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# The EU's Performance in Rural Georgia: the Common Agricultural Policy's Relevance, Effectiveness, and Impact

## **Abstract**

How the EU interacts with its Eastern neighbours has been researched extensively. How it has performed in this region however has been systemically researched on far fewer occasions. This gap is even more glaring when straying away from policy areas such as trade, rule of law, or democratisation. More than ten years after the Eastern Partnership's inauguration, this paper therefore investigates the performance of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), with a specific focus on its endogenous rural development programme LEADER in Georgia. It finds a mixed picture for the performance attributes relevance, effectiveness, and impact, with differences in performance found between policy instruments and between actors on the local and state level. Therefore, it suggests analysing performance not only across its constituent attributes, but also with a view to specific policy instruments and actors beyond the central government.

**Keywords:** EU external action, performance, Eastern Partnership, rural development, agriculture

## **Introduction**

Having been established in 2009, the EaP was intended to create closer political and economic relationships between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, particularly with a view to democracy, prosperity and stability inside a so-called 'ring of friends' (Saari and Secieru 2019: 1). Considering the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, escalating human rights violations in Belarus, and the political crises following the 2020 Georgian Parliamentary elections, this seems more doubtful than ever. Nonetheless, it would

be too easy to dismiss the EU's performance as a failure. Its actions are multifaceted, cover various policy sectors through multitudinous mechanisms and engage with diverse audiences.

How the EU interacts with its Eastern neighbours is one of the best-researched topics in the area of EU external action (Korosteleva 2011; Delcour 2013; Christou 2010). Nevertheless, gaps exist, and this paper focuses on two of the arguably most glaring ones. First, curiously, there is little guidance on how to conceptualise and assess the EU's performance. While the effectiveness of EU actions and its consequences are discussed often, an overarching concept of performance is underdeveloped. Second, while the EU's actions in various policy sectors from civil society promotion to environmental policies received significant scholarly attention (e.g. Youngs 2009; Dandashly and Noutcheva 2019), one of the EU's central policies, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has rarely been analysed in this region.

Applying Baltag & Romanyshyn's framework on EU performance in the EaP, the paper assesses the CAP in Georgia along three of the proposed performance attributes: relevance, effectiveness, and impact. Importantly, it zooms in not only on the CAP within the context of the EaP, but also differentiates policy instruments and investigates their performance with respect to different actors within Georgia. In turn, the paper demonstrates the importance of unpacking performance along two dimensions: within policies, and the domestic contexts in which they perform.

The case of Georgia is selected as it allows to address the central research puzzle, considering that Georgia adopted various EU policies, particularly in economic fields (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2020). The CAP encompasses various instruments, from typical agricultural market measures and direct income support for farmers to broader rural development policies not restricted to

agriculture. Turning towards the analysed instrument, LEADER<sup>1</sup> in Georgia stands out as an instrument that is directly traceable to the CAP and thereby the EU. In brief, the programme provides funding<sup>2</sup> for rural communities organised in so-called Local Action Groups (LAGs) to design and implement local development actions (Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development 2006). This means that as an endogenous development programme it differs from ‘typical’ top-down development actions by the EU and other donors. Moreover, in Georgia, rather than through government budget-support, international non-governmental organisations are subcontracted to assist implementation. While this means limiting parts of the paper to a special instrument within the CAP, it allows to connect a specific EU policy instrument to its performance, specifically its impact, in a third country.

Much of the data analysed in this paper was collected during my PhD research on the external governance of the CAP. It utilises 18 semi- to unstructured interviews with EU and Georgian government officials, experts, and civil society representatives, conducted between 2018 and 2019. Due to the small number of actors in this field, all interviewees have been anonymised to broad categories rather than specific departments or organisations which would make them identifiable. In addition, the analysis draws on reports, evaluations, government strategies, programme newsletters, and blog entries, which not only provide an overview of activities but also perceptions and narratives surrounding the EU’s performance in Georgia in the sector of agriculture and rural development.

The paper finds that while the relevance of the CAP is high on some instruments, perceived (costly) misfits are rejected by the Georgian government. For relevant instruments, effectiveness is high, partly because local actors compensate for the central government’s

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<sup>1</sup> Liaison entre actions de développement de l’économie rurale, or links between actions for the development and rural economy.

<sup>2</sup> 162 Million Euros from 2013 to 2020 (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia 2018; European Commission 2015: 10).

reluctance and disinterest particularly on rural development instruments. Zooming in on LEADER, the paper then demonstrates moderate impact. The programme's benefits varied across and within rural areas, and impacts can be reversed if funding ceases. Additionally, the programme creates an image of the EU as providing tangible benefits on the ground in regions that were feared to be both unstable and susceptible to Russian influence.

## **Measuring performance in the Eastern Partnership**

How to measure the performance of governments (Lee and Whitford 2009; Brewer et al. 2007), international organisations (Tallberg et al. 2016; Gutner and Thompson 2010), or pressure groups (Grant 2005; Willems et al. 2014), has been discussed extensively.

How well the EU performs, internally and externally, is of tremendous significance for the EU's legitimacy both to EU and neighbourhood audiences (Papadimitriou et al. 2017; Börzel and Risse 2007; Bretherton and Vogler 2013; Baltag and Romanyshyn 2018). The EU's performance in the EaP is of particular interest, considering not only current political challenges, but also due to the unclear future of EU enlargement.

Previously, the EU's performance has been largely understood in terms of actorness and presence (Jupile and Caporasso 1998; Allen and Smith 1990), capabilities and expectations (Hill 1993), or unintended consequences (Burlyuk 2017; Burlyuk and Noutcheva 2019). Recently, more comprehensive conceptualisations have been developed. In their analysis of EU and member state diplomacies in Moldova and Ukraine, Baltag and Smith understand performance as 'completing a task at macro or micro level and the way in which the task is achieved' (Baltag and Smith 2015). Focusing on the EU's performance in Central and Eastern Europe and the neighbourhood, Papadimitriou, Baltag and Surubaru distinguish between process and outcome driven performance (Papadimitriou et al. 2017). Thereby, 'EU performance becomes the difference between the desired effect of Brussels-designed policies

and the real outcome they have at the internal and external level' (Papadimitriou et al. 2017: 3).

In the introduction to this Special Issue, Baltag and Romanyshyn advance performance as a systematised concept by presenting five attributes: relevance, cohesion, effectiveness, impact, and resilience (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). As argued by Jørgensen, Oberthür, and Shahin, unpacking performance into its respective attributes is vital particularly due to the multiplicity of meanings performance itself attracts (Jørgensen et al. 2011: 601). As will be discussed below, this does not mean that performance attributes do not present similar difficulties. Nonetheless, the differentiation along certain performance dimensions is necessary to structure analyses and is relevant empirically. Therefore, this paper analyses the attributes of relevance, effectiveness, and impact. These three attributes are especially appropriate to be analysed in this paper given that the lack of fit with domestic contexts and limited policy impact have been frequently mentioned as shortcomings of the CAP during the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the EU and can therefore be expected to be important also for rural development in Georgia (Lovec 2016; Petrick and Weingarten 2004).

Curiously, while Political Science literatures criticise analyses' lack of relevance for policymakers (e.g. Lepgold 1998, Jentleson 2002; Kruzel 1994), what makes a policy relevant is hardly discussed. In organisational studies literatures, relevance has been understood as 'the ability of an organisation to meet the needs and gain the support of its priority stakeholders in the past, present, and future' (Jørgensen et al. 2011: 603), with stakeholders defined as 'individuals and groups, internal and external to the organization, that are most involved in a project with a vested interest in its outcome or contribution' (Barclay et al. 2010).

In the analysis of EU performance in the EaP, Baltag and Romanyshyn (2022), following Jørgensen et al. (2011) highlight that the perception of actions as relevant by Member States is

a necessary condition for performance to occur. Therefore, the EU's relevance in the EaP can be measured as the way stakeholders such as neighbourhood governments accept or reject EU policies or the EaP as a whole (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). Concretely, a high degree of relevance would imply no domestic contestation of the legitimacy and validity of the policy, while rejection implies a low degree (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). A medium level would imply a certain degree of contestation, including through modification (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). By focusing on the perception of external stakeholders, this performance measurement also addresses a criticism of EU-centrism in which 'no one seems to doubt for a minute the Union neighbourhood's overall receptiveness to the Union's ideals and its application of its "normative" or "soft" power' (Haukkala 2008: 37). Instead, how external actors perceive the EU is not assumed but analysed.

For the second dimension, effectiveness, various, partly competing conceptualisations have been developed. In public policymaking and management, it has been tied to the achievement of policy goals (Héritier 2012, Lusthaus 2002). Despite often overlapping with other performance attributes such as coherence and impact, a common theme across the International Relations and EU Studies literatures is that of goal attainment (Baltag and Smith 2015; Jørgensen 2011; Niemann & Bretherton 2013; Romanyshyn 2015).

However, for the EaP, it is not always clear what the EU's overarching goal *is*. In the Lisbon Treaty, goals in the neighbourhood are rather vaguely defined in terms of establishing 'an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation' (Official Journal of the European Union 2007: Art. 7a). Considering the scholarly debate, the original goal of the EU has arguably shifted from goals such as democracy promotion to more pragmatic ones of stabilising EU borders by promoting economic and political stability (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2018; Christou 2010; Papadimitriou et al. 2017). Nonetheless, even this understanding implies significant

ambiguity as to at what exact point the EaP could be characterised as effective, further complicated by the analytical bottlenecks identified by Baltag and Romanyshyn.

Therefore, this paper measures effectiveness with respect to the EU's goal of exporting its rules beyond its borders (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009). For instance, in Lavenex and Schimmelfennig's framework, the dimensions of rule adoption and rule application scrutinise whether EU rules were adopted into non-member states' legislation and applied in political and administrative practice (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009). Correspondingly, in the introduction to this Special Issue, Baltag and Romanyshyn differentiate levels of effectiveness, where a high value implies adoption and implementation of EU rules. Medium effectiveness refers to partial compliance with EaP goals which may be adopted but not implemented, and low effectiveness describes no observed compliance (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022).

This means that rather than focusing on the goals of the CAP itself, here the policy instruments investigated are analysed as part of the overarching EaP. While necessarily partial, this conceptualisation of effectiveness to some extent avoids the overlaps with other performance indicators, specifically impact, which then focuses on the policies' problem-solving capacity.

The third analysed performance attribute, impact, is thus conceptualised as the 'ability of a policy to address, mitigate, and eradicate a given issue that triggered the policy's creation' (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022; see also Tallberg et al. 2016). For the EaP, problems have often been understood in terms of economic or political instability at EU borders (Christou 2010; Baltag and Romanyshyn 2018). Impacts do not have to be anticipated nor intended, meaning that unintended consequences can contribute to problems' solution (Burlyuk 2017; Baltag and Romanyshyn 2018). Similarly, the attainment of a goal does not automatically imply that meaningful and sustainable transformations took place (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). In this



paper, impact is differentiated along three levels in which high impact implies the durable solution of a problem, here “stabilizing the EU’s Eastern borders” (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022), while weak impact implies the lack thereof (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). Moderate impact would mean that the problem is partially solved, through a limited number of reversible changes (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022).

## **Relevance**

As highlighted previously, EU performance only occurs if EU actors find a measure relevant in the first place. Analysing the CAP in Georgia, stakeholders include the EU, specifically the European Commission and the European External Action Service, as well as the Georgian government.

As outlined above, relevance can be measured in the clients’ degree of acceptance, with no domestic contestation of the validity of a measure implying a high degree, rejection a low degree, and contestation or modification a medium degree of relevance (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022). Indeed, many parts of the CAP were either accepted as relevant by the Georgian government, or lip service was paid to them, implying a moderate relevance. What primarily facilitated the relevance of the CAP was the absence of existing agricultural and particularly rural development policies in Georgia. For instance, the Food and Agriculture Organisation noted that the sector was the ‘Cinderella of development assistance’, lacked ‘any defined state policy or strategy’ and was ‘abandoned by the Government’ (FAO 2012: n.p.).

Hence, the 2007–2013 European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument provided for technical assistance to the government to develop the 2015–2020 Agricultural Sector Strategy and the 2017–2020 Rural Development Strategy, the latter of which constitutes the first systematic strategy on this sector in Georgia (Government of Georgia 2017; Chaudhry and Gviniashvili 2018). Both strategies explicitly refer to the CAP as their blueprint (Ministry of Agriculture of

Georgia 2015; Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017). Focusing on LEADER, the strategy attributes ‘utmost importance’ to the central LEADER idea, that locals actively participate in rural development decision-making (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017a: 5). It also welcomes the establishment of three pilot-LAGs (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017a: 10). Hence, it is clear that some instruments were indeed either relevant or lip service was paid to them. To ascertain the latter, analysing effectiveness is necessary, as it requires a discussion of whether instruments that were described as relevant in these documents were indeed implemented.

However, parts of the CAP were rejected due to their perceived lack of fit for the Georgian context, indicating low relevance. One interesting example is one of the most prominent CAP instruments within the EU, direct income support for farmers. Here, Emerson and Kovziridze argue that the Georgian government was reluctant to completely approximate with the CAP in the DCFTA primarily because of the large number of small farmers in Georgia (Emerson and Kovziridze 2016). This indicates a perceived misfit between Georgian and Western-European rural contexts for which the CAP was originally developed, a recurring obstacle that already hindered the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement rounds. Then, a central point of contention was the necessity to develop vast administrative systems to distribute comparatively small sums of direct payments to a very large number of small farmers (Gorton et al. 2009; Petrick and Weingarten 2005). Given the prevalent land fragmentation in Georgia (FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia 2012; Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017a), this policy misfit mirrors the Georgian context.

Thus, while the relevance of some CAP instruments was high or moderate, others were rejected. While the systematic identification of factors that affect relevance is not the focus of this paper, it can be hypothesised that the Georgian government could more easily accept the validity of rural development measures due to their comparatively lower costs. Accepting the

legitimacy of an action (high relevance) or at least paying lip service to it (moderate relevance) is arguably less costly in the area of rural development without pre-existing policy alternatives, in which the government has little interest, and for which in many instances, such as the LEADER programme, implementation costs would be borne by the EU. On the other hand, especially without access to the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund, instruments such as direct payments were perceived as costly in terms of the administrative efforts and costs in the Georgian agricultural context. This highlights the necessity to dissect policies to account for the possibility that while some instruments demonstrate high or moderate relevance, others' relevance is limited.

## **Effectiveness**

As mentioned, effectiveness for this Special Issue on EaP performance understood in terms of the attainment of the EU's goal to export its policies to its Eastern neighbours and is measured in terms of whether policies are adopted and implemented. As mentioned previously, many of the CAP's objectives were adopted into the two key governmental strategies. Various concrete policy instruments have also been adopted, including a system akin to the EU's Land Parcel Identification System and further approximation on Geographical Indications (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2015). In the Rural Development Strategy, next to CAP instruments such as cooperative development or special support for mountainous areas (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017a), evaluating the effectiveness of the LEADER programme is particularly interesting with regards to conceptualising performance and whether it has been adopted and implemented will therefore be discussed in more detail. Importantly, within the EU, member states must apply the LEADER programme in order to access EAFRD funding.

Turning first to its adoption, LEADER is mentioned in the Rural Development Strategy as a measure to achieve the priority of social inclusion (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017a:

30f. 35). However, in the 2017 Rural Development Strategy, no measure corresponds to central LEADER objectives, and in the 2018–2020 plan, measures that reflect LEADER do not have a budget attributed to them (Ministry of Environment Protection and Agriculture of Georgia 2018; 2019). Another indication can be found in the Strategy itself, which notes that ‘the rural population lacks the capacity to precisely recognise problems’ (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2017a: 35), contradicting the main idea of LEADER that locals are best placed to identify and solve rural development problems in ‘their’ area (European Commission 2006). Evidently, despite surface-level adoption in the Rural Development Strategy, the government appears unwilling to promote the programme. This was also noted in the final evaluation of the first phase of ENPARD, which cautioned that the Rural Development Strategy lacked

‘a description of comprehensive implementation mechanisms with respect to the LAGs, their institutionalisation at the national level and their recognition as important players in rural development (Channon et al. 2017: 59).

Returning to the previous section, this indicates that lip service was paid to this instrument, indicating moderate relevance.

Nonetheless, turning to the second aspect of EU-effectiveness as understood in this paper, LEADER was implemented regardless by local actors, and since 2013, twelve LAGs have been established. Consequently, by programme’s first evaluation in 2017, 121 sub-projects were implemented by the three pilot LAGs in Borjomi, Lagodekhi, and Kazbegi alone (Channon et al. 2017).

One factor explaining this contrast between the central government and the local level is the role of local administrations and mayors in particular. Here, interviews with civil society representatives involved in the implementation of the programme and evaluations highlight that the backing of mayors and local administrations was crucial for the implementation and hence effectiveness of the programme (Interviews 7; 9; 10; 12; Channon et al. 2017: 50). Contrary to the central government, EU officials and civil society representatives argued that

mayors and local administrations perceived LEADER as a political opportunity in light of limited budgets and consequences at the municipal level (Interviews 4; 7; 9; 10; 11). One civil society representative involved in the implementation of the programme illustrated that LEADER allowed local politicians to directly engage with constituents at LAG meetings, but also deliver clear, visible outputs through the funding and implementation of sub-projects (Interview 9).

Therefore, the CAP's effectiveness is mixed depending on the specific instrument in question. Zooming in on one of these instruments, LEADER, it also becomes clear that analyses of effectiveness need to be specific about which actors adopt or implement policies. To illustrate, LEADER demonstrates medium effectiveness on the level of the national government, as it superficially adopts but does not implement the instrument. Yet, effectiveness is high on the local level, where LEADER is adopted and implemented.

## **Impact**

For the third dimension of performance analysed in this paper, the focus will be on impact understood as the problem-solving ability of a policy and measured on whether far-reaching, durable transformations addressing the original problem have taken place (Baltag and Romanyshyn 2022).

LEADER aimed to address issues such as the unattractiveness and lagging economic development of rural areas (European Commission 2006). In Georgia, similar problems were perceived. One government official described the perception of rural areas as 'a place you go when you've got nothing left or when you're old' (Interview 15). While Georgia witnessed an outmigration from urban to rural areas between 1989 and 2002 mainly towards subsistence farming, there is an overall trend of urbanisation particularly among younger Georgians (Zhukova et al. 2017; GeoStat 2020). Correspondingly, an EU member state embassy official

highlighted the need to create opportunities that would mean living in rural areas can be a choice (Interview 6), with experts highlighting the need to attract younger people in particular (Interviews 16; 17).

Indeed, there exists an extensive literature on the impact of LEADER within the EU. Research has demonstrated its potential to strengthen local democratic participation (Papadopoulou et al. 2011; Granberg et al. 2016b), local identities (Ray 1998), and capacity-building (Shucksmith 2000). Nonetheless, overall, the impact of the programme has been viewed as mixed both across and within member states. Despite its focus on inclusivity, participation by women is weak (Bock 2015; Thuesen 2010), and well-educated, local elites are more likely to participate (Maurel 2008; Granberg et al. 2016b; Esparcia et al. 2016) and benefit (Csurgó & Kovach 2016; Pollermann et al. 2017). Moreover, LEADER's impact has been argued to be influenced by government and governance cultures on the local but especially the central government level (Granberg et al. 2016a; Dax et al. 2016).

This picture is confirmed by the case of Georgia where impacts are reversible and vary across and within regions. As one main indication, the funding of sub-projects varies according to specific sectors. Primarily, business support projects were funded, particularly those in agriculture and tourism. For instance, 55% of the projects of the Lagodekhi LAG until 2017, and 53% of projects during the 2019 round of funding from the Keda LAG supported agriculture or tourism-related sub-projects (Channon et al. 2017; ENPARD 2019a). In turn, while these measures address agricultural productivity problems, they are less likely to diversify local economies or necessarily make rural areas more attractive for a range of younger inhabitants. Importantly, this uneven impact in terms of economic benefits could also be reversed if EU funding decreases and the government does not support the programme instead. While local administrations were central in implementing the programme, their limited budgets could not offset the loss of funding. Similarly, a non-governmental expert who was involved

in the implementation of the project and an EU official confirmed that the participation in LAGs depends on existing skills as well as locality, meaning that predominantly well-educated, English-speaking actors in the municipal centre are involved in the drafting of local strategies (Interviews 4; 12).

Nonetheless, when studying the performance of this instrument in the EaP, as is the focus of this Special Issue, “problem-solving is about stabilizing the EU’s Eastern borders” (Baltag and Romanyshyn; see also Christou 2010; Cadier 2018). In brief, the tangible and visible activities of LEADER had a moderate impact by introducing the EU ‘on the ground’ to new, rural, audiences who have been feared both by the EU and Georgian officials to be more susceptible to what they perceive to be destabilizing foreign influence, particularly from Russia.

The EU’s portrayal of itself as an active and interested actor was facilitated by the tangible outputs LEADER produces through its sub-projects. Even though many sub-projects primarily benefitted local businesses more narrowly, the actions were visible beyond this group of immediate beneficiaries. In Borjomi, LEADER funded the local tourism information centre and a sports ground, in Akhalkalaki the construction of a guest house, and in Kazbegi equipment for the local kindergarten and electricity for the farmers’ market (LAG Akhalkalaki 2018; Channon et al. 2017). These projects are visible and tangible to a large variety of audiences: tourists, farmers, parents, children, and so forth (Interviews 7; 12). Considering the number of projects, 121 until 2017, the EU was clearly visible on the ground for rural Georgians (Channon et al. 2017).

In interviews this was contrasted with typical EU actions far away from ‘normal’ citizens. For instance, a civil society representative maintained that the large number of local projects implied high visibility particularly when compared to other EU activities in agriculture and rural development, such as technical assistance (Interview 7). EU officials and programme

evaluations also asserted that LEADER is picked up as a success story in national, local, and social media, which they argued helped foster an image of an EU that creates impact on the ground (Interviews 1; 2; 4; Channon et al. 2017). Another case in point are the frequent visits of the EU Delegation to LAGs, and the people-to-people contacts that are fostered through the programme's study groups to Spain, Scotland, the Czech Republic, or Estonia (Channon et al. 2017; ENPARD 2019b).

Consequently, through LEADER the EU pushes its actions from often elusive or untransparent cooperation with and assistance for governments in capital cities to very concrete activities on the ground. It thereby reaches audiences that are less likely to be in contact with other EU activities that are organised in cities or foster people-to-people contacts of younger people. Moreover, LEADER as a bottom-up programme in which LAGs are led by local actors, avoids allegations of being run by 'foreign agents' that have been levelled at various international NGOs in the region (Toal et al. 2020). Rather, locals primarily perceive local LAG members, not subcontracted NGOs or the EU itself, as responsible for funding decisions (People in Need 2018; Interview 12).

Strikingly, through these visible actions the programme can - in a limited way - respond to the perceived instability at the EU border. This becomes evident considering the location of many LAGs. While none of the interviewed officials provided the rationale for LAG's locations, one EU official noted that the areas tend to be 'where people remember the Soviet Union fondly' and have more positive attitudes towards Russia (Interview 5). They are also often located far from Tbilisi and close to borders. For instance, Lagodekhi lies directly at the border to Russia in the Greater Caucasus. An even clearer example is Akhalkalaki, which is located close to the border with Turkey and Armenia. Akhalkalaki had, as one government official stated, long been perceived as particularly 'underdeveloped' (Interview 13), a 2002 report highlighting its remoteness by describing the main road into Akhalkalaki as 'nightmarish' (Peuch 2002: n.p.),



and the EU argued that the region had long been neglected by the central government (EEAS 2019). Indeed, in the early 2000s the Georgian government feared the area, in which the majority of the population identifies as Armenian, as hosting secessionist groups wishing to unite with Armenia (Peuch 2002). Until the mid-2000s, Akhalkalaki also hosted a Russian military base, with reports from the early 2000s noting that ‘Moscow sees the retention of at least a residual military presence in Georgia as essential’ (Lieven 2001: n.p.) to limit international influence in the South Caucasus. Another Russian military base existed in Adjara, where two other LAGs were established. Additionally, both the Georgian government and the EU perceive so-called ‘empty villages’ as national security issue, as they would pose an easy target for Russian expansion into Georgian territory (Interview 13; Channon et al. 2017). Here, LEADER’s aim to make villages more attractive intersects with these broader security considerations.

Thereby, albeit to a limited extent, LEADER economic and political instability in Georgian areas and creates a ‘ring of friends’ in these untypical audiences. Of course, whether these larger geopolitical impacts were fully intended can be questioned. Yet, one EU official made the rationale of pursuing activities especially in regions which are feared to be exposed to Russian influence explicit. They illustrated that with actions such as LEADER the EU demonstrates that ‘by the way, the EU Russia threatens you so much with is here, gives you things, and doesn’t want anything in return’ (Interview 5).

Even though LEADER will neither completely revert the economic challenges in rural areas nor neutralise Russian hard power, by moving out of its typical space of action, capital cities, the EU is able to shape perceptions of rural Georgians through providing tangible support, all whilst not appearing as a ‘meddling’ foreign power. At the same time, that the programme on the surface appears to be apolitical, in a sector that is perceived to have little relevance (rural

development), and comparatively small in its financial scope, facilitates that it does not raise the interest of potential veto players.

Importantly, to assess the impact of LEADER, a counterfactual argument has to be raised that without the programme, the observed transformations would not have occurred. Here, the respective counterfactual arguments would be that without the implementation of the programme, local businesses would still have been supported by alternative governmental policies or the development assistance of other actors. The first counterfactual is unlikely considering the Georgian government's track record on rural development policies. Arguably, without the technical support that led to the formulation of the 2017 Rural Development Strategy, the government would have continued to view rural development not as a specific sector but part of overarching national economic development, as one government official argued (Interview 15). Additionally, while other actors such as USAID or the World Bank are involved in Georgian rural areas, their projects largely focus on issues such as infrastructure development rather than LEADER's bottom-up actions (USAID 2020; World Bank n.d.). The EU is, for once, the 'only game in town' (cf. Börzel and Risse 2012: 2).

Overall, LEADER demonstrates moderate impact. It intersects with economic and security instability, but transformations may be reversed in the future if EU funding decreases. The analysis also raises a broader point for the dimension of impact, in that researchers should not shy away from straying off the beaten track when analysing the performance of EU external action. Certainly, when searching for EU actions to counteract instability in its neighbourhood, a rural development programme in Georgia is not the obvious place to start. While LEADER would have to be compared more systemically with traditional development instruments to reach conclusions on whether bottom-up development instruments perform better on the dimension of impact, in this case the EU is able to have its cake and eat it, too: it delivers tangible actions and avoids allegations of acting as an intrusive power.

## Conclusion

The EU interacts with various actors, on various levels, in different policy fields through multitudinous channels. This paper limited itself to one policy sector and one specific policy instrument to trace the EU's performance in the EaP. It found that while some policy instruments were perceived as highly relevant by stakeholders, others were rejected. Performance was also effective in terms of the adoption and application of relevant instruments. However, instruments, LEADER specifically, were adopted and implemented to different extents by actors on different levels. While the central government only superficially adopted the programme, local actors also implemented LEADER. Impact was moderate, in that LEADER only partly addressed problems that triggered its creation and that of the EaP. Benefits are also reversible if funding stops. Nonetheless, particularly LEADER's consequences in remote regions demonstrate the importance of small programmes for the EaP's performance. This finding is particularly interesting as it speaks to other contributions to this Special Issue that highlight the potential for Russia as an obstacle to EU external actions (Rabinovych 2022). Similarly, pushing the boundaries of EU actions beyond capital cities is vital in creating awareness around the EU, which has been highlighted as an obstacle to EU performance by Moga and Bureiko (2022). However, factors explaining relevance, effectiveness, and impact have not been studied systematically. While the paper stipulates that transition and implementation costs affect the relevance of an instrument, and that the bottom-up nature of LEADER lends itself to a specific form of impact, a more systematic analysis of these factors is necessary.

The findings demonstrate the necessity to analyse performance not only across its constituent attributes but also with a specific view to different policy instruments. Moreover, analyses should differentiate actors, extending the view beyond the central government to include the

audience of specific policy instruments. As discussed by Rabinovych (2022), impact can be further differentiated along the lines of economic, legal, and political effects they may have.

Certain aspects can be raised to reflect on the Special Issue's conceptualisation of performance. First, the separation of attributes can become blurred in empirical analyses. This pertains particularly to effectiveness and impact, but relevance and effectiveness also have significant overlaps, as it is unlikely for a policy to be effective if it is not perceived as relevant by stakeholders, and the analysis of effectiveness is necessary to ascertain whether an actor merely paid lip service to the relevance of an instrument. Therefore, relevance may be a necessary condition for effectiveness, rather than an independent attribute of performance. Similar arguments have been raised by van Gil's (2022) and Khvorostiankina's (2022) contributions in this Special Issue. Next to these empirical overlaps, the five attributes raise questions of hierarchy. For instance, is impact as the solution of a problem more important than cohesion? Both points should be explored in future research.

Overall, the paper reaffirms its initial statement, that the EaP, even after ten years, cannot be praised nor chastised for its overall performance. Instead, the scholarly debate as well as policy practice should focus on specific instruments in specific contexts to identify which policies perform well, where, and for whom.

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Interview 15: Government Official, mid-2018

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