

MAKING AN EUROPEAN COUNTRY IN THE CAUCASUS: THE GEORGIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to investigate and explain the Georgian aspiration to join the European Union. The research is divided into three parts: 1) exploring the European identity of Georgia; 2) describing the process of consolidation of Georgian democracy needed for the integration into EU; 3) investigating the new developments in the geopolitical scenario and looking at some obstacles to the Georgian "europeanization". It was clear from the very first moment that independent Georgia had a strong will to move toward the West and after the collapse of Soviet Union it gradually changed its identity from Post-Soviet to European. Georgians consider themselves as Europeans, especially when it comes to identity. The results of this research show that, despite the new developments in the international geopolitical scenario and in the Georgian government and presidency, the idea that Georgia's will to continue its path to the European Union is lower than before doesn't reflect accurately the country's reality. This indeed is a myth and needs to be dispelled. On the contrary, judging from the latest developments of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, Georgia remains by far the most motivated country, in its geographical area, to join European institutions.

Key words: Georgia, European Eastern Partnership, Vilnius Summit, Eurasian Union

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INTRODUCTION

The following paper is about the "European identity" of Georgia and the process of Europeanization in the Country. The Georgian path to European culture and institutions seemed to be consolidated at least until the elections of October 2012. As soon as the new Prime Minister Bdzina Ivanishvili came into power, it has been said that Georgia would not continue in its previously defined pro-European, pro-democracy and pro-reform orientation. Furthermore, the creation of a new Eurasian Customs Union lead by Russia – that wants to transform it into an Eurasian Union by 2015 as a political counterpart to the European Union –, as well as its recourse to the consistent tactic of boycotting the neighbors to gain political leverage or its pressure to the former Soviet

republic included in the European Eastern Partnerships, increased the fear that Georgia would end its way toward European Union.

The research is divided into three parts. The first part is about the process of nation-building in order to construct a European identity in Georgia, starting with an overview of the geographical position of the country and its belonging to the European or Asian continent. Later, the study follows with analyzing the presence in Georgia of European culture since ancient times and focuses on the importance to feel and to be European for Georgian people. The second part of the paper continues the discussion about European identity and shows the power of this identity in implementing and building a democratic European country. The final goal of this process is the integration into EU institutions, a top political priority since Georgia regained its independence after the collapse of Soviet Union. This part discusses the history of relationships between European Union and Georgia and the process of consolidation of democracy in the country. The last part aims to investigate and to describe the current geopolitical scenario around Georgia, focusing on the creation of the Eurasian Customs Union and on the recent developments of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius on 28- 29 November, 2013.

Most of the research for this paper is based on fieldworks in Georgia (2009, 2010 and 2013) and open sources, also embracing innovative methodological approaches to very substantive content analyses of journalistic texts. Sections of it are based on extended interviews the author took with political actors, diplomats and members of the local scientific community in Georgia. In most cases, these interviews were conducted on the record and published. Sometimes there were multiple interviews with the same individuals. In particular, official and recorded interviews were held with the ex-President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze (2009), with Mr. Irakli Alasania, Minister of Defense since 2012 (in 2010 and in 2013), with the Minister for Integration in EU and Nato Alexi Petriashvili (2013), with the Georgian Ambassador in Italy Mr. Konstantine Gabashvili (2011) and several times with the Georgian Ambassador to the Holy See, Ketevan Bagrationi de Moukhrani. Part of the materials used for this paper is contained in the author's Doctorate Thesis: *"La Georgia nell'attuale scenario internazionale: una analisi geopolitica e geoeconomica"* (Georgia in the new international scenario: a geopolitical and geo-economics analysis).

GEORGIA: EUROPE OR ASIA?

From the historical and cultural perspectives Georgia considers itself – and is partly considered – as a European country. More controversial is whether it is a European country also from a geographical point of view. In this regard, debate is still open among scholars in Physical Geography and Geology.

The eastern borders of Europe have been defined in various ways since ancient times. Herodotus believed that Europe was extended till the Oriental Ocean. Bonacci (1923, 5) believed that: "Europe has well-defined boundaries of three parts - the Arctic Sea, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean - but uncertain in the East, where as extreme points are indicated the rivers Manych and Ural and the Ural Mountains, beyond them Asia stretches out". Today there is a consensus in defining as eastern borders of Europe the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea and the Ural mountain range, but the confines between these last two are uncertain: for the limit between the Ural mountains and the Black sea have been proposed, for instance, the Don, the depression of the Kuma-Manych, the

Caucasus, Russia's borders or the river Rioni in Georgia. One of the official definitions proposed in 1730 by the geographer Philip Johan von Strahlenberg and adopted by Tsarina Anna I of Russia, considers the Euro-Asiatic borders going from Baydaratskaya Guba, on the Kara sea, following the eastern side of the Ural mountains and then the Ural river south until the Mugodzhar hills; following the Emba river to the Caspian sea; from the Caspian sea through the Kuma-Manych depression to the tip of the sea of Azov, joining with the Black sea. In this case Georgia is not included in the European part of Eurasia.

Professor Thomas V. Gamkrelidze, a member of Parliament in Tbilisi, in 2009 presented to the Parliament a scientific document¹ in which the question of the geographical belonging of Georgia at the European continent was exactly addressed. This question is extremely important and frequently debated, especially as far as the accession of Georgia to the European Union, as well as its increasing integration into European structures, are concerned. In this document Gamkrelidze, starting from the classical Greek mythology, according to which the boundary between Europe and Asia was along the river Phasis in Cochide (that can be identified with the modern Rioni in Georgia or with even southernmost Georgian rivers, such as Chorocki or Kura), concludes that a large part of Georgia belongs to the European continent (although – Gamkrelidze adds – it would not be incorrect to refer to Europe and Asia as a single continent: the Eurasia). Considering, in fact, the Euro-Asiatic border along the crossing point of Surami (the Caucasian watershed) or on the line of the rivers Kura and Rioni, then a large part of Georgian territory would fall into Europe.

Indeed, one of the unofficial definitions proposes the following eastern border of Europe: from Baydaratskaya Guba, on the Kara Sea, following the eastern side of the Ural mountains and then the Ural river south until the Mugodzhar hills; following the Emba river to the Caspian sea; following the Kura river from its mouth on the Caspian sea, through the Surami passage to the Qvirila river; following the Qvirila river to its mouth by Poti on the Black sea. In this case about 70% of Georgia is located within Europe (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1. European trans-continental states considering the eastern border of Europe through Surami passage

(Source: Author's elaboration based on World Gazetteer, Statistics of administrative units, towns and cities)

Country	Total area (kmq)	Area in Asia (kmq)	Area in Asia (%)	Area in Europe (kmq)	Area in Europe (%)
Georgia	69.700	20.460	29,35	49.240	70,65
Azerbaijan	86.600	46.870	54,12	39.730	45,88
Russia	17.075.200	13.115.200	76,81	3.960.000	23,19
Kazakistan	2.717.300	2.346.927	86,37	370.373	13,63
Turchia	780.580	756.768	96,95	23.812	3,05
Armenia	29.800	29.800	100	0	0
Cyprus	9.251	9.251	100	0	0

Apart from geographical considerations, Georgia claims to be European especially from social and political standpoints. As it will be better described in the following section, historically Kartvelian people (the ancient Georgians) were strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture, considered the cradle of European culture and civilization. In addition, the eastern Christianity, including the

¹ Gamkrelidze T.V., Georgia: Europe or Asia?,

http://www.parliament.ge/pages/archive_en/C_D/europe.htm, last visit 22 October 2013.

Georgian one, came into contact with the cultural and religious traditions related to the Byzantine period. Then, as Professor Gamkrelidze concludes in his document, “Georgia's accession into European institutions serves as a corroboration of the Georgian state always included into the European part of the Eurasian continent, in other words, recognition of our traditional *Europeanness*” (Gamkrelidze, 2009, 2).



Figure 1. Geographical and political boundaries of Europe considering the eastern border of Europe through Surami passage.
(Source: Alinor, Electionworld, Wikimedia.org)

GEORGIA: EUROPE STARTED HERE

Georgians claim their “Europeanness” and believe they have the right to join the European institutions much more than other countries such as Turkey and Moldova. Since the proclamation of Georgia as an independent and sovereign state, Kartvelian scholars could freely search and find the roots of their own people in order to reaffirm Georgian identity that the Soviet Union unsuccessfully tried to choke and to confirm to the world that European culture has deep roots in the country. Their aim is also to assume that Europe - both physically and culturally - originates in Georgia. One of the most popular tourist headline - with strong political implications - says: “Georgia: Europe started here” (Figure 2).

Georgians consider themselves as Europeans at least from three different points of view:

- from a geographical standpoint, if we place the border between Europe and Asia on the pass of Surami, as described in the previous section, about the 70% of Georgian territory would fall into Europe;



Figure 2. Slogan: “Europe started here”

(Source: main slogan of www.georgia.travel.ge, official tourism web-site in Georgia, 2011).

- from a religious point of view Georgia developed into one of the major Christian states and cultural centers. Georgia is a Christian nation since 327, although surrounded by Muslim states, except for Armenia. “Byzantine cultural traditions took shape through a merger of this symbolic culture with eastern Christianity, embracing the countries exposed to the eastern Christianity area, including Georgia” (Gamkrelidze, 2009, 2);

- from an historical and cultural perspective, in Georgia are located the old territories of Iberia and Colchis (the latter linked to the myth of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece), which in ancient times belonged to - or at least, in the case of easternmost territories, were strongly influenced for commercial and cultural reasons by - Magna Grecia (cradle of European culture and civilization) and, later, the Byzantine Empire.

We can also add the recent discovery of the Dmanisi hominids which, for some scientists, shows how migration from Africa to Europe of the primordial man passed through the lands that now belong to Georgia before moving to the West.²

Beyond the way Georgians have built their European identity, what is striking is the determination of these people – and sometimes the obstinacy – with which they feel part of the European culture and the equally strong will to be integrated into European Union. In no other country of the former Soviet Union (with the exception, of course, of Baltic countries) there is such a strong political and popular motivation. In Tbilisi European Union flags are raised alongside Georgian ones on practically every public building - from schools to Parliament. The local population is almost unanimous in saying: “We are Georgians, then we are Europeans”. A questionnaire administered by the author in September 2009 to 77 students of the University “I. Javakhishvili” of Tbilisi, asking to identify their

² Although, following more recent studies published on Science (<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/326>) on October 18, 2013 the skull fossils discovered in the Republic of Georgia suggests simpler human lineage and may rewrite the evolutionary history of our human genus Homo. In other words, just as today people look different from one another, so did early hominids, and the dissimilarity of the bones they left behind may have fooled scientists into thinking they came from different species.

identity in an international cultural context, showed that almost half (43%) of the interviewees, along with the unanimous identification as Georgian (two answers could be given), indicated to feel European, while no one identified himself as Asian (Figure 3). This result, although high, has been decreasing after the war with Russia; in a previous interview in June 2008 (two months before the war), commissioned by the European Union to the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the "I. Javakhishvili" and administered by Prof. Giorgi Gogsadze, the percentage of students who identified themselves as Europeans was up to 51% (Figure 4). Moreover, after the war the sense of belonging to the Georgian nation in terms of absoluteness has substantially increased: while in the first questionnaire each respondent flanked a second option next to the answer "Georgian", in the interview of 2009 many students, instead of adding a second answer, often made comments like "only Georgian" or "forever Georgian" (also demonstrated by the fact that only 47 out of 77 students had scored 2 replies).

Figure 3. One of the question from the author's questionnaire, September 2009 (77 students, absolute values)
(Source: author's questionnaire administrated at students "I. Javakhishvili" of Tbilisi, September 2009)

Would you identify yourself as:	Closed (2 answers possible)
European	33
Asian	0
CIS	2
Caucasian	10
Georgian	77
Middle East	2

Figure 4. One of the question from G. Gogsadze's questionnaire, June, 2008 (47 students, absolute values).
(Source: Prof. Giorgi Gogsadze's questionnaire administrated at students of "I. Javakhishvili" of Tbilisi, June 2008).

Would you identify yourself as:	Closed (2 answers possible)
European	24
Asian	3
CIS	0
Caucasian	20
Georgian	47
Middle East	0

This different inclination can be partly explained, on the one hand by the strong nationalistic propaganda that followed the war and, on the other hand, by the disappointment of not seeing the European institutions alongside Georgia in the war against Russia. In fact, Georgia was expecting a greater involvement in the resolution of the conflict by NATO, the EU and international organizations. In this regard, the Georgian ex-President Saakashvili repeatedly accused the European parliament to be afraid of Russia and, for that reason, avoided dealing with it openly.

In fact – although the European Union moved for the benefit of Georgia during the war of August 2008, asking the cease-fire and not recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as Russia and very few other countries did – it moved always with great diplomacy and without hurting too much the Kremlin because of energetic and economic interests. Mr. Saakashvili,

during his visit in Italy on May 2009 for the launch of his book-interview “I speak of freedom”, said: “It is an “old ” habit of the West after the end of the Soviet empire. After the Cold War, Westerners have had only one idea in mind: to apologize for having beaten the USSR”.³

But why do Georgians feel they are Europeans and what does it means for them? As new Minister for Integration into EU and Nato, Mr. Alexi Petriashvili explained:

“We do feel we are Europeans. For Georgians and for me personally it means that you have the freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and basic values which give you the chance of competitiveness with other Europeans or competitiveness inside of our country. It means to have democratic institutions needed in civil society in controlling the government and to have a strong government overseen by the parliament. It means also the distribution of the power between the branches. And, of course, the freedom of the individuals; every individual of my Country has his/her own rights protected by the State. But what is most important is our feeling when you go to Europe: people are free! Especially after the changes in the government. Nine out of ten will tell you that things has changed dramatically since last October elections.”⁴

INTEGRATION INTO THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE TOP POLITICAL PRIORITY SINCE THE INDEPENDENCE

The integration into Europe and developing towards Europe has always been a priority for independent Georgia. Even during the first independent period (1918-1921), the orientation of the Government was towards integration into the political European world. The Head of the first independent Georgian Government, the journalist Noe Zhordania, dreamed of Europe for his country and – referring to Russia – declared: “...*We have taken different paths, they are heading for the East and we for the West*” (Kirkhick, 2010). He also tried to establish closer cooperation with European states. The first Republic of Georgia lasted only for three years, until 1921, when the Red Army invaded the territory of Georgia and a period, now called “Russian occupation and oppression of Georgia”, started for the country; this last message is evident when you visit the Georgian National Museum on Rustaveli Avenue: part of the permanent exhibition is called Museum of Soviet Occupation and it documents the history of the anti-occupational, national-liberation movement of Georgia, along with the victims of the Soviet political repressions throughout seven decades of Russian occupation.

When in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia finally regained its independence, it was again possible to take back the European dream in the wake of the break-up of the Soviet Union. The first step was the establishment of diplomatic relations between EU member states and Georgia in 1992, but at that time there was little room for external aid to state-building because of the profound instability in the country.

It was Eduard Shevardnadze, President of Georgia from 1995 to 2003, in the attempt to implement the creation of a “New Silk Route” as a principal East-

³ S. Magni, “Saakashvili deluso dall’Occidente: ha paura della Russia” in “L’Occidentale”, 30 maggio 2009, <http://www.loccidentale.it/>

⁴ Author’s interview with Mr. Alexi Petriashvili, Minister of Integration in EU and Nato, Tbilisi, September 17, 2013.

West artery through Georgia and through a “Peaceful Caucasus”, who put forward the conception of being closer to European Institutions.

Still in October 2009, Shevardnadze – by that time already ex-President since 6 years – answering our questions on relations between Georgia and Western institutions (EU and NATO), said:

“...Years ago, during one diplomatic meeting in Brussels, I knocked the door of the European Union. Well, from then we are still knocking! And this obviously irritates Russia. For Georgia this (integration in European Union) would represent a decisive turning-point for its present problematic situation, but we could not enter either in the EU or in Nato before 4 or 5 years. Unfortunately, after the war with Russia, our prospects are even worse, and probably we should wait much longer before we realize our wish.”⁵

With Shevardnadze a political stabilization started in Georgia that favored cooperation with the EU. In 1999 Georgia became a full member of the Council of Europe and a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Georgia and EU entered into force during the same year. “This opened a new opportunity for its (Georgia) participation in European integration, particularly as regards democratization, the rule of law and minority rights.” (IIFFM on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, II, 51)

However, it can be said that in Shevardnadze’s period the mentality of Georgians was still (post)soviet as the Russian influence was yet strong – first of all because it is not easy to eradicate 70 years of soviet rules and, except for a few countries (Baltic states for instance), the transition is a long and complex process; at that time Shevardnadze himself, as former USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs, was very close to Russia. As a result, by 2003 “political power was increasingly fragmented, corruption and crime were rampant, there were massive arrears in pension payments and teachers’ salaries, and infrastructure was in a state of near collapse...” (World Bank, 2009, 1).

Bilateral relations with the EU had further intensified after the 2003 “Rose Revolution” which brought to power a young and pro-Western government lead by Mikheil Saakashvili, who committed to an ambitious program of political and economic reforms; this raised great expectations in EU countries. From the first day after coming into power, Mr. Saakashvili and his government have been pointing out that the main goal of the country was to join the European community and develop towards the West (Georgiev, 2008, pp. 34-51). The new government was effective not only in modernizing the economy and establishing the role of law but also in reforming civil service and fighting corruption. As a result investments started to flow in and the country’s economic situation started to improve: in the first half of 2008 real GDP growth reached 9%. (IIFFM on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, II, 55).

A new basis for EU-Georgia relations were created in June 2004 with the inclusion of South Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This policy aims at bringing Georgia and another 15 countries⁶ close to the EU in

⁵ Cappucci M., “La Georgia non è schiava né di Washington né di Mosca: intervista ad Eduard Shevardnadze” on <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes/la-georgia-non-e-schiava-ne-di-washington-ne-di-mosca/9635?h=0>

⁶ Countries included in ENP: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine.

legislative, economic and political terms. The ENP offered perspectives for economic integration, financial assistance and political dialogue in order to stabilize neighboring countries.

“One of the tasks of the new Georgian government was also to shift the identity of Georgia from post-Soviet to European, following the example of other former socialist states.” (Cochia & Troitiño, 2011, 90). The main foreign language studied and spoken in the country became English instead of Russian and developing and moving towards West and particularly towards Europe became both the government – including the opposition parties – and society’s priority.

As Head of the opposition political party “Our Georgia – Free Democrats”, Irakli Alasania - now Minister of Defense – in an interview with the author in May 2010 said:⁷

“Georgian society’s mentality is European and we want to join the European family. Our final goal is the integration into the European Union...To achieve this it will be of course a very long process of transformation based on the creation of truly and stable democratic institutions.”⁸

In particular, the stability of institutions and democracy are considered core elements in order to join the EU: the applicant country must adhere to the principles of Article 6(1) of Treaty of European Union (TUE) which all the Member States subscribe to and on which the EU is based: freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.⁹

In 10 years of Saakashvili’s government there were concerns with regards to the above mentioned principles. “...Conditions of the opposition and freedom of the media stay as points to be concerned and worried about” (Cecire, 2001, 2).

Emblematic was the lack of media independence and the media manipulation to influence elections. In this regard a few days before the local elections in Tbilisi again Mr. Irakli Alasania – at that time mayoral candidate – explained:

“In my opinion those of the President to influence the mass media are the most serious crimes in our country. The simulation of a Russian attack on Georgia, which appeared on IMEDI TV on 13 March 2010, was a psychological trauma for most of the population. The whole thing was orchestrated to frighten the voters and to make clear to citizens that, once the polls will be closed, it was not the case to protest against the President. As, according to the President, the opposition was with Russia.”¹⁰

The popularity of Saakashvili fell sharply after a heavy defeat in the war of August 2008 against Russia over Georgia’s small breakaway region of South

⁷ Cappucci M., Tosi C., “La Georgia alle urne: intervista con Irakli Alasania”, on <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes/la-georgia-alle-urne-intervista-con-irakli-alasania/12960>.

⁸ Cappucci M., Tosi C., (2010) “Un'altra Georgia è possibile, in Left avvenimenti, n. 21, p. 42, 28 May 2010, p. 28

⁹ Art. 6(1) TEU: the Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States.

¹⁰ Cappucci M., Tosi C., (2010) “La Georgia alle urne: intervista con Irakli Alasania”, on <http://temi.repubblica.it/limes/la-georgia-alle-urne-intervista-con-irakli-alasania/12960>.

Ossetia. The war almost destroyed the country's economy and caused the loss of Georgian territorial integrity and its sovereignty over the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The much promoted European orientation of the country suffered a setback in terms of politics as, on that occasion, the government felt abandoned by the European institutions. From their side the EU and Western organizations offered a prompt assistance: the EU provided money in humanitarian aid for people affected by the conflict and for economic recovery. Then, a civilian European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) was deployed in Georgia on 1 October 2008.

Citizens became fed up with the government and started to demonstrate asking Saakhashvili's resignation. Nevertheless, he remained in power, which was mainly due to the disunity and the incompetence of the opposition.

In the October 2012 parliamentary elections, held with a reformed electoral system, the opposition *Georgian Dream* coalition, of billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili (who managed to unite the fragmented opposition parties), won the majority of seats and a new government was formed as envisaged by the 2010 constitutional amendments that include a significant reduction of the president's powers in favor of the Prime Minister.

As soon as the new Prime Minister Ivanishvili came into power, it has been said that Georgia would not continue in its previously defined pro-European, pro-democracy and pro-reform orientation. This is due to many factors. First of all, Mr. Ivanishvili is a businessman very close to Russians as he became a billionaire in the metals, real estate and banking sectors in Russia in the 1990s. Almost for the same reasons – and because of the change of rhetoric in the new government – Georgia has now better relationships with Russia, at least in terms of trade and in terms of mobility: after a 7 year ban on Georgian products, imposed by Russia since 2006, now some Georgian agricultural products are again exported to the Russian Federation; furthermore, people to people relationships and exchanges have improved and Russians enjoy a free visa regime to enter Georgia for business or tourism.

The author, in September, 2013 met Mr. Alexi Petriashvili, Georgian Minister for Integration into European Union and asked him to explain how Georgia can both improve relations with Russia while remaining on the path to EU and NATO. He answered:

“It's our foreign policy priority: it is defined that Georgia will become a NATO member. Georgia is moving in the direction of the European Integration and the end goal for Georgia is becoming a member of the EU. We have neighbors like the Russian Federation who wish geography will not be changed, we cannot do so and we are not willing to do so. We would like to normalize the relationship with the Russian Federation but it needs time, it needs talks and negotiations between the two. The rhetoric after the change of the government in Georgia has changed on both sides, in Russia and in Georgia as well. We are negotiating the separate channel of communication. In particular the Special Representative of the Prime Minister Zurab Abashidze, is negotiating the return of Georgian goods, Georgian wine, Georgian mineral waters, Georgian agricultural goods, to the Russian market. Now there will be another round, we will talk on the permanent flights between Russia and Georgia and the facilitation of the Visa regime for Georgians because

we have unilaterally waved the visas for the Russian citizens... Russians themselves are also very keen to see the steps forward in normalization between Georgia and Russia but there is the so called redline for Georgians; this is the territorial integrity and sovereignty, this is the occupied territories. And the de-occupation and non-recognition policy is remaining number one priority for Georgian strategic interests and it will never be changed unless they return the territories and the territories are free from the foreign occupation of forces. Russia in my believe made a mistake when it first occupied Georgian territories and second recognizing Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region as independent states. It was a mistake, it was an emotional, very pragmatic mistake but it was a mistake. It was their fault but we cannot change it, they have to change it. It's hard for them to change it, we understand, we realized this but it needs time and it needs negotiation. Abkhazians and Ossetians can see that they are isolated and not independent, there are some talks that maybe they become part of the Russian Federation and they (Abkhazians in particular) do not like this. They also see that only the Russian Federation and one or two other islands and States have recognized their sovereignty... So they failed! And Georgia has to demonstrate that the economy is prospering in the country, human rights are protected in the country and basic principles of freedom and human rights are guaranteed in Georgia. Otherwise they (Abkhazia and Ossetia) are maybe thinking about staying alone. They have to see what is attractive in living together with a Georgia that is integrated in European systems of values, travelling in Europe like Georgian citizens, having the jobs across Europe like the Georgian citizens and not staying in the part of a Russian controlled regime.”¹¹

On the same topic Minister Alasania explained: “We need to have better relationships with Russians in order to oversmart them.”¹²

New government's priority of improving and normalize relationships with Russia seems to be even more consolidated from the recent presidential elections. Last 27 October, 2013 with elections declared to be "clean" and "transparent" by international observers, the government's candidate, Mr. Giorgi Margvelashvili, became the new President of Georgia. The result was considered to be a consolidation of Ivanishvili's power and political priorities.

MORE DEMOCRACY, MORE EUROPE: EU DEEP AND COMPREHENSIVE FREE TRADE AREA

Apart from Georgian Dream's foreign policy priorities, it has been said that the recent elections (government in 2012 and new President in 2013) are the demonstration of Georgia's stronger democratic credentials. In this regards EU Commission's President Barroso stated:

“I believe we can say that Georgia is today a more stable democracy than before. We have seen this in last weekend's presidential election.”¹³

¹¹ Author's interview with Mr. Alexi Petriashvili, Georgian Minister of Integration in EU and Nato, Tbilisi, September 17, 2013.

¹² Author's interview with Mr. Irakli Alasania, Georgian Minister of Defense, Tbilisi, September 11, 2013.

This gives to Georgia more qualifications to move forward in the process of integration into the European Union. Georgia and EU, after 17 months and seven rounds, on July 2013 successfully concluded negotiations for a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (Dcfta), as part of the Association Agreement between them. The Association Agreement, together with the Dcfta, aims to provide for the close political association and economic integration of Georgia with the EU. The comprehensive FTA would ensure Georgia's access to a stable and reliable market of over 500 million consumers and, more importantly, it will open the door to Georgia's future integration into the European Community.

On November 28-29, 2013, the Lithuanian capital Vilnius hosted the third Eastern Partnership Summit (the first was in Brussels 2009, the second in Warsaw 2011). The high officials from EU and its member states, as well as their counterparts from the six Eastern Partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus assembled to discuss the achieved progress and set the future priorities. The summit was of crucial geopolitical significance not only for Eastern Partners, but also for Europe in general and for Russia. Some important issues were on the table; it was initially expected signing the Association Agreement with Ukraine, finalizing talks on the Deep and Comprehensive Trade and Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Armenia (after having completed negotiations with the three countries in June-July 2013), as well as discussing the visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Two months before EaP Summit the Georgian Minister for integration into EU (A. Petriashvili) said strongly:

“Vilnius Summit will be a success. We expect that Ukraine will be signing the Association Agreement with EU, this is very important for Europe, for the Euro-Atlantic developments and for Ukraine itself. It will be a success also for Georgia and Moldova that are going to initial the Dcfta as part of forthcoming Association Agreement. These 3 countries made very clear that they want to be the part of the EU. So, Europe has to make steps forward and we have to move into the same direction but we need to work in order to build the democratic institutions... This is because we are not ready for the membership for the moment...Georgia in particular will be ready in a few years, 3, 5 or maybe 7 but no more than that.”¹⁴

When Mr. Petriashvili made this forecast, in the end of September 2013, the Armenian President Serž Sargsyan, had already taken his decision (on 3th September) to break with the EU and to join the new Eurasian Customs Union. *“This is a sovereign choice of Armenia, they decided to become part of the Customs Union and they have applied for the membership of the Eurasian Economic Union. Unfortunately Eurasian Customs Union and the Dcfta or the association agreement are not compatible to each other. But I am sure that in the future we will meet again Armenia in the process of integration into EU.”¹⁵* With these words again Mr. Petriashvili commented the Armenian decision.

¹³ EU Commission's President SPEECH/13/870 29/10/2013). http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-13-870_en.htm.

¹⁴ Author's interview with Mr. Alexi Petriashvili, Georgian Minister of Integration in EU and NATO, Tbilisi, September 17, 2013.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

The project of a “new” Eurasian Union was launched in June 2009 when Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin surprised everybody stating that Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan would enter the WTO as a custom union. These three countries agreed to unify their customs tariffs. In 2010 the Eurasian Customs Union came into existence with the implementation of a common customs tariff and joint Customs Code. In January 2012 customs controls were abolished. A joint Secretariat, the Eurasian Economic Commission (designed as the European Commission) was set up in Moscow with a staff of more than 1.000 people. “*The ostensible purpose of this initiative is economic. Its primary objectives, however, are geopolitical, and these are to be achieved in large part by economic means*”(Adomeit, H., 2012, 8). The ultimate Customs Union’s goal is the creation of a “Eurasian Union” by 2015! This Union “*can be considered to be the organizational and institutional counterparts to the EU’s European Neighborhood Policy and its eastern dimension, the Eastern Partnership* (Adomeit, H., 2012, 8).

Before the EaP Summit in Vilnius, Moscow did everything possible to intimidate the countries in the EU’s Eastern Partnership to keep them from signing new trade, economic, and political accords with Brussels.

The pressure points are well known: from threatening impoverished EU eastern partners with higher energy prices to stopping exports of certain products to Russia.

As a result Moscow had already some pre-Vilnius victories. Except for Belarus, inside of the Customs Union from the very beginning, and partly from Azerbaijan that does not meet the basic requirements defined by the EU – most probably because they don’t make any efforts in this direction, as it is contrary at their energetic and strategic priorities – Armenia and Ukraine before the EaP Summit had already decided not to sign any agreements with EU for not compromising their trade and commercial relationships with Russia. Despite pro-European rhetoric and active participation in EU talks, “*Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich snubbed EU leaders by not signing a painstakingly negotiated association agreement at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius.*”¹⁶

After Ukraine’s decision (about 10 days before the EaP Summit) Georgia and Moldova were then faced with a very tough choice: either they could stick to their commitment to move closer to Europe and risk a fierce economic and trade backlash from Russia, or they could also ditch an association deal with the EU.

*“Russia would close its borders to goods from any country signing the EU association agreements. Migrant workers would be banned from finding jobs in Russia.” Both countries “are very much aware that Russia can use its energy sources and its big markets as weapons to make them toe the line, too. Their economies are not sufficiently independent of Russia, nor are their energy resources diverse enough to be able to deflect Russian blackmail.”*¹⁷

In Georgia, Russia has considerable leverage, especially through its support for the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have proclaimed their independence since the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. These are

¹⁶ Kateryna Pishchikova, Richard Youngs, Ukraine’s European Future: How the EU Can Make a Difference, in Carnegie Europe, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=53779>.

¹⁷ J. Dempsey, Vilnius: Now what for Georgia and Moldova? in Carnegie Europe, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=53696>.

similar to the problems that Moldova has with its breakaway region of Transnistria. Despite the recent relaxation of Russia's economic sanctions against Georgia and the ongoing dialogue between the two countries – after the election of Mr. Javashvili – it has been observed “*the continued and increasing activities by Russian security forces to erect fences and other obstacles along administrative boundary lines in Georgia between the territory administered by the government in Tbilisi and the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.*”¹⁸

Actually the instrumentalization of protracted conflicts, together with the possible misuse of energy pricing and artificial trade obstacles were some of the threats from Russia to the possible signing of agreements between Georgia and the European Union.

Also, as we have observed before, the new Georgian political coalition could raise doubts during the interim between initialing and signing its agreement, as has happened with the Ukraine. The current government insists its choice “for Europe” is firm, and there isn't any tilt away from a Western orientation. On this topic Mr. Alasania confirmed:

*“The integration of Georgia into the Eurasian Customs Union is absolutely out of questions. It's neither been discussed in Georgian parliament of government. More than 75% of our citizens supports Georgia to be part of the European family. We don't even take into consideration the emerging Eurasian Union as we see it is founded on the ideology of Soviet Union.”*¹⁹

“In contrast to its neighbors, Azerbaijan and Armenia, who are constantly trying to keep the balance between their relations with the EU and Russia, in Georgia, not only the government and the ruling party but also the opposition are united behind the pro-European way of the Country” (Cornell & Nilsson, 2009:262). Nevertheless, eyebrows were raised when the – now former – Prime Minister Ivanishvili pondered aloud whether the Eurasian Union might be an attractive alternative for Georgia, and only when the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Maia Panjikidze, finally signed the initialing of an Association Agreement including a Dcfta during the EU Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, any residue of uncertainty had disappeared. The Summit was not as successful as EU expected because there were only the initialing of the Association Agreement with Georgia and the Republic of Moldova– except for a signature of a visa facilitation agreement with Azerbaijan and the initialing of a civil aviation agreement with Ukraine – but at least Georgia entered a very important stage of integration with the European Union.

CONCLUSIONS

Making a European Country in Georgia is a difficult developing process which involves the social sphere in building a European identity. Georgians began their way toward West and particularly to Europe for cultural reasons, but most of all because they wish to break their Soviet past, shaking off Russian oppression. The gravitation towards the EU and its standard appears to Georgia as the principal way to overcome the corruption and the absence of rule of law that are

¹⁸ EEAS Statement n. 131001/02, 1 October 2013.

http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131001_02_en.pdf

¹⁹ Author's interview with Mr. Irakli Alasania (2013).

still hindering Post-Soviet countries' development after twenty years of transition. On the other side Russia considers former Soviet countries as its natural sphere of interest and influence and does not allow them to move to the West. This is one of the reasons why Moscow started a process of building the Eurasian Union – which can be considered to be the organizational and institutional counterpart to the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy and its eastern dimension – and is pressuring the EU eastern partners in order to push them into the Customs Union, the first stage of this new Russia's project. Russian pressure – consisting mostly in trade obstacles, increasing of energy price and instrumentalization of protracted conflicts – became particularly strong before the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Vilnius in late November 2013. Georgia, together with the Republic of Moldova, did not succumb to the Russian threats and, unlike Ukraine and Armenia, initialed an Association Agreement with the EU and will ratify the accord during the next EaP Summit in Riga in 2015.

Will Georgia change its European priority between initialing and signing this agreement, as it happened with Ukraine?

The same day in which the Georgian Minister Maia Panjikidze was signing the Dcfta in Vilnius (29/11/2013), the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) noted that, following a reduction in 'borderisation' since September, installation of fences along the breakaway South Ossetia's administrative boundary line were resumed.

The main issue between Russia and Georgia is about the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, as also Mr. Petriashvili asserted, "*no Georgian citizen would accept the loss of these territories in exchange of integration in European Union.*"

Also, it has to be considered the geographical isolation of the country in European terms. If Ukraine joins the EU it could represent a strong ally for Georgia both in countering Russian threats and in being the vehicle to approach Europe easily. The future of Georgia in Europe also depends, in a way, on the relations between Turkey and the EU because of obvious geographical reasons; unfortunately for the moment the enlargement to Turkey is in a stand-by phase.

One thing is certain: despite the volatile and vulnerable scenario all around and its internal problems, Georgia seems to be the most pro-European country in its geographical area and is taking all the right steps in order to become the easternmost member of the European Union.

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