



# BULLETIN

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## Georgia in the Context of the Crisis in Ukraine: A Dangerous Curve on the Road to the European Union and NATO

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*South Caucasus, like Ukraine, is a target of Russia's aggressive policy that aims to subjugate the nations of the former Soviet Union. The annexation of Crimea and the support for separatism in Donbas show the increasing role played by the military, and by political subversion, in Russia's regional policy. The European Union and NATO should strengthen security ties with Georgia, the most integrated with the Euro-Atlantic community among the countries of the region. The government in Tbilisi needs the support of its Western allies to optimise the armed forces in the face of asymmetrical threats similar to those in Ukraine.*

Events in Ukraine have shown that the signing of association agreements with the EU by the Eastern Partnership countries is regarded by Russia as a threat to its plans for the reintegration of the former Soviet states. The Kremlin, seeing the lack of effectiveness of the vague and largely showy Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), is increasingly reaching for hard power means such as direct military intervention or destabilisation of the situation in post-Soviet states aspiring to political rapprochement with the EU or NATO. In connection with the signing of the Georgia–EU Association Agreement, planned for 27 June, which is perceived by Russia as a threat to its interests, hostile Russian actions against Georgia may be expected.

**Georgia—Number One Target.** The key to the success of Russian reintegration of ex-Soviet states in the South Caucasus is to force Georgia to participate in these projects. This country is a corridor between Azerbaijan and Turkey, which allows the development of Caspian hydrocarbon exports and the transit of goods between Central Asia and Europe, bypassing Russia. The existence of economic-political alliance between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, seriously undermines Russian influence in the region. Russia also sees this as an expansion of the European Union, which supports exports of hydrocarbons. On the other hand, Georgian territory is also a transport corridor (including gas transit) between Russia and its regional ally, Armenia. The fact that Georgia rejects Russian integration projects makes control over Armenia difficult for the Kremlin, hampering the transit of equipment and troops to the military base in Armenian Gyumri (currently only accessible by air) and the real integration of this country with the EEU.

**Georgian Dream—Russian Disappointment.** Georgia's president, Giorgi Margvelashvili, and prime minister, Irakli Garibashvili, leaders of the Georgian Dream coalition, support Georgia's integration with the EU and NATO. They took a clear position on military intervention of Russia in Ukraine, with Margvelashvili calling Russia's actions acts of aggression against the sovereign state. The government of Georgia called on the Euro-Atlantic community to respond adequately to Russia's intervention in Ukraine.

The attitude of the Georgian political elite is a disappointment for the Kremlin, which expected that the loss of power by the pro-Western United National Movement of former president, Mikheil Saakashvili, would trigger foreign policy reorientation towards rapprochement with Russia. Similar hopes were fuelled by the fact that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the ruling coalition Georgian Dream, and prime minister until November 2013, is a billionaire, who earned his fortune in Russia. Without doubt, at least until the sale of his Russian assets (in the autumn of 2012), he must have

had close contacts with the Kremlin, as did all major players in Russian business. His resignation from the post of the head of government and formal exit from politics in November 2013 could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid responsibility for the internal situation in Georgia, as well as for its foreign policy.

The political thaw between Georgia and Russia, initiated by the Georgian Dream after it came to power, has not led to a breakthrough. Since December 2012, negotiations between Zurab Abashidze, the Georgian government's representative for relations with Russia, and Grigory Karasin, Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs, have continued. Talks have focused on visas, people-to-people contacts and economic issues. The only result was the abolition of the embargo on imports of Georgian wine and mineral water by the Kremlin in the autumn of last year. The abolition of visas for Georgians travelling to Russia is linked by the Kremlin with the establishment of diplomatic relations, cut by the government in Tbilisi after the Russian attack on Georgia in 2008. The restoration of the embargo by Russia would affect the interests of wine producers, but its effects would not change Tbilisi's pro-Western foreign policy. Due to the weakness of economic instruments in Russian policy towards Georgia, it is possible that Russia will try to undermine the security of this Caucasian state.

**The Annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a Tool for Destabilisation.** The recent mass protests and coup d'état in Abkhazia will result in the Kremlin tightening its control over the breakaway region of Georgia. The removal from power of Alexander Ankvab, president of the republic, by protesters led by pro-Russian politician Raul Khajimba on 1 June, will facilitate the inclusion of the territory of Abkhazia into the Russian Federation. A similar scenario is even more likely in the case of South Ossetia, where the sparse population supports unification with the Russian North Ossetia. On 8 June, the United Ossetia party won the parliamentary elections. The party has promised to hold a referendum on joining Russia.

Both separatist republics have remained since the Russian-Georgian war under the control of the Kremlin. However, the implementation of an annexation scenario (tested in Crimea in March) would become another signal from the Kremlin that the recovery of the lost territories of Georgia would not be possible, at least until the abandonment of its plans for European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The growing popularity (albeit marginal, until recently) of pro-Russian political groupings such as the Democratic Movement-United Georgia, the party of the former speaker of parliament Nino Burjanadze, and the increase in the number of Russian-financed "Eurasian" NGOs indicate that Georgian society's so far stable support for European integration and Euro-Atlantic ties may change. The annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be a strike at the current pro-European government in Tbilisi, weakening its image in the eyes of the Georgians.

**Recommendations.** If Georgia were to receive the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the September NATO summit in Wales, it would be an unequivocal signal to Russia about the ineffectiveness of its policy of intimidation of post-Soviet countries seeking integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures. However, given the fact that a substantial number of alliance members resist this solution, political support to Georgia should be expressed in a different, but equally strong way. A clear statement by alliance members at the summit, that Georgia remains on the path of integration and in the future will become a member of NATO, is necessary. It is important to show that the alliance did not bend under the pressure of Russian aggression in Georgia in August 2008, and has not abandoned the goals of the 2008 summit in Bucharest (i.e., further enlargement). At the same time, it is necessary to appreciate the current reforms of the Georgian army, which now de facto meets MAP requirements.

The alliance should expand the realm of practical cooperation with Georgia. It should also increase the number of joint exercises with Georgian forces. It is worth considering inviting Azerbaijan to participate in similar exercises, the aim of which should be protection of energy infrastructure. The stability of the transit of hydrocarbons through the territory of Georgia is of crucial importance for Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. The civil war in eastern Ukraine shows that the post-Soviet countries also face asymmetric threats (such as terrorism and separatist military action in urban areas). Therefore, members of alliance should support Georgia in the creation of special forces able to take on such challenges.

In the context of possible Russian provocation in the breakaway Georgian republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), and its role in publicising Russian violations of the ceasefire agreements negotiated by Nicolas Sarkozy and Dmitry Medvedev in August and September 2008, is of growing importance.

The Ukrainian conflict is associated with an unprecedentedly intense, aggressive anti-EU (and generally anti-Western) campaign in the Russian media, but also in the media of other post-Soviet countries (including Georgia) linked to the pro-Russian milieus. The EU should respond actively and effectively with a media campaign explaining the benefits for Eastern Partnership societies of the rapprochement with the EU, including in the sphere of freedom of travel to EU countries. The EU should support the work of existing institutions, NGOs and think tanks, promoting EU-Georgian political, business and cultural relations, and the emergence of new initiatives. An important element of the EU information campaign should be the fight against the pro-Russian media disinformation about the alleged catastrophic moral consequences of approximation of the South Caucasus states to the EU. (A common theme in Russian propaganda is, for example, presenting the EU's protection of sexual minorities as the promotion of homosexuality or tolerance for paedophilia). There is a need to explain the nature of the EU's concept as based on common values of democracy and the free market, but not interfering with the worldview of the citizens of the Member States.