

# “Fear or Love Thy Neighbour”? The EU Framework for Promoting Regional Cooperation in the South Caucasus

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## Abstract

Building on the model of the enlargement policy, the European Union (EU) designed the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership to further promote its norms and principles. One of the goals of its new policies has been to foster regional cooperation among partner countries and their neighbours. This article specifies the EU’s framework for promoting regional cooperation through the aforementioned policies and discusses its potential impact on the example of the South Caucasus republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The South Caucasus has not only been an arena of intraregional conflicts, but has also often been troubled by disputes between its neighbours. This article argues that, due to a lack of proactive and consistent engagement, the EU’s framework risks leaving regional conflicts in the current state of stagnation and without advancement in regional cooperation.

## Keywords

Regional cooperation; Conflict; European Neighbourhood Policy; South Caucasus

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THROUGH THE ENLARGEMENTS OF 2004 AND 2007, THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) transferred its norms to the then candidates and managed partly to silence the critics of its foreign policy (Kelley 2004, 2006; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Smith 2008). Nevertheless, the EU’s foreign policy incorporates sometimes clashing objectives and aims to play a unique role in respect of each of them. While the unique actorness of the EU is disputable in the cases of the promotion of human rights, the promotion of democracy and good governance, the prevention of violent conflicts, and the fight against international crime, its uniqueness is beyond doubt in the case of the promotion of regional cooperation (Smith 2008). The objective of regional cooperation has also found its place in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and later in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was dubbed as an upgrade to the ENP for some of its members.<sup>1</sup> Geographic position and levels of cooperation have largely varied among the ENP partners because the policy has included states as dissimilar as Ukraine, Egypt or Jordan. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>1</sup> The EaP partner countries are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

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EU has been optimistic about the ENP's impact on the target countries (Ferrero-Waldner 2006).

This article analyses the role of the promotion of regional cooperation within the ENP and discusses the potential influence of its framework and mechanisms on the current cooperation status of the ENP countries in the case of the South Caucasus. It also examines the EU's framework for promoting regional cooperation and its possible outcomes based on the proposed analytical framework for cooperation that equally considers the actions of both international and regional players. It goes on to analyse the role of regional cooperation in the ENP and the strategies of promoting regional cooperation and discusses their conduciveness to successful implementation of the policy. The South Caucasus region, which includes the three post-Soviet countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, has been included in the EU's external relations for more than ten years and holds important connections vis-à-vis relations with Russia. The region has lacked cooperation in certain issues and has been marred by intraregional and interstate disputes. Successful regional cooperation is of utmost and particular importance in a region such as the South Caucasus, where political and economic developments are closely interconnected with the resolution of the half-frozen conflicts. The examination of policy strategies and domestic conditions can shed light on potentially effective strategies in problematic regions.

Currently, the ENP and the EaP are the main instruments of the EU in the region, which address political and economic issues and have regional cooperation as one of their priorities. As the ENP and the EaP are currently under implementation, with progress reports being published every second year, this study is both an ex-ante and ex-post examination of regional cooperation policies. Though both policies lack the attractive membership perspective, they still aim to promote EU norms within neighbourhood. However, lack of sufficient funding and weak engagement tools, make the EaP unlikely to transform the target countries (Boonstra and Shapovalova 2010), leaving the main focus of this article on the ENP.

The EU's strategies of promoting regional cooperation in the South Caucasus countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are analysed. The Nagorno Karabakh conflict receives a specific focus here. Though some authors (Way 2006) have equated these conflicts to the umbrella category of ethnic conflicts, they are different. Unlike South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Nagorno Karabakh case has transformed from a secessionist movement supported by a kin-state into an interstate (and intraregional) conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>2</sup> The article is based on the analysis of the concept of cooperation, on its further modification, and application to the EU's framework for regional cooperation. It also entails the analysis of possible behavioural options of the EU and partner countries based on the interaction of the already-introduced components of successful cooperation. Through consideration of the effectiveness of the ENP based on these results, the article suggests policy implications and areas for future research. Based on the empirical findings, this article argues that the EU needs to set clearer objectives and follow a consistent plan of implementation, combined with credible incentives and conditionality to achieve progress in regional cooperation. In addition, the analytical framework of game-theoretical cooperation is a useful tool for understanding the potential impact of the policy under specific international and domestic conditions.

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<sup>2</sup> The conflicts in Georgia caused the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in summer of 2008. However, unlike the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, the Russia-Georgia war is not an ongoing conflict with an imminent threat of transforming into a full-scale war.

## Framing the promotion of regional cooperation

The possibilities of cooperation have always been at the centre of the neorealist-neoliberal debate. Before proceeding to the main components of regional cooperation analysed in this article, this section briefly outlines the debate presenting the main arguments for and against the likelihood of cooperation. If simplified, the neorealist (whether defensive or offensive) argument claims that cooperation is largely impossible and if possible then only in the low politics arena (economics), however, not in the high politics one (security) (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). The neoliberal perspective claims that cooperation is possible regardless of the issue (Keohane 1984; 1989) and, in contrast to the neorealist perspective, that conflict is simply unnecessary and avoidable. However, according to neoliberals, conflict can be overcome and lead to cooperation if preferences over strategies are changed, and institutions are an effective tool for this. On the other hand, neorealists argue that institutions can be effective only if both parties believe that cooperation would result in mutual benefit. Following these arguments, liberalist thought has always been more supportive of cooperation, mostly due to economic interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977), and has believed that international institutions are the main instruments to help overcome the selfish behaviour of states and put them on the way to sustainable cooperation (Walt 1998).

Despite disagreement on the possibilities of cooperation, both camps of scholars agree on the absence of a sovereign authority able to impose binding agreements on other states. Nevertheless, through its promotion of regional cooperation the EU to a certain extent attempts to take the role of the common government by creating institutions to facilitate cooperation among third parties, in some cases concluding binding agreements, and introducing sanctions, rewards, and conditionality. Despite the fact that sometimes the terms cooperation and integration are used interchangeably by both the EU and the South Caucasus countries, the two should not be confused (Vasilyan 2006: 2). Integration entails the shifting of loyalties of domestic political actors to a supranational centre, which “possess[es] or demand[s] jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states” (Haas 1958: 16). Cooperation happens in the environment of conflicting interests, where actors are required to adjust their behaviour to the preferences of others (Axelrod and Keohane 1985). Cooperation requires “the presence of common problems and tasks” and is derived out of “concrete needs” (Welsh and Willerton 1997: 37) and assumes “self-governing, self-provisioning communities interacting with each other through consensus” (Edwards 2004: 11).

The international and domestic conditions of effective promotion of regional cooperation are yet to be identified. However, a considerable amount of research has been done on the achievement of cooperation under conditions of systemic anarchy. When considering cooperation in world politics, issues are traditionally divided into political-economic and security-military ones, where the former is more institutionalised than the latter (Lipson 1984). To understand the failure or success of cooperation efforts, three dimensions of variables borrowed from a game-theoretical approach should be taken into consideration—the mutuality of interest, the shadow of the future, and the number of players (Axelrod and Keohane 1985). The mutuality of interests refers to the payoff structures that might encourage the actors to cooperate or defect and is based on how the actors perceive their own interests. At the same time, the economic issues demonstrate less conflicting payoff structures than the security ones (Oye 1985). The shadow of the future is seen as “long time horizons, regularity of stakes, reliability of information about others’ actions, quick feedback about changes in the others’ actions” (Axelrod and Keohane 1985: 232), and for cooperation to happen future payoffs should be valued over the current ones. This dimension still visibly differentiates between the economic and security issues because there are more chances of retaliation in the case of defection from economic cooperation than the security one.

Another factor facilitating cooperation is the number of actors and the structure of their relationship where reciprocity plays a major role (Axelrod 1984) and is conditioned by the ability of actors to identify the defectors, ability to focus retaliation on defectors and presence of incentives to punish the defectors (Axelrod and Keohane 1985). Thus, cooperation would be achieved best “not by providing benefits unilaterally to others but by conditional cooperation” (Axelrod and Keohane 1985: 249). Besides the three dimensions, cooperation also depends on the context in which interaction takes place, which largely means sharing norms and values with other international and regional actors. In the case of EU promotion of regional cooperation, the presence of shared norms and values with other states in the region, and to a lesser extent with the EU, would increase the likelihood of cooperation as there would be no societal barriers. Cooperation is also possible without commonly shared norms; although it becomes more problematic if the actors adhere to different values.

Though developed to analyse possibilities of cooperation between states provided there is no central authority, the framework can also be applied to the case of the EU’s promotion of regional cooperation and is applicable to any region where regional cooperation is promoted. The EU is the major promoter of regional cooperation (Vasilyan 2006) and is even considered to be a unique actor in this field (Smith 2008). Choosing the South Caucasus as a target region, this article covers an economically and politically troubled region with semi-frozen conflicts. In addition, the case of the South Caucasus permits controlling for the identification-with-the-promoter component: though the intensity of the EU membership aspirations of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan vary, all three countries demonstrate rhetorical commitment to EU norms.

The EU, of course, does not represent a supranational authority; however, it provides a certain agenda for facilitating cooperation and to some extent acts as a guiding authority. When considering these dimensions on an EU-partner<sup>3</sup> divide, the mutuality of interests and number of actors combined with the structure of their interaction are applicable to both, while the shadow of the future dimension fits best the EU alone, because it provides a framework for possible cooperation (see Table 1). Mutuality of interests refers to the EU to the extent it helps to understand whether the EU is interested in promoting regional cooperation on certain issues. The EU may be in line with regional interests rhetorically and fully endorse cooperation on certain issues in respect of action (high) as well, but it may also show strong rhetorical commitment combined with vague and inconsistent actions (medium). However, as it has already launched certain policies it is unlikely not to endorse the policies at least rhetorically (low). In the case of partnering countries, the mutuality of interest refers to their understanding of the issue and sharing a mutual interest not only in the form of cooperation but also in respect of the outcomes of the cooperation. Thus, states in the region may show commitment to cooperation and be interested in a similar framework and outcome (high); or show commitment, be interested in a similar framework, but prefer different outcomes (medium); or show commitment but be interested in different frameworks and prefer different outcomes (low). Showing no commitment to cooperation in certain issues would not be an option in this case, as the EU’s promotion of regional cooperation is always based on consensus. A combination of high mutuality of interests from all actors would facilitate the cooperation process, while the medium and low factors would decrease the potential of cooperation, especially in security matters.

The shadow of the future dimension with its constituting elements in this case refers to the framework for cooperation to be provided by the EU to facilitate cooperation. Thus, providing long-term cooperation opportunities accompanied by regular rewards, reliable

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<sup>3</sup> When addressing EU promotion of regional cooperation, this article considers the initiatives launched by the EU or its bodies and not by the individual member states.

information about all actors and quick reaction to possible changes would increase the likelihood of the promoted regional cooperation happening. These elements can score from high to low within the cooperation framework. Both partner actors and the EU should have a clear understanding of the consequences of non-cooperation, which should be the same for all the actors involved. The promoter should have consistent mechanisms for information sharing (meetings, summits and conferences) to identify and sanction or reward the states for their respective actions. The promotion policy has a higher probability of success when there is the chance of either social and material sanctions or rewards. Sanctioning in the case of defection may be exercised by various means by both the promoter of regional cooperation and regional actors (see Table 1). However, the willingness of the EU to exercise sanctioning may depend on its overall geopolitical and economic considerations. As security issues are generally considered to be cooperation-laggards, closer attention is paid to those in the following sections that analyse the variables described above in the case of EU promotion of regional cooperation in the South Caucasus.

**Table 1:** Dimensions of a framework for externally promoted regional cooperation

		EU	ENP COUNTRIES
<b>MUTUALITY OF INTERESTS</b>	high	strong rhetorical commitment with consistent policy actions	interested in the same framework and the same outcomes
	medium	strong or medium rhetorical commitment with inconsistent policy actions	interested in the same framework but different outcomes
	low	low rhetorical commitment with no policies	interested in different frameworks and different outcomes
<b>SHADOW OF THE FUTURE</b>	high	fixed term policy with a specific outcome; regular material and social rewards; fast feedback; information from all parties	N/A
	medium	fixed term policy without a specific outcome; irregular material and (maybe) social rewards; fast or belated feedback; only partial information sharing	N/A
	low	no fixed term policy; irregular social and no material rewards; no feedback; no information	N/A
<b>IDENTIFICATION OF DEFECTORS</b>	high	high information sharing	high information sharing
	medium	medium information sharing	medium information sharing
	low	low information sharing	low information sharing
<b>SANCTIONS</b>	high	withdrawal of all (mainly material) rewards and possibly termination of the policy	termination of bilateral cooperation projects until compliance
	medium	rechanneling the policy to another domestic actor without withdrawal of rewards	no individual sanctioning, waiting for the promoter's actions (provided the promoter has sanctioning mechanism)
	low	no sanctioning or social shaming	no mention of sanctioning in the policy

## The EU as a promoter of regional cooperation

The EU pursues various foreign policy objectives, however the one that makes it stand out among other international actors is that of regional cooperation. While the member states have not needed much encouragement to pursue other foreign policy objectives, such as the promotion of democracy and human rights, fighting against organised crime and violence, regional cooperation has always been a unique domain of the EU (Smith 2008). The uniqueness of the EU's promotion of regional cooperation is the extent to which it prefers to group neighbouring countries that share transnational problems into regions. Generally after the regional groups are defined, the EU actively supports cooperation within the group and among different regional groups (Smith 2008). It classifies countries under regional strategies and supports regional groupings (Smith 2008) understanding regional cooperation as "all efforts on the part of neighbouring countries to address issues of common interest" (European Commission 1995: 3). Theoretical differentiation between regional integration and regional cooperation is reflected in the actual practices of the EU. While regional integration aims to remove the barriers to movement of goods, services and production, regional cooperation aims to reduce those barriers and better manage common resources (European Commission 1995). Thus, due to its understanding of regional cooperation rather than imposition of its own model, the EU tends to support cooperation efforts (Smith 2008).

As with all foreign policy objectives, the promotion of regional cooperation is explained by rival motives: materialist and idealist (Smith 2008). From the materialist perspective, regional cooperation increases the EU's power vis-à-vis other international actors and target countries as regional cooperation often entails increased trade and diffusion of EU rules (Soderbaum et al. 2005). Though EU promotion of regional cooperation may increase the leverage of neighbouring countries in the grouping, it is up to the EU to bestow or withdraw the benefits (Edwards and Regelsberger 1990). Thus, the economic interests of the EU are never sacrificed for the sake of regional cooperation. Regional cooperation and treatment of neighbours based on regional grouping also saves time and finances for the EU as it can create regional strategies and organise regional meetings that also include bilateral<sup>4</sup> negotiations (Reiterer 2006). Additionally, from the neorealist point of view, promotion of regional cooperation is in the EU's interests (European Commission 1997) since it is supposed to eliminate possible dividing lines between neighbouring countries, thus decreasing chances of conflict in proximity to the EU.

From the idealist perspective, the EU has promoted regional cooperation because based on its own experience it realises that such cooperation provides peace, stability and economic development (Smith 2008) and is supposed to "make an important contribution to a more orderly world" (European Commission 2003: 9). Although these altruistic considerations are sometimes responded to with doubt (Farrell 2005), according to the EU it promotes regional cooperation to foster economic development in neighbouring countries and assist them in increasing their competitiveness (Development Council 1995). Following the usual perception of the EU as "one of the most important, if not the most important, normative powers in the world" (Peterson 2007), the EU promotes regional cooperation to demonstrate the effectiveness of its own policies and structural organisation, at the same time assisting target countries to develop their own policies for their own sake. Though the EU's motives for promoting regional cooperation may vary, it is more important to understand what the potential of promoting regional cooperation is in general and in a conflicted region in particular.

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<sup>4</sup> In this article, bilateral agreements refer to the agreements signed between the EU or its bodies and a partner country.

The EU's traditional instruments of regional cooperation promotion are assistance to conflict prevention and crisis-management by increasing the capacity of regional groupings, cooperation agreements, economic assistance for cross-border projects, political and economic dialogue and conditionality, albeit to a limited extent. Interestingly, the EU is the only donor which provides financial aid for regional cooperation programmes and through political dialogues it aims to provide a framework for discussion of issues of regional interest. In contrast to its enlargement processes, the EU does not often use its favourite tool of conditionality when promoting regional cooperation and in cases where the regional groupings are weak it opts for bilateral agreements still aimed at promoting cooperation between the neighbouring countries. Bilateralism over regionalism is especially visible in the case of the ENP which gives considerable preference to bilateralism (Smith 2008). While rhetorically promoting regional cooperation, the EU opts for concluding bilateral agreements with a partner country, instead of involving the interested parties in multilateral negotiations and agreements. This lack of multilateral agreements may be due to poor economic or security stability in the ENP regions. The lack of stability also applies to the South Caucasus.

### **Regional cooperation in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy**

The ENP was introduced in the Commission Communication on Wider Europe and was created to respond to post-enlargement challenges (European Commission 2004). Its principal mission is the elimination of the dividing lines that appeared after the enlargements of 2004 and 2007, through promotion of stability, security, and democracy. The Strategy Paper on the European Neighbourhood Policy published in May 2004 sketches out strategies for cooperation with partner countries (European Commission 2004), while the documents published in December 2006 and December 2007 outline suggestions for strengthening the ENP (European Commission 2006a). Though the ENP lacks a "uniform *acquis*" (Kelley 2006: 36), it proposes partnership based on "mutual commitment to common values principally within the fields of the rule of law, good governance, the respect for human rights, including minority rights, the promotion of good neighbourly relations, and the principles of market economy and sustainable development" (European Commission 2004: 3). The partnership is offered to neighbouring countries according to the "extent to which these values [respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights] are effectively shared" (European Commission 2004: 3).

The partnering countries regard the EU as an important player but the EU also clearly realises its capabilities and therefore the opportunities for success in promoting regional cooperation. The Commission states that because no other donor holds a similar key position in its neighbouring regions, the EU "represents a unique driver for change and progress" and "has the ability to act as mediator, facilitator and accelerator of processes beneficial to both the EU and partner countries" (European Commission 2007). Thus, to ensure the attractiveness of its activities through the ENP, the Commission elaborates the following incentives:

1. a perspective of moving beyond co-operation to a significant degree of integration, including a stake in the EU's internal market and the opportunity to participate progressively in key aspects of EU policies and programmes;
2. an upgrade in the scope and intensity of political co-operation;
3. the opening of economies, reduction of trade barriers;



4. increased financial support;
5. participation in Community programmes promoting cultural, educational, environmental, technical and scientific links;
6. support for legislative approximation to meet EU norms and standards;
7. deepening trade and economic relations (Kelley 2006: 37 based on the Action Plans).

In 2007, the EU introduced reforms to the structure of its external funding replacing MEDA, TACIS, and other programmes with the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument to support reform, according to the priorities of country-tailored Action Plans. The financial tool of the ENP has EUR 12 billion available for the budgetary period 2007-2013. Following the enlargement logic, this assistance is conditional:

where a partner country fails to observe the principles referred to in Article 1, the Council, acting by a qualified majority on a proposal from the Commission, may take appropriate steps in respect of any Community assistance granted to the partner country under this Regulation (EP and EC Regulation No 1638/2006: Article 28/1).

Nevertheless, the sanctions for defection are incomplete because Parliament and the Council proceed to clarify that in case of non-cooperation by the state institutions “Community assistance shall primarily be used to support non-state actors for measures aimed at promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms and supporting the democratization process in partner countries” (Official Journal of the EU: Article 28, para 2). Thus, the EU does not fully withdraw financial assistance, instead just switching its recipient from state to civil society, still maintaining assistance in the country. Given that most of the ENP countries are not consolidated democracies and their civil societies are weak and largely dependent on donor and sometimes state financing, this strategy is unlikely to be effective (Schimmelfennig et al. 2006). Another concern arises over the question of considering whether the EU will be consistent and impartial when exercising its conditionality and sanctions.

The ENP is supposed to reinforce and encourage further development of regional networks by designing various cross-border cooperation initiatives, which include local and regional authorities and non-governmental actors. In its ENP Strategy Paper, the EU differentiates between those regions it is targeting and, in regard to regional cooperation on its eastern borders, prioritises “reinforced cooperation on economy, environment, nuclear safety and natural resources, Justice and Home Affairs issues, and people-to-people contacts” (European Commission 2004: 19). While the EU is not willing to establish new regional organisations but rather wants to support existing ones, it does seek the greater involvement of Russia in efforts to promote regional cooperation in the eastern dimension of the ENP. Involving an important regional player is a praiseworthy effort. However, the EU should arguably contain the imperialistic ambitions of Russia towards the South Caucasus; otherwise, a strategy of retreat risks increasing Russia’s influence in the region and undermining the EU’s efforts, when it does not have recourse to reliance on a credible membership perspective.

In an attempt to strengthen its strategy and better address some regional cooperation issues, the EU stated that more active interaction should be encouraged, especially in the resolution of regional conflicts (European Commission 2006). Thus, the EU has launched the Black Sea Synergy initiative to complement its mainly bilateral policies (European Commission 2007). With regard to cooperation on the resolution of frozen conflicts, the Black Sea Synergy aims to promote “confidence-building measures in the regions affected,

including cooperation programs specifically designed to bring the otherwise divided parties together” (European Commission 2007: 7). Still employing the somewhat vague language of the ENP, little is said about how such promotion is to be implemented and some duplication of the efforts already described in the ENP Action Plans and the ENP Instrument of Eastern Regional Programme is discernible. In addition to its fuzzy language, the EU often treats the politically, culturally, and economically divergent countries of the South Caucasus with “simplistic uniformity” (Babayan 2011: 4). Rhetorically acknowledging some differences, the EU involves the South Caucasus countries in the same policies and assigns them the same priority areas, running the risks of decreasing its efficiency (Babayan 2011).

### **Promoting regional cooperation in the South Caucasus as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy**

Unlike the other post-Soviet states grouped in a region, i.e. the Baltic States, the South Caucasus republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have never been in the spotlight of the EU’s attention. The EU initiated relations with the region later than some EU member states, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, which entered the region in 1992. Relations with the EU were channelled through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) that were signed in 1996 and entered into force in 1999 in all three countries, while assistance funds were allocated through TACIS and the EIDHR (European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights). However, in 2001 the EU expressed its willingness for closer cooperation with the South Caucasus, one of the objectives of such cooperation being the resolution and prevention of conflicts. The South Caucasus governments were ready to welcome this initiative and in 2003 the European Council appointed Heikki Talvitie as the first EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus. Taking into consideration the strongly expressed EU aspirations of all three states, the EU possesses both legitimacy and credibility in acting as an external mediating actor. The region has become closer to the EU economically because since 2004 the EU has been its primary trade partner (though for the EU the trade with the South Caucasus is only 0.5% of its overall figure), and geopolitically because of the eastern enlargements of 2004 and 2007. The EU has preferred to include previously weak and unstable South Caucasus states in its “ring of friends” (European Commission 2003) because they have been deemed potentially helpful in fighting terrorism and trafficking (European Council 2003).

Because the region shares borders with important international actors such as Russia and Iran and with NATO member and EU candidate Turkey, the EU “has a strong interest in the stability and development of the South Caucasus” (European Commission 2004). This interest is also justified bearing in mind that the region suffers from three frozen conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and proximity to a conflict region is not in the EU’s interests. Although the governments of all three states have expressed their willingness to resolve the conflicts, there has been no visible progress and resolution is unlikely without external mediation. These conflicts have also negatively impacted the economy of the region because the dispute over Nagorno Karabakh prevents Armenia and Azerbaijan from cooperating economically or in respect of security. The conflicts have wider impact as well: the Nagorno Karabakh conflict has slowed down improvement in Armenian-Turkish relations; while the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts have aggravated Georgian-Russian relations. Armenia, which is under the economic embargo of Azerbaijan, has maintained economic cooperation with Georgia, and Georgia has maintained economic and security cooperation with Azerbaijan, there has been no trilateral cooperation in the region. Achieving trilateral cooperation through resolution of the frozen conflicts should be among the priorities of the EU regional cooperation policy for the South Caucasus. Further complexity lies in the fact that the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts are internal to Georgia rather than regional.

It is true that involvement in the ENP denies prospects of membership. Nevertheless, it represents advancement in relations with the EU and provides certain incentives for cooperation and compliance with the ENP requirements. The EU's conditionality methods with respect to the ENP and South Caucasus countries differ from those it uses with its candidate countries. Conditionality in the case of the former is a positive one, i.e. the complying states will receive the promised stakes of closer integration into the EU market and to some extent politics. However, there is no mention of negative conditionality or sanction in case of non-compliance, which could actually limit the effectiveness of the ENP implementation. Thus, although the EU does provide a framework of long-time horizons and regular stakes, it does not guarantee punishing the defectors, thus undermining the value of its stakes and potentially undermining the achievements of the other cooperating state.

To guarantee "joint ownership", each ENP Action Plan was developed in consultation with the respective government and civil society. The Action Plans for the South Caucasus states were adopted in 2005 and the financial tools, National Indicative Plans, cover two equal periods within 2007-2013. The three governments had different success rates when attempting to incorporate certain clauses into the Action Plans. While the Action Plan for Armenia mentions the concept of "the principle of self-determination of people", the Action Plan for Azerbaijan, unlike the one for Georgia, mentions the concept of "territorial integrity" only once. According to some scholars this is a double standard on the part of the EU (Alieva 2006), but it can also be attributed to the different bargaining strategies of the South Caucasus states and the willingness of the EU to accommodate two ENP partner states with contradictory aspirations.

Each Action Plan for the South Caucasus covers a variety of issues such as economic development, promotion of democracy and human rights, energy, transport, environmental protection, people-to-people contacts, development of political institutions, cross-border and regional cooperation. These issues are grouped and divided into priority areas in each Action Plan. Although regional cooperation is given a separate priority area, the definition of regional cooperation in the South Caucasus is vague. While the regional cooperation priority area entails specific action, the concept of regional cooperation is a presence throughout the Action Plans, the Strategy Papers and the National Indicative Plans, being mentioned in the fields not originally present in the corresponding priority area. An important role is given to transnational and inter-parliamentary dialogues concerning cooperation in water management, border management, transport and communication; however, there is no explicit mention of inter-governmental interaction. This omission probably arises from the non-existent dialogue between the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments. However, the whole concept of regional cooperation in the South Caucasus is at risk if these two countries are not able to achieve a compromise.

The Action Plans for Armenia and Georgia elaborate on eight priority areas, the Action Plan for Azerbaijan on ten. There are expected overlaps in the priority areas though the numbering of those is usually different. However, the sequence of priorities in the Action Plans should not be seen as pointing to the importance of the issue, at least in the case of regional cooperation, because it would be highly irrational to think that one of the states needs regional cooperation more (Georgia) than the other two. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, there are two priority areas that explicitly mention regional cooperation: contribution to the peaceful solution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and enhanced efforts in the field of regional cooperation (priority areas 7 and 8 for Armenia and 1 and 10 for Azerbaijan respectively). The nearly identical priority areas of Nagorno Karabakh in the Armenian and Azerbaijani Action Plans call for increased diplomatic efforts, increased political support to the OSCE Minsk Group, people-to-people contacts and intensified EU

dialogue. However, there is nothing about bilateral talks or efforts directed at how those might be carried out.

The rhetorical sharing of mutual interest in fast and peaceful resolution of the conflict does not translate into shared expectations in the outcomes, which can be seen from the text of the Action Plan alone. Thus, given the differences and vague language the value added of this priority area to potential regional cooperation is rather dubious. There has not been tangible progress in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations since the enforcement of the ENP and peaceful resolution is doubtful given Azerbaijan's increased military spending, which doubled from 2005 to 2006 (SIPRI 2008) and continues to increase. Bellicose statements from the Azerbaijani government do not contribute to peaceful resolution either. President Aliyev's statement that Azerbaijani people "have to be ready to liberate [their] lands by military means, and [they] are ready" (Aliyev 2008) casts uncertainty over the possibilities of cooperation on this particular issue. Although this divergence in interests cannot be blamed on the ENP implementation framework, the EU's adherence to consensus and friendly language in the Action Plans reduces the possibility of any concrete action in conflict resolution through cooperation. The Mardakert skirmishes in March 2008, which coincided with riots in Yerevan due to contested presidential elections results, and the subsequent mutual blame exercises clearly demonstrated the fragility of cooperation. Despite the fact that the incident directly undermined efforts at cooperation, the EU delegation in Armenia did not officially react to that.

The Action Plans of all three states mention the need for enhanced cooperation in education, environment, transport, border management; strengthened participation in law enforcement initiatives of the Black Sea region; support for the Caucasus Regional Environmental Centre; enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the Black Sea region; and youth exchange. In addition to these, the Armenian and Georgian Action Plans include a point on enhanced cooperation in the energy and transportation sectors. This clause is a separate priority area in the Azerbaijani Action Plan. Interestingly enough, only the Armenian Action Plan has a clause calling to "continue efforts in cooperation with neighbouring countries, to resolve regional and other related issues and to promote reconciliation" (European Commission 2006b). This clause seems general but may point to two perspectives: either Armenia is the least cooperative South Caucasus state, thus it, requires a separate clause encouraging it to cooperate or the EU is inconsistent in the wording of its policies even when targeting the same region. However, given the so-called "complementary diplomacy" strategy of the Armenian government throughout the 1990s and 2000s and at least rhetorical commitment to cooperation, Armenia is unlikely to defect.

Despite the rhetorical commitment of the ENP to facilitate cooperation in military-security matters, country related ENP documents show more concrete actions and less vague language on economic matters (see Table 2). Regardless of the nature of the cooperation issue, the ENP provides a long-term cooperation framework, but does not clearly specify what partner countries can expect after the ENP implementation is over. The ENP entails regular rewards if applicable, however the rewards do not vary depending on the priority area and domestic costs of adaptation. Through regular progress and country reports, the ENP provides reliable information about its, and if possible, the partner states' actions. However, feedback on changes in actions of the partner states might sometimes be absent or not actually relevant because in cases of non-cooperation or non-compliance, instead of addressing the issue of divergence, the EU simply opts for amending the Action Plan. In addition, while the rhetorical commitment of the EU, Armenia and Azerbaijan to the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is high, the ENP framework is vague and often sacrifices specific actions for consensus. In their turn Armenia and Azerbaijan strive for different outcomes from the conflict: Armenia advocates for the

independence of Nagorno Karabakh, while Azerbaijan insists that Karabakh is to be within its territory and shows readiness to advance its perspective through military means.

Though the number of actors in the South Caucasus regional cooperation is not large and they are coordinated by the EU, the situation is complicated by the EU's inconsistent policy of conditionality. Unlike other international organisations present in the region, the EU, due to its economic and political status, has the leverage to sanction the regional actors in case they defect from cooperation. However, in the ENP documents sanctions are mentioned only as a change of target within the country through which the assistance is channelled. Nevertheless, despite the fact that participating countries either rhetorically or even sometimes by action have defected from the accepted framework for cooperation, the EU has not introduced any sanctions. In addition, though the South Caucasus states can identify the defectors from cooperation, they are not entitled to take preventative actions against defectors, at least not within the ENP framework and not explicitly quoting non-cooperation as a reason.

**Table 2:** Military-security issues and cooperation on the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict

	ENP	Armenia	Azerbaijan
<b>Mutuality of Interests</b>	medium	medium	low
<b>Long-term cooperation</b>	medium	N/A	
<b>Regular rewards</b>	medium		
<b>Information</b>	high		
<b>Feedback</b>	medium		
<b>Identification of non-cooperation</b>	high	high	high
<b>Sanctioning non-cooperation</b>	medium-low	low	low

## Conclusion

The ENP Strategy Paper identifies the South Caucasus as a region that should receive “stronger and more active interest” than it currently does (European Commission 2004: 10). The EU also acknowledges the promotion of regional cooperation as one of its main foreign policy priorities and lays claim to a unique approach to it. This article argues that the ENP framework has greater potential to achieve successful promotion of regional cooperation in economic rather than in military-security issues. Though the EU does offer further economic cooperation as a stake for cooperating states, this might not be enough when addressing security issues. In addition, the article argues that due to the lack of a proactive and consistent approach, the EU risks leaving the regional conflicts in stagnation. The potential ineffectiveness of the ENP promotion of regional cooperation in military-security issues can be explained not only by the divergent interests of the regional actors but also by the reluctance of the EU to take specific actions, instead opting for vague propositions and inconsistent policies. While stressing the importance of the region and intentions of closer cooperation with it, the EU, nevertheless, has struggled with the

decision of appointing a new EU Special Representative, with the decision finally being made in late August 2011 after months of uncertainty.

In its multilateral approach to the conflicts in the South Caucasus, the EU is closely connected to current international initiatives (the OSCE Minsk Group). However, it gives the priority to other organisations with less leverage, rather than acting proactively. Even if conflict resolution may not be the EU's main priority in the South Caucasus, conflicts that largely dominate the economy and politics of the region cannot be ignored. In addition, the ongoing conflicts may also be used by the partner countries as justification for their non-compliance. The mere rhetorical support to the OSCE Minsk Group undermines the visibility of the EU in the region. However, delegating its own representative to the Group, instead of those of seven scattered member states, would increase the involvement and stabilise the position of the EU in the region. Such an action seems timely also given the creation of the European External Action Service. Increased involvement may also garner more EU-enthusiasts and result in increased EU-isation of the regional policies. However, the current approach of the EU, besides having marginal, if any effect on conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, risks decreasing the leverage of the EU in the region, inducing the local actors to turn for more concrete action to Russia or the USA. Reiterated commitment to "enhance EU involvement in solving protracted conflicts" (European Union 2011) is yet to demonstrate positive results.

Without undermining the EU's efforts at promoting regional cooperation within the ENP framework, this article argues that the EU needs to take a more proactive role not only in the implementation of policies but also in the development of certain conflict settlement actions. This would not only give the EU ownership over the policy but would also increase the legitimacy of its interests in the South Caucasus. Though conflict resolution is rather different from general regional cooperation it should be specifically addressed within the policy of regional cooperation when dealing with a post- or in-conflict region. The EU needs to develop clear and feasible objectives, take concrete actions and carry out active monitoring of implementation, both on a regional and country basis. Given the close relations of the South Caucasus countries with some of their out-of-region neighbours, there is also a need for an increased engagement of regional actors—Turkey and Russia—in the development of cooperation policies over issues requiring more attention.

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