

What Brexit promises to the South Caucasus?

The three South Caucasian republics, namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, are in geometrically variable partnerships with the EU, but each advocates a greater EU presence in the region. The EU's ambitions in the region are subject not only to the interests and foreign policy scopes of member states, but also to the interests and capacity to cooperate of regional actors. The UK is one EU member state that has an active presence in the region, particularly in Azerbaijan (also in Kazakhstan), due to its significant investments in the energy sector. On the eve of an expected UK withdrawal from the EU, it is reasonable to reflect on the possible consequences of Brexit for the Caucasus region.

It is worth underlining that EU membership seemingly enhances the UK's role as a global actor, since its foreign policies, including trade, development aid, the fight against global warming, immigration, cross-border policing and energy policies are undertaken within the EU. The EU consolidates the member states' positions and has demonstrated its ability to be a decisive global actor, for example in the Iran nuclear diplomacy process, even though it failed to deliver productive outcomes in Ukraine and in other Middle East conflicts. Considering the UK's political and economic weight, its withdrawal from the common EU foreign policy may weaken the European position – most importantly, from the Caucasus perspective, vis-à-vis potential Russian dominance in the region.

Nevertheless, the EU is not the sole forum within which the UK implements its foreign policy. In the South Caucasus, the UK's actions are undertaken through different networks. Great Britain is not a member of the OSCE Minsk Group, mandated to mediate the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK has demonstrated a certain degree of diplomatic activity in urging a rapid resolution of the conflict. In the Caspian region, the UK accepts and follows the leadership of the United States regarding regional security issues and the safety of its investments. Moreover, the UK has no military presence in the region. The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), established in the country since the Georgia–Russia war of 2008, is the only

European mission in the region, but it is not a military task force. The UK has contributed to the military component of Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations, although it has demonstrated a preference to act within the framework of NATO. Modern-day Britain has evidently restructured its diplomacy in accordance with the opposition of both the public and the elite to external military deployment, and the diminution of defence expenditures.

For a long time, the UK was a major advocate of active EU enlargement, before tempering this stance. Candidate states and others with strong EU membership aspirations, such as Georgia, could rely on the British position being favourable to EU expansion to the East. Although at present Turkey's EU membership seems extremely problematic, the departure of the UK means that this project, which would lead to the EU being bordered by three Caucasian countries and Iran, might seem to be losing one of its potential supporters. However, the campaign over Brexit has removed doubts about this question and revealed that Britain is anxious about possible enlargement.

Ultimately, a significant change in the UK's position in the South Caucasus in the aftermath of Brexit does not seem realistic. Perhaps some consequences, in addition to those discussed above, should be expected in the long run. Brexit and the withdrawal process, which continues to consume more effort than expected, has weakened the image of the EU as a strong actor in the eyes of external partners. Moreover, the UK has been a net contributor to the EU budget, which provided the financial instruments supporting the EU projects in the Caucasus region. In the end, without a clear outline of the withdrawal plan, anticipating its consequences remains a difficult task. At the time of writing this comment, the fate of Brexit remains uncertain.