, the EU has not enforced the provisions of its democracy promotion programmes in Azerbaijan with consistency and the Union's (in)action is largely criticised by local actors. The latter would support a more engaged policy drawing on strong conditionality and sanctions against the government, which they assess as likelier to foster democratisation than the current unassertive approach of the EEAS and the Commission. The interviewed NGO representatives are nonetheless aware that such an approach would mean a reversal of the EU's priorities in Azerbaijan: the EU would have to assert the primacy of human rights and democratic principles over its economic, energy and geopolitical interests. A stronger and more confrontational approach may indeed lead to the cooling of EU-Azerbaijan relations. It remains however unlikely that the EU will operate a shift in its foreign policy in a short term perspective, as negotiations for a further cooperation agreement with Azerbaijan should begin in the coming months, despite the absence of tangible progress regarding the respect of human rights and democratic standards in the country.

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