

Government Rhetoric on EU Integration: A Comparative Analysis of Serbia and Azerbaijan

By Milica Stankic and Zumrud Pashayeva

Introduction

This article studies the rhetoric used by the governments of Azerbaijan and Serbia regarding European Union (EU) integration during the period of 2023-2024. It explores how these two countries, with differing geopolitical contexts and aspirations, frame their engagement with the EU in domestic discourse.

The analysis highlights Serbia's candidate status of the European integration, investment and development collaboration between Serbia and the EU. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's rhetoric reflects a pragmatic approach, focusing on trade partnership and energy cooperation without explicitly pursuing membership.

By analysing official statements, interviews, and speeches given by governmental institutions and high-level officials of both countries the study identifies key themes such as political sovereignty, territorial integrity, and economic opportunities. The findings reveal how each government shapes EU integration narratives to influence public opinion, strengthen negotiation positions, and adapt to an evolving geopolitical environment. This research concludes with insights into how the official rhetoric of the governments reflect broader regional dynamics and the challenges of fostering deeper EU relationships in diverse political contexts.

Legal basis of Serbia - European Union relations

During the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003, Serbia was identified as a potential candidate for the EU membership¹. In 2008, the European partnership for Serbia was adopted, and Serbia applied for the EU membership in 2009. Serbia was granted a EU candidate status in March 2012, and the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force in September 2013².

Following the European Council's decision in June 2013, accession negotiations with Serbia officially began in January 2014 with the first Intergovernmental Conference. To date, 22 of the 35 negotiation chapters have been opened, including all chapters in Cluster 1 (fundamentals) and Cluster 4 (Green agenda and sustainable connectivity), with two chapters provisionally closed.

Key Elements of the Government's Rhetoric on Integration in Serbia

This research delves into the key rhetoric and strategies that the government of Serbia uses to communicate about the country's journey toward the European Union membership, emphasizing the intertwined goals of economic modernization and legislative alignment with the EU standards. In order to determine the elements impacting the dynamics of the accession process, the study will

¹ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/serbia/european-union-and-serbia_en?s=227

² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/serbia_en

focus on important areas such as European integration, legislative reforms, bolstering human rights, and European cooperation. Central to Serbia's accession process are initiatives promoting European integration, strengthening governance through reforms, and fostering regional cooperation. These efforts are complemented by strategic investments and development programs aimed at economic stabilization and attracting foreign capital.

European integration

The process of European integration, which is essential to Serbia's political, economic, and social development, remains a top priority in 2024. When it comes to rhetoric, the government has remained unwavering in its will to conform to EU norms, which entails not only implementing important reforms but also actively participating in significant projects that promote democracy, economic modernization, and regional stability.

Tanja Miscevic, Serbia's Minister of European Integration, has emphasized that aligning Serbian laws, institutions, and practices with those of the EU is a key step in fostering not only national improvement but also regional peace and prosperity³. This dual focus supports Serbia's strategic positioning within the region while addressing domestic expectations. By emphasizing measurable outcomes and citizen-focused improvements, Miscevic communicates the value of EU integration, aiming to bolster support both at home and among EU stakeholders. She highlighted ongoing reforms to strengthen judicial independence, enhance media freedoms, and combat corruption⁴. These efforts aim to ensure that Serbia meets EU accession benchmarks while providing tangible benefits to its citizens, such as improved governance and legal protections.

The most significant component of Serbia's EU enrollment is economic integration so does the rhetoric. The EU is traditionally Serbia's key trading partner accounting for 60% of Serbia's total trade in 2023, with similar percentages persisting over the years and it is strategically important that Serbia maintains its economic integration with the EU single market⁵. The value of Serbia's exports to the EU has grown more than five times from nearly EUR 3.2 billion in 2009 to just below EUR 18 billion in 2023⁶. After the EU, Serbia's main trading partners in 2023 were Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) countries (9.3% of total trade), China (8.6%) and Russia (4.1%)⁷. In conclusion, the EU continues to be the biggest trading partner for Serbia in 2024.

President Aleksandar Vucic recently discussed Serbia's integration into the EU's Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), set for January 1, 2025. *"That is important not only for payment of remittances but, above all, for our small enterprises and our companies"*⁸, Vucic told reporters. He emphasised how important it is for facilitating quicker and more affordable financial transactions,

³<https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/news/1830/more/w/0/interview-of-the-week-tanja-miscevic-minister-of-european-integration-on-cooperation-between-serbia-and-the-eu-there-are-no-shortcuts-to-the-eu-but-there-are-no-new-obstacles-either/>

⁴<https://www.mei.gov.rs/eng/news/1830/more/w/0/interview-of-the-week-tanja-miscevic-minister-of-european-integration-on-cooperation-between-serbia-and-the-eu-there-are-no-shortcuts-to-the-eu-but-there-are-no-new-obstacles-either/>

⁵ <https://europa.rs/trade/?lang=en>

⁶ <https://europa.rs/trade/?lang=en>

⁷ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2024_en

⁸<https://www.tanjug.rs/english/politics/111098/vucic-eu-path-sepa-green-lanes-discussed-in-brussels/vest>

which will especially help small and medium-sized businesses. This breakthrough is a component of the larger EU-Serbia cooperation that was discussed during discussions with Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, and others in Brussels.

Meanwhile, President Aleksandar Vucic has frequently highlighted Serbia's economic advancements, describing the country as a leading economy in the Western Balkans⁹. In 2024, Serbia achieved a significant milestone by being upgraded to a BBB- investment-grade credit rating by Standard and Poor's, the first Western Balkan nation to achieve this¹⁰. This upgrade marks a major step in attracting foreign investment, reducing financing costs, and enhancing international confidence in Serbia's economic stability.

Investment and Development

At a rhetorical level, the leadership of Serbia has been continuously underlining the advantages of deeper connections with the EU and its dedication to the EU integration process. In order to bring Serbia into compliance with EU norms, President Aleksandar Vucic and Minister for European Integration Tanja Miscevic have emphasized the importance of cooperation and reforms. In one of his speeches, Vucic said: *"We are very enthusiastic about this plan from the very first moment. I don't usually address anyone in particular, especially not in the presence of others, but I must say that this changed approach is actually a great opportunity for us in the Balkans, and I thank you all for doing this."*¹¹ The "changed approach" that President Vucic refers to is the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, adopted by the European Commission on November 8, 2023.¹² With an emphasis on providing measurable benefits of EU integration before to full membership, this plan marks a change in the EU's approach to the area. The EU Growth Plan aims to: Integrate Western Balkan partners into the EU's single market, enhance regional economic cooperation, deepen EU-related reforms including those related to the rule of law and economic governance, to support the Western Balkans' path toward EU membership, increase pre-accession funding. This strategy is important because it provides a quicker and more realistic route to EU integration, calming fears regarding the slow progress of enlargement. The plan's concentration on regional stability and economic progress offers quick incentives for collaboration and reforms, strengthening the groundwork for future membership. Regarding this explanation, it ties Vucic's optimism to the tangible benefits and transformative potential of this new EU strategy, making it clear why it represents a "great opportunity" for the Balkans.

As it can be observed both in the speeches and actions of the Serbian government the economic part of the European integration is of paramount importance. Not once has President Aleksandar Vucic emphasized Serbia's deepening economic integration with the EU, supported by significant investments and reforms under the EU's Growth Plan. This commitment was further highlighted

⁹ <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/press-center/press-releases/serbia-made-a-historical-breakthrough-with-ig-rating>

¹⁰ <https://www.predsednik.rs/en/press-center/press-releases/serbia-made-a-historical-breakthrough-with-ig-rating>

¹¹ <https://www.blic.rs/biznis/vesti/vucic-promenjen-pristup-eu-po-pitanju-plana-rasta-dobra-prilika-za-region/2f612te>

¹² <https://europa.rs/growth-plan-for-the-western-balkans/?lang=en>

during a meeting with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 25 October 2024, as part of her official visit to Serbia.¹³

The Minister Miscevic highlighted significant support from the EU, including a €165 million grant to help vulnerable households manage energy costs, demonstrating the immediate advantages of the integration process. She mentioned *“We are especially grateful to the European Union that it managed to find a way – even under the conditions of a serious energy crisis across Europe, and in addition to regular support for the implementation of reforms in the domain of energy – to also approve an additional urgent budget aid grant amounting to 165 million euros. We will use that money to mitigate the negative consequences of the crisis on citizens and the economy, particularly on small and medium-sized enterprises.”*¹⁴ Miscevic specifically notes the importance of this grant, which was approved despite the broader energy crisis affecting all of Europe. Miscevic highlights the grant's wider economic impact by tying it to small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), which are the foundation of Serbia's economy as well as individual residents.

Challenges in European Integration in Serbia

Fundamental Rights

The issue of respecting fundamental rights in Serbia has been a significant concern for the European Union (EU). Despite having a constitutional framework that guarantees various fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, assembly, and the rule of law, the Serbian government has faced criticism for not fully respecting these rights.

However, while the authorities in Serbia emphasize that they will work more on reforms in the upcoming period, it is evident that there have been no improvements recently, as noted by Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law (FRRL) Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) while visiting Belgrade on November 2024. According to their findings in Serbia the following issues remain problematic: social partners' concerns about anti-union discrimination, no level playing field for economic operators, unequal application of the law, and ineffective social dialogue; Civil society organizations' concerns about being targeted, and arrests and violence among others after the Novi Sad demonstrations, and activists on blacklist were detained at the border; Media professionals' warnings about government-controlled media, lack of safety of journalist with previous murders still unresolved, and the excessive use of SLAPPs to silence journalist. Some pride parades had been banned for safety reasons, and there was a lack of actions against discrimination, lack of legal remedies, and the ombudsman office was not responsive and active. Concerns of endemic corruption with the government in control of all branches of government, and with the prosecution and judiciary under political influence.¹⁵ According to available information, President Aleksandar Vucic or other high officials of Serbia did not make public comments regarding the visit of the Group for Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to Serbia at the end of November 2024, nor did they refer to their conclusions.

¹³ <https://english.news.cn/europe/20241026/e65571c8383747b395d89a51d0ff663c/c.html>

¹⁴ <https://cordmagazine.com/country-in-focus/serbian-economy/tanja-miscevic-serbian-minister-of-european-integration-were-returning-to-the-essence-of-the-european-path/>

¹⁵ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/eesc-fundamental-rights-and-rule-law-group-concludes-visit-serbia>

This is one of the indicators that the authorities in Serbia do not attach great importance to fundamental rights, which could lead to major problems in Serbia's path to joining the EU.

Belgrade - Pristina negotiations

The relationship between Belgrade and Pristina has been shaped by Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, which Serbia does not recognize. According to international law and the UN framework, Kosovo views Serbia as a neighbour, while Serbia views Kosovo as its southern province. Negotiations mediated by the EU were initiated in 2011 to normalize relations and address issues like trade, governance, and regional cooperation in order to decrease these tensions. These discussions came after the International Court of Justice ruled that Kosovo's declaration of independence was legal, which led to a resolution between the EU and Serbia to hold technical talks under UN supervision.

The EU's plan ties normalization to Serbia and Kosovo's respective integration into the bloc. While both parties have agreed to many elements of the proposal, challenges remain regarding implementation, particularly over issues such as Serbia's resistance to recognizing Kosovo's membership in international organizations and the execution of previously signed agreements.

President Aleksandar Vucic's administration in Serbia has often underlined that full EU membership is the ultimate objective. In a recent interview, on 25 November 2024, with the BBC Vucic reaffirmed this goal, saying that Serbia would keep working to achieve the EU's requirements, which include a wide variety of legal, political, and economic reforms¹⁶. He confirmed Serbia's commitment to participate in the Belgrade-Pristina discussion as part of the ongoing process assisted by the EU, but he noted the difficulties, especially about the normalization of relations with Kosovo. *"Normalization means living in peace, stability, and tranquillity, ensuring the free flow of goods, capital, people, and services, developing our economies, starting discussions on various issues, and working to resolve them,"* Vucic said in one of the interviews.¹⁷

Indeed, one of the challenges Serbia faces in joining the European Union is its refusal to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state, continuing to regard it as an autonomous province. The majority of EU member states have recognized Kosovo's independence, and one of the EU's requirements for Serbia's accession is to accept Kosovo as a sovereign nation. However, the President of Serbia consistently asserts that this will not happen. He has stated: *"I will not sign, and I will not accept Kosovo's independence. And they know that."* He further added, *"They say – you have this option, will you sign? I won't. It's not easy to say that; these are serious people, the most responsible for Europe's future."*¹⁸ These examples illustrate his firm stance on rejecting Kosovo's independence and his resolve to communicate this position to EU leaders and the most powerful member states. This approach highlights the tension between Serbia's national policy and EU demands, presenting a significant obstacle to Serbia's EU membership aspirations.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JtmbZD3nfM>

¹⁷ <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-za-bbc-ponosan-sam-sto-sedim-samo-u-srpskoj-stolici/>

¹⁸ <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-nezavisnosti-kosova-svima-sam-u-briselu-u-lice-rekao-da-necu-priznati-kosovo/>

According to Vucic, the EU, US, France, Germany and Italy told him that Serbia will not be able to progress with its membership in the bloc and investments will be withdrawn if it does not cooperate on the issue of Kosovo.

"All EU member states accepted that plan, including five countries that did not recognize Kosovo, because they explained to them that there was no explicit recognition of Kosovo's independence, although they concealed the fact that there is an implicit obligation that Serbia does not oppose Kosovo's entry into the UN...Everyone accepted that, and the plan actually, not formally, became a new negotiating framework for Serbia," he said¹⁹. The statement illustrates Serbia's battle to strike a compromise between its internal policy of not recognizing Kosovo and its goal to join the EU. This causes conflict both inside Serbia and with the EU, since nationalist groups can see any implied compromises as treachery. By framing the plan as a "new negotiating framework," Vucic suggests that Serbia's EU membership is now heavily contingent on Kosovo-related concessions. This acknowledgment may exacerbate domestic resistance to the European path.

Political sovereignty versus membership

Serbia balancing between "Eastern" versus "Western" world

Serbia's foreign policy is characterized by a complex balancing act between the "Eastern" world, represented by Russia, and the "Western" bloc, led by the European Union. Although Serbia officially seeks EU membership, its close ties with Russia and continued engagements undermine alignment with the EU foreign policy and raise concerns about its long-term geopolitical orientation. The European Commission views Serbia's ongoing relations with Russia as a potential threat to Serbia's alignment with the EU's strategic priorities from the "Serbia Report 2024"²⁰. The report notes that Serbia has not aligned with restrictive measures against Russia or EU statements on Russia and Ukraine, while high-level contacts, including multiple visits between Serbian and Russian officials in 2024, persist and raise concerns about Serbia's strategic direction²¹. This two-pronged strategy reflects Serbia's strategic aim in cultivating links with the West as well as its historical, cultural, and economic ties to the East.

The historical ties between Serbia and Russia, spanning from the renewal of the modern Serbian state to the present day, highlight profound cultural, religious, linguistic, and historical connections that have significantly shaped the relationship between these two Slavic nations²². These bonds, rooted in shared Orthodox traditions, the use of the Cyrillic script, and similarities in mentality,

¹⁹https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eus-plan-for-kosovo-is-new-condition-for-serbias-integration-vucic/2795521?fbclid=IwY2xjawHC1kRleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHTFfNdk9MzYLZmahCHTmI8R8lInA0XjdkM8PTZ1HVw7LWBkqSa7B8aNm7g_aem_uBytvZqRzWCRXhfSCSvTWQ

²⁰https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

²¹https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

²² Serbia's foreign policy and the EU's common foreign and security policy; Research on topic: "Four Pillars of Serbian Foreign Policy", Aleksandar Gajić and Slobodan Janković; pg. 6
<http://repozitorijum.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/369/1/22.%20Spoljna%20politika%20Srbije.....%282012%29-176-199.pdf>

extend far beyond a purely "rational" understanding of political and interest-based relations between states.

Russia has consistently supported Serbia's territorial claims, framing its opposition to Kosovo's independence as a defense of international law. The Government of Serbia emphasized how important this is for the country since Russia is a key ally in the United Nations, using its veto power in the Security Council to block any attempts to recognize Kosovo's independence²³. In recent years, Serbia's leaders, including President Aleksandar Vucic, reiterated the strategic significance of this support, portraying Russia as a crucial ally in the fight against Western-backed Kosovo independence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia stated: *"Although strategically committed to full membership in the EU, Serbia seeks to preserve and enhance its relations with friends and partners around the world,"*²⁴ which also applies to relations with Russia. Furthermore, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marko Djuric, and in addition to the president of Serbia, expressed deep gratitude towards Russia for its unwavering support regarding the preservation of Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, particularly in relation to the Kosovo issue. He highlighted Russia's significant role in international forums, particularly its backing in preventing the recognition of Kosovo's independence.²⁵

Despite the continued strong relationship between Serbia and Russia, this alliance poses a significant challenge to Serbia's aspirations to join the European Union. The EU views Serbia's close relations with Russia, particularly regarding the Kosovo problem, and Russia's backing in international fora, such as the UN Security Council veto to prevent Kosovo's independence, as barriers to Serbia's alignment with EU foreign policy²⁶.

Serbia is expected to demonstrate its commitment to the EU's values, including supporting the sanctions imposed on Russia and distancing itself from actions that undermine the EU's foreign policy objectives. However, the EU sees Serbia's reluctance to impose sanctions as problematic because Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents a direct challenge to European security and the international order, including territorial integrity and sovereignty - values that are central to the EU's foundation. Serbia is aiming to protect its national interests by remaining loyal to both sides (or rather, by not angering anyone)²⁷. Vučić stated: *"Serbia supports the UN Charter, the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and has never questioned this for a second, nor will it,"* during the General Assembly session of the United Nations in September 2024.²⁸

A lesser-known fact is that Serbia and Ukraine have been viewed as "brotherly nations" for centuries and have a centuries-long tradition of good relations. It is in the interest of both Kyiv and Belgrade to recognize the importance of preserving and further developing this tradition.²⁹ Since February 2022,

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia%27s_reaction_to_the_2008_Kosovo_declaration_of_independence

²⁴ <https://lat.rt.rs/srbija-i-balkan/98392-djuric-grusko-rusija-kim/>

²⁵ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/djuric-zahvalnost-rusiji-na-podrsci-po-pitanju-kosova-12-11-2024>

²⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2024/04/23/top-eu-diplomats-put-serbia-against-the-wall-with-kosovo>

²⁷ <https://europrospects.eu/serbias-balancing-act-between-russia-and-the-eu/>

²⁸ <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/634215/vucic-danas-svi-govore-o-ukrajini-niko-ne-sme-da-prica-o-srbiji-video>

²⁹ <https://sres.ies.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SRES-2024-01-2-Martinjuk.pdf>

Serbia has increasingly supported or abstained from pro-Ukraine resolutions at the UN, contrasting with its previous opposition in the past. Serbia has also provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including €3 million through UNICEF/UNHCR and \$32.4 million via the National Bank of Ukraine (2024).³⁰ Contributions included energy equipment, medicines, and ambulances, facilitated by cooperation between the Serbian government and Ukraine's First Lady³¹. Considering its historical connections and external influences, Serbia carefully balances despite complex political relations.

In September 2024, the EU told Serbia that its ties with Russia during the aggression against Ukraine were not in line with the accession process, following the announcement of a meeting between Aleksandar Vulin (Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Serbia) and Putin³². Serbia's Prime Minister, Milos Vučević, in response to Brussels' reaction, stated that *"there is nothing monumental or that serious"* about Vulin meeting Putin and added that *"we have not broken diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation, and it is not prohibited for anyone to meet with representatives of the Russian Federation."*³³

Additionally, framing the relationship as one rooted in both national interest and cultural ties underscores the complexity of Serbia's balancing act between East and West. In one of the many interviews where Vučević was asked about imposing sanctions on Russia, he stated: *"Relations with Russia have not changed in the past two years, despite the turbulent situation we are in today. We will not impose sanctions..."*³⁴ In the part of this interview where the President of Serbia states that *"relations with Russia have not changed in the past two years,"* he emphasizes that there is still a good relationship with Russia in the areas of foreign policy and investments. He also mentions that he does not want to end the centuries-old friendship between these countries, nor recognize the sovereignty of Kosovo, and therefore does not want Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia. Additionally, in one of the latest interviews with the BBC President Vučević stated that Serbia balances between the West and East. He also emphasized that Serbia maintains strategic relations with Russia, while simultaneously trying to get closer to the European Union³⁵.

This analysis adds nuance to the narrative, showing that Serbia's diplomacy is not just about strategic calculations, a crucial aspect of its foreign policy, but also about longstanding cultural and historical affinities both with Russia and Ukraine, which is not typical to a country, which strives to European integration at this very moment, when the collective West fights against Russia.

³⁰ <https://sres.ies.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SRES-2024-01-2-Martinjuk.pdf>

³¹ <https://sres.ies.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SRES-2024-01-2-Martinjuk.pdf>

³² <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vulin--putin-rusija-srbija-sastanak-eu-sankcije/33104157.html>

³³ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vulin--putin-rusija-srbija-sastanak-eu-sankcije/33104157>

³⁴ <https://sputnikportal.rs/20231214/vucic-ekskluzivno-za-sputnjik-srbija-nece-priznati-kosovo-i-nece-vesti-sankcije-rusiji-video-1165097159.html>

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JtmbZD3nfM>

Azerbaijan - European Union Relations

Legal basis of Azerbaijan-European Union relations

The European Union possesses a variety of tools to support countries aspiring to join and align with its values, using political conditionality as a powerful lever to influence governments.

The "more for more" principle was a key element of the European Union's engagement approach, especially within the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) which is a conceptual basis for the EU's cooperation with six states - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine was initiated in 2008. It is based on the idea that the EU provides increased incentives and support to partner countries that show greater dedication to reforms in areas such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and economic development. However, it faces challenges in addressing nations that prefer selective alignment without seeking membership. In the Eastern Partnership region, Azerbaijan exemplifies this approach, engaging with the EU on its own terms without fully committing to its broader system.

Over time, it became clear that six countries in this platform had various ambitions, highlighting the need for the EaP to adopt a more tailored approach to each partner state.

Unlike other Eastern Partnership countries, Azerbaijani authorities view their relationship with the EU primarily as an opportunity for economic benefits and a component of their multi-dimensional foreign policy, rather than as a pathway to democratization or deeper integration with the EU.³⁶

For cooperation the EU presents different legal frameworks. In 2010 Azerbaijan and the EU began to negotiate about Association Agreement (AA) but later the country had declined this agreement claiming it does not meet Azerbaijan's national interests. The Azerbaijani government proposed two alternative frameworks that would supposedly be better aligned with the interests and objectives of the country. Baku's first initiative, the Strategic Modernization Partnership (SMP), proposed in 2013, would not be legally binding (on the contrary to the AA), preserve the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) of 1996 as the legal basis for relations, exclude politically controversial issues and clearly mention Azerbaijan's territorial integrity relating to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.³⁷

The EU dismissed the SMP but demonstrated a more receptive tone for the second proposal – Strategic Partnership Agreement – that was initiated by the Azerbaijani government at the Riga Summit of the EaP in 2015.

The EU's relations with Azerbaijan are currently regulated by the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which has been in effect since 1999. Negotiations for a new framework agreement aimed at strengthening political dialogue, trade, and mutually beneficial cooperation have been ongoing since 2017 but until now there has not been agreed.³⁸

³⁶(https://www.ab.gov.tr/files/ardb/evt/1_avrupa_birligi/1_11_dis_iliskiler/The_EU_and_Azerbaijan.pdf)

³⁷<https://aircenter.az/en/single/examining-the-eu--azerbaijan-relations-prior-to-the-eastern-partnership-summit-835>

³⁸<https://aircenter.az/uploads/JQtZi6TBPadh.pdf>

Key themes in the rhetoric of Azerbaijani government on European Union relations

Economic partnership and energy cooperation

In its relations with the EU, Azerbaijan has placed a strong emphasis on the economic dimension, particularly focusing on trade and energy cooperation. As an energy partner, Azerbaijan plays a role in supplying Caspian energy resources to the EU market. The country is acknowledged as a strategic energy partner of the EU, and this relationship is a central theme in the country's official discourse on EU relations. Analyzing speeches, interviews, and statements from Azerbaijani government over the past year reveals that, while there is criticism of the EU on certain issues like democracy and human rights—where Azerbaijan views EU's involvement as interference in its internal affairs—the Azerbaijani government highlights energy cooperation as a significant accomplishment.³⁹ President of Azerbaijan İlham Aliyev in his speeches frequently emphasizes this cooperation and calls Azerbaijan “*a reliable partner of Europe in the field of energy*”. According to him, in the continent of Europe ten countries receive gas from Azerbaijan, seven of which are members of the European Union. “*That is probably why the European Commission calls Azerbaijan a pan-European gas supplier and a reliable partner*”, President Aliyev said when he delivered his speech at the international Cernobbio Forum themed “*Intelligence on the World, Europe, and Italy*” in September 2024 in Italy.⁴⁰

It must be noted that since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 and the EU's efforts to reduce dependence on Russian gas, EU-Azerbaijan cooperation has increasingly concentrated on the energy sector.

In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in Energy, aiming to double the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor and supply at least 20 bcm of Azerbaijan's natural gas to the EU by 2027. However, achieving this target requires Azerbaijan to boost its gas production and expand the pipeline infrastructure. This, in turn, demands significant investment for infrastructure which the EU does not guarantee to provide due to concerns over long-term gas sales and limitations on funding fossil-fuel infrastructure. This uncertainty regarding investment by the EU is criticized by Azerbaijan.⁴¹ Azerbaijan's government states that there is a need for long-term guarantees and available financial instruments to invest in gas production growth. Speaking at the international forum “*COP29 and Green Vision for Azerbaijan*” in April 2024 Azerbaijani President said: “*The European Union wants more gas from Azerbaijan (...) We must produce more. But there are restrictions on financial institutions financing fossil fuel projects. For instance, the European Investment Bank has completely taken it out of their portfolio. The EBRD has a small portion for fossil fuel projects. So, how does Europe want to get more gas from Azerbaijan? When, first, they do not provide financing. And the second question is, they want us to produce and supply more, and they do, by the way. There are projects related to interconnectors construction in Europe. But at the same time, they do not give us a guarantee that*

³⁹<https://president.az/az/articles/view/66522>

⁴⁰<https://president.az/en/articles/view/66804>

⁴¹<https://un.mfa.gov.az/az/news/3550/ilham-eliyev-ada-universitetinde-cop29-ve-azerbaycan-ucun-yasil-baxis-movzusunda-kecirilen-beynelxalq-forumda-istirak-edib>

our gas will be needed for a long time. So, we cannot invest billions only for 5-10 years and then not be able to recover the costs".⁴²

EU's involvement in peace process in South Caucasus

The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia - before the second Karabakh war in 2020 and later peace negotiations between two parties - has been a significant factor shaping Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities. Naturally, this issue has an impact on the Azerbaijani government's narrative on EU integration.

After 44 days of war in 2020, the European Union became actively involved in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations, dedicating significant high-level efforts to address a long-standing dispute that had often been overlooked. Traditionally, since the 1990s Russia has played a dominant role, engaging directly with both Azerbaijan and Armenia in order to consolidate its influence in the South Caucasus. Following the new developments in the region, the EU began to emerge as a new player in the region. The war in Ukraine further weakened Russia's position, opening the door for the EU to step in as a mediator. Alongside Moscow's efforts, Brussels began to assert its diplomatic presence, and it must be noted that at the beginning Azerbaijan welcomed the EU's role in these efforts.⁴³ In a joint press briefing by EU Council President Charles Michel and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in 2021, Aliyev spoke about the EU's peace-making role: *"Now it is the time to think about peace. We are ready for this. Today, Mr. President (Charles Michel) and I had a wide-ranging discussion about our plans, initiatives and approaches to the new situation. I think that in a relatively short time, by demonstrating goodwill and a very pragmatic approach, we can resolve most of the issues still on the table and lay the foundation for broad regional cooperation in the region. The European Union plays a very important role in this regard, and I am sure it will continue to play. Mr. President's visit to the three countries of the South Caucasus demonstrates European involvement, the European agenda, and this is fully consistent with our agenda".⁴⁴*

Since December 2021, regular meetings between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the EU have taken place, addressing key issues. The EU's mediation revived diplomatic dialogue between the parties, with some tangible results such as the establishment of a hotline between the Defense Ministries of Azerbaijan and Armenia, the exchange of war prisoners, agreement on launching Joint Border Commissions. This positive development with the assistance of the EU has been recognized by Baku.⁴⁵

But in 2023, after serious escalations on the Azerbaijan-Armenia border, the EU took concrete steps by launching the EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) under the EU Foreign Affairs Council in February that the Azerbaijani government later expressed its disagreement. According to EEAS, the mission's purpose is to observe and report on the situation, contributing to human security in conflict-affected areas and supporting confidence-building between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁴⁶ However, Azerbaijan

⁴² <https://president.az/en/articles/view/65580>

⁴³ <https://president.az/az/articles/view/67077>

⁴⁴ <https://apa.az/xarici-siyaset/prezident-ilham-eliyev-ve-sarl-misel-birge-metbuat-konfransi-keciribler-video-yenilenib-653236>

⁴⁵ <https://president.az/az/articles/view/67273>

⁴⁶ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/about-european-union-mission-armenia_en?s=410283

has strongly criticized the EUMA, accusing it of bias and actions that undermine the country's interests. Since then, this is one of the foundational elements of Azerbaijani government's rhetoric.

According to the statements given by Azerbaijani officials, the Mission contradicts the agreements made during the 2022 Prague meeting. Azerbaijani government argues that the Mission's mandate was extended without consultation with Baku. *“Representatives of some European countries, and not only European countries, but also other Western countries, have started working in the Armenian army. An illegal “European peace”, or I don’t know, “observer” mission has been established on our border, while this is a violation of the agreement reached. I would also like to remind both the European Union and Armenia that at the Prague meeting in 2022, an agreement was reached - yes, we also agreed - that a small number of observer missions would be stationed on the Armenian side in the direction of the conditional border, for only two or three months. That is, this was agreed with us. But then they extended it without us, increased their number, included representatives from Canada, and in fact this mission is a NATO mission. After that, a policy of “binocular diplomacy” was pursued against us. Foreign representatives came to the border in a day and night and watched us with binoculars. What did they want to show us?! What kind of demonstration is this, what kind of cheap show?! All these factors should make us think seriously”*, President Aliyev said these in the first session of the seventh term of the National Parliament of Azerbaijan in September 2024.⁴⁷

Official Baku argues that the EU's institutions' critical statements and resolutions against the country and expanded observer presence along the border have exacerbated Azerbaijan's mistrust of EU involvement, claiming that the mission's activities contribute to anti-Azerbaijani narratives. In the press releases delivered by MFA of Azerbaijan on the EU Monitoring Mission it has been stated. One of the press releases by MFA on the Polish President's visit to this Mission in 2024 November reads: *“(...) contrary to its declared purposes of contributing to stability in the region and confidence-building between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the mission is being widely exploited as an anti-Azerbaijani propaganda tool”*.⁴⁸

In response to Azerbaijan's military operation in September 2023, when Azerbaijan regained full control of the self-proclaimed “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic”, both sides - Azerbaijan and the EU blamed each other. Azerbaijan characterized this as a failure of EU mediation and claimed that Brussels had not been able to ensure the demilitarization of Karabakh with Armenia's cooperation.

Following this military operation, the European Union institutions issued several critical statements and resolutions, expressing concern over the humanitarian impact of the operation. These statements were met with strong backlash from Azerbaijan, with high-level officials accusing the European Parliament of bias. Baku's official statements argued that the EU overlooks the historical context and facts of the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, highlighting the selective outrage and inconsistent application of international law. For example, commenting on the resolution of the European Parliament of March 13, 2024, spokesperson of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the resolution *“has been sponsored by a number of groups in the European Parliament that*

⁴⁷ <https://president.az/az/articles/view/66924>

⁴⁸ <https://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/no46324>; <https://www.mfa.gov.az/az/news/no39224>;

<https://turan.az/az/siyaset/prezident-ilham-eliyev-avropali-musahideciler-baki-ve-brussel-arasinda-etimadsizliq-yaradirlar-785698>

are influenced by Armenia and the Armenian Lobby, is an integral part of the smear campaign against Azerbaijan, in which every fact is falsified, despite being presented as "promoting peace" and purportedly dedicated to the European Union-Armenia relationship. The resolution contains ludicrous and offensive statements that go beyond political ethics contradicting the essence of international relations, as well as statements that are in clear violation of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty, revealing the true nature of the MEPs who proposed the resolution. The European Parliament may prove a more useful institution if it addresses more serious issues plaguing Europe, such as racial discrimination, Islamophobia, xenophobia, extremism, and inhumane treatment of migrants, instead of interfering with the normalization process between Azerbaijan and Armenia".⁴⁹

In 2024 another development has cooled relations between Baku and Brussels, the financial support for Armenia from the "European Peace Facility" by the European Union has been harshly criticized by Azerbaijani government. In the speech when Azerbaijani President delivered at the first session of the 7th term of the Parliament of Azerbaijan, he expressed strong disapproval of this decision by the EU. He criticized this fund, suggesting that *"so-called "European Peace Facility," demonstrate a remarkable level of hypocrisy. The fund is intended for weapons, yet they label it as a Peace Facility. Armenia benefits from this arrangement, receiving free weapons from France. And this money is not being repaid from any other sources either".⁵⁰*

In the certain statements given by MFA of Azerbaijan, the EU institutions and officials were accused of being hypocritical towards Azerbaijan. These criticisms often center on perceived "double standards" in the EU's approach to human rights, territorial integrity and relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Here are several examples:

- One of press releases spread by press service of MFA on the meeting between Azerbaijani Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and Markéta Pekarová Adamová, President of Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic on February 2, 2024 we read: *"Minister Jeyhun Bayramov emphasized that Azerbaijan is a reliable partner of the EU and its member states, applying double standards and the display of an unfair approach towards our country do not contribute to the establishment of sustainable peace in the region"⁵¹.*
- the Azerbaijani MFA has blamed the EU for unfairly criticizing Azerbaijan's domestic policies while allegedly overlooking similar issues in other countries with closer ties to the EU: *"We express our regret over the disregard for instances of fundamental human rights violations in certain EU member states, including the imprisonment of individuals due to political persecution, the loss of lives in prisons and during protests such as the "Yellow Vest" demonstrations, as well as the violent suppression of protests in New Caledonia. These actions serve as clear examples of double standards. We call on the European Union's*

49

https://azertag.az/en/xeber/azerbajjans_foreign_ministry_the_resolution_adopted_by_the_european_parliament_serves_as_a_clear_example_of_a_recurrent_double_standards_approach_against_azerbaijan-2948529

⁵⁰ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66895>

⁵¹ <https://mfa.gov.az/az/news/no04124>

institutions to cease their provocations against Azerbaijan”, MFA responded to the question from local media on the EU criticism related to human rights in Azerbaijan.⁵²

In general, analysis of relevant data demonstrates that Azerbaijan's rhetoric has become increasingly critical of the EU since the military operation in Karabakh in 2023. Officials argue that the EU's condemnation of Azerbaijan's actions disregards the country's sovereign right to restore constitutional order in a region recognized as part of its territory. Studying the content of critical messages of Azerbaijani officials against the EU, we understand criticism mostly focuses on the EU's failure to address this conflict before the war in 2020, with Azerbaijani officials accusing the EU of politically motivated actions that hinder peace efforts in the South Caucasus. It must be noted that the European Parliament has been the main target in this criticism because of its statements and resolutions.

Political sovereignty versus membership

Commitment to **multi-vector foreign policy** is a thesis that is often emphasized by Azerbaijani officials. Official Baku perceives the EU as a strategic partner and interested in strengthening cooperation on an equal footing.⁵³ According to the position of the government, considering two parties are equal then the EU has no right “to dictate” Baku.

Geopolitical realities are another point frequently emphasized by Azerbaijani authorities in this framework. The core of this argument is that Azerbaijan navigates a complex regional landscape, maintaining delicate relationships with the EU, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Full EU membership, they contend, could potentially disrupt this balance and create instability within these dynamics.

“Us and them” – conservatism versus liberalism

Although this element is not raised in the government's rhetoric too much, at least in the time frame that was studied in this research but from time to time cultural and religious distinctions between Azerbaijan and the EU countries could be applied to shape public opinion. This rhetoric emphasizes Azerbaijan's traditional and conservative values, contrasting them with the perceived liberalism of European integration. Even on several occasions at the highest level it has been expressed concerns about the adoption of Western progressive ideologies, such as feminism and LGBTQ+ rights, framing them as incompatible with Azerbaijan's cultural fabric.⁵⁴

For example, Azerbaijan's President in his speech that delivered in the ceremony held on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Baku State University in November 2019 clearly highlighted this distinction: *“We are building a state based on traditional values. We must protect this. Now in some countries this is not paid attention to. There is no longer a distinction between women and men. But we live and must live in a traditional society. We must respect women, we must protect them, we must defend them. They should not do for us, we should do for them. There is gender equality, and we accept it. But we cannot live outside of traditional thinking, and the younger generation must*

⁵² <https://www.mfa.gov.az/az/news/no31424>

⁵³ <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/azerbaijan-is-interested-in-european-integration>;
<https://mfa.gov.az/en/category/regional-organisations/relations-between-azerbaijan-and-european-union>

⁵⁴ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/34985/videos/6>; <https://president.az/az/articles/view/66894>

know this. The elderly must be respected, based on their age. Now some people want the word “elder” to be removed from our vocabulary, as in some countries. When you look at them, you are horrified. Then they tell us, come and integrate with us. I said once, when the economic crisis broke out in Europe, I said, where should we integrate, into the crisis? Where should we integrate, to those who say “Stop Islam!”? Where should we integrate, to those who do not see a difference between men and women?”⁵⁵ In particular, the perception of protection of national values from “foreign (Western) elements” is highlighted by MPs who have been a mouthpiece of the government. For example, Azerbaijani MP Javid Osmanov in his interview to the local media suggested that “society should completely isolate LGBT representatives, feminists! They should not have any integration into society. They only have a negative impact on Azerbaijani society. They only bring harmful habits”.⁵⁶

This rhetoric positions Azerbaijan within a broader conservative framework similar to that of countries like Russia, highlighting a strong emphasis on preserving national identity in contrast to perceived external cultural influences.

Democracy and Human Rights

Azerbaijan is rich in energy resources and fits the classic description of the political economy of oil-rich states. This contributed to “resource curse” and the resulting lack of integrationist drive and democratic deficit. The legacy of Soviet bureaucracy and certain structural factors have a role in the integration process. European integration requires reforms which put the elite’s political power at risk and demands rule of law, free media, transparency etc. But throughout years the EU’s energy interests led to lowered expectations on its part as regards Azerbaijan’s performance in reforms. The principle of conditionality was not really applied despite a bad human rights record. On the other hand, the weakness of another EaP instrument – the “more for more” principle – was clear for a state whose daily income from oil revenues often exceeded the annual reward by Brussels for the successful implementation of reforms.

Criticism from the European Union regarding the human rights situation in Azerbaijan is typically met with a rebuttal from the government, which frames such critiques as an unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. The Azerbaijani authorities often argue external actors should not impose their values or judgments on the nation's domestic policies.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ <https://president.az/az/articles/view/34958>

⁵⁶ https://musavat.com/news/deputat-cemiyet-lgbt-numayendelerini-feministleri-tamamile-tecrid-etmelidir-musahibe_894259.html?d=1

⁵⁷ <https://report.az/xarici-siyaset/ai-nin-qerezli-ve-edaletsiz-beyanatlari-azerbaycanin-daxili-islerine-mudaxile-kimi-qiymetlendirilir/>

Conclusion

The research examines how popular perceptions of European integration are shaped by official narratives from the Governments of Serbia and Azerbaijan, two nations with very different geopolitical settings and objectives.

As a formal applicant for EU membership, Serbia presents its integration as a means of achieving political, economic, and regional stability while emphasizing reforms like judicial independence, environmental sustainability, and cross-border collaboration. But there are still major obstacles to overcome, including the normalization process with Kosovo and adhering to the EU standards and norms. Additionally, Serbia's struggle to join the EU is tied to its refusal to impose sanctions on Russia. However, from the analysts' point of view, the authorities in Serbia are more focused on making statements about these issues rather than taking significant steps to improve fundamental rights in Serbia. The Government of Serbia presents the EU as an economic benefit rather than values. This is the main problem because there is no progress in Fundamental Rights.

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, views its relationship with the EU mainly as a practical economic alliance, particularly in the energy sector. Although Azerbaijan interacts with the EU in sectors like energy and trade, it has continuously avoided applying for full EU membership, indicating a more limited alignment. In addition to good cooperation in the economic sphere, our analysis showed that in 2023-2024 Azerbaijani government's rhetoric was in harsh tone against the EU and the block was accused of being biased regarding the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Both countries prioritize fostering bilateral relations with individual EU Member States, rather than engaging primarily within the broader, collective framework of the European Union.

Both nations' political and economic agendas influence their rhetoric. While Azerbaijan sidestepped a commitment to the EU membership in favor of focusing on energy cooperation and selective alliances, the Serbian government promoted EU integration as an essential step to the nation's modernization. These differing approaches reflect broader regional dynamics and the challenges each country faces in navigating its relationship with the EU.

Disclaimer: *The research was carried out with the financial support from the Warsaw Euro-Atlantic Summer Academy (WEASA) in the frame of the activities designed for WEASA Alumni members. WEASA is carried out in partnership with the College of Europe in Natolin, the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), and the Polish American Freedom Foundation.*