

## Reinventing 'Europeanness' as a tool of negotiation

### Abstract

*The present paper was written prior to the unjustified, unprovoked full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This war has resulted in an unprecedented acceleration of rapprochement of Georgia to the EU, a unique event that greatly increased the dynamics of relations between the EU and Georgia. But before this one-off condition, the fundamentals of Georgia-EU entered into stagnation. We will try to analyse the obstacles challenging closer EU-Georgian relations, and will look for a possible way out of the current lassitude. These obstacles existed even before the war in Ukraine, and they continue to exist. This paper presents the external and internal obstacles (from the point of view of Georgia), encompassing both hard and real problems, and the perceived dimensions of hindrances. Real problems are pressure on the single currency, immigration, and enlargement fatigue. The perceived problem is the long and subtle transformation of the EU's image from an object of admiration to one of nihilism and even bitterness.*

*The paper suggests that lowering the expectations of Georgian society to that of a truly peripheral region will bring more adequate modus operandi between the two entities, putting Georgia in a more realistic position.*

**Keywords:** EU and Georgia, inadequate and naïve expectations, enlargement fatigue, Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, External and internal sets of problems, Russia, frozen conflicts.

*Methodology and Data:* We employ qualitative methods of text and narrative analysis. We researched primary and secondary literature and website sources. The author also refers to his diplomatic tenure in the Mission of Georgia to the European Union.

*Article classification:* Conceptual article.

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## *Introduction*

In now faraway 1994, I started to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. At that time, Georgia was marred by violence, the primary commodities were nearly absent, and the country was sunk deep in despair.

A small group of Georgian diplomats, including myself, had the task of negotiating a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Georgia and European Communities (the forerunners of the EU). The initial draft that was offered by the European Commission was a standard text designed for the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a descendant to the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). We declined the draft, feeling that it was unjust to have an agreement similar to that of other CIS members. The negotiations, which lasted for two years, in Brussels and Tbilisi, resulted in a much more comprehensive agreement. The feeling of injustice that spurred our refusal to accept a standard agreement was caused by the vague feeling that we belong to Europe and thus deserved a special attitude. None of us had any practical knowledge of Europe, but this feeling of belonging was our guiding principle. Unbelievable as it seems now to push for Europeanness on the background of a nearly failed state – it worked, and that PCA created the fundamental basis for all subsequent EU political and economic activities in Georgia, including the latter's participation in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).

This feeling of (be)longing to Europe, as to a lost home, since then has continued to be present in Georgia's societal and political dynamics.

### *The origins of the EU; Exogenous and Endogenous Challenges (economic, political and military) for the EU The Enlargement Process*

In 1952, the European Steel and Coal Community was formed in Paris. The six war-torn states formed a common market, which decades later became the EU, a land of peace, stability and unprecedented wealth in the ocean of a poor and volatile world. The forerunners of the EU - the initial economic communities, later the EEC – had a rough ride ahead, but they always preserved a feeling of goal-getting. But now the EU has lost its direction, and EU member states cannot decide which are the most pressing problems, or which reforms are needed, let alone how to implement them or what the stages and timing of the reforms should be.

*Exogenous problems seen from the Georgian perspective (i.e. problems over which Georgia has absolutely no control):<sup>i</sup>*

- A. *Single currency:* The lockdown caused by Covid has put enormous pressure on the Euro. States have been trying to reduce the ongoing economic shock by siphoning hundreds of billions of Euros into businesses and populations<sup>ii</sup>, giving tax breaks and, as a result, accumulating ever-increasing public debts. Previously, the shock of the 2008-09 financial crises also took its toll on the EU's single currency.
- B. *Single market:* There are procedures that limit subsidies, but these have been put on pause as governments inject massive amounts into businesses.<sup>iii</sup>
- C. *Structural and investment funds:* The rich EU north is reluctant in its diligent transferring of funds to the poorer EU south. The reasons for its hesitation are twofold: the rich countries are not happy to have to give up the wealth they themselves created, and, by making the transfers, the poverty of the south is perpetuated. In the end, the economic stagnation may well send the whole house to ruins.<sup>iv</sup>
- D. *Brexit:* The economic and financial costs of Great Britain leaving the EU have yet to be counted, but it has shaken the EU psychologically.<sup>v</sup> The exit of one of the oldest democracies and significant economic powers greatly damages the organisation's image in the world, and weakens its moral standing and attractiveness.
- E. *Immigration:* Multiculturalism has collapsed both as an idea and as a reality, and has even been denounced publicly, amongst others by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and ex British Prime-Minister David Cameron.<sup>vi</sup> The problem of integrating immigrants into the economic and social layers of recipient countries remains acute, and ghettoisation is widespread. The banlieues, literally and metaphorically, have not disappeared, and the recent and large-scale influx of Syrian refugees has only aggravated the situation. The immigration issue has created new fissures between certain countries of Western Europe, with some more willing to accept refugees and some, particularly states of Eastern Europe, that are hostile to this matter.
- F. *Russia:* Russia remains an adversary of the EU, although many countries (bar notably Poland and the Baltic states) do not wish to acknowledge this (Note, the situation has changed dramatically since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022<sup>vii</sup>). But, as we mentioned in the introduction, in this paper, we are analysing the *pre-war* fundamentals). Russia continuously tries to undermine the unity of the EU<sup>viii</sup> by deepening

the divide within its societies, no matter the topic: religion, secularism, extreme right/liberalism, LGBT plus rights, etc. Russia skillfully uses all mainstream and social media outlets, bringing more havoc to an already shaken EU. Aside from this, in its war with Georgia, annexation of Crimea, supporting a separatist war in Donetsk, and shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines flight over the war zone in Eastern Ukraine (by Russian supported separatist forces), Russia is putting an unprecedented strain on the EU and its member states trying to stand boldly against wrongdoings, and they often fail to do so. These unanswered challenges tarnish the image of the EU and its member states in the international arena.

- G. *Enlargement fatigue* – With already 27 member states with rather dissimilar political structures and economic systems, different ethnicities, diverse social strata and often unrelated political agendas, contradictory military and security issues, the EU finds it increasingly arduous to arrive at common positions, and especially hard to implement them. As a result, the EU has less appetite for further enlargement.
- H. *The EU's attitude towards Georgia*: The stance EU member states in the 1990s and early 2000s seemed to have, was that Georgia was mostly a zone of Russian influence, and involvement in security issues was not desirable. However, this position has changed since the Rose Revolution, leaning now towards greater engagement, albeit mostly in the economic sphere.<sup>ix</sup>
- I. *Donor fatigue*: Since 2011, the EU, as in the late 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>x</sup> has grown increasingly tired of the economic and democratic setbacks in Georgia.

### *Endogenous problems: The growing disillusion with the EU in Georgia*

- A. *Reverence*: In the late 1980s and very early 90s, the perception of Europe was very positive in Georgia, and even reached the level of admiration. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was a very strong indicator of the advantage of democracies over the soviet system. On a popular level, the quality of a few western products (mostly clothes, footwear and electric domestic products) available at that time were incomparably better than their soviet analogues. Plus, at that time, very few Georgians had ever been abroad, let alone to Western Europe, and the image of the lavish lifestyle and services available in the West were perceived via movies (the great majority of which were pirate copies) and were generalised.

- B. *Glorification with a historical tint:* The high esteem of Europe<sup>xi</sup> was strengthened by the belief that common Christian history makes Georgians eligible to claim Europeaness. The common ties with Western Europe were grossly exaggerated in the public perception.
- C. *Ethno-territorial wars:* War in South Ossetia and especially in Abkhazia, and the near absence of Europe's involvement in its resolution (favourably for Georgia) has left many Georgians embittered. The fact that there was significant humanitarian aid coming from Europe went virtually unnoticed, as it was totally overwritten by the sheer misery of the lost wars, the casualties, and the influx of internally displaced persons from the two occupied regions.
- D. *Inadequate and naïve expectations.* Expectations were inadequately high and very often naïve. For instance, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and US President George H.W. Bush were Georgian ex-Head of State Eduard Shevardnadze's personal friends, thus Germany and the USA were expected to help Georgia. Yet, since the end of war in Abkhazia in 1993, and in the following decades, the lack of a European presence in Georgia has intensified the feeling of "abandoned child", and this grief has in some cases grown into anger.
- E. *Lack of mutuality:* The lack of reciprocity (perceived or real) and "unrequited love", have left many Georgians bitter or at least morally neutral, and it will take a long time and a lot of effort to fix this wound. It must be noted that due to the social and psychological immaturity of Georgian society in general, and political immaturity in particular, public opinion can be bent relatively easily in any direction.
- F. *Heterogeneous Europe:* With the passage of time, and with the increased number of Georgians visiting, studying, working and being asylum-seekers increasing, views about the EU have become more subtle. On a popular level, people have started to distinguish among the external and internal policies of the EU on one hand, and of the EU member states on the other, and are finding out that they are quite different.

## *The EU's involvement in Georgia*

### *A. Hard security issues*

The EU's involvement in Georgia since the latter's independence has resulted in mixed outcomes. Objectively, the EU has delivered more than expected in terms of humanitarian aid, infrastructure development and project financing in various fields.<sup>xii</sup> On the other hand, there are still expectations that

the EU and/or its member states can assist in the resolution of hard security issues, including the Abkhazian and South Ossetian topics, with the EU having its Monitoring Mission on the South Ossetian administrative border and the EU governing bodies making generally supportive declarations. The lack of the desired resolution fuels dissatisfaction in the EU, and the latter outweighs its positive image. The notion of “concern” often expressed by EU representatives regarding borderisation or human rights violations, concerns that are not backed by tangible action, has become a matter of bitter irony among the local population.

The 2020 war in Karabakh aptly demonstrated the absence of the role of the EU and its member states in security matters. The armed conflict also widely exposed the 28-year long inaptitude of the OSCE Minsk Group, of which some EU member states are part. A significant area of the South Caucasus is already lost to Russia, and Georgia is on its way to this end. In Georgia’s case, Russia employs both hard and soft power. The hard power elements are surface-level: the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. But the soft power deployment is more subtle. One of the main elements of sustained disinformation is the description of Europe as a place of economic instability and moral degradation, scaring the conservative part of the Georgian population, which is quite considerable in proportion.<sup>xiii</sup> The unity in faith and common Christian values with Russia is systematically highlighted, while the fact that other Orthodox countries, namely Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, are members of the EU, is downplayed.

### *B. Economic and energy issues*

The economic success of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries like China and Turkey also renders the image of Europe as that of an entity embroiled in different economic and social problems and having a fundamental problem viz. its identity crisis, thus making it less attractive.

The open statement of the EU<sup>xiv</sup> on its “energy security” clause, and its interest in the South Caucasus, namely the possibility of diversifying its energy imports and becoming less dependent on Russia, is important. But even the construction and successful operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi gas pipeline did not put Georgia into the spotlight of European energy security. While diversification of energy supply is a mantra, it still remains a near empty statement when, meanwhile, the reality demonstrates something quite different. Paradoxically, there has been no tangible action from the EU (or at least a major member-state) towards easing EU dependence on Russia energy resources, though this is a fact that

is expected to change dramatically following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The functioning Nord Stream 1 and nearly finished Nord Stream 2 were good examples of the pre-war fundamentals.

Georgia is supposed to be a gateway between Europe and Asia. This position has been supported by the EU project “The Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia Transport Corridor” (TRACECA)<sup>xv</sup> for many years, and yet still not that much cargo is being transported.<sup>xvi</sup>

### *Frozen conflicts*

It is often argued that the frozen conflicts in Georgia present a threat to the EU<sup>xvii</sup>. But the EU’s footprint is not very visible in the realistic resolution of the conflicts. As mentioned above, the Karabakh War in 2020 demonstrated the utter absence of the EU and its member states in the conflict resolution, as well as in the post-war settlements. The only platform of negotiation was the OSCE Minsk Group, in which EU member states are participants. The group has not reached any tangible results during the 28 years of its existence, and it is somewhat surprising that Russia and Turkey did not fill the power vacuum earlier.

Thus, Georgia continues to affirm stubbornly that it is the hub of alternative energy, has a valuable strategic transport corridor, and that the conflict zones of Abkhazia and South Ossetia pose hard security challenges to the EU in a situation which demands the EU’s deeper involvement. Despite the mentioned claims of Georgia, the EU does not seem very convinced that this is the case, and if the EU is not convinced, then its inconsistent and shallow involvement in regional security matters is perfectly explicable. So, what’s the problem? It is the exceedingly high expectations in Georgia that are placed upon her European partners, especially with regards to security matters. This attitude has plagued Georgian society since the early days of its independence. Lowering expectations and making them acceptable would bring into balance geopolitical patterns and give peace of mind to the political elites involved, as well as to the Georgian population in general. The strategic aim should be softer but more encompassing: becoming part of Europe in terms of societal values and culture, and then, one day, maybe without much pressure, to arrive at the final destination: membership of the EU.

### *Conclusion*

The EU has venues open to make itself stronger and more acceptable to the outside world, and for its peripheries especially, using not the mantra

of “More Europe”, but rather a “different Europe,” based on so called “variable geometry” or “different tiers”<sup>xviii</sup>. This variable geometry should be institutionalised to make it more plausible. At the first tier can be the single currency states; the second tier can comprise the EU member states that are not single currency holders; the third tier can be made up of member states of the European Economic Area; and in the fourth tier can be the peripheral countries that are either unwilling or unable to meet the criteria of EU membership, or which the EU does not want to be members of the club for various reasons. These countries can be involved in different economic dimensions and may have associate status in the defense and security domain. It seems that Georgia is a member of the fourth tier, but still with a rather long-term perspective for EU membership. Such an approach is more realistic and makes the expectations of Georgia more realistic, as well as diminishing the anguish of EU policy makers. Inevitably, there will be the sentiment of being a passenger in the second-class wagon, but the existence of core and loose members is already a reality and what should be important is not which class you sit in, but that you are in one of the wagons of the train. Georgia must cast away the burden of enterprises that it is either unwilling or unable to carry, even at the sacrifice of certain influences. With so many members already, the EU’s “one-size-fit-all” does not and will not work.

The declared aim of the Government of Georgia to advance its formal bid for EU membership in 2024<sup>xix</sup> was a reasonable and useful move. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the rapprochement process, and in May 2022, the Government of Georgia handed over the completed EU membership questionnaire. But, again, here, we are analyzing the pre-war fundamentals. This will be a very long and strenuous path to take. The EU is burdened by its internal problems and has little appetite for newcomers, and Georgia has a pile of reforms to adopt and implement so as to meet the relevant criteria. Putting aside the political agenda and economic technicalities, the abovementioned declaration (coupled with the EU membership questionnaire) is a move that reflects the deep-seated belief widespread in Georgian society that, despite numerous failures, Georgia does actually belong in Europe, the citizens of Georgia are fit for Europeanness, the views on EU still remain positive,<sup>xx</sup> and the country is firm in its desire to be (re)united with its family. Without negating the utmost importance of the constellation of international politics, the most powerful tools for negotiating the way to the EU may not be found only in geopolitical settings, economic costs and benefits, but in the feeling of belonging to Europe, this (re)invented elusive sense of Europeanness, and the need for the restoration of historic justice. The conclusion is that the (re) invention of “Europeanness” should never cease to be a (metaphysical) tool



in the arsenal of Georgia's strenuous, complex and labourious way to, and negotiations along the road to, its ultimate home, Europe. This faith will create a solid fundament for Georgian future negotiators, and, as Lao Tzu put it: "The journey of a thousand li begins with a single step."

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