

# THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IN PROMOTING DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS STATES

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## Abstract

The article explores the role and significance of international organisations in the democratisation of the South Caucasus, focusing on the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) as key actors in the democratisation processes in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

The research highlights that while external actors provide important incentives and frameworks, the sustainability of democracy ultimately depends on domestic political commitment and institutional resilience. Despite some democratic backsliding in Georgia and Azerbaijan's ongoing authoritarianism, there are genuine aspirations for democratisation in Armenia, indicating that external incentives can be effective when combined with society's willingness and readiness, and the real will of political authorities.

**Keywords:** Democratisation, South Caucasus, European Union, Council of Europe, CEPA, PACE.

## ԵՎՐՈՊԱԿԱՆ ՄԻՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԵՎ ԵՎՐՈՊԱՅԻ ԽՈՐՀՐԴԻ ԴԵՐԸ ԺՈՂՈՎՐԴԱՎԱՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԽԹԱՆՄԱՆ ԳՈՐԾՈՒՄ. ՀԱՐԱՎԱՅԻՆ ԿՈՎԿԱՍԻ ՊԵՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ԴԵՊՔԸ

### ՎԱՐԴՈՒՏԻ ՀՈՎՀԱՆՆԻՍՅԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ փիլիսոփայության, սոցիոլոգիայի և իրավունքի ինստիտուտի կրտսեր գիտաշխատող, քաղաքագիտության ասպիրանտ  
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### Համառոտագիր

Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է միջազգային կազմակերպությունների դերն ու նշանակությունը Հարավային Կովկասի երկրների ժողովրդավարացման գործում, մասնավորապես ուշադրության կենտրոնում

են եղել Եվրոպական Միության (ԵՄ) և Եվրոպայի Խորհրդի (ԵԽ) գործունեության ուղղությունները՝ որպես Հայաստանում, Վրաստանում և Ադրբեջանում ժողովրդավարացման հիմնական դերակատարներ:

Հետազոտությունն ընդգծում է, որ թեև արտաքին դերակատարներն ապահովում են կարևոր խթաններ և ինստիտուցիոնալ շրջանակներ, այնուամենայնիվ ժողովրդավարական կայունությունը կախված է ներքին քաղաքական հանձնառությունից և ինստիտուցիոնալ ճկունությունից: Չնայած Վրաստանում ժողովրդավարացման որոշակի նահանջին և Ադրբեջանի շարունակական ավտորիտարիզմին՝ Հայաստանում նկատվում են ժողովրդավարացման իրական ձգտումներ: Վերջինս վկայում է, որ արտաքին խթանները կարող են արդյունավետ լինել, եթե դրանք համակցվեն հասարակության պատրաստակամության և քաղաքական իշխանությունների իրական կամքի հետ:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** ժողովրդավարացում, Հարավային Կովկաս, Եվրոպական Միություն, Եվրոպայի Խորհուրդ, ՀԸԳՀ, ԵԽԽՎ:

**Introduction**

The transitions from authoritarian regimes to democracy in the former Soviet Republics have varied widely in both starting conditions and outcomes. In some countries, the transition has been smooth and rapid, facilitated by favourable starting conditions, including geographical proximity to democratic states and a democratic legacy, while in others, internal and external factors, ethnic conflicts, and weak economies have complicated and delayed the political transition. In these cases, the democratization process has often been hindered by internal political resistance, underdeveloped institutions, and contradictory external influences. As a result, some countries have successfully established stable institutions, free elections, and active, thriving civil societies. In contrast, others remain under the strong control of political and administrative systems with limited capacity to uphold democratic norms.

The South Caucasus countries, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, provide a clear illustration of these differences. Despite shared Soviet-era historical legacies and regional contexts, their political development paths differ substantially. According to Freedom House’s Nations in Transit 2024 index, Armenia (Democracy Score: 3.07/7) and Georgia (3.04/7) are classified as Transitional or Hybrid Regimes, while Azerbaijan (1.07/7) is categorised as a Consolidated Authoritarian Regime (Freedom House, 2024). This classification highlights both the common challenges of the region and the significant divergence in their democratic development paths. Such variation underscores the complexity of democratisation in the South Caucasus. It suggests that domestic efforts alone are often insufficient to implement and sustain real democratic reforms without sustained international support.

Within this context, the concept of democracy promotion becomes particularly relevant. As Diamond (1992) emphasises, “promoting” democracy does not mean “exporting” it. Except in rare instances, democracy does not

work when foreign models are imposed. Rather, promoting democracy means offering moral, political, diplomatic, and financial support to individuals and organisations struggling to open authoritarian regimes. Countries that are trying to institutionalise democratic government must receive economic assistance to help them weather painful economic reform and the training and technical support to make democracy function effectively. Assistance must also be provided to the nongovernmental pillars of democracy: parties, civic groups, think tanks, and the mass media (pp. 25–46). Democracy-promoting actors can include individual states, as well as regional and international organisations, which provide frameworks, resources, and incentives for reform.

Building on this understanding, democracy promotion is commonly defined as a set of foreign policy activities which aim at fostering the transition to, consolidation of, or improvement of democracy in other states and their societies (Huber, 2015, p. 23). Earlier, Schmitter and Brouwer (1999) conceptualised democracy promotion as encompassing all overt and voluntary activities adopted, supported, and (directly or indirectly) implemented by (public or private) foreign actors explicitly designed to contribute to the political liberalisation of autocratic regimes and the subsequent democratisation of autocratic regimes in specific recipient countries. These definitions highlight the central role of external actors, particularly states and international organisations, in implementing democratic reforms.

Drawing on this theoretical and conceptual basis, the research explores the role of international organisations in supporting democratisation in the South Caucasus, with a particular focus on the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE). The article aims to analyse how these organisations, through their instruments, mechanisms, and policies, have shaped democratic development in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. By employing a comparative approach, the study identifies both similarities and differences in organisational impact across the three countries, accounting for their unique political trajectories and levels of cooperation with international actors.

### **Research Methodology**

The paper provides a comparative analysis based on a range of qualitative and quantitative data sources, including official documents, policy papers, reports, statements from international organisations, international tools and indexes of democracy measurement, academic literature, and expert analyses. This methodological framework allows for a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of international engagement and its implications on the democratisation of the three countries in the South Caucasus region.

### **EU Policy and Mechanisms in the South Caucasus**

As one of the world’s leading promoters of democratic governance, the European Union is often regarded as one of the “democracy centres” and a normative power shaping political transformations beyond its borders. Based on

the foundational values of human rights, the rule of law, and democracy, the EU places great importance on advancing and upholding democracy worldwide. In the South Caucasus, democracy promotion has become both a normative commitment and a strategic instrument, as the EU seeks to stabilise its neighbourhood, prevent conflicts, and create closer political and economic ties. The EU has played a significant role in promoting democratisation in the South Caucasus through different initiatives such as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Eastern Partnership (EaP), and others. Within the framework of these projects, the EU applied its influence and soft power by establishing conditions that promoted the implementation of democratic reforms.

The first objective of the EU in the South Caucasus is to promote European values of good governance, democracy, human rights, and the rights of minorities, as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2012). Both the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, which form the basis of EU engagement with the South Caucasus, emphasise the importance of good governance and democracy as key drivers of security and stability. Moreover, the EU normative approach is enshrined in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, which require the South Caucasus states to cooperate with the EU to strengthen the rule of law and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in accordance with international law and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) principles. Obligations related to human rights, democracy, and the Rule of Law are further outlined in the Association Agreement (AA) with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between the EU and Georgia, and in the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the EU and Armenia. The EU has long maintained a modernisation narrative, in which greater democracy leads to greater economic development, which in turn fosters political stability (Deen et al., 2023, pp. 27–29).

The most typical example from this perspective is EU–Armenia relations, which have gained new dynamics in recent years. Armenia, though a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), has signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU, indicating its commitment to alignment with EU standards. The CEPA covers areas such as the independence of the judiciary, the impartiality and effectiveness of criminal prosecution and law enforcement, access to justice, the right to freedom from torture, the right to life, freedom of assembly and association, the right to vote, the right to freedom of expression, the fight against corruption, transparent and accountable governance, freedom of the media, and the right to be free from discrimination in matters of democratization, human rights protection and the rule of law. It also aims to promote, preserve and strengthen peace and stability at both regional and international levels, including through joining efforts to eliminate sources of tension, enhancing border security, and promoting cross-border cooperation and good neighbourly relations (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, 2018).

Armenia and the EU are making good progress towards deepened cooperation based on the CEPA. The EU remains the largest donor in the country, providing important support in areas such of justice, the rule of law, anti-corruption, etc. Armenia has gone through major political changes in recent years, with a government committed to both ensuring genuinely functioning democratic institutions and using the CEPA as a blueprint for reforms to modernise the country, despite considerable challenges. In recent years, Armenia has made further progress in implementing reforms in key areas, such as justice and the rule of law, particularly by advancing police reforms and strengthening democratic institutions, including efforts to combat corruption (Council of the European Union, 2024). This dynamic underscores that the EU's influence is strongest where there is clear domestic political will to pursue democratisation.

Armenia's relations with the EU have intensified significantly in recent years, as the country seeks to diversify its security and economic ties. In March 2025, the Armenian Parliament adopted a law on the "initiation of the process of EU accession" (National Assembly of the RA, 2025), based on a citizens' initiative. While not constituting an official EU membership application, the law confirms the country's European aspirations. Reflecting the mutual interest in deepening ties based on common values, the EU and Armenia have successfully concluded negotiations on a new EU-Armenia partnership agenda for more ambitious cooperation across all areas, including on security matters (Placzek & Jiráček, 2025). Among the key priorities of the new Partnership Agenda is also strengthening Democracy, Human Rights, and Good Governance: reinforcing the rule of law, advancing justice sector reform, combating corruption, and ensuring the protection of fundamental freedoms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RA, 2025). This development suggests that Armenia is gradually positioning itself as one of the EU's closest partners in the region, despite geopolitical constraints. However, implementing Armenia's ambitious reform agenda requires significant administrative and institutional capacity.

In parallel with the example of Armenia, it is also important to consider the influence of the EU in the democratization process of Georgia. The EU also played a turning role in strengthening the democratic governance and political stability of Georgia. The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership laid the foundation for political dialogue and cooperation between Georgia and the EU, with the main goal of promoting the development of a more stable and democratic governance structure in Georgia. Many reforms were carried out in the country, mainly aiming to improve the existing election processes, strengthen judicial independence and the rule of law, redistribute functions and duties between governmental institutions, and develop effective anti-corruption mechanisms. Effective public administration, the rule of law, and the adoption of a comprehensive legislative framework are critical parts of political development. Combining these and other reforms lays the foundation for a robust governance framework, which is fundamental to building a stable democratic system (Iakobishvili, 2025, pp. 124–139).

In Georgia, the EU supports the development of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The Association Agreement was concluded in 2016, and the Association Agenda 2021–2027 guides EU–Georgia cooperation in the field of human rights and democracy. While a culture of human rights still has to take firm root nationwide, there has been significant progress in the fields of human rights and democracy. Important electoral and judicial reforms have taken place, creating a more solid legal basis for the country's democratic consolidation of the country, although significant challenges remain in both areas. EU support to human rights, democracy and rule of law is particularly directed towards transparency and inclusiveness of the electoral process, independence and impartiality of the judiciary, gender equality, rights of persons belonging to minorities, rights of persons with disabilities and labour rights (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023).

More than 80% of the Georgian population supports democracy and EU membership, according to a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Centre for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) (International Republican Institute, 2023). However, since 2012, the country has been governed by Georgian Dream (GD), a party that has gradually adopted elements of authoritarianism, tightening its control over all state institutions, including the judiciary and the electoral commission, while harassing political opponents and independent media. Two recent laws have caused uproar in the country: the so-called “foreign agents law” and the “law on family values and the protection of minors”. These laws are fundamentally at odds with core EU values and incompatible with Georgia's stated EU aspirations. Granting Georgia official candidate status for EU membership was primarily intended to prevent further democratic erosion and reduce Moscow's influence. However, the situation continues to deteriorate (Everts, 2024). Condemning violence against peaceful protesters in ongoing Tbilisi rallies, High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos warned that the Georgian government's actions “have direct consequences” on the relationship with the EU. “The door to the EU remains open, and the return of Georgia to the European values and the EU accession path are in the hands of the Georgian leadership” (“Civil Georgia,” 2024; European Commission, 2024).

Georgia's democratic development had ups and downs, improving after the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the first electoral transfer of power in 2012, but declining after 2007, when the government grew more undemocratic, and again after 2016 with the government's supermajority in Parliament that gradually led to the shrinking of space for opposition, media, and civil society. Today, the country is stuck in the “electoral democracy” category. Increasing ties with the EU helped Georgia advance in some aspects of democratic development, particularly during the Georgian Dream party's first term in office. Having secured a parliamentary supermajority in 2016 and subsequently near-total control of all democratic institutions, Georgian Dream has consolidated its hold on power. Since the 2018 presidential election, particularly the 2019 protests, Georgia has been in a political

crisis. The EU’s mediation in 2021 helped temporarily defuse it, but the EU’s goal of reducing political polarisation and improving power-sharing in parliament has not been achieved (Brudzińska et al., 2025; Sirbiladze & Ventura, 2023). This political stagnation and growing polarisation have weakened Georgia’s reform momentum and undermined its long-standing image as a regional frontrunner in democratisation. The government’s increasing reluctance to engage constructively with the EU reflects a gradual shift away from earlier commitments to deeper European integration.

The situation became more serious when Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced that the opening of accession talks with the EU would be removed from Georgia’s agenda and that the country would refuse EU budgetary grants until the end of 2028, “when Georgia will be adequately prepared economically to open negotiations to become a member in 2030” (Parulava, 2024). Such decisions further distance Georgia from its European trajectory and raise serious doubts about the country’s willingness to implement the democratic reforms required for EU membership. As a result, Georgia is missing the opportunity that closer ties with the EU could provide to pave the way for political stability and institutional strengthening.

Compared to Georgia, the EU’s policy towards Azerbaijan has had a fundamentally different nature due to the country’s limited development of democratic institutions. The promotion and support of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a key element of the EU’s action in Azerbaijan, along the following priorities: to strengthen the rule of law and democratic institutions, the EU is supporting steps in the direction of an independent, fair and efficient justice system, as well as supporting the fight against corruption. The EU is supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) and strongly promoting the elimination of legal provisions (such as registration obligations) that are currently hampering CSOs’ space and action in the country. Promoting freedom of expression is also an important element: the EU supports the freedom of the press and the plurality of opinions, advocating against the prosecution of individuals on political grounds. The EU also aims to contribute to the protection of rights, equal opportunities, and equal participation in the public and political life of women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced people, and minority groups (EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, 2022, pp. 34–36).

According to the latest EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, the overall state of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan deteriorated further in recent years, as reflected in the unprecedented crackdown on critical voices, reduced space for civil society and independent media, and ongoing limitations on civil liberties. The elections held in the country fail to meet the standards of genuine democracy. The general electoral legal framework still needs to be reviewed to align with international standards and obligations. The crackdown on journalists, human rights defenders, and civic and political opposition activists, which had started in September 2023, further intensified. More independent journalists, human rights defenders and political activists

were arrested on charges of money laundering. Activities of non-governmental organisations remain restricted. Corruption is a systemic problem.

The EU continued to address concerns related to human rights and democracy with the relevant competent national institutions. The EU Delegation organised meetings with representatives of NGOs, think tanks, members of political parties, human rights lawyers, human rights defenders, and journalists. The EU Special Representative for Human Rights raised the EU's concerns with the Azerbaijani authorities on several occasions (EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World, 2024, pp. 40–41). The European Parliament even adopted three resolutions regarding the violation of human rights and international law, and the repression of civil society and independent media in Azerbaijan (European Parliament Resolutions, 19.12.2024; 24.10.2024; 25.04.2024).

Thus, the EU's involvement and influence in the South Caucasus countries take different forms. While in Armenia and Georgia it is mainly manifested through cooperation and promotion of reforms, in the case of Azerbaijan, it is more often expressed in a monitoring and critical format. In general, the EU's activities in the region contribute to the spread of democratic values. However, their effectiveness depends directly on each country's political will and domestic developments of each country.

### **Policies and Mechanisms of the Council of Europe in the South Caucasus**

The Council of Europe is focused on human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law. All three South Caucasus countries are CoE members and have ratified the European Convention on Human Rights.

Since it acceded to the Council of Europe, Armenia has taken active steps towards fulfilling its obligations to the Council of Europe. All the Council of Europe conventions required for membership have been ratified. Over the years, with the expert support of the Secretariat of the Council of Europe and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), the Respective Codes and Laws of the Republic of Armenia have been amended, including the 2015 Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, followed by the ongoing amendments to the legislation. The projects implemented by the Council of Europe in Armenia are drawn up based on the priorities of the Government of Armenia, as well as the recommendations of the Council of Europe monitoring and advisory bodies, contributing to the implementation of reforms in Armenia in line with the European standards in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Since 2012, this cooperation between Armenia and the CoE has been conducted within Action Plans (Permanent Representation of Armenia to the Council of Europe, n.d.).

Ratifying the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 2002, Armenia has undertaken far-reaching reforms to strengthen local democracy. In late 2022, the Territorial and Administrative Reform of Armenia (TARA) reorganised the country into 71 consolidated communities, followed by the approval of a

Decentralisation Concept on 7 November 2023, further aligning Armenia’s governance with the Charter principles. A strategic focus of the CoE’s work in Armenia has been the support for local governance and democratic participation. Projects like the Democratic Development, Decentralisation and Good Governance in Armenia – Phase II and Support to Communities Hosting Refugees in Armenia under the Council of Europe Action Plan for Armenia 2023–2026 strengthen municipal structures, align local governance with the European Charter, and equip authorities to better manage responsibilities, including services to refugees displaced from Nagorno–Karabakh (Council of Europe, n.d.).

Armenia’s example is followed by the experience of Georgia, where a number of reforms and initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions have also been implemented with the assistance of the Council of Europe. By becoming the 41st Member State, Georgia accepted the obligations incumbent on all Member States under Article 3 of the Statute of the Council of Europe, i.e., compliance with the principles of pluralist democracy and the rule of law, as well as respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons placed under its jurisdiction. To date, the country has signed and ratified numerous treaties and protocols of the Council of Europe. It is subject to a number of Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE, 2025, p. 10).

Georgia, as a member of the Council of Europe, has been cooperating with the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) since the 1990s and has been drafting amendments to the commission for expertise. At all stages of the development of Georgia’s electoral system’s development, the participation of international organisations, such as the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, was important. Georgia also follows the Election Code under the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Nakashidze & Sirabidze, 2020, pp. 9–27).

Since its accession, Georgia has adopted laws and implemented several reforms to strengthen decentralisation and enhance civic engagement in decision-making, including Article 7 of the Constitution of Georgia, which introduced constitutional guarantees for local self-government; the adoption of the 2014 Self-Government Code; and the Decentralisation Strategy 2020–2025. Georgia has also implemented since 2014 the National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights, accompanied by successive action plans (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE, 2025, p. 11).

Georgia has greatly benefited from the co-operation programs of the Council of Europe since 2006. Since 2013, three Action Plans have provided a strategic framework for co-operation with the Council of Europe in support of democratic reforms in Georgia. The Council of Europe’s current Action Plan for Georgia 2024–2027, which is the fourth Action Plan, has been prepared in close consultation with the Georgian authorities. Its priorities also reflect the recommendations set out in the European Commission’s opinion on Georgia’s application for European Union (EU) membership, as well as Georgia’s national reform agenda. The Action

Plan is a strategic programming instrument that aims to align Georgia’s legislation, institutions, and practices with European standards in the areas of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE, 2025, p. 11).

The main results of previous Action Plans include: the enhanced knowledge and expertise in civil participation methodologies among local experts, public officials, civil society organizations and individual citizens; reinforced National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia, as a fully-fledged intermediary to promote the needs and identify the challenges existing at local level before the central government with a view to securing efficient and effective localization of human rights principles and increased engagement of citizens and civil society organizations in decision-making processes, and other results in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Council of Europe, 2023a, pp. 7–8).

In recent years, the Council of Europe has maintained close oversight of Georgia’s democratic trajectory and its adherence to international obligations. Once regarded as a regional example of reform and constructive engagement with the Council of Europe, Georgia demonstrated a clear readiness to align its policies and reforms with European democratic standards and norms. This willingness to engage in open dialogue distinguished the country from its neighbours and positioned it as a model of cooperation. However, recent developments have significantly altered this perception. The Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) has expressed deep concern about political shifts that raise questions regarding Georgia’s commitment to democratic principles, Euro-Atlantic integration, and the fulfilment of membership obligations. Constructive cooperation and dialogue, which once characterised Georgia’s approach, have been increasingly replaced by uncompromising rhetoric and confrontational attitudes toward critical voices. Instead of progress, signs of democratic backsliding have emerged, creating uncertainty about the country’s future trajectory within the European institutional framework (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2024).

The example of Georgia shows relative success and progress, but recent developments have raised some concerns. This also highlights the differences between the countries in the region. Unlike Armenia and Georgia, the Council of Europe’s relations with Azerbaijan have been more controversial.

Azerbaijan joined the CoE in 2001 and became a member of the ECHR in 2002. Joining the CoE, Azerbaijan made a wide range of commitments to uphold specific principles of Article 3 of the Statute of the CoE and implement reforms such as protecting the rights of journalists and citizens to express opinions freely, including critical viewpoints, ensuring citizens’ rights to peaceful gatherings and protests, engaging with the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe (PACE), Venice Commission (constitutional experts), and other relevant monitoring bodies, and abiding by the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) (“CSO Meter”, 2024). To date, the country has signed and ratified 65 treaties of the Council of Europe treaties, signed seven more, and is subject to a number of

Council of Europe mechanisms and bodies (Council of Europe, 2022, p. 6).

The Council of Europe supported the Azerbaijani authorities in harmonising national judicial practices by providing analysis and recommendations to state actors in the light of the case law of the ECHR and other human rights protection mechanisms under the Action Plans for Azerbaijan 2014–2017 and 2018–2021 (Council of Europe, 2022, p. 11). The next Action Plan, planned for 2022–2025, is also intended to support the country’s efforts to fulfil its obligations as a Council of Europe member state. It is a strategic programming instrument aimed at further aligning Azerbaijan’s legislation, institutions and practices in the areas of human rights, the rule of law and democracy with Council of Europe standards (Council of Europe, 2022, p. 2).

At the same time, Azerbaijan has one of the worst records among Council of Europe member states of implementing European Court of Human Rights judgments. In January 2024, according to the resolution passed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Azerbaijani delegation was suspended for 12 months for persistent violations of Council of Europe standards; the persecution of the opposition and independent media; and actions in Nagorno–Karabakh that led to the mass exodus of Armenians. Unhappy with the growing criticism, the Baku authorities responded by temporarily withdrawing from the work of many CoE’s institutions. At the same time, repression against independent news outlets and civil society activists intensified in the country (Council of Europe, 2024).

In July 2024, the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) took the “exceptional decision” to make a public statement concerning Azerbaijan under Article 10 (2) of the Convention for the Prevention of Torture, citing the government’s “outright refusal” to cooperate with the Committee. The CPT has repeatedly highlighted severe and systemic issues related to the treatment of people in police custody. Likewise, the European Union Delegation to the Council of Europe has expressed grave concern over Azerbaijan’s persistent lack of cooperation with international mechanisms. The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights has raised the alarming increase in politically motivated detentions of civil society representatives and journalists (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

After those events, there was increasing speculation that Azerbaijan would follow Russia’s example and leave the organisation. Despite increasing repression at home, Azerbaijan formally remains a member of the Council of Europe, though it engages only with selected branches of the institution. This approach not only undermines the legitimacy of the institution as a whole but also dashes hopes of Azerbaijani political prisoners regaining their freedom. Although, in theory, the Council of Europe procedures do not envisage a scenario in which a member state does not have a delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly but continues to work in the other Council institutions, Azerbaijan may set a new precedent for many months or even years (Zamejc, 2025). As it appears, the Council of Europe’s activities in Azerbaijan are facing more serious obstacles, including human rights violations, democratic regression, and limited cooperation with international organisations.

Another programme is the joint initiative of the European Union and the Council of Europe, The Partnership for Good Governance (PGG), which has played an important role in advancing democratic governance, rule of law, and anti-corruption reforms in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (it is an initiative for the Eastern Partnership countries). In Armenia, the programme contributed to the adoption of a new Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan in 2019, supported the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Committee in 2021 and specialised Anti-Corruption Court in 2022, and promoted integrity standards through improved asset declaration systems and training for public officials. Judicial reforms were strengthened by the revision of the Judicial Code in 2022 and enhanced training for judges, while targeted measures promoted gender equality in the justice sector (Council of Europe, 2023b; European Union/Council of Europe, 2023a). In Georgia, the PGG supported reforms in the areas of anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing, the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, and access to justice. The programme also provided capacity building for legal professionals, introduced new digital tools for constitutional justice, and strengthened legal aid for vulnerable groups (European Union/Council of Europe, 2023b). In Azerbaijan, key results include reforms in anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing, including the adoption of key laws and support for the implementation of non-discrimination and gender equality standards, with particular attention to combating violence against women (Council of Europe, 2025; European Union/Council of Europe, 2023c).

Overall, the PGG has contributed to aligning governance and justice systems in the South Caucasus with European standards. By supporting legislative reforms, enhancing institutional capacities, and promoting equality and inclusion, the programme has created more transparent, accountable, and citizen-oriented institutions in the countries of the region.

In summary, the Council of Europe has become an important partner in building democracy and the rule of law in the countries of the South Caucasus. Although the experiences of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan differ, ranging from the depth of institutional reforms to the demonstration of political will, the overall role of the organisation is important in guiding the democratization processes in the region and spreading European values.

### **The EU and CoE Impacts in Promoting Democracy: Comparative Analysis**

The democratization process in the South Caucasus cannot be considered without the involvement of international organisations. In this context, two main European institutions play a key role: the Council of Europe and the European Union, which are the most influential international actors in terms of democratisation.

The CoE was one of the first international organisations to become involved in the democratization process of the newly independent states of the South Caucasus. It used monitoring mechanisms and a system of commitments and reporting to promote legal and institutional reforms. It is especially important to consider the

process of implementing the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, the advisory activities of the Venice Commission, as well as the monitoring missions of the PACE. On the one hand, these tools have contributed to the approximation of the legislative field to European standards; on the other hand, they have often encountered resistance from political elites, as a result of which the depth of real reforms remained limited.

Unlike the CoE, the EU acted not only as a normative power but also as a partner, offering opportunities for economic, political, and institutional integration. The EU's approach to democratization in its Eastern neighbours, including Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, has been largely shaped by the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership program, which aim to strengthen ties with these countries and offer political and economic support in exchange for reforms aimed at establishing democratic institutions, the rule of law, and respect for human rights (Ordukhanyan et al., 2025). Along with these projects, later, the Association Agreement in the case of Georgia and the CEPA framework in the case of Armenia also allowed the EU to link democracy promotion with economic integration and financial assistance, creating incentives for reforms.

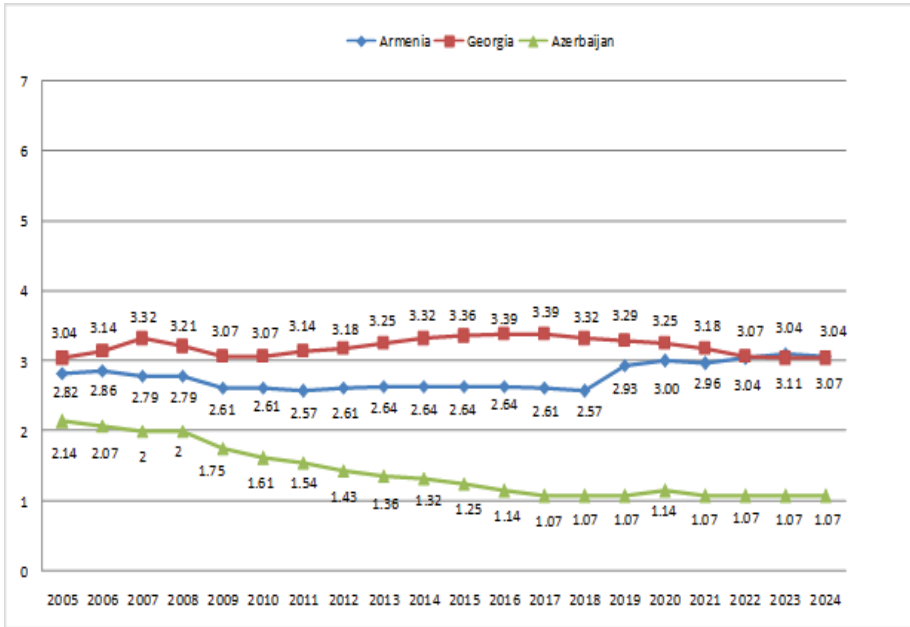
The comparative analysis shows that the CoE's influence was mainly manifested at the monitoring and advisory levels, ensuring compliance with and adherence to democratic and human rights standards. The EU, in turn, viewed democratisation not only as the spread of a value system but also as a means of ensuring security and stability, linking it to regional development and economic cooperation. In this regard, the EU's involvement was more practical and stimulating.

The effectiveness and results of these approaches are most clearly demonstrated in democracy scores. Exploring the democracy scores of the South Caucasus countries for 2005–2024 according to Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* index (Freedom House, n.d.) (see Figure 1), significant differences are observed in the dynamics of democratisation of these three countries.

- Georgia – Initially, having more favourable starting conditions, Georgia recorded relatively high democracy indicators and rapid progress. However, in recent years, a loss of democratic momentum has been observed due to the centralisation of power by the political elite, the dominance of parliament, and restrictions on civil liberties.

- Armenia – Initially, the indicators were significantly lower, and progress was slow. However, in recent years, a new momentum of democratic development has emerged, and even the indicators are slightly higher than those of Georgia. This is due to both the willingness and readiness of broad layers of society, and the willingness of the authorities to promote democratic reforms.

- In Azerbaijan, unlike Armenia and Georgia, a regression of democratic development is observed. The indicators have remained low and have declined further in recent years. This is due to the nature of the political regime, in which the authorities not only fail to promote democratic development but also restrict the activities of civil society and opposition structures.



**Figure 1.** Democracy Score in the South Caucasus countries in 2005-2024 Nations in Transit  
 (The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democracy)

This analysis shows that although the involvement of international organisations plays a key role, the democratic development of countries is largely determined by internal factors: the willingness and readiness of society and the real will of political authorities.

These dynamics not only reveal the different paths of democratisation in the region but also reflect the varying extent to which the engagement of the EU's and the CoE's engagement has influenced the outcomes. The role of the EU in Georgia's democratisation was of great importance, enabling Georgia to achieve the status of an EU candidate country. However, a recent deviation from democratic values has been observed. For Armenia, CEPA created a new roadmap aimed at reforms in democratic governance, the judiciary, and anti-corruption policy. In the case of Azerbaijan, the influence of both the CoE and the EU remained limited due to the limited willingness of the authorities to implement democratic changes.

In this context, it is obvious that international organisations can offer mechanisms, financial support, and monitoring tools, but their effectiveness depends on the willingness of domestic institutions and political powers. Therefore, for further democratic development, it is necessary to combine at least two important components: the continuous involvement of international institutions and the state's willingness and readiness to participate. The experience of the

EU and the Council of Europe shows that only through joint efforts can an environment be created in which democratic institutions become a stable basis for socio-political life.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the involvement of international institutions, in particular the European Union and the Council of Europe, in the democratisation process of the South Caucasus has been multifaceted and significant. While in the cases of Armenia and Georgia, with specific characteristics, external support has contributed to legislative reforms, institutional development, and progress in the protection of human rights, in the case of Azerbaijan, this impact has also been limited due to the priorities of the political regime.

In this context, it becomes clear that the tools and mechanisms of international institutions, from financial support to political dialogue and monitoring, can create favourable conditions for democratisation. However, their effectiveness largely depends on internal factors, which determine the extent to which international support can translate into real democratic reforms. The several key factors are:

- Political will of the ruling elites to initiate and sustain democratic reforms.
- Societal readiness to accept and internalise democratic values.
- Civic mentality, reflecting the broader attitudes and expectations of citizens toward democratic governance.
- The strength and activity of civil society, capable of promoting and defending democratic principles.
- Political legacy, which shapes the institutional culture and trajectory of democratisation.

Without the commitment of both authorities and broader segments of society, as well as an active civil society able to advance democratic principles, real reforms are difficult to achieve, and international support remains at a merely formal level.

Therefore, the future democratic development of the South Caucasus is conditioned by two main factors: *first*, continuous and consistent involvement of European institutions that can provide guidance, incentives and oversight, and *second*, internal willingness and readiness of regional countries to build stable democratic institutions, develop civil society and strengthen the rule of law. Only with this combination will the South Caucasus countries be able to move toward genuine, irreversible, and sustainable democratisation.

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