

Research Paper

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Changing Perceptions of the West in the South Caucasus

Adoration No More



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Summary

- In the late 1980s and early 1990s perceptions of the West in the three republics of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – were almost uniformly positive. Such views largely reflected the West’s economic superiority and popular disillusionment with the Soviet experiment.
- Perceptions changed as a result of a lack of Western political support for the new states in the early, difficult years after their independence in 1991. This significantly tarnished the image of the West – although it also lowered expectations, which hitherto had been unrealistically high.
- Today there is less uniformity in perceptions of the West in the South Caucasus. The United States and NATO are generally regarded through the lens of hard security and geopolitics, whereas the European Union and major European governments are viewed as forces for the spread of democracy and institutional efficiency.
- The record of Western engagement in the region since 1991 is mixed, with successes and setbacks visible in all three countries. Increased economic cooperation around infrastructure projects is an example of the former, while the West’s failings have included inconsistent policies on security and human rights, and uneven political support for institutional and structural reforms in newly independent states. Unfortunately the boost to the image of Western actors from the successes has been outweighed by the reputational damage from the setbacks. As a result, there is a risk that the West’s mistakes in its policies towards the South Caucasus could result in the ‘loss’ (in terms of geopolitical alignment and alliances) of the entire region to Russia.
- Political leaderships throughout the South Caucasus have striven to maximize economic aid and security guarantees in their relations with Western entities. Yet with the partial exception of Georgia, governments in the region have remained reluctant to open up politically and democratize. Moreover, political leaders’ use of mass media to express frustration with Western policies has contributed to deteriorating popular perceptions of the West in general.
- Russia’s ambitions to restore its influence in the region complicate the picture. Moscow continues to exert pressure on governments and other actors, employing both hard and soft power. It tries to undermine the West’s standing in the region – for example, by depicting Western countries as places of economic uncertainty and moral decomposition, and by instilling fear of Russia’s hard-power capabilities.

Introduction: the myth of the idyllic West

In the dying days of the Soviet Union, the prevailing (and naive) international mood was that within a few years the countries of the post-Soviet space would join the ranks of advanced liberal capitalist states. That is, that they would become Westernized. Ostensibly pro-Western leaders such as Boris Yeltsin (in Russia), Eduard Shevardnadze (Georgia), Levon Ter-Petrosyan (Armenia), Stanislav Shushkevich (Belarus) and Leonid Kravchuk (Ukraine) came to power. In the three small South Caucasus states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – people looked upon the West with nothing less than adoration. They saw the West as a Cold War victor, and Westernization as the only acceptable political path.

Societies in the region, and Georgia in particular, had long believed that the Soviet annexations in 1920 and 1921 had halted their orientation towards the West. Georgians and Armenians believed that they were historically a part of European civilization and entitled to cultivate these roots.¹ Similarly, many Azerbaijanis, proud of establishing ‘the first Muslim democracy’ in 1918–20, also believed in their essentially Western affiliation.

This paper will show how popular perceptions of the West have changed in the South Caucasus over the past 25 years. The reasons are unique to each country. The domestic and foreign policies of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia respectively – as well as those of Russia and major Western actors – have all contributed to the trajectories that attitudes have followed. Yet perceptions of the West in each country are not as different as the divergence in foreign policy orientations would suggest. Even in the less pro-Western states of Armenia and Azerbaijan, attitudes towards the West remain fairly favourable. This leaves Western leaders with the chance to re-engage more successfully with the region.

Background: early hopes

The underpinnings of the region’s historical affinity with Western Europe are diverse. While the Georgians and Armenians associated themselves with Europeans because of their ancient Christian roots, the pro-Western orientation of Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim nation, was unusual. One particular development in the historical ties between Baku and the West provides the clue: the oil boom in the last quarter of the 19th century brought a significant Western presence to the city. The accompanying financial windfall allowed many locals to pursue education in Europe (including in St Petersburg and Istanbul). Exposure to European thought and practices had a number of important consequences, including the rise of national identity politics and Pan-Turkism, features that would help to define the subsequent historical path of Azerbaijan.

This exposure provided an image of the West as an affluent, institutionally efficient and technologically advanced group of states. Partly as a result, the borrowing of progressive Western policies played a conspicuous part in the 1918 formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic

¹ Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 68.

(which, incidentally, extended suffrage to women earlier than in most Western democracies).² In this regard, Azerbaijan went beyond the Ottoman empire and even the Turkish republic, in which emulation of Western practices was qualified and intermittent rather than systemic.

Admiration of the West continued, in some respects, throughout the Soviet era. The Soviet Union had an anti-bourgeois ideological position with regard to colonialism and imperialism. Under the Penal Code of 1940, 'adoration of the West' was punishable by imprisonment.³ Yet the country also separated ethnic groups into those defined as 'advanced', or 'Western', and those classified as 'culturally backward' or 'Eastern'.⁴ Only six nationalities qualified as 'Western' in this taxonomy – among them Georgians and Armenians. During the Cold War there was a tension between, on the one hand, a 'decaying West' narrative that instilled in Soviet citizens a sense of enmity towards their Western neighbours; and, on the other, widespread respect for the West as an economic and military adversary.

Modern perceptions of the West were linked in turn to complex perceptions of the Soviet past. At the start of the 1990s, all three South Caucasus republics advanced claims that they had been illegally annexed by the Bolsheviks and on this basis had the right to independence. Certainly, Moscow's grave mishandling of all three countries' grievances and aspirations served to support their respective cases for independence. For Georgia, it was the bloody Soviet crackdown on a peaceful demonstration on 9 April 1989, followed by distorted coverage of the event by Soviet media.⁵ For Azerbaijan and Armenia, their brewing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was managed so poorly by the central authorities in Moscow that both sides ended up believing the Soviet leadership supported the other party to the dispute.⁶ Against this backdrop, the thoughts and aspirations of regular citizens in all three countries turned to the West. Growing disillusionment with the policies of the 'centre' rendered the image of the major Western countries all the more appealing.

The weakening of Soviet ideology was exacerbated by economic contradictions. Despite middling living standards – much lower than in the West, but higher than in the developing world – the Soviet Union's command economy was characterized by serious malfunctions and shortages, and by the low quality of commercial products, from cars to matches.⁷ The superior quality of Western products encouraged an appreciation of the West, even among otherwise enthusiastic supporters of socialism.

Several other historical factors supported this paradoxical state of affairs. Although Russian imperialism and subsequent Soviet domination had brought oppression, they had introduced some modernization and Westernization in the region's politics, society and culture. The opening of an opera theatre in Tbilisi in the 1860s, the establishment of the profitable and renowned Yerevan Brandy Company in 1887, and the establishment of Baku as a centre of jazz culture in Soviet times

² Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The Shaping of a National Identity in a Muslim Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 144.

³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* [Arxipealag Gulag] (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), Vol. 1, p. 24.

⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 23–24.

⁵ Jones, *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence*, pp. 31–33.

⁶ Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press 2013), pp. 3–44.

⁷ Vladimir Papava, *Necroeconomics: The Political Economy of Post-Soviet Capitalism* (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2005), pp. 5–10.

– all were initiatives that met with enthusiasm and that remain a source of national pride. People recognized that these developments, along with the emergence of educated local elites as a result of higher-education opportunities in Russian and sometimes even European universities, would not have been possible under the Ottomans or Persians. A comparison between Azeris from Azerbaijan and their ethnic kin in Iran, south of the Araxes River, reveals the Westernizing dimension of the Soviet legacy. Azeris in Azerbaijan are more secular, modern and socially open than their Iranian counterparts. This phenomenon can primarily be attributed to the fact that Persia ceded the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan to the Russian empire as a result of the wars of 1813 and 1828.⁸

Many Western political leaders and scholars believed that the presence of an educated labour force, manufacturing base and political order in the former Soviet Union would facilitate Western-style democracy and prosperity in the South Caucasus republics upon independence.⁹ However, the reality is that none of the three countries have met the expectations placed upon their original pro-independence leaders and societies.

Reciprocity deficit

The positive image of the West (in particular of the United States) that was increasingly widespread in Soviet society in the final years of the USSR, and even more so in the South Caucasus and the ‘European USSR’ (the Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova), endured a hard early test. Although the Soviet Union’s ultimate collapse had been foreseeable in the long run due to its profound systemic deficiencies, its formal dissolution in late 1991 was nevertheless unexpected for the West, which at first responded to this momentous event with apprehension. Yugoslavia’s first stages of dissolution had instilled fear in the West of a catastrophic collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ This apprehension was voiced by US president George H. W. Bush in his controversial ‘chicken Kiev’ speech, when he warned against radical Ukrainian nationalism and advocated the continuation of a renewed, more benign and democratizing Soviet Union. The speech was heavily criticized by pro-independence politicians and activists in the Soviet republics.¹¹

In the event, the West’s fears of instability proved justified. The South Caucasus republics, along with Tajikistan, were exceptions in the relatively peaceful disintegration of the Soviet Union. The early post-independence years in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were periods of turmoil and ethno-territorial conflict, during which the silence of the West and its limited participation in conflict resolution increased popular feelings of abandonment. These feelings intensified later in the decade, as the West’s relative lack of engagement with the South Caucasus contrasted with its massive engagement in the crises of the Balkans. The perception was that the former Soviet space was so low on the West’s list of priorities that it did not merit a fraction of the attention accorded to geographically closer areas.

⁸ Svante Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), pp. 20–21.

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁰ It is worth noting in this context that the USSR of 1991 was no longer seen in the West as an adversary, but rather as a weak yet democratizing area. In some respects – owing to glasnost, perestroika and its facilitation of German reunification – it was considered a potential ally.

¹¹ *The Washington Times*, ‘Bush Sr. Clarifies “Chicken Kiev” Speech’, 23 May 2004,

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/may/23/20040523-101623-2724r/> (accessed on 11 December 2013).

In addition, domestic developments in Azerbaijan and Georgia were not encouraging. The ascents to power of Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan and of Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia (despite the latter's positive image as Mikhail Gorbachev's 'right hand man' in his capacity as former Soviet foreign minister) were interpreted domestically and abroad as evidence of both countries' inability to chart a genuinely independent course. In Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan drifted towards Moscow as the war over Nagorno-Karabakh underscored the extent of Yerevan's dependence on Moscow for security.¹² In the minds of many Western policy-makers and analysts, the Caucasus was an appendix of Russia rather than a region of independent nations.¹³

A more realistic assessment of Aliyev's and Shevardnadze's independent statesmanship by Western leaders emerged with time, but not until the potential of Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources and the willingness of Baku and Tbilisi to build a westbound supply route were evident by the mid-1990s. The September 1994 signing of the 'contract of the century' with foreign oil companies on oilfield development and production-sharing in Azerbaijan was a watershed event that focused Western attention on the region.¹⁴ As Western oil companies rushed to Baku, it took the perseverance of two successive directors of the US National Security Council's Russian, Ukrainian and Eurasian programmes – Rosemarie Forsythe and Sheila Heslin – to overcome the opposition of Strobe Talbott, Bill Clinton's deputy secretary of state, to the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline (which would bypass Russian territory).¹⁵ Eventually, American backing of the project changed the public mood in Azerbaijan and Georgia strongly in favour of the United States and Turkey. Thanks to its NATO membership and EU accession ambitions, the latter was also perceived by Tbilisi and Baku as an essentially Western state up until the early 2000s.

In the absence of an established political culture, the public mood in the South Caucasus during the early days of independence was fickle. According to Mehman Aliyev, director and editor-in-chief of the Turan News Agency in Azerbaijan, there was 70 per cent approval for a strong economic and political union between Azerbaijan and Turkey in mid-1992, when Abulfaz Elchibey was in power in Azerbaijan. Just one year later, however, nearly 70 per cent of people favoured strong ties with Russia, a development that heralded the return to power of Aliyev.¹⁶ Present-day public opinion is still volatile, albeit to a far lesser extent. Polls conducted in two consecutive years on any issue almost never show a change greater than 10 per cent.

One important policy change in the biggest of the post-Soviet states, Russia, ultimately came to influence the perception of the West in the former Soviet Union. In late 1991 and early 1992, Yeltsin and his entourage, the people who wielded power in Russia and consigned the USSR to the proverbial 'dustbin of history', saw the so-called 'peripheral states' (the other 14 republics) as parasitic recipients of Russian aid and therefore as a drain on the country's economic resources. However, in the last months of 1992 Russia adopted a strategy of re-engagement and rediscovered

¹² Fiona Hill and Pamela Jewett, *"BACK IN THE USSR": Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs Of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy Toward Russia*, Brookings Institution, 1994, p. 10.

¹³ Hill and Jewett, *"BACK IN THE USSR"*, pp. 1–4; Françoise Companjen, 'Recent Political History of the South Caucasus in the Context of Transition', in Françoise Companjen, László Károly Marác, Lia Versteegh (eds), *Exploring the Caucasus in the XXI Century: Essays on Culture, History and Politics in a Dynamic Context* (Amsterdam: Pallas Publications, 2010), p. 111.

¹⁴ Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, p. 402.

¹⁵ Steve LeVine, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 222–29.

¹⁶ Author's interview, 4 October 2013, Baku.

‘raw geopolitics’ with its attendant concepts of zero-sum competition and spheres of influence. This change was evident in the increasingly confrontational rhetoric and hawkish attitude expressed in three successive conceptual documents: the Foreign Policy Concept of January 1993, the National Security Concept of April 1993 and the Military Doctrine of November 1993.¹⁷ For countries with ethnic minorities prone to secessionist claims, this meant more proactive Russian interference in their domestic affairs, usually on the side of separatists. Russian strategy aimed to weaken statehood and deter newly independent states from turning towards the West. Major Western states and organizations responded to Russian strong-arm tactics with token resolutions and declarations,¹⁸ which was disappointing for the majority of ordinary Georgians and Azerbaijanis, who were expecting more clear-cut political backing and broader Western participation in the post-conflict settlement.

The West: no longer a homogeneous entity

A more nuanced image of the West emerged over time in the South Caucasus, as people became more aware of distinctions between the United States, the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe. The connection between attitudes towards the West and the actual post-independence trajectories of the South Caucasus states can be observed in three distinct but overlapping areas: security, economics, and democracy and governance. The expectation was that the progress in each area would occur in lockstep with that in others, but this was not the case.

Attitudes towards NATO have tended to reflect the security preoccupations of the moment. Debates about relations with the North Atlantic Alliance figured prominently in public discourse in the three South Caucasus states. In all three countries, support for NATO membership dropped between 2007 and 2009 because of the August 2008 Russia–Georgia war and fears that a similar conflict could happen again. The unwillingness of the West to intervene on the side of Georgia led to a decrease in the share of those who supported NATO membership: from 47 per cent to 42 per cent in Georgia, from 39 per cent to 21 per cent in Azerbaijan, and from 15 per cent to 10 per cent in Armenia.¹⁹

The sharp drop in support for NATO membership in Azerbaijan was particularly significant. For about a decade and a half before the August 2008 war, the Azerbaijani political elite and a sizeable part of its urban population had been unquestionable supporters of integration into Western institutions. This reflected two major strands of thought, according to Ceyhun Mahmudlu, a professor of political science at Qafqaz University in Baku. The first concerned the cultural, economic and political set-up of Western societies, of which democracy and secularism were the most appealing features. The second was about down-to-earth strategic considerations and balance-of-power politics, with close relations and eventual integration into Western institutions seen as guaranteeing security and statehood.²⁰ Azerbaijan positions itself as a moderate Islamic state – and

¹⁷ Dmitri Trenin, ‘Russia’s Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region’, in Bruno Coppetiers (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: VUB Press, 1996), pp. 32–40.

¹⁸ OSCE Summit Document, ‘Towards a Genuine Partnership in a New Era’, Budapest, 5 and 6 December 1994, pp. 5–6 (Nagorno-Karabakh), pp. 7–8 (Georgia), <http://www.osce.org/mc/39554>.

¹⁹ Therese Svensson, ‘Attitudes Towards the West in the South Caucasus’, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 13 (February 2010), p. 10.

²⁰ Author’s interview, 2 October 2013, Baku.

as a bridge between the West and the Islamic world, rather than between the West and Russia. But disappointment about the Western failure to deliver security and support on Nagorno-Karabakh led to a gradual lessening of support for Western institutions and policies in Azerbaijan. Another significant factor in this shift was criticism, led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), of successive Azerbaijani elections and human rights abuses.

For the small and economically weak South Caucasus states, efforts to reform their economies and foster good governance should have been areas of cooperation with the West. However, this was not consistently the case in practice. The prioritization of security imperatives continued to a large degree to determine foreign policy orientations – and, by extension, attitudes towards external actors. Thus while the three countries started in broadly the same position in 1990, today their foreign policy paths have diverged. In a 2012 poll by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) that asked Georgians ‘Who is the biggest friend of your country?’, 62 per cent of respondents said the United States and 5 per cent said the EU. However, 86 per cent of respondents in Armenia favoured Russia, while only 2 per cent favoured the United States and 10 per cent the EU. The results for Armenia reveal the primacy of physical security – provided exclusively by Moscow – in respondents’ considerations.²¹ This is despite other polls and research indicating that the only acceptable identity other than ‘Armenian’ for the majority of Armenians is ‘European’ – not post-Soviet, not CIS and not Eurasian.²² Statistics for Azerbaijan from the same 2012 poll reveal the extent of its disillusionment with both the West and Russia, with 99 per cent of those polled rejecting the United States, the EU and Russia in favour of Turkey.²³ Given the pace of Turkish desecularization and the country’s distancing of itself from the West under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), this underlines Baku’s lack of Western orientation.

Despite this foreign policy orientation, Azerbaijan’s relations with the West have remained surprisingly successful in a number of respects. For example Western political pressure (primarily from the United States) and consistent energy policy made possible the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and, later on, the South Caucasus Pipeline (Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum). The payout from these projects contributed to a robust economic recovery, which included double-digit GDP growth and left the country more confident. Yet economic gains also contributed to increasing sensitivity on the part of government officials in Baku, in the face of public criticism and damning reports from the OSCE and non-governmental international and regional agencies on the worsening situation with respect to human rights and democracy. With progress stalled over Nagorno-Karabakh – by far the most painful issue for Azerbaijan – estrangement with the West took root. This was exacerbated by Russian and American backing of an attempted rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, which Azerbaijan saw as detrimental to its claim over Nagorno-Karabakh and which briefly spoiled Azerbaijani–Turkish relations. In retaliation against Turkey, Azerbaijan even sold a small quantity of natural gas to Russia: 0.5 billion cubic metres (bcm), about 9 per cent of Azerbaijan’s overall annual natural gas exports of 5.6 bcm. But the most powerful message from Azerbaijan’s new foreign policy priorities was its joining of the Non-Aligned Movement in May 2011

²¹ Social Sciences in the Caucasus, ‘Go West? Perceptions of the West in the South Caucasus’, Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), 5 August 2013, <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/go-west-perceptions-of-west-in-south.html> (accessed on 11 December 2013).

²² Many thanks to Alexander Iskandarian for relevant information. Interview with the author, Yerevan, 14 October 2013.

²³ Social Sciences in the Caucasus, ‘Go West? Perceptions of the West in the South Caucasus’.

– which was tantamount to renouncing aspirations to become a part of the West in any meaningful way.²⁴

Since 2013, as the Azerbaijani authorities have intensified their crackdown on NGOs, independent and investigative journalists, and human rights groups, Baku's official anti-Western rhetoric has become so aggressive as to be reminiscent of the Soviet era. Phrases such as 'corrupting influence of the West' are often touted.²⁵ The reaction of the Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev, to the resolution of the European Parliament of 10 September 2015,²⁶ which expressed serious concern over the country's worsening human rights record, is a case in point. He branded the resolution as 'completely baseless ... political provocation based on lie, slander and biased attitude'.²⁷ The episode serves as a reminder that the Russian and Azerbaijani regimes share a number of similarities. These include authoritarianism and a willingness to resort to harsh methods to silence criticism, as seen in their rankings in widely followed indexes on corruption perceptions and press freedom.²⁸

One source of President Aliyev's irritation with the West, and especially with the United States, is a feeling that Azerbaijan's geopolitical stature is in decline. Russian assertiveness in promoting its own energy projects, the reduced presence of NATO and its allies in Afghanistan, and the global 'shale gas revolution' all weaken Azerbaijan's currency in international affairs.²⁹ Given the extent of state control over mass media, the latest spike in anti-Western rhetoric is likely to permeate popular perceptions.

Inconsistent engagement

A lack of cohesion between the United States and major European countries over governance, economic issues and security in the South Caucasus has also contributed to the region's collective disillusionment. Some Western leaders – George W. Bush, in particular – turned a blind eye to democratic regression largely for geopolitical reasons. In Azerbaijan these reasons included the country's potential role in diversifying energy supplies to Europe, and its strategic location as a staging post for transporting military supplies and personnel to Afghanistan (which is why the end of NATO's International Security Assistance Force mission at the end of 2014 has weakened Azerbaijan's geopolitical leverage).³⁰

In Georgia, the 2003 Rose Revolution and the relatively unquestioned progress of the country's reformist young leadership in its first four years in power gave the public hope that the West would become more consistent and balanced in its policies, instead of prioritizing energy and hard security as it did in Azerbaijan. However, Western policies – with some notable exceptions, such as an open letter by Amnesty International to President George W. Bush – were largely ignorant of

²⁴ Rashad Shirinov, 'Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy: Seeking a Balance', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 37 (March 2012), p. 4.

²⁵ APA News Agency, <http://ru.apa.az/news/260766>, 2 December 2013 (accessed on 11 December 2013).

²⁶ European Parliament resolution of 10 September 2015 on Azerbaijan, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2015-0316+0+DOC+PDF+Vo//EN> (accessed on 14 October 2015).

²⁷ 'President Aliyev: European Parliament's resolution – piece of paper for Azerbaijan', Trend News Agency, 15 September 2015, <http://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2433717.html> (accessed on 14 October 2015).

²⁸ Transparency International, 'Corruption Perceptions Index 2014', <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results> (accessed on 18 August 2015); Freedom House, 'Freedom of the Press 2015', p. 23.

²⁹ Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm, 8 December 2015 (accessed on 6 January 2016).

³⁰ Jim Nichol, 'Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: Developments and Implications for US Interests', Congressional Research Service, October 2013, pp. 5–6.

and/or unwilling to recognize massive democratic rollbacks in Georgia. This changed only after the violent and disproportionate crackdown on protesters on 7 November 2007.³¹

Attitudes towards the United States

The changing attitudes of people in all three South Caucasus republics are revealing when juxtaposed with their views on the performance of the United States between 2007 and 2012. Gallup's annual 'U.S.-Global Leadership Track' poll asked: 'Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of the U.S.?'³² The global median approval rate was lowest (at 34 per cent) in 2008, the final full year of the Bush presidency. This was followed by a sharp rise and a peak (at 49 per cent) in 2009, associated with high expectations of Barack Obama, and then a gradual slide to 41 per cent by 2012. Although approval ratings varied among countries, the trend of disliking Bush and pinning hopes on Obama was near universal.

This makes it all the more interesting that two of the South Caucasus states, Armenia and Georgia, constituted rare exceptions to the global pattern. In Armenia there was a steady decline in approval ratings of the United States, from 55 per cent to 46 per cent, while in Georgia there was a steady rise in the overall approval rate from 42 per cent to 51 per cent. One possible explanation for the latter was Washington's continued support for Georgia despite apprehensions in Tbilisi of an imminent decline in such support after the Bush era.

Azerbaijan, too, did not entirely follow the global trend of attitudes towards the US president. Positive attitudes rose during both the Bush and Obama presidencies, slumping only in 2012, possibly due to perceived US disengagement owing to the absence of an ambassador to Azerbaijan for two periods of six months in 2011 and 2012.³³

Attitudes towards Europe

People in the South Caucasus still primarily associate the EU with high living standards, but recent crises have dented its image. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and now are Eastern Partnership states.³⁴ Even though trust in the EU has slightly declined in all three republics since 2010,³⁵ in 2012 it was still higher than the level of distrust. In polls in Azerbaijan and Armenia, the level of trust exceeded the level of distrust by relatively insignificant margins: 37 per cent versus 27 per cent in the former, and 39 per cent versus

³¹ International Crisis Group, 'Georgia: Sliding to Authoritarianism?', Europe Report No. 189, 19 December 2007, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/south-caucasus/georgia/189-georgia-sliding-towards-authoritarianism.aspx>.

³² Gallup, The U.S.-Global Leadership Project, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161309/global-leadership-project.aspx>.

³³ 'US Ambassador to Azerbaijan Leaving Post', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/matthew_bryza_azerbaijan_us_ambassador_washington_armenia/24437637.html (accessed on 8 January 2014). Matthew Bryza was nominated as ambassador to Azerbaijan in late 2010 by President Obama, who had to override strong opposition by Congress, particularly those elected by Armenian-American constituencies. This controversial nomination created a six-month delay. But in late 2011, Congress did not vote on Bryza's appointment before going into recess, and he had to return to Washington.

³⁴ The Eastern Partnership encourages enhanced cooperation between the EU and six post-Soviet states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine – and strives to reflect their varying European aspirations. See http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/107589.pdf (accessed on 18 August 2015).

³⁵ 'Caucasus Barometer', 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010, available at: <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/TRUSTEU/>, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2012/TRUSTEU/>, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2011/TRUSTEU/>, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2010/TRUSTEU/>.

29 per cent in the latter. The level of trust in Georgia, however, was considerably higher at 55 per cent in 2012, with only 7 per cent of respondents expressing distrust.³⁶

These favourable ratings persist in Georgia despite the lack of a unified European voice. After the 2004 EU enlargement, a rift developed between the states of so-called ‘old Europe’, once keen to appease Russia (especially France, Germany and Italy); and the eastern and Baltic states of ‘new Europe’, which were interested in NATO enlargement and closer integration into European institutions. Although the terms themselves (‘old Europe’ and ‘new Europe’) were coined by the US secretary of defence, Donald Rumsfeld, in 2003 to highlight the opposition of major Western European states to the war in Iraq (when many Eastern European countries joined the coalition), the nomenclature caught on in relation to other issues on which Western and Eastern Europe disagreed.³⁷ This discourse was particularly relevant for Georgia and was headlined at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008. The Baltic states, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic sided with the United States in support of Georgian and Ukrainian bids for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), only to be thwarted by ‘old Europe’ states.³⁸ However, a demonstrably firmer stance by the German leadership since Russia’s annexation of Crimea and activities in eastern Ukraine in 2014 suggests that Germany is abandoning its conciliatory policy towards Moscow. This, in turn, indicates a more cohesive European policy towards all Eastern Partnership countries (including the South Caucasus states) – a major prerequisite for cooperation that is likely to boost the EU’s image in all three states.

Cultural clashes and costlier Western mistakes

The allure of the West was so strong in the 1990s that even serious policy mistakes did not significantly affect its ideological, let alone economic and political, appeal. Statesmen, experts and the general public alike largely considered the debacles in Somalia, failure to act in Rwanda, insufficient intervention in Bosnia and ineffective engagement in Kosovo as minor setbacks, or at least too far removed from more self-interested concerns. Over the past decade, however, this tolerance for foreign policy mistakes – both globally and in popular opinion in the South Caucasus – has thinned considerably. The West simply does not hold the status that it did in the early 1990s. The global financial crisis of 2008 exacerbated this. The fact that liberal market capitalism could suffer such a disaster further dented the economic image of the West. National debt crises in some EU countries later revealed more systemic deficiencies.

Turkey and Greece provide useful comparisons. Greece, an EU member, has been a near-dysfunctional state since 2009, whereas the economy of Turkey – a country that has been trying to join the EU since 1963 – contracted only at the height of the crisis in 2009 but rebounded the following year. Given the hundreds of thousands of people from all three South Caucasus republics who travel to Turkey and Greece as seasonal workers or as tourists, this contrast sent a clear message about the advisability of EU membership.

³⁶ ‘Caucasus Barometer’, 2012. The exact question was: ‘How much do you trust or distrust the European Union?’

³⁷ Mark Baker, ‘Rumsfeld’s “Old” and “New” Europe Touches on Uneasy Divide’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 January 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1102012.html> (accessed on 18 August 2015).

³⁸ Ronald Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 111–139.

The perceived relative decline of the West undermines the assertion that liberal market democracy is the only model that can guarantee development and stability.³⁹ The South Caucasus states are struck by these doubts too. Azerbaijan, by far the most authoritarian and corrupt state of the three, has a larger economy and higher GDP per capita (\$17,500 at purchasing power parity, or PPP) than Armenia and Georgia combined (\$8,100 and \$7,600 respectively).^{40, 41}

The West's ability to 'win hearts and minds' is also complicated by cultural differences over social issues and by its mixed record in support of human rights and democracy. Although the South Caucasus countries vary in their human rights records and democratic achievements (Georgia leading the way, Armenia in the middle and Azerbaijan lagging behind), all three have conservative societies. This is seen, for example, in almost uniformly intolerant views on sexual minorities. Across all age brackets, only around 3–7 per cent of people believe that homosexuality is acceptable.⁴² The dilemma for Western engagement in the region, therefore, is that taking a firm and principled line in support of protections for LGBT communities, for example, could come at a political cost.

Georgia's EU integration process is a case in point. One of the conditions of the country's EU Association Agreement – only recently ratified by all EU member states⁴³ – was that it pass anti-discrimination legislation. Parliament duly did so in May 2014.⁴⁴ But changing popular opinion is another matter. Any perception that the West was trying to force liberal attitudes on the population would risk causing resentment counter-productive for integration. In effect, if the West's cultural and moral appeal in the eyes of ordinary Georgians is diminished, so too is the rationale for political and economic alignment with the EU rather than Russia.

It should also be remembered that Western advocacy on social issues presents an opportunity for Russian soft power. With Russia having adopted a number of anti-LGBT laws, the Russian church and media are presenting anti-discrimination initiatives as 'propaganda'. These tactics are working, reinforcing entrenched attitudes in the South Caucasus.

Yet failing to take a principled *enough* a line on some issues, such as human rights and democracy, is equally problematic, potentially exposing Western interlocutors to charges of hypocrisy. Western support of Mikheil Saakashvili continued for years after Georgia had become increasingly authoritarian and turned into a virtual one-party state.⁴⁵ This probably prolonged Saakashvili's stay in power and allowed the Georgian leadership of the day to disregard the social costs of his economic and agricultural reforms.⁴⁶ This has influenced attitudes towards the West in Georgia, particularly on the part of those on the receiving end of abuses of power, as well as their relatives

³⁹ *The Economist*, 'Hello America', 16 August 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16834943> (accessed on 15 January 2014).

⁴⁰ Transparency International, 'Corruption Perceptions Index 2013', pp. 2–3; UNDP, *Human Development Report 2013*, pp. 144–147.

⁴¹ World Bank, 'GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$)', <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD> (accessed on 15 October 2015).

⁴² Social Science in the Caucasus, 'Attitudes towards Homosexuality in the South Caucasus', CRRC, 24 July 2013, http://crcc-caucasus.blogspot.co.uk/2013_07_01_archive.html (accessed on 8 December 2013). The exact wording of the question is: 'Do you think homosexuality can be justified?'

⁴³ 'Belgium Ratifies EU-Georgia Agreement', *Georgia Today*, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/2474/Belgium-Ratifies-Georgia-EU-Agreement>, 24 December 2015 (accessed 6 January 2015).

⁴⁴ Civil Georgia, 'Anti-Discrimination Bill Adopted', 2 May 2014, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27192> (accessed on 25 August 2015).

⁴⁵ 'Obama Praises Georgia as Model of Democracy', Second Channel Georgia, 31 January 2012, <http://www.2tv.ge/en/news/view/34297.html> (accessed on 19 August 2015); Svante Cornell, *Getting Georgia Right*, Centre for European Studies, 2013, pp. 29–39, http://www.martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/getting_georgia_right_-_website.pdf.

⁴⁶ Stephen Jones, 'Democracy in Georgia: da Capo?', Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper, April 2013.

and friends. These people were particularly embittered to hear panegyrics about Georgia's 'democratization'.⁴⁷

There are also blatant double standards between the West's treatment of Azerbaijan and Belarus respectively. Both states are authoritarian, but Azerbaijan enjoys 'valued partner' status because of its Caspian Sea oil and gas resources, whereas Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka is demonized and was even barred from travel to the EU between 2006 and 2008.⁴⁸ This approach not only disillusiones the few progressive forces in Azerbaijan but also serves as a major disincentive for the Azerbaijani leadership to reform.

Furthermore, due to Armenian sensitivity over anything related to Azerbaijan, the people and leadership of Armenia are losing faith in the West's declared adherence to the values of modern liberal democracy, as the perception is that these principles are not applied in practice. That said, the West has acted more prudently with respect to Armenia than to Azerbaijan. Maybe this is due to the greater Russian presence in Armenia. Yet notwithstanding the integral role of 'Europeanness' in the Armenian identity, social conservatism and lack of civic awareness mean that only a fraction of the country's population sees the concept of 'Europe' or European values as extending beyond affluence, welfare, clean streets and an honest police force.⁴⁹ Among 18- to 25-year-olds the understanding of the West is more realistic, though even a majority of them (48 per cent) favoured membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) over membership of the EU (42 per cent) in 2014. According to the same poll, some 25 per cent in this age group believed that the EEU would provide security, whereas only 12 per cent believed that the EU would be able to do so. Of those polled, 24 per cent believed that Armenia's choice is dictated by its geopolitical position (7 per cent thought that Armenia should have taken a European path).⁵⁰

Domestic barriers

Even if major Western actors make their policies towards the South Caucasus more consistent, domestic challenges will remain. How receptive are Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian societies to genuine Westernization? Secularism/religiosity, attitudes to minorities, intolerance of differences, the prevalence of nepotism and the lack of social capital are some of the areas where dissimilarities with the West remain apparent. Polls conducted over the past decade by the CRRC expose these dissimilarities.

Religious beliefs are a significant area of difference. The degree of religiosity in the societies of Armenia and Georgia, with 92 per cent and 84 per cent Christian respectively, is considerably higher than in Azerbaijan (47 per cent Muslim). It is also higher than the global average (59 per

⁴⁷ Charles H. Fairbanks, 'Georgia's Prison Rape Scandal – and What it Says About the Rose Revolution', *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/09/georgias-prison-rape-scandal-and-what-it-says-about-the-rose-revolution/262720/> (accessed on 23 August 2015); Thomas de Waal, 'So Long, Saakashvili', *Foreign Affairs*, 29 October 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2013-10-29/so-long-saakashvili> (accessed on 23 August 2015).

⁴⁸ Roman Goncharenko, 'In Azerbaijan, EU focuses on Energy Instead of Democracy', *Deutsche Welle*, 8 October 2013, <http://www.dw.de/in-azerbaijan-eu-focuses-on-energy-instead-of-democracy/a-17145518> (accessed on 9 December 2013).

⁴⁹ Alexander Iskandarian, 'Armenia-Europe: Minimizing Opportunity Costs', in *The South Caucasus 2018: Facts, Trends, Future Scenarios* (Georgia: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) 2013), pp. 306–307.

⁵⁰ Diana Ter-Stepanyan, Tigran Khachatryan, 'Between Freedom and Security: Research Analysis', Peace Dialogue NGO, Vanadzor, Armenia, March 2015, pp. 28–31.

cent). In Armenia and Georgia religiosity undermines attempts to modernize and negatively affects liberal Western perceptions of these two countries.⁵¹ Decades of aggressive policy promoting atheism by the Soviet Union were resented in societies that took pride in their Christian heritage as a mainstay of national identity. The pro-Western attitudes of the late 1980s and early 1990s have gradually weakened as Georgians and Armenians have adopted the view that most Western societies are ‘too secular’ and lacking in ‘moral fortitude’. In Azerbaijan, meanwhile, the country’s own brand of historically rooted secularism exists in parallel with a more traditional Muslim society.

Public discourse in all three countries is still permeated by security and identity, rendering the societies closed and in that sense less ‘Western’. Georgia appears slightly more open than Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some 30 per cent of Georgians are of the view that ‘people of other ethnic groups enrich the cultural life of our country’; this compares with 25 per cent of Azerbaijanis and 20 per cent of Armenians. However, more Georgians (31 per cent) also think that the presence of other ethnic groups is a cause of insecurity, followed by 24 per cent for Azerbaijanis and 20 per cent for Armenians.⁵² This discrepancy might be explained by Georgia’s more diverse ethnic composition compared to that of Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁵³

The limited socio-cultural openness of the three societies can also be ascribed to centuries of statelessness, followed by Soviet rule and finally fragile statehood in the 1990s. Soviet ethno-territorial policies encouraged the outflow of ethnicities other than the native peoples as well as the immigration of titular nationalities in many republics, thus contributing to a decline in diversity. The conflicts that followed exacerbated mutual suspicions between ethnic groups and entrenched ethnic nationalism.⁵⁴ People in many countries associate Europe and the United States with multiculturalism and civic nationalism – but widespread embrace of such values remains a far-off prospect for the South Caucasus nations.⁵⁵

The Soviet legacy also lingers in the region in other important respects. For example, according to a 2013 poll, citizens of Armenia and Azerbaijan remain more willing to do business with Russians than with Americans or Europeans.⁵⁶ (Georgia is the exception, with respondents expressing similar levels of willingness to do business with all three cohorts.)

This can be partially explained by the fact that the populations concerned have a better command of Russian than English, but it also reflects acceptance of typical post-Soviet business practices, based on closely knit clan-based networks and ‘sweetheart deals’, rather than strict and clear-cut rules and legally binding contracts. The tenacity of these preferences is a serious hindrance to Westernization.

⁵¹ ‘Religiosity in the South Caucasus’, CRRC Report, September 2013, p. 7. The exact wording of the question was: ‘How religious would you say you are?’. The percentages cited here as evidence of religiosity include both those who answered ‘very religious’ and those who answered ‘somewhat religious’.

⁵² Social Science in the Caucasus, ‘Us and Them: Ethnicity in the South Caucasus’, CRRC, 5 November 2013, <http://crcc-caucasus.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/us-and-them-ethnicity-in-south-caucasus.html> (accessed on 16 December 2013).

⁵³ In Georgia, minorities constitute about 17 per cent of the population, with Azeri (6.5 per cent) and Armenian (5.7 per cent) minorities the most notable and compactly settled. In Azerbaijan, minorities make up about 8 per cent of the population and in Armenia only about 2 per cent. CIA *World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/> (accessed on 20 August 2015).

⁵⁴ Anna Matveeva, *The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities*, Minority Rights Group International Report, 2002, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁵ ‘Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the West’, Gallup World, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157082/islamophobia-understanding-anti-muslim-sentiment-west.aspx#4> (accessed on 8 May 2014).

⁵⁶ Caucasus Barometer 2013, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/BUSINEUR/>, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/BUSINUSA/>, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/BUSINRUS/> (accessed on 25 August 2015).

Table 1: Attitudes towards doing business with different countries and regions (% of respondents)

Do you approve of doing business with...	... Russians?	... Americans?	... Europeans?
Armenia	89%	75%	76%
Azerbaijan	86%	73%	79%
Georgia	80%	81%	82%

Source: Caucasus Barometer.

Perceiving a stronger ally as an unqualified patron rather than as an equal partner (the United States for Georgia, Russia for Armenia) is another consequence of centuries-long statelessness in the region. Even in pro-Western Georgia, the way in which the West and Western leaders are looked on brings back unsavoury memories of the Soviet era. For instance, naming a street in Tbilisi after George W. Bush following his state visit to Georgia in 2005 is an example of possibly undue adulation similar to that expressed by Eduard Shevardnadze, who infamously said to Brezhnev in 1981 that ‘the sun rises in the north for Georgia’. Political leaders and publics are struggling to become more independent and shed their self-image of supplication.

The leaderships in all three states have so far failed to capitalize on their countries’ historical legacies. Prior to their forced incorporation into the Russian empire during the first half of the 19th century, the region’s independent and semi-independent states and principalities were manipulating greater powers and playing them off against one another, more than the other way around.⁵⁷ One could argue that centuries of existence as a part of larger political entities (the Russian empire and the Soviet Union) have contributed to the incapacity of political elites to perform statesmanship that would allow them to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of any given geopolitical alignment.

Armenia’s unexpected U-turn and decision to join the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union could be viewed through this lens. Until 3 September 2013, when Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan announced this decision, the country had an almost dual-vectored policy, benefiting from the West economically and supposedly gaining security protection from Russia. For more than three years, the EU’s Association Agreement and DCFTA⁵⁸ negotiations proceeded smoothly in Armenia. The idea of moving closer to Europe went relatively unquestioned.⁵⁹ Armenia was also one of the highest per capita recipients of American development aid, of which one of the most notable contributions was \$230 million from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC).⁶⁰ But many Armenian analysts assert that Armenian leaders have made virtually no reforms and squandered strategic opportunities to improve the country economically, institutionally and politically with aid money.⁶¹ Had they fared better, Armenia could have achieved greater independence, enabling it to withstand

⁵⁷ Thomas de Waal, ‘Three Mirages and Two Markets: Understanding the South Caucasus’, Carnegie Commentary, September 2010.

⁵⁸ Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

⁵⁹ Richard Giragosian, ‘Armenia’s Strategic U-turn’, European Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR99_ARMENIA_MEMO_AW.pdf, April 2014 (accessed 30 December 2015).

⁶⁰ The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) is an innovative and independent US foreign aid agency that is helping lead the fight against global poverty. Created in 2004, it has already helped 25 countries, with Armenia and Georgia among the recipients of development aid. See <http://www.mcc.gov/> (accessed on 13 January 2014).

⁶¹ Many thanks to Richard Giragosian and Mikael Zolyan. Author’s interview, 15 October 2013, Yerevan.

Russian pressure on 3 September 2013. Equally, Western donors could have attached more conditions to aid and monitored reforms more attentively. This would have been much to the liking of the local population, which often resents Western aid – seeing it as a means of enrichment for the elite rather than of institutional enhancement.

In this connection, it is noteworthy that in Armenia popular support for membership of the Russia-led EEU (64 per cent, according to a Gallup International poll in October 2014)⁶² has been paralleled by a sense of ‘envy’ of pro-Western Georgia – primarily, but not exclusively, among younger people.⁶³ Beset by the Soviet legacy of patron–client relationships, a sizeable part of the Armenian population realizes that the progress Georgia has made over the past 10–12 years, however imperfect, is related to shedding this heritage.

The ‘big brother’ keeps watching: Russia’s overbearing role

Home-grown challenges to Westernization are present in all three South Caucasus republics. These challenges primarily include inefficient Soviet-style social systems, weak traditions of state-building, a lack of political culture and entrenched habits of patrimonialism both in public service and in business. But they are often exacerbated by the interference of Russia. In its pursuit of political supremacy in the post-Soviet space, Moscow is determined to exert political, economic and cultural leverage on the region.

Russia still possesses significant (albeit diminished) soft power in the South Caucasus, although it fails to take advantage of its capabilities. Yet even in the absence of well-formulated policy in Moscow, the Russian language remains better understood and more widely spoken than English in all three countries, as attested to by a 2013 survey.⁶⁴

Table 2: Language skills in South Caucasus states (% of respondents)

Do you have intermediate or advanced knowledge of Russian?	... English?
Armenia	84%	18%
Azerbaijan	35%	8%
Georgia	70%	21%

Source: Caucasus Barometer.

Beyond the language factor, until recently the high prices of oil and natural gas, Russia’s main exports, perpetuated Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. As a resource state, Russia could pursue a coercive policy and make good on its threats. In the post-Soviet space, and specifically in the South Caucasus, Moscow can even compete with the West economically, despite being behind

⁶² Mher Almasyan, ‘Why Armenia Chose the Eurasian Economic Union’, *The Armenite*, 3 December 2014, <http://thearmenite.com/2014/12/armenia-chose-eurasian-economic-union/> (accessed on 13 October 2015).

⁶³ ‘Georgians Used to Envy Us, and Now it’s the Other Way Round’ [‘Ran’she gruziny nam zavidovali, teper’ my im zaviduyem’], *News.am*, 10 March 2011, <http://news.am/rus/reviews/1422.html> (accessed on 13 October 2015).

⁶⁴ Caucasus Barometer 2013, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/KNOWENG/> and <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2013/KNOWRUS/> (accessed on 24 August 2015).

Western states in GDP per capita, as trade with Russia accounts for large shares of the exports and imports of these states.

Furthermore, there are more Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani migrant workers in Russia than in any other country. This gives Russia political leverage, as expulsion of these people would deliver an economic blow to the South Caucasus states. Remittances constitute an appreciable part of these countries' economies and contribute to the perception of Russia as a benefactor. Almost 340,000 Armenians work in Russia, amounting to 11.5 per cent of the total Armenian population.⁶⁵ The value of inward remittances is equivalent to 21 per cent of Armenian GDP (the sixth-highest percentage in the world), and Russia remains the destination of choice for 61 per cent of Armenia's pool of potential emigrants.⁶⁶ Nearly 1.3 million Azerbaijani citizens, almost 15 per cent of Azerbaijan's population, live and work in Russia; their remittances amount to 8 per cent of Azerbaijan's GDP.⁶⁷ Georgia also has a substantial expatriate workforce: between 500,000 and 600,000 Georgians currently work in Russia.⁶⁸

Another instrument in Moscow's soft-power toolkit, which it employs with considerable efficiency, is the Russian mass media, which broadcasts in the region and appeals to commonalities and 'historical friendly ties' between Russia and the former Soviet republics. Since disagreements with Russia are chiefly on the issue of foreign policy orientation, Moscow only blames pro-Western leaderships for these disagreements. Invectives against pro-Western leaders, with blatant manipulation of the truth, are a staple of Russian news agencies and TV/radio channels. But even relatively loyal leaders like Aleksandr Lukashenka of Belarus and Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia are taken to task by the Russian media for overtures towards the West.⁶⁹

Russia's undemocratic system contributes to a widening gap between the political elite and government – between 'friendly' businesses on the one hand and the rest of society on the other, particularly outside Moscow and St Petersburg. This is evidenced, for example, by the rising Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality.⁷⁰ To counter criticism to that effect, significant efforts have been deployed to portray Western societies as characterized by the same ailment – riddled with income inequality and corrupt elites.

Russian-language TV is widely watched in Armenia and Azerbaijan, even though it is understood by a decreasing share of the audience. These channels are less self-congratulatory and ideologically laden than their Soviet predecessors. However, they are redolent of the 1970s and early 1980s in their coverage of the West. They present imperfections and corruption scandals as typical of the

⁶⁵ 'Over 300,000 Armenian citizens live in Russia', News.am, 24 October 2013, <http://news.am/eng/news/177525.html> (accessed on 6 December 2013).

⁶⁶ Social Science in the Caucasus, 'At the crossroads of Europe and Eurasia – exploring public attitudes in South Caucasus', CRRC, 23 October 2013, http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.co.uk/2013_10_01_archive.html (accessed on 6 December 2013).

⁶⁷ 'Azerbaijan labor migration', Export Support Website, 2006, http://export.by/en/?act=s_docs&mode=view&id=7487&type=by_country&country_id=432&mode2=archive&doc=64 (accessed on 6 December 2013).

⁶⁸ Jane Buchanan, Branka Sesto and Giorgi Gogia, *Singled out: Russia's Detention and Expulsion of Georgians*, Human Rights Watch, Vol. 19, No. 5, 2007, p. 8.

⁶⁹ 'Yerevan Decorated Saakashvili to Spite Russia?' ['Yerevan nagradil Saakashvili v piku Rossii?'], 26 June 2009, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2009/06/26/650620.html> (accessed on 22 August 2015); 'Russian Bullet went into Belarusian Milk' ['Rossiyskaya pulya ushla v belorusskoe moloko'], 8 June 2009, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2009/06/08/ic_articles_112_163050/ (accessed on 22 August 2015).

⁷⁰ 'Growing Inequality in Russia', The Sloman Economics News Site, <http://pearsonblog.campaignserver.co.uk/?p=1708> (accessed on 16 January 2014).

Western political and socio-economic system. Also common are TV reports decrying American imperialism and American proclivity to espionage, and stories of economic woes in the United States and Europe. At the same time, reporting on Eastern European countries either explicitly states or gives the impression that accession to the EU is ill-advised: detrimental not only to their economies but also to their national identities. The goal of this campaign is to portray Russia's political system, for all its shortcomings, as not so different from Western systems, thus stripping the West of any moral high ground.

Despite its own less-than-impressive economic record, Russia has also been stressing the benefits of the Eurasian Union and specifically the EEU. Russian authorities and Kremlin-friendly scholars present the latter as the entity that provides 'guarantees of stability for the ruling class during changes of political generations'.⁷¹ In democratic societies political elites are determined through competition between and within political parties. This is uncomfortable for many post-Soviet leaders, who prefer to perpetuate their own power and manage transitions if they must. In this regard, the political dimension of the Eurasian Union can be likened to the Holy Alliance of European monarchies of 1815 (which included the Austrian empire, the kingdom of Prussia and the Russian empire), with its 'divine rights of kings'. Just as the role of the alliance was to serve as a bulwark against the steady march of democracy and secularism, the Eurasian Union positions itself as a bastion against Westernization.⁷²

Russia astutely plays on the security fears of its neighbours. A significant factor in the decisions by Kazakhstan and Armenia to join the Eurasian Customs Union and subsequently their full incorporation into the EEU was their unease about China and Turkey/Azerbaijan respectively, as well as Russian pressure. Moscow may one day manage to bring Azerbaijan into closer cooperation as well, simply by playing up the Iranian threat. However, Azerbaijan is unlikely to join the EEU because of Armenia's membership of it. Georgia, which sees Russia as the primary threat, might be coerced into joining if it perceived Western support to be lacking. In this connection, the recent trend of growing public approval for EEU membership – at 31 per cent in April 2015, up from 20 per cent in late 2014 – could be considered a Russian victory. Moscow has had some success in conveying to the Georgian public the idea that the EU and NATO will never accept Georgia as a fully fledged member.⁷³

The Russian media has also been capitalizing on religious attitudes.⁷⁴ Taking advantage of conservatism and adherence to traditions in the three societies, many Russian articles and TV programmes published or broadcast in the South Caucasus picture the West as depraved and a threat to 'traditional' Christian and Islamic values, as well as to the national identities of small states.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Pavel Salin, 'Spiritual Values to Cement the Eurasian Union', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 26 October 2013, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Spiritual-Values-to-Cement-the-Eurasian-Union-16163> (accessed on 17 December 2013).

⁷² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 82–83.

⁷³ National Democratic Institute (NDI), 'Public attitudes in Georgia' surveys (April 2015 and August 2014), <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/na2015ge/GEEURASU/>, <https://www.ndi.org/node/21874> (accessed on 22 August 2015).

⁷⁴ Interview with Natalya Narochnickaya (in Russian), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Rfv4XDJ1bk>, 25 March 2013 (accessed on 9 December 2013).

⁷⁵ 'Why Armenia Chose Russia, and not Europe?' ['Pochemu Armenia vybrala Rossiyu, a ne Evropu?'], *Okno Planety*, <http://oko-planet.su/politik/politikmir/214870-pochemu-armeniya-vybrala-rossiyu-a-ne-evropu.html>, 17 October 2013 (accessed on 8 December 2013).

Armenia and Azerbaijan, in particular, offer fertile ground for Russia's media campaigns. In a 2007 poll, 64 per cent of Armenians and 63 per cent of Azerbaijanis subscribed to the notion that '... our country's culture is increasingly threatened by Western cultural influences'. In Georgia, however, only 24 per cent of those polled believed this statement.⁷⁶ Despite this relative cultural openness, Georgia remains susceptible to appeals to 'cultural affinity' underpinned by a common Orthodox faith. Recently, the Russian Orthodox Church has become an important agent in this respect, preaching 'common values' and religiosity.⁷⁷ The patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church is the most trusted figure in the country, and frequently preaches on the spiritual closeness of the Russian and Georgian nations.⁷⁸ As other options for influencing Georgia are limited, less subtle forms of pressure – such as via the church – have gradually become prevalent again, particularly after Georgia signed its EU Association Agreement in June 2014.⁷⁹

Russia may also at some point capitalize on the half-hearted efforts by the government in Tbilisi to integrate Georgia's minorities into mainstream society. This applies in particular to the Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in the southern regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli respectively. The poor integration of these regions manifests itself in increasingly negative perceptions of the West. A late 2013 poll showed that 38 per cent of Georgians believed the EU to be the entity that can best support Georgia, but that only 14 per cent of minorities in the country shared this view. Similarly, Russia enjoys support among 17 per cent of Georgians but 57 per cent of minorities in the country.⁸⁰ This provides Russia with leverage to sow discord along ethnic lines.

Conclusion: Does the West care? And should it?

It is not yet clear if the world has already entered a 'post-American' or 'post-Western' era, so to speak. But the appeal and international weight of Western values and governance models have undoubtedly suffered lately, as shown by EU and NATO enlargement fatigue. Whether these problems are entrenched or temporary is unknown, but the West's lack of political will in countering Russia's aggressive policies towards Ukraine has strengthened the position of those who believe the West is in decline.

Perceptions of the West in the South Caucasus are shaped by global, regional and local factors. Even though their track record leaves a lot to be desired, the EU and the United States enjoy greater popularity in the South Caucasus than is the case on average globally.⁸¹ This is remarkable given the sustained attempts by Russia to undermine the West's reputation, the West's own problems and mistakes, and those of the governments of the South Caucasus themselves.

⁷⁶ Svensson, 'Attitudes Towards the West in the South Caucasus', p. 14.

⁷⁷ James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013), p. 89.

⁷⁸ Nadezhda Kevorkova, 'Patriarch of Georgia: Our church and people never cut ties with Russia', *Russia Today*, 22 July 2013, <http://rt.com/op-edge/patriarch-georgia-russia-ties-438/> (accessed on 17 December 2013).

⁷⁹ George Mchedlishvili, 'Viewpoint: What is Behind Russia's Actions in Georgia?', *BBC News*, 10 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33675488> (accessed on 22 August 2015).

⁸⁰ Eurasia Partnership Foundation, *Knowledge and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia: Changes and Trends 2009 – 2013*, January 2014, http://www.epfound.ge/files/eu_survey_report_2013_final_eng_.pdf, p. 10.

⁸¹ For attitudes towards the United States see footnote 21, above. As far as the EU is concerned, data are presented in the 'Pew Research Global Attitude Project', http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/05/13/decreasing-faith-in-the-european-union/pg_13-05-10_ss_europeanunion-02/ (accessed on 20 January 2014).

Accordingly, the United States and the EU would be well advised to encourage and incentivize the South Caucasus states to implement policies that contribute to reforms along Western lines, even without direct promises of membership of major groupings/organizations in return. At the moment this might apply to Georgia in particular, as it has best withstood Russian pressure. This would send a strong message to Russia and could help to make the EU more attractive. Failure to do so would give the impression that the EU is unable or unwilling to uphold its own values, an impression that was reinforced by Europe's inability to find a solution to Russia's annexation of Crimea or to its covert backing of separatists in Ukraine's east.

The deeply rooted 'adoration' of the West in the South Caucasus has not yet completely evaporated. If Western leaders can renew their interest in the region and develop a more integrated and clearer strategy, their countries' reputations can be restored. The South Caucasus may even become a region where Western powers can regain the initiative and assert a more prominent role. The Western model of democratic and liberal development, which enjoyed unquestionable appeal just 25 years ago, is today under considerable strain globally, as discourses on alternative models are increasingly vocal. This is also partially the case in the South Caucasus: on the one hand, Georgia is an EU-associated state; while on the other, Armenia is a member of the Russia-led EEU. The region is under permanent Russian political, security, economic and even cultural pressure. With Georgia apparently remaining the West's last political toehold in the South Caucasus (as the only country actively pursuing a pro-Western course), the United States and Europe will have to work hard to regain their once considerable appeal in the other two states – if, of course, they are genuinely interested in turning the region into an area of reliable, democratizing allies. The West achieved this in Eastern Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s. It remains possible today in the South Caucasus, although the task will be considerably harder.

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Cover image: Wind-torn European Union flag on a flag pole

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