



**European Politics and Society:  
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**Tatev Derzyan**



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**The Effectiveness of Erasmus+ and UGRAD Soft Power on Armenia  
during Hard Times (Nagorno-Karabakh War 2020)**

Master's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2021

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

Prague, June 28 2021

Tatev Derzyan



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## **Abstract**

The thesis focuses on soft power and public diplomacy through exchange study programs of the European Union and the United States. Precisely, the thesis studies the influence of the educational exchange programs (Erasmus+ and UGRAD) on the Armenian exchange students in the scope of soft power. After establishing the influence of the exchange programs on the formation of the perceptions about the host countries, the thesis further focuses on the sustainability of the perception taking into consideration the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war which is a 'critical juncture' as it was a dramatic event in the life of the Armenian youth and could have influenced their views of the EU and the US. It is important to note that the academic literature on the exchange students' perceptions does not provide any studies through the lenses of the political events in the participants' home country.

Thirty-nine semi-structured interviews have been conducted among the Erasmus+ and UGRAD participants from Armenia alongside the content analysis of the documents that the EU and the US released during the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war in order to understand what was the politics of the host countries and what was the impact of the EU and the US reactions to the conflict on the Armenian exchange students. While most of the participants preserved the positive image that was formed thanks to the respective exchange program, largely they stated that they have detached their personal experience from the political beliefs after the war, or have changed their worldview due to 'cognitive dissonance'.

## **Keywords**

Soft power, public diplomacy, education, Erasmus+, UGRAD, Eastern Partnership, The European Union, the United States of America, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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## **List of acronyms**

- AA - Association agreement
- CEPA - EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
- CV - Curriculum vitae
- DAAD - German Academic Exchange Service
- DCFTA - Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
- EaP - Eastern Partnership
- ECA - The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
- EEAS - European External Action Service
- EEU - Eurasian Economic Union
- EMJM - Erasmus Mundus Joint Master
- ENP - European Neighbourhood policy
- EP - European Parliament
- EQF - European Qualification Framework
- ERASMUS European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students
- EU - The European Union
- FLEX -Future Leaders Exchange Program
- HR/VP - High Representative/Vice-President
- KGB - the Committee for State Security of the USSR
- MFA - Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- NATO - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- PCA - Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
- RA - Republic of Armenia
- RQ - Research question
- STEM - science, technology, engineering and mathematics
- TIFA - Trade and Investment Framework Agreement
- UGRAD- Global Undergraduate Exchange Program
- USA - United States of America
- USAID - United States Agency for International Development
- USIA - United States Information Agency
- USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

## **Introduction**

Countries exercise their influence over other countries using different tools of influence, and the main distinction is drawn between ‘hard’ and so-called ‘soft power’. Hard power bases on military intervention, coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions (Wilson, 2008) and relies on tangible power resources such as armed capabilities or economic sanctions (Gallarotti, 2011). Soft power, on the other hand, is based on the belief that certain ‘national values’ can be made attractive, soft power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want. (Hall, 2010) (Nye, 1980). In different parts of the world, the countries able to allocate resources for the development of soft power drew from their own culture, value systems, or policy alternatives as the most attractive. European states emphasize the soft power of their values; and the United States, although highly relying on its military and economic capabilities, employs the strategy of soft power through public diplomacy. Education and exchange programs have been emphasized as one of the most prominent tools for the soft power, as it exposes the students to the values of the host society and shapes perception about it. The studies have shown that the exchange students tend to have a good perception about their host country and show willingness to support the cooperation between home and host countries (Atkinson, 2010, etc.). Nevertheless, the studies do not show the durability and sustainability of the effect and how the dramatic events such as war can influence the perception.

This thesis focuses on the specific components of the soft power of European Union and the United States of America: the EU uses more soft power policies, attracting new members and allies through European values and creating a shared European identity, also trying to reinforce reforms in the European Neighbourhood. As the US Department puts it, along with hard power exercised by the military, soft power of public diplomacy is an essential support in advancing U.S. interests abroad (Hall, 2010). Since soft power uses a wide range of tools, the thesis focuses on educational exchange programs as the channel of soft power, given that they are also considered soft power mechanisms by Joseph Nye. The research was conducted with the Armenian students who participated in Erasmus+ (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) or UGRAD (Global Undergraduate Exchange Program). The choice of the exchange programs is determined by their comparability: both are non-degree, fully-funded programs organized by relevant bodies among the EU and the US. The choice of the case of Armenia was

conditioned by its similar relations with the EU and the US, which focus on developing democracy and human rights and have certain economic components. Armenia's cooperation with the EU functions in the scope of Eastern Partnership in accordance with the CEPA (EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement) document targeting the democratic development and human rights protection in the country; the US pursues similar goals in Armenia, that is promoting U.S. values and countering the Russian leverage, besides, the US is a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, the body which is entrusted to find the resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>1</sup>. The recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh Second war<sup>2</sup> enabled the testing of soft power theory, particularly in the context of the dramatic developments in the home country of the exchange studies participants.

The thesis aims to test the theory of soft power: if the perception formed thanks to soft power lasts given the on ground politics and responses of the host countries to the dramatic events of the home countries of the exchange participants. Taking into account the similarity of the goals of the US and the EU regarding Armenia, as well as their mostly common stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the research questions and hypotheses are

1. RQ1 - What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?
2. RQ2 - What is the response of Erasmus+ and UGRAD students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?
3. RQ3 - How did the students' perceptions of the USA or EU, respectively, change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?

#### Hypotheses

1. Participants of exchange programs tend to have expectations of support from their

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<sup>1</sup> The Minsk Group, a mediation effort led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was created in 1994 to address the dispute and is co-chaired by the United States, France, and Russia.

<sup>2</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh Second war is a period of September 27 -November 10, between Armenia and Azerbaijan for a territory called Nagorno-Karabakh. Nagorno-Karabakh is a disputed territory, which Azerbaijan regards as part of its territorial integrity, while Armenians regard it as the Republic of Artsakh, a non-recognized state inhabited by ethnic Armenians. The Nagorno-Karabakh First war was from the 1980s to May 1994 which ended with a ceasefire and since then the conflict was 'frozen': it was under Armenian control, nevertheless the resolution of the conflict was placed under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group (Cornell, 1999). The Nagorno-Karabakh Second war was finished by the ceasefire deal on November 10, according to which Armenia had to make considerable secessions.

host countries when their home country is in crisis.

2. If the on-ground politics of the host country is favorable for the student's home country during the crisis, the perceived attractiveness of the home country rises, and vice versa.
3. Unfavourable on-ground politics of the host country towards the student's home country during the crisis will undermine soft power efforts.

As the EU tries to enlarge the scope of its influence mainly using the soft tools, it is relevant to understand if those are effective enough and if Erasmus is as effective outside its frontiers as it is within the EU, given that the available literature has limited research on the impact of Erasmus outside the EU, and most importantly how the on-ground-politics of the EU interacts with the perception that was formed during Erasmus+ exchange. As for the US, soft power is incorporated into public diplomacy aims at enlarging the US leverage coupled with hard power. The literature mostly speaks of the long term programs and do not assess the effect of the short term programs, besides the studies are mostly concentrated on the effect of the exchange programs on the collapse of the USSR, and the current studies mostly analyse the effects on the Arab countries and China. The case of Armenia is a good test ground for the soft power given the turbulence of the war that might have put the previous perceptions about the US and the EU for a change<sup>3</sup>. The importance of this research is bridging the effects of on ground politics with soft power efforts and understanding how the former influences the latter. In order to achieve that end, the research is built upon a large body of literature which studies the effect of exchange programs of the EU and the US, then the research narrows down to the documents of the EU and the US where they describe their policies towards Armenia and public diplomacy efforts. Furthermore, the content analysis of the EU and the US responses to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war is carried out in order to lay the ground for the studies of perceptions. The most important part is the semi-structured interviews with the alumni of Erasmus and UGRAD to understand the effects of the war on their perceptions about the EU and the US. To sum up, this thesis studied the Erasmus+ and UGRAD exchange students, their perception of the EU and US respectively; the change of perception thanks to their experience in the EU/US, and the possible change of perception after the Nagorno-

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the thesis is **not** examining the legitimacy of the stance presented by the US and the EU, neither it aims to examine the roots of the conflict and its legal and political repercussions, it will only focus on the possible change of perception on the relevant exchange students.

Karabakh Second war. The contribution of this research to the literature is placing exchange programs as institutions and viewing them through the lenses of the importance of 'critical juncture', in this case, Nagorno-Karabakh Second war, understanding the limitations of the soft power during hard times.

## 1. Soft Power through Education and its Limitations

Power in international relations is about gaining influence over other actors; it can be done with hard or soft, or a combination of both power types (Willson, 2008). Types of power have been described in various writings of international relations, including in the earliest realist writings, where the importance of norms, morality, and world opinion as forms of power was rather small (Morgenthau 1948), (Carr, 1956). Hard power strategies focus on military intervention, coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions to enforce national interests (Art, 1996). If the concepts of hard and soft powers are in the paradigm of international relations theories, it is the neorealist approaches that emphasize hard power, especially the hard power of states. Soft power is different from hard power because there is no coercive force present to force the opponent to adopt the preferences; it is defined by the ability to get what the state wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It comes from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies (Nye, 2004). The concept of country attractiveness is the core element of a country's soft power, it enhances the success of policies of countries in the various fields (Lee, 2016). Soft power changes the behaviour in others, by using persuasion and attraction not through military means, therefore, the concept of soft power is close to the liberal tradition since the liberal, neoliberal scholars mention soft power as a resource of influencing other states' politics, even if 'there is no contradiction between realism and soft power' (Nye, 2011). The core assumption of neoliberalism sees institutions as a means to tone down the effects of anarchy: *"a set of networks, norms and institutions, once established, will be difficult either to eradicate or drastically rearrange"* (Keohane and Nye, 1998).

The influence of soft power in international relations involves mechanisms such as attraction through norm diffusion or the rhetoric or discourse control. Norms diffusion can influence perception various groups of individuals, such as epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) or transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), while the rhetoric or discourse control is identified as creating a dominant discourse through the use of symbols and rhetoric provided through media (ibid). Perception is defined as human's primary form of cognitive contact with the surrounding world. As all conceptual knowledge is based upon or derived from the primary form of awareness (Efron, 1969).

Historically, policy-makers have viewed educational exchange programs as one of the tools to gain influence and shape perception and influence politics. One of the effective mechanisms for disseminating democratic values is international educational exchange (Williams, 2004). Nye's main example of the soft power through education is depicted with the US educational programs involving Chinese students "*The ideas and values that America exports in the minds of more than half a million foreign students who study every year in American universities and then return to their home countries [...] tend to reach elites with power*" (Nye, 2014). The US policy has promoted educational exchange programs as one way that US soft power mechanisms gain their efficiency, meanwhile Erasmus+ is an equivalent program for the European Union, trying to communicate the EU values within its borders and beyond.

The thesis focuses on public diplomacy, as the communication of values is transmitted through public diplomacy channels. "Public diplomacy" is defined as "*how a nation's government or society engages with external audiences in ways that improve these foreign publics' perception of that nation*" (Cross 2013). Some scholars also prefer to use the concept of cultural diplomacy to depict relationships with foreign audiences. However, this thesis uses the idea of public diplomacy since cultural diplomacy can be regarded as a subset of public diplomacy; public diplomacy is more encompassing than cultural diplomacy (Hwajung, 2017).

Constructivist theory is the main ground of the theoretical framework of the thesis as it addresses the interrelationships on the international arena and is a philosophy that explains the impact of education on an individual and society. To address the effectiveness of soft power through education, one should consider how education can influence the individual, whether it can affect the values of the individual, and if the effect of education can be translated into the fulfilment of foreign policy goals. According to the constructivist theory, knowledge can emerge and develop as non-objective and constructed explanations by humans who are engaged in discussion or other forms of communication; it contributes to the debate that humans are not born with innate knowledge, but instead develop it through their experiences (Fosnot, 2013), (Barkin, 2009). Consequently, education is not a value-neutral process; individuals engaged in the learning process can influence each other's world outlook.

Constructivist theory can further be explored by social communication theory. As Deutsch puts it, social communication is used for identity formation within the nation-states and can be effective for identity-building purposes in transnational communities (Deutsch, 1966).

The student exchange programs are the extension of this belief because of its political importance as they have a transformative effect on the identities and perceptions of participants. Social psychology theories suggest that personal contacts between different groups can positively affect their attitudes towards each other. Following the constructivist theory, the contact hypothesis and the in-group model suggest European student mobility can be regarded as a tool for the promotion of collective European identity (Favell et al, 2008). For highlighting the transformative impact of European exchange programs, Green mentions that when students have the chance to leave their countries for a significant amount of time for studies, the experience of other cultures and interacting with people with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds will lead them to expand their understanding of 'home space' from their nation-states to the European level (Green, 2007). Nevertheless, the mentioned authors agree on the transformative power of education; they do not expand on how transformative the power is, whether it is achievable for students coming from relatively similar cultural backgrounds or the transformation exceeds the borders of European civilization. Based on the constructivist theory of education, as well as the socializing mechanisms, student exchanges are one of the channels of public diplomacy; education is one of the factors that compose a country's soft power as identified by the author of the concept, Joseph Nye. The role of education has increased due to modernization and significant transformation in the global market, and it has become one of the factors of a country's prestige (Wojciciuk, 2015).

Public diplomacy, as a variation of foreign policy, aiming to construct certain attractiveness for a country, has various tools at its disposal; foreign exchange programs combine all three soft power resources namely culture, political values, and foreign policies. Nye defines culture as set of practices that create meaning for a society, such as literature, art, education and means of mass entertainment; the political values can be source for the soft power when the country lives up to them domestically and in international relations; and the foreign policies can be used as soft power when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority. The soft power of exchange programs exists somewhere at the crossroads of educational, cultural, and non-state public diplomacy; it allows a state to use all three sources of its soft power- culture, values, and policies at once. Therefore, the multidimensional soft power of student and scholar exchange programs are institutions that create space for a new, largely unique area of public diplomacy research (Latypova 2017).



Public diplomacy and soft power are related to each other as the soft power is derived from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies and uses those to channel their attractiveness to the foreign public. They communicate with selected people to fulfil the actor's primary purpose "get what the country wants through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye, 2008). For obtaining what it wants, the country that exerts soft power should inspire other countries to follow its example because of prosperity and openness. The soft power objectives of the American public diplomacy are supported by American libraries and exchange programs that bring foreign students and professionals to the US to experience aspects of American society and culture (Rough, 2017). The logic of the soft power is that the experience may impact the political institutions and political behaviour in their home countries. Three components must be present for the interaction to take place

1. The depth and extent of social interactions that occur while abroad,
2. The sharing of a sense of community, and
3. The attainment of a politically influential position by the exchange participant at home (Atkinson, 2010).

Research has shown that exchange students return home with a more positive view of the country in which they studied, and they also show some sympathy to the people they interacted with (ibid).

To further understand the impact of the educational exchange programs within the scope of soft power, the programs will be regarded as 'institutions' as this theory helps to view the exchange programs in their development. Historical institutionalism and neo institutionalist theories, sociological institutionalism specifically, tend to define the institutions differently, historical institutionalism defines institutions as 'the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity' (Kathleen, Steinrno, 1988). Sociological institutionalists tend to broaden the definition by adding not only formal rules, but also cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the 'frames of meaning' guiding human action influencing their most basic preferences and very identity (Fligstein, 1994). Such a definition defuses the conceptual divide between 'institutions' and 'culture'. Historical institutionalism differs as it takes into account 'path dependence' and unintended consequences as well as look into the contribution of ideas that can impact political outcomes. Moments when substantial institutional change takes place are called 'critical junctures', they are 'branching points' from which historical flow moves onto a new path. Critical junctures are created as a result

of the impact of economic crisis and military conflict and can influence the ‘frames of meaning’ (Gourevitch, 1986).

There is debate over the effectiveness of soft power regarding achieving foreign policy goals. Sceptics of soft power argue that hard power is more effective for reaching foreign policy goals; it can be said that soft power works when the sending and receiving sides agree on the nature of cooperation (Trunkos, 2013). Other authors, such as Cooper, also question the strength of culture as a soft power resource, for instance cultural influence does not equal political power (Cooper, 2004). Secondly, the desirability of soft power policy outcomes depends on particular circumstances that cannot necessarily be influenced by states (ibid.)

There also can be limitations to the soft power, for instance, it may be out of control of political leaders or policymakers, as the attractiveness of the country cannot always be controlled, or a policy designed to cultivate soft power may not work; moreover, soft power cannot always substitute hard power; as the attractiveness of the country does not always ensure influence in international relations. The soft power can be time and space bound. However, soft power may be useful for long-term foreign policy strategy as it builds relations on common ground.

In order to perform the empirical part of the research, one needs to understand how ‘critical juncture’ aligns with the limitations of the soft power. The educational exchange programs are designed as institutions which aim at changing the identity and consequent influence of the preferences of a student that will further bring about an overarching change of the home country’s political preferences, so it should be discussed how the ‘critical juncture’ can halt the process of influencing the preferences or raising the attractiveness of the host country. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people have an inner drive to hold all their attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance) (Festinger, 1957). When there is a dissonance between attitudes or behaviors, a change must occur to tackle the dissonance. Dissonance can be eliminated by changing existing beliefs, adding new ones, or reducing their importance. Therefore, a critical juncture may cause a cognitive dissonance and the latter can bring forward certain ways to tackle the dissonance, such as change of perception.

Soft power advocates, US policy makers, and scholars claimed that US-hosted educational exchange programs can assist the United States to engage its ideational adversaries and in the ‘war of ideas’ with the non-liberal forces (Nye and Owens, 1996). The most prominent example of the usage of soft power through education comes from both of the protagonists

in the Cold War where the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and the US pursued political influence with exchange programs. On the Soviet side, the International Lenin School in Moscow students were more likely to achieve high positions within the communist party in Great Britain during the 1920s through 1940s (Cohen, 2005). The US-hosted exchanges exposed future leaders to the values under a democratic government and free-market system on the US side. Exchanges increased Western influence, particularly within the Russian intelligentsia, helped to boost gradual change in the Soviet Union that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Soviet system (Richmond, 2003; Nye 2004). Former KGB General Oleg Kalugin emphasized the importance of such programs in undermining the ideological basis of the communist system: “Exchanges were a Trojan Horse in the Soviet Union”. They played a tremendous role in the erosion of the Soviet system. They opened up a closed society. They greatly influenced younger people who saw the world with more open eyes, and they kept infecting more and more people over the years” (Richmond, 2003).

The US-hosted educational exchange programs are part of public diplomacy, aiming to bring citizens of non-democratic states to experience life first-hand in a democratic country. The most studied US-funded exchange programs are Fulbright and FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange Program). A few opinion polls have revealed that after their visits to the United States students have a more favorable attitude towards America (Fitzpatrick and Rugh, 2006). And study groups mostly composed of Arab exchange students, who might be sceptical about aspects of American society and culture have opportunities to see America not filtered by the US government. Soft power advocates, US policy makers, and scholars claimed that US-hosted educational exchange programs can assist the United States to engage its ideational adversaries (Nye and Owens, 1996).

Furthermore, the European Union and its ability to exercise power externally, as well as the essence and the source of the European power should be examined. The European Union strives to be regarded as a normative power, given that it tries to influence other countries by disseminating norms rather than exercising military operations or economic sanctions. However, the critique over Manners’ work suggests that the Union navigates not only in compliance with the norms outlined in the Treaties but also in account the interests of the Union as a whole and the Member States individually (Pace, 2007). The Principled pragmatism outlined in “A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy: Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe” suits well. It finds the middle ground between normative power and the current state of affairs in the world (Manners

2001). Nevertheless, the EU is also regarded as soft power and transformative power when it comes to its relationship with candidate and neighboring states, so the underlying difference between the aforementioned power types and the choice of using 'soft power' in current research lies in the argument that normative power underlines the essence of power. In contrast, soft power implies outsourcing ideas, models, and norms (Nielsen, 2013). Bologna process is one of the means of exercising soft power through education as it calls for 'greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education' thus making education as one of the tools of soft power as its overarching aim is an enhanced 'attractiveness' and 'competitiveness' of Europe's higher education systems (Wächter, 2004).

With establishing soft power definition, and its usage through education, its usefulness for foreign policy goals is yet to be investigated. Soft power assists the process of "Europeanisation from outside" (Djordjievic, 2008), attracting the state which seeks democratic change, with the propagation of European values, social norms, and institutional structures outside of Europe. Different from concepts of 'European integration' and 'European governance' or 'European integration,' in a way, it tries to project the internal solution externally. Europeanization can be achieved by four mechanisms: conditionality, externalization, socialization, and imitation. Socialization is the mechanism used to impact the Neighborhood countries combined with conditionality; it persuades the outside actors the norms and ideals of the Union (Schimmelfennig, 2020). As this thesis concentrates on Eastern Partnership, which is the program under the European Neighborhood umbrella, socialization mechanism is used to explain the process of Europeanization; the other mechanisms are directed at the elite of the country, while socialization functions in societal levels, such as students (Bulmer and Radaelli, 2004).

As for assessing the impact of Erasmus, mostly, the researchers of the soft power of study mobility use the number of incoming students as a soft power success measurement, or in general, the Erasmus mobility success is measured by the employability of the alumni. However, Perilli used the returning students for measuring the impact of Erasmus, comparing Erasmus students' opinions with the general polls on EU matters (Perilli, 2017). The mentioned research was carried out for the European Neighbourhood countries (Georgia, Ukraine, and Tunisia) and it outlined the lack of research on the Erasmus soft power on European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries. In the US, the research mostly focuses on FLEX and Fulbright exchange students; the studies mostly focus on the military exchange as well as change of perception among Arab students, leaving the rest of the

world rather unstudied after the collapse of the USSR. The literature lists three levels through which the attraction of soft power can be directed: attraction towards the elites of the countries which can influence their societies directly; attraction towards the target groups which will transmit the attraction in indirect ways, through organizations and media; the third level is attraction towards the general public of the country (Li, 2018).

## **2. Methodology**

The theoretical framework of the present research is the ‘soft power’ theory by Joseph Nye and the new institutionalism which allows regard to the exchange programs as institutions influencing the perceptions of the participants. Cooper’s critique of Nye’s work on the limitations of the soft power which implies that the state does not have full control over the consequences of this form of the soft power using the concepts of the ‘critical juncture’ and ‘critical dissonance’ to test the durability of the soft power consequences (perception) during hard times (Nagorno-Karabakh Second war). The choice of the US and the EU is also connected to their political significance to Armenia, the US is a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group which is entitled to find the resolution of the conflict, and therefore the US’s reaction to the war is essential to the Armenian public and also to the small target group of exchange students. France is the only EU state which is a member of the OSCE Minsk Group. The EU’s stance on the conflict is important because of Armenia’s political and cultural ties to Europe, as well as the popularity of European exchange programs among Armenian youth. It is evident that, Nagorno-Karabakh Second war is a critical juncture that could result in possible change of Armenians’ perception of the EU/US as it was the major political cataclysm in the past 30 years of Armenia.

The research is exploratory and deductive. It focuses on the specific segment of soft power, i.e. education exchange program students whose country recently went through a war. The logic of soft power dictates: it increases the attraction of the host country, through the mechanisms of norm diffusion, it produces the changes perception of the participants, and it is designed to contribute to the foreign policy goals of the initiator countries by ‘producing’ people more inclined to establish and develop the relationship between their home and host countries. Nevertheless, program participants may later come to understand that the countries in the international area do not always act according to their values but according to their interests, therefore their response to the political event such as war can be dictated not by their public diplomacy goals but their other interests, such as economy or security.

## **2.1 Research Design**

The primary method of the thesis is semi-structured interviews, which were conducted via Zoom due to the coronavirus restrictions. Considering the great number of the students who participated in the exchange programs and the feasibility of the research, and the intention to do an in-depth analysis, the interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. According to Saunders, semi-structured interviews should be 5-25 people as, after that, the information is repeated (Saunders, 2012). According to the General Data Protection Regulation, neither the EU institutions nor the National Erasmus+ offices in Yerevan can share the data on the participants of Erasmus+ Mobility Action One. The US Embassy in Yerevan does not have the permission to share the details of the UGRAD participants. Taking this into consideration, I used snowball sampling to find the interviewees; using the Facebook platform of the National Erasmus+ office to diversify the snowball sampling, as simultaneously, participants have referred their peers to me after their interview. I have conducted 23 interviews among Erasmus+ Armenian students who have been to various EU countries, and 16 interviews among UGRAD students to different US states. After I noticed that certain answers and topics were being repeated by the participants, I interviewed 2-3 more participants until fully reaching saturation of data. The first part of the interview was aimed at identifying motivation of mobility, outcomes in terms of perception and understanding of the European Union and the United States; the second part of the interview was designed for identifying the perception of the European Union/United States as a partner of Armenia, lastly there were questions to understand the change of perception due to the ‘critical juncture’ - the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war. For the language of interviews, the students had a choice to speak either English or Armenian<sup>4</sup>.

## **2.2 Content analysis**

The collected data included both primary sources and secondary sources, the primary sources constitute the interviews conducted by me, as well as the documents of the EU and the US, such as Action plans, Eastern Partnership factsheets, Public Diplomacy

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<sup>4</sup> For the Armenian students, the choice is given for not creating an artificial barrier between the interviewer and interviewee as they know that I am a native Armenian speaker. I am aware of the limitations that this model will imply; however, I think that conducting the interview in any other language than Armenian with Armenian students will create a wall between me which will harm the honesty of answers and me.

strategies, Erasmus strategy, Country-specific strategies as well as former studies about Erasmus and US-funded exchange programs as secondary sources.

Content analysis is the secondary method for the study: primary sources are the documents of the EU and the US, such as Action plans, Eastern Partnership factsheets, Public Diplomacy strategies, Erasmus strategy, Country Specific strategies as well as former studies about Erasmus and US funded exchange programs, coupled with separate study the EU and US reactions to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war, period 27th of September 2020 to the 10th of November and a certain period after that (up March 1, 2021) because the post-war reactions could also influence the perception of the interviewees as they were being interviewed in February-March, 2021. The documents included the statements, press releases, announcements coming from the State Department of the United States and the resolutions introduced to the Congress of the United States, for the EU, there were included the statements by The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), press releases of European External Action Service, also the resolutions relating to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war, which were either introduced or adopted by the European Parliament. Documents were collected from the public domain.

Content analysis method is chosen as supplementary to the qualitative interviews in order to triangulate the methodology, to facilitate impartial and consistent analysis of written policies (Wach, 2013). In qualitative content analysis, data are presented in words and themes, which enable the researcher to make conclusions on interpretations (Burnard, 1991). Certain elements of both latent and manifest analyses were used. In manifest analysis, I described the information with quotes having the key concepts of the research, and with latent analysis, I have described and interpreted what message the documents were trying to deliver (Berg, 2001). Process tracing is an analytic tool of the content analysis for drawing descriptive inferences from documents as part of a temporal sequence of events, this time EU/US response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war. This tool is useful for identifying novel phenomena in development (Collier, 2011). Content analysis and a specific number of documents were chosen to understand the balance between perceptions to the statements about the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war and the actual statements and stance of the EU and the US to the conflict. As the theory of soft power implies that in addition to raising the attractiveness of the country, it should also facilitate the understanding and acceptance of the foreign policy of the relevant actor. It is crucial to



understand if the people who were involved in the exchange programs actually have the full grasp of the messages coming from the relevant states.

The key aspects that that, I looked for in the documents

1. How do they describe the conflict,
2. What are they calling for,
3. How do they address each of the parties of the conflict,
4. How do they address the other actors of the conflict,

For that end, the documents are listed chronologically, the key phrases from each document are quoted and the implicit meaning of the documents is discussed. At the end of each chapter the summary is presented according to the four points presented above.

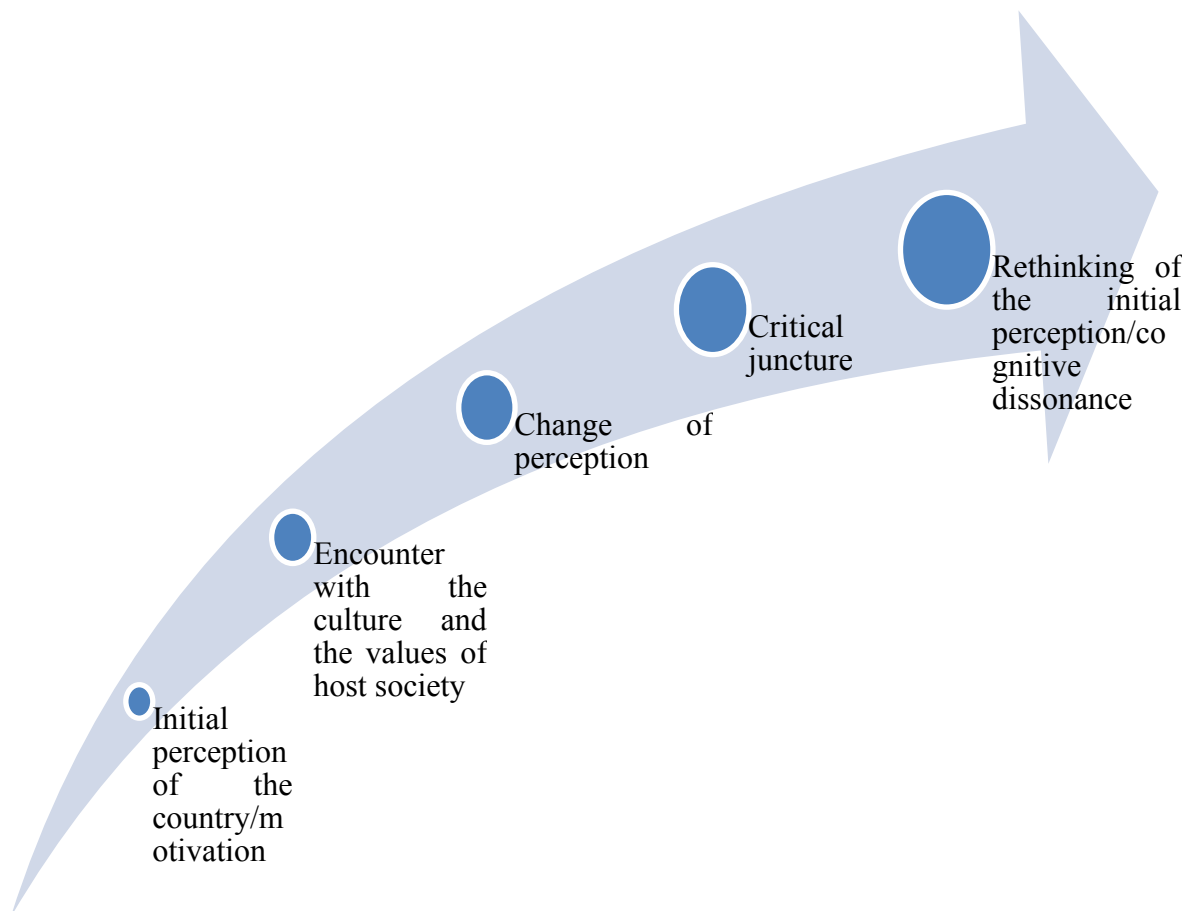


Figure 1 Operationalization

## **2.3 Limitations of the Research**

Limitations of the methodology is that the procured data cannot be generalized for all the participants of the Erasmus+ or UGRAD, rather the findings of the thesis can be further used for quantitative research to find out how widespread the phenomena described in this thesis. The participants were chosen based on snowball sampling, and proportionality of gender and geography was not taken into account. As a result, the numbers of male and female respondents is disproportional<sup>5</sup>. The disparity of programs is also a limitation: Erasmus + is a program of the supranational entity such as the EU, and it exposes the students to the variety of European countries and has rather decentralized form of planning, on the other hand UGRAD is a program of a federal country, it exposes the students to the different states of the same federal republic, and has a centralized way of organization. The thesis aims to research a topic which was only theorized previously as a limitation of soft power, but it has never been empirically studied. On one hand it enables me to have my humble contribution to the study of the topic, on the other hand, it limits the scope of the literature I can refer to. There are no studies of change of perceptions after UGRAD (or any other US exchange program) and Erasmus+ among Armenian students, that is why as a baseline for my study I have used the general studies carried out in other countries. Another limitation of the given topic is that it is still in the process of development, although I have chosen the specific time frame for the relating to the topic documents and the ones that came later were not taken into account, the responses of the US and the EU are still being released after the 1st of March which might or might not alter the alleged change on participants' perceptions.

## **2.4 Questionnaire and its rationale**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted according to this questionnaire, which intends to establish the ground of the soft power influence and further explore how the critical juncture has or has not altered the perception.

1. When did you participate in Erasmus+/UGRAD mobility?
  - a. Which EU country (US state) was your Erasmus/UGRAD destination?
  - b. Did you have any experience in Europe or in the United States?
  - c. Which was your home university?
  - d. Which was your host university?

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<sup>5</sup> All the respondents are coded with 'they' pronoun in the empirical chapters.

2. What was your motivation for participation?
  - a. What were your expectations from the program in terms of education and life in Europe/ in the United States?
  - b. What were the main benefits/gains from the program?
3. What kind of message did the program deliberately or not deliberately try to convey about the US/EU according to you?
  - a. What did you learn about the Host country/American society?
4. Immediately after the end program, what was your perception of the US/EU?
5. Have you retained ties to the countries that hosted you?
  - a. Do you have friends there or professors with whom you communicate?
  - b. Do you plan to go to your host country again?
  - c. Did your experience impact your educational or career choices?
6. Do you see the US/EU as a reliable partner for Armenia?
  - a. In which spheres do you see the EU/US as a reliable partner?
7. What values is the US/EU trying to boost in Armenia?
  - a. Do you see the US/EU promoting democracy and human rights in Armenia?
  - b. Do you consider their involvement successful?
8. How much did you follow the EU/US reactions towards the Nagorno-Karabakh 2020 war?
9. How did you perceive the US/EU statements towards Armenia during the war?
  - a. Statements of which EU/US institutions (EEAS/European Parliament, State Department/Congress) were you following?
  - b. Were your expectations from the EU/US different from the peers who did not have experience in mobility?
  - c. Were you surprised by the US/EU statements?
10. What are your perceptions of the EU/US after the war?
  - a. Have they changed as compared to the perception you previously had of the war?

The empirical chapters of the thesis are divided according to questions, research questions and hypotheses. The first question(s) are diagnostic questions and 1b aims to find out if the perception of the relevant countries was formed due to the educational exchange program or if it has some other ground per a different visit. The second question aims to understand whether the EU and the US are prestigious destinations for studies, whether the students had predisposition to study in the specific countries (according to Wächter one of the

sources of soft power to enhance attractiveness and competitiveness of the country), if the participants were attracted to those countries for the quality education, language development career development (professional motivation), lifestyle, intercultural communications, traveling, cultural exposure (personal motives). The 2b aims to identify the type of benefits: skills or network developed thanks to the program. The third question aims to identify if the participants can formulate the messages that the program had built in itself and if they have felt the message was deliberate or not. The fourth and third questions seek to find the answer to the Research question N1<sup>6</sup> and understand if education abroad has a transformative effect and influences/increases the country's attractiveness, the previous questions were the build-up for this question, because it is important to find out the dimensions of the impact before asking for the perception per se. Question N5 aims to find out the depth and extent of socialization that occurred, the sharing of a sense of community, (the attainment of a politically influential position by the exchange participant at home part is not taken into account because of the limited timeframe of the study: the participants did not have enough time to do so) (Atkinson, 2010), and to understand the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. Questions 6 and 7 aim to further explore the impact of host country's culture, political ideals, and policies on the participants' home country and their attitude towards it (RQ N2<sup>7</sup>). Question 8, 9, 10 constitute the final stage of the interview and aim to finalize and answer RQ N3<sup>8</sup> and either confirm or reject the proposed hypotheses: to understand if the 'critical juncture' has created 'cognitive dissonance' and if the latter has brought forward any coping mechanisms.

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<sup>6</sup> What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?

<sup>7</sup> What is the response of Erasmus+ and UGRAD students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?

<sup>8</sup> How did the students' perceptions of the USA or EU, respectively, change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?

### **3. The European Union Soft Power through Erasmus, and its relation to Armenia**

The Erasmus program was founded by the European Community in 1987; it exercises the soft power of education in the Member States and beyond, Armenia being one of the program countries that recently was involved in K1 Mobility action. The founding document of Erasmus (Council Decision of 15 June 1987 adopting the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus)) sets out the objective to “strengthen the interaction between citizens in different member states with a view to consolidating the concept of a People’s Europe” (Sigalas, 2010).

With non-EU citizens, Erasmus aims to build a better understanding of the EU norms among them; the research has shown that after Erasmus mobility, the students develop the so-called ‘We-feeling’: they feel more attached to Europe; they also develop language and intercultural communication skills. According to the study carried out by Perrilli among Georgian, Ukrainian, and Tunisian students, non-EU participants perceive the benefits of Erasmus+ the most positively: ENP Erasmus participants feel more attached to the EU than EU citizens themselves. (Perilli, 2017).

The students who participated in the Erasmus+ Action 1 exchange have been exposed to the European way of life and thus have experienced the Erasmus effect, which is the impact that the Erasmus experience, such as new environment and linguistic experience, has on participants (Mitchell, 2015), (Atkinson 2010), (Dolga et al. 2015).

The main motivations to study or train abroad for more than 85% of students are the opportunity to live abroad and meet new friends, improve foreign language proficiency, develop soft skills, enhance employability abroad. Over 90% of the students wished to experience living abroad, to develop adaptability, and to improve their language abilities. 99% of the institutions observed an improvement in their students’ confidence and adaptability (Erasmus + report, 2018).

As studies indicate, Erasmus enhances the soft skills of the students that are improvement of their international competencies, such as knowledge of a foreign language and the understanding of the concept of intercultural communication (Sengel, 2010). Upon their arrival in home countries, students mostly value the improvement of cultural skills and

personal growth, language proficiency rather than academic achievements. Moreover, the newly acquired experiences drive them closer to the EU, posing the question if the students can contribute to bringing their societies closer to the EU (Jacobone, 2015). According to studies, Erasmus facilitates labor circulation by improving the language, communication, cultural and problem-solving skills (84% of mobile students improved their problem-solving skills, 88% of students are ready to work in a foreign country in their future career, 97% of students improved their language skills, 95% of students learned about cultural differences) (Erasmus + report, 2018). On average, Erasmus students have better employability skills. 40% of Erasmus alumni moved abroad after graduation, as compared to 23% of non-mobile students. 93% of mobile students want to live abroad in the future, as compared to 73% of their non-mobile counterparts (ibid).

Erasmus was the experiment to create European identity from the bottom up. According to the former European Commissioner for Education Jarn Figel (2006) “it is clear that Erasmus can contribute enormously to forging and promoting a European identity. It does so in many ways, but in particular by breaking down social and cultural barriers among Europeans.” He also coined the term of ‘Ambassadors of European values’, which implies the idea of Erasmus “*bringing students to Europe, bringing Europe to all students.*” Even if the idea of the ‘People’s of Europe’ was abandoned over time, the idea of constructing European identity remains high on the Commission's agenda. Before the creation of Erasmus mobility, student exchanges were still valued for bringing ‘European awareness’ and spreading the word about cultural and linguistic diversity, as mentioned in the document ‘Solemn declaration on European Union of 1983’ (European Council, 1983). The Commission also recognized the importance of Bologna process and the development of European Higher Education Area which goes beyond European integration itself and fosters competition among higher education institutions within the Area, encourages linguistic pluralism and inter and multicultural dialogue as the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area (European Commission, 2009). While for the non-EU nationals Erasmus assists building trust and understanding in non-EU countries. Per Perilli’s research’s expert interviews with MEPs, ‘Erasmus alumni can become carriers of EU soft power after returning home.

In the 2018 evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme, the Commission doubled the budget of the program amounting to €30 billion for the period 2021-2027. The consequent rise of the budget was accounted for by the recorded success of the program, which provides “strong EU added value”. The goal of the rise of the budget is to increase the number of

beneficiaries of the program, increase social inclusiveness, and promote mobility and cooperation within the European Member States and beyond. The goal of the program is as restated to “*support innovation and forward-looking study fields, and promote European identity*” (ibid). The budget increase was motivated by the results that the program provided: the satisfaction rates remain very high, with over 95% of students satisfied with their Erasmus+ experience abroad, as mentioned above. Erasmus is a European program which is also designed to bring non-Europeans to Europe, nevertheless, the Erasmus effect on non-Europeans remains poorly studied especially amid political turbulence; the studies mostly concentrate on employability and job skill assessment<sup>9</sup>.

### **3.1 Armenia and the EU: an overview of relations**

Armenia’s relationship with the European Union is built both on a multilateral and a bilateral basis. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed in 1996, starting a bilateral relationship, which was later strengthened within the framework of Eastern Partnership. Currently, the relationship functions according to the Action Plan and EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which is a less ambitious agreement after Armenia’s U-turn from Association Agreement to join Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) led by Russia.

Freyburg (2009) stated that with the launch of the Eastern Partnership, the EU exercised conditionality mainly based on economic ‘carrot’ for signing the DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) agreement. Democratization and human rights were also high on the EU’s agenda in the region. The ‘More for more’ principle is present as the EU foresees maximization funds for the ENP countries, which depend on their ambitions and commitment to European values. The countries that are reluctant to share European values and are more inclined to “a more limited number of strategic priorities” can build relations based on ‘less for less.’ (ENP, 2015).

The Action Plan of the EU for Armenia was first issued in 2006. The Action plan is the political document that outlines the roadmap of the cooperation; it was revised per the relationship and PCA, CEPA, and failed AA (Association Agreement) are the consequent

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<sup>9</sup> A first European Commission’s assessment of the Erasmus effect (Erasmus Mundus) on ENP nationals shows that ‘when asked for the greatest impact, the majority of graduates indicate their intercultural competencies (58.6%). Regarding the European neighbouring countries more specifically, ‘Erasmus mostly influenced the cross-cultural competences of Eastern European respondents: intercultural competences (32%), language skills (23%) and communication skills (20%) (European Commission, 2017)

results of cooperation outlined in the Action Plan. The Action Plan states that the deepening of the relationship depends on the “degree of Armenia’s commitment to common values, as well as its capacity to implement jointly agreed priorities, in compliance with international and European norms and principles”. The number one priority of the Action Plan is “Strengthening of democratic structures”, of the rule of law, including reform of the judiciary and combat of election fraud and corruption; the other priority areas revolve around the first one and extend to with strengthening economic capabilities. Action Plan ambiguously mentions the support for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, referring to the OSCE resolution framework<sup>10</sup>.

The recent edition of the Action Plan in 2018 mentions the ‘Velvet Revolution’ as a democratic transformation of Armenia and expresses the EU’s support for democratic activities undertaken by the government (EU Commission on Annual Action Plan, 2018). The first component is “increased trust in Government” ensured by the credibility and transparency of elections. It included mechanisms for human rights protection, including access to justice, with civic participation; “deepening civic engagement in Armenia” focused on expanding the understanding of participatory democracy and tools to engage as an active citizen. There was a small shift in financialization after the Velvet Revolution; the EU welcomed the free and fair elections held after the revolution and provided €1.5 million of assistance.

As compared to objectives set out in Action Plan 2018, the revised Action Plan 2019 sets the first objective to strengthen the institutions and enhance their capacity to implement the legal approximation and the CEPA-related priority programs. The Action Plan also addresses energy efficiency and the environment as well as local empowerment (the EU Commission, Annual Action Plan, 2019).

Notwithstanding, the financial and technical support from the European Union did not increase after the Velvet Revolution, even though the reason for the revolution was the

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<sup>10</sup> The ENP Action Plans for Azerbaijan and Armenia highlighted different principles for the settlement of the conflict: the Azerbaijan Action Plan stressed the principle of territorial integrity, one, at the same time, for Armenia, it mentions national self-determination of nations. As for Nagorno-Karabakh conflict where Azerbaijan claims it as its territory per territorial integrity principle, and Armenia regards it as independent given that the majority of the population in Armenia, the use of different principles on Action Plans brings confusion (European External Service, EU Azerbaijan, 2006) (European External Service, EU Armenia, 2006).



abolition of authoritarianism, and the aim was the democratization of the country. The Revolution and the pledges of new authorities to commit to the democratization process were appreciated in the EU level and by the Member States individually; however, unlike Georgia and Ukraine, which witnessed a significant increase in political support by the EU after their revolutions, in Armenia's case, the EU response was rather rhetorical. However, Armenia's bottom-up democratic shift happened without a change in foreign policy trajectory, without a commitment to change to the West and leave "Russia's sphere of influence". In Armenia's case, the normative power of the EU is challenged to show it is functioning according to the 'more for more' principle for ambition for democratic transformation that the normative power does not depend on the country's willingness to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic coalition (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2019).

According to "the OPEN Neighbourhood — Communicating for a stronger partnership: connecting with citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood" published in March 2020, attitudes towards the EU are mainly positive among Armenians (53%) 'possibly due to the consequences of the Velvet Revolution which brought a significant shift in perceptions,' although the effect have started fading since 2019.

Most of the EaP (Eastern Partnership) population associate the EU with democratic values – especially 'human rights' and 'economic prosperity' (78% both):

- 53% of Armenians have 'very positive' perception of the EU, with 34% having 'fairly positive' perception.
- 60% of Armenians trust the European Union, compared to the 51% of trust towards Eurasian Economic Union, the member of which member Armenia is.
- 65% of Armenians know about the European financial support, most of which, according to the participants, are directed towards education. 80% of Armenian considered the support effective.
- 65% of Armenians agreed with the statement that integration with the EU increases the country's security and stability (ibid).

The following chapter further unpacks the EU-Armenian relations during hard times in order to set the ground for the empirical chapter which discusses the perception of the students of the EU response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war.

## 4. The EU Response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second War

The European Union position on the war was manifested in the official statements, press releases, and oral remarks, also distributed in a written form. The EU Parliament reaction was displayed with the debates on the topic, as well as references of the conflict in the official documents of the Parliament. The mentioned reactions of the EU Commission were shared by the European External Action Service (EEAS) website on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell (hereinto HR/VP). HR/VP was also the main voice of the European Union during the war. The statements and remarks reached the respective publics in Armenia and Azerbaijan through the European Delegation efforts in each of the countries. The analysis encompasses the documents issued from the start of the war on September 27 until March 1 when the CEPA agreement between Armenia and the EU came into force. The supplementary chronological content analysis was done to assist in understanding the perceptions of the specific segment of the Armenian public. The latent and manifest analyses are carried out according to the four points/questions identified in the Methodology Chapter 2.

The first reaction from the European Union was released on the same day that the war broke out, September 27, 2020, by HR/VP Josep Borrell, establishing the fact of resumed fighting “*along the Line of Contact in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone*”, the statement called for “*an immediate cessation of hostilities, de-escalation and for strict observance of the ceasefire*” and further urged the return to the negotiation table “[.....] *under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, without preconditions..*” (EEAS, September 27, 2020).

Afterward, the statement of the European Council in conclusions about external relations (October 1, 2020) in the discussion mainly concentrated on the Eastern Mediterranean crisis due to maritime-related disputes between Turkey and Cyprus. On September 28, the Council repeated the statements expressed by HR/VP adding: “*the loss of life and the toll on the civilian population are unacceptable. There can be no military solution to the conflict, nor any external interference*” and tasked HR/VP with further investigation and finding out the ways of EU’s possible assistance. This is the first time that the phrase ‘*external interference*’ is found in the EU official documents (EU Council, 1 October, 2020).

On October 7, HR/VP Borrell was invited to the European Parliament plenary debate on the resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. He emphasized the critical position of the European Union previously stated by the Council “*the fighting must stop; both sides need to re-engage in meaningful negotiations without preconditions, under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs. There can be no military solution to the conflict or external interference*”. HR/VP Borrell also underlined the absence of reliable information on the matter as the OSCE monitoring on the ground remained suspended. He noted the round of phone calls with the main conflict parties, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the MFAs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) of key regional actors, Russia and Turkey. He stated the confusion created by the MFAs of Armenia and Azerbaijan “*I heard from both sides the actions taken by the other side; each one of them blames the other for starting and for attacking civilian populations.*” He pointed out that the passivity of the US and the ‘*stronger, assertive*’ position of Turkey was mentioned for the first time in the EU documents instead of ‘*external interference.*’ He pledged to work with Turkey to “*build a constructive contribution to the conflict settlement and help the efforts to stop the hostilities,*” nevertheless, HR/VP was ‘*really concerned*’ when he saw that Turkish Foreign Minister (Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu) was expressing ‘*full support to Azerbaijan.*’ Azerbaijani Minister Jeyhun Bayramov was also ‘*very worrisome*’ as he was posing the preconditions for the start of the conversation. On the final note, he said that to ‘*act*’ for the EU will never be in the form of military action (EEAS, October 7, 2020).

After the first agreement of humanitarian ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia mediated by Russia, HR/VP welcomed the agreement on behalf of the EU and “*urged the sides to ensure full respect of the agreement on the ground as there were reports of continued military activities and civilian targets*” (EU Commission, October 11, 2020)

On October 17, the EU for the first time released a statement including specific names as the targets of the strikes “*on the Azerbaijani city of Ganja during the night of 16-17 October resulting in civilian loss of life and serious injury*” (EEAS, October 17, 2020.). This statement was shared only by the EU Delegation to Azerbaijan.

The following statement came after the second ceasefire mediated by the EU member and OSCE co-chair France. Apart from the points being continuously restated in these statements, HR/VP stated, “*the population in Nagorno-Karabakh has already experienced excessive suffering*”, mentioning the Nagorno-Karabakh population as a separate entity (EEAS, October 18, 2020).

The following statement was released on the occasion of the visit of the president of the Republic of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian, to Brussels. The press release again stated the EU's readiness to assist the negotiation in the OSCE framework and condemned the break of ceasefire agreements. Furthermore, it was emphasized that both parties *"have an obligation to comply fully with international humanitarian law ... as well as bringing an end to the dangerous, inflammatory and xenophobic rhetoric."* (EEAS, 22 October 2020) After the 3<sup>rd</sup> ceasefire agreement, mediated by the third member of the OSCE Minsk Group, the United States, on October 28, the spokesperson of EEAS said that *"Union finds it unacceptable that after three agreements brokered by Russia, France, and the United States on a ceasefire, the fighting in and around Nagorno-Karabakh still continues"* (EEAS, 28 October, 2020).

On November 9, the final ceasefire agreement was brokered between Armenia-Azerbaijan by Russia; the agreement had nine points that made Armenia make territorial secessions and agreed upon placement of the Russian peacekeepers and exchange for prisoners of war and people killed in action<sup>11</sup>. The statement by HR/VP welcomed the cessation of hostilities in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and ensured *"support the established, OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs led, format and stands ready to contribute to these efforts and to the implementation of agreements for a peaceful and prosperous development of the entire South Caucasus region."* (EEAS, 10 October 2020). The second statement after the war came on November 12 where the HP/VP stated that he had spoken to both sides and *"expressed the hope that the cessation of hostilities will enable efforts towards a lasting peaceful resolution [.....] negotiated, comprehensive and sustainable settlement of the conflict"* (EEAS, 12 October, 2020).

On November 20, the Press and Information team of the EU delegation to Armenia released a statement on behalf of the EU. The statement was only available in Armenian and was disseminated only for the Armenian language segment of the EEAS website and the EU delegation to Armenia social media pages. The new information in this statement is that *"the EU also calls for the full and immediate withdrawal of all foreign militants from the region."* The information about the foreign militants was never mentioned in the EU

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<sup>11</sup> Full text of the agreement is available here 'Statement by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and President of the Russian Federation' [https://web.archive.org/web/20201111212431if\\_/http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384](https://web.archive.org/web/20201111212431if_/http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64384) (last accessed on May 17, 2021)

statements; it was only mentioned by the MEPs during the Plenary Session. Another piece of new information is *“the EU believes that new efforts are needed to negotiate a comprehensive, lasting settlement of the conflict, including on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh.”* It is worth noting that the phrase *‘status of Nagorno-Karabakh’* is only mentioned in the Armenian text as the Republic of Azerbaijan issue can be solved with the principle of territorial integrity which is also mentioned in the Action Plans of the EU with Azerbaijan. The EU called on the parties to implement the agreements on the exchange of prisoners of war and the return of human remains, which was also not mentioned in the previous statements (EEAS, 20 November 2020).

The EU-Armenia and EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council meetings took place on December 17 and 18, respectively. The meeting was chaired by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and attended by the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhel. Both meetings convey similar messages about the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and underline *‘the EU’s support for the region’s reconstruction and lasting peace’*. The press releases of both meetings showed that the EU mostly saw its role in reconstruction and reconciliation. During the meeting with the Armenian MFA, HR/VP emphasized the efforts of Armenia regarding democratization; during the meeting with Azerbaijan, the EU stressed *“key partner for Azerbaijan in areas such as energy, trade, investment, and communications.”* (EEAS, October 17, 18, 2020).

Part of the communication was of humanitarian nature: the EU Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič allocated €3,9 million in 2020 to the EU humanitarian partners, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross to provide immediate relief to those affected by the fighting on both sides of the contact line. On March 1 2021, the CEPA agreement signed between Armenia and the EU was coming into force, as noted by HR/VP Borrell *“at a time when Armenia is facing serious challenges, sending a strong signal that the EU and Armenia are committed to democratic principles, to the rule of law, and to a broader reform agenda.”* The aim of the agreement is to contribute to overcoming the challenges of Armenia's reform agenda in the political, economic, and trade spheres, to make positive changes in people's lives (EEAS, 1 March 2021).

European Parliament did not have a special session on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue; rather it was discussed together with escalating tensions in Varosha, in the context of the Cyprus and Turkey conflict. The resolution on the escalating tensions in Varosha following the

illegal actions by Turkey and the urgent need for the resumption of talks’ 2020/2844(RSP) November 26 2020 resolution stated “*Turkey’s direct engagement in support of Azerbaijan, in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict shows more ambitious geopolitical agenda*” and added that it shows “*Turkey’s continuous and growing distancing from European values and standards has brought EU-Turkey relations to a historic low point*” (European Parliament, 26 November, 2020).

The second resolution concerning the war was adopted on January 20 2021 as an annual report of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (2020/2206 (INI). The resolution stated that it welcomes the agreement on ceasefire, and also underlined that “*the process of achieving peace and determining the region’s future legal status should be led by the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and founded on the group’s Basic Principle*”, further stressed that the security of the Armenian population and its cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh should be ensured, and more importantly calls on “*the EU to be more meaningfully involved in the settlement of the conflict and not to leave the fate of the region in the hands of other powers*”. By a separate provision the resolution condemned ‘*the destabilizing role of Turkey*’ and called upon Turkey “*to refrain from any interference in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict*”, the resolution also addressed issues never specified in other EU documents released during or after the war. It condemned “*the transfer of foreign terrorist fighters by Turkey from Syria and elsewhere to Nagorno-Karabakh, as confirmed by international actors, including the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries*”. (European Parliament, 20 January 2021).

In comparison, the EU’s reaction to another conflict in the South Caucasus region, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, was rather active, with the EU managing to broker a ceasefire between the conflicting parties, and establishing a monitoring mission to Georgia (Seppo, 2011). The EU’s statements about the war were more specific as well as, such as “*the European Union reiterates its firm support to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders*” (Council of the EU, 2018).

**Table 1 Summary of Chapter 4: EU response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second War**

<b>How do they describe the conflict?</b>
The documents discussed above approach the conflict quite carefully and neutrally; they describe the conflict with the passive voice ‘ <i>conflict erupted</i> ’, avoiding addressing any of the sides as the initiator of the conflict, they also use ‘ <i>both sides</i> ’ to appeal to the conflicting parties. The statements stress the ‘ <i>loss</i>

*of human lives*' and outline that the conflict does not have a military solution.

**What are they calling for?**

The EU documents call for the cessation of the hostilities and immediate resumption of the negotiations without preconditions. The EU documents and statements have recognized the OSCE Minsk Group as the primary body for dealing with the conflict. As for its role in regulating the conflict, the EU sees itself as a provider of humanitarian help, but by no means a provider of military help. It also sees its role as assisting the development of the entire South Caucasus region. As the events were unfolding, the EU messages about the three failed ceasefire agreements, attacks on the civilian populations also were similar in their wording.

**How do they address each of the parties of the conflict?**

The majority of the statements of EEAS were addressing 'both sides', maintaining the neutrality of the tone throughout the statements. HR/VP Borrell underlined the absence of reliable information on the matter because the OSCE monitoring on the ground remained suspended. He stated the confusion created by the MFAs of Armenia and Azerbaijan as both of them accuse each other of the escalation of the conflict and targeting the peaceful population. The statement released on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October favored Armenia's standpoint on the issue (self-determination of nations) and was released only in the Armenian language. On October 17, the EU for the first time released a statement including specific names as the strikes target "*the Azerbaijani city of Ganja during the night of 16-17 October resulting in civilian loss of life and serious injury*".

**How do they address the other actors of the conflict?**

The phrase 'external parties involved in the conflict' was never specified in the statements of HR/VP, except for in his speech at the Plenary Session at the European Parliament in which he specified it to be Turkey. The two resolutions adopted by the European Parliament were more specific in their addresses: they condemned the '*direct*' role of Turkey in the conflict on multiple occasions, underlying the phrase 'status of the region' concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as for the first time in the EU documents accusing Turkey of '*involving terrorists to the conflict*'. It is generally expected that MEPs are freer to express their viewpoint on certain occasions, while the external service is constrained by representing the European Union Member States and following the foreign policy interests of the Union.

The other actors, namely the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries, France, the United States, and Russia, were viewed as contributors to the resolution of the conflict.

## **5. The United States Soft Power on Armenia: Implications of the Educational Exchange Programs**

After World War II, the State Department developed its means of communicating its messages to the foreign audiences, one of them being ‘wireless file’ transmitting full texts of unclassified policy statements and American commentaries to every embassy. At the same time, the Voice of America was broadcasting, in English and in foreign languages, transmitting US policy statements and commentaries and explaining the US government’s point of view, as well as some information about American society, culture, and values (Rugh, 2017). Consequently, in 1953 the United States Information Agency (USIA) was created to counter Communist propaganda during the Cold war (Stevenson, 1994). Its purpose was to fight ‘for the hearts and minds’ of peoples worldwide against the proliferation of communism (Bardos, 2001). It was aimed at “*helping to achieve United States foreign policy objectives*” (ibid). From 1953 until 1989, the US engaged in a propaganda battle with the USSR that involved everything from exchange programs to clandestine radio (Galal, 2014). In this campaign, the US always focused on the USSR’s weaknesses in areas like human rights and freedom of the press (Galal, 2014). As stated before, the US exchange programs played their role in the fall of the USSR. After the end of the Cold War, public diplomacy funding fell sharply as there was no evident opponent ideology (Laqueur, 1994). As a result, USIS was finally dismantled on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1999 and placed under the Department of State (Johnson, 2004).

The exchange programs received an additional boost in the post-9/11 United States when the idea of ‘war of ideas’ received a new face. In 2003, \$245 million was spent on exchanges (Amr, 2004). As per the official documents that enforce the exchange programs, the National Security Strategy of the United States recommends them as one strategy whereby the United States might promote democracy and effectively engage in the so-called ‘battle of ideas’ with non-liberal forces (Atkinson, 2010). Former Secretary of State Rice pointed out: “*every foreign student attending one of our universities represents an opportunity to enhance democracy in America and strengthen the cause of freedom abroad*” (Rice, 2006). Studies have shown that educational exchanges were associated with an increased propensity to respect human rights conceived as basic rights to freedom of movement, speech, religion, political participation, and workers’ rights. Greater participation in US university studies by foreign students was associated with improving



human rights records in the home states of the students (Atkinson, 2010). The research argues that countries that sent their military officers to study at military institutes in the United States were more likely to improve human rights records than states that did not send their military officers.

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) coordinates US Federal Government-sponsored student and scholar exchange programs. In 2013 the number of foreign participants of the programs rose to 9 million people, 565 alumni of the ECA programs became the heads of state and government, and 31 alumni are heads of international organizations (Anderton, 2018). ECA's Functional Bureau Strategy 2018-2022 The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs resides within the U.S. Department of State. ECA has five goals: Advance American foreign policy objectives through flexible, responsive exchange programs; increase America's global competitiveness with the development of the professionals through the American exchange, improve the contribution to the local economies and build skills; counter disinformation and radicalization; bolster democratic principles, strengthen the rule of law, encourage strong civil society institutions; Bolster democratic principles, strengthen the rule of law, encourage strong civil society institutions.

As UGRAD is a relatively smaller program in comparison with FLEX and Fulbright, the evaluation studies of the impact have been carried out by the State Department relevant agencies focusing on two mentioned programs. Even though the programs are different from UGRAD in age groups and duration and degree attainment, they also compose the 'fourth dimension' of the American foreign policy, trying to raise the attractiveness of the US. Assessment of the Future leaders exchange program study (which also included Armenian participants) found out that

- FLEX alumni prefer democracy in their own countries and to disagree with the use of force.
- alumni significantly favor principles of individual freedom, civil and human rights, and representative democracy,
- they state they would like to work or study in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe,
- 75% of alumni preserved contact with classmates or friends in the U.S,

- alumni reported skills improvements in written and oral English comprehension and computer skills, increased communication skills, tolerance, independence, values, self-confidence,
- they believe that their participation in the FLEX program helped them to be admitted to the university of their choice,
- alumni reported that the FLEX experience influenced their educational and career choices,
- alumni tend to associate America with the cultural uniqueness, freedom/independence, equal opportunities/equal rights, democracy, free speech, high living standards.

Evaluation of the Fulbright Foreign Student Program: Impact on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) Participants identified the motivations and the impact of the program on participants. As Fulbright is a full Master degree program the motivations of the participants and their learning outcomes are more academic/professional than personal experience-related. Nearly 50% of the survey respondents identified the calibre of the science practiced in the United States as the main motivation for their application. 25% of survey respondents were more focused on pursuing U.S. study opportunities. Approximately 75% said that they gained technical skills in their STEM field, as well as got better at technical writing, networking and leadership skills, and also developed networks within the international scientific community.

### **5.1 Armenia and the US: an overview of relations**

The U.S builds its relations with Armenia under ‘the Integrated Country Strategy’. It states that “The U.S. Mission in Armenia advances American interests by helping Armenia succeed as a secure, prosperous, and democratic country at peace with its neighbors, and more closely integrated with the Euro-Atlantic community. The U.S. relationship with Armenia evolves based on mutual trade, values, and security.

The State Department outlines the goals of the US in Armenia as follows: promoting U.S. values and countering Russian leverage, promoting and protecting U.S. interests abroad, ensuring a stable, prosperous, secure Armenia at peace with its neighbors. Moreover, the USAID tries to promote a resilient and democratic society, strengthen economic growth and energy security, and support social sector reforms (USAID, 2021)

The document implies that the US perceives Armenia as the Russian sphere of influence since Russia is the primary security provider of Armenia. Nevertheless, the US tries to promote the goals through public diplomacy as its main tool. The US understands its ally in the interests in Armenia is the European Union and values “*completing a unique Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in 2017 and increasing its participation in NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) deployments*”. With the US, Armenia’s business relations function under the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) trying to remove trade and investment barriers. The Country Strategy speaks positively about the increasing relations between Armenia and the NATO, liberalization of the energy market, and adoption of laws that bolster citizens’ rights in line with Western European and American values. The US is also co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group which is entrusted to find the resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (OSCE, 1995).

The Strategy enlists democracy and human rights as spheres that will boost the US interest and counter Russian influence in the country and assist Armenia in getting more American companies to do business in Armenia. Furthermore, the Strategy defines 4,000 alumni of U.S. government-funded exchange programs to the United States as “advocates for U.S. values in their jobs, communities, and families”.

According to the research of the International Republican Institute of 2018, 84% of Armenians view the relations with the US 'positively' (Russia 87%, the EU 81%), the most positive relations were evaluated to be with Iran and France (88% both). 39% of people consider the US as an important political partner (the EU is 37%, while Russia 84%), which concerns economic importance. 30% of Armenians view the US to be the most important (the EU 37%, Russia- 76%).

The following chapter further unpacks the US-Armenian relations during hard times in order to understand the interrelations of the perceptions of the people who were exposed to the US values in the US itself with the actual American policy reactions.

## 6. The US Response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second War

The United States reaction towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war was in the form of statements from the State Department (including the White House officials), Congress, and separately from the OSCE Minsk group co-chair representing the U.S. and the OSCE Minsk Group as the State Department was consistent in the delivery of the messages of the Group to the public. The OSCE Minsk Group<sup>12</sup> is the leading international body trusted with the resolution of the conflict (OSCE, 1995). As the war was going on during the presidential campaign and election of the United States 2020, for the complete picture of the perceptions, the statements of the presidential candidate Joseph Biden were also observed<sup>13</sup>.

The United States' first response came in the form of the OSCE Minsk Group statement on the first day of the war (September 27). The Co-Chairs condemned the use of force and regretted *the "senseless loss of life, including civilians"*. They also appealed to the sides to cease hostilities and resume negotiations (OSCE, September 27, 2020 ). The U.S State Department responded to the escalation of the conflict on a separate note with the statement from Morgan Ortagus (State Department spokesperson until 2021) where in addition to the concerns expressed by the OSCE Minsk Group, it was added that the U.S. believes *"participation in the escalating violence by external parties would be deeply unhelpful and only exacerbate regional tensions"* (US Department of State, September 27 2020).

The following statement came from the OSCE Minsk Group country presidents (the United States, France, and Russia) on October 1, where they called for the immediate cessation of hostilities between the relevant military forces and resuming substantive negotiations. Two days later, a similar statement by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs was issued where the concern for the involvement of 'external parties' was expressed for the first time within the OSCE Minsk Group format (OSCE, 1 October 2020). On the US level, Deputy Secretary

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<sup>12</sup> The OSCE Minsk Group currently is chaired by Igor Popov of the Russian Federation, Stephane Visconti of France, and Andrew Schofer of the United States of America.

<sup>13</sup> The candidate of the Republic Party, Donald Trump was the President of the United States at that time, the State Department foreign policy and the White House remarks can be regarded as part of his stance on the issue.

Stephen Biegun stressed *'the need to find a peaceful solution'* to the Foreign Minister of Armenia and Azerbaijan (Department of State, 5 of October 2020).

On October 5, The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France Jean-Yves Le Drian, and the US Secretary of State of the United States of America Michael R. Pompeo, called once again upon the conflicting parties *"to accept an immediate and unconditional ceasefire and ensure it with the contribution of the Minsk Group capitals"* (U.S. Department of State, October 5, 2020). After the first ceasefire brokered by Russia on October 10, the OSCE co-chairs called on the sides to implement the humanitarian ceasefire immediately to allow the return of remains, prisoners of war, and detainees and appealed to the sides to agree urgently upon a ceasefire verification mechanism.

On October 15, Secretary Michael R. Pompeo was interviewed by Erick Erickson, and it was shared on State Department platforms. He spoke of the issue in different terms, replacing usual calls for ceasefire and negotiations with more information on the war, such as the involvement of the external party was replaced by *"We now have the Turks, who have stepped in and provided resources to Azerbaijan,"* and added *"We – we're hopeful that the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azerbaijanis are doing, and that they will all before that takes place, get the ceasefire right"*. (U.S. Department of State, October 15, 2020).

Following the meeting with Armenian Foreign Minister Mnatsakanyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Bayramov with their American counterpart on October 23, the third ceasefire was brokered by Washington D.C. to take effect on October 26, 2020. Before that, Security advisor O'Brien said *"Armenia has accepted a ceasefire, Azerbaijan has not yet"*. Later, he expressed willingness to assist the deployment of Scandinavian peacekeepers to the region; nevertheless, this idea was neglected by all the parties, including the other members of the OSCE Minsk Group (CBS News, October 25, 2020).

After the ceasefire announcement, the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group mostly restated the previous statements they had released. The statement also included the date of the future meeting in Geneva on October 29 with the aim *"to discuss, reach agreement on, and begin implementation, in accordance with a timeline [...] and with the basic principles accepted by the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia"* (U.S. Department of State, October 25, 2020). In Geneva, in addition to calling upon the sides to implement the ceasefire agreed upon three times in three capitals of the OSCE Minsk Group members, they also had a less ambitious point regarding deliberately not targeting civilian

populations or non-military objects under the international humanitarian law rather than calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities; recovery and exchange of remains on the battlefield with the assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross; delivery of the list of currently detained prisoners of war to provide access and eventual exchange; and comments on *'possible ceasefire verification mechanisms'* (OSCE 30 October 2020).

The following statement came after the final ceasefire brokered by Russia on November 10 without visible assistance from the other OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries. The U.S. OSCE Ambassador James S. Gilmore III's statement on the conflict was released three days later, on November 13, which welcomed *"the apparent ceasefire and cessation of fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone*, and noted that they *"learn more about the arrangement announced November the 10th, we will need to address the role of the international community and the OSCE itself in maintaining a transparent peace"* (US Mission to OSCE, 12 November 2020). Secretary Pompeo welcomed the cessation of active hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, noting that ending the recent fighting was the first step toward achieving a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group (U.S. Department of State, November 17, 2020).

Later, on November 19, U.S. responded to the OSCE Minsk Group statement, saying that no military solution was going to resolve this conflict over the longer term—any final resolution must be based on the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act (1975): non-use of force, territorial integrity, and self-determination. These principles must be applied for a long-term solution to this conflict (the US mission to the OSCE, 19 November 2020). The principles were not emphasized in the OSCE Minsk Group statements, although they are the founding principles for conflict regulation.

Post-war statements coming from the OSCE Minsk group of December 14 and February 24 mostly affirmed their continuing commitment to engage constructively with the sides to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and resolve urgent issues.

The Congress, mostly The House of Representatives, was also vocal on the conflict. On October 16, Representatives Eliot L. Engel, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and William R. Keating, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, called upon the Administration *"to increase pressure to push back against Turkey's continued regional aggression and undemocratic behavior"* also mentioning the Turkish involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The

representatives underlined that Administration's responses to these and other provocations since “2016 had been shamefully muted and give implicit support to autocratic behavior, also jeopardizing NATO security” (House Foreign Affairs Committee, October 16, 2020)

Five resolutions were introduced in the House of Representatives during the war and after that. The first one, H. RES. 1165, was introduced in the House on October the 1st, 2020, condemning Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh and denouncing Turkish interference in the conflict. The resolution has marked Azerbaijan as an initiator of the largest military operations since the ceasefire of 1994. The resolution's final point was “to secure an agreement from Azerbaijan to cease offensive military operations against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia” (Congress, October 9, 2020).

On October 16, two resolutions were presented to the House by the Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy and the Environment H. RES. 1195 and H. RES. 1196. The first one reinstated the Turkish involvement in the conflict, saying that political support has transformed into '*direct military support*'. The final statement was calling the President to work with the NATO to create the necessary process to remove Turkey from the NATO; “calling for an end to escalating violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, for each side to return to the peace process, and for external parties to cease their support for and interference in the conflict” (Congress, October 16, 2020) . The following resolution presented on the same day was less ambitious. It did not indicate any of the sides as the initiator of the conflict, and called for the immediate cessation of hostilities under the OSCE Minsk Group auspices, nevertheless it mentioned the '*destabilizing role of the Turkish military*.' (Congress, October 16, 2020.)

H. RES. 1203 October 23 was the most ambitious of the statements, as it expressed support to the “*Republic of Artsakh*<sup>14</sup> at all levels of civil society and government” and recognized the inalienable rights of the people of Artsakh to self-determination. It called on the President of the United States to follow the congressional intent of section 907 of the Freedom Support Act and withhold any further assistance to Azerbaijan, as well as called for direct communication with executive and legislative branches of the Republic of Artsakh (Congress, 23 October 2020). The recent resolution on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was introduced on March 16, 2021, calling on Azerbaijan to release all prisoners

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<sup>14</sup> “Republic of Artsakh” is an internationally not recognize state known to international community as Nagorno-Karabakh.

of war and captured civilians immediately. The resolution pointed out that Azerbaijan with the *“support from Turkey and foreign militia groups, launched a military assault on Nagorno-Karabakh.”* (Congress, 16 March 2021). The last remark including the Nagorno-Karabakh war came after the war, on 16 of December, where the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel and Lead Republican Michael McCaul stated their *“deep concern over Turkey’s actions under President Erdogan that endanger the NATO alliance”*, the broader region, and democracy and the rule of law in Turkey—and also mentioning *“President Erdogan’s involvement in other global conflicts, reportedly sending Syrian mercenaries to Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh”*.

As most of the Nagorno-Karabakh war was happening during the presidential elections, for a clearer picture of the messages coming from the United States' top echelons, it is crucial to consider the messages released by the future president-elect Joseph Biden. The first statement was released on October 13 apart from the apparent campaign messages criticizing the political opponent, Donald Trump, on *‘delegating the diplomacy to Moscow,’* the statement also addressed the sides of the conflict, to Azerbaijan as the initiator of the war, to Armenia for re-engaging in meaningful negotiations as *“regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be occupied indefinitely.”* The statement also mentioned Turkey and Iran as the external factors which influence the conflict, mainly *“Turkey’s provision of arms to Azerbaijan and bellicose rhetoric is encouraging a military solution.”* On October 17, the Biden-Harris issued a position paper outlining what a Biden-Harris administration would accomplish after the election. The statement emphasized the revision of the U.S. engagement in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and preventing interference by third parties, including nation-states like Turkey and foreign mercenaries paid to commit crimes against the people of Nagorno-Karabakh. After the collapse of the ceasefire announced by the Trump Administration, then-presidential candidate Biden released a statement calling the Trump administration to implement *“section 907 of the Freedom Support Act to stop the flow of military equipment to Azerbaijan and call on Turkey and Russia to stop fuelling the conflict with the supply of weapons and, in the case of Turkey, mercenaries”*(Joe Biden, October 28, 2020). In comparison, the US’s reaction to another conflict in the South Caucasus region, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, was rather active. Secretary Rice participated in drafting the Ceasefire Agreement and the State Department also precisely framed its stance on the conflict by stating *“we must support Georgia”* establishing the goal of helping Georgia to stabilize. The US State Department stated *“We are active, working with our European*



*allies, in putting pressure on Russia to adhere to the Ceasefire”* (US State Department, 2008).

**Table 2 Summary of Chapter 6: The US response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war**

<p><b>How do they describe the conflict?</b></p>
<p>In the Statements of the OSCE Minsk Group and the US State Department the start of the conflict is described as <i>‘the conflict erupted’</i>, and followed by the condemnation and empathy for <i>‘senseless loss of life, including civilians’</i>. The most common message is <i>“to accept an immediate and unconditional ceasefire and ensure it with the contribution of the Minsk Group capitals”</i> The messages coming from the OSCE Minsk Group were rather neutral and not direct, using the phrases <i>‘both sides’</i>, <i>‘external parties’</i>. As the OSCE Minsk Group has been entrusted to find the resolution of the conflict since 1993, it was restrained to specifically target one of the sides with accusations. Nevertheless, the Helsinki principles that were agreed upon to serve as the foundation of the conflict resolution were quoted only once.</p>
<p><b>What are they calling for?</b></p>
<p>The overall call was to cease the hostilities and start the unconditional negotiation in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. As the conflict was escalating further, the calls became more specific, calling not to target the civilian population, and emphasizing that <i>“participation in the escalating violence by external parties would be deeply unhelpful and only exacerbate regional tensions”</i>. The State Department was more direct targeting with the naming of the 'external parties', while the OSCE Minsk Group statements were more reserved. The calls for peace and stopping external parties from involvement were more vocal from the House of Representatives.</p>
<p><b>How do they address each of the parties of the conflict?</b></p>
<p>While the OSCE Minsk Group statements address the parties of the conflict as 'both sides'. The US on its own is more specific. On October 15, Secretary Michael R. Pompeo said <i>“We – we're hopeful that the Armenians will be able to defend against what the Azerbaijanis are doing”</i> also mentioning the resources provided by Turkey (U.S. Department of State, October 15, 2020) Before that, Security advisor O’Brien (the White House) said <i>“Armenia has accepted a ceasefire, Azerbaijan has not yet”</i>. (CBS News, October 25, 2020).</p>
<p><b>How do they address the other actors of the conflict?</b></p>
<p>The OSCE Minsk Group statements never mentioned the name of the <i>‘external party’</i>. On October 15, Secretary Michael R. Pompeo specified the resources provided to Azerbaijan by Turkey. The House of Representatives, mostly Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, focused on <i>“the external party”</i> namely Turkey, calling the Administration to review its approaches to Turkey.</p>

Presidential candidate Joseph Biden accused the Trump administration of handing the resolution of the conflict to Moscow. He also mentioned, if elected, his engagement in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He condemned Azerbaijan for military rhetoric and Armenia for the occupation of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and stated the need to prevent interference by third parties, including nation-states like Turkey and foreign mercenaries paid to commit crimes against the people of Nagorno-Karabakh.

## **7. Erasmus+ Participants and Their Perception of the EU: Did Nagorno-Karabakh Second War play a role?**

Twenty-three Armenian participants of the Learning Mobility of Individuals Erasmus+ Key Action 1 program were interviewed in the scope of the empirical part of the thesis. The exact number of interviews was not determined in the research design. Given the novelty of the study, I have decided to interview as many participants as it takes to reach saturation of information. After the 18th interview, I noticed certain common answers among the interviewees.

The participants of the interviews were Erasmus Key Action 1 Mobility students from the period of 2014-2019 who lived and studied in one of the EU countries (namely Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Hungary, Croatia, Estonia, and Greece). Some of the participants had participated in Erasmus twice, in different capacities (during their Bachelor, Master or PhD program); some pursued master's degrees in Europe (German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) or Erasmus Mundus Joint Master (EMJM) programs) or in the United States (Fulbright). 14 students participated in Erasmus during their Bachelor studies, three students had Erasmus experience during Bachelor and Master studies, 1 participant during Bachelor and PhD studies, and five students participated only during their Master studies. For the majority of the students, their Erasmus was also the first visit to Europe and to the host country, with only a small minority having tourist experience.

For the start of the interview, I intended to build up the foundation for understanding the motivation and predisposition of the people who take part in Erasmus exchange program. Most of the participants favored '*personal experience*' over professional one as motivation to apply for Erasmus+, interestingly enough, the students that participated in Erasmus exchange program during their bachelor studies were more inclined to have higher hopes for personal non-formal experiences, such as '*traveling*' and '*novelty*' than the ones who participated in the program during their Master studies. Most of the participants mentioned that Erasmus attracted them for its non-formal opportunities rather than educational benefits, such as traveling and intercultural communications. The participants mentioned that they sought '*novelty*' and '*independence*' to live abroad on their own. They did not

lead a chance to live independently previously, and Erasmus provided them with an opportunity and finances to have an independent life for a short period of time. However, the privilege of Western education was also mentioned multiple times as a motivational factor. According to the participants, it is very much valued in Armenia and is considered an advantage in the CV (Curriculum vitae) when seeking a job. ‘*Cultural exposure*’ was also among popular answers. Many interviewees mentioned that, as they came from a country with closed borders and a homogeneous population, open borders of the EU and the cultural heterogeneity of Erasmus participants were the highlights of their stay. As for professional education-oriented motives, the participants mentioned the desire to practice the English language, personally choose their study tracks and courses (the Armenian universities do not provide that option), use libraries, understand different methodological approaches, as well as experience other student-professor relationships.

As for the program's benefits, apart from the apparent financial assistance from the Commission, the participants mainly mentioned personal development. According to them, the Erasmus experience made them more ‘*tolerant, open-minded, confident, independent*’. Participant N4 said, “*Armenians are very family-orientated; I didn’t live alone before Erasmus, and therefore living alone abroad was an eye-opening experience.*” They<sup>15</sup> also emphasized that the experience or courses during Erasmus influenced their careers in their home country, for instance Participant N5 said, “*My experience of teaching kids in Brno, the Czech Republic, contributed to my professional development as a teacher*”. Participant N10 underlined the usefulness of Erasmus that gave “*cultural knowledge, soft and transferable skills, such as working in a team*”. Nevertheless, the interviewees who participated in Erasmus in non-Schengen countries, such as Croatia and Bulgaria, had a different experience as compared to the ones that had freedom of traveling in the Schengen zone; they mentioned that they had more exposure to the cultural life of their host country, although they lacked the freedom of movement within the European Union. Overall, the answers of the participants in this section overwhelmingly matches with the literature data and findings discussed in chapters 1 and 3.

#### **RQ1 - What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?**

The participants mostly agreed that the program was not intentionally trying to persuade students of anything, but rather it was designed to for non-EU citizens in this case to

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<sup>15</sup> Pronoun ‘they’ is used for all the participants in the thesis regardless of their gender.

expose them to the European lifestyle: *“They attract people by showing and allowing people to experience the European lifestyle and inspire the participants to build it in their home countries”*. Some of the participants who had experience in Erasmus projects stated that they tend to carry an apparently positive message about the EU, as Erasmus+ mobility is more about being exposed to Europe rather than speaking about it. Some of the participants also saw the Erasmus message in building the human capital either for their home countries or for the European job market. Participant N16, a master student in one of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master programs, said *“Students gain the benefits that the locals initially have, they want to show if your country enters the EU, what kind of benefits you will have. This may sound materialistic, nevertheless, it will help to develop the society”*. Participant N23 was extensively involved in the EU programs, and their perception was formed before Erasmus due to other EU-funded programs, such as the Young European Ambassadors program and European Youth Parliament. They said that the first of all these programs act as informative tools, and secondly, they present the EU in a positive light. As the most important aspect of soft power is the formed perception of the country due to the exchange program, when answering to Question N4<sup>16</sup>, the participants expressed diverse viewpoints. There were two initial categories of participants: ones that already had exposure to the EU through other EU-related programs or tourism and the ones who had their first EU experience thanks to Erasmus+. The first category of the participants said that they had positive perceptions during their first experience in an EU country because they saw a *‘developed, convenient and different lifestyle.’* And their perception of the EU immediately after returning to Armenia remained relatively the same. People, who have had European experience for the first time due to Erasmus, unanimously agreed that after returning their perception of Europe in general, their host country and the EU have become more positive than they had before going. Participant N2 claimed, *“Our perception of Europe is different from that of the ordinary Armenian people; it is better.”* Moreover, one of the participants said *“I want to help my peers to have the same experience, to have the same benefits as I did, so I volunteered at the Erasmus office of my university to help the students with their documents, I opened the first English language club to help the students with their spoken interaction.”*

As for their attitude towards the EU, they viewed it through the prism of Erasmus and used words such as *‘gratitude’ and ‘thankfulness.’* One of the participants said, *“European*

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<sup>16</sup> Immediately after the end program, what was your perception of the US/EU?

*taxpayers fund the Armenian citizens to come and study there, I was touched by that.”* Participant N4 noted that after returning, they experienced ‘*cultural shock*’ and had to re-socialize into the Armenian society. As for the value system in the European countries, participant N6 mentioned ‘*humanity and example for the world*’, Participant N4 ‘*result-oriented*’, Participant N 9 mentioned ‘*easy, light lifestyle.*’ Only two out of 23 participants have experienced xenophobia but said that they were minor instances in the pool of the positive ones. Participant N7 emphasized that they had become the ‘*ambassador*’ of the EU and kept talking about the travels, open borders, cultural richness, and the opportunities, such as student discounts. Apart from the educational plans made after Erasmus, three of the participants started working for Erasmus offices, one of them in the university Erasmus office, two others were the founders of the European Student Network in Armenia launched in late 2020, and they emphasized Erasmus experience as the primary trigger for understanding the importance of ESN and bringing it to Armenia.

If to view the answers of the participants through the lenses and the components that need to be fulfilled for the soft power through exchange programs to actually work, it looks like this: the participants admitted having life-changing, meaningful experience during their studies; they have built a network with the professors and fellow Erasmus participants.

## **RQ 2 What is the response of Erasmus+ students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?**

The interviewees who went to Austria and Germany mostly spoke of the culture of responsibility and hard work, resilience to stress, while the participants who studied the Southern European countries, such as Greece and Italy, mentioned the cultural similarities with Armenia and affinity of the cuisine. Some participants had double Erasmus experience in different EU countries. One of them said that “*Europe is freedom, although Romania and Spain are different, freedom and mobility unites them.*” “*Belgium is a hub for Europeans; you feel at the center of Europe.*” The most persistent point made by the interviewees was the culture and the participants were attracted to the culture more than to values or foreign policies of the country or the EU.

Participant N1 was admitted to a full master program in their host country. Participants number 2 and 6 were invited to a special ceremony for the 100th birthday of their university. Several others expressed a desire to study a full master's program either in their Erasmus+ host university or in Europe in general. Participant N3, who was awarded Erasmus+ scholarship during her Master and Bachelor studies for studying in two different EU countries, was admitted for a full master in the third one, and they mentioned the

readiness of the relevant embassies in Yerevan to include them in the events and maintain ties with them. Most of the participants who studied for Master's degree or are planning to do so highlight that their desire has grown thanks to their Erasmus experience, as it has given them '*courage*,' to do so. Participant N11 outlined that they managed to further develop the institutional ties among the universities: after their Erasmus experience, their professors from the host university visited their home university in the framework Erasmus exchange for professors.

Furthermore, with the questions that followed up, I have tried to see if the values and the foreign policy that manifest in their home country by the programs funded by the EU align with their perceptions formed when they were in the EU. Some of the participants valued the ties preserved with the host society and university. To the question about the reliability of the EU as the partner for Armenia, the answers were diverse. The participants were reluctant to give a straightforward answer, and preferred to give an area-specific answer. The most popular area was where the former Erasmus students viewed the European Union as a reliable partner for Armenia was education; and they identified the exchange programs as a great contributor for the development of the society: "*The exchanges help to build up the human capital, people who come back, invest their skills in the job market, and also bring the European culture with them*". The other participant added, "*In education, only IF the people come back to Armenia, if they come to work in the government, then yes, the EU is a good partner in education.*" Other participants identified the negative aspects of the cooperation in education and economy, mainly saying that the EU countries attract the cheap labor from countries like Armenia and cause brain drain. The economy and environmental sustainability were other fields that were mentioned. Participant N23 said that Armenia needs the EU funds to assist the Armenian government, such fields as human rights; one of the participants said also said that "*Armenia can never become a totalitarian state because of the ties with the EU and European countries separately.*"

On the less positive note, participant N4 answered with a rhetorical question "*EU fails to be a reliable partner for its own members on certain issues, given that it did not respond properly when the rights of its own members Greece and Cyprus were violated, so how can it be a reliable partner for a non-member country?*" and added that "*We are a place for the clash of interests, and the EU has always had double standards, especially for the Middle East and Northern Africa region.*" Some other participants also held views similar to the mentioned ones: '*in politics interests are over values*,' "*Armenia can view the EU as a reliable partner only in the fields where our interests coincide.*"

As per the values that the EU tries to introduce in Armenia, the participants' answers mostly correspond to what the EU document depicts as planned for Armenia. They underlined that the EU tries to promote liberal values: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, gender equality, open societies, tolerance, peacebuilding, and open-mindedness. The participants did not share similar approaches to the values that the EU boosts, precisely; Participant N4 viewed EU's support to the civic society as having positive impact, while Participant N20 disagreed with the statement, as they viewed EU's work with the civic society '*superficial.*' Participant N9 used similar wording when expressing their view on the EU values in Armenia, stating that "*EU works on the excellent delivery of the values, not the values themselves*". On a separate note, two of the participants also remembered that the EU tries to make peace with neighboring countries: "*Its goal is to iron out the regional disputes.*" This part of the interview did not intend to bring up the topic of the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war, but the participants mentioned the war as the focal point for their perception of the EU as a partner. Several of them asked the interviewer, "*before the war or after the war?*" One of the participants answered "*Before September 2020, yes, the EU was a reliable partner. I was waiting for Europe's assistance to the democratic regime in Armenia, compared to authoritarian regimes of Turkey and Azerbaijan*". The interviewee further explains that they were not expecting military intervention but other ways of intervention such as sanctioning. For the question of the values, the same participant continued, "*The basis of those values is shaky, during the important times they may disappear.*" The other participant expressed a similar view "*Before the War, I thought that they would somehow manifest the years-long propagation of human values when the right time comes. But I understood that we are not something big or important to them, as we cannot offer them anything, they will not help us*". Participant N10 said, '*the beacon of liberal values abandoned Armenia during crucial times.*' Thus, the EU was mainly perceived to be a reliable partner sphere-wise, but not specifically in international relations.

### **H1 Participants of exchange programs tend to have expectations of support from their host countries when their home country is in crisis.**

The last part of the interview was designed to understand whether the students were following the statements coming from the EU or their host country, or whether they were surprised at the statements. Finally, the statements and overall reaction of the EU have reshaped the initial perception formed thanks to Erasmus's experience. To the question, if they were following the EU reaction to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war, all the



participants unanimously replied that they were closely following all the international responses coming from all over the world. Still, they mainly cared for the reaction coming from the EU. Participants agreed that due to their emotional ties with the host country their expectation from that country and from the EU in general was higher.

They were following all the statements either by the HR/VP that was shared by the EU Delegation to Armenia as an official source of information, or by the MEPs, whose quotes were shared on social media. Participant N1 said that all their life, they have been participating in the events funded by the EU or by the Council of Europe, and they were all about peace communication, dialogue, *“but when the War broke out, all those institutions that taught me were very slow to react, very neutral, and I thought they left me alone. I had expectations from them but I regret having them, I was expecting them to be vocal and call things by their names.”* Most of the participants disapproved of the statements coming from the EU because of their *‘apparent neutrality.’* Participant N4 said that *“I always liked the balance of the EU, I understood that peaceful resolution is important. But I didn’t understand why they had no proposal on the resolution of the conflict. Their texts said nothing, they could still keep balance in more normal texts, they didn’t care much and released the statements for the sake of formalities, and the same text was ‘recycled’ just to keep their face”.* Participant N16 said that they were expecting something *‘serious’ and ‘precise’, and ‘bold’,* not necessarily taking any of the sides, but an attempt to understand the situation, but the statements *‘always put the equality sign between the sides, “as they intentionally neglected several facts found out by their own special services. They breached my confidence in them, they say that humans are of the highest value, but in reality, you can neglect it if your interests are at risk”.* The clash of the education and the messages of peace from the EU were also part of the disappointment in participant N8, as they called the behavior of the EU *‘amorphous’ and ‘inactive’* that did not match its messages they received. They also called the statements by the EU a *“punch to the youth of Armenia who hold dear the values of the West”.* The other participant said, *“We were nourished by the ideas of human rights. The ideas of human life are the most valuable and highest values, and we don’t see the institution that says it cares about them, actually to show care when needed”.* Participant N17 also stated that the EU could not voice its concerns because of the close relations and dependency on Turkey over the refugee crisis and continued *“they chose not to see the chemical weapons used on people.”*

Some of the participants also admitted that the EU does not have a single foreign policy; on the other hand, it is common, and it was possible that 27 members could not agree on a

single response to the war. Therefore they had more *'hopes'* from the EU countries separately rather than from the EU itself. Several participants also pointed out some countries and their responses to the war from the joint reactions coming from the EU, those countries being France, Austria, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus, which, according to the participants, had more pro-Armenian policies. Several of the participants also acknowledged the lack of the EU's influence on the region and the war, particularly, given that *"Russia was the most significant player."* Two other participants also acknowledged the breach of communication and lack of explanation to the elites and public. Some blamed it on the Armenian authorities and their incompetency to properly explain the issue to their European counterparts, some blamed the breach of the messages on the EU public diplomacy, saying that the public diplomacy did not take into account the mentality and problems of the Armenian people and their priorities.

### **RQ3 How did the students' perceptions of the EU change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?**

As per change of the perception of the EU because of the war, the answers were diverse, as some of the participants could identify the change in their perception and their attitude to the Union, the other group of participants did not relate their perception of the political entity to their educational experience, the third category initially did not expect the EU to be a reliable partner in political and security spheres, therefore the war had little impact on their perception.

### **H2 If the on-ground politics of the host country is favorable for the student's home country during the crisis, the perceived attractiveness of the home country rises, and vice versa.**

Some of the participants differentiated their rational response to the EU's stance on the war from emotional one, saying that even though they understood how and why the EU reacted the way it did, it nevertheless *'hurt'* them because *"when my country and myself and my life were in danger, my attitude toward, the people who were indifferent changed dramatically"*, with the most common word in regards to the change of perception being *'disappointment.'* One of the students who was studying in Europe at the time of the war said that they wanted to leave their studies, explaining that *"they don't care about my country, I was frustrated, I understood that even if something happened to me they wouldn't care"*. The other participant, who also was a student in Europe (a full master's program not funded by the EU), said, *"we were questioning everything, all the ideas that we hold dear were coming from the EU. And now we have lost the belief in everything"*.

The other participant said *“I was continuously talking to my friends who also had Erasmus experience; I understood that for us, the lack of adequate response coming from the EU and European countries was more hurtful than for our other peers because we felt let down by the same institution that gave us the European exposure, I felt that I have cognitive dissonance”*. A similar description was also given by four other participants. The other participant continued with the same logic *“After November 2020, I understood it was a facade. I understood that no one owes us anything. Oil is much more important than beautiful words”*. Participant N14 said, *“The romantic inside me thought the EU would stand beside the democratic state. But from a rational point, I understood that the EU did what it was supposed to do for its economic interests”*. Several participants who hold opposing views to those presented above articulated their opinions based on the vectors of the Armenian foreign policy. As Armenia chose the politics of complementarity, one of the participants said *“we were trying to sit on both chairs, the EU and Russia, the result was that we were not properly sitting on any.”* Participant N1 (also an International relations student in Europe) expressed their views using political science terminology *“I understood that only realism applies to our situation because only interests are at play.”*

### **H3 Unfavourable on-ground politics of the host country towards the student’s home country during the crisis will undermine soft power efforts.**

Interestingly enough, some of the interviewees flipped the question around and instead answered how they changed their perception of Armenia rather than the EU: four participants gave similar to the one by Participant N1 *“I changed my views of my country, and how it should build relations with other states and organization, based on mutual interests: if the EU views us ‘softly,’ we should also view them ‘softly.”* According to Participant N4 *“EU is a beautiful thing that can nourish us and teach beautiful things, but it is not relevant in our region, it is not a global power”*. The participants underlined that they value being part of the Eastern Partnership and the benefits that come with it. Nevertheless, in politics, they tend to prioritize state interests and build cooperation between them and underline the importance of self-reliance in Armenia. They have also recorded change in their personal relationship with the EU: as they continued to view the EU as a prosperous place, with a good record of human rights and opportunities, they still viewed the EU countries as a good place for education and career. Nevertheless, the image of the EU as a value-based entity was shattered and the feeling of *‘global citizen.’* The transformation of the views was explained by participant N7 as the following: *“In 2017 I held romantic views towards the EU, I became a realist after the war, the security*

*concerns over my country made me review my attitude''*. Participant N9 compared the soft power of the EU and the US to a shadow that disappeared after their inaction in the region. The other participant noted that *“it is sad that democratic countries are powerless as compared to authoritarian states.”*

Another aspect of the change of perception was the interpersonal relationships between the participants and their European peers. Participant N 16 identified the difference between them as follows *“Young Europeans grew up with Disney glasses on. They don't really understand what war really is. They understand that it is a horrible thing, but their understanding is limited. This generation in Europe never saw a war(which is good), but they also have a very amorphous understanding of life and conflict”*. Several other interviewees also mentioned the inconsistency of experiences between the Armenians and the Europeans and the failure of both sides to express and explain the difference. Participant N20 said *“Overall they were busy with their problems. Even my friends did not realize the seriousness of the problem; they did not understand why I care so much given it is not my city under fire”*. Another participant said *“When Europeans want to see their values here, they don't understand that the people here have different problems. As long as they don't address their problems, the communication is flawed”*.

Participant N4 explained the change of their perception metaphorically *“Imagine you have a wealthy relative and one close friend; the close friend always tells the truth in your face. You probably don't like him; he sometimes manipulates and uses you. On the other hand, the relative is always on good terms with you; he is rich and has good manners. And there comes a day when your two neighbors beat you severely in front of your friend and the relative. The relative watches and smiles while your friend lets you get beaten a bit but intervenes later, in a critical moment, so you don't die. After all these, how you can love your relative that has excellent aristocratic life, you still like his values, you still want to have a quality life, but nevertheless, that is a far relative that left you alone in a critical moment, that is why you wish you or not, start to dislike him”*, as later clarified by the interviewee, the hero of the metaphor is Armenia, the close friend is Russia, the rich relative is the EU, and the two neighbors are Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Table 3 Summary of the Chapter 7 according to Research questions and Hypotheses

**RQ1 - What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?**

For the people who had travelled to Europe for the first time thanks to Erasmus+ opportunity, the impact was greater: as the overwhelming majority have been impressed by the open borders and cultural richness of Europe. The people who have previously travelled to Europe in the capacity of a tourist, also had their perception of Europe enriched by their Erasmus. The personal or professional benefits seem to contribute to the positive perception of the EU, since the participants experienced the EU as the main source of developing certain skills that came handy later in life. ‘Thankfulness’ is the term that can be generalized from the 23 interviews as the main word to describe their relations to the program.

**RQ2 What is the response of Erasmus+ students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?**

The students’ perceptions of the EU values, policies and culture have manifested themselves in two layers: first hand interaction with the attributes of the soft power in Europe, as well as their opinion of the EU programs promoting values, culture, and certain policies in Armenia. While in Europe those things were the source of attraction, they ceased to be so when the participants were put into the Armenian reality. The questions in this section were not designed to bring up the topic of the war, but the participants were asking questions in order to understand the framework of their answer. Foreign policy and values were attractive to them in Europe, while they saw the propagation of thereof in Armenia as non-productive especially in the context of the war, where, according to the participants, the values did not correspond to the actions of the EU, which they described to be more interest-oriented than value-oriented. Cultural affinity was the most persistent during the interviews, for the participants felt closer to the culture and culture appealed to them more than to the values or foreign policies of the country or the EU. And it is important to note that the term ‘culture’ was mostly used to describe the life of a certain European country rather than the EU itself.

**RQ3 How did the students’ perceptions of the EU change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?**

The participants agreed that due to their exposure to the EU and its values, they were more inclined to expect not neutral statements from the EU during the war. As their expectations were not met, the participants have experienced a ‘cognitive dissonance’ and in order to cope with it their view of certain

things have changed. They used the phrases “interests over values” to express their new comprehension of the situation.

**H1 Participants of exchange programs tend to have expectations of support from their host countries when their home country is in crisis**

The participants who have connected their exchange experience in the EU member state to their political perceptions and viewpoints tend to have certain expectations from the host country when their home country is in crisis. But the participants who do not connect their political worldview with their Erasmus experience tend to be less enthusiastic about the responses coming from the EU or their host country, but they admitted that they were following the reactions of the EU and their host country to the war.

**H2 If the on-ground politics of the host country is favorable for the student's home country during the crisis, the perceived attractiveness of the home country rises, and vice versa.**

I have found more profound data than the initial hypothesis intended: although ‘disappointment’ was the most common word used to describe their change of perception about the EU, participants also noticed that the change of perception was wider, it did not include a single entity, like the EU. The participants have noticed that their trust in the international, supranational institutions has significantly lowered; some said that their entire worldview has changed, and they have understood that the states are driven not by their values but their interests in a crisis such as war. Some participants said that their perception of Armenia has changed and the way how Armenia should conduct its foreign policy, by relying more on itself, building its own capacities, rather than relying on international partners. Although the change of perception of the EU can surely be observed as a result of interviews, quantitative research is needed to understand if that one is more persistent than other changes.

**H3 Unfavorable on-ground politics of the host country towards the student's home country during the crisis will undermine soft power efforts.**

As soft power and public diplomacy intend to increase country's attractiveness and influence other country's foreign policy by creating favourable perception of the country. In the case of the soft power through education, exchange students are the main channel to shift the home country's foreign policy, the consistency and durability of their positive perception of the participants matter. As the interviews and their analysis have shown, a change of perception has occurred among the interviewees after the

Nagorno-Karabakh Second war (although further research is needed to understand how the perception has changed) students have mostly answered that they were more focused on the interests of Armenia, which should be prioritized over the positive experience they might have had in Europe. Although most of the participants still viewed the EU and the West in general as ‘role models’ and that Armenia should aspire to become more democratic and have economic ties with the EU, majority have instituted that security of Armenia have become a priority for them, and Armenia’s main interest lays where the security is. Some of the participants remained consistent in their view of not mixing their positive experience in the EU with their political viewpoints.

## **8. UGRAD Participants and Their Perception of the US: Did Nagorno-Karabakh Second War play a role?**

Sixteen interviews were conducted among the UGRAD alumni from different Armenian universities from the period of 2016-2019 who have lived and studied from 6 months up to one year in one of the US states (full list is in Appendix, Table N2). Most of the students participated in various exchange programs after or before UGRAD: Participant N1 was involved in another exchange program financed by the State Department, and later continued their studies in Germany with the DAAD program, receiving a grant from the US Embassy in Yerevan. Participant N2 had multiple experiences in the US, they also did an internship at the US Embassy in Yerevan and studied MA program in France, Participants N5 and 7 were also Erasmus+ students in Belgium and Spain respectively, Participants N6 and 11 studied in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master program, Participant N9, prior to UGRAD was a FLEX participant and did an MA program at Stanford University, Participants N10 and 12 are employed by an American company remotely, several other participants were waiting for the results of their application for acceptance to the American universities.

For the start of the interview, I intended to understand the motivation and predisposition of the people who took part in the UGRAD exchange program. The UGRAD participants had a distinct motivation to study in the US, and they justified it by their initial perception of the US as *'country of opportunities'*. Other participants said that *"the US was always a dream for me"*, mentioning the motivation to experience life in America to see whether it is like the one in the Hollywood movies. Participant N2 clarified that *"I have tried to participate in FLEX, I always wanted to go to the US as it is a country of immigrants, I also wanted to experience a different educational environment, one that is not founded on the Soviet ideology"*. The common thread between the UGRAD and Erasmus participants is the desire to improve English communication skills, experience new environments, experience Western education, gain a new cultural experience, etc. Participant N10 summed up saying that *"I wanted to taste the colourfulness of the US"*. In the dichotomy of the 'personal' and 'professional' motives, the UGRAD participants seem to favour the overall American experience, which includes experiencing different cultures, mastering the language and interest in the academic life in the US.



As for the benefits of the program, most of the participants pointed out that being close to the State Department and participating in a program funded by it is a benefit itself apart from the apparent benefit of scholarship. Moreover, participants also spoke of the opportunities that UGRAD gives them as alumni: ties to the US Embassy in Yerevan, special network of the US program graduates, unique opportunities such as grants available only to the alumni, special networking events which include diplomats from the US. As per more personal, mental benefits, participant N3 said *“I became open minded, confident, tolerant, more motivated, proactive and not afraid of change, I became an ambassador of change”*. Participant N4 added *“I gained independence, confidence, communication skills, I learned a lot about the communication ethics, because it was different from the Armenian way of communication”*. The benefits of gaining leadership skills were one of the most popular answers. Participant N11 touched upon the topic of ‘self-discovery’ *“Everything fell into perspective, I became a planner from a dreamer, after UGRAD, I came back as a person who knew what to do in life.”*

**RQ1 - What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?**

When answering the questions concerning the kind of message participants received from the program and whether it was intentional or not, they unanimously agreed that the program had the intention to gather talented young people from all over the world in the United States and show the United States from a positive perspective and urge them to localize the practices that have seen in the American universities or elsewhere. The participants diverged in their answers on how UGRAD was trying to depict the US. The most persistent answer was again *“the US as country of opportunities”*, other participants also recalled that the program was trying to ‘market’ the US as a *‘multicultural, diverse country of equal rights’*. UGRAD participants agreed that the program exposes the person to a better way of living and the person develops the desire to emulate this on their own, no propagation or persuasion is needed, Participant N11 called it *‘sugar-coated version of America’*. As an additional component of the program, the participants mentioned that it simulated the interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds and, thus, built a community from them. The students saw the intention to ‘show’ the United States in the program because the organizers encouraged travelling across the United States, the cost of which was later reimbursed by the UGRAD organizers. This was identified as the main difference of Erasmus and UGRAD by a participant who an experience of both of them:

UGRAD is more structured in its delivery as it has fewer participants and it also maintains the relationships with the beneficiaries of the program.

UGRAD program also intended to bring all of the participants together in the capital of the United States, Washington DC for a workshop dedicated to US history, to the American lifestyle, as well as leadership skills, and project management. UGRAD also had a compulsory component of 20 hours' voluntary work after completion of which the participants can receive the certificate of completion of the program. Several interviewees who had also been Erasmus+ exchange, identified this as the main strength of UGRAD as compared to Erasmus: the internship, the planned event in the capital helped the students not only feel closer to the host country and create a community but also be closer to the local communities. Given that the universities of the participants were in the small cities, all of them identified that they had experienced '*different America*' than the one presented in the Hollywood movies, which helped to create the initial perception of most of the participants. The program also facilitates the exchange of culture in two directions: it creates opportunities for the locals to learn about the cultures of the countries from which they host people. Participant N2 identified all the components mentioned above as '*richness of the program*'. The cultural aspects that participants mentioned as the one that they liked most of all and wanted to see in their lives was the value of an individual, and respect for individual choices. Many participants agreed that from far away they viewed the US as a progressive country, but living in conservative states and cities made their experience in the US '*real and not cinematic*'.

All the participants agreed that upon their arrival back in their home country, their perception about the US has changed for the better (for 15 out of 16 the participants UGRAD was the first chance to travel to the US). Participant N5 particularly said that after UGRAD "*I had to resocialize in Armenia, it was hard for me, lifestyle in the US was better, lighter*", another participant added that they had the feeling of '*greatness of America*'. The usual phrases describing the US were "*American dream, it is beautiful, a big space for opportunities*'. Participant N15 said '*If you are dedicated to your work sooner or later you will get what you want.*'"

If to view the answers of the participants through the lenses and the components that need to be fulfilled for the soft power through exchange programs to actually work: the participants mostly agreed that they had quite a wide range of social interactions while in the US, from students, professors to politicians and NGO workers; the sense of community is quite strong among UGRAD-ians, as the State Department and the US Embassy in

Yerevan reinforce and develop the links between the alumni of different American exchange programs.

**RQ2 What is the response of and UGRAD students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?**

All of the participants agreed that UGRAD shaped their future plans in one way or another. Several participants have understood and discovered different fields where they can be more successful academically or professionally due to some extra courses that they took during UGRAD or due to the internship. Participant N1 has changed their academic goals from Business management to Information technologies because of the internship experience in the US and has chosen Germany for masters studies. Participant N2 has also opted for a western country for their master studies saying that *“the American experience helped me to gain courage to apply for a full master program abroad, and for the selection committee my experience abroad meant that I am stress-resilient and tolerant”*. Participant N3 admitted that UGRAD helped to understand the profession better, and participant N7 started working in Armenia after completing her studies thanks to the US filmmaking courses. For others UGRAD *‘shaped’* their personal qualifications. Five of sixteen interviewees were also Erasmus+ participants after UGRAD, and all of them have identified UGRAD as the main reason they applied for Erasmus and justified it by *‘hunger’* for foreign education and for travelling. Participant 11 said *“Recommendation letters for my Erasmus were from my professors from UGRAD, where I found my academic goal. It was a motivation to go to Erasmus. In Belgium, I chose subjects based on my interests I developed during UGRAD”*. Two of the participants who work for the American companies said that their experience with the Americans during UGRAD helps them to better communicate with the Americans, and the UGRAD experience *“gives a badge to every quality they see in me, it is a huge bonus”* as one of them put it.

It can be observed that the participants express their perception mostly about culture rather than foreign policy and values which are also included in the components of the soft power. Given that the participants’ exposure in the US was more focused on enriching their cultural experience, UGRAD filled the gap in their political exposure by one compulsory course about US history, government or politics that the participants took at the universities.

Following the same logic the values that the US tries to promote in Armenia according to the participants are *“equality before the law, democracy, freedom of speech, tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and in general the increase of well-being”*. Participant N 11

answered the question from a different angle “*the US main purpose is to weaken the post-soviet ties, and counter the Russian influence*”. Participant N15 noted that besides the American values, the US also tries to help Armenia and the realization of its potential by funding cultural initiatives and STEM education.

**H1 Participants of exchange programs tend to have expectations of support from their host countries when their home country is in crisis.**

All participants were following the response of the other countries to war, and they admitted that the reaction of the United States was especially important for them for personal reasons as well as objective reasons, because the United States is one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group and thus has certain responsibilities in the scope of the conflict.

Although in this part of the interview the consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh war were not taken into account, the participants themselves referred to the war as a basis for their answer.

The most common answer was that Armenia’s relations with the US are based on interests, and because the US is a global power Armenia needs the US more than the US needs Armenia. Participant N1 underlined “*soft power is a small part of the US’s agenda, if we want better relations with the US, we need our interests to match theirs*”. Participant N2 said “*In education, democracy and human rights development the US may be a reliable partner, nevertheless, the war has proved that Armenia is not that important to them*”. The same participant also elaborated that “*after the war I was angry with the whole world, emotions were blurring my vision, but now I understand that during wars countries’ interests are in their most visible stance*”. Participant N3 said “*If you had asked me before the war, I would have said ‘absolutely yes, the US is a reliable partner’ but now I understand that in international relations we cannot judge a country by our experience there*”. Participant N7 agreed with the previous statement saying “*On the surface, they showed they are reliable but during hardships they vanish*”. Participant N13 “*After Biden was elected, I became more optimistic about the US. Nevertheless, we need the US because it is the only country that can balance the Russian influence*”. Participant N12 mentioned that the “*US is a reliable partner in the spheres which the USAID prioritizes, such as democracy and human rights*”.

**H2 If the on-ground politics of the host country is favorable for the student’s home country during the crisis, the perceived attractiveness of the home country rises, and vice versa.**

Participant N5 (who is also an Erasmus alumnus) said, *“I felt that the EU and the US were bystanders, I was disappointed because for several years I have placed big trust in them”*. Participant N1 described the US reaction as ‘Mercantile’ and added *“I do not know if it was because of Trump or not, but the US withdrawal from the South Caucasus was a bad decision”*. Participant N7 said *“In Washington DC, we were told that any human life is precious, nevertheless thousands lives were being taken and the US reaction was unspeakably slow and not effective”*. Participant N2 who studied in France after UGRAD said *“Even though the US and France initially showed support for Armenia, that did not translate into anything practical or real, the promises remained on paper”*. Participant N6 said *“I hoped that democratic and freer Armenia would have more allies from the free world, I was wrong”*. Participant N12 recalled the OSCE Minsk Group statements, stating *“they were always calling for something, and then their call was not heard, so they called again”*, participant N14 saw the situation in the context of the Russia-US relations: *“I did not understand the part when America willingly conceded an entire region to Russia, I do not comprehend how that goes with their interests”*. Participant N13 also was puzzled *“I did not understand how the US tolerated the breach of the ceasefire brokered by it, apart from other things in America, we understood what a strong country it is, but letting a ceasefire be broken did not match that image”*.

### **RQ3 How did the students’ perceptions of the USA change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?**

Finally, answering the question on the change of their perception due to the war, the participants elaborated beyond the question and the common thread was the general change of the worldview which included the change of perception towards the US and Armenia. Participant N12 summed up as *“The experience abroad changes you, it also changes your perception towards your country, you understand your country in a bigger context, you understand that you are part of the world. Nevertheless, after the war, I think that the Armenians should have interaction with the Americans, with the Chinese, we should build relations in every direction, not restrict ourselves”*. Other participants focused on the idea that the development of Armenia has become their main purpose regardless of political ‘devotion’ to any country.

### **H3 Unfavourable on-ground politics of the host country towards the student’s home country during the crisis will undermine soft power efforts.**

The UGRAD interviewees labelled the US response to the war as ‘disappointing’, they also said that their perception of the US has not changed per se, it still remains a country of

opportunities for them, a place of good education and a good potential partner for Armenia. Participant N6 specifically said *“I do not connect my experience in the US to the US's response to the war, the second one was entirely political, and in politics only interests are at play”*. Most of the participants also saw their experience in the US detached from political opinions. Participant N4 said *“I am still thankful for the experience”*. On a personal level, the participants noted that the indifference of their foreign friends was more painful than their country's response or lack thereof.

Table 4 Summary for Chapter 8 according to the Research questions and Hypotheses

<p><b>RQ1 - What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?</b></p>
<p>The overwhelming majority of the interviewees were specifically motivated to study in the United States, as they initially had a certain perception of the US ‘as a country of opportunities’. The impact of UGRAD was certainly tangible in the enrichment of the perception, since the participants have observed that after UGRAD their understanding of the US became deeper, nevertheless the perception remained in the scope of ‘country of opportunities’. The opportunity of staying in touch with the State Department through Embassy that UGRAD provides and benefiting from special grants designed specifically for the alumni of the State Department exchange projects seem to create a special bond between the host country and the exchange participants.</p>
<p><b>RQ2 What is the response of the UGRAD students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?</b></p>
<p>The students’ perceptions of the US values, policies and culture have manifested themselves in two layers: first hand interaction with the attributes of the soft power in the US, as well as their opinion of the US programs including values, culture, policies towards Armenia. The questions in this section did not refer to the war, nevertheless the participants were asking ‘before or after war?’ in order to formulate their answers. Values in the US were attractive to them, but during the war, where, according to the participants, the values did not match their actions. Cultural affinity was the most persistent factor during the interviews, the participants felt closer to the culture and were attracted to the culture more, ‘individualism’ and ‘determination’ were parts of values/culture that participants like most.</p>
<p><b>RQ 3 How did the students’ perceptions of the USA or EU, respectively, change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?</b></p>
<p>The participants agreed that due to their exposure to the US and its values, they were more inclined to expect something from the US during the war. As the result did not meet their expectations, the participants have experienced ‘cognitive dissonance’ and in order to cope with it their perception of certain things have changed. They used the phrases “interests over values” to express their new comprehension of the situation.</p>
<p><b>H1 Participants of exchange programs tend to have expectations of support from their host</b></p>

### **countries when their home country is in crisis**

All the participants have affirmed that they have been following the US reaction to the war, mainly the State Department posts, and have had certain expectations from the US. The expectations had three reasons: first, because of their ties with the US, the participants have expected that the 'care' for them would manifest itself in the form of political assistance (at least verbal), second, the US is a global power and it would anyhow defend its interests in the region and thirdly, institution-wise, the US is a member of the OSCE Minsk Group and has obligations to contribute to the resolution of the conflict.

### **H2 If the on-ground politics of the host country is favorable for the student's home country during the crisis, the perceived attractiveness of the home country rises, and vice versa.**

The response of the US was in general assessed as 'not enough' by the participants, I can assume from the interview data, that they were expecting more than 'calls', given that the OSCE Minsk Group statements were also released by the State Department channels simultaneously with the US reaction, the participants were giving their reaction to both of them. Special point was made by several participants, that their 'disappointment' was deepened when the US did not act on the broken ceasefire brokered by it. As per the change of perception because of the war, the data is ambiguous, as the participants answered that they still view the US as a good place to live, to work, or to study, nevertheless they have changed their views on how their country should build relations with the external world: the word 'interest' was the most common in this context, identifying interests as the main foundation of the relations, instead of relying on their positive experience in the US.

### **H3 Unfavourable on-ground politics of the host country towards the student's home country during the crisis will undermine soft power efforts.**

Majority of the participants agreed that their political views are detached from their experience in the United States, nevertheless it is worth mentioning that as the soft power intends to achieve its foreign policy goals through the students, the change of perception towards their home country might play a role: the exchange students do not only intend to bring their country closer to the host country, after the war, they see their country pursuing their interests. However, the positive image of the US has remained, none of the participants was against the development and promotion of the US-Armenian relations.



## Conclusion

The exchange programs are one of the ways to use country's soft power for obtaining foreign policy goals. It allows a state to use all the three sources of its soft power- culture, values, and policies simultaneously. The goal of the soft power through exchange programs is to create/change the perceptions of the exchange students who can later act based on their perception and become a bridge between home and host countries, the theory of soft power operates within the liberal framework. As this thesis is a meeting point of politics and education, in order to explain the role of education in the formation of perceptions, I have used the constructivist and social communication theories which suggest that human identities are malleable thanks to the educational environment.

So far the literature has been firm on the exchange programs effect on students; the studies have been conducted to find out the effects of both American and European programs. Although they have had their limitations; such as focusing on the Erasmus effect on employability solely among the European students. In the US's case, the literature mainly concentrates on the countries with which the US has some problems, such as China and the Arab nations. They have not considered the durability of perception and did not view it through the lens of the political events in the participants' home countries. Taking all above said into consideration, this thesis regards exchange programs as 'institutions' which are the 'frames of meaning' guiding human action and influencing their most basic preferences and identity, and 'critical junctures', as the critical events that may change the 'frame of meaning' of the institution.

In order to understand the connection of the 'critical juncture' with the perceptions created thanks to the soft power through education, the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war and its possible influence on the perception of the Armenian exchange students of Erasmus + and UGRAD concerning the EU and the US respectively was studied. To that end, before the interviews, the relations between the EU-Armenian, and the US-Armenian were studied in the scope of their goals towards Armenia, alongside the content analysis of the EU and the US reactions to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war.

The EU-Armenian relations function according to the CEPA and updated Action plans. Both of them mostly concentrate on mechanisms for human rights protection, including access to justice, civic participation; "deepening civic engagement in Armenia" focused on

expanding the understanding of participatory democracy and tools to engage as an active citizen. As for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution, the documents mention its solution to be found in the scope of the OSCE Minsk Group. Given that Armenia is also part of the ENP, the ‘more for more’ principle is present as the EU foresees maximization funds for the ENP countries, which depend on their ambitions and commitment to European values.

The U.S builds its relations with Armenia under ‘the Integrated Country Strategy’: “The U.S. Mission in Armenia advances American interests by helping Armenia succeed as a secure, prosperous, and democratic country at peace with its neighbors, and more closely integrated with the Euro-Atlantic community. The State Department outlines the goals of the US in Armenia as follows: promoting U.S. values and countering Russian leverage, promoting and protecting U.S. interests abroad, ensuring a stable, prosperous, secure Armenia at peace with its neighbors. The US is a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group which is entrusted to with addressing the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (OSCE, 1995). The American and European goals toward Armenia are mostly overlapping, as both of them want to promote the Western (Euro-Atlantic) value system and bring Armenia closer to the West.

The content analysis of the documents which were released as a response to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war had shown different approaches from the EU and the US to the resolution of this phase of the conflict. Both the EU and the US documents and statements have recognized the OSCE Minsk Group as the primary body for dealing with the conflict. The US being part of the OSCE Minsk Group was naturally more proactive and has viewed the OSCE Minsk Group statements as part of its own foreign policy. The press releases from the EEAS, HR/VP and State Department of the US are similar with their description of the conflict as ‘*conflict erupted*’ and their calls to ‘*both sides*’ and ‘*external parties*’. The US and the EU documents call for the cessation of hostilities and immediate resumption of the negotiations in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group without preconditions. The phrase ‘*external parties*’ have been clarified by the HR/VP and the State Department Secretary not in the documents but during parliamentary hearings and interviews. As the US was the broker of the third failed ceasefire, the White House made specific comments about the processes and had to use specific names instead of ambiguous language. The House of Representatives and the European Parliament used specific language in their resolutions. Compared to the EU, the US communication never dispatched its messages either to the Armenian or Azerbaijani public, all statements were

available and shared for both publics in English, while the EU used different languages for each of the sides (for example mentioning ‘status of the Nagorno-Karabakh’ only in the Armenian statement).

The interviews were aimed to finalize the circle of the studies of perceptions of the EU and the US thanks to the exchange experience. Although the qualitative study does not allow us to do generalizations, it has revealed some interesting aspects which can later be studied with quantitative methods to understand how widespread they are.

**RQ1 - What types of impact do Erasmus+ and UGRAD have on Armenian students in terms of their perceptions about the respective countries?**

Both Erasmus+ and UGRAD have attracted the people who were motivated to experience cultural diversity and study in another country. As compared to Erasmus+ participants, UGRAD-ians had more professional goals for their stay in the US, while Erasmus+ participants mostly highlighted the open borders and intercultural communications. UGRAD participants had a certain perception of the US, the most common answer was ‘the country of opportunities’. People who have participated in both of the programs have highlighted that the strength of UGRAD is the sense of community that it gives to all State Department exchange program alumni by allowing them to maintain special ties with the Embassy as well as apply for specific grants. UGRAD was also more structured as it was designed to expose participants to different parts of American life as much as possible, while in case of Erasmus, it was mostly left to the participants.

**RQ2 - What is the response of Erasmus+ and UGRAD students to the values, policies and culture of their host countries?**

The values, policies and culture of the host countries were studied from two perspectives, whether they liked mentioned manifestations of the soft power in the host country during the exchange and whether they liked them when the host country promoted policies, values and culture in their home country. While the participants were abroad those things were the source of attraction, but they ceased to be so when they were put into the Armenian reality. The questions in this section were not designed to bring up the topic of the war, but the participants were asking questions in order to understand the framework of their answer. Foreign policy and values were attractive to them when they were abroad whereas they saw the propagation of thereof in Armenia as non-productive especially in the context of the war, where, according to the participants, the values did not correspond to their actions. Cultural affinity was the most persistent during the interviews, for the participants felt closer to the culture. While the UGRAD participants emphasized that they liked

‘individualism’ and ‘determination’ in the US culture, the Erasmus+ participants mostly spoke of the culture of their host countries rather than the single European culture.

**RQ3 - How did the students’ perceptions of the USA or EU, respectively, change during the Nagorno-Karabakh war?**

The participants agreed that due to their exposure to the EU and the US and their values, they were more inclined to expect certain support from the EU during the war, as they have indicated the support they anticipated was never military, but rather verbal and more comprehensive than the statements presented by the EU. The expectations were formed because, according to the participants, Erasmus+ has taught them about the EU values, one of which is the human rights. And the failure to meet their expectations has caused ‘cognitive dissonance’, a mismatch between their beliefs and reality. They used the phrases “interests over values” to express their new comprehension of the situation. Nevertheless, the gathered data does not allow to claim change of perception of the US and the EU, the change of perception has indeed happened but it was more encompassing than towards any single institution: the disappointment that the participants described was from the liberal world order, and the international organizations which “failed to act upon their values”. The change of perception was interestingly more about the home country, rather than the host country: namely that Armenia should build its foreign politics and cooperate with the actors based on mutual interests.

**H1 Participants of exchange programs tend to have expectations of support from their host countries when their home country is in crisis.**

The participants who have connected their exchange experience in the EU member state to their political perceptions and viewpoints tend to have certain expectations from the host country when their home country is in crisis, the expectations were in the form of anticipation of statements which did not have a neutral tone. All the UGRAD participants have affirmed that they have been following the US reaction to the war, mainly the State Department posts, and have had certain expectations from the US. The expectations had three reasons: first, because of their ties with the US, the participants have expected that the ‘care’ for them would manifest itself in the form of political assistance (at least verbal), second, the US is a global power and it would anyhow defend its interests in the region and thirdly, institution-wise, the US is a member of the OSCE Minsk Group and has obligations to contribute to the resolution of the conflict.

**H2 If the on-ground politics of the host country is favorable towards the student's home country during the crisis, the perceived attractiveness of the home country**

### **rises, and vice versa.**

I have found more profound data than the initial hypothesis intended: although 'disappointment' was the most common word used to describe their change of perception about the EU and the US, the reaction of those countries was not described as 'unfavourable' but rather 'not enough'. Some participants said that their perception of Armenia has changed and the way how Armenia should conduct its foreign policy, by relying more on itself, building its own capacities, rather than relying on the international partners. Special point was made by several participants, that their 'disappointment' was deepened when the US did not act on the broken ceasefire brokered by it. As per the change of perception because of the war, the data is ambiguous, as the participants answered that they still view the US and the EU as a good place to live, to work, or to study, as democratic places where human rights are protected, nevertheless they have changed their views on how their country should build relations with the external world.

### **H3 Unfavourable on-ground politics of the host country towards the student's home country during the crisis will undermine soft power efforts.**

As the interviews and their analysis have shown, a change of perception has occurred among the interviewees after the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war. The students have mostly answered that they were more focused on the interests of Armenia, which should be prioritized over the positive experience they might have had in Europe. Although most of the participants still viewed the EU and the West in general as 'role models' and that Armenia should aspire to become more democratic and have economic ties with the EU and the EU, majority have stated that the security of Armenia has become a priority for them, and Armenia's main interest lies where the security is.

The majority of the participants of the UGRAD agreed that their political views are detached from their experience in the United States. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that as the soft power intends to achieve its foreign policy goals through students, the change of perception towards their home country might play a role: the exchange students do not only intend to bring their country closer to the host country, after the war, they want their country to pursue their own interests. However, the positive image of the US and the EU have remained; none of the participants was against the development and promotion of the relations between their home and host countries.

To conclude, the qualitative study allowed to understand and bringing up the concepts and framework where the 'critical juncture' has impacted the institutions of the exchange programs as channels of soft power. The crucial finding was that the change of perception

indeed happens, but is not targeted solely to the host country but rather 'cognitive dissonance' alters the world view where the participants noticed that they have lost trust in the international institutions in general. As the soft power theory operates within the neoliberal school of thought, it requires belief towards the international institutions. The conducted research shows that the belief system of the participants has shifted into the realist theory of international relations. Further quantitative studies can explore how widespread is the phenomenon of 'critical juncture' altering the perceptions formed thanks to the exchange studies.

## Summary

The thesis studies the effects of the soft power through education and contributes to the academic literature by looking at possible changes of the perceptions of the exchange students due the events of the participants' home country and their interconnectedness with the host country's policies. To that end, the target group has been chosen from the Armenian exchange students of Erasmus+ and UGRAD, relatively similar programs of the European Union and the United States of America. The Armenian students have been chosen because of the events of Nagorno-Karabakh Second war in autumn 2020 which serves as 'critical juncture' that is an event which can alter the perception formed thanks to the exchange programs<sup>17</sup>. The thesis studies the literature on soft power and other theories such as institutionalism, constructivist theory, social communication theory and cognitive dissonance theory in order to build the theoretical framework of understanding the effects of soft power and their possible change. The main method used is the semi-structured interviews with the Erasmus+ and UGRAD participants, as a secondary method I have chosen the content analysis of the statements that were released by relevant institutions during the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war in order to have the full picture of the ground for the participants' reaction. Lastly, two chapters per each exchange program describe the experiences of the participants during Erasmus+ and UGRAD programs and their reaction toward the EU and the US responses during the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war.

Soft power is different from hard power because there is no coercive force present to force the opponent to adopt the preferences; it is defined by the ability to get what the state wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It comes from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies (Nye, 2004). The concept of soft power is close to the liberal tradition since the liberal, neoliberal scholars mention soft power as a source of influencing other states' (Nye, 2011).

Historically, policy-makers have viewed educational exchange programs as one of the tools to gain influence and shape perception and influence politics. One of the effective mechanisms for disseminating democratic values is international educational exchange

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<sup>17</sup> Critical junctures are created as a result of the impact of economic crisis and military conflict and can influence the 'frames of meaning' (Gourevitch, 1986).

(Williams, 2004). Nye's main example of the soft power through education is illustrated through the US educational programs involving Chinese students "*The ideas and values that America exports in the minds of more than half a million foreign students who study every year in American universities and then return to their home countries [.....] tend to reach elites with power*"(Nye, 2014). The US policy has promoted educational exchange programs as one way that US soft power mechanisms gain their efficiency, meanwhile Erasmus+ is an equivalent program for the European Union, trying to communicate the EU values within its borders and beyond.

The educational exchange programs are designed as institutions which aim at changing the identity and consequently influencing the preferences of a student that will further bring about an overarching change of the home country's political preferences, so it should be discussed how the 'critical juncture' can halt the process of influencing the preferences or raising the attractiveness of the host country. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people have an inner drive to hold all their attitudes and behavior in harmony and avoid disharmony (or dissonance) (Festinger, 1957). When there is a dissonance between attitudes or behaviors, a change must occur to tackle the dissonance. Dissonance can be eliminated by changing existing beliefs, adding new ones, or reducing their importance. Therefore, a critical juncture may cause a cognitive dissonance and the latter can bring about certain ways to tackle the dissonance, such as change of perception.

In order to understand the goals of the EU and the US regarding Armenia, the documents of their relations were studied, such as Action plans, Eastern Partnership factsheets, Public Diplomacy strategies, Erasmus strategy, Country Specific strategies, as well as former studies about Erasmus and US funded exchange programs. Another section studies the EU and US reactions to the Nagorno-Karabakh Second war, period September 27, 2020 to the November 10 and a certain period after that (up March 1, 2021) because the post-war reactions could also influence the perception of the interviewees as they were being interviewed in February-March, 2021. Both the EU and the US documents and statements have recognized the OSCE Minsk Group as the primary body to deal with the conflict. The US being part of the OSCE Minsk Group was naturally more proactive and has viewed the OSCE Minsk Group statements as part of its own foreign policy. The press releases from the EEAS, HR/VP and State Department of the US are similar with their description of the conflict as '*conflict erupted*' and their calls to '*both sides*' and '*external parties*'. The US and the EU documents call for the cessation of hostilities and immediate resumption of the negotiations without preconditions in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group.



The empirical part of the thesis is broken down according to the research questions and hypotheses which were designed to firstly find out the influence of the exchange programs on the perception of participants and secondly the possible change of perception due to the events in Nagorno-Karabakh Second war. The results show that both Erasmus+ and UGRAD have attracted the people who were motivated to experience cultural diversity and to study in another country. As compared to Erasmus+ participants, UGRAD-ians had more professional goals for their stay in the US, while Erasmus+ participants mostly highlighted the open borders and intercultural communications. While they were living abroad values and policies were a source of attraction, they ceased to be so when the participants returned into the Armenian reality. Foreign policy and values were attractive to them when they were abroad while they saw the propagation of thereof in Armenia as non-productive especially in the context of the war, where, according to the participants, the values did not correspond to their actions

The participants agreed that due to their exposure to the EU and the US and their values, they were more inclined to expect certain support from the EU during the war, as they have indicated the support they anticipated was never military, but rather verbal and more comprehensive than the statements presented by the EU. The failure of the EU and the US to meet their expectation has caused ‘cognitive dissonance’, a mismatch between their beliefs and reality. They used the phrases “interests over values” to express their new comprehension of the situation. Nevertheless, the gathered data does not allow to claim a change of perception of the US and the EU, the change of perception has indeed happened but it was more encompassing than towards any single institution. The change of perception was interestingly more about the home country, rather than the host country: saying that Armenia should build its foreign policies and cooperate with the actors based on mutual interests.

Although most of the participants still viewed the EU and the West in general as ‘role models’ and that Armenia should aspire to become more democratic and have economic ties with the EU and the EU, the majority of the interviewees have stated that the security of Armenia has become a priority for them, and Armenia’s main interest lies where the security is.

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## List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: List of Erasmus participants base (table)

Appendix no. 2: List of UGRAD participants (table)

**Table 1 List of Erasmus participants**

<b>N</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Host country</b>	<b>EQF</b>
1	Female	Austria	Bachelor
2	Female	The Czech Republic	Bachelor
3	Female	Poland	Bachelor
4	Male	Austria	Masters
5	Male	The Czech Republic, Italy	Bachelor, PhD
6	Female	Bulgaria/EMJM	Bachelor, Master
7	Female	Romania, Spain	Bachelor, Master
8	Female	Poland, Estonia	Bachelor, Master
9	Male	Austria	Master
10	Male	Belgium	Master
11	Female	Hungary	Bachelor
12	Female	Poland	Bachelor
13	Female	Austria	Bachelor
14	Male	Spain	Bachelor
15	Male	Germany	Bachelor
16	Female	France	Master
17	Female	Greece	Bachelor
18	Female	Italy	Bachelor
19	Male	Italy	Bachelor

20	Female	Croatia	Bachelor
21	Male	Italy	Bachelor
22	Female	Italy	Bachelor
23	Male	Italy	Master

**Table 2 List of UGRAD participants**

<b>N</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>State</b>
1	Male	Nebraska
2	Male	West Virginia
3	Female	Kentucky
4	Female	Iowa
5	Male	Michigan
6	Female	Minnesota
7	Female	Kansas
8	Female	Iowa
9	Female	Minnesota
10	Female	North Dakota
11	Female	New Jersey
12	Male	Florida
13	Male	Kansas
14	Male	Illinois
15	Female	Wisconsin
16	Male	Wisconsin