



**EU SOFT AND RUSSIAN HARD POWERS IN AZERBAIJAN:
THE STRUGGLE HAS BEGUN**

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EU soft and Russian hard powers in Azerbaijan: The struggle has begun

The Russian recognition of the “DNR” and “LNR” coupled with its military offensive into Ukraine has left Azerbaijan in a difficult situation. The war has brought a new reality when Baku would need to formulate or adjust its foreign policy. Any reproachment of Azerbaijan with the EU would be considered as a betrayal by Moscow, while the EU hopes that Baku will come around to support the Western-led sanctions regime against Russia. The situation is exacerbated with the fact that around [51% of Azerbaijan’s export](#) is going to EU countries, while Moscow plays a decisive role in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict through its deployment of the Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh. The field for maneuvering for Azerbaijan has been reduced and is likely to keep shrinking. So far, Baku has abstained from open criticism of Moscow for its actions in Ukraine, while vividly and fully supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sending humanitarian aid. Thus, Azerbaijan did not vote against Russia in the U.N. General Assembly. Meanwhile, beyond official support of Ukraine’s [territorial integrity](#), Baku has sent 380 tons of humanitarian aid worth more than 5.5 million Euros, while Azerbaijani state oil company continuously supplying emergency vehicles in Ukraine with the free oil and oil products. Baku mayor’s office even granted a permit for a pro-Ukrainian rally to take place in the city in March of 2022. With the start of the war the public and mass media was clearly anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian, seeing the conflict like what Azerbaijan has experienced during the last 30 years in Karabakh.

The escalation of war had intensified the competition between EU and Russia in maintaining leverage on Baku. Both the EU and Russia will use their own arsenal with different means and tools to achieve policy objectives in Azerbaijan. How EU soft power and the Russian hard power will clash over maximizing interests in Azerbaijan, and what will be the future implications of this invisible struggle for Azerbaijan are the main questions to be addressed.

Background

During the 44-day war in Karabakh in September-November of 2020, Russia has strengthened its hard power in Azerbaijan by successfully mediating the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The inability of the OSCE Minsk group to make any serious changes in the resolution of the conflict for a long period of time, as well as impotent and controversial positions of main EU countries, has undermined the confidence of the public and elites in the West in general and in the EU. As a result, the Russian establishment has monopolized the peace process, and Moscow was able to deploy peacekeepers consisting of [1,960 military personnel](#) with small arms, [90 armored personnel carriers](#), and 380 units of automobiles and special equipment along the contact line in Karabakh.

Since 1992, when the last Russian military personnel left Azerbaijan, it was the first time when Kremlin has deployed its military units in Azerbaijan in such an arrangement. The presence of the Russian peacekeepers gives the Russians undeniable advantage to manipulate and maximize its influence and power in the region. Dependence on the Russian peacekeepers resulted in the signing of the Declaration on [“Allied Interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the](#)

[Russian Federation](#)” on February 22, 2022. The declaration considers strengthening ties between Azerbaijan and Russia by ensuring cooperation in various fields such as trade and economic, investment, scientific and technical and military cooperation. Although the Declaration was purely demonstration and was effectually a collation of all previously signed agreements and declarations, yet its signing right before the start of the war irritated the Azerbaijani public. Nevertheless, since November 2020 Azerbaijan has successfully resisted Russian attempts to bring the country into either the Eurasian Economic Union or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (or both) that was frequently heralded by pro-Kremlin propagandists and influencers.

In contrast to the Russian actions, the EU has intensified its strategies and policies in the region right after the war. Although the EU and Azerbaijan formalized their relations with the Partnerships and Cooperation Agreement in 1999, the Eastern Partnership Association Agreement that was considered by the EU as the major soft power tool was rejected by Azerbaijan. Instead, Baku proposed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2016, which remains on the negotiating table. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan and the EU have signed a [Partnership Priorities](#) for 2018-2020 document, which is a policy framework identifying partnerships in the spheres such as strengthening institutions and good governance, connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate action, mobility and people-to-people contacts.

Despite the mismatch of interests in several spheres, the EU and Azerbaijan interests are congruent on energy cooperation. As an important energy partner, Azerbaijan supplies around 5% of the EU’s gas demand and targets to increase its gas supply in 2022 by pumping [16.2 billion cubic meters](#) via the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, mainly to Europe. Today, Baku is the main gas supplier to Greece, Albania and Turkey, and plans to expand its network to Bulgaria and Central Europe. Trying to keep parity between two adversaries – Armenia and Azerbaijan - the EU has allocated [2 billion euro](#) to Azerbaijan as a part of an investment plan which shows offering economic aid and appealing to shared values. Subsequently, the EU tries to counterbalance Russian hard power and maintain its influence through soft power policies in Azerbaijan. In April 6, 2022 [President of the European Council, Charles Michel, hosted presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia](#) where they discussed current situation in South Caucasus and efforts for stabilizing the region and establishment of peace between two sides parties. During the meeting, the EU’s willingness to actively participate in confidence and peace building measures and post conflict reconstruction have been widely discussed.

From the public perception, the EU has a superior advantage. In general, Azerbaijani young people look to Europe as the main destination for study, employment, or development. A number of [polls](#) conducted in the past four years in Azerbaijan show a constant growth of trust toward the EU within that timeframe, especially among the youth. (Figure 5). Thus, 44% of Azerbaijani citizens have a positive image of the EU, especially among the youth, while the number of people who distrust the EU dropped from 41% to around 30% (Figure 34). Additionally, more than two thirds of the population described the relations between Azerbaijan and the EU as ‘good’ (69%).

FIGURE 5 – Trust towards the EU (Q2.11)
 (Percentages refer to Azerbaijanis who have heard of the EU)

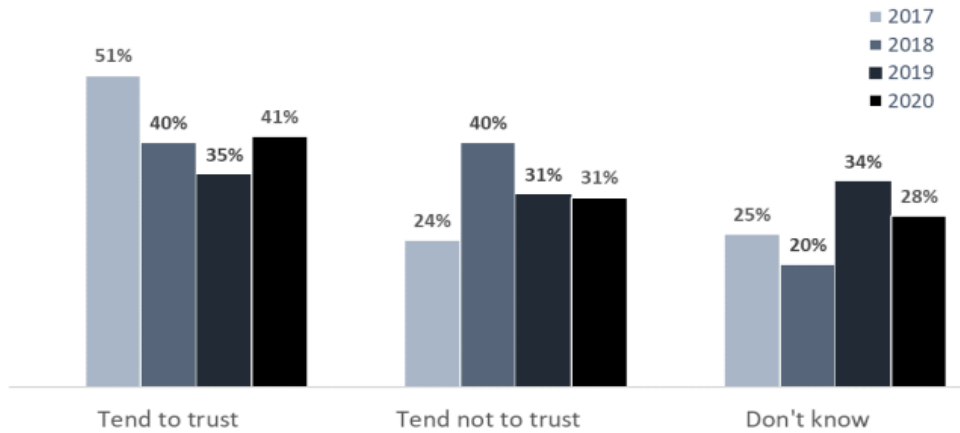


FIGURE 34 – Socio-demographic characteristics and geographical location of Azerbaijanis with a positive image of the EU



Future implications

With the continued escalation of in the conflict over Ukraine, Russia is likely to try to maximize its hard power through the instrumentalization of its peacekeeping forces in the part of Karabakh under its present jurisdiction and put Azerbaijani foreign policy in a framework which serves its foreign policy goals in the South Caucasus. This would not necessarily rise to the level of the “*Finlandization*” of Azerbaijan’s foreign policy, but Baku would need to keep taking Russian concerns into consideration. Russia through its peacekeepers can easily escalate the situation and affect Azerbaijan’s domestic politics. Moreover, the subordination of Karabakh’s Armenian separatists to the Russian peacekeepers, coupled with Yerevan’s withdrawal from the affairs of the Karabakh Armenians, would ensure that any process of negotiations with Azerbaijan would be put solely into Russia’s hands. In other words, Baku would end up negotiating with Moscow directly on the fate of the Karabakh Armenians inhabiting the Russian peacekeeping zone. Thus, although the agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia envisages the phased disarmament of the local separatists, yet Karabakh separatists are still not disarmed and continue to present a clear and present danger to the reconstruction efforts. Depending on certain Azerbaijani actions, Russia could sporadically create a situation in which pro-Russian Karabakh Armenian separatists will haunt Azerbaijan and the *Tskhinvalization* of the conflict could become a policy option worth pursuing for the Russian establishment. Consequently, Russian hard power will be harshened and will be utilized by different means to pressure and reach political goals. Thus, after Azerbaijani humanitarian aid was delivered to Ukraine, a member of Russia’s parliament and the deputy chair of the Duma’s Economic Policy Committee, Mikhail Delyagin, threatened Azerbaijan with a nuclear strike. Russia will hardly abstain from its hard policy and even weakening of the Russian military establishment would hardly change such a situation.

At the same time the EU will continue utilizing its soft power potential in Azerbaijan through different educational, cultural and support programs counterbalancing Russian hard power in the post war period. Through cultural and economic influence, the EU will try to substitute Russian hard power and take advantage of its positive image among Azerbaijani society. A lot of emphasis will be placed for people-to-people relations to engage with civil society members. Thus, recent inauguration of Azerbaijani-Italian University in Baku; bringing EU companies (mostly Italian) into Karabakh reconstruction efforts as well as intensifying contacts with EU officials signal the intention of Azerbaijan to lean toward the EU in its further development. From this perspective, the EU should take advantage at this stage to expand its programs, contacts as well as involvement in reconstruction efforts that in future benefit both Azerbaijani and Armenian communities.

Conclusion

While Russian hard and EU soft power struggle over influence, Baku will continue its balanced foreign policy. Considering the uncertain situation in Ukraine, Baku will take more cautious steps in building its relations with Russia and the EU. In the coming years, we will see the EU's counterbalancing efforts through participation in post-conflict reconstruction and various support programs. With the growing pressure on Russia with sanctions, Moscow may increase its pressure

on Azerbaijan to halt the gas supply and strangle Europe with gas shortage. From this perspective Baku will need for the EU to provide both stronger guarantees and greater support to withstand whatever Russia may have in store. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's role as a reliable and growing gas supplier to the EU will gain in importance. Thus, it would stand to reason that it is in the interest of the European Union to offer Azerbaijan more tangible support, including trade preferences, a visa-free regime, and other benefits that would further win the hearts and minds of the Azerbaijani public and its elites.

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