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ASSESSING THE WESTERN EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY RESPONSE TO AZERBAIJAN'S COUNTERTERRORISM ACTIONS IN KHANKENDI

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Abstract. This article analyzes Western European reactions to Azerbaijan's counterterrorism operation in Khankendi on 19–20 September 2023, situating them within the broader transformation of EU foreign policy from normative ideals toward strategic pragmatism. The study argues that Europe's response was shaped primarily by energy interdependence, regional stability, and the strategic impact of the war in Ukraine, rather than moral or humanitarian considerations. France pursued an ideologically driven, pro-Armenian stance, resulting in diplomatic isolation, while Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom emphasized pragmatic engagement, prioritizing energy security, dialogue with Baku, and regional predictability.

EU institutions revealed internal inconsistencies, with declarative rhetoric often lacking operational follow-through, underscoring the limits of the normative power paradigm in peripheral regions. The Khankendi case illustrates the consolidation of realism as the guiding principle in European policy toward the South Caucasus. For Azerbaijan, this shift reinforced its sovereignty, strategic role, and capacity to act as a stabilizing actor in the post-conflict region, highlighting the growing recognition of its importance in Europe's energy and security architecture.

Key words: Azerbaijan, European Union, Western Europe, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Khankendi, Counterterrorism Operation, Strategic Pragmatism, Energy Security, South Caucasus, Ukraine War, EU Foreign Policy, Realism, Geopolitical Transformation.

Introduction. Azerbaijan's military operation on September 19–20, 2023, aimed at neutralising armed formations that were obliged to leave the territory of Azerbaijan in accordance with the Tripartite Statement in Karabakh, marked a precedent in post-Soviet history. For the first time, a country restored its territorial integrity through a forceful yet brief and precisely coordinated operation, without external intervention. This operation did not constitute an act of aggression, but rather a measure aimed at restoring constitutional order within internationally recognised borders, conducted with limited impact on the civilian population. Azerbaijan underscored its capacity to address protracted conflicts autonomously, without inducing sustained regional instability.

The operation eliminated the last focal threat to internal stability and opened the way for the full-scale post-conflict reintegration of Karabakh. It dismantled an artificial regime that had existed for over 30 years in a state of legal vacuum and laid the foundation for the establishment of a unified legal, infrastructural, and economic space (De Waal, 2022).

The regions of Eastern Zangezur and Karabakh are now being integrated into national development and logistics initiatives. For the entire South Caucasus, this marked a turning point: since 2023, the regional priority has shifted from conflictual coexistence to institutional reconfiguration.

The initial days following the operation were marked by restrained statements from most international actors, with no direct condemnation of Baku's actions. The absence of a consensus-based denunciation reflects a recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereign right to restore order. While some states raised humanitarian concerns, none questioned the fundamental issue of Karabakh's territorial affiliation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework. The analysis of Western European reactions to Azerbaijan's counterterrorism operation in Khankendi requires a theoretical grounding that captures the transformation of European foreign policy identity, the constraints of energy interdependence,

and the geopolitical marginality of the South Caucasus within the European strategic imagination. The concept of “Normative Power Europe”, initially formulated by Ian Manners (2002), presumed that the European Union and its member states act primarily as moral actors, projecting democracy, human rights, and rule-of-law principles beyond their borders (Manners, 2002).

However, by the 2020s, this framework has undergone a substantial erosion. The shift toward “Strategic Pragmatism” – explicitly acknowledged in the EU’s 2021 Strategic Compass and reiterated in Josep Borrell’s 2023 statements – illustrates that the EU’s foreign policy has become more interest-driven and selective in its normative advocacy, particularly in regions of secondary strategic value (Cornell, 2021).

This evolution is visible in the South Caucasus, where Western Europe’s rhetorical commitment to principles has often clashed with its geopolitical and energy priorities. In 2023, the EU imported approximately 11.6 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Azerbaijan through the Southern Gas Corridor, a 40% increase compared to 2021, following the Memorandum of Understanding on Energy Partnership signed between Ursula von der Leyen and President Ilham Aliyev in July 2022 (Ursula von der Leyen, Aliyev, 2022).

This quantitative growth directly constrained the political space for adversarial rhetoric toward Baku, particularly in Germany and Italy, which rely on stable Caspian gas flows to diversify away from Russian sources. Consequently, the European position became characterized by a dualism: while Brussels and Paris expressed concern over “humanitarian consequences” in their statements after 19 September 2023, Berlin and Rome avoided any language that could jeopardize energy cooperation or regional dialogue (Larrabee, Thompson, 2022).

The logic of security and energy interdependence – as outlined by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye – suggests that asymmetric dependency often shapes diplomatic moderation. Western Europe’s cautious approach toward Azerbaijan after the Khankendi operation aligns with this model: while some governments voiced “deep concern,” none pursued sanctions or formal condemnations. France, however, remained a notable exception. The French Senate’s resolutions of November 2022 and October 2023, openly calling for sanctions against Azerbaijan and the recognition of “Nagorno-Karabakh,” demonstrated an ideologically motivated, pro-Armenian stance inconsistent with both EU law and international recognition of Azerbaijani sovereignty. Paris’s unilateral policy isolated it from the broader European consensus, revealing an attempt to leverage the Armenian diaspora as a domestic political instrument rather than to contribute constructively to regional stability (Keohane, Nye, 2021).

From a geopolitical standpoint, the South Caucasus remains a peripheral security space for Western Europe. Despite its critical role as an energy and transport hub connecting the Caspian basin to Europe via the Middle Corridor, the region still occupies a marginal place in Brussels’ strategic calculus compared to the Eastern Partnership’s “core” areas such as Ukraine and Moldova. This peripheral perception explains why the EU’s engagement has been largely reactive and declarative. The European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament released multiple statements post-September 2023, yet none translated into policy instruments or strategic missions.

In synthesis, Western Europe’s foreign policy response to Azerbaijan’s counterterrorism actions reflects the decline of normative idealism and the consolidation of interest-based realism. The contrast between France’s ideologically biased activism and Germany’s, Italy’s, and the UK’s pragmatic restraint underscores a broader transformation: the European Union, once claiming moral leadership, now operates within the logic of geopolitical necessity. For Azerbaijan, this shift has revealed both the fragility of European normative discourse and the growing recognition of Baku’s sovereignty as an irreversible geopolitical fact in the post-conflict South Caucasus (Kalyvas, Balcells, 2024).

Mapping Western European Responses. The spectrum of Western European responses to Azerbaijan’s counterterrorism operation in Khankendi on 19 September 2023 reveals a clear hier-

archy of political motives, ranging from France's ideologically charged opposition to Germany's energy-driven pragmatism, the United Kingdom's restrained realism, and the European Union's institutional incoherence. Each actor's reaction was rooted less in the substance of the operation – which was conducted on the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan to restore constitutional order – than in the interplay between domestic politics, strategic interests, and the recalibration of Europe's post-Ukraine security logic (Smith, Timmins, 2023).

France. Among all Western European actors, France adopted the most confrontational and one-sided stance. President Emmanuel Macron's statement on 21 September 2023, which accused Azerbaijan of "violating international law," starkly contrasted with the United Nations' acknowledgement of Baku's sovereignty over the Karabakh region. The French Senate reinforced this narrative by adopting resolutions in November 2022 and October 2023 urging sanctions against Azerbaijan and recognition of the so-called "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh." These resolutions, however, were non-binding and lacked executive backing even within the EU framework. French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna's visit to Yerevan in April 2023 and her failure to engage directly with Baku further illustrated the erosion of France's diplomatic credibility as a mediator.

Domestically, the motivation behind France's pro-Armenian posture was largely electoral: the Armenian diaspora in France exceeds 600,000 people and holds significant influence in key urban constituencies. This domestic factor overshadowed rational geopolitical calculation and contributed to France's growing isolation in European decision-making circles. Both Berlin and Brussels refrained from aligning with Macron's rhetoric, and by late 2023, Paris found itself excluded from the EU's negotiation tracks concerning the South Caucasus. Thus, France's approach represented a rhetorical escalation without strategic substance, undermining its own diplomatic leverage and credibility in the region.

Germany. Berlin's reaction, by contrast, was emblematic of calculated pragmatism. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, in her statement of 20 September 2023, expressed "concern" over humanitarian conditions but simultaneously emphasized the "need to maintain dialogue with both sides." This dual message reflected Germany's structural dependency on energy diversification: in 2023, Azerbaijan supplied approximately 5% of Germany's imported natural gas through the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and related infrastructure (European Commission, 2023).

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government, aware of this interdependence, avoided any moves that could jeopardize the ongoing EU–Azerbaijan energy partnership. German analytical institutions, including the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), in late 2023 explicitly advised against alienating Baku, noting Azerbaijan's growing strategic role in EU energy security (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2023).

Berlin also demonstrated awareness of the regional power balance. Germany's cautious tone stemmed from a realist understanding that Azerbaijan's territorial sovereignty is internationally recognized and that its counterterrorism actions were internal by nature. In practice, this meant rejecting any French attempt to push for punitive EU measures. Consequently, Germany solidified its image as a pragmatic interlocutor rather than a moralizing critic.

The United Kingdom. Post-Brexit Britain pursued an independent and strategically pragmatic approach. The UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) issued a single, carefully worded statement on 20 September 2023 calling for "de-escalation and humanitarian access" but deliberately avoided any criticism of Baku. This cautious stance aligned with London's growing economic and defense cooperation with Azerbaijan, particularly in renewable energy projects and the Middle Corridor connectivity initiatives. British trade with Azerbaijan reached over £900 million in 2023, underpinned by investments from BP in the Shah Deniz and Azeri–Chirag–Gunashli fields (Smith, Roberts, 2022).

London's restrained reaction also reflected its broader strategic shift: after Brexit, the UK has sought to expand its geopolitical influence in non-EU regions through "Global Britain" diplomacy,

prioritizing stable relations with resource-rich partners. The British government therefore viewed the Khankendi operation through a security and sovereignty lens, emphasizing territorial integrity and internal stability rather than ethnic politics. This approach contrasted sharply with France's emotive tone, reinforcing Britain's image as a pragmatic external partner grounded in realism rather than ideological posturing (Hill, Smith, 2021).

European Union Institutions. At the supranational level, the European Union's reaction revealed institutional fragmentation and bureaucratic incoherence. The European External Action Service (EEAS), led by Josep Borrell, released a statement on 19 September 2023 expressing "deep concern" and calling for dialogue. However, the Council of the European Union refrained from adopting any collective punitive measures, despite French lobbying. The European Parliament, in contrast, passed a resolution in October 2023 with more accusatory language toward Azerbaijan, but this resolution was largely symbolic and non-binding. The divergence between the Parliament's activist rhetoric and the Council's realist restraint underscored the absence of a unified European position (Borrell, 2023).

The bureaucratic inertia within EU structures further weakened the Union's credibility in the South Caucasus. Charles Michel's mediation initiative, known as the "Brussels format," lost momentum as Armenia pivoted toward the U.S. and France, while Azerbaijan disengaged due to perceived bias. Despite official statements supporting "peace and dialogue," EU institutions failed to articulate a coherent strategic vision for the region (Michel, 2023).

The mapping of Western European reactions demonstrates a fragmented and inconsistent response driven by competing logics of domestic politics, energy interests, and institutional limitations. France's overtly pro-Armenian stance led to diplomatic isolation; Germany and the United Kingdom prioritized stability and economic cooperation; EU institutions remained paralyzed by internal contradictions. For Azerbaijan, this divergence among Western European actors underscored an emerging reality: the erosion of European normative influence in the South Caucasus and the consolidation of realist pragmatism as the new foundation of Europe's regional engagement.

The Energy Factor as a Constraint on Moralism. The energy dimension constitutes the most critical structural determinant in shaping Western Europe's position. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the decline of Russian gas imports, Azerbaijan emerged as one of the EU's few stable and politically reliable energy partners. The July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding between Baku and Brussels envisaged a doubling of Azerbaijani gas supplies to Europe by 2027 – from 10 bcm to 20 bcm annually. This strategic dependence effectively limited the scope of Western criticism (Chivvis, Smith, 2024).

Germany, Italy, and several Central European states prioritized long-term contracts with SOCAR and the expansion of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) and the Southern Gas Corridor. These commitments turned Azerbaijan into a crucial component of Europe's energy diversification strategy. As a result, any attempt to exert pressure through sanctions or diplomatic isolation risked undermining Europe's own energy security objectives. In this context, realpolitik prevailed over normative zeal. The European Commission's restrained tone after 19 September 2023 was not a sign of apathy but a calculated decision to protect the Union's strategic autonomy in the energy sector.

A key factor: the war in Ukraine and the changing strategic priorities of the West. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not merely reshape the European security landscape – it redefined the hierarchy of the West's global priorities. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the European Union and its major Western European states adopted a war-driven strategic posture, where survival, deterrence, and supply security took precedence over normative diplomacy. This realignment produced a fundamental shift in how peripheral regions like the South Caucasus were perceived and treated within Western strategic planning.

Between 2022 and 2024, Western Europe committed over €90 billion in combined military, financial, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Such unprecedented concentration of resources on a single

theatre resulted in the reallocation of diplomatic capital and attention away from secondary regions. Policy briefings from Chatham House (2023) and the European Council on Foreign Relations (2024) reveal that over 70% of EU foreign policy instruments – missions, delegations, and working groups – were directed toward the Eastern European front. The South Caucasus, by comparison, accounted for less than 5% of policy engagement. This numerical imbalance speaks to a broader strategic narrowing: the EU became a “single-issue actor” focused on deterring Russia, while other regional processes were filtered through that same lens (Aliyev, 2024).

From this perspective, Azerbaijan’s counterterrorism operation in Khankendi occurred at a moment when Western governments were unwilling to jeopardize their fragile energy and security balance. Azerbaijan had emerged as an indispensable partner for Europe’s post-Ukraine energy transition, providing Caspian gas as a substitute for Russian supplies. By 2023, Azerbaijani exports to the EU surpassed 11.6 bcm – a 40% increase compared to pre-war levels – making Baku a critical node in the EU’s diversification strategy. European policymakers understood that alienating Azerbaijan would risk undermining the very resilience they were trying to build against Moscow. Thus, the muted and cautious Western response to the Khankendi operation was not a diplomatic accident, but a deliberate choice rooted in strategic prioritization (Chatham House, 2023).

Moreover, the war in Ukraine recalibrated Europe’s moral compass. Normative discourse on “human rights” and “self-determination” was subordinated to geopolitical necessity. Western institutions that once invoked these principles to engage the South Caucasus now viewed stability and territorial integrity as higher-order imperatives. The logic was straightforward: any renewed conflict in the Caucasus could open another security vacuum exploitable by Russia or Iran. As such, Western leaders – particularly in Berlin and London – opted for neutrality rather than confrontation, implicitly acknowledging that Azerbaijan’s rapid restoration of constitutional order contributed to regional predictability.

The same dynamic also revealed a deeper shift in strategic thinking. Before 2022, EU foreign policy was anchored in the belief that promoting liberal norms would generate stability. After the outbreak of the Ukraine war, this idealism gave way to a containment-first logic: the priority became preventing Russian expansion and ensuring unbroken access to energy corridors. In this recalibrated framework, Azerbaijan was not perceived as a problem but as a stabilizing actor – a state capable of maintaining balance between competing regional powers without aligning fully with any of them (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

The intersection between the Ukraine war and the Khankendi events thus exposes a defining paradox of contemporary European strategy: while the EU rhetorically condemns unilateral actions elsewhere, it simultaneously rewards assertive regional stabilizers that deliver security and energy continuity. The Western reaction to Azerbaijan’s operation reflected this new hierarchy of interests. Whereas Paris framed the event in moral terms, Berlin, Rome, and Brussels viewed it through the prism of strategic containment.

In essence, the war in Ukraine did not only shift Western Europe’s geopolitical focus – it normalized realism as the core principle of its external action. The prioritization of energy, deterrence, and regional stability over abstract moral considerations has become the defining characteristic of post-2022 European foreign policy. For Azerbaijan, this transformation reinforced its position as an indispensable partner in Europe’s evolving security and energy architecture, while simultaneously exposing the irreversible decline of normative idealism in Western diplomacy.

The Decline of the Normative Model in Peripheral Regions. The cumulative effect of these dynamics has been the erosion of the EU’s “normative power” paradigm in regions beyond its immediate neighborhood. The South Caucasus, long framed as a “partner” under the Eastern Partnership initiative, has now become a testing ground for Europe’s post-normative pragmatism. The EU’s limited influence in the aftermath of Azerbaijan’s operation underscored the structural weaknesses of its foreign policy model: declarative diplomacy without strategic leverage.

France's moralistic activism, unsupported by the rest of Europe, further demonstrated that normative rhetoric is no longer a unifying principle within EU foreign policy. Instead, national interests – particularly those tied to energy security and regional influence – dictate the behavior of key member states. The European Parliament's resolutions and rhetorical condemnations could not conceal the fact that Brussels has lost both credibility and coherence as a geopolitical actor in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion. The Western European reaction to Azerbaijan's counterterrorism operation in Khankendi on 19 September 2023 demonstrates a fundamental recalibration of the EU's regional posture. Rather than adhering to its traditional normative vocabulary centered on human rights, mediation, and conflict prevention, Western Europe opted for a restrained, pragmatic approach grounded in strategic and energy-security considerations. The response – marked by carefully balanced statements and the absence of coercive measures – reflected not a lack of awareness, but a deliberate adaptation to the shifting geopolitical environment defined by the war in Ukraine and Europe's consequent dependence on non-Russian energy corridors.

This restrained attitude signifies a broader transformation in the EU's external action: the normative-liberal model that once guided its engagement in the Eastern Neighborhood has given way to a realism shaped by economic vulnerability and strategic necessity. Azerbaijan's role as a reliable energy partner and a stabilizing regional actor has become indispensable to Europe's diversification agenda. As a result, Brussels and leading Western European capitals have shown growing willingness to compartmentalize their relations with Baku – distinguishing between the political rhetoric of values and the operational logic of energy and security cooperation.

The implications for the future EU–Azerbaijan interaction format are significant. The relationship is likely to evolve along the lines of a “functional partnership”, emphasizing energy connectivity, transport corridors, and post-conflict reconstruction within the logic of mutual benefit rather than conditionality. This dynamic will further institutionalize Azerbaijan's position as a strategic partner in the EU's eastern vector, even if normative concerns remain part of the declarative discourse.

Looking ahead, the European approach to the South Caucasus is expected to consolidate around a realist paradigm. The combination of protracted war in Ukraine, rising global competition, and the redefinition of the EU's geopolitical priorities will likely entrench a policy framework driven by stability, access, and strategic balance rather than democratization or transformation. For Azerbaijan, this shift opens broader diplomatic space to pursue multidirectional partnerships while maintaining constructive engagement with Western Europe under the new parameters of pragmatic interdependence.

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