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FROM "TERRA INCOGNITA" TO STRATEGIC NEIGHBORHOOD: THE EU'S LONG ROAD TO A COHERENT SOUTH CAUCASUS POLICY

Rahil Dadashli*

Abstract. This article traces the evolution of European Union engagement with the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) from the chaotic post-Soviet years to the present day. Beginning with ad-hoc technical and humanitarian assistance through TACIS (1991–2006) and ECHO, the EU initially operated in a region it barely understood, providing emergency aid and modest state-building support amid wars and separatist conflicts. These early efforts were demand-driven and often poorly coordinated, yet they laid the first institutional bridges. The 2004 enlargement and the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) marked a shift toward a more ambitious structural foreign policy aimed at creating a "ring of friends" sharing EU values and prosperity without offering membership. In the South Caucasus, the ENP introduced bilateral Action Plans, increased financial assistance via ENPI, and tentative regional initiatives. However, its one-size-fits-all approach, lack of membership perspective ("everything but institutions"), and inability to address frozen conflicts limited its transformative impact. Growing differentiation among the three countries together with the 2008 Russo-Georgian War exposed the ENP's shortcomings. These developments paved the way for the 2009 Eastern Partnership, which introduced stronger conditionality and deeper integration instruments. The article argues that lasting EU influence in this contested region depends on combining normative ambitions with pragmatic, conflict-sensitive, and genuinely differentiated policies.

Keywords: South Caucasus, European Union, TACIS, European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, structural foreign policy

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ОТ TERRA INCOGNITA К СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОМУ СОСЕДСТВУ: ДОЛГИЙ ПУТЬ ЕС К СОГЛАСОВАННОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ В ЮЖНОМ КАВКАЗЕ

Рахиль Дадашлы*

Абстракт. В статье прослеживается эволюция взаимодействия Европейского Союза с Южным Кавказом (Армения, Азербайджан и Грузия) от хаотичных постсоветских лет до настоящего времени. Начавшись с разрозненной технической и гуманитарной помощи в рамках программ TACIS и ECHO, ЕС первоначально действовал в регионе с ограниченным знанием местных реалий, оказывая экстренную помощь и скромную поддержку государственному строительству на фоне войн и сепаратистских конфликтов. Эти ранние усилия были ориентированы на спрос и часто плохо скоординированы, но они заложили первые институциональные мосты. Расширение 2004 года и запуск Европейская политика соседства (ЕПС) ознаменовали переход к более амбициозной структурной внешней политике, направленной на создание «кольца друзей», разделяющих ценности и благосостояние ЕС, без обещания членства. В Южном Кавказе ЕПС ввела двусторонние План-действия, увеличила финансовую помощь через Европейский инструмент соседства и партнёрства (ЕИСП) и инициировала попытки регионального сотрудничества. Однако универсальный подход ЕПС, отсутствие перспективы членства («всё, кроме институтов») и неспособность эффективно решать замороженные конфликты ограничили её преобразующий эффект. Усиление дифференциации между тремя странами вместе с российско-грузинской войной 2008 года выявили слабые стороны ЕПС и подготовили почву для запуска Восточного партнёрства в 2009 году, которое предложило более жёсткую условность и инструменты углублённой интеграции. В статье утверждается, что для устойчивого влияния ЕС в этом спорном регионе необходимо сочетать нормативные амбиции с прагматичной, чувствительной к конфликтам и действительно дифференцированной политикой.

Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ; Европейский Союз; TACIS; Европейская политика соседства; Восточное партнёрство; структурная внешняя политика

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“BİLİNMƏYƏN TORPAQLARDAN” STRATEJİ QONŞULUĞA: AVROPA İTTİFAQININ ƏSASLI CƏNUBİ QAFQAZ SİYASƏT YOLU

Rahil Dadaş*

Abstrakt. Bu məqalə Avropa İttifaqının Cənubi Qafqazla (Ermənistan, Azərbaycan və Gürcüstan) əlaqələrinin post-sovet dövrünün xaotik başlangıcından indiyə qədərki inkişafını izləyir. 1991–2000-ci illərdə TACIS və ECHO vasitəsilə göstərilən texniki və humanitar yardımın təcili, tələbə əsaslanan və çox vaxt koordinasiyasız olduğu, lakin ilk institusional körpüləri yaratdığı vurgulanır. 2004-cü ildə genişlənmə və Avropa Qonşuluq Siyasətinin (AQS) tətbiqi daha ambisiyalı, strukturlaşdırılmış xarici siyasetə keçidi başladıb; AQS çərçivəsində ikitərəfli Fəaliyyət Planları, Avropa Qonşuluq və Tərəfdaşlıq Aləti (AQTA) vasitəsilə maliyyə dəstəyi və məhdud regional təşəbbüsələr təqdim edildi. Lakin AQS-nin vahid, üzvlük perspektivi olmayan (“hər şey amma institutlar”) yanaşması və dommuş münaqişələri həll etmək qabiliyyətinin məhdudluğunu onun transformasiyaedici təsirini zəiflətdi. Üç ölkə arasında artan fərqlər və 2008-ci il Rusiya-Gürcüstan müharibəsi AQS-nin çatışmazlıqlarını açıq göstərdi. Bu inkişaflar 2009-cu ildə Şərqi Tərəfdaşlığı (ŞT) təşəbbüsünün meydana çıxmına zəmin yaratdı; ŞT daha güclü şərtlər və dərin integrasiya alətləri təklif edirdi. Məqalə iddia edir ki, bu rəqabətli və strukturca zəif regionda Avropa İttifaqının davamlı təsiri normativ ambisiyaları praktik, münaqişə-həssas və hər bir ölkənin tələblərinə fokuslanmış siyasetlə uzlaşdırmaqdan asılıdır.

Açar sözlər: Cənubi Qafqaz, Avropa İttifaqı, TACIS, Avropa Qonşuluq Siyasəti, Şərqi Tərəfdaşlığı, struktur xarici siyaset

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 thrust Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia into sudden independence amid violent conflict, economic dislocation, and political uncertainty. For the European Union- then still the European Economic Community- this turbulent region represented both a humanitarian challenge and a strategic unknown. Initial engagement through technical assistance (TACIS) and humanitarian relief (ECHO) was improvised, reactive, and often poorly coordinated, reflecting Europe’s limited knowledge of the South Caucasus. Yet these early steps laid the groundwork for more structured involvement. Over time, enlargement pressures, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and later the Eastern Partnership (EaP) transformed the EU’s role from ad hoc donor to aspiring architect of regional order. This article traces that evolution, arguing that the EU’s long road toward a coherent South Caucasus policy illustrates both the promise and the limits of structural foreign policy. It shows how normative ambitions- promoting democracy, rule of law, and integration-have repeatedly collided with pragmatic constraints of conflict, energy politics, and divergent national trajectories. The central claim is that lasting EU influence depends on differentiated, conflict-sensitive engagement that balances ideals with realism.

2. Early EU Engagement: TACIS and ECHO

The TACIS program, launched by the European Commission (EC) in 1991, was one of the EU’s earliest instruments for engaging with the post-Soviet space. It operated until 2009, when it was replaced by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) [Delcour & Hoffmann, 2018]. As Alexander Frenz, a long-term monitor of TACIS projects, recalled, the program began “in a rush: unexpectedly and with virtually no time to prepare. There was little to no information, no traditional ties which could be activated.” He also noted that representation was minimal-only one EU official was based in Tbilisi, with limited understanding of developments on the ground [Frenz, 2006].

Despite this improvised start, TACIS pursued ambitious goals: democratization, rule of law, rural and agricultural development, economic transition from planned to market systems, social sector reform, infrastructure modernization, and environmental protection [European Comission, 1992]. Its evolution can be divided into two phases. The “demand-driven” period (1991–1999) responded directly to requests from partner governments, channeling an estimated €4.2 billion in assistance. By contrast, the “dialogue-driven” phase (2000–2006) introduced reciprocity, requiring recipient states to commit to reform objectives in exchange for EU support [Frenz, 2006, p.6].

Concrete successes did emerge, particularly in Azerbaijan. The EU financed and supported Integrated Border Management (IBM) along Azerbaijan’s

southern frontier with Iran, implemented by the International Organization for Migration. This included the creation of a Border Guards Training School (BGTS), equipped with EU-provided curricula, resources, and expertise [IOM, 2006].

Yet TACIS also revealed systemic weaknesses. Overreliance on foreign experts, poor contextualization, fragmented project management, and unrealistic reform timelines limited its impact. While it introduced valuable governance tools and supported civil society, reforms often lacked sustainability and failed to adapt to local political economies. In short, TACIS was a pioneering but imperfect experiment—an improvised bridge between the EU and the South Caucasus that highlighted both the potential and the pitfalls of external assistance in a region still struggling to stabilize after the Soviet collapse.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Positive Outcomes and Systemic Failures in Technical Assistance to CIS Countries (1992–2006)

| | Training of civil servants and non-governmental organization (NGO) staff; knowledge transfer; creation of centres of excellence | Overreliance on foreign experts; limited use of local knowledge; poor contextualization |
|--|---|---|
| | Legal and administrative reforms; governance tools such as monitoring and evaluation (M&E), performance-based budgeting | Parallel structures undermining domestic institutions; weak sustainability of reforms |
| | Focus on health, education, social welfare; economic management and small and medium enterprises (SME) support | Imbalanced sectoral focus; neglect of engineering and production sectors |
| | European Union (EU) standards alignment; improved donor coordination post-Paris Declaration | Donor-driven agendas; poor fit with local political economy and reform incentives |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | Improved indicators in reform-oriented states (e.g. Armenia, Georgia); support for civil society | Modest overall governance gains; uneven transition progress across Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) |
| | Introduction of performance-based budgeting; use of monitoring tools | Ineffective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks; unrealistic reform timelines; fragmented project management |
| | High technical assistance (TA) volumes enabled reform momentum in small states | Overload in small countries; low uptake and diluted impact |
| | Exposure to global norms and practices | Ignored informal economies and local administrative realities |
| | | Duplication of efforts; lack of strategic coherence |

Source: Based on finding from Mogilevsky & Atamanov (2008)

The EU’s humanitarian and civil protection arm, ECHO, has been a key framework for engagement in the South Caucasus, providing roughly €188 million in support since 1992—€97 million to Georgia, €49 million to Armenia, and €42 million to Azerbaijan. These funds covered emergency humanitarian aid for conflicts and natural disasters as well as longer-term disaster risk reduction [EU External Service, 2017].

Since 2010 the EU’s Disaster Preparedness Programme (DIPECHO), funded with over €10.4 million, has become central to resilience building, helping communities and institutions prepare for natural hazards and conflict-related risks [EU External Service, 2017].

DIPECHO’s practical, people-centered interventions include:

- Education: integrating disaster risk reduction into school curricula and inclusive programs for vulnerable children.
- Capacity-building: strengthening operational readiness of national and local disaster management authorities.
- Community preparedness: promoting low-cost measures such as disaster mapping, evacuation planning, and stockpiling emergency supplies.

These initiatives were implemented in partnership with UNDP, UNICEF, Save the Children, Oxfam, and national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies,

combining local ownership with international expertise [EU External Service, 2017]. Beyond immediate relief, the EU also supported economic and social recovery by assisting the newly independent republics’ transition from Soviet-style systems to market economies through capacity building, education, and training.

In its early engagement the EU operated with limited direct knowledge of the region- its understanding was shaped largely by Soviet-era ties to Moscow- so meaningful, structured policy only emerged after about a decade, culminating in the European Neighbourhood Policy and later the Eastern Partnership (2009), which shifted EU action from ad hoc aid to a more strategic regional approach.

3. Eastern Partnership and European Neighborhood Policy

The “big bang” enlargement of 2004 marked a turning point for the European Union, expanding its membership from 15 to 25 states, and later to 27 in 2007. This wave of accession brought several post-Soviet and post-communist countries into the Union, integrating them into a collective, market-oriented political system. Yet, six post-Soviet republics- Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan- remained outside this process, each for its own set of political, economic, or strategic reasons.

At the same time, debates over “enlargement fatigue” grew louder. Some voices argued for intensive integration, focusing on deepening ties and strengthening cohesion within the Union itself. Others defended extensive integration, emphasizing the importance of continuing to expand the EU’s geographical boundaries. This tension meant that further enlargement was far from universally supported.

In 2002, then-European Commission President Romano Prodi captured the dilemma in a speech, noting that if the EU wished to meet the expectations of both its citizens and its neighbours, it had to become a true global power. His words underscored the need for a new approach to the Union’s immediate neighbours-including the six post-Soviet states left outside enlargement.

Parallel to these debates, another concern emerged: the need to create a secure environment for Europe’s growing community. Without offering a formal promise of accession, the EU’s foreign policy began to cultivate what was described as a “ring of friends”- neighbouring countries encouraged to share the Union’s core values and aspirations. This vision was anchored in the Treaty on European Union, particularly Article 4, and reinforced by Article 8, which commits the Union to building “a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation [Blockman, 2017]. This provision provided the legal and political foundation for the EU’s strategy of building structured

partnerships with its neighbours. The approach relied on normative alignment-encouraging neighbouring states to adopt the Union's values and standards-and on cooperative frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership.

The importance of this orientation was reaffirmed at the 2002 Copenhagen European Council, where the Union expressed its determination to "avoid new dividing lines in Europe and to promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders of the Union." This statement captured the EU's ambition to ensure that enlargement did not create new exclusions, but instead fostered a wider zone of security, prosperity, and shared values around the Union [Copenhagen European Council, 2002]. This policy however should be long lasting, promoting democratic values, human rights, environmental awareness, market economy, good governance and other EU values. Most importantly, those neighbouring countries were considered being EU like countries without being EU countries.

4. Structural Foreign Policy in EU-Neighbour Relations

Keukeleire and Delraux (2022) describe the European Union's foreign policy as a form of structural foreign policy. Unlike traditional diplomacy that reacts to crises or pursues short-term objectives, the EU often seeks to reshape the underlying structures of other societies- their political institutions, legal systems, economies, and cultural frameworks. This long-term and transformative approach is not about temporary fixes but about building systems that remain resilient and functional over time. For such a policy to be effective, Keukeleire emphasizes that it must be comprehensive, meaning that the EU must act across multiple domains simultaneously and engage with actors at different levels, from local communities to national governments.

This strategy is rooted in constructivist and liberal international relations theories, which highlight the diffusion of norms and the transformation of target societies. A comprehensive structural foreign policy therefore balances economic initiatives such as trade agreements, development aid, and investment programs with political measures like governance reforms, professional training, promotion of the rule of law, and support for civil society. It also extends into cultural fields through educational exchanges, media cooperation, and language promotion. In this way, the EU avoids ad hoc responses and instead pursues a rational, predictable, and tailored foreign policy designed to gradually align neighboring regions with EU-like conditions.

The EU's neighborhood can broadly be divided into three groups: the Balkans and Türkiye, which have long-standing ties and institutional similarities with the EU; post-Soviet states that gained independence after the collapse of the USSR or transitioned into market economies; and

Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries, including Arab states of North Africa and Western Asia, as well as Israel, Malta, and Cyprus. The volatile political environments, economic challenges, and geographic proximity of these regions have compelled EU policymakers to design a comprehensive foreign policy framework. Structural foreign policy lies at the heart of this effort, aiming to foster conditions similar to those within the EU.

A notable example of this approach is the Barcelona Declaration of 1995, which established a partnership between the EU and twelve Mediterranean countries. This framework sought to integrate political, social, economic, financial, and security cooperation, embodying the EU’s vision of structural foreign policy in practice [Barcelona Declaration, 1995]. Notwithstanding, it was neither adequate nor comprehensive since leaving eastern states out of the cooperation umbrella.

5. Development of the European Neighborhood Policy

The first attempt to design a comprehensive foreign policy with the characteristics outlined above came from Poland, which, as a new EU member, sought to involve other Eastern European states- particularly Ukraine- to draw them closer to the Union [Adamczyk, 2013]. Building on this momentum, the European Commission in 2003 issued its Wider Europe Communication. This document presented an ambitious vision of extending peace, stability, and prosperity to the EU’s broader neighborhood, described as a “circle of friends” bound together by shared values and deeper integration. Responding to feedback- such as the expressed interest of Southern Caucasus countries to join the initiative- and considering subsequent internal and external developments, the Commission released an updated version in May 2004 [Pomorska, 2006]. The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia played a significant role in this decision, as the EU interpreted it as a clear alignment with its own objectives.

Alongside formal EU initiatives, non-formal regional engagements also emerged. One notable example was the “3+3 initiative” launched by the Baltic states- Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia- together with the South Caucasus countries of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Sharing a common Soviet legacy, the Baltic trio sought to transfer their own experiences of “Europeanisation” to their Caucasian counterparts. This initiative proved particularly effective in the case of Lithuania and Georgia, culminating in the establishment of a coordination center within the Georgian Embassy in Vilnius [Simão, 2018, p.68].

As with all bilateral or multilateral relations, the effectiveness of engagement depends heavily on how each side perceives the other. Mutual understanding is shaped by what is offered and what is expected, and when these needs are correctly identified, the resulting structures are more likely to endure. In the case of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), effectiveness was most

visible between 2004 and 2009, after which a new framework was required to address its shortcomings. Nevertheless, important milestones were achieved during this period. In 2006, the EU negotiated and agreed upon ENP Action Plans with three states. These bilateral strategic documents outlined reform priorities, cooperation goals, and benchmarks for progress over several years. For Azerbaijan, the plan emphasized energy cooperation, legal reform, and administrative capacity-building. Georgia’s plan focused on democratic reform, public administration, and conflict resolution. Armenia’s priorities centered on judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and economic liberalization [European Neighbourhood Policy, 2005]. Although these plans were not legally binding, their implementation was monitored through periodic reviews and reports every two to three years.

6. Institutional Presence and Financial Assistance under ENPI

Delcour and Duhot (2011) argue that the European Union’s institutional presence in the South Caucasus developed unevenly across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, though it broadly followed a similar path of formalization during the mid-2000s. In Armenia, the EU Delegation was established in Yerevan in 2008, strengthening bilateral cooperation and raising the EU’s visibility. Azerbaijan also saw the opening of an EU Delegation in Baku in 2008, which formalized diplomatic engagement and created a permanent channel for dialogue. Georgia, however, hosted the EU’s Regional Delegation in Tbilisi as early as 2005, later supplemented by a national delegation. At the regional level, all three countries signed bilateral European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) Action Plans in November 2006, signaling a formal alignment of their policy frameworks with EU priorities.

Financial assistance under the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) between 2007 and 2010 reflected differentiated priorities across the three states. Armenia received €98 million, directed toward governance, education, and nuclear safety. Azerbaijan was allocated €92 million, with a focus on border management, justice reform, and energy cooperation. Georgia benefited from €120.4 million, supporting reforms in public finance, the justice sector, and infrastructure development. At the regional level, ENPI replaced the earlier TACIS program, expanding both funding and flexibility. Dedicated envelopes were introduced for initiatives such as Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership, designed to promote regional cooperation alongside bilateral engagement.

7. Support for Governance, Rule of Law, and Conflict Sensitivity

EU support for governance and the rule of law in the South Caucasus varied across the three states. In Armenia, judicial reform was promoted through sector budget assistance worth €18 million, complemented by TAIEX workshops and EIDHR projects that strengthened legal awareness and

improved access to justice. Azerbaijan received €16 million for justice reform, achieving some technical progress, though the judiciary’s political independence remained weak. Georgia had earlier hosted the EUJUST THEMIS mission in 2004, which advised on criminal law reform, while TACIS and ENPI programs reinforced the Ministry of Justice and the Prosecutor’s Office. At the regional level, Twinning and TAIEX were introduced in 2007, EIDHR targeted NGOs and civil society, and the Instrument for Stability was deployed in post-conflict contexts.

Conflict sensitivity also shaped EU engagement in distinct ways. In Armenia, the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict constrained regional cooperation, with EU efforts focusing on confidence-building through civil society and cross-border initiatives. Azerbaijan declined to participate in joint ENP regional programs with Armenia, opting instead for bilateral formats. In Georgia, the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) was deployed after the 2008 war, and the EU played a central role in Geneva talks and donor coordination. At the regional level, the bilateral legal design of the ENP limited direct conflict resolution, though initiatives such as Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership provided alternative platforms for dialogue.

8. Regional Cooperation and Differentiation in the ENP

Regional cooperation initiatives revealed clear divergences among the South Caucasus states. Armenia took part in Black Sea Synergy and Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC), aiming to mitigate the isolation created by its closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan engaged only selectively, avoiding regional formats that included Armenia due to the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Georgia, by contrast, was highly active, participating in TRACECA (the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia), INOGATE (energy cooperation), and Black Sea Synergy. At the broader regional level, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) promoted networks in transport, energy, and environmental cooperation, while CBC initiatives targeted grassroots actors. A striking example of EU commitment to regional energy connectivity was the €300 million allocated to the Black Sea Energy Transmission System.

Over time, differentiation within the ENP became increasingly evident. Armenia pursued pragmatic engagement, prioritizing economic cooperation and sectoral reforms, with its diaspora playing a notable role in shaping ties with the EU. Azerbaijan maintained limited expectations from the ENP, using its energy resources- particularly Shah Deniz II- as leverage for strategic autonomy. Georgia, meanwhile, demonstrated strong ambitions for EU integration, launching negotiations for an Association Agreement (AA) and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). At the regional level, the ENP’s design allowed for tailored engagement: Georgia was regarded as a

reform frontrunner, Armenia as a pragmatic partner, and Azerbaijan as a selective participant. These distinctions were reflected in the respective Action Plans and underscored the EU’s differentiated approach to the South Caucasus.

9. Shortcomings of the ENP and the Transition to New Frameworks

Despite the positive effects of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), its shortcomings ultimately overshadowed its achievements, particularly in the South Caucasus. As Jagiello (2014) argues, the EU made several strategic missteps. First, the ENP was designed in a Eurocentric manner, with the EU positioning itself as a role model and assuming that partner countries would readily adopt European values. Second, even if partners fully complied with the principles outlined, they were offered no prospect of membership. The ENP promised “everything but institutions,” leaving no clear pathway to accession and thereby weakening its leverage. Finally, the policy grouped together vastly different countries under a single framework, disregarding regional and cultural distinctions. This diluted the effectiveness of its tools and reduced its overall impact.

Drawing lessons from these failures, Schimmelfennig and Kakhishvili (2024) propose several improvements to the EU’s approach toward its neighbors. These include strengthening conditionality mechanisms, engaging more effectively with civil society, promoting public participation and transparency, addressing regional disputes, and adopting a differentiated integration model that reflects the diversity of partner states.

The urgency of these reforms became increasingly evident. It was clear that Eastern European and South Caucasus states could not be treated in the same way as southern neighbors. As Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski remarked in 2008: “To the south, we have neighbours of Europe, to the east we have European neighbours.” His statement accompanied the Polish-Swedish proposal that launched the Eastern Partnership initiative (Devrim & Schulz, 2009), marking a shift toward a more tailored and region-sensitive framework.

10. Conclusion

The European Union’s engagement in the South Caucasus has progressed from hesitant humanitarian outreach to increasingly ambitious frameworks of cooperation. TACIS and ECHO provided vital early assistance but revealed the limits of improvised, donor-driven approaches. The ENP introduced structure and conditionality, yet its Eurocentric design, lack of membership perspective, and “one-size-fits-all” framework curtailed its transformative potential. The Eastern Partnership sought to correct these flaws by emphasizing differentiation and deeper integration, but its impact has varied sharply across the three states. Georgia has emerged as the reform frontrunner, aligning closely with EU norms and pursuing association agreements. Armenia

has adopted a pragmatic balancing strategy, engaging economically while constrained by unresolved conflicts and external pressures. Azerbaijan has remained selective, leveraging its energy resources for strategic autonomy while limiting political integration. These divergent paths underscore the article’s central argument: the EU cannot rely on uniform templates but must combine normative ambitions with pragmatic, conflict-sensitive policies tailored to each partner. Only through such differentiated engagement can the Union hope to exert lasting influence in a region that remains strategically contested and structurally fragile.

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