

# Georgia: identity, foreign policy and the politics of a “Euro-Atlantic orientation”

By Kornely Kakachia

## ■ Executive summary

Often considered to be a “beacon of democracy” in the post-Soviet space, Georgia has publicly committed itself to establishing the rule of law and building Western-style democratic institutions. As Georgia’s ambitions to draw closer to Europe and the transatlantic community have grown and the country has assertively reclaimed its European identity, its relations with neighbouring Russia have deteriorated. Simultaneously, as the government has increasingly turned to the West as the guarantor of the country’s security and counted on eventual inclusion in Western economic, political and security structures, Georgia has tried to reject its post-Soviet identity and achieve full membership of European and Euro-Atlantic structures. No longer willing to be labelled merely as a post-Soviet state, nor wishing to be identified with the volatile and fragmented Caucasus region, the Georgian polity sees its ties with the Black Sea community as a way to become affiliated with the rest of Europe. This policy brief examines Georgia’s foreign policy orientation and the role of identity politics, and attempts to identify the key causes and motivations pushing Tbilisi towards European integration.

## Identity politics and Georgia’s quest for a European future

Over the two decades since it regained its independence, the small, weak state of Georgia has faced serious domestic and international problems that have threatened its existence as a sovereign state. Inheriting a political culture lacking a strong democratic tradition, an inexperienced foreign policy elite, scarce financial resources and poorly defined competing social forces, initially Georgia was unable to develop a viable foreign and security policy towards the outside world. The country’s fragility was tested by constant Russian attempts to undermine and manipulate it, which constituted the greatest challenge to its national security. Consequently, enjoying as it did significant Western support, Georgia’s post-Soviet leadership felt that the country needed to be engaged in an unfolding pattern of alliances involving regional and extra-regional powers. Similarly, Tbilisi’s initial foreign policy was driven by attempts to ally Georgia with other external powers, leading it from a general balancing policy of checking Russia to a more specific bandwagoning policy of joining the West and seeking the direct patronage of the U.S.

To ensure its security, it is widely believed that Georgia must take serious steps to enhance its unconsolidated democracy, building on the reforms it has already achieved. To boost its successful transformation, Georgia needs to bring the state closer to a balanced political system, with more power residing with parliament and a more vibrant, functional system of checks and balances. The peaceful transfer of power following Georgia’s October 1st 2012 parliamentary elections reflects positively on the country’s institutions, as it has not experienced such a political development since its independence. However, it gives no reason to assume that sudden democratic breakthroughs or abrupt changes in economic, social or diplomatic policy are likely. Moreover, Georgian society needs to choose a model of development for its polity and has to determine whether the country will progress towards a truly stable, modern democracy or deteriorate into a fragile, pseudo-pluralistic and stagnating system.

## What drives Georgian foreign policy?

During the last 20 years since regaining its independence the main goal of Georgian foreign and internal policy was to disassociate itself from its Soviet past and escape from

Russia's historic, strategic and civilisational space. Similarly, it often distanced itself from post-Soviet institutions and regional groupings like the Commonwealth of Independent states (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Customs Union, etc. dominated by Moscow. In some ways "desovietisation" was Georgia's nationwide slogan constructed by an identity-based narrative. Consequently, as Georgia attempted to find security through an ideology based on its "Black Sea" identity, given its political, security and economic realities, and a prolonged period of tension with Moscow, it also developed the national narrative that considered Russia to be an existential threat. In some way this seemed quite logical and even necessary, because Georgia was (and still is) in the process of shaping its identity and determining its corresponding national interests.

Because Georgia is in a tough neighbourhood and is likely to continue to face challenges from its external environment, Georgian political leaders have portrayed full integration into the European Union (EU) as a single and coherent strategy that could become the country's long-term strategic objective. The National Security Concept of Georgia, the basic document that explains the country's fundamental national values and interests that was adopted by parliament in July 2005, describes Georgia as

An integral part of the European political, economic and cultural area, whose fundamental national values are rooted in European values and traditions [and which] aspires to achieve full-fledged integration into Europe's political, economic and security systems ... and to return to its European tradition and remain an integral part of Europe (Georgia, 2005).

The later version of the National Security Concept, adopted on December 23rd 2011, also underlines the aspiration of the Georgian people to achieve fully fledged integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the EU, and to contribute to the security of the Black Sea region as a constituent part of the Euro-Atlantic security system. Although the prospect of Georgia's membership might seem distant, members of Georgia's political class<sup>1</sup> have faith that integration will serve as an important guarantee for the country's economic and political development, and will further foster democratic process and strengthen the country's market economy, security and stability.

After the Rose Revolution in November 2003 the European integration project acquired a new momentum. Georgia, as an ancient Christian country, frequently claims a European identity for itself and that close affiliation with European structures would be a restoration of historical justice. The Georgian narrative claims that due to difficult historical circumstances it become isolated from European civilisation and culture and thus has been unable to move in

parallel with European developments. Since liberal democracy is considered a part of European civilisation, the aspiration to establish Western-style democracy became a part of the Georgian subconscious. Similarly, the Georgian political class perceives modernisation and Westernisation to be complementary. Zurab Zhvania, the late Georgian prime minister and former speaker of the Georgian parliament, declared on his country's accession to the Council of Europe in February 1999, "I am Georgian, therefore I am European". This statement underlined the aspiration of the Georgian people to achieve fully fledged integration into European political institutions as part of Georgia's national narrative and articulated its foreign policy agenda for the coming decades.

While Georgia's foreign policy is considered pro-Western and less multifaceted, it is not always based on principles of pragmatic expediency. One may even claim that the country's foreign policy priorities are identity driven (determination to join the West, the EU, NATO, etc.) and, unlike its neighbours, not based on realist paradigms like national interest, pragmatism, the balance of power, etc. In some sense the notion that Georgia belongs in the West provides a foundation for Georgia's pro-Western orientation and its identity-driven foreign policy. At the same time, it is interesting to note that considering its past political history, potentially Georgia could associate itself with a post-Soviet, Caucasian or even Middle Eastern identity if it decides to do so. However, after rejecting all three alternatives as models of regional integration, only the Black Sea identity as a part of its European identity has played a major role in Georgia's pro-Western drive. It is assumed that the long-term self-preservation of Georgia's cultural, political and religious heritage might be better achieved in Europe's multicultural and plurilingual environment than in other integration projects.

## National identity and Georgian-Russian relations

An identity-based approach also has the potential to offer a deeper and more complete understanding of the complex web of problems characterising Russo-Georgian relations. For members of the Georgian political class, Russia and its political model – which is still in the process of transformation – is not attractive, as it does not generate new, interesting political, cultural or civilisational ideas that could change the world as it once did. They would prefer to be united to the core area of global development (the West), not to peripheral areas (the CIS and post-Soviet space). Moreover, they have sought to sever the link to post-communist rule through an ideological separation from Soviet-style leadership, believing that such a break with Soviet history can of itself change the country's situation and give some chance of progress towards a bright future. From Georgia's point of view, Russia offers no compelling

<sup>1</sup> I use Gaetano Mosca's definition of political class here, i.e. "the relatively small group of activists that is highly aware and active in politics, and from whom the national leadership is largely drawn".

vision of a revived Russian sphere of influence, even for its own allies. Besides this, the Georgian political elites see Russia as the direct successor of the Soviet empire, and any attempt to integrate the post-Soviet space under the auspices of a Eurasian Union (or any other post-Soviet regional organisation) umbrella is perceived as a threat to Georgia's national security and survival.

Some of these fears are psychological and have their roots in the period of the Russian empire and the Soviet occupation of Georgia after the establishment of the first republic. However, the real reason that Georgia finds Russia so unco-operative does not lie in the realm of psychology, but in objective calculations of national interest that are based on the country's identity discourse. All the grievances accumulated from the time of the Russian empire have led Georgian elites to perceive their interest as utterly incompatible with those of the Russian Federation. They also see little advantage in co-operating with the Kremlin because they do not believe that a deal can be negotiated with Russia. Even after the election success of Georgian tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili during the most recent parliamentary elections, it is clear that while Georgia's new leadership may seek more pragmatic approaches towards Russia, it is unlikely that Georgia will change its foreign policy orientation, because Russia's conduct towards Georgia has alienated the country's elites and made a pro-Russian stance untenable.

It is noteworthy that for some unknown reason neither the Russian nor the Soviet empires are seen by Georgians as "European". (The probable reason for this could be that the Russian empire was autocratic and the Soviet empire was ideologically anti-Western.) Moreover, a large part of the Georgian public do not consider Russia as part of the pan-European project (the Kremlin's assertive neo-imperial policy vis-à-vis Georgia in 2008 did a very good job of strengthening this stereotype) and believe that Russia is a distinct phenomenon that cannot disassociate itself from its imperial Eurasianist ideology, which neatly fits its geopolitical ambitions on the world stage. As this (mis) perception still prevails in the subconsciousness of Georgia's political elites, many polls have clearly indicated that while most Georgians support good neighbourly relations with Russia, they also do not want to be involved in any Russian-dominated integration process in Eurasia. In short, Georgians perceive their country in the long term as "European", part of a united Europe and in no way a part of any "new Eurasian superpower project" promoted by Moscow.

## Conclusion

In recent years Georgia has managed to dramatically transform itself by moving towards the consolidation of its political institutions, in which process the hope of a European future played a significant role. Despite its problems, the country's course towards democracy and integration into European structures is evident. Last

October's parliamentary elections, which led to a smooth transfer of power, were a huge achievement not only for Georgia, but to some extent a success for the EU's democratic agenda in the Eastern Partnership. An economically and politically stable Georgia, which in the long run may become a successful Eastern European country, could be a model for development that other post-Soviet states could follow. However, if we consider Georgia as the region's front runner in terms of European integration, it still needs to pursue a coherent approach to solve its current problems and advance democratic changes. In order to assist Georgia the international community should focus on the following points:

- In a very short period of time Georgia has demonstrated that there can be a functioning modern democratic state in the Caucasus, one in which the economy can develop without government interference and where corruption does not reign. Europe, which has invested considerable resources and diplomatic capital in Georgia's development, should continue to express its sympathy for the challenges inherent in this experiment, as well as contribute both moral and political support.
- As Georgia welcomes the EU's goal of achieving greater engagement and co-operation with Russia, it is necessary to convince Russia that Georgia's progress and its rapprochement with Europe are irreversible. Moreover, it is of vital importance to Georgia that the EU, as the mediator of the Russian-Georgian Ceasefire Agreement of August 12th 2008, exercise effective influence on Moscow to fulfil the norms of international law and the international obligations it has undertaken.
- With Russia seeking to pressure Georgia to accommodate its geopolitical interests, Moscow needs to recognise that a Georgia closely tied to Europe would pose it no threat. A Georgia that is integrated into the West would be a source of regional security and stability. Georgia's Western friends need to explain to Moscow that bringing Georgia into Europe would not threaten Russia; rather, it would stabilise the relationship between the two countries, much as it did with the Baltic-Russian relationship.
- To gain international support, Georgia should show commitment to the goals of the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership and deliver on the promises of Europeanisation, stability, democracy and economic development that are fundamental to maintaining support for continued European integration.

## References

Georgia. 2005. National Security Concept of Georgia. <[http://www.parliament.ge/files/292\\_880\\_927746\\_concept\\_en.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/292_880_927746_concept_en.pdf)>

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