

The Georgian Perspective on Geopolitical Changes in the Caucasus

Introduction: Georgia's Geographic Centrality

Georgia borders Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey. It remains a transit hub for oil and gas pipelines originating in Azerbaijan and a road hub for goods coming from Iran via Armenia to the European Union (EU), from Armenia and travelling to Russia, and from Turkey and travelling to Russia and Azerbaijan. As a result, changes that are taking place in the Caucasus due to the Russian war against Ukraine are directly affecting Georgia. Russia as a gatekeeper in the South Caucasus is less able to defend its interests in the region and that results in the ongoing skirmishes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iranian military exercises on the border with Azerbaijan, and reciprocal Azerbaijani-Turkish exercises. Thus far, Georgia has kept itself out of the conflict and has even tried to play the role of mediator in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, but to no avail, since Georgia is not considered a powerful enough conflict mediator.

Georgian-Russian Relations: Economy is in the Driving Seat

Despite Georgia's central role, it remains vulnerable to any potential conflict with Russia. President Putin's administration fully grasps the role and place of Georgia in the Caucasus and will be ready to bring Georgia back to its fold at a time that is suitable for Russia. Russia sees Georgia as a kind of spider, forming a web that maintains friendly relations with three out of the four countries in the region. As for Georgian-Russian relations, in particular, they remain polite. What is important to remember and emphasise is that they also are economically viable. According to an article published on the Eurasia Daily Monitor website, on the one hand, the Georgian government advertises the unprecedented economic growth it has been

enjoying recently. On the other hand, it rejects the notion that this has come about through expanded economic ties with an increasingly isolated Russia. This conclusion is doubtful. According to the National Bank of Georgia (NBG), a record number of money transfers were sent from Russia to Georgia in 2022. In one year, remittances from Russia to Georgia increased fivefold and amounted to more than US\$2 billion, representing 47.29 percent of total remittances from all countries¹ around the world. This contradiction exposes the shift of the Georgian Dream (GD) government towards Russia, in which it found a reliable economic partner. Such a reliance of Georgia on Russia is problematic, as Russia often uses its economic leverage to punish countries with such dependencies.

Apparently, the GD government has not drawn the right conclusions or perhaps forgotten altogether that Russia's State Consumer Protection Agency (RosPotrebNadzor) banned Georgian goods from the Russian market several times in the past.² However, when Moscow sees that Georgia is willing to turn a blind eye to such trifles, Moscow is ready to reciprocate by, for instance, offering to resume flight services between Russia and Georgia³ banned by President Putin on 8 July 2019.⁴ The only person criticising the potential resumption of flights was the Georgian President, Salome Zurbishvili, who stated loud and clear: "Flights with Russia not welcome."⁵ Zurbishvili added: "For me, and I am sure for the majority of society, the position of the government and the ruling party is, to put it mildly, incomprehensible. At this time, if we have any memory of Russia's already outdated tricks, we should understand that the Kremlin uses such topics when it hopes to create some kind of rift or wedge between us and our Western partners. This, however, should not be allowed."⁶ Zurbishvili's voice, however, has very little political

weight since the GD government decides economic and foreign policy.

Another turn towards Russia was the recent initiative proposed by the People's Power group, a kind of splinter GD parliamentary group that continues to support the ruling party, to accept the Foreign Agent Law without any discussion with the Georgian people. This law would label media and civil society organisations which received more than 20 percent of their income from a 'foreign power' an 'agent of foreign influence.' Any such organisation would be forced to register in a 'Foreign Influence Agents Registry' or face fines of up to GEL25,000 (US\$9,400).⁷ After three days of demonstrations (7-9 March), the government cancelled the law. Furthermore, the law was voted down in the Georgian Parliament on 10 March. However, a quick look at the voting record shows that the ruling party did not vote down its law but [rather] registered for the quorum and then did not vote, thus allowing the opposition "nays" to carry on. Out of the 76 majority MPs that voted for the law on 7 March, none voted against it on 10 March. In other words, the ruling party shows no intention of changing its strategic course. Its leaders are considering the defeat in the streets as mostly a public relations failure and an attempt to focus on winning the "hearts and minds" battle in the new round of public relations confrontation.⁸

As a result, it can be said that as long as the ruling party governs the country, its confrontational course with the Georgian people continues. Furthermore, anti-Western rhetoric remains a dominant factor on the ruling party's agenda. As long as the West, namely the EU and the US, is not imposing economic sanctions on the ruling party and its parliamentarians, nothing will change the party's current confrontational course that is likely to continue until next year's parliamentary elections.⁹ Whether

elections will lead to a decisive defeat of the ruling party and subsequently bring a new force into Georgian politics remains to be seen. An article published by Eurasianet titled "Elections are not enough: Georgia needs a new model of democracy delves deeper in the necessary political overhaul"¹⁰ If we look carefully at the countries surrounding Georgia (in particular Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey) we can see that elections as such do not dislodge the ruling parties but rather strengthen the parties' grip on the countries. This is in part because the opposition in these countries is not strong enough or is often divided and, in part, because the leadership of the ruling parties knows how to manipulate elections to its advantage.

The aforementioned examples of Georgia's shift towards Russia clearly show or rather expose the real direction of the ruling party, which is not supported by the Georgian people. More than 80 percent of Georgia's population supports Georgia's European path, which is also enshrined in the country's constitution.¹¹ The rift between the Georgian people and the GD government will continue. As a result, the country is likely to face more protests in the coming months. What exactly can Georgia do to change the current difficult situation?

Georgia's Path towards NATO and the EU

Georgia's path towards NATO and the EU remains difficult and, not least, complicated. There is a general feeling in Georgia that both organisations let Georgia down and the country's expectations were not met. It is easier to start with the NATO accession process that has been going on for 15 years. The current result is that Georgia continues to strive to join NATO, but the process has come to an impasse.

Georgia's NATO Accession: Left in Limbo

With regard to Georgia's NATO accession process, not much has changed since the well-known NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008. In other words, NATO maintains its mantra of an open-door policy for Georgia and recognises Georgia's

independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, but no Membership Action Plan (MAP) has been offered thus far. Without a MAP, Georgia is effectively left in accession limbo, a situation which is likely to continue for the next five to ten years with no guarantee of success. There is one additional factor that concerns Georgia. Prior to the Madrid Summit on 29-30 June 2022, Georgia and Ukraine were both treated as aspirant members of the Alliance. After the summit, Georgia's bid was decoupled from Ukraine's, its status was downgraded and linked to that of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova – two countries that have a long way to go before they will be able to join NATO.

To reinforce the author's argument, according to the NATO document "On the Agenda", 'Sustaining support for Ukraine' came as Item 2 while 'Reinforcing partnership and maintaining an Open Door' [policy] which concerns Georgia and the other [aforementioned] partners, came as Item 4.¹² NATO established and enhanced several result-oriented programmes with and for Georgia, such as the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC),¹³ the Annual National Programme (ANP),¹⁴ the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP)¹⁵, its associated Joint Technical and Evaluation Centre (JTEC).¹⁶ and an initiative of the SNGP known as the Defence Institution Building School.¹⁷ But these programmes were no and are no substitute for a MAP even though they have an added value for Georgia. The programmes have created possibilities for the country to prepare itself for membership, even if joining the Alliance presently remains beyond the horizon. As a result, NATO has so far left Georgia in the position of partner but not a member. Georgia's accession efforts are encouraged, but the potential that Georgia may remain a partner rather than becoming a member requires acknowledgment by the Georgian government. The ruling party does not know how the Georgian people will react to this statement. Therefore, it prefers to keep it in the dark, since it is afraid to admit that mistakes were made over the last 15 years. If Georgia's path to NATO stalls, then the path to the EU remains full of twists and turns.

Georgia's Path to the EU: More Questions, Less Answers

Political polarisation is one of the most crucial problems of Georgian society, which is broadly divided into supporters of the current GD government and supporters of the opposition. There are many countries around the world with polarised societies but in Georgia's case, the country also wishes to become a member of the EU. The present political polarisation makes it harder for Georgia to achieve this goal. While the GD government strives toward EU candidate status, its chances of attaining this goal are slim as it is not implementing the 12-point recommendations made by the EU on 17 June 2022¹⁸, despite saying otherwise. What is more, there is a lack of national consensus regarding the implementation of these recommendations. Kornely Kakachia and Bidzina Lebanidze very sharply formulated the dilemma facing the three actors; namely, Georgia's opposition, the GD government and the EU.

The opposition fears that if the EU grants Georgia candidate status before the [parliamentary] election [planned in 2024], it may further solidify the GD's authoritarian grip on power and strengthen Georgia's oligarchic leadership. GD leaders fear that the fulfilment of the EU's 12-point recommendations, including de-oligarchisation [author's italics], may lead to it losing power.¹⁹ And losing power is something that the ruling party is not ready to accept. As for the very complicated issue of de-oligarchisation, see an interim opinion issued by the Venice Commission. The Commission stressed that de-oligarchisation should be ensured through a systematic approach [author's italics] and not through the Georgian draft law that focuses on a so-called "personal" [punitive] approach.²⁰ Therefore, it can be said that the ruling part is not ready for systematic reforms but rather for purely cosmetic reforms that change nothing.

Meanwhile, Brussels has its own fears. If it again rejects Georgia's EU candidate status it may legitimise the Eurosceptic discourse in Georgia, strengthen the pull of Russia,

silence pro-reform actors and give the government a free hand to undermine democratic structures in the country. On the other hand, giving a positive signal would anchor Tbilisi in the EU's geopolitical orbit, contribute to peace and stability in the region and strengthen the EU's ownership of the domestic reform process. Of course, this approach is risky. Moral considerations aside, disregarding Georgia's democratic backsliding will be hard to sell to member states. The other option would be for the EU to apply a strategic patience and wait for better momentum to reward Georgia with candidate status. Either way, Brussels needs to find creative ways of accommodating its geopolitical interest without emboldening emerging authoritarianism in Georgia²¹ in the shape of the current GD government. One thing is certain, the EU must continue to support civil society in Georgia despite the ruling party's anti-Western policy and its statements that Georgia deserves the EU candidate status.

Conclusion

It needs to be remembered and emphasised that Georgia has no allies or partners that will come to its rescue in case of military conflict with Russia. Georgia is situated in a 'grey zone' with respect to Russia and will therefore need to rely on its own strengths and resourcefulness. Although Prime Minister Garibashvili often speaks about peace, the country needs to be prepared militarily for conflict, in order to maintain this peace. Georgia, however, is not prepared for conflict. In other words, Georgia lacks a strong and united Home Front that brings the country's population to support the military efforts. As long as the country remains politically divided and the society is polarised, the chances for creating a strong and united Home Front remain elusive. What is known to the author is also known to the main adversary of Georgia; namely, Russia.

Besides, the ruling party's anti-Western rhetoric drives the country away from the EU and makes its request to receive potential EU candidate status very difficult for Georgia and very challenging for the

EU. This dilemma was aptly presented by Kakachia and Lebanidze. The country also has no realistic chance to become a NATO member in the next five to ten years at least. As a result, it is likely to foresee the GD government turning further towards Russia and further embracing its economic pull. The proposed EU's economic sanctions on the ruling party and its associated parliamentarians, together with assistance to civil society, may lead the ruling party to a reconsideration of its plans or, alternatively, may lead to a confrontation between the authoritarian ruling party and Georgian society. Does it mean that Georgia will go through its own revolutionary 'Maidan' with its consequences? Such a scenario is probable. What will be the outcome of such a confrontation is difficult to forecast. Nevertheless, it can be said that violence and bloodshed will not benefit the ruling party. As a result, the choice made by the EU is crucial for Georgia's opposition, ruling party and the EU itself. The way out proposed by Kakachia and Lebanidze, to apply strategic patience and wait for better momentum to reward Georgia with the candidate status, is perhaps the best option for all involved.

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Endnotes

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21) Carnegie Europe, Georgia's slide.



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