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### **Beyond human rights ‘promotion’: reimagining the EU-South Caucasus relation**

*The EU’s policies of human rights ‘promotion’ in the South Caucasus region are loaded with coloniality. Rather than projecting a pre-set agenda with homogenising outcomes, the EU should recognise the ‘right to opacity’ of South Caucasus communities and create space for locally meaningful, emancipatory claims to emerge.*

Following a global trend, in the past decade the European Union (EU) devised the principle of [local ownership](#) as a way to legitimise its human rights interventions in third countries, including in the South Caucasus region. Within this reasoning, support to civil society is expected to contribute to bottom-up democratisation, improved human rights protection and ‘development’.

But while the EU proudly presents itself as one of the biggest donors for civil society in the South Caucasus, scholarly and activist voices from the region urge to “[decolonise](#)” Eurocentric approaches to human rights ‘promotion’. This begs two main questions: what is there exactly to decolonise in EU-South Caucasus relations? And how could we reimagine the EU’s human rights policies in the South Caucasus through post-development thinking?

Answering the first question requires considering the interstitial position that Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – within the wider post-socialist ‘East’ – occupy in world politics. Despite not having been dominated by Western colonial powers, these spaces served as [orientalised colonies](#) against which the Russian empire could define its own Europeanness. In light of their relative proximity (read: peripherality) to colonial Europe, these borderlands [voluntarily absorbed](#) its basic values and cultural supremacy. In short, they are “[not-quite-North](#)”, but also “[not-quite-South](#)”.

Since the Soviet Union’s collapse, these borderlands’ ‘development’ trajectory has been measured according to Western-centric yardsticks, as the so-called ‘Europeanisation’ theory suggests. It was assumed that they would smoothly ‘transition’ from state-controlled to neoliberal market-economy, from a one-party system to a liberal democracy – ultimately ‘catching up’ with Western modernity. However, in spite of this teleological narrative, their ‘[Eastness](#)’ has never been completely erased.

This same [logic](#) governs the EU’s relationship with the South Caucasus: the Eastern Partnership framework expects these countries to ‘modernise’ and adopt particular standards of development and ‘good life’ – by [approximating](#) key EU legal norms in the domains of human rights, democracy,

good governance and sustainable development. Simultaneously, they are denied the opportunity to fully integrate the EU – remaining in the “[waiting room of history](#)”.

As they are meant to ‘stabilise’ a [conflict-ridden](#) region close to home, and to secure the EU’s hegemony vis-à-vis other regional powers, these policies could be read as a continuation of colonial Europe’s *mission civilisatrice*: a way of using normative discourses to legitimise hierarchical relations between the ‘core’ and the ‘periphery’.

Clearly, the goal of the EU’s human rights policies is to make the South Caucasus region look more like the EU itself, in [a homogenising and depoliticising](#) fashion, rather than to open up the space for locally-owned agendas.

By claiming it [promotes](#) the “universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms”, the EU articulates a [harmonious and consensual discourse](#) where all rights are seen to push in the same direction of democracy and ‘development’. However, more complex struggles are at play – as human rights are not a neutral but a contested political project.

For instance, when it requires partner countries like Georgia to adopt anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBTIQ people, tying these reforms to the negotiations of a visa liberalisation regime and free-trade agreement, the EU is [promoting a particular model of equality](#) grounded in a neoliberal capitalist system. These interventions reduce the space for critical views on (LGBTIQ) rights as part of broader struggles for social justice, which may be more locally relevant.

The normalisation of the EU’s own models and its transfer abroad also contributed to the [‘geopoliticization’](#) of norms in the region: as the human rights agenda became entrenched with Western security interests, it started to lose meaning per se – while being instrumentalised by political elites to either signal their belonging to a Euro-Atlantic imagined community, or to resist cultural imperialism while strengthening authoritarian rule.

Instead of ‘supporting’ bottom-up developments, the EU’s practices most often constrain the agency of the local civil society sector, which in the South Caucasus is still heavily NGO-ised and reliant on (Western) donors’ funding. This money comes with strings attached: in the [words](#) of a civil society worker from Tajikistan, also relevant here, NGOs are often “eating bread crumbs of donors’ geopolitics”.

This leads to the second question raised earlier. If post-development thinking [challenges](#) us towards “a more radical collective imagining of alternative futures”, it is fair to argue that collective movements in Eurasian borderlands have been geared more by [a desire to assimilate to the West](#),

rather than to imagine futures beyond the options offered by either communism or liberalism and their aftermaths.

Nevertheless, and particularly at a time when the hegemonic liberal order is [called into question](#), debates on alternative futures may be in the making – if one dares to listen carefully.

Activist groups across the South Caucasus are critically reconsidering the [outcomes](#) that dependence on Western/EU donors' funding and priorities produces. More [grassroots](#), [critical alternatives](#) to Western neo-colonial governmentality, based on support for NGOs, are needed to accomplish transformative socio-political work. While NGOs' advocacy agenda in the region has mostly been steered towards first generation, liberal human rights – which are often unattractive to the broader public, or sidelined by governments' [crackdown](#) – [social issues](#), [environmental](#) and other solidarity rights show a higher potential to mobilise and build bridges across different segments of society.

The observations made so far call for a critical reappraisal of the EU's human rights 'promotion'. Some may [argue](#) that the contemporary human rights discourse is unable to reverse – or even complicit with – colonial and Eurocentric schemes. Among others, because it leads to the creation of 'experts' designated to speak to 'underdeveloped' peoples about the rights they possess, 'empowering' them in a paternalistic way. However, one cannot deny the global appeal of human rights as a [radical alternative](#) to challenge injustice, exploitation and discrimination.

A way to solve this tension could be to [defend the 'right to opacity'](#) invoked by Caribbean philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant: those who have historically been constructed as 'Others' can and should be allowed to affirm their particularity, instead of being understood and classified against Western parameters based on 'transparencies'. Glissant calls for a global [relation](#) which "interweaves and no longer projects", where different opacities can "coexist and converge" without hierarchies – as in a [pluriverse](#).

If external human rights interventions cannot be [delegitimised](#) altogether – as local movements may benefit from transnational solidarity, especially in authoritarian contexts where they are [marginalised](#) – the task is to reconfigure the terms of the EU's relation with the South Caucasus.

For the EU, this involves first and foremost accepting that local struggles for emancipation cannot be reduced to and measured against EU-niversalistic standards. Instead of projecting a pre-set or "[geopolitical](#)" agenda, the EU should engage in a debate on the kind of rights local communities need in the first place and be ready to respond to alternative, potentially radical claims.

Beyond supporting civil society to solve 'local' problems in the South Caucasus, within a renewed relation the EU should equally show commitment to fight, on a more structural level, the global

neoliberal and (neo-)extractivist policies which cause human rights violations and social justice claims to emerge.

For activists in the South Caucasus, this means delinking human rights work from de- and geopoliticised 'development' goals: human rights should instead be *repoliticised* to serve local visions of a 'good life'. Rather than assuming that South Caucasus countries' 'deviation' from Western modernity is to be fixed through various correctives, their historicity has to be reclaimed as the ground on which to build different futures, by thinking from the borders.

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