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## Georgia at the gate of Europe

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## Georgia at the gate of Europe

Coming from the country which used to be called Iberia, or Caucasian Iberia in ancient times, I am particularly pleased to speak in front of this distinguished audience. I would like to recall that according to some mediaeval sources, already in the 11<sup>th</sup> century there was significant interest in learning more about our Western namesake, and even plans of an expedition to be sent there to establish contact with the „Georgians of the West”<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, there are only very scarce bits of information preserved on this.

For the start, I would also like to recall a comic episode that took place a couple of years ago in one of the Baltic countries. I was asked to give an interview, and the journalist asked me as follows: „you, Georgians, want to join Europe. But how much is this justified – you reveal so different a temperament, different set of values...”. Trying to be diplomatic, I replied: „I have a feeling that you speak from a somewhat Nordic perspective. Do you mean that Greeks, or Italians, who contributed so much to the birth of the European civilisation, are not quite European? – as they have similar temperament, and to great extent share the same Mediterranean set of values as Georgians”.

Still, the question resonated, and would have deeper connotations in the case of Georgia. Indeed, how much a part of Europe Georgia is, what are the prospect of Georgia joining the core Europe – which basically is EU, if we forget for a moment of such countries as Switzerland and Norway, and what are the obstacles to Georgia’s accession?

### The Roots of Georgia’s European Identity

European tradition in Georgia is to great extent linked to its centuries-old Christian tradition, starting from the 4th c. AD, although even earlier there were close contacts with the ancient world. As Christianity was more and more restricted to Europe, Christian identity was increasingly coupled with Europe, even if the concept of Europeanism was not yet developed. Particularly strong the European idea became during the Crusades, in some of which Georgia participated,

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<sup>1</sup> The prominent Georgian religious writer Giorgi Mthatzmindeli (George of Mt Athos) (1009-1065) narrates about the wish of certain Georgian nobles and priests to travel to the Iberian peninsula. A. Mikaberidze, *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, The Scarecrow Pres, Toronto 2007.

at the same time maintaining close relations with Byzantium. This first period of growing European identity dramatically in Georgia with the Mongol invasions, and further with the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Orthodox brand of Christianity itself became gradually quite marginal from European perspective, identified with cultural and political backwardness and not quite European to that matter.

However, along with the Christian, Western component, equally strong was in Georgia the Asian component, particularly the influence of Iranian culture, counting many centuries of interaction. Nevertheless, even when a number of Muslim kings ruled Georgia in 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were continuous attempts to move closer to Europe, achieving its highest point with the embassy of scholar and diplomat Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani who in 1713-1714 visited a number of European courts, the Holy See and France in the first place, requesting assistance in countering pressures from Iran and Turkey, then the dominant powers in the region.

When the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the forced unification within the emerging Russian Empire, now on one hand now Georgia could be only considered an Asian part of rapidly ascending Russia, in itself not a full-pledged member of the European community in the sense of identity (though this identity was quite strong among the nobility), on the other – it was through Russia that now came the ideas of Europeanism, nationalism and liberalism – as the names of Napoleon, Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Hugo became hugely popular among the educated layers of the society.

Still, it was the brief independence of Georgian Democratic republic that first time reinstated the notion of Georgia as a part of Europe. Being considered as a first successful case of a socialist state, many leaders of the II Socialist International such as Ramsay MacDonald, Karl Kautsky, Emile Vandervelde, Ethel Snowden, Pierre Rénaudel, Camille Huysmans, and others, would hail Georgia as a part of European community<sup>2</sup>. Pro-German sympathies of the republic were punished to some extent with the end of the WWI, but the European identity was increasingly strong both among the social-democratic internationalists (led by Noe Jordania) turned nationalists under the pressure of reality, or by their political opposition. In another episode causing some associations with more recent developments, in December 1920 a French naval flotilla visited Georgian ports, and the French High Commissioner Abel Chevalier declared in Tbilisi that „any infringement of Georgia’s integrity would be resisted to the death by France and her allies”<sup>3</sup>, echoed by the statements of the commander of the French naval mis-

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g.: K. Kautsky, *Georgia: A Social-Democratic Peasant Republic – Impresions and Observations*, translated by H.J. Stenning and revised by the Author, International Bookshops Limited, London 1921, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1921/georgia/index.htm>

<sup>3</sup> D. Marshall Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1962.

sion to Near East, Admiral Dumesnil<sup>4</sup>. However, notwithstanding all such elevated rhetoric, the intrusion of the Red Army in February 1921 suspended this cycle of the European dream for many decades.

## The Revival of the European Dream

While throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century many representatives of the Georgian political emigration kept European dream alive, its revival in Georgia started with the dissident movement of early 1970s and acquired impetus with the weakening of the Soviet Empire in late 1980s. With independence, pro-European rhetoric and the expressed hopes of Euro-Atlantic integration became a universal trend characteristic of all governments in Georgia, replacing one another in a sequence of coups and upheavals. Particularly strong such rhetoric became in the aftermath of the so called „Rose revolution”, and the flags of European Council/EU proudly fly in front of every single official building in Georgia.

However, as it became more and more obvious, that European integration is not forthcoming any time soon, more and more disappointment was taking place, and this issue was gradually replaced by more stress on integration into NATO as the first step toward the further integration process. At the same time, while a number of steps have been taken to move closer to European standards in many areas of public life, one could also observe relatively more influence of an American social model, and lately more divergence from European standards e.g. in such areas as labour code of social welfare.

At the same time, strong support for the Georgian leadership by the European governments explicitly observed in the aftermath of the Rose revolution, gradually waned, particularly after grave mistakes committed by the Georgian government committed during 2007-2008.

Since the Rose revolution of 2003, along with some significant achievements, the Georgian leadership has created an adaptable political system of semi-authoritarian control and make-believe democratisation. However, the system failed to create a pluralistic, robust political society in the country, and over time its very survival exacted greater and greater costs. These costs, among other losses, implied the dramatic decline in the prospects of Georgia's European integration.

After the victory of November 2003, the young leadership, in full control of both the executive and the legislature, and backed by high public support, launched radical reforms – on one hand liberalising Georgian economy and strengthening pro-western orientation, on the other – strengthening the centralisation of

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<sup>4</sup> L. Trotsky, *Between Red and White: A Study of Some Fundamental Questions of Revolution, With Particular Reference to Georgia (Social Democracy and the Wars of Intervention) 1922*, Chapter VI, Denouement, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/red-white/ch06.htm>

power. International support rocketed, also soared direct foreign investment. International financial institution considered Georgia as the speediest reformer on international scale, in particular with reducing low-level corruption and creating business-friendly conditions for investment.

However, not all developments could be considered as full success. Most of negative trends were rooted in underdeveloped democratic and civic culture, and in dangerous domination of a single political power. Lack of political participation and pluralism led to dramatically weakened system of checks and balances and caused inability to understand the implications of haphazard action and the need to assess strategic alternatives before acting, as the costs of a mistake were irrelevant. While there was significant economic growth, incidence of poverty has not changed much, while the gap between the new rich and the poor was growing. New dominant political ideology became populist liberalism. Political opposition and parties, organised around individuals rather than agenda and values, were weak and unable to propose any alternative model of development, constructive political programme or leadership.

Grounded on the excessive concentration of presidential power, public support for the government was organised along populist lines that took advantage of the weakness of alternative political parties and the civil society, but after four years it started gradually waning. After violent suppression of mass protests in November 2007, early presidential elections were appointed on January 5, 2008, in less than two months. This would hardly give the opposition any opportunity to prepare well. While many international observers noted pre-electoral violations and particularly violations during the voting and vote-counting processes, immediate after-election international trend was to assess elections as a „step forward”. Another „step forward” was announced by many international observers during the parliamentary elections of May 2008, though this time, notwithstanding numerous violations, there was little doubt that the ruling party – „United National Movement” – won elections.

All the drama of party politics could not hide the increased tension around the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Security situation there started to rapidly deteriorate immediately after the NATO Bucharest summit in April 2008. Encouraged by Russia's support, secessionist leaderships had no inclination either to make any compromise with Georgia, or the West. Although the government was on multiple cases advised by western politicians not to fall into a trap of confrontation with Russia, it had not heeded advice. While the majority of world leaders enjoyed attending the Olympic Games in Beijing, the war in South Ossetia started.

Just before midnight of August 8, 2008, when several Georgian-controlled villages came under heavy artillery fire from the South Ossetian side, the Georgian military command announced the decision to „restore the constitutional” order in South Ossetia. In a move that put under doubt the competence of Georgia's

leadership, Georgian troops started to advance towards the breakaway capital. The very next morning, Russian army attacked Georgian positions, in a few days bringing the Georgian military to a collapse. Two weeks later Russian president Medvedev made a statement recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The old order has come to an end, and the ancient principle „might makes right” seems to be reinstated to dominance.

## Half a Year after the War: What Now?

The Russian-Georgian war was a relatively small-scale event on the global geo-strategic scene that has hardly changed the actual balance of power. However, its symbolic importance is significant<sup>5</sup>, and it appeared to be of particular importance for the Georgia's European aspirations. The events have indicated toward the emerging dynamics in the geo-strategic configuration, and the limited capacity of Western powers to stop Russia from abusing the norms of international law. This appeared to be the latest of Russia's attempts to change the European security architecture. This was also a message to the West that Russia can and will act against Western interests in Eurasia with confidence that there would be much rhetoric but little action in return.

While the ability of Russia to amass support to its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was circumscribed by its lack of sufficient leverage, and the fears even among its immediate CIS clientele – at the same time, the gas crisis of January 2009 became one more illustration of the dangers of too much dependency of Europe on Russian energy supplies, and the limited ability of EU states to act decisively and in concert in crisis.

On the other hand, the war has revealed not only the fragility of Georgia's statehood, but also the essential unpredictability of even softer authoritarian regimes such as in Georgia, to say nothing of Russia. Indeed, unpredictability is the key word to describe the situation in and around Georgia in the short and medium term. Still, it is important to try understanding the possible developments and scenarios.

One important aspect of volatility of Georgia's future stems from the weakening legitimacy and eroding popularity of its incumbent government. Georgia still needs to experience a peaceful and normal change of leadership. Every single Georgia's government since independence has contributed to developing a system that would eventually disown its creator. More and more members of the ruling elite are splitting of and joining opposition, while the embattled government

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<sup>5</sup> „The August war in Georgia shattered the assumption that the continent was somehow fixed in place or that war in wider Europe was no longer possible”. R.D. Asmus, *Dealing with Revisionist Russia*, „The Washington Post”, December 13, 2008, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/article.cfm?id=517>

does not seem to be giving up its power easily. The bitterness of military defeat, the full loss of control over the secessionist entities, economic hardship and disillusionment with social policies of the government and its authoritarian qualities, which seemed acceptable against the background of previous optimism, stability and economic growth – all these may lead to a social explosion involving impatient masses that have been more than once successful in ousting leaders who have lost popularity.

Under such condition, the government may either further strengthen repressive and authoritarian tendencies in an attempt to suppress dissent, therefore losing western support, or moving toward more democracy and pluralism – in both cases putting under serious threat its grip on power as well as political stability within the country.

Equally unpredictable is the geopolitical environment in which Georgia finds itself. Russia may for whatever reason (e.g. in order to divert public attention from economic difficulties, or in order to appease military elite, or maybe just as a part of a power game in Kremlin) find it useful to further destabilise the situation in Georgia, notwithstanding longer term risks for stability along its southern borders and spoiled relations with the West. Russia retains a very dangerous weapon in its hands – an ability to restart military action in Georgia any time it finds it convenient. The key strategic implication of the August war is that Georgia now finds itself in a „no war, no peace” situation with regard to Russia<sup>6</sup>. The threshold for military action has much lowered with August events, but also current disposition along the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia allows easy provocation. Russia seems to love any action that may cause irritation in Washington, and would against all odds try to at least symbolically stress its global significance and military rise.

One more issue of concern is the decision by the Russian leadership to establish a naval base for its Black Sea fleet (Ochamchire port), an air base (Gudauta, Bombora airfield), and one more base in South Ossetia (Java)<sup>7</sup>. This in addition to generally changing the balance of military power in the Black Sea region (if previously NATO was moving closer to Russian borders, now this has reversed with Russia on the move) may prompt certain strategic response from other players (including Turkey – which on the one hand finds common interest with Russia,

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<sup>6</sup> J.E. Chicky, *The Russian-Georgian War: Political and Military Implications for U.S. Policy*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, February 2009, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0902Chicky.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> *Permanent Russian bases in S Osetia, Abkhazia next year*, Agence France-Prese, Oct 22, 2008 <http://newsx.com/story/32498>; *Rusia to stick to its decision on bases in S.Osetia, Abkhazia*, „RIA Novosti”, 8 February 2009, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2009/02/mil-090208-rianovosti01.htm>; *Rusia plans base in Georgia rebel region*, „Reuters”, January 26, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/europeCrisis/idUSLQ360123>

apart of existing energy dependence, not to allow external powers into the Black Sea<sup>8</sup>, on the other – is worried by Russia's military expansion to the South).

EU seems to be the most predictable big player in the region, ready to allocate certain financial resources to help Georgia, or sending unarmed observers to the region, but by all means avoiding any confrontational situation that may seriously irritate Russia – justifying this by its reliance on „soft” power, but in reality due to diverging interests and difficult decision-making within this 27 member strong body. Currently, it appears that much of the Western Europe has accepted the new disposition of forces in the Caucasus<sup>9</sup>.

The last, but by no means the least important regional player is of course the United States. August events appeared to be a serious blow to its policies in the region, and to its image a reliable defender of its political allies. While it is yet unclear what will be the position of the new US leadership in the face of the challenges posed by Russia both globally and in the Caucasus, there are a few hints to the possible developments. While the US are seeking Russian cooperation in a few areas such as Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea, at the same time they do not seem to accept the changing status quo and the geostrategic balance in the region.

With regards to Georgia, US will definitely help the country to reconstruct its heavily bruised economy and military potential. Still, this will hardly make Russia withdraw from the occupied parts of the Georgian territory, or agree to civilised terms of conflict resolution in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Nor will this in short term prevent Russia to use any artificial pretext to further hurt Georgia.

Although the State Department has on a number of cases rejected the existence of such plans of the deployment of US or/and NATO bases in Georgia<sup>10</sup>, this seems to appear the only logical, though to some extent risky move that may change the current deadlock. Notably, already in the beginning of March 2007, an official representative of the US Department of Defence declared the intention of the US to consider the possibility of deployment of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) radar in the Caucasus region, in the framework of development of the ABM defence system in Eastern Europe. In the light of current events, a radar and anti-

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<sup>8</sup> F. Hill, O. Taspinar, *Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?* „Survival”, Vol. 48, no. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 81-92, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/articles/2006/spring\\_turkey\\_hill/2006\\_survival.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/articles/2006/spring_turkey_hill/2006_survival.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. the report on 14 November EU-Russia summit in Nice: „Georgia was relegated to the status of a largely ritual sideshow at the summit. Sarkozy reiterated the EU's condemnation of Russia's decision to recognize the independence of South Osetia and Abkhazia, and its support for Georgia's territorial integrity. Medvedev for his part said Moscow will not reverse its decision, and that it recognizes Georgia's territorial integrity without Abkhazia and South Osetia, which are now «subjects of international law»”. Ahto Lobjakas, RFE/RL, November 14, 2008 [http://www.rferl.org/content/EURussia\\_Summit\\_Hints\\_At\\_Geopolitical\\_Rapprochement/1349273.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/EURussia_Summit_Hints_At_Geopolitical_Rapprochement/1349273.html)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.interfax.com/17/471696/Interview.aspx>



missile capacity based in Georgia as a part of the broader system involving Poland and Czech Republic seems to be an option considered by military planners, and may be indeed an only way to avoid further frustration in the South Caucasus. The recent demand by Kyrgyz government to withdraw the US air base in Manas serving as a transportation hub on the route to Afghanistan, obviously happening under Russian pressure, may be another reason to look for alternative air bases in the region, and prompt considering Georgian airfields as a worthy alternative.

Against such geopolitical background, it becomes obvious that there is almost no chance that the issue of the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia may bring any other significant outcome than just declarations of commitment to peaceful means of conflict resolution. Indeed, the first two rounds of negotiations in Geneva under the aegis of EU/UN/OSCE did not bring much result and cannot in fact achieve any dramatic change as such would be definitely blocked either by Russia or Georgia, due to radically differing positions on either the status of secessionist entities or the return of IDPs. The format itself of the (second round of) talks, when two separate informal working groups (one dealing with security and stability and another one with return of displaced persons) with negotiators from Georgia, Russia, the United States, as well as from two breakaway regions meeting each other in an individual capacity, and without holding an official plenary session – indicates that no important results can be expected in any area other than temporary security measures. The next round of talks in February may bring some positive outcomes, but hardly any breakthrough.

What would all this mean for Georgia's European and NATO aspirations? On one hand, it is obvious, that Georgia is currently ready for neither, either due to the part of its territory being currently occupied by Russia, or because neither its democracy<sup>11</sup> nor its military<sup>12</sup> are in any adequate shape. On the other hand, Georgia seemed to have been moving to a political dead end, and the events brought new dynamics both to its internal policies and to its western support.

Important implication for the entire Europe-Eurasia region is not only the unclear future of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe or CFE, but also the new threats to the oil and gas transportation routes via the South Caucasus. This may consolidate US and European response to these new challenges, and bring in more concerted policies with regards to Russia, among other things implying more support to the European aspirations of Georgia (and Ukraine to that matter). One thing is more-less clear – with all vacillations in Georgia's politics, its commitment to eventually become an integral part of Europe is unwaver-

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.freedomhouse.hu/images/fdh\\_galleries/NIT2008/NT-Georgia-final.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.hu/images/fdh_galleries/NIT2008/NT-Georgia-final.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> C.J. Chivers, T. Shanker, *Georgia Lags in Its Bid to Fix Army*, „New York Times”, December 17, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/18/world/europe/18georgia.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/18/world/europe/18georgia.html?_r=1&pagewanted=1); R.E. Hamilton, *Georgian Military Reform – An Alternative View*, CSIS Report, February 3, 2009, [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/090203\\_hamilton\\_militaryreform.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/090203_hamilton_militaryreform.pdf)

ing and earlier or later this is bound to bring fruit. Such longing toward Europe is also the strongest motivation to undertake reform and move against obsolete pattern of authoritarianism and further on the route of democracy and the rule of law.