CHAPTER 8

The EU's Promotion of Human Rights in the South Caucasus: Underpinning Logics and Alternative Imaginations

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Introduction

In early March 2023, thousands of protesters took to the streets in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, in an attempt to prevent the passage of a controversial draft law on 'Agents of Foreign Influence'. Under the proposed bill, any Georgian-language media or non-governmental organization (NGO) registered in Georgia that receives over 20% of their annual income from abroad—that is, almost the entirety of Georgian NGOs—would be forced to register on a 'Foreign Influence Agents Registry'. While the ruling Georgian Dream party stressed the importance of following Western transparency standards, opposers of the draft bill denounced the attack on

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critical media and independent civil society organizations, including the people who benefit from their services (Women's Fund in Georgia, 2023). Protesters opposing what they dubbed the 'Russian law' discursively linked the proposed bill with the 'Foreign Agents Law' introduced in Russia in 2012: through legislative restrictions to undercut the transnational ties between Western donors and foreign-funded NGOs, coupled with a stigmatizing rhetoric, this had effectively turned "civil society into a geopolitical battleground" between the Russian conception of 'sovereign democracy' and Western democracy promotion agendas (Stuvøy, 2020). Brussels repeatedly warned that adoption of the law would undermine Georgia's prospects of joining the European Union (EU). In one video from the protests that went viral, a woman continues waving the EU flag even while being blasted by a water cannon. Popular mobilization in March 2023 had successfully halted adoption of the law, as the government withdrew the bill. However, the 'Foreign Agents' bill (and mass protests aimed at fighting it) made a comeback in Spring 2024, months after the European Commission had recommended granting candidate status to Georgia, and was eventually adopted in May 2024.

These ongoing developments highlight the need to examine not only the financial, but also the discursive and geopolitical entanglements between 'civil society' and 'Europe', as they are manifested and contested in the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU. Since the early 2010s, under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework, the EU has been engaging with civil society actors in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, considering them important partners in the bottom-up promotion of human rights, democracy and development (Buzogány, 2018; Luciani, 2021). However, in a context of waning global consensus concerning liberal democracy, the norms promoted by the EU and the very idea of an 'enabling' space for civil society have become deeply contested. The adoption of the 'Foreign Agents Law' in Georgia is another iteration of attempts by hybrid and authoritarian regimes in the Eurasian region to contest the role played by transnational civil society and its ties with Western donors (Cooley, 2019). In the South Caucasus, these trends intertwine with protracted conflicts and heightened EU-Russia competition over their neighbourhood—with the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine marking a major geopolitical turning point. This conjuncture has resulted in increased insecurity for rights-based civil society groups, who are labelled as agents of foreign powers and often targeted as proxies of what is perceived as Western cultural imperialism. Human rights NGOs in the region find themselves

caught between EU-sponsored standards of 'development' that they are expected to further promote and increased domestic and regional resistance to these very paradigms.

In this chapter, I propose a transnational and relational analysis of the EU's human rights promotion in the South Caucasus region. I will outline how the multi-scalar combination of EU interventions, post-socialist domestic conditions and grassroots agency creates particular challenges and tensions for local civil society. To do so, I will unpack three logics underpinning the EU's normative interventions in the South Caucasus—namely: depoliticization, homogenization and geopoliticization—and provide illustrations of how they play out on the ground in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Bringing together theoretical and empirical engagements, I will argue that local civil society actors are able to negotiate, subvert and resist these EU logics in multiple ways, which also make it possible to envision alternative social orders beyond EU-centric ones. The analysis draws on a combination of qualitative methods, including multi-sited participant observations, over 90 in-depth interviews and informal conversations (involving research participants from local civil societies, EU institutions, the scholarly and expert community, international donor organizations and governmental agencies), which were conducted between 2018–2022 in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Brussels in the framework of doctoral research (Luciani, 2022). An initial list of civil society organizations (CSOs) and experts collaborating with the EU was compiled from publicly available sources and personal contacts, and was subsequently further expanded by 'snowballing' a diverse range of respondents, from formal NGOs to grassroots initiatives and independent activists, which may or may not be engaged with the EU. The fieldwork data were supplemented by a discourse analysis performed on key EU policy documents, relevant statements, as well as media and social media sources.

This chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I will review the literature on civil society developments in the South Caucasus, focusing on the interplay between post-socialist conditions and international interventions. Following this, I will unpack the three dominant logics underpinning the EU's promotion of human rights, as they are mainstreamed and enacted in EU transnational cooperation with civil society in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Thirdly, I will consider ongoing attempts by activist groups in the South Caucasus to articulate alternatives beyond these dominant logics and their conditions of possibility in the current

geo-political context. Finally, I will discuss the prospects of critically reappraising the EU's promotion of human rights in the South Caucasus.

Civil society 'building' and transformations in the South Caucasus

During the latter years of the Soviet era, various networks dedicated to human rights and democracy, such as the Helsinki Citizens Assembly committees, were active in the South Caucasus and across Central and Eastern Europe. Some of these had roots tracing back to the 1975 Helsinki Accords or were affiliated with dissident movements from the perestroika era (Mendelson & Glenn, 2002). In the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, these networks experienced significant expansion, facilitated by the financial support provided to civil society initiatives by Western donors, which led to the establishment of the region's first human rights NGOs (Babajanian et al., 2005; Matveeva, 2008). The emergence of a 'civil society' must be placed in the context of the 'transition' programme in post-socialist Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, which was influenced by neoliberal ideologies and the Washington consensus (Ishkanian, 2014). As an alternative to the totalitarian rule of the communist state, an independent civil society was considered to be a necessary precondition for democracy. Aside from this, it was also a means for creating a free market economy, by dismantling the social state and outsourcing its responsibilities to non-state actors (Baća, 2022; Matveeva, 2008; Ishkanian, 2014). Around the same period, optimistic scholarship praised the emerging role played by NGOs, as entities (allegedly) guided by activist—rather than power- or profit-driven—principles (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Transnational advocacy networks gained attention for their perceived ability to pressure "even repressive governments to enact progressive change by mobilizing outside allies in likeminded international organizations, states, and large NGOs" (Cooley, 2019 598). Along these lines, donors viewed the presence of civil society in the post-socialist region as an indicator of development and progress in the transition towards liberal democracy. Although numerous NGOs were formally established, the practical landscape demonstrated low levels of trust and public engagement, which combined with government suspicion and a widespread structural reliance on donor funding. The 'weakness' of post-socialist civil society evoked by Howard (2003) became an explanation for

its limited role in democratization and a defining feature of the region, one that was perceived as almost pathological.

While some scholars have argued that the historical legacies of the Soviet period weakened the ability of civil society to facilitate democratization in the South Caucasus (Aliyev, 2015; Paturyan & Gevorgyan, 2021), a number of accounts critiqued the dominant normative view and the (unintended) consequences of external civil society-building, whereby institutional designs and economic resources from Europe and North America were 'transplanted' to the post-socialist region (Atlani-Duault, 2007; Hann & Dunn, 1996; Vetta, 2009). Ishkanian (2014, p. 152) describes this phenomenon as a "genetically engineered" civil society: by this, she means that, thanks to the injection of external funding, it "experienced spectacularly rapid growth, which would have not occurred organically". She shows how, within one year of the establishment of a local NGO Resource and Training Centre funded by USAID in Yerevan, the number of NGOs registered in Armenia went up from 44 to more than 1500 in 1996. In a post-communist context, where many people had lost their jobs or did not have the financial means to survive, NGOs essentially became a business or a source of income. The resulting 'civil society' was characterized by a professionalized structure and donor-driven agenda, which lacked a grassroots constituency and was unable to mobilize society "or contentiously address the most pressing issues brought about by rapid socioeconomic transformation" (Baća, 2022, p. 8). At the same time, in an NGO-ized context, the civic sector crafted effective strategies to influence the state by advocating for improved governance and reforms, while also assuming the role of the state in delivering essential services (Baća, 2022; Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech, 2014). Nevertheless, even the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia (2003) or Ukraine (2004), where civil society played a pivotal role, came to be understood as democratic "moments" rather than enduring movements (Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech, 2014, p. 11).

In recent years, scholars have emphasized the diversity of post-socialist civil society, pointing to the emergence of new actors, claims and forms of engagement—together with a recognition that illiberal actors, as well as CSOs closely related to governments, "populate civic space" as much as pro-Western and pro-democracy CSOs and activists (Balfour et al., 2020, p. 15; see also Ishkanian & Manusyan, 2019). Various explanations have been given for these transformations, which were also visible in the South Caucasus. Firstly, they could be read as a response to the perceived disconnect of the NGOs from concerns that the citizenry considered as pressing

(Balfour et al., 2020; Dilanyan et al., 2018). In Armenia, small grassroots 'civic initiatives' and left-leaning groups that emerged around the 2010s have critiqued neoliberal policies, and their impact on socio-economic inequalities and the environment (Ishkanian, 2016). Similarly, the recent anti-dam movement in Western Georgia, spearheaded by the 'Save Rioni Valley' activists, has been described as a subaltern attempt to fight for development paths that offer an alternative to the neoliberal capitalist option (Rekhviashvili, 2021). Secondly, these transformations reflect shifts in state-civil society relations, such as in the aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine and the Velvet Revolution in Armenia (Ishkanian & Manusyan, 2019; Shapovalova & Burlyuk, 2018). Last but not least, they constitute coping strategies in response to mounting authoritarian repression of Western-funded NGOs (Chiarvesio & Di Puppo, 2022; Stuvøy, 2020). In Azerbaijan, the progressive curtailment of freedoms for organized civil society between 2013 and 2015 resulted in the strengthening of the state-led civil society, through government funding and attempts at co-opting independent activists. At the same time, however, it also led to the emergence of non-formalized, youth civic initiatives based on volunteering, crowd-funding and social media engagement (Luciani, 2023b; Kamilsoy, 2023).

Considering this fluidity and ambiguity, new analytical paradigms have also emerged. Baća (2022, p. 16) advocates for a departure from normative notions centred on "the region's Westernisation through 'catching up'", to focus instead on empirical realities and the diversity of compliant and contentious practices "through which postsocialist civil societies are manifested, enacted, and actualized". Drawing on Gramscian insights, other contributions have made the case for viewing post-socialist civil society as a battleground for hegemonic struggles related to democratization, neoliberal restructuring and European integration (Khelaia & Chivadze, 2022; Mikuš, 2018; Shirinov, 2015). Diverging from the tendency to focus on large-scale, political upheavals (e.g.: revolutions) in the study of post-socialist civil societies, anthropologists have suggested looking at the everyday work of activists with a focus on 'prefigurative politics': a commitment to fight different forms of domination while seeking to construct alternative futures in the aftermath of state socialism, neoliberal reforms and the professionalization of civil society (Kurtović & Sargsyan, 2019; Milan, 2021). This chapter is inspired by these types of critical perspectives, which have not yet found appropriate consideration in the study of the EU's external engagements with post-socialist civil society—a topic

that is mainly characterized by debates related to (in)effectiveness in the diffusion of norms or 'Europeanization' (Luciani, 2021). Although this chapter examines civil society developments in the South Caucasus in the transnational context of the EU's policies aimed at promoting human rights, it does not approach civil society as a means for the EU to pursue its pre-defined democratization and development goals, but rather as an arena of struggle and diversity—wherein hegemonic orders can be reproduced, negotiated as well as contested.

EU HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION VIA CIVIL SOCIETY: UNPACKING THE LOGICS

Published a few months after the beginning of the Arab Spring, the 2011 Joint Communication 'Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of EU External Action: Towards a more effective approach' addressed the need for a more enhanced engagement with civil society in the EU's external relations. This 'local turn' was subsequently reflected in the conclusions produced by the Council in 2012 on 'The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development': in this document, civil society is acknowledged as a key component of any democracy, contributing to "more effective policies, equitable development and inclusive growth" and playing a crucial role in the promotion of human rights (Council of the European Union, 2012). Five years later, the Council reaffirmed this commitment to a "more strategic engagement with CSOs [which] should be mainstreamed in all external instruments and programmes and in all areas of cooperation", including in the European Neighbourhood Policy (Council of the European Union, 2017). From 2016 onwards, the idea of 'resilience' gained a prominent role in the EU's agenda, something that was most clearly seen with the 2020 Joint Communication 'Eastern Partnership Policy Beyond 2020': in this, resilience was intended to foster local ownership by further shifting responsibility from the EU to the domestic level, with an emphasis placed on the ability of partner countries to come up with their own solutions to deal with crises (Petrova & Delcour, 2020). In this context, human rights groups in the South Caucasus have benefited from EU financial assistance, strengthened cooperation and consultations and have also had opportunities to participate in policy developments, both multilaterally and bilaterally. However, despite the rhetoric of 'local ownership', governments in the region have met EU efforts with

suspicion. Moreover, the historical disconnect between the public and organized civil society has persisted, together with the dependency of the latter on donor funding.

In the remainder of this section, I will propose a three-fold typology to unpack the three main logics that underpin the promotion of human rights by the EU, and the effects they produce on the ground, based on the findings of my doctoral research (Luciani, 2022). The logic of *depoliticization* entails the reframing of human rights from a radical political action into a technical-legal process, whereby CSOs are intended to play the role of neutral mediators. *Homogenization*, in turn, suggests that human rights struggles abroad are measured against the EU's own experience and models, foreseeing the approximation of South Caucasus countries and societies to EU standards, which are purported as universal. Finally, *geopoliticization* involves the discursive construction of human rights, particularly in the realm of gender and sexuality, through the civilizational and value-laden binaries of 'the EU versus Russia'. Each logic will be examined in a separate subsection, weaving together theoretical engagements with existing literature that has problematized the normative interventions of the EU, as well as original empirical evidence from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Although they will be disentangled for analytical clarity, these three logics should be understood as interrelated and mutually reinforcing. As I will show, they are co-constituted within the encounter between EU policies and grassroots agency: they can be actively reproduced or appropriated by civil society actors on the ground for particular purposes or challenged in more or less overt ways (Luciani, 2022).

Depoliticization

'The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Women' emerged as a grassroots movement in Armenia in 2010, following the brutal murder of Zaruhi Petrosyan by her husband. The Coalition subsequently institutionalized and registered as an NGO; it has received financial support under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), among other sources, to implement awareness-raising activities, lobby for improved state policies and provide services to support survivors of gender-based violence. What emerged from the interviews conducted as part of this research is that Coalition members often struggled to find a balance between a radical commitment to fighting patriarchal violence, including through disruptive actions held against state institutions, and

the more reformist, advocacy and service-provision role they were obligated to fulfil as 'beneficiaries' of EU funding (Luciani, forthcoming). As EU funding schemes require CSOs to deal with cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, this reduces the amount of time activists can dedicate to grassroots mobilization—which, according to the interviewees, had at times proved more effective in achieving change than lobbying government officials (ibidem). These findings echo the arguments made by scholars who conceptualize the EU's promotion of civil society in its external relations as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Kurki, 2011; Muehlenhoff, 2019). Accordingly, the EU facilitates a neoliberal conception of democracy and human rights (promotion)—one that extends the free market ideas of entrepreneurship and competition into all spheres of social life. EU funding practices *depoliticize* CSOs, encouraging them to become service providers substituting the state and bearers of rational, efficient and apolitical solutions for deeply political questions. Thus, human rights politics is reframed from transformative political action into a series of visible, measurable and controllable activities. CSOs navigate such neoliberal rationalities and depoliticizing logics in different ways: while interviewees from the Coalition were required to conform to the EU's 'rules of the game' in order to financially sustain their activities and provide essential services such as shelters, which would otherwise not be available to women in Armenia, they also stressed the need to carry out "more radical actions", including disruptions held against the state, and to challenge the status quo by continuously questioning EU project frameworks and procedures (Luciani, forthcoming).

The depoliticizing logic is also manifested in a legalistic understanding of human rights—as the EU requires neighbouring countries to adopt specific laws and create institutions that are meant to uphold them, assuming that social change will follow from 'approximation' to and compliance with particular legal standards. For 10 years, the 'Coalition to stop Violence against Women' had been advocating for the adoption of a national law to prevent and combat domestic and gender-based violence. After being rejected in 2013, the bill was eventually adopted in late 2017, only after the EU had attached conditionality to its passing, namely the disbursement of €12 million in aid under the Human Rights Budget Support programme. However, when human rights reforms are adopted from a list of pre-established EU requirements in exchange for particular incentives (visa liberalization, a budget-support programme or eventual EU membership), their implementation may remain elusive (Dilanyan

et al., 2018; Slootmaeckers, 2023). The Armenian domestic violence law adopted in 2017 thanks to EU conditionality contained highly problematic wording, affirming the primacy of 'family reconciliation' over the protection of victims' rights, and lacked implementation mechanisms.[1] This, in turn, is not conducive to real change in societal attitudes: laws meant to protect marginalized communities remain on paper only if these people do not seek justice for fear of the further social exclusion that follows from speaking up for one's rights, in a context where legal norms do not resonate with societal attitudes (Slootmaeckers, 2023). Finally, while both governments and NGOs receive EU funding to pursue their implementation, this technocratic manner of developing human rights legislation may fuel opposition against 'foreign interventions' (Rawłuszko, 2021): in the Armenian context—marked as it is by the Russian rhetoric of 'traditional values' as well as societal perceptions of a contradiction between the Western-sponsored human rights agenda and 'local traditions'—feminist activists found themselves caught under the 'double pressure' of Western conditionality and local anti-gender groups, who discredited EU interventions as promoting 'values from outside' (Luciani, forthcoming).

Homogenization

The EU's promotion of human rights is sustained by a complex system of project- and country-reports, European integration indexes and roadmaps, through which South Caucasus countries and their (civil) societies are permanently categorized and evaluated vis-à-vis international standards, EU expectations and benchmarks of 'success'. This system relies on particular regimes of visibility, allowing the 'knower' to transmit specific information and transform particular subjects into a whole field of knowledge (Luciani, 2023b). In the authoritarian context of Azerbaijan, the EU tends to classify civil society groups based on their attitudes vis-à-vis the government, distinguishing between 'independent' and 'government-organized' NGOs (GONGOs) (Luciani, 2023b). This posits a liberal understanding of civil society, articulated as autonomous from and opposed to the state, as the 'normal'—overlooking the complex experiences and struggles that civil society groups face on the ground (Stuvøy,

[1] Following the 2018 Velvet revolution, the Armenian domestic violence law was amended multiple times to improve its enforcement and support for survivors, most significantly in April 2024.

2020). In a repressive environment, Azerbaijani CSOs have developed pragmatic and ambiguous coping strategies in order to perform human rights work without exposing themselves to government repression (Luciani, 2023b). Some interviewees regretted that, in the years leading up to the crackdown, Western support of civil society focused on topics that are antagonized by the government, such as the issue of political prisoners, while overlooking 'softer' issues (such as domestic violence, labour rights or water management) that are also political—as "the rest of the population is not in prison but still repressed" (Azerbaijani women's rights defender, cited in Luciani, 2023b). At the same time, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war exposed the vacuity of these binary categorizations, as the views of many civil society representatives that had benefited from EU grants for the promotion of democracy and peacebuilding converged with the position of 'GONGOs' in supporting the military actions and Armenophobic rhetoric of President Ilham Aliyev.

Rutazibwa (2013, p. 94) has described the "homogenizing effect" of ethical agendas in Western foreign policy, which "mirrors, or is inspired by, western experiences and achievements". Due to a changing consensus in Western societies about what a 'good life' entails, and since the proposed agenda "often does not match the needs or priorities of the receivers and therefore fails to take root, the need for western interventions is moreover consolidated in time" (ibidem). This logic of homogenization, which is also evident in the EU's mode of knowledge production about the countries and (civil) societies in its neighbourhood, has two consequences that are worth considering. Firstly, as the EU's contingent models and categories are purported to be universally applicable and neutral, the promotion of human rights serves to re-produce the cultural superiority of Europe,[2] while strengthening the representation of post-socialist South Caucasus countries as permanently 'catching up' (Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2017). In this context, civil society becomes an "agent in a geopolitical ordering of state-civil society relations", which should be restructured following the EU blueprint (Stuvøy, 2020, p. 14). Secondly, local struggles for emancipation are measured against the EU's own standards and expectations regarding democratization. This conceals the fact that post-socialist countries find themselves in different historical, social and political

[2] The term 'EUrope' indicates a hegemonic position of the EU in influencing and defining the notion of Europe/European, and the fact that the two notions are often conflated in EU discourse.

conditions, requiring a different approach to the promotion of human rights than a mere copying and pasting of Western models. In Azerbaijan, EU interventions generate particular imaginaries of state-civil society relations that reduce local complexities but reinforce the self-understanding of Brussels as a 'normative power'. However, these practices may have the unintentional consequence of reinforcing the regime's grip over civil society, by creating a strong aid addiction that makes any crackdowns by governments easier to enact—as the money comes from abroad and domestic support for NGOs is not strong—and by exacerbating competition for external funding among civic groups (Luciani, 2023b). At the same time, discourses, practices or aspirations that deviate from the EU-centric canon are ignored. Donor-centric accounts of Azerbaijani civic space as simply 'shrinking' obscure subtler shifts and transformations: notably, the emergence of groups that intentionally position themselves outside of the 'donor-recipient' chain, prefiguring alternative modes of activism beyond the neoliberal civil society, rejecting "the notion that from authoritarianism [Azerbaijani society] should go to liberalism" and advocating for more radical, leftist and feminist futures (Kluczewska & Luciani, 2023).

Geopoliticization

The fact that Western agendas that promote democracy and civil society are skewed by geopolitics is not a novel argument: donors tend to reward NGOs whose pro-Western, English-speaking leaders 'think and act' like them (Ishkanian, 2014), while geopolitical interests determine the level of financial aid and democratic conditionality in resource-rich, authoritarian countries like Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2016). Moreover, normative agendas can be appropriated by domestic socio-political actors to signal belonging to a Euro-Atlantic imagined community or contested to strengthen authoritarian arrangements in the name of resistance to Western cultural imperialism—as the struggles around the Georgian 'Foreign Agent Law' evoked above suggest. Here, I consider the logic of geopoliticization as an outcome of EU-Russia competition over their so-called shared neighbourhood (Cadier, 2019): this crystallizes the idea of a value-based divide between so-calledpro-European' constituencies—equated with 'liberal' and 'modern' values—and 'pro-Russian' constituencies—equated with 'illiberal' and 'backward' values (Luciani, 2023a). One example of this is the framing of LGBTQ+ equality, epitomized by the safe holding of Pride marches, as a test for a country's commitment to 'European values', a

practice that has been scrutinized in the literature on the Eastern enlargement of the EU (Slootmaeckers, 2023). In non-candidate EaP countries, located in the EU-Russia 'neighbourhood', commitment to LGBTQ+ equality has also come to discursively mark a country's differentiation from Russia and the Soviet past—a strategy that was noticeable in the debates that surrounded the holding of the Tbilisi Pride event in 2019 (Luciani, 2023a). By framing the holding of a 'March for Dignity' in geopolitical terms, the Pride organizers managed to attract Western political and financial solidarity, while shaming the Georgian government for not upholding the 'European values' of freedom of expression and assembly for queer people. However, this framing also reproduced cultural cleavages between so-called progressive and backward parts of Georgian society, exacerbating already polarized political and public debates. Part of the Georgian queer community contested the relevance of Pride as an internationally sanctioned, one-day recognition of LGBTQ+ equality, pointing instead to the everyday socio-economic exclusion faced by queer people. However, these views were sidelined from the debate because they did not fit into the dominant geopolitical dichotomies (Luciani, 2023a).

Although such deconstructions of geopolitical binaries may seem misplaced at a time when LGBTQ+ rights are openly weaponized by Russia to justify its war of aggression in Ukraine, it is important to underline how the geopoliticization of gender and sexuality resulting from EU foreign policy practices is also constraining in specific ways. As critical scholarship has shown, civilizational framings of LGBTQ+ rights may have outcomes that backfire or are outright harmful: on the one hand, they may provide activists with a strategic framework to advance rights claims and push governments to adopt pro-human rights policies. However, while such 'progress' can be showcased internationally by governments who aspire to have their claims to 'Europeanness' recognized, they can also be domestically undermined by homophobic rhetoric and practices (Slootmaeckers, 2023). On the other hand, civilizational framings of homophobia—as something the 'West' has already left behind but that is still culturally present in the 'East'—can foster the consolidation of anti-LGBTQ+ forces (Kahlina, 2015). In Georgia, the geopoliticization of LGBTQ+ rights has resulted in an overwhelming focus on queer visibility, which is increasingly instrumentalized by domestic political elites and met with violence by the Far Right, to the detriment of socio-economic challenges that are perceived as the most pressing for the queer community *and* the broader population—such as unemployment, poverty, protection from

homelessness and access to education (Jalagania, 2020, p. 152). The logic of geopoliticization also works to obscure the political-economic realities, such as neoliberal deregulation and dispossession, which both generate suspicion vis-à-vis the 'West' and reproduce the societal insecurities for which queer communities are scapegoated (see, Rao, 2020).

Alternative imaginations

In a recent contribution on the decolonial critique of knowledge production and activism in Eastern Europe, Popovici (2023) described the "post-socialist activist condition" as a subaltern agency, meaning that civic and activist struggles in the region are acknowledged "only if they contribute to development as catching up" with their Western counterparts. Furthermore, this condition results in the marginalization of any emancipatory narratives "seeking liberation from labour exploitation, patriarchal dominance, or state authoritarianism", as they do not fit into the dominant binaries of 'westernization' versus nationalism, coated in anti-imperialist language (ibidem). In the South Caucasus, such alternative narratives are mostly voiced by activists operating on the margins of funding schemes operated by Western donors and, more rarely, within formally established NGOs that characterize themselves as oriented towards social justice. In a post-socialist context where neoliberalism has assumed 'gospel' status among the political elites and liberal civil society alike (Ishkanian, 2016), these voices remain small-scale and unlikely to pose a fundamental challenge to the current hegemonies. Nevertheless, as I will suggest in the remainder of this section, they prefigure forms of autonomy, solidarity and resistance that challenge the promotion of human rights as it is currently envisioned by the EU—revealing decolonial alternatives from a more grounded, as opposed to a theoretical, point of view.

My research shows that human rights groups in the South Caucasus are critically reconsidering the outcomes that dependence on donors' funding and priorities produce. To prevent co-optation by donors and governments, and the depoliticization of radical struggles, groups such as the 'MiL Network' or 'Feminist Peace Collective' in Azerbaijan, 'Left Resistance' in Armenia and the 'Khma' movement in Georgia refuse to take part in the EU grants economy and the rationalities that come attached to it. They may instead choose to rely on crowdfunding, donations or engage with alternative donors (such as feminist funds) that are seen as less top-down, hierarchical and bureaucratic. At the same time, it

remains challenging for groups and organizations in the South Caucasus to be completely independent in the face of structural, political and cultural realities (Dilanyan et al., 2018). As the Georgian protests against the 'Foreign Agents Law' suggest, cutting oneself off from the international lifeline of external funding is not a desirable outcome—especially for CSOs representing the interests of vulnerable communities. Moreover, the extent to which these independent initiatives are sustainable in authoritarian contexts where they are marginalized or repressed, such as in post-war Azerbaijan, remains questionable. Nevertheless, there is a need to envision alternative forms of organizing and sustaining socio-political activism beyond the NGO model: by repositioning civil society further away from donors and governments and closer to the public, gearing resources towards grassroots mobilization and long-term social and cultural transformations. Indeed, while human rights remain the frame of reference for the EU and CSOs in the region, more radical claims for dignity and justice also deserve a hearing. The disjuncture between EU-sponsored legislative frameworks or institutionalized recognitions of rights and the lived experience of everyday oppression calls for the liberal rights-based frameworks to be transcended, to instead pursue transformative agendas aimed at systemic change and redistributive interventions.

Related to this, some civil society groups attempt to eschew the various regimes of visibility that result in homogenizing outcomes: these include the production of knowledge on civil society, aimed at evaluating its activities in conformity with the EU's expectations regarding democratization, but also forms of recognition and 'progress' that are intelligible to Western audiences, such as Pride marches. This is also linked to a critique of 'European values' as a colonial construct that de-historicizes and delegitimizes the development path of countries in the South Caucasus—as some activists struggle to recast the post-socialist experience not as a 'deviation' from EUropean modernity, but as a ground from which to draw lessons and on which to build alternative futures. For instance, feminists in Armenia challenge the rhetoric of gender equality as a EUropean characteristic or 'value', pointing to the existence of and the need to retrieve local feminist histories and thinkers (Luciani, 2022). However, 'authenticity' is not always a possible alternative in the so-called Global East, as "indigenous forms of life and knowledge that ground decolonial projects in the Americas, Africa, and Asia" are not easily identifiable or have not been sufficiently explored in the region (Kušić et al., 2019, p. 28). Although particular models of activism are inevitably shaped by the

experience of Western countries, some of the research participants still insisted on the need for external human rights promoters and the domestic civil society to acknowledge that their country and society "is in different conditions" (Georgian human rights NGO worker, cited in Luciani, 2022, p. 162).

Against the shrinking of knowledge production in the South Caucasus to a binary space of EU-Russia competition, global neoliberal hegemonies, as they take root in competing geopolitical alliances, also need to be re-centred in activism (Shirinian, 2021). One interviewee noted that "many people see the geopolitical competition, one empire playing against the other", while simultaneously considering themselves "outside of the human rights that are being promoted [by the EU]" (Armenian scholar, cited in Luciani, 2022, p. 162): this is because poverty, economic violence and the devastating consequences of capitalism are not addressed in human rights programming, besides being further exacerbated by the macroeconomic policies and market-based criteria that drive the development agenda of the EU in the region (see, Debusscher, 2012). A potential alternative strategy would involve re-focusing human rights agendas on local needs, while delinking them from geopolitics. This approach could alleviate cultural cleavages within society and foster intersectional, progressive coalitions among allied groups. Still, implementing such an approach remains challenging, especially in contexts where contentious issues like LGBTQ+ rights are manipulated for geo-political purposes. For instance, the 'Save Rioni Valley' grassroots environmental movement had managed to bring together protesters from very different segments of Georgian society, including rural communities, Tbilisi-based human rights NGOs and queer activists, around demands for economic and environmental justice (Rekhviashvili, 2021). However, this unity collapsed in July 2021, when its leaders participated in an anti-Pride rally under pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church and far-right groups, leading the Georgian CSOs 'Social Justice Center' and 'Green Alternative' to cut ties with the movement (Schiffers, 2021).

During an interview conducted with one Armenian eco-feminist activist, she explained that, despite doing "work which is helping humans to enjoy their rights, including political and economic rights", she does not frame her struggles in the language of human rights, considering her standpoint as being "more radical" (Luciani, 2022, p. 162). She is part of a coalition of grassroots movements named 'Left Resistance', which was created in 2020 as a united front to "liberate the people and nature from

the oppression of capital, workers from exploitation, womxn[3] from patriarchy, the country from neo-colonial dependence, and our society from xenophobia" (Progressive International, n.d.). As stated in their manifesto, 'Left Resistance' "rejects authoritarianism, domination, exploitation and subordination, […] transcends national boundaries and strives for a just, free, solidary and post-capitalist society" (Progressive International, n.d.). One way of strengthening this resistance is through alliances with people abroad who are fighting for the same goals, for instance anti-mining movements across the Global South, by spreading information and translations about their campaigns and writing statements in solidarity with them. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and its aftermath heavily affected 'Left Resistance', exposing ideological fractures within the group, leaving some members burned-out and further narrowing down the discursive space for critiquing patriarchal and reactionary arrangements in a militarized society. Nevertheless, initiatives like this one testify to the development of decolonial discourse, thinking and agency in the South Caucasus, through the search for means of emancipation that involve "coalitions and dialogues with others on a global scale" (Tlostanova, 2010, p. xx).

Conclusions

This chapter has proposed a relational and transnational analysis of the EU's promotion of human rights in the South Caucasus, revealing how the multi-scalar combination of EU interventions, post-socialist domestic conditions and grassroots agency have created particular challenges and tensions for local civil society groups. This chapter has taken a critical stance towards EU human rights promotion; however, other scholars, including a number in this volume, have demonstrated that EU interventions have the positive potential to open up the political and discursive opportunity structure for certain claims (including radical ones) to be put on the domestic agenda (e.g. Buzogány, 2022). While not dismissing such findings, this chapter has aimed to advance problematizations of the EU's normative interventions in the neighbourhood that have yet to become mainstream, by foregrounding the power relations therein and civil society negotiations thereof.

[3]The term "womxn" used in the manifesto is an intersectional alternative spelling of "woman"/"women" meant to include transgender and non-white women.

The chapter has made a two-fold contribution. Firstly, it has proposed a three-fold typology to unpack the logics of depoliticization, homogenization and geopoliticization that underpin the EU's promotion of human rights. It suggested that EU policies not only overlook the realities and obstacles human rights NGOs and activists in the South Caucasus face when working on the ground; amid a shifting geopolitical conjuncture, they may even limit these groups' room for manoeuvre in managing domestic resistance. At the same time, the chapter has provided illustrations of how civil society actors are able to negotiate these logics and navigate the contradictions they produce, by interrogating their EU-centric foundations and by prefiguring alternative socio-political orders. Although this chapter has focused on the South Caucasus region, the proposed typology holds relevance for other contexts where similar logics are at play, such as Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia. Secondly, while illiberal, conservative and ultra-nationalist forces have been the most vocal in questioning the EU's promotion of norms in the South Caucasus and the role of Western-funded civil society, this chapter has engaged with another, lesser-examined, form of contestation emerging 'from below': that voiced by left-wing, feminist and grassroots groups working for social justice, who contest the legitimacy of the liberal civil society and its donors, their detachment from societal concerns and the neoliberal, Western-centric developmental model they reproduce. Although such political visions and mobilization attempts remain both marginal and marginalized in the current geo-political context in the South Caucasus, I have argued that they constitute grassroots attempts at imagining different futures, beyond the options offered by the EU's development paradigms as well as by nationalist, authoritarian and imperialist agendas that contest the logics of European modernity but propose no true emancipation.

The critiques presented in this chapter call for a reflexive rethinking of EU foreign policy practices, one that would carefully (re)consider the consequences that external interventions have for "the real bodies and lives of people who inhabit the 'subject positions' to which 'democracy' and 'human rights' are then 'applied'" (Kulpa, 2014, p. 434). It is crucial to take this contestation seriously, rather than falling into "the trap of geopolitics" and discrediting it as the outcome of Russian disinformation campaigns (Valenza, 2021). However, in 2020 the EU announced a "geopolitical agenda on human rights and democracy" (European Commission, 2020), while demands for a more geopolitical and security-conscious Union have gained further traction following Russia's full-scale invasion

of Ukraine. This 'geopolitical turn' seems to have reinforced already problematic tendencies: on the one hand, there has been a doubling-down on the EU's *mission civilisatrice* in opposition to the 'Others' that it portrays as bad. In a tweet popularized by Georgian media outlets, Member of the European Parliament Viola von Cramon stated that if the EU were to grant candidate status to Georgia (as eventually happened) "it's not because government & ruling party implemented all the priorities the EU had given to Georgia but because the Georgian people deserve it *and the geopolitical logic demands it*", followed by the hashtag: #StopRussiaNow.[4] On the other hand, a *Realpolitik* consideration can be invoked to pursue extractivist policies that disregard human rights altogether. In July 2022, EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev concluded a memorandum of understanding on an energy strategic partnership, aimed at reducing the EU's dependency on Russia. Brussels's willingness to whitewash the authoritarian Azerbaijani regime as a 'trustworthy partner' to guarantee gas supplies came at the expense of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh—as testified by Azerbaijan's nine-month blockade that preceded the military recapture of the region in 2023—and of Azerbaijani dissident voices who are currently experiencing a second crackdown. If a geopolitical EU is meant to promote the 'European way of life' abroad more strongly, the chances the EU will reflexively rethink its role on the global stage seem rather low.

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[4] See: https://twitter.com/ViolavonCramon/status/1653046330908876803 (last accessed August 5, 2023).

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