

State of Play of Azerbaijan-EU Relations (Part I)

Implications of the Forthcoming EU Parliament Elections on Baku-Brussels Relations

Inara Yagubova

This is the second part of an IDD Analytical Policy Brief (the first part can be accessed [HERE](#)) that examines Azerbaijan-EU relations in the context of the forthcoming EU Parliament elections and the possible impact of the general intra-EU jockeying for power and influence that will follow. The first part focused on some of the main trends and directions of the EU foreign and security (and energy) policy as they relate to Azerbaijan. The present paper analyzes the possible consequences of the forthcoming parliamentary elections and gets into its implications on EU-Azerbaijan relations in the time ahead.

EU Parliament Election Scenarios

The most prominent political groups that currently hold seats in the EU parliament are the center-right European People's Party (EPP), the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats (S&D), the pro-business Renew Europe camp, the Greens, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and Identity and Democracy (ID). The President of the EU Parliament is Maltese conservative politician Roberta Metsola, a member of the EPP. Various polls predict that the EPP and the S&D are likely to lose some seats while ECR and ID are likely to make gains. Predictions indicate that the EU Parliament will shift further towards the right; however, this change will not result in a steady majority. One can observe such a shift in the present Parliament, when EPP recently joined forces with the ECR home to parties like Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni's rightist Brothers of Italy MEPs and ID against the EU's nature restoration law.

Inara Yagubova is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University, where she previously served as Project Manager of its Centre for Excellence in EU Studies.



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An increase in far-right representation might hinder green policies, result in a harder line on both legal and illegal immigration, the EU's enlargement policies, and political and financial backing for Ukraine. The possibility of parties uninclined to link the EU's security concerns to Ukraine's struggle and its ambition to join both the EU and NATO gaining electoral ground (and thus greater representation in the Parliament) also might have implications for the EU in supporting Ukraine and perpetuating (and strengthening) its sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia. However, current polls indicate that parties affiliated with the center-right EPP are probably going to maintain their strength and, in general, that the overall result of the elections will not be much different from the present composition.

Since the EU Parliament formally appoints the President of the EU Commission upon the proposal of the EU Council, vets prospective EU Commissioners, and approves the entirety of the EU Commission, the results of the parliamentary election can have a significant impact on the selection of top EU officials, including the head of the EEAS (the so-called "High Representative"). Currently, the position of EU Commission President is held by Ursula von der Leyen, an EPP member from Germany where she previously served as defense minister. During the course of her tenure, von der Leyen has led several initiatives at the personal level to increase the EU Commission's level of engagement with the countries of the Union's southern and eastern peripheries—the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus (the latter two regions are sometimes grouped together within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, or EaP)—in line with her ambition, announced at the beginning of her term, to lead a "geopolitical Commission." One achievement of her outreach was the [MoU on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy](#) signed in Baku between the presidents of Azerbaijan and the EU Commission in July 2022. Another has been a more encouraging policy toward some of the countries in these neighborhoods to move closer to the EU—even to apply for membership (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). Given the current polling data and institutional standings, despite several challenges, at present the conventional wisdom is that von der Leyen will secure a second term.

Although it is anticipated that Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left group in the Parliament will soon announce their *Spitzenkandidat* (this is a process that involves major political parties in the EU nominating their candidate for President of the EU Commission prior to EU parliamentary elections), this has not yet happened. Considering, that the two largest rightist political parties in the EU (i.e., ECR and ID) fundamentally oppose the *Spitzenkandidat* procedure, which means they are unlikely to field a candidate, and keeping in mind that there is no credible leftist candidate, it seems quite likely that von der Leyen will emerge as the EPP's lead candidate.

Should she end up securing a second term, it seems highly likely that von der Leyen will face pressures to clarify the EU Commission's line on enlargement and asking for

concrete commitments. Reports indicate that this sort of pressure is what pushed her to make a U-turn recently and return to the initial EU Commission's commitment to conduct discussions on Ukraine's accession in March 2024. On the other hand, to secure majority support after the EU parliamentary elections, she has hinted she would be open to work with those MEPs in the ECR who are perceived to be more right-wing than her own center-right party: when asked if she would work with the ECR, she avoided giving a direct "yes" or "no" response. Although some level of collaboration is anticipated with rightists, it is unlikely that she will deviate from the course she seems to have set for her second mandate. As she put it recently, she intends to "keep the direction of travel for the big topics"—e.g., the Green Deal, digital transition, climate resilience, and so on.

The governments of the largest EU member states are led by different political majorities: France is led by Gaullist centrists, Italy by a coalition led by a populist right-of-center party, Germany and Spain by coalitions of leftist socialists, and Poland by a center-right liberal political party. With such a composition of the EU Council that will decide on a new Commission head, a significant shift in the EU's policy agenda is not expected—despite the possibility of heightened pressure by rightist parties. At the same time, the rightist surge in the EU Parliament could hinder decisionmaking through a majority vote, which would undermine the role of the Commission in executing the EU's foreign and security policy.

Possible Policy Implications of the EU Parliament Election Results

The EU parliamentary elections coincide with an increasingly challenging foreign and security policy environment, as seen through the lens of Brussels, which will require a rethink of the EU's foreign and security policy direction.

Although the EU Parliament has limited capacity to define the course of the EU's foreign and security policy, the results of the elections could shift the direction of domestic policy discussions, which in turn might have some implications for how the EU Parliament approaches the EU's external affairs. Moreover, the EU Commission has instruments and institutional capacity that could enable it to redesign the EU's strategy towards the South Caucasus. When it comes to the EU Council, Charles Michel, the Council's president, has made attempts to strengthen the body's work on foreign and security policy in the South Caucasus in the postwar period vis à vis Azerbaijan. It is worth mentioning that in this regard, the EU played an important role in eliciting statements from both Baku and Yerevan that they each recognize the territorial integrity of the other. Despite such and similar efforts, the EU Council's foreign and security policy responses are usually reactive (as opposed to proactive, which suggests a greater emphasis on tactics as opposed to strategy), as they are usually formulated and executed as part of a crisis management response. This

perhaps helps to explain why the EU has failed to produce an updated, written strategy on the South Caucasus, in contrast to Central Asia—and why the EU seems unwilling to see these two sub-regions holistically (perhaps together with Türkiye, as well).

Whatever the new composition of the next EU Parliament, Brussels is likely to continue to play a facilitation role in the negotiations between Baku and Yerevan (although recent events suggest this may be taken over by Berlin—perhaps this is a temporary shift; perhaps not). However, it is unlikely the EU will be able to muster a united and constructive approach due to the different views of its member states. Despite the formation of a “common foreign and security policy” at the Union level, its effectiveness and the inability of EU member states to articulate (much less execute) it in a single voice will continue to impede the EU’s balanced approach in the context of the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. A case in point is that it does not appear that the EU has fully grasped the strategic implications of Azerbaijan’s response to what Baku perceived as France’s one-sided approach to this issue (or, perhaps the other major EU member states are unable or unwilling to reign in Paris’ increasingly overt bias). Here, then, is a reminder of part of Azerbaijan’s reply to France’s bias, as Tweeted on 5 October 2023 by President Ilham Aliyev’s presidential aide, Hikmet Hacıyev: “France’s biased actions and militarization policy [...] seriously undermine regional peace and stability in the South Caucasus and put at risk the European Union’s overall policy towards the region.” Subsequent French actions, including an agreement to heighten defense cooperation and arms sales, illustrate the EU’s limits of executing a “common foreign and security policy” when one of its member states seems to be determined to actively pursue a parochial foreign policy.

The level of EU engagement with Azerbaijan will also depend on developments in the Russian-Ukrainian war, as well as its outcome. The EU institutions (including the Parliament) will continue their preoccupation with this conflict and are likely to view adjacent geopolitical and geoeconomic theaters through that lens. In some cases, the application of such a filter might produce a distorted picture, up to and including seeing at least some of the countries of the South Caucasus as mere objects of major power rivalry.

Relatedly, some of the current EU Parliament’s actions clash with the current EU Commission’s stated objectives and priorities. This will need to be sorted out in Brussels in the wake of the elections. For instance, the EU Commission’s connectivity ambitions—including its commitment to deepening the European Union’s strategic energy partnership (both gas and renewables) as evidenced in the July 2022 MoU—is to be contrasted with the 5 October 2023 EU Parliament non-binding [resolution](#) against Azerbaijan, which called for a “comprehensive review of the EU’s relations with Azerbaijan”; demanded that “the EU and its Member States to adopt

targeted sanctions against [certain] individuals in the Azerbaijani Government”; and called “for the EU’s dependency on gas exports from Azerbaijan to be reduced.”

A cooling of relations with Azerbaijan will invariably have an impact on the EU’s relationship with Azerbaijan’s neighbor, Georgia, particularly in the context of Tbilisi’s just-begun, long and arduous journey towards eventual EU membership. It could also complicate the EU’s calculations with regard to Armenia. On the other hand, a renewed commitment to deepening relations with Azerbaijan could catalyze the EU’s ambitions in the South Caucasus, which seem to be growing. With the EU’s new enlargement policy (toward Georgia, but also Moldova and Ukraine), the new EU Commission would be wise to follow a policy that contributes to regional integration in the South Caucasus—a complex undertaking that is unlikely to succeed unless the national interests, preferences, and constraints of the three countries are properly understood. This also means being sensitive to the national interests, preferences, and constraints of the sub-region’s three immediate neighbors: Iran, Russia, and Türkiye.

Such nuance seems to have been absent in the deliberations of the current EU Parliament; it remains an open question how a possible surge in populist or rightist representation in this institution after the elections will have an impact on the EU’s engagement and cooperation with the South Caucasus, as the EU’s external ambitions may either end up taking a back seat to its internal challenges or result in greater resistance to continuing to financially, politically, and diplomatically support Ukraine against Russia.

Conclusions

With all these developments, it does not appear likely that the EU will be able to play a significant security role in the region, given the likely outcome of the EU parliamentary elections and the existing divisions in the approaches of its member states regarding the South Caucasus.

What is at issue is the ability of the EU institutions to determine a coherent strategic posture of engagement with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Working with these three countries—bilaterally and regionally—on setting an acceptable and clear agenda should be a priority.

Still, this IDD Analytical Policy Brief should not be understood as constituting a gloomy forecast. There is still a reasonable chance for the EU’s influence in the South Caucasus to expand and partially fill the vacuum resulting from Russia’s preoccupation with the conflict over Ukraine and America’s disengagement with the region.

For the EU, Azerbaijan should be seen as the bellwether—Georgia seeks membership in both the EU and NATO and thus should be moving towards Brussels anyway; Armenia is destined to remain firmly under the influence of Russia, irrespective of the tactical en-

treaties by its present leadership and the support it has received from the likes of France and [Greece](#) (its [economic](#) and security dependence on Moscow is simply too entrenched to move decisively away from the Kremlin's orbit, at least in the short to medium term). And, of course, there is the obvious yet sometimes underappreciated fact that Azerbaijan is the geopolitically and geoeconomically strongest country in the South Caucasus.

One way for each side to demonstrate its good intentions to the other would be to renew work on finalizing the new Azerbaijan-EU framework agreement (i.e., the one that should replace the existing and in many parts outdated [Partnership and Cooperation Agreement](#), which came into force in 1999).