

Eastern European Partnership and Georgia's foreign policy: a security dilemma or a call for change?

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Abstract

Since gaining independence in 1991, the Georgian state has undergone a thorough political and economic transformation that led to an increasing significance in its role on the contemporary geopolitical map. After more than a decade of moving “back to Europe” and working on joining the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, Georgia is now facing a security dilemma caused by the uncertain strategic approach of both Georgian leadership and its Western partners. It is obvious that Russian foreign policy behavior is significantly influencing the speed and effectiveness of mutual collaboration between Georgia and the EU, as well as with NATO and neighboring states of the South Caucasus. This article provides a brief analysis of recent developments in Georgia's foreign and security policy approaches, looking through a prism of the Eastern Partnership initiative as its main declared foreign policy objective.

Introduction

Although the foreign and security policies of Georgia have developed distinctively in recent years, there is extensive debate about the effectiveness of the current Georgian government's approach and its ability to address new geopolitical challenges in the long-term perspective. The geographic location has historically created both opportunities and challenges for the country. Throughout centuries, the state was divided and occupied, making Georgia play the role of buffer zone between great powers. This particular position considerably shaped the formation of the Georgian European identity which was reflected by foreign policy aspirations. Zurab Zhvania, former parliamentary chairman, said: “I am Georgian, therefore I am European”¹. In this regard, Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe represented a historical step in its aspirations to be back in Europe.

The first significant launch of reformation in Georgia came after the Rose Revolution in 2003, which accelerated rapprochement with the EU. A year later, Georgia became a member of the European Neighborhood Policy which was followed by the adaptation of the European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan, making it a milestone framework guiding the country on the way towards strengthening its democracy, the rule of law, human rights, justice, and economy. The 2008 war between Georgia and Russia highlighted the legacy of the post-Cold War division of spheres of influence and at the same time proved that Georgia's foreign policy aspirations contained risks that had not been adequately addressed. Not only did the Russian intervention cause serious concerns among Eastern European and Baltic states, but it also called into question the assurance of the Georgian government of Western support when it came to state security and the possibility of changing the structure of relations between Russia and the West. Moreover, the European Community came to the realization that European security begins outside the borders of the EU and its own well-being is highly dependent on the developments in its neighborhood.

The next significant step was launching the Eastern Partnership Program (EaP) in 2009 with the aim of ensuring stability and security on the eastern borders of the EU by means of multilateral and bilateral initiatives. The program included cooperation with Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. Deepening relations with the EU required comprehensive reforms and progress in democratization, development of civil society and the rule of law, ensuring and increasing human rights and justice, as well as the alignment of the legislative framework and practices with international, and more precisely European, standards. This new stage became a representation of an added value to Georgia², since bringing relations with the EU to a new level meant opening doors for free trade and association between the two. Nine years later, Georgia achieved considerable progress both in political and economic reforms, becoming one of the top-tier partners in terms of implementation of European aspirations. However, recent developments in world politics, including the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, change in US administration, as well as a range of European internal challenges, such as Brexit, refugee crisis and various foreign policy approaches within the EU, lead to uncertainty regarding the future avenues for political and security cooperation. Moreover, changing foreign policy objectives with a new government in Georgia from 2012 have not contributed to the enhancement of an overall secure environment.

Absence of practical policy solutions: Georgia's search for a coherent foreign and security strategy

Georgia is now enjoying more progress and perspectives among six EaP countries including Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. The new EU Global Strategy 2016 recognized Georgia as “an example of state and societal resilience in the eastern neighborhood”. Relations between the EU and Georgia have been developing at a faster pace in recent years, indicated in the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 (which entered into full force on 1 July 2016) that includes an agreement on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Launching the DCFTA has quickly resulted in the EU becoming the key trading partner for Georgia with its share in total trade increasing from 27% to 31%. Moreover, from 28 March 2017, Georgian citizens were granted visa-free access for short stays in the Schengen Area³. These steps represent continuing strengthening links between Georgia and the EU, despite complex geopolitical tension in the region. In the meantime, Georgia's aspirations for full integration with the EU are increasing, which consequently brings the foreign and security policy agenda to the table.

Tightening links with the EU didn't stop Tbilisi from adopting a new direction in its foreign policy aimed at normalizing relations with Moscow. It was motivated by the necessity to restore trade with Russia, especially concerning Georgia's key export goods – mineral water and wine – that had been under Russian embargo since 2006⁴. Shortly after the Georgian Dream coalition came to power, economic relations with Russia were restored and the two countries launched a political dialogue for normalization. Consequently, the Georgian market enjoyed an increase in a foreign direct investment from Russia, making it the third biggest trading partner for Georgia.

The new Georgian government elected in 2012 experienced extensive criticism with regards to a non-balanced policy approach. The highest polemics were caused by the Ukrainian crisis when Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili blamed the West for not showing stronger resistance to

Russia in 2008, meaning that in this case the aggression in Ukraine could have been avoided. The UNM members of Parliament and former President Mikheil Saakashvili accused the current government of not providing enough support to Ukraine, a country which has always stood up for Georgia's territorial integrity. Against the background of the August war in 2008 and unresolved border disputes with Russia, the Georgian government rather cautiously reacted to the Russian aggression. In light of such controversial polemics, Tbilisi did not join anti-Russian sanctions in June 2015 and restricted its actions to humanitarian and moral support for Ukraine⁵.

While trade and economic relations between Georgia and its partners were developing, the security environment didn't much improve, if not vice versa. Aside from signing the EU Association Agreement, Georgia continued cooperation with NATO and was granted a "Substantial Package" after the Wales Summit in 2014, which included launching a NATO training center. While the West openly supports Georgia's territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and provides assistance in defense and related security capacity building, there is no possibility to deploy large military forces on Georgia's territory, which is explained by the unwillingness of Western partners to further deteriorate already strained relations with Russia. According to Vasil Sikharulidze, President of the Atlantic Council in Georgia: "The reality is that some big NATO members will oppose granting [Georgia] MAP because they are not prepared to defend [the country]"⁶, meaning that this would provoke Russian aggression in the region making Western partners unable to adequately react to an open conflict. The Ukrainian crisis led to more inward-looking policies both in the EU and NATO, which created additional obstacles for Georgia in joining these institutions in the foreseeable perspective. As Barak Obama stated after the EU-US Summit in Brussels in 2014: "neither Ukraine nor Georgia are currently on a path to NATO membership"⁷, whereas European partners also made no promising declarations and emphasized that the EaP is not to be considered as a platform for accession to the EU⁸.

Thus, continuing debate about "right and wrong" among Georgia's political elite and the absence of any practical solution related to enhancing foreign and security strategy lead to the stagnation of overall multilateral cooperation. As a result, unresolved conflict with Russia translated into deterioration when Russia moved the occupation line on the border with South Ossetia in early July 2017. According to the Georgian Foreign Ministry: "This fact, and the general situation in Georgia's occupied regions and adjacent territories, once again points to the necessity of establishing international security arrangements and creating human rights monitoring mechanisms on the ground"⁹. Shortly after, and with an expectation of the Georgian leadership for the international community to adequately react to Russia's violation of commitments undertaken under the Ceasefire Agreement of 12 August 2008, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine called on the European Parliament to adopt a declaration of support before the EaP Summit. As the call stated: "We, the parliaments of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, call on the European Parliament to adopt a Resolution prior to the EaP Summit reflecting political support and reaffirming the appeal to the European Council to opening the Perspective of Membership to the three Associated Countries in line with Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union"¹⁰. It is therefore becoming even more evident that Georgia, NATO and the EU have to react in a more definite manner on changing the geopolitical conditions.

Implications of the regional security environment on Georgia's European aspirations

The EaP not only fosters Georgia's economic and political development but also creates new potential opportunities for enhancing regional security. However, two main characteristics – focus on trade and uncertainty in politics – still exist in each dimension. Thus, discussions between Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are limited to economic cooperation and energy issues, while neglecting the regional security architecture. Differing from Georgia's successful development towards Europe, both Armenia and Azerbaijan took steps backward from the EU by making a decision not to associate with the institution¹¹. Moreover, these countries are constantly being criticized for violation of human rights, the absence of democratic political reform, and incompetent governance. While Armenia continued political and economic dialogue with the EU after the refusal to sign the AA in 2013, it also joined the Eurasian Economic Union lead by Russia in 2015 which points to the absence of strong foreign and security policy priorities and a high level of dependency on Russia. Yet, Georgian-Azerbaijani relations are described as a strategic partnership, strengthened by numerous regional projects, including a key regional energy infrastructure, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

Although Georgia is maintaining stable relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, tensions around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict keep restricting opportunities for joint cooperation in the South Caucasus. For example, discussions about building a transportation network connecting Russia and Georgia through Abkhazia caused serious concerns in Azerbaijan¹², which feared that such infrastructure could be used by Moscow to support Yerevan if conflict breaks out in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016 highlighted bigger risks for the security and foreign policies in the region. The geographical location of Armenia and Azerbaijan makes them dependent on Georgia due to links with Europe and energy connections. There is a direct threat to Georgia's security in this regard, since hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan are more likely to target key energy and communication infrastructure, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. Additionally, the escalation of the conflict implies the possibility of Russia strengthening its role and increasing its military presence in the region, including in occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which would lead to the deterioration of both the regional and global security environment¹³.

Being the most developed state in the South Caucasus and at the frontline of the EaP, Georgia could potentially take on the role of regional leader or a conflict mediator. However, there is not much likelihood this will happen due to the absence of a common ground between regional governments. South Caucasian countries could learn a great deal from the example of cooperation between the Baltic States and the V4, but the basis for such cooperation has to lay on common priorities, interests, and values. The main issue is that ignoring regional affairs for Georgia creates additional obstacles for European integration since this process is not just about economic development and democratic reform, but also about creating a stable and peaceful regional security environment. On the other hand, the EU does not have the full capacity to boost cooperation in the South Caucasus which, along with instability, restricts the effectiveness of numerous EU projects in the region. In light of the importance of developing the energy market counterbalanced to Russian, the cooperation of the South Caucasus states in the framework of the EaP gains strategic importance, which is impossible without progress in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Conclusion

While Georgia is continuously advancing in its cooperation with both the EU and NATO, recent developments still display a very fragmented foreign policy approach. As of now, Georgia's involvement in the ESDP and joint military trainings is mainly at the forwardness stage, while the priority in EU-Georgia cooperation is given to the socio-economic dimension, which serves as a basis for trade development and reforms implementation. The same motivation underpins restoration of relations with Russia as a significant trade partner for Georgia. Relations with neighboring countries Armenia and Azerbaijan largely neglect a political and security dimension and put an emphasis on the development of regional trade and the energy market. However, as we have observed over the last decade, the foreign and security policy of the state is one to be considered as a long-term strategy and not to be ignored. It has a greater significance for such states as Georgia, geographically located between great powers and their spheres of influence. Despite huge success in political and economic developments, Georgia's security environment at most remains unchanged.

The world community today is constantly assured of Russia's strategic and pragmatic foreign policy approach, the core element of which is the defense of its borders and unwillingness to accept the transition of states that have historically been incorporated into its sphere of influence. Even though the EU officially declared Russia a threat in its new Security Strategy 2016, it is unable to offer any sophisticated security and defense guarantees to its Eastern Neighbors. Moreover, a shift in the US foreign and security policy with the new Trump administration, along with internal divisions in foreign policy approaches within the EU, delay Georgia's prospects for accession in the near future. In the present reality, Georgian security can only be ensured by deploying NATO military on its territory, although that would complicate the already sensitive political situation with Russia. Georgia plays an important role for the Russian "near abroad" not only due to the divisions of spheres of influence but also due to its geographical location as a buffer state between Russia and the West. The absence of practical improvement in Georgia-NATO relations emphasizes the high level of Russian influence on NATO's decision-making in terms of the enlargement process.

A number of scholars today describe Georgian foreign policy as a pragmatic one, however, it seems that the word "uncertain" has become more appropriate, taking into account the vibrant regional and global security environment. At this stage, the Georgian government needs to realize that the existing foreign and security policy can only be beneficial for a small state in a short-term perspective. In order to adequately address contemporary security challenges and become a more significant security actor, Tbilisi has to reconsider its approaches by developing its defense potential, along with strengthening political and security cooperation with strategic partners. On the other hand, despite the fact that Western partners recognize Georgia's "impressive" reforms, particularly within the framework of the EaP, the actions of both NATO and the EU have shown less commitment to that support when it comes to closer security cooperation with states neighboring Russia. As the EU faces internal challenges, world affairs are changing rapidly, with Russia becoming more confident in its pragmatic and strategic behavior. In addition to that, a lack of near-future perspective for improving cooperation between the states of the South Caucasus reduces the effectiveness of the EaP as a framework

for integrating countries based on common values and priorities. This makes it necessary for the EU to reconsider its policies towards its Eastern Neighbors based on an individual approach and go beyond the declarative character of political interaction by putting on a faster integration track the three top-tier associated states, including Georgia.

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