
Georgian Foreign Policy in a New Era

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This is a summary of a roundtable held at Chatham House on 18 March 2014. Davit Zalkaliani discussed Georgian foreign policy ambitions, balancing domestic priorities and responding to recent developments in the region.

The main priority for the current Georgian government is joining the family of European nations. This trajectory is undertaken with supported of all major political parties in the country. Georgia is in a new chapter of relations – ‘irreversible Europeanization.’ The main objectives include signing the Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), obtaining a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO, securing economic support from the West and instituting a visa-free regime under the Eastern Partnership programme.

During the Vilnius summit last year, Georgia expressed its determination to establish closer ties with the EU by endorsing the Association Agreement. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in the Association Agreement will have long-term benefits for Georgia, with 70 per cent of its stipulations applicable immediately upon signing and ratification. Georgian businesses are preparing for DCFTA, as it requires adjustments in the short-term. Georgia can be a credible ally for the EU, and the Association Agreement can provide gradual political and economic integration.

During the 2014 NATO summit in September, Georgia is hopeful of an invitation for an MAP. Georgia does not intend to import problems into the alliance and sees no alternative other than a peaceful resolution to its dispute with Russia. As a member of the North Atlantic Partnership Council, Georgia has been cooperating with NATO on civilian and military initiatives. Notably, it has contributed to NATO operations in Afghanistan under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and is willing to support future NATO security and peace building efforts in Mali.

Georgia has taken concrete steps domestically to facilitate European integration and NATO membership. The parliamentary elections in 2012 and presidential election in 2013 allowed for a democratic transfer of power under the rule of law. While the current Georgian administration has been less visible on the international stage compared to the previous administration, it has taken the leadership role in the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and focused on domestic concerns such as improving social and economic situation in the country. The government has instituted constitutional reforms such as a system of internal checks and balances, enhancing the role of parliament and the courts. It is also implementing programmes to inform Georgians about the benefits and drawbacks of association with the EU and other political initiatives.

With regard to the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the current administration has not used force, in contrast to the previous government. Diplomacy and strategic

regional cooperation to ensure stability and security are the foreign policy strategies of the government. The most pressing concerns are the installation of a 50-kilometre barbed wire fence by Russia, which has affected over 200 families, and the violation of Georgian air space after the Sochi Olympics. These Russian provocations must be addressed during negotiations in Geneva by consolidating international support for Georgia.

The policy of the government is to fully integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Georgian state and society. Developing a strong Georgian state, with democratic institutions and property rights, will provide visible incentives for those living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to reintegrate. Domestic policy objectives regarding the status of these two regions can be impediments to foreign policy objectives and vice versa. The Georgian government is constantly in consultation with all segments of society in order to build up democratic institutions domestically, which can have a positive impact on the occupied regions. The government is working with wider society on anti-discrimination laws, and on integration of NGOs, civil society organizations and religious institutions in order to improve the social, political and economic situation in the country. For instance, the state budget includes support for Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and other religious groups.

The current crisis in Ukraine has significant implications for Georgia. The absorption of Crimea using Russian military forces is an incursion on the sovereignty of an independent state, similar to what happened in Georgia in 2008. Ironically, military incursions in Ukraine are carried out while the 1994 memorandum is in place. The parallel situation for Georgia is Russia breaching the military withdrawal and territorial stipulations of the legally binding ceasefire agreement of 2008. Outcomes in Ukraine concerning territorial integrity and sovereignty impact stability in the entire region. Given that no third party should decide the fate of Ukraine, the EU is best positioned to set a precedent in the region by intensifying relations with Moldova and Georgia, and by transforming the system of European security.

In the framework of Geneva negotiations, the Georgian parliament has reaffirmed the pledge not to use force with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Russia has not. The last four rounds of Geneva negotiations were very difficult and complicated. President Vladimir Putin's firm regional policy as portrayed in his recent address leaves few options for neighbouring countries. Russia was using 'Sochi leverage' to prevent the initialling of the Association Agreement at Vilnius. The decision to participate in Sochi Olympic Games was not easy for Georgia, but it prevented further deterioration of Georgian-Russian relations. There is also an ongoing Karasin-Abashidze bilateral dialogue, which is separate from the Geneva format.

The government has considerable backing from Georgian society, with 85 per cent having supported candidates in favour of integration. Since the change of government, Russia

has opened its markets to Georgia. Approximately 26,000 bottles of wine and an equivalent amount of mineral water were exported from Georgia to Russia last year. While Georgia welcomes Russia to the negotiating table, it will not yield to it on territorial issues. In contrast to 2006, when Russia could use economic leverage to weaken Georgia, today Georgia is not vulnerable. It has a \$200 million export capacity and, unlike Ukraine, it is not fully dependent on Russia for its energy needs.

When diplomatic and economic relations were broken between Moscow and Tbilisi in 2008, Turkey was a crucial economic partner. Turkey is Georgia's number-one trading partner and there is a free trade agreement in place. The two countries cooperate on energy security over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) natural gas pipeline, and have joint infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway. Turkey has a historical link to the region of Abkhazia and recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia. Partnerships with other neighbours such as Armenia and Azerbaijan are also important for regional prosperity and security. Countries in the region are moving in different political directions such as Armenia moving away from association with the EU. Maintaining good relations with Armenia is difficult but cooperation on certain joint projects is essential.

The Eastern Partnership and the crisis in Ukraine are lessons to be learned. The contradictory policy of cajoling Russia and criticizing it is a difficult policy to maintain for the Georgian government. There has been a change in attitude in Georgia since the start of the crisis in Ukraine, and for Russia the initial euphoria of 'victory' is unlikely to last.