

# THE EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION UNDER SCRUTINY: THE DOUBLE STANDARDS IN THE CASE OF BELARUS AND AZERBAIJAN

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**Abstract:** *Since the change of context in which the EU operates, democracy promotion has become a tool to ensure stability in the region. This article examines how the EU engages in democracy promotion with special case countries such as Belarus and Azerbaijan. It argues that the EU applies double standards when it comes to the application of conditionality although both countries share an alarming human rights record. The discrepancy stems, among others, from the geographical location of the two countries and also the fact that Azerbaijan is as an alternative energy or transit provider.*

**Keywords:** *democracy promotion; double standards; ENP, normative power*

## Introduction

Much has been said and written about the fundamental developments experienced by the EU during past two decades. Crucial changes to the institutional architecture and the decision-making algorithm were implemented. The number of member states has grown remarkably, increasing nearly two-fold. And most importantly, the EU had to alter its classical understanding of accession policy and crystalize its long-exercised democracy promotion scenario. In fact, welcoming new member states in 2004 was highly entwined with reaching out to a significant number of new neighbours, with all their possessions, internal particularities and aspirations.

In 2002 Javier Solana and Christopher Patten articulated in their letter that the 2004 enlargement would “bring the dual challenge of avoiding new dividing lines in Europe while responding to needs arising from the newly created borders of the Union” (Patten *et al.*, 2002). What they also stressed in the letter, and what will be the leitmotiv of the following EU documents dealing with the neighbourhood, was that “stability, prosperity, shared values and rule of law along our borders are fundamental for our own security” and “failure in any of these

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areas will lead to increased risks of negative spillover on the Union” (Patten *et al.*, 2002).

The new geography of the EU also brought new perceptions and challenges when it comes to regional insecurity. New conflicts, illegal migration or radicalisation were now part of the EU’s new reality. What is more, in fact, it was the EU’s neighbourhood that was often viewed as a major source of these threats. In addition to this, at the beginning of 2000s, the growing hostility and unpredictability of Russia’s behaviour, has pushed the EU to seek alternative energy resource providers in its Eastern neighbourhood. These troubling questions shed light on the need for a redefinition of the EU’s stance towards the neighbourhood and the role it wants to play in it.

The Wider Europe Initiative, which for the first time addresses the Eastern neighbours with a comprehensive policy was a pivotal step in safeguarding its surroundings. Inspired to create “a ring of friends” (European Commission, 2003), the EU embarked on the democratization crusade in its closest neighbourhood equipped with a rich toolkit of various instruments and policies which were intended to bring the countries on the democratic path. It is in the ENP, the later translation of Wider Europe Initiative launched concomitantly with the 2004 enlargement and extended also to South Caucasus countries, that the EU further imprinted its commitment to fundamental values, with particular emphasis placed on democracy and obliged itself to monitor the dedication of the neighbours in adapting these values. Its role as a global actor and a protagonist of democracy promotion is incontestable. However, one of its main setbacks is inconsistency in its policies. Throughout the years of democracy promotion endeavours, the EU has subjected some countries to severe shock therapy while others have been approached with a more pragmatic attitude. That was the case also with the two countries – Azerbaijan and Belarus – under investigation in this paper.

Looking at the EU’s neighbourhood today, its outlook raises troubling questions. Political attention is spread across various problems spanning from the lingering repercussions of the financial crisis, through the influx of refugees and migrants which delivers a blow to further divisions among the EU member states up to un-freezing conflicts in the neighbourhood. Additionally, the further backsliding towards authoritarianism and thuggish aggression of Russia not only plants a seed of fear over security, but also raises the EU’s concern over stable energy supplies. In the context where EU has been a beacon of democratic liberal norms and a *sui generis* entity which proved capable to impose, for two decades, respect for such norms, a number of cases of authoritarian regimes brought in the limelight the limits of EU’s external governance philosophy to produce systemic democratic changes.

In consequence, new threats have also impacted the EU’s approach towards the two countries in question. Belarus further benefits from critical engagement, however the grip of sanctions has been loosened recently and Azerbaijan is generally faced with a ‘business as usual’ approach. Although the policies towards



the two authoritarian regimes have come slightly closer, the EU is still criticized for pursuing a policy of double standards, selectively upholding its principles as a democracy promoter.

Scholars admit that there are double standards in democracy promotion (Bosse, 2013, p. 89), however, as much as they often deal with cases from the Southern neighbourhood, little attention is given to the special cases of the Eastern neighbourhood, such as Belarus and Azerbaijan. Therefore, the choice of this topic was guided by a willingness to meet this challenge and provide contribution to bridging this gap.

The Normative Power Europe concept, which pays tribute to the normative principles and explains the EU's role as a shaper of what is normal will serve as conceptual frame for the deliberations on the EU's involvement in the neighbourhood. Belarus and Azerbaijan constitute a very compelling example. Both are authoritarian regimes, which flagrantly violate EU's fundamental values; however, they are confronted with different responses. Against this background, it is important to assess how the EU reaches out to the two countries and tries to secure its values diffusion. In this context, I pose the following question: How does the EU engage in democracy promotion in Belarus and Azerbaijan?

## 1. EU as a harbinger of a better world

Scholars have utilized a massive string of adjectives and concepts to describe best the EU's distinct presence in the world. In fact, as much as the EU evolved into a *sui generis* entity, so did the complexity of its classification. The EU was referred to as a civilian power, post-modern power, ethical power, structuring power, transformative power, soft power, economic power, humanitarian power, herbivorous power and finally as a normative power (Gerrits, 2009, p. 2). Although these concepts pick up various perceptions, they all source from the concept of 'civilian power' first coined by the François Duchêne in 1970 and relate synonymously to Nye's concept of "soft power". The normative power Europe concept was inspired by idealism and gained probably most of the attention among scholars in the post-Cold War period.

Normative power, which describes the EU's underlying power and which is highly related to the democratization process especially in the context of the 2004 enlargement, was pioneered by Ian Manners. Manners argues that the essence of the EU lies in the fact that the EU's normative power resides in what the EU is, instead of what the EU does or says. He refers to normative power as to a "difference engine" which is able to "shape conceptions of the normal" (Manners, 2002, p. 239) and incite a wave of change in the international arena (Manners, 2003, p. 381). To elaborate, this definition does indeed identify the EU as a particular entity, but it also denotes a specific objective which is to set standards (Diez *et al.*, p. 175). The most noteworthy aspect of the concept is that the normative power is based not on the physical force or economic resources but on a normative explanation and power of



ideas. Manners believes that the primary difference between the EU and other pre-existing entities rests in its normative foundations and the norms. In his influential paper he emphasized the role of the EU in abolition of the death penalty and remarked the “historical context, hybrid polity and political-legal constitution” (Manners, 2002, p. 240) of the EU. The very constitutional basis of the EU not only builds its identity, but also stimulates it to act in a normative manner in the international arena. Within the context of identity, one remark shall be made, as according to Manners, a normative power shall be also analysed as its international identity and type of actor. In other words, the EU is a “changer of norms in the international system” and an ideal type of normative power which uses normative explanations to “normalize a more just and cosmopolitan world” (Manners, 2011, p. 232).

Further addressing the norms which are central in the discussion about normative power, Manners distinguishes two groups of norms: core norms and minor norms. The first one derives from a broad set of EU’s policies and legally binding commitments (Dunne, 2008, p. 22), and comprises: peace, liberty, and the trinity of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law (Manners, 2008, pp. 50-52). The second group of norms is rooted in the EU’s practice and constitution and consists of: social solidarity, anti-discrimination and sustainable development, good governance (Manners, 2002, pp. 242-244). Building on the deliberation of the norms, Manners points out that normative principles shall be introduced following the rule of “living by virtuous example” (Manners, 2008, p. 56). That is to say, the EU needs to be coherent and committed both in terms of its principles and policies. At the end of the day, the *raison d’être* of the EU is the promotion of its normative principles in a normative and sustainable way.

The question which arises immediately is how to translate the norms into action. Manners identifies six ways which include: contagion, informational and procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion and cultural filter (Manners, 2002, p. 244). He states that contagion refers to unintentional spread of norms to other actors. Informational diffusion occurs through strategic and declaratory communication of the EU. Procedural spread is a result of the institutionalization of the relations, such as Partnership and Cooperation Agreements or the Association Agreements with third countries. In case of transference, norms diffusion takes place with the exchange of benefits with the third countries, for example through the technical assistance programme for the CIS countries (TACIS). Presence on the ground of the EU’s institutions or agencies in third countries also contributes via overt diffusion. The last cultural filter is simply related to the political learning and cultural diffusion in the third countries. The four selected strategies of procedural, informational, transference and over diffusion will serve as measures in the analytical part of this current paper.

To conclude the deliberations on the NPE concept, light will be shed on how the EU promotes the norms. Manners states that the EU disposes of the whole range of policies and practices however he remarks that the EU was more



successful in its actions in the past. Manners discusses three different methods which are on the opposite side of the coercive imposition. He foresees “persuasion, argumentation and the conferral of prestige and shame” (Manners, 2009, p. 12). In other words, persuasion covers the dialogue both multi- and pluri-laterally, by means of institutionalization and constructive engagement. Argumentation in the promotion of norm involves reference to common principles or invitation to an agreement and understanding. The final point covers a wide spectrum of practices including sanctions, public condemnation or on the other hand public support or membership perspectives. When discussing how the norms are being diffused, another question arises. Namely why the states decide to emulate the norms spread by the EU? In fact, it is assumed that given the exemplary nature of the EU which occurs as the harbinger of the better world, states are attracted and agree to follow the example set by the EU (Aggestam, 2009, p. 29).

Obviously the NPE has faced virulent criticism. Some have argued that the EU does not really display its normative nature. In fact, following the Hyde-Price critique the EU is simply an instrument used by its member states to provide them with particular benefits (Hyde-Price, 2006, pp. 217-234). Interestingly, Hyde-Price dedicated an entire paper to voice its realist critique towards the normative power. Among his main findings, he stressed that states are primarily preoccupied with their survival and security and therefore engage in competition and attempt to maximise its power. Bicchi, in turn, accuses the EU of a certain eurocentrism and lack of foundation on universal values. According to Bicchi, the EU adapts its values or as she puts it “reproduces in relations with third countries” (Bicchi, 2006, pp. 286-303). Haukkala oscillates in his discussion between calling the EU a normative power or a normative hegemon. As he puts it, the EU’s internal messiness hampers the “blossoming of the flowers in the neighbourhood” and therefore it shall ease its normative hegemony and focus on the basics of the good governance (Haukkala, 2007, p. 18).

Undeniably, this idealist concept, when exposed to empirical grounds, can be easily challenged and applied only partially. Especially, regarding the selected country studies, the EU does not always comply with the norms it promotes. Interestingly, Manners himself admits in his recent work that the ENP embraces both normative and interest-driven characteristics (Manners, 2010, p. 30). As much as in case of Belarus the EU has indeed been for years consistent and determined to promote its normative principles, the recent Council decisions heralding lifting of the sanctions have proved that security matters more than values. Equally for Azerbaijan, growing economic interests seem to overshadow the EU’s concerns for human rights. All in all, given strong foundations of the EU on the norms articulated and present in the majority of legal documents Manners’ concept will be applied to understand whether the EU acts as a normative power and secures its values.



## 2. EU Relations with Belarus and Azerbaijan after the Cold War– the “it’s complicated status”

### 2.1. EU relations with Belarus – hard conditionality

The relations with Belarus could be described as a thorny road with a number of sharp and unexpected U-turns. Although at the beginning, the independence boded well and the EU-Belarus relations were viewed through an optimistic lens, preceding years stifled the rapprochement euphoria. Illustrating the development chronologically, the wave of the declarations of independence in the 1990s was welcomed very cautiously by the EU. This stemmed, on the one hand, from the fear for the national minorities which were exposed to growing power nationalist aspirations and, on the other, from the presence of strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus (Dumasy, 2002, p. 179). In the end, the EU understood that it can contribute to the democratic transition of Belarus. At the initial stage, the prospects for the proper relations were very good. Belarus immediately established good relations with the Western European bodies and joined the flagship institutions such as EBRD, IMF or the World Bank. Moreover, the EU also managed to negotiate the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and the Interim Trade Agreement (EEAS, 2016).

However, Belarus soon demonstrated that the EU might have misinterpreted its genuine dedication to Western values. Several cycles of elections and referenda were held and their conduct always fell short of any democratic standards. With regard to the electoral democracy, the EU persistently addressed every election in Belarus in its Council conclusions or European Parliament resolutions. The EU did engage in this area both at the level of judgment and application and on both levels it kept a very consistent attitude. These developments had a durable impact on the EU’s policies towards Belarus. The EU, which places human rights at heart of its cooperation with Belarus, immediately demonstrated its non-agreement with the actual state of play. One of the first glimmers of Lukashenko’s autocratic aspirations was the controversial constitutional referendum in 1996, which enormously enlarged his powers and extended his term. As a consequence, the EU halted all the projects which aimed at democracy promotion, it froze the PCA and the Interim Trade Agreement and limited the ministerial contacts (European Commission, 1997). However, the situation aggravated, preceding elections followed the same pattern. The elections in Belarus were notoriously marred by manipulation, rigging, violence, lack of transparency and harsh crackdown on civil society and inexistence of the opposition. In order to oppose these developments, the EU employed the strategy of overt condemnation while applying the spiral of sanctions by gradually imposing more and more sophisticated measures (Portela, 2011, pp. 499-501). Interestingly, the EU started slowly to articulate its security concerns by recognising Belarus as a source of threats of various nature, that is illegal migration, crime or unstable energy transit (Allison *et al.*, 2005, p. 491).



The contacts remained frozen until 2006 when the Commission after rethinking its hard conditionality approach to Belarus decided to issue a non-paper. The document, which sets a number of democratization steps Belarus was supposed to undertake with no flexibility, marked also the beginning of a reverse trend and a critical engagement with Belarus (Bosse, 2013, p. 89). In order to please the EU, Lukashenko implemented certain reforms including privatisation programme and released some opposition leaders (Portela, 2011, pp. 499-501). The energy supplies cut by Russia, which occurred in 2007, planted a seed of fear in the EU and made the security concerns reach the EU's rhetoric. As a result, the EU welcomed Belarus under the umbrella of the Eastern Partnership. Also, the 2008 parliamentary elections were generally positively assessed, although Council voiced certain complaints when it comes to the democratic criteria. The drive for rapprochement with Belarus prevailed and in response the EU restored the diplomatic relations with the regime and suspended other measures it put in place before such as visa and travel bans (Portela, 2011, pp. 502-503).

The reform plan ended fast as the violation of democratic standards and freedom of assembly climaxed during the 2010 presidential elections and was followed by the shutting down of the OSCE mission in Minsk. The elections again fell short of any democratic standards. Minsk witnessed unprecedented outburst of massive protests, crackdown on activists and numerous imprisonments (Vizgunova, 2015, p. 1). The EU renewed sanctions and introduced an isolation approach. It is interesting to note the fact that the EU followed a two-track policy as it applied hard conditionality towards the authorities and still tried to appeal to the society by delivering support to the civil society. The story of fraudulent elections continued in 2012. The Council reacted to the developments with a similarly strong stance on the measures and additionally, to punish Belarus for its poor human rights record, the arms embargo, assets freeze, travel ban were imposed (Council of the European Union, 2012). The parliamentary elections were regretfully commented by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle as "yet another missed opportunity to conduct elections in line with international standards in Belarus" (European Union, 2012).

Another U-turn in the EU-Belarus relations might be remarked following the Ukrainian crisis. Given a certain change of tactics embodied in Lukashenko's reluctance to back Putin's acts in Ukraine coupled with his clear willingness to restart relations with the West, the EU became more inclined to suspend the sanctions, what ultimately occurred. The EU foreign ministers especially appreciated the release of the political prisoners and Belarusian "proactive role in the region" as shown in the Council Conclusions from February 2016.

The EU-Belarus relations are highly complex and unpredictable. Although after the collapse of the Soviet Union the situation boded well for the future, the optimism period was fast gone. The track record of violating democratic and human rights principles made Belarus immediately subject to EU sanctions. For years, the EU has been persistent in its critical judgments and implementing



sanctions against the acts of violation, however such approach has not been fully maintained. A moderate change in the human rights and democracy standards coupled with a similarly moderate involvement of the Lukashenko in the Ukrainian crisis were prerequisites for a complete change of the EU strategy and lifting the sanctions what, if we want it or not, raises questions on the incoherence in the EU policy.

## ***2.2. EU relations with Azerbaijan – reserved in its concern***

The EU-Azerbaijan relations were launched right after the collapse of the Soviet Union and crystalized in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1996 and enforced in 1999. From the very beginning Azerbaijan showed a strong willingness to ensure the implementation of the PCAs. In return, the EU showed great interest in providing it with the development assistance (Frappi, 2012, p. 109). Nonetheless, an aspect worth highlighting is the fact that since the very beginning of cooperation, Azerbaijan has experienced a negative human rights record. Presidential elections in 2003 revealed a grim domestic situation. Hundreds of journalists and activists were put in jail, others were exposed to other forms of intimidation and prosecution (Amani, 2013). The reaction from the EU was far from what one might have expected. From the ambiguous joint statement of the Council and the EP we learn that “we did not come to Azerbaijan to give lessons or to measure the rate of democratic development in the country but rather to witness and encourage the transition process towards democracy that the country is experiencing” (Amani, 2013). The EU was reluctant to take a strong stance on these developments, since the role of Azerbaijan in the EU-envisaged energy architecture was salient.

Next development in the EU-Azerbaijan relations was the inclusion of Azerbaijan in the ENP. Azerbaijan had a clear roadmap addressing implementation of human rights, democratisation and energy reforms. On top of that, the country benefited from various projects aiming at boosting private sector and economic developments. Programmes such as Tempus aimed at modernising education system or TACIS dedicated to the administration sector were realised as well. The main focus was, however, placed on the energy cooperation, since Azerbaijan appeared as a potential energy producer and transit country (Frappi, 2012, p. 110). Energy cooperation was first outlined in the PCAs. It was also echoed in the ENP Action Plan (European Commission, 2014). Later on, this vector of cooperation was cemented in 2006 Memorandum of understanding. Interestingly human rights issues remained off the agenda. Another important milestone is the Southern Gas Corridor project signed in 2011, which encompasses subprojects such as the Trans-Anatolian, Trans-Adriatic, Trans-Caspian Pipeline and failed Nabucco/Nabucco West (Trans Adriatic Pipeline, 2016).

Noteworthy here is that the relations with the EU were evolving in parallel to the consolidation of power by the newly assigned Azerbaijani president – Ilham





Aliyev. Given the domestic developments in Azerbaijan, right after the launch of the ENP, Azerbaijan emerged as highly reluctant to follow the EU's transformative agenda. In fact, its domestic situation was gradually exacerbating. Every election took place according to the same pattern: no opposition, massive imprisonments of journalists and activists, scare presence of the international observers. The 2005 elections were accompanied by the massive demonstrations and again "failed to meet international standards" (Crisis Group, 2005). This time the EU issued a more critical statement where it shared its concern about the events and also urged Azerbaijani authorities to ensure respect for human rights and free media (European Parliament, 2005). Surprisingly, no restrictive measures were put in place. The same situation occurred during the next presidential elections in 2008 when Aliyev won unchallenged and Baku was again engulfed with boycotts. This more passive attitude stemmed from a significant fatigue of the opposition and lack of tangible change in the government's conduct. Similarly, the EU was divided in this regard; the parliamentary report assessed the elections as a positive development, however one with some room for improvement. The following resolutions in 2011 and 2012 again addressed the electoral irregularities by stating insufficient progress in the conduct of the elections, and calling on authorities to put electoral legislation as well as political freedoms in place (European Parliament, 2011; 2012). Despite several attempts by the EU to seek areas where Azerbaijan would like to adopt the EU's norms, it remained the most reluctant country from the South Caucasus (Hale, 2012, p. 2). In the meantime, Azerbaijan was also invited to join the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy.

Despite warnings from international organizations on the alarming human rights situation, the EU was always careful about its statements towards the Azerbaijani regime. The very first awakening of the EU as a human rights defender in Azerbaijan took place in 2014 with the EP resolution in which it condemned the crackdown on civil society and called for the release of human rights defenders and respect for democratic principles (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2014). The resolution in 2015 issued in the aftermath of the imprisonment of an investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova brought a different tone. It employed a very determined narrative in which it not only urged the European institutions to investigate the allegations revealed by the journalist and immediately stop the negotiations on the Strategic Partnership Agreement with Azerbaijan. The EP strongly called upon avoiding double standards and taking high-impact measures. Additionally, it emphasized major breaches with regards to the electoral process during every election since 2003 (European Parliament, 2015). The interesting part of the resolution reveals a controversial move of the EP which left space for economic cooperation, since it states that "sectorial cooperation is mutually beneficial, especially in the energy sector; whereas Azerbaijan has the potential to become one of the EU's major commercial partners" (Muradova, 2015).

Azerbaijan, in return, reacted promptly and very negatively. It left the EURONEST and postponed an official EEAS visit to Baku. The March 2016 visit



by the High Representative was supposed to pacify the situation and restart the relations, manoeuvre which was visible with the cautious discourse of Federica Mogherini. Despite of the open letter from the Human Rights Watch which called for concrete steps against Azerbaijan given its worsening human rights track, she put emphasis on the energy and sectorial cooperation and called Azerbaijan “a strategic partner with regard to European energy security” (EEAS, 2016).

The EU-Azerbaijan relations depict a real story of missed aspirations and ambitions. For the past two decades, Azerbaijan has seemed to follow its own way and secure its domestic situation from external interference. It showed certain inclination in reforming its energy sector, however it strongly opposed any normative convergence in the human rights dimension. A number of recurring acts of violations of human rights have been left with insufficient response from the European side. This clearly shows Azerbaijani’s leverage and EU’s energy security concerns which prevail over the normative principles.

### **3. European Neighbourhood Policy – the twilight of democracy promotion**

Having a brief look at the EU’s involvement in the respective countries, it is worth taking a broader perspective and looking at how, on the level of policy, the EU positioned itself vis-à-vis its neighbours and what role it committed itself to play. The Wider Europe Initiative launched in 2003 was a real “stepping stone towards conceptualizing the EU as a real global player” (Korosteleva, 2012, p. 1). It was also the primary document with which the EU addressed the Eastern neighbours and Belarus explicitly. In the Wider Europe Initiative, the EU referred to it as a country which is destined to have enhanced relations with the EU however the EU’s strategy towards the regime was not yet set. The document states ambiguously that the “EU faces a choice in Belarus: either to leave things to drift – a policy for which the people of Belarus may pay dear and one which prevents the EU from pursuing increased cooperation on issues of mutual interest - or to engage, and risk sending a signal of support for policies which do not conform to EU values” (European Commission, 2003). Azerbaijan appears for the first time in the documents in the developed ENP. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan’s dedication to democratic principles might be questioned especially in the light of the turmoil during the 2003 elections, the EU when addressing Azerbaijan stated vaguely that the relations are based on the normative principles. In 2004, Belarus is excluded from benefiting from the full offer of the ENP (European Commission, 2004).

Given the Belarusian denials of the human rights and democratic principles the EU decided to apply conditionality against the regime. As stated in the document, more active engagement might happen only under when a certain democratisation process is started. The European Commission in turn decided to issue the already mentioned non-paper which included a number of democratization conditions. The issuance of a separate document addressed to a



single country significantly elevates the gravity of the issue and serves as the proof of hard conditionality imposed on Belarus and cements the normative grounds of the EU.

Concurrently, the 2004 ENP contains a significant discrepancy in the way it addresses the two regimes. As it was outlined in the previous subsection, democratic standards were not met in both countries during the elections, however the EU applied non-congruent approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan. The launch of the EaP broke to a certain extent with the double standards as this initiative was also dedicated to Belarus.

Yet, the reviewed ENP in 2011 marked the next swing of the European pendulum in the development of the EU as a democracy promoter. It put a stronger emphasis on democracy promotion by commanding “deep democracy” and it therefore marked a certain change with the initial ENP where the stability was the prevailing goal. Belarus is again pointed as the country struggling with the continued repression (European Commission *et al.*, 2011). Concurrently, Azerbaijan remains unmentioned.

Last on the list of the recent developments on the rise of the EU as a democracy promoter is the review of the ENP published in 2015. While there is a general consensus that the EU is a global player, this review constitutes a testimony that it has lost its credentials as a democracy promoter. It broke with the democratisation goal, abandoned conditionality and put all the stress on stability in the name of the back to the basics principle (European Commission *et al.*, 2015).

The ENP was launched as a mean to ensure stability by promoting a value-based agenda. Democracy promotion was omnipresent in the documents with different intensity. It appeared, however, both in the discourse and action. Hence, it appears that with the last revision, democracy promotion lost its prominence and left room for the goal of stability.

#### **4. Democracy promotion and double standards?**

When trying to answer the question of how the EU is involved in the neighbourhood we might follow the ways outlined by Ian Manners and his aforementioned Normative Power Europe concept. In his prominent work, he detects persuasion, argumentation and the conferral of prestige and shame (Manners, 2009, p. 12). With respect to the conferral of shame, a discrepancy in the way the EU uses sanctions against Belarus and Azerbaijan can be observed. Noteworthy is that the EU not only applies the double standards in its discourse, but also in its action.

First, the EU differentiates the two regimes in its documents. Belarus is either explicitly mentioned as the country violating human rights or is simply excluded from the initiatives as it was in the case with the initial ENP. This is also translated into action, as the EU for the past two decades has applied hard conditionality on Belarus. Interestingly, Azerbaijan has never been explicitly



criticized in the EU's documents for its conduct – nor were sanctions ever imposed on the country. We might argue that the 2015 EP's recent resolutions might change this picture, however when comparing the discourse used towards Belarus and Azerbaijan, the author dares to state that the interaction with Azerbaijan far from qualifies as a form of public punishment. The EU depends on the country as a cooperation partner within the energy sector and is either deeply concerned with the domestic developments or strongly condemns the particular events.

Further intensifying the analysis of how the EU is involved in democracy promotion in Belarus and Azerbaijan, one might look at the different features of their dialogue. This area of analysis again brings into light the double standards previously mentioned. For years, the EU has maintained its cooperation with Belarus which was based on European values. Principles of democracy or respect for human rights appeared as a leitmotif in the EU's documents addressed to Belarus. When investigating the dialogue with Azerbaijan, the stress on economic cooperation and a certain negligence of the human rights question is striking. The iteration of democratic principles does occur, however, sporadically. Given the strong signals coming from Azerbaijan about the lack of agreement with the EU's interference in its domestic affairs, the cooperation remains only on a selected number of areas.

Another point which sheds light on the EU's antagonist discourse is the general attitude and strategy the EU pursues when establishing a dialogue with the regimes, either in the form of isolation or critical engagement. Once the EU maps areas which are not compatible with European standards, it moves to either halt any interaction with the country or on the opposite tries to find grounds where these contacts might be maintained. The case of Belarus, especially in the early 2000s, represents clearly the first one of the two approaches. Interestingly, the EU swiftly learnt its lesson and switched towards critical engagement with Belarus, reflected in the publication of the prominent 2006 non-paper. The EU's attitude towards Azerbaijan was always very cautious, as the EU never froze any initiatives addressed at the regime. On the contrary, it has always tried to include Azerbaijan in its projects.

Belarus and Azerbaijan differ when it comes to their domestic situation and one cannot treat them as similar cases. However, what links them is the fact that they both remain authoritarian regimes with disturbing human rights records. Nevertheless, the reality shows how often double standards are being applied.

## Conclusions

The EU has grown as a democracy promoter during recent decades. Whereas this growth in involvement with countries in the neighbourhood has occurred, there are still troubling questions as to what the real motivations of these activities are or how effective they are. The aim of this paper was to map how the EU engages with two similarly consolidated countries in their authoritarianism and track why these



policies were so divergent. The paper started with a review of the Normative Power Europe which on top of explaining the rationale behind the EU's democracy promotion, provided a powerful instrument of analysis.

According to the analysis, perhaps the most challenging question is that of the coherence of the EU's policy. In this respect, the findings demonstrate that the EU applies double standards in its policy towards Belarus and Azerbaijan. What is more, this incoherence in the EU action is present on the judgmental, action and also on the country strategy level.

Taking under scrutiny the first one, the discourse towards Belarus differs drastically from the one applied towards Azerbaijan. Belarus, both in the EU's documents such as the ENP and its respective revisions or the Council's conclusions, faces staunch condemnation which often elevates to a real ostracism. In the 2004 ENP document the EU clearly and unequivocally criticized Lukashenko's way of governing and blocked Belarus from benefitting from the policy. In addition, every major violation has sparked EU's officials' protests, while in the case of Azerbaijan the EU often turned a blind eye to the government's poor democratic records. Resolutions adapted on Azerbaijan, acted as boilerplate and away from public opprobrium. On top of that, Azerbaijan is often portrayed as the EU's strategic partner and its role in bringing the energy resources to Europe is assessed as pivotal.

As far as the action level is concerned, the disparity is eye-catching. The EU for years pursued a hard conditionality approach which spanned from suspending agreements, through freezing aid up to the strict sanctions towards Belarus. The spiral of measures applied by the EU was fuelling up in parallel to the backsliding towards authoritarianism. Despite having a very similar track record regarding violations of democratic standards and human rights, Azerbaijan was never confronted with high-impact measures. In fact, sanctions emerged in the EP narrative as late as in its 2012 resolution and were never translated into actions.

Interestingly, the policies towards Belarus and Azerbaijan, when analysed separately, are also marked by incoherence. Although the EU has disapproved Belarussian actions, its policy experienced some changes which collided with its initial way of argumentation. Such was the case in 2009, when despite little evidence that the Belarussian government eased its repressive policies, the EU after revising its policy, announced a shift towards critical engagement. Similarly, the recent lifting of the sanctions explained by the promising role of Belarus in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and growing involvement in the EaP occurs as a very prompted and premature switch, abandoning the long-exercised EU tactic.

Similarly, the approach towards Azerbaijan, although it is characterised by long continuity, noted first omens of change in 2012 along with the first mention of sanctions to be considered which culminated in the 2015 EP resolution where the double standard card was used against the Council. From a steady policy of predictable resolutions and statements it slowly evolved into a kind of hardball policy, as sanctions came to stage. The 2015 resolution itself is very particular and



to a certain extent contradictory given that it both ostracized Azerbaijan and voiced the urgency to consider restrictive measures and on the other hand emphasized the strategic character of the partnership with Azerbaijan.

The EU's policy towards Belarus and Azerbaijan is best characterised as incoherent. As much as this paper sought to assess how the EU is involved with the two countries, its aim was to concomitantly try to map the groundings of such divergent approaches. To this end, Normative Power Europe served as a conceptual framework. As far as Belarus is concerned, from the very outset of the relations with the country in the 1990s, the idealist view has prevailed. The EU immediately embarked on a weighty negative conditionality path with the aim of regaining the vestige of democratic principles in Belarus. In fact, the approach continued and the goal of promoting democracy and human rights stood out from the EU documents. Interestingly, the EU's motives started slowly to be backed up by other concerns. The unstable Russian energy supplies coupled with the Ukrainian crisis and the conviction that Belarus plays a role as gatekeeper for illegal migration made the EU favour more its security goals more.

As far as the case of Azerbaijan is concerned, it is not surprising that Normative Power Europe is completely overshadowed. The primary interest the EU has in Azerbaijan is simply to secure an alternative energy supply. And on a number of occasions, democratic principles were traded for safeguarding a stable supply of energy resources. Such was the case with the exemplary 2015 resolution which unequivocally called for breaking with double standards. In reality, however, the EU's actions towards Azerbaijan never moved from a declaratory level.

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