

ATHENA

RESEARCH PAPER SERIES

2025

MSc Course

**"The EU as a Global Actor: Peace,
Security and Conflict"**

Liberal Power Europe? Assessing the
European Union's Response to the 2020
Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Sasha
Pearson



Co-funded by
the European Union

ATHENA
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This essay was originally written for the ATHENA Jean Monnet Chair MSc Course “The EU as a Global Actor: Peace, Security and Conflict” taught by Dr. Dimitris Bouris. It is published as part of our mission to showcase peer-leading papers written by students during their studies. This work can be used for background reading and research, but should not be cited as an expert source or used in place of scholarly articles/books.

Introduction

On the 27th of September 2020, a period of increased tensions in the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in a 44-day war (Karlinsky and Torrissi, 2023, p. 41). Despite increased involvement in the South Caucasus region, the European Union's response was negligible. The conflict was then eased on the 44th day by a Russian brokered ceasefire (Karlinsky and Torrissi, 2023, p. 41).

Situated in a land locked region between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the contested nature of Nagorno-Karabakh can be largely attributed to the conception of 'mutual insecurity' (De Waal, 2013, p. 311). The involvement of the EU in the Southern Caucasus region began predominantly in aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the birth of numerous independent nation states (Ghazaryan, 2023, p. 224). Initial interactions between the EU and both Armenia and Azerbaijan were characterised by individual Partnership and Cooperation agreements (PCAs) which at this point were largely identical in nature (Ghazaryan, 2023, p. 225). In relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the EU opted to support the OSCE Minsk group, a group consisting of international mediators co-chaired by Russia, France, and the US (Popescu, 2011, p. 97). At this point however, efforts of the Minsk group were already steeped in failings, resultingly leading to EU 'support' efforts remaining ineffectual (De Waal, 2013, p. 317).

Utilising the conceptual framework of 'Liberal Power Europe' (Hereinafter LPE) developed by Wolfgang Wagner (2017) as its main lens, this paper aims to illuminate the complex characteristics of the EU's external foreign policy. This paper seeks to contribute to literature surrounding both the conceptualisation of the EU as a Liberal Power, and its foreign policy involvement in the South Caucasus region. Furthermore, the central research question that guides this paper is, *"To what extent does the conceptualisation of a 'Liberal Power Europe' illuminate the main contributing factors behind the European Union's inaction during the 2020 outbreak of conflict in Nagorno-Khabakh?"*

To answer this question, I will begin by outlining the conceptual framework of this paper by performing a literature review on the dominant conceptualisations of the EU as a global power, and the subsequent conceptual emergence of 'Liberal Power Europe'. Following on, I then establish the methodological process and research design, then present the analysis of my findings. This leads me to conclude that whilst the conceptualisation of 'Liberal Power Europe' illuminates the many complex contributing factors to the EU's inaction in this area, the approach lacks a robust and/or refined definition critically limiting the applicability of the conceptualisation in other analytical realms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The EU as a global power*

Since the creation of the EU, academics have flocked to conceptualise and categorise the ‘power’ and ‘purpose’ of the institution upon a global platform. What type of global power does it possess and why does this matter? Conceptual approaches have sought to disentangle the complexities of a multi-state actor failing to fall neatly into established categorised distinctions of state entities. Some articulations draw on the economic and regulatory strengths of the EU categorising it as a ‘Market Power Europe’ (Damro, 2012), whereas alternative categorisations draw on the EU’s steadfast dedication to liberal normative value promotion, distinguishing it as an ‘Normative Empire Power’ (Del Sarto, 2016). Whilst extensive varieties of these conceptualisations exist, the following three seminal articulations have proved crucial for subsequent conceptualisations of the EU on the global stage.

Firstly, Duchêne’s (1973) conceptualisation of Europe as a ‘Civilian Power’ arguably remains one of the most influential to date. This approach follows that inherent interests of the EU and its resulting external relations ultimately are bound to its structural organisation of a ‘civilian group of countries, long on economic power and relatively short on armed force’ (Duchene, 1973, p. 19). Civilian Power Europe, however, has not been exempt from scathing critiques, resulting in rich academic debates. Most notably, Hedley Bulls famous affirmation that the articulation of a ‘Civilian Power Europe’ was a ‘contradiction in its terms’ (Bull, 1982).

Bull’s (1982) critique draws on the dynamics of great power politics, which rose to prominence within the 1980s (Manners, 2002, p. 236). Bull (1982) highlights that the civilian power of the EU was inherently dependent on the military power of states (Bull, 1982). This focus on military power and subsequent might reflects prevailing security concerns during the cold war, which additionally can be seen within Bull’s (1982) attention to the importance of nuclear deterrence and conventional forces (Bull, 1982).

Lastly, Normative Power Europe (NPE) coined by Ian Manners, draws from elements from both established lenses though diverges in focus. Manners (2002), argues that the EU has a normatively different basis for its international relations, owing in part to its unique historical experience, hybrid polity and constitutional makeup (2002, p. 252). The duality of this concept includes the assumption that the EU is constructed on a normative basis and consequently concludes that it is predisposed to act within a normative capacity in global affairs (Manners, 2002, p. 252). In sum, these three authors have provided a robust theoretical basis for the development of power analysis of the EU, one of which I will detail further and utilise to shape the subsequent analysis of this paper.

2.2 Liberal Power Europe

Liberal Power Europe (LPE) synthesises key constituent elements from both civilian power Europe and NPE whilst containing additional valuable insights into EU characteristics. Coined by academic Wolfgang Wagner (2017), these insights are of particular use within the field of foreign policy analysis. This is due to its disentanglement of both motivating and constraining factors, whilst including careful attention to the importance of causal pathways and politicisation. It should however be clarified that the concept is not a fixed theory or definition. Instead, LPE builds upon the conceptual development literature surrounding characteristics of the European Union and its subsequent power.

Wagner's (2017) conceptualisation of LPE can be broken down into four main constituent characteristics. Firstly, the role and importance of normative values for the EU as motivating factors. This characteristic largely shares the nature of norms and values encapsulated within the NPE framework. Secondly, LPE additionally recognises material interests driving the EU into action (Wagner, 2017, p. 1401), allowing for a greater consideration of what factors contribute for action or inaction within foreign policy areas. Thirdly, the inclusion of a 'liberal' analysis allows for the acknowledgement of distinctively democratic constraints, such as, casualty avoidance and the moral dilemmas created by the conception of Wheelers (2000) liberal articulation of 'saving strangers' (Wheeler, 2000). This inclusion allows for a dialogue between the foreign policy analysis schools and liberalism broadly. Lastly, the inclusion of politicisation allows for an in-depth analysis of causal mechanisms additionally allowing for the analysis and consideration of the intergovernmentalism structure of the EU and its subsequent impact its global position of power (Wagner, 2017, p. 1404).

Whilst these four characteristics can be drawn from the LPE, it is crucial to emphasise that considerable attention should also be devoted to the ways in which these four characteristics interact. The proceeding outcomes of interactions can often indeed alter decision making processes. Tensions, for example often occur between the commitment to upholding liberal values in a neighbouring warring state that may also be in need desperate military support to ease conflict.

In this instance, foreign policy tensions may arise from both the politicisation characteristic and distinctively democratic constraints at play. Concerning politicisation, member states may additionally withhold an adequate response due to their diverse economic and crucial stakes in a specific affected country. Secondly, as aforementioned, the notion of saving strangers presents a dichotomy: This involves choosing between saving peoples in a neighbouring country to uphold

and maintain liberal values abroad or safeguarding one's own democratic society by avoiding risks to its own citizens lives.

LPE is a particularly suited conceptualisation for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict due to its unique considerations of the complex characteristics, interests, and factors at play.

3. Methodology and Research Design

For my research paper I have chosen to utilise a critical discourse analysis across performed across EU official documentation. Critical Discourse Analysis enables me to explore the ways which 'discourses give legitimacy and meaning to social practices and institutions' (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 364). For this process I analysed texts focussing on the language and semiotics used and then subsequently placed my findings into the wider context to unpick the constituent elements (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 365). Discourse analysis can be categorised as both interpretive and constructivist. It is largely based upon the interpretive assumption that people act on the basis for ideas and values that give 'meaning' to actions (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 366). It aims to 'unravel' the meanings behind objects for the agents (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 366). In addition to the interpretive foundation, it also assumes that people act in ways to an object that mirror the objects meaning to them with the caveat that these meanings are constructed (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 366).

For this analysis I have utilised a total of 15 different official European documents spanning from 2018 to 2022. To holistically understand the position that the EU establishes within the region, I have utilised policy positions detailing the joint Eastern Partnership (EaP) goals within the region and individual partnerships that the EU has with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. To gain a deeper insight into the progression of these relationships, I chose to include policy documents from 2018 in each area prior to the discussed conflict and policy positions that proceeded the 2020 conflict in both 2021 and 2022. This allowed me to monitor any variations in stances and positions in official communications.

Drawing from Wagner's (2018) paper on LPE and the analysis of the relevant sources, I have established four main codes to utilise for the critical discourse analysis, assessing the extent to which the EU's position within the region reflects a liberal power. These codes are operationalised upon LPEs four main characteristics: The inclusion of liberal norms and values, concern for material interests, the acknowledgment of distinctive liberal constraints, and lastly, causal pathways and politicisation. Upon initial analysis of these four codes, I will draw insights from surrounding academic literature to contextualise the content in accordance with the mechanisms of critical discourse analysis.

4. Analysis

4.1 Liberal Normative Values

Liberal values such as the promotion of democracy, human rights, international law, institutions, and the market economy are stances that can be anticipated from a liberal power (Wagner, 2017, p. 1404). To that end, this preceding section will discuss each of these elements in relation the EUs interactions with both Armenia and Azerbaijan prior, during and following the 2020 outbreak of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The European Union is a quintessentially liberal-democratic organization (Schimmelfennig, 2003). Consequently, one could assume that the prioritisation of democratic mechanisms and human rights considerations would enrich policy objectives. On the EaP (2020) fact sheet, the European Commission asserts this exact sentiment stating that, ‘Liberal values are the ‘backbone of strong and resilient states and societies’ (European Commission, 2020). The European Commission (2018) continually asserts that the EU will work closely with Armenia to ‘promote democracy, the rule of law and respect of human rights, as well as a resilient and prosperous social and economic system’. In addition, the commission also praises Armenia’s independent progress in these areas commending the new law created in December 2017 aimed at preventing violence and protecting victims (The European Commission, 2018). The EU-Azerbaijan cooperation Council’s (2018) recommendations for the pre-existing CPA also repeatedly throughout the document reinforces the importance of the ‘respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law’ (2018, p. 2). The picture however differs with relations in 2021 and 2022 for the two countries.

Whilst the strengthening of democracy, human rights, mechanisms of accountability and transparency are repeatedly emphasised within the CEPA (2021) fact sheet, the same cannot be said about the communicated relationship between Azerbaijan and the EU. Within the European Commission (2021) factograph on the countries relations with the EU, the economic partnership is emphasised between the two actors. Within the institutional category of cooperation, the Commission (2021) details the prioritisation of access to justice through the utilisation of legal aids as opposed to judicial reforms. This further emphasises the differences in EU relations that these two countries have. When discussing and loosely comparing these documents it should however be noted that the CEPA (2021) document detailing the EU and Armenia’s partnership is its own individual partnership, whereas the Commissions (2021) ‘factograph’ draws from the Azerbaijani-EU relationship under the umbrella of the wider EaP. Despite this the differences, these documents clearly illuminate the variations in normative prioritisation within the region.

In addition to democratic principles and human rights, international law is equally as important to the concept of a 'liberal power'. Considerations to the commitments to international law were indeed utilised in the EaP partnership documents but were of far greater significance within the immediate responses to the 2020 outbreak of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Whilst the response from the EU was ineffectual and arguably may not even constitute the title of a 'response', the statements released did emphasise commitments to international law. References to the commitment of international law were additionally discussed within the European Commissions (2021) press release statement surrounding the allocation of increased funding for humanitarian aid. Within this statement, the Commission (2021) reinforced its commitment to 'humanity' 'neutrality', and international law (European Commission, 2021).

Within the analysis of documents surrounding the EU's involvement in the region, it became clear that it repeatedly engages with terms of conditionality. This was most apparent within the joint declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit in 2021. Within this declaration the Council of the European Union (2021) acknowledges that 'the EU's conditionality and incentive-based approach will continue to benefit those partners more engaged at implementing reforms' (p.4). Subtle pointers to conditionality additionally were found across most papers that discussed normative values alluding to the requirement of normative acceptance for economic prosperity and cooperation.

Whilst the normative commitments are evident within the policy documents, there remains a disparity between these commitments and the actual actions of the EU. To illuminate this dynamic, Ghazaryan (2023) highlights the considerable leverage that the EU holds over both Armenia and Azerbaijan because of its involvement as a major trading partner in both countries (2023, p. 54). Furthermore, Ghazaryan (2023) asserts that the EU's inaction during armed hostilities contradicts the EU's 'constitutional obligations of upholding its values and international law in relations with the wider world and its neighbourhood specifically' (2023, p. 54).

4.2 The Power of Material Interests

The LPE approach allows for the analysis of both the importance of normative values of the European Union and considerations of material interests. This is of relevance when assessing the relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan and its robust economic partnership. Whilst EU narratives surrounding relations with Armenia also include economic parameters, the material interests within this relationship are considerably less. This section will seek to understand how the EU is motivated by material interests when making policy choices in the region importantly focussing on the inaction during the 2020 conflict.

Azerbaijan is frequently described across the documents as a ‘a strategic energy partner for the EU’ (EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council, 2018, p. 2). This energy cooperation with the EU is of great importance not only as its role as a transit country but also due to its role as a supplier of oil and gas to the European Market (Ghazarakh, 2023, p. 56). This highlights the significant material interest that the EU has with Azerbaijan and consequently within the stability of the region.

Drawing conclusions from the analysed policy documents, it appears that the relationship between Armenia and the EU is much more intensely focussed on normative foundations whereas in the case of Azerbaijan, material interests take priority. This illuminates Wolfgang’s (2017) discussion of the interactions between different motivating factors and constraints. It could be argued that material interests and strategic oil considerations in relation to Azerbaijan could lead to the EU exercising caution and reluctance towards its relations with Armenia. One could even hypothesize through this reasoning that this could have contributed to the inaction in the 2020 conflict. Though as Ghazaryan (2023) highlights the inaction of the EU in relation to its material interests are somewhat peculiar as fighting ensued only a few kilometres away from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipelines putting the EU energy supply at significant risk (Ghazaryan, 2023, p. 61).

To assess the extent of EU motivations from material interests presents an impossible task. As Wolfgang asserts, ‘the exact weight of ideas, on the one hand, and interests, on the other hand, cannot be determined ex ante and varies across issue-areas and cases’ (Wolfgang, 2017, p. 1401).

4.3 Distinctively Democratic Constraints

Distinctively democratic constraints consist largely of cases where one would be acting within typically ‘undemocratic’ pretences to achieve a liberal or democratically driven task. For the case of EU foreign policy, it seems apt to assess the lack of involvement and response from the EU.

When conflict broke out in Nagorno-Karabakh, the EU simply condemned the actions and chose to only voice its ineffectual support for the OSCE Minsk Group for its resolution. Whilst not evidenced within the EUs discourse the distinct lack of action in the face of the outburst of conflict could be attributed to the democratic constraint surrounding the efforts of ‘casualty aversion’. This explanation follows that the EU did not get militarily involved due to concerns about citizen casualties if deployed into action. This emphasises the duality of the distinctly democratic concerns. Furthermore, Wagner (2017) contends that the ‘avoidance of casualties and collateral damage has therefore become a main feature in liberal democracies’ (Wagner, 2017, p. 1407). Whilst there

could be merit within the distinctively democratic descriptions the politicisation of policy making decisions delves into this area with greater empirical weight.

4.4 Causal Pathways: The Politicisation of Decision-making

EU external relations are intimately tied up with politics. Owing to the intergovernmental institutional structure of member states, vast varieties of actors and complex global dynamics are at play. Additional consideration of this attribute serves to strengthen the conceptualisation of LPE specifically within this case. Furthermore, across all member states there was no ‘shared vision’, or common position developed on the conflict and each member state had ‘varying stakes in relations with Russia’ (Ghazaryan, 2023, p. 62). To assess the merit of politicisation in understanding the EU’s inaction interactions with other actors in the documents and relevant literature are analysed.

From the analysis of the documents very few cases of Causal Pathways or politicisation can be drawn. The only interaction between the EU and other countries (other than Armenia and Azerbaijan) is that of the support for the OSCE Minsk Group, voicing its support for their role in resolving the conflict. With Russia sitting as a co-chair for this group and later supporting a ‘Russian brokered ceasefire’ the various stakes of member states relations with Russia are brought into light. Comparatively, in relation to the prioritisation of the normative motivators the absence of causal pathways and politicisation within communicated documents is stark.

Surrounding literature, however, illuminates the complex relations and dynamics at play in the region. The extent of effective action that the EU can have in the South Caucasus region has depended largely on the level of cooperation and coordination with actors such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the US (Nuriyev, 2007, p. 2). The EU’s foreign policy towards Azerbaijan has also been entangled historically with considerations of how European policies will affect EU–Russia relations (Nuriyev, 2007, p. 20). Regional considerations play a significant part in determining the external foreign policy positions of the EU and member states. More recently, owing to Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan and the continual communication between Russia and Turkey during conflict in the region, these two countries have emerged as the main security actors (Ghazaryan, 2023, p. 60). Ghazaryan even goes as far to categorise the EU’s response as ‘purposeful inaction’ attributing its lack of involvement to the concerns of ‘disturbing the status quo in its relations with relevant regional actors.’ (Ghazaryan, 2023, p. 54).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wolfgang's (2017) conceptualisation of a 'Liberal Power Europe' enables a rich analysis of the complex characteristics that contribute to the EU's lack of inaction during the outbreak of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Whilst the conceptualisation allows for a rich analytical discussion of each contributing factor the approach fails to determine which areas were of the greatest importance in the resulting lack of action. To this end, LPE suffers from a lack of foundational and definitional strength resulting in a weak applicability to other cases and additionally fails to provide insights when seeking to understand the main contributing factors within political occurrences.

The four main elements within the LPE approach provided a robust exploration into the factors contributing towards the EU's inaction. It is clear from the analysis of normative value promotion and prioritisation that the EU certainly embodies the role of a liberal actor as per established by the LPE frame. While the EU's normative commitments are consolidated on paper, they are thin in practice in relation to the actual response to the conflict. Secondly, the EU and Azerbaijani partnerships illuminate considerations of material interests. Conversely to Armenia's normative relationship, Azerbaijan's relationship is built on strategic economic cooperation. The case of Azerbaijan illuminates the EU's concerns for material interests as well as normative ones as is evident with the continued relations with both countries. The extent to which the material interests in Azerbaijan can however be responsible for the lack of action in Nagorno-Karabakh is limited. This notion is furthered due to the proximity of the conflict to an important pipeline. If this was of the greatest concern, then more action would be anticipated. Democratic constraints were less obviously present within the EU's involvement in the conflict. Though as previously established, the very lack of action itself could highlight a democratic constraint of casualty aversion though this is hard to prove. Lastly, the politicisation of decisions and interactions between different political actors is of great importance in understanding the dynamics of the conflict, and additionally can shed light on the potential concerns of the EU in the face of a more robust response. What remains clear, is there exists a multitude of complex interconnected factors many of which contributed to the inaction of the EU during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020.

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