



Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"

**THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR: A NEW REALITY IN THE
SOUTH CAUCASUS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2004 the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and since 2009 the Eastern Partnership policy has been in place as a specific dimension of the ENP. The EU policy towards the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood has been guided by the objective of having a “ring of friends” in the neighbourhoods. However, instead of the desired “ring of friends”, the EU has faced a “ring of fire” in North Africa and the Middle East, and in the Eastern Partnership area. The Eastern neighbourhood has been, indeed, highly affected by complex and prolonged frozen and armed conflicts; the recently erupted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict constitutes one of those. The devastating war in Nagorno-Karabakh, in fact, has entailed major geo-strategic reshufflings in the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, the EU’s weak response to the war has clearly demonstrated the Union is far from being a “geopolitical”; i.e. strategic-security actor in the region. As a result of the weak response, the EU is sidelined in the South Caucasus in strategic terms.

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ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
UK	The United Kingdom
US	The United States of America

1. Introduction

The world order established after the fall of the “Iron Curtain” has been diminishing; new powers have been gaining strength and growing into regional and international politics. The security architecture in the EU’s Southern and Eastern neighbourhood has been crumbling and hence posing threats to the wider European security and stability. The EU has faced a “ring of fire” (Taylor, 2015) instead of the desired “ring of friends” (Taylor, 2015) in the neighbourhoods. In fact, one of the lengthy and complex conflicts in the Eastern neighbourhood- the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict recently erupted into a full-scale war. At the end of September 2020 Azerbaijan, heavily backed by Turkey in political and military terms, launched a large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. The renewed hostilities quickly escalated into a full-fledged war with unprecedented intensity and magnitude. Lasting for over six weeks, the devastating war culminated with the Russia-brokered ceasefire statement and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh. The war, in fact, has entailed fundamental geo-strategic reshufflings in the South Caucasus. In the meantime, the EU’s response to the war has vividly showcased that the Union falls short of being the aspired “geopolitical”- strategic actor in the South Caucasus leaving the EU sidelined in the region. Respectively, the research paper reflects on the strategic environment in the Eastern neighbourhood, precisely in the South Caucasus, i.e. provides situational awareness- discusses the root causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the main triggers of the war. The paper further elaborates on the EU’s power position in the South Caucasus in the face of the shifted balance of power and offers concrete policy recommendations concerning the measures the EU could effectively undertake aimed at promoting stability in the region.

2. *The strategic environment in the Eastern neighbourhood*

➤ 2.1 *The EU's policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood*

The global and regional balance of power established after the end of the Cold War have been rapidly shifting, and the global strategic environment has been characterised by growing insecurity, instability, and unpredictability. Against the backdrop of the newly emerging world order, the EU has aspired to maintain its influence in world affairs and to acquire power- **to gain strategic autonomy** (European External Action Service, 2016), so to be adequately equipped to address, contain and deter security threats and risks posed to the EU, and to co-shape the rules of global and regional order. Respectively, the security architecture in the EU's Southern and Eastern neighbourhood has been diminishing; the neighbourhoods have been engulfed in thorny and prolonged conflicts. Acknowledging the risks the armed and unresolved conflicts could pose to the EU's security, the EU has come forward with a reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) putting stress on promoting **stability and resilience** in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood (European Commission, 2015). Furthermore, conflict prevention and resolution have been enshrined among the key strategic priorities in the EU's Global Strategy adopted in 2016 (European External Action Service, 2016),

“The EU will engage in a practical and principled way in peacebuilding, concentrating our efforts in surrounding regions to the east and south, while considering engagement further afield on a case by case basis”.

In addition, taking office since December 2019, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has made a firm commitment to running a “**Geopolitical EU**” (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020). The primary objectives set in the framework of the reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy, elaborated and enshrined in the Global Strategy, and voiced by President von der Leyen enable to conclude that the EU has strived to become an influential strategic-security actor in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. Meanwhile, as the war in Nagorno-Karabakh apparently showcased, the EU falls short of being a “geopolitical”, i.e. strategic-security actor in the Eastern neighbourhood.

In 2004 the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and since 2009 **the Eastern Partnership policy** has been in place as a specific dimension of the ENP. The primary focus areas of the Eastern Partnership policy have constituted democracy promotion, economic integration, and facilitation of people to people contacts (Council of the European Union, 2017). Meanwhile, the security aspect, except for the EU energy security aspirations, has been largely left out of the policy agenda. However, the lack of security and stability in the Eastern neighbourhood has risked undermining the Eastern Partnership policy and posing threats to the wider European security and stability. The Eastern neighbourhood has been, indeed, highly affected by complex and prolonged frozen and armed conflicts; the recently erupted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict constitutes one of those. To this end, the EU's response to the devastating war in Nagorno-Karabakh, has vividly demonstrated the major flaws of the Union's policy towards the neighbourhood. In this regard, before elaborating on the point, firstly, it is significant to provide situational awareness, i.e. to reflect on the root causes of the conflict and the war triggers.

➤ **2.2 The root causes of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

On 27 September 2020, primarily a day after the completion of Russia-led Caucasus 2020 military exercise, Azerbaijan, heavily backed by Turkey in political and military terms, launched a large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. The renewed hostilities escalated into a full-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh with unprecedented magnitude and intensity (ARMENPRESS, 2020). The fierce fighting between Nagorno-Karabakh/Armenia and Azerbaijan/backed by Turkey lasted until 10 November 2020 and culminated with the Russia-brokered ceasefire statement and deployment of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh (The Russian Federation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). As a result of the war, Azerbaijan has established control over the southern districts, and, in addition, Armenia has handed over the districts of Aghdam, Lachin and Kelbajar, while the status of Nagorno-Karabakh hangs in balance.

Figure 1 Map of Nagorno-Karabakh (source: The Russian Federation. Ministry of Defence, 2020)



Against the backdrop of the full-scale war, it is significant to reflect on the root causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The roots of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are entrenched in the 1921 arbitrary and Stalin-influenced decision taken by the Caucasian Bureau of the Communist Party of Russia (Krüger, 2010) to *annex* Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic giving it the status of an Autonomous Oblast. The *illegal annexation* decision apparently went against the will of **94.4 percent Armenian majority populated Nagorno-Karabakh** (Krüger, 2010) and mainland Armenia. However, provided the Soviet Union umbrella, the tensions were kept under check. The gloom surfaced in the wake of the Soviet Union fragmentation. In 1991 Nagorno Karabakh held an *independence referendum and 99.89 percent majority* of the eligible voters voted in favour, with the voter turnout of 82.2 percent (Ourfalian, 2020). The self-determination

decision of Nagorno Karabakh was met with iron fist by Azerbaijan; in response Azerbaijan waged war on the self-proclaimed Nagorno Karabakh Republic. The sides fought a full-fledged war lasting from 1991 to 1994 with Armenia stepping on the side of Nagorno Karabakh. As a result of the war, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh established control over Nagorno-Karabakh per se and 7 adjacent districts. The war culminated with the Russia-mediated ceasefire agreement signed between three warring parties-Nagorno Karabakh, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, respectively (The University of Edinburgh, 2020). However, only a cease fire agreement and not a final peace treaty was signed, and the conflict remained unregulated.

The parties to the conflict used to have diametrically opposing positions. Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh have heavily insisted on Nagorno-Karabakh's right to self-determination and independence recognition (The Republic of Armenia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020) driven by the *objective security reasons*, i. e. Azerbaijani-posed *existential threat* to the Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh. Albeit not internationally recognized as such, Nagorno-Karabakh has developed the required attributes of state- i.e. it has its governance bodies- a president, a parliament; an army, runs a democratic form of governance holding free and fair elections. Azerbaijan, on the contrary, has pursued an *expansionist agenda* treating the conflict as a territorial dispute with Armenia, and stressing the right to territorial integrity (Commonspace.eu, 2020). The political resolution talks have been held under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States of America. However, despite the claims that the sides were close to finding a compromise solution on numerous occasions such as at the Key West talks or at Kazan talks, the negotiation process failed to yield fruit, and eventually the devastating war broke out in September 2020.

➤ 2.3 Why war? The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Geopolitical context

Despite the defeat at war of the 1990s, Azerbaijan neither abandoned the territorial claims to Nagorno-Karabakh and 7 adjacent districts (Commonspace.eu, 2020), nor a military solution to the lengthy and complex conflict. Azerbaijan constantly resorted to war threats (Mehdiyev, 2020) and, in fact, waged the war, first and foremost, counting on a *blitzkrieg takeover* of the adjacent territories and, subsequently, Nagorno-Karabakh per se (Commonspace.eu, 2020). The war served Azerbaijan's *expansionist agenda* and the long-adopted and implemented policy of encircling and weakening Armenia. When it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, the war was purely a *defensive* one in the face of the Azerbaijani and Turkey-posed *existential threat*. Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia had no vested interest in waging a war whatsoever; the maintenance of the status quo-the military balance of power on the ground, would best serve their interests. Furthermore, the parties would prefer the war option to be avoided provided the enormous human and economic costs. In the meantime, Armenia was hit hard by the Coronavirus pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) putting high pressure on the health system and causing vast economic damage (The World Bank, 2020) which would in and by itself nullify a war option.

Two major factors could be identified as *the triggers of the war*: the long ongoing *arms race* and *Turkey's position*.

Arms race: For quite a long period of time arms race has been ongoing between Armenia and Azerbaijan clearly indicating the parties might be on a dangerous collision course. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2020) data, between 2009 and 2019 Azerbaijan's military spending totalled around 25USD billion, and Armenia's military expenditure totalled around 5USD billion in the same period. *Russia* accounted for *94 per cent of Armenia's* arms imports in 2015-2019, while *Israel* accounted for *60 percent*, *Russia* for *31 percent* and

Turkey for **3.2 percent** of **Azerbaijan's** arms imports in 2015-2019 (Wezeman et. al., 2020). Due to the vast amount of military spending and the purchases of modern and highly sophisticated Israeli, Russian and Turkish produced weaponry, Azerbaijan might have sensed **military superiority** (Gatopoulos, 2020) and hence looked for a conducive moment for resorting to military offensive.

Turkey's role: A Turkey-ordered war? Turkey's unequivocal political and military support for Azerbaijan played a **decisive role** empowering Azerbaijan to wage the war. Turkey threw its full political and military power behind Azerbaijan. Turkey's political and military leadership, and influential political parties (the Republican People's Party, the Nationalist Movement Party, the Good Party) repeatedly voiced strong support for Azerbaijan. President Erdogan stated, "Turkey stands with and will continue to stand with friendly and brotherly Azerbaijan with all our means and all our heart" (Turkten, 2020). The statement was echoed by Foreign Minister Cavusoglu, "We stand by Azerbaijan on the field and at the table. Now we want to solve this problem completely" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020). In the meantime, Turkey firmly denounced the repeated ceasefire appeals, "Those who stay silent on the occupied Azerbaijani lands should ensure Armenia's retreat from Karabakh instead of calling for a cease-fire", said Turkey's Defence Minister Hulusi Akar (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020). On top of the firm political support, Turkey provided substantial military backing to Azerbaijan. Turkey transferred huge number of terrorist fighters from Syria and Libya- from its closely affiliated groups, to Azerbaijan (Gotev, 2020); the fact widely confirmed as such by the President of France E. Macron, Russian Foreign Ministry, Russia's Defence Minister, Russia's Head of Foreign Intelligence Service, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights based in the UK. In addition, Turkey deployed special units of its armed forces, and dispatched high-ranking military instructors to Azerbaijan. The Turkish F-16 fighter jets, Bayraktar UAVs were used and on certain instances Turkey commanded the air offensives against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia (The Republic of Armenia. Ministry of Defence, 2020).

Turkey's strategic calculations: Turkey's position has been determined by geopolitical and strategic calculations. As far as Turkey's geopolitical interests are concerned, Turkey has vivid imperialistic designs; as put forward by President Erdogan, "**We strive day and night for our country to take its deserved place in the global world order**" (Al Arabiya, 2020). Turkey strategically views itself as **a hegemonic power**, first and foremost, **in the oil/gas rich broader Middle East, and in the oil/gas rich Caspian-including the South Caucasus**. Turkey, indeed, has strengthened its position 1) in Libya and Syria capitalising on the enormous power vacuum left due to strategic misconduct by the United States (primarily under President Obama Administration), 2) in the Eastern Mediterranean due to the weak response by the European Union, 3) in the Persian Gulf, and Africa. Respectively, Turkey has aspired to change the status quo-the balance of power, and security architecture, and **to maximise its power in the South Caucasus**.

While firmly backing the war, **Turkey, first and foremost, has challenged Russia's position** and has aimed at further reducing Russia's power and influence in the region. The military offensive, in fact, was launched by Azerbaijan on 27 September 2020, primarily a day after the completion of **Russia-led Caucasus 2020 military exercise** (TASS Russian News Agency, 2020) having Russia's strategic ally-Armenia among the participants. Russia is 1) among the UN Security Council 5 permanent members, 2) possess large nuclear arsenal, 3) is well equipped with modern highly sophisticated weapons (REUTERS, 2020), and 4) according to the US assessment (The White House, 2017, p. 25) has the capability to pose a credible existential threat to the US. Russia held a weeklong military exercise displaying its military might at the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea included and the next day Azerbaijan waged the Turkey-backed war. The sequence of events clearly has spoken about **the massive failure of deterrence** and Turkey's deliberate attempt to showcase power vis-à-vis Russia.

Provided the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s hegemonic power has, indeed, significantly diminished in the South Caucasus, instead Turkey has acquired much power. Turkey has forged a strategic alliance with Azerbaijan having at the core geo-economic, military, geopolitical components. Turkey is a major destination for Azerbaijani gas exports and a main transit route for Azerbaijan’s oil and gas delivery to world markets. 80% of Azerbaijan’s oil export to world markets is delivered via Turkey (via Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline), Turkey used to be the main market for Azerbaijan’s gas export (supplied via Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline) and Turkey is the key transit route for Azerbaijan’s gas delivery to Europe (via Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline linked with Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline).

Figure 2 Azerbaijan-Turkey oil and gas pipelines (source: Energy Northern Perspective, 2020)



Furthermore, Turkey and Azerbaijan have tight military-to-military ties established; joint military training and exercises are regularly held, and a mutual defence pact has been in place ever since 2010 (Jasem, 2020). Turkey and Azerbaijan, indeed, have a shared interest in limiting and counterbalancing Russia’s power and influence in the South Caucasus, and in weakening Armenia. Turkey has a hostile attitude towards Armenia- justifies the 1915 Armenian Genocide committed by Ottoman Turkey and has imposed economic blockade on Armenia along with Azerbaijan since the early 1990s. The attempt to normalise Armenia-Turkey relations and to establish diplomatic ties culminating with the signature of Zurich protocols in 2009 ended in failure proving Turkey’s lack of interest in engaging constructively with the neighbouring Armenia. While supporting the war, Turkey has aspired to further increase its power via establishing a military base in Azerbaijan (Jasem, 2020), next door to Russia. Turkey also counts on using the conflict to increase its bargaining power vis-à-vis Russia concerning the issues of Syria and Libya (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020).

In the second place, the EU candidate and NATO member *Turkey has challenged* the NATO ally *U.S.'s* and NATO ally and leading EU member *France's* power. France (The Republic of France. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020) and the United States (The United States of America. Department of State, 2020) in their capacity as the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs, as well as the NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020) consistently urged for *the secession of hostilities, resumption of the peace talks* and called upon third parties to refrain from fuelling the fire. In addition, Paris and Washington made efforts to secure a ceasefire albeit never materialized on the ground. The opposing positions of France and the United States points to the conclusion that Turkey's decision to provoke the war was taken without consultation with the NATO allies.

Furthermore, Turkey has strived to change the Nagorno-Karabakh peace talks format away from the Minsk Group, and to secure a place around the negotiation table (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020). Turkey, in fact, has gradually moved away from the EU and NATO in terms of democratic credentials, strategic interests and alignments; *the 2016 coup attempt- "a gift from God"* in President Erdogan's words (Champion, 2016) and viewed as orchestrated by the West, being the tipping point. Once viewed as a security shield (more precisely, at the Cold War period), the EU and NATO have come to be deemed as security threats and coup plotters by Turkey's leadership against the backdrop of the coup attempt. Turkey has begun the process of *informal withdrawal from the NATO alliance*; hence the purchase of S-400 Russian missile defence system (Al Jazeera, 2020) and the increase of military cooperation with China (Alemdaroglu and Tepe, 2020). In this regard, against the backdrop of the war, Turkey has strived to demonstrate power vis-à-vis France and, in general, the EU, and the US capitalising on the election period in the States, and to sideline and downgrade the influence of the parties in the South Caucasus. Turkey, in fact, has succeeded in its endeavours; i.e. a joint Turkey-Russia centre is being established to monitor the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh (Hurriyet Daily News, 2020), the Minsk Group has become irrelevant and the EU's power has been downgraded in the South Caucasus largely because of the EU's weak response to the war situation.

3. *The new reality in the South Caucasus and the EU's standing in the region*

➤ *3.1 The EU's response to the Nagorno-Karabakh war*

The EU's weak response to the Nagorno-Karabakh war has vividly showcased the major flaws of Brussels's policy towards the South Caucasus and made it apparent that the Union falls short of being a "geopolitical", i.e. strategic-security actor in the region. The EU heavily relied on "**soft**" **diplomacy**, which apparently **yielded no fruit** in terms of stopping the devastating war and promoting peace, security, and stability in the region. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, (Delegation of the European Union to Armenia, 2020) the European Council President Charles Michel, and the European Council (European Council, 2020) issued statements emphasizing the imperative of cessation of hostilities and settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict exclusively by peaceful means under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group. However, the EU's actions did not go far beyond the statements and occasional phone calls, which apparently failed to produce tangible results and silence the guns and secure peace. In this regard, it is crucial to mention, the leading EU member France specifically made huge diplomatic efforts. France with the active personal involvement of President Emmanuel Macron, and the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian, in its capacity as an OSCE Minsk Group co-chair, indeed, intensified diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the war and reviving peace talks. (The Republic of France. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020). Furthermore, Paris attempted to broker a humanitarian ceasefire, albeit never materialized on the ground. However, France's diplomatic efforts, as intense as might be, failed to secure peace eventually.

➤ *3.2 The EU's unutilised strategic power*

The EU's handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh war situation could well be classified as an act of strategic misconduct, which has come at a high geopolitical cost for the EU leaving the Union sidelined in the South Caucasus. The EU solely employed "soft" diplomacy for bringing about the end of hostilities. Meanwhile, the EU was well equipped with **hard bargaining power features** inherent to a **strategic- "geopolitical" actor** which could have been used aimed at restoring peace and security in the South Caucasus, more precisely in Nagorno-Karabakh, and hence the Union's position would be strengthened in the region. There were, indeed, a series of effective and decisive measures the EU could have undertaken.

"Smart" sanctions: The EU could have imposed "smart sanctions"; i.e. targeted sanctions, for instance, asset freezes and travel bans, on Azerbaijan's political and military officials responsible for the war. In addition, the EU could have worked out and imposed sanctions on Azerbaijan's financial and economic sectors. The primary strategic objective of the sanctions would be not solely to stop the war, but also to provoke political change-i.e. democratic opening, in the country so to bring it closer to the EU and pave the way for democratic peace in the South Caucasus on a long-term basis. In other words, the EU should have heavily insisted on the democracy clause put forward in the framework of the Eastern Partnership policy, and equal to "more for more" -i.e. incentives based approach, employed the "less for less" or "stick" aspect.

Strategic use of the energy card: The EU, and mainly Italy, is a highly important market for Azerbaijan's oil export and consumption (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2019). The

EU (namely, Italy, Bulgaria and Greece) has recently become a crucial market for Azerbaijan’s gas export and consumption as well (Hajiev, 2020). Meanwhile, it is crucial to highlight that the EU imports large volumes of oil and gas chiefly from Russia. In other words, the EU’s geo-economic- vital energy security interests are not guaranteed by Azerbaijan’s oil/gas supplies, while Azerbaijan strategically depends on the EU as a key oil and gas export and consumption market. Italy constitutes the exception; the country imports large volumes of oil from Azerbaijan (Statista, 2020), however it could have been easily and quickly replaced with cheap Middle East/Persian Gulf oil in case of necessity. Hence, the EU could have effectively threatened and in case of no impact, actually could have imposed an *embargo* on Azerbaijan’s oil/gas shipments to the EU. The fact, that oil/gas embargo could have been highly effective in promoting peace and security, is well proved by the example of the 1973 Yom Kippur war when OPEC-imposed oil embargo eventually led to the cessation of hostilities and the Israel-Egypt peace treaty (The United States of America. Department of State. Office of the Historian, 1969-1976).

Figure 3 EU-27 imports of petroleum oil from main trading partners; 2019 and first semester 2020 (source: Eurostat, 2020)

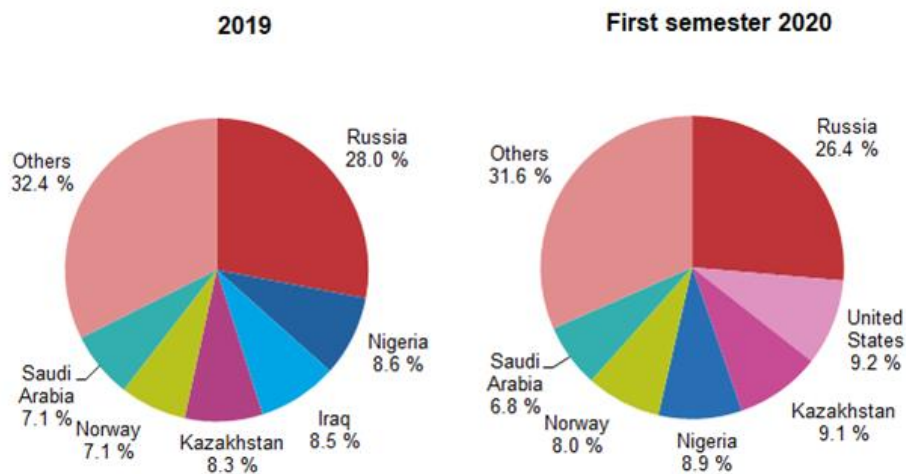
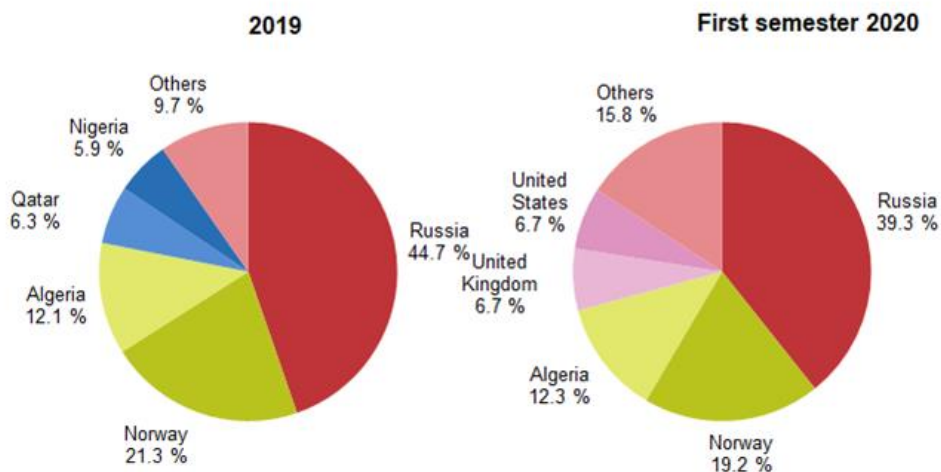


Figure 4 EU-27 imports of natural gas from main trading partners; 2019 and first semester 2020 (source: Eurostat, 2020)



Review of policy towards Turkey: The EU candidate Turkey under President Erdogan's leadership has been undermining security and stability in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, threatening the EU's vital strategic and security interests, and the rules-based international order. Hence, the EU should have adopted a **containment policy** towards Turkey using as power tools the imposition of tough sanctions targeting Turkey's financial and economic sectors, arms embargo, asset freezes and travel bans on political and military officials responsible for the war provocation. The actions would be aimed at provoking political and policy change in the country.

Strategic unity: The EU foreign policy decisions are taken by **consensus**, and there was a lack of consensus among the EU member states on policy towards Turkey and the Eastern neighbourhood. While France, Austria, Greece, and Cyprus advocated a hard line on Turkey, Germany, Italy, and Spain strongly argued against (Michalopoulos, 2020). Turkey constitutes an important arms export market for Italy and Spain. For instance, 20% of Italy's arms export and 11% of Spain's arms export are destined to Turkey (Wezeman et. al., 2020). Provided the Coronavirus pandemic, both Italy and Spain have suffered huge economic damage and hence could prefer to avoid an arms embargo on Turkey which would cause additional financial losses. Germany would value cooperation with Turkey on the migration issue (European Council, 2016). However, despite the divergent interests and viewpoints, **the EU strategic unity** and bold action was absolutely essential as **the EU's vital strategic interests** and very **power position in the newly emerging order in the South Caucasus** was at stake.

➤ 3.3 The EU's standing in the South Caucasus

The Nagorno-Karabakh war, which lasted from 27 September to 10 November 2020, in fact, has entailed radical geopolitical, security and strategic shifts in the South Caucasus. The balance of power has changed, and Russia and Turkey have emerged as the dominant powers in the region. Against the background of the newly emerged security architecture and geo-strategic balance of power in the South Caucasus, the EU's power is downgraded, and the Union is sidelined in the regional affairs in strategic-geopolitical terms. In this regard, the EU has attempted to regain its position. For instance, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has issued the following declaration on behalf of the Union (European Council, 2020):

The cessation of hostilities is only a first step to end the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The EU considers that efforts must be renewed for a negotiated, comprehensive, and sustainable settlement of the conflict, including on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. The EU therefore reiterates its full support to the international format of the OSCE Minsk Group led by its Co-Chairs and to the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office to pursue this objective.

In addition, France has argued for an international supervision of the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh amid concerns that Russia and Turkey could move the future peace talks format away from the Minsk Group (Irish, 2020).

In this regard, it is significant to mention that provided the geopolitical reshufflings in the South Caucasus, the Minsk Group has lost its relevance. Even if the peace talks take place in the framework of the Minsk Group in the future, those will be of an exclusively formal nature.

Furthermore, it is less realistic to expect that Russia or Turkey would be keen to share power with the EU and to agree to an international supervision of the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh. Overall, if the EU keeps on relying on soft power features only, its power to influence the state of affairs in the region will be limited in strategic terms. While employing *soft power*, the EU can effectively undertake the following measures *aimed at stabilising the situation* on the ground:

Economic support: The war, coupled with the Coronavirus pandemic, has caused enormous economic damage to Armenia (The World Bank, 2020). In this regard, it would be highly helpful if the EU grants Armenia loans, etc. on beneficial terms, and relocates funding available for Armenia based on local needs.

Rehabilitation programs: The devastating and horrendous war has claimed the lives of thousands of young Armenian soldiers, and thousands more have suffered serious injuries (BBC, 2020). Respectively, the EU needs to make funding available and put forward rehabilitation projects. As for the implementation of the projects, the EU could closely coordinate with the medical institutions in Armenia.

Reconstruction assistance: Azerbaijan shelled to rubble Nagorno-Karabakh cities and villages using Israeli made *cluster bombs prohibited by the international humanitarian law* (Amnesty International, 2020) and heavy artillery. The deliberate attacks have caused enormous damage to civilian infrastructure. Hence, the EU could get involved and assist in reconstruction activities.

Humanitarian assistance: The war caused displacement of around *90.000 civilians* (Khachatrian, 2020) and humanitarian crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh. As of the end of hostilities around *34.000 civilians* have returned to their homes (The Russian Federation. Ministry of Defence, 2020), however they *face dire living conditions*. In the meantime, thousands of civilians have become homeless. Hence, continual EU humanitarian assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh/Armenia is absolutely essential to overcome the difficulties and crisis, to recover the inflicted damage.

EU foreign policy review: As the Nagorno-Karabakh war demonstrated, the EU is not well prepared to take bold measures and to act quickly, timely and decisively *aimed at securing the Union's interests*. In this regard, it would be useful for the EU to launch debates and discussions on the EU's foreign affairs, and, more precisely, on the policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood. The EU needs to clarify for itself what type of foreign policy actor the Union strives to be, does the Union intend to be an influential "geopolitical"- strategic and security actor in international politics and in the Eastern neighbourhood in particular, is the EU prepared to show strategic unity and undertake bold actions? If the EU strives to be an influential strategic actor in the Eastern neighbourhood- the South Caucasus, the Union needs to consider employing *the hard power features outlined in the paper*. The practice proves that the reliance on soft power exclusively is far from being enough for guaranteeing the EU's geopolitical and strategic interests. The soft power needs to be supplemented by hard power features which are well at the EU's disposal and are discussed in the paper.

Contingency planning: Provided the fact that the EU is a Union of 27 different states with respective strategic culture, foreign policy vision and priorities, divergent threat and risk assessments, the EU could find it useful to conduct *contingency/scenario planning on foreign affairs*. A scenario/contingency planning would be useful for overcoming the difficulties in securing a unified position of 27 members in the face of a sudden crisis situation and would empower the EU to act promptly and boldly. To this end, the EU needs to develop a deep *situational awareness*, and hence it would be useful to enrol the best and brightest regional specialists in the works of the policy think tanks closely affiliated with the EU.

4. Conclusion

The world order established after the end of the Cold War has been swiftly crumbling, and the global strategic environment has been characterised by growing insecurity and unpredictability. The global power reshufflings have left an impact on the regional balance of power system. The security architecture and distribution of power in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood have been diminishing and hence entailing threats and risks to the wider European security and stability. In 2009 the EU launched the Eastern Partnership policy as a specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Having at the core the democracy clause, economic integration, and facilitation of people to people contacts, the EU policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood has been guided by the objective of expanding the circle of stability, prosperity, and security. However, despite the EU designs, the strategic and security environment have vehemently deteriorated in the neighbourhood ever since 2009. The Eastern neighbourhood has been engulfed in complex frozen and armed conflicts; the recently erupted Nagorno-Karabakh war constitutes one of those. The distribution of power, security architecture and strategic atmosphere, in fact, has fundamentally shifted in the Eastern neighbourhood, more precisely in the South Caucasus as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Russia and Turkey have emerged as the dominant powers in the South Caucasus, while the EU's power has been downgraded in strategic terms due to its weak response to the situation. To this end, the EU's response to the devastating war in Nagorno-Karabakh has vividly demonstrated the major flaws of the Union's policy towards the neighbourhood. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh apparently showcased that the EU falls short of being a "geopolitical", i.e. strategic-security actor in the Eastern neighbourhood. The EU's handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh war situation could well be classified as an act of strategic misconduct, which has come at a high geopolitical cost for the EU leaving the Union sidelined in the South Caucasus. Respectively, the EU has attempted to regain its power. However, if the Union keeps on relying exclusively on soft power features, its power to influence the state of affairs in the region will remain limited in strategic terms. The EU can effectively employ the outlined soft power features aimed at stabilising the situation on the ground. Meanwhile, if the EU aspires to be an influential "geopolitical"- strategic actor in the Eastern neighbourhood, the Union needs to be prepared to supplement the soft power with the hard power features which are well within its reach.

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