

Georgia: Reducing Anti-Russian Rhetoric, Accelerating Co-operation with the European Union

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Executive summary

Georgia has recently signed and ratified an Association Agreement with the European Union. While some work still needs to be done before Georgians fully enjoy the benefits of the agreement, it serves as clear identification that the newly-elected government of Georgia has remained dedicated to its pro-European foreign policy². Simultaneously, the current governing coalition, Georgian Dream, has shown milder rhetoric towards Russia compared to its predecessor the United National Movement. While certain steps have been made to stabilise relations with Russia, diplomatic missions have not been re-established and the relationship remains rather fragile. Moreover, the ratification of the Association Agreement has already caused some tensions and, as Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has claimed, may be followed by “protective measures”.

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² For example, Georgia needs to apply food safety regulations to benefit from the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), harmonize legislation with EU regulations, adopt new anti-monopoly laws, etc.

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This paper looks into the costs and benefits of Georgian foreign policy choices and the reasoning behind its aspiration towards joining the EU structures vis-à-vis the membership of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Furthermore, it explores the leverages Russia may use to pressure Georgia into its sphere of influence. Lastly, it examines existing public opinion of Georgia's pro-European foreign policy, analyses the role of national identity in EU/Russia dichotomy and ends on a number of policy recommendations.

Introduction

On 27 June 2014, Georgia signed and shortly after ratified an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU)³. The agreement envisages the creation of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU, which holds great socio-economic and political importance for Georgia. Not long before the agreement was signed, then-president Mikheil Saakashvili's openly pro-Western government lost the parliamentary and presidential elections to the newly emerged coalition of Georgian Dream. Bidzina Ivanishvili, a controversial multi-billionaire, who accumulated his fortune in Russia, led the coalition. His statements signalled that the new government meant to settle relations with the northern neighbour. For example, in September of 2013, at a press conference and, later, during an interview, he confirmed that the government did not exclude the possibility of joining the Eurasian Customs Union: "We are looking into it and examining whether this will be useful for the country and if so, why not⁴?" Simultaneously, he highlighted that European values were important and Georgia would seek closer relations and,

³ "Georgia, EU sign association agreement", *Civil.ge*, 27 June 2014. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27417>

possibly, integration with the European Union. This statement led to speculation in Georgian media and among the political opposition that the new government was keeping its options open. Nevertheless, despite such speculation, Georgia has never rejected signing the Association Agreement, as Armenia or Ukrainian former president Yanukovich did.

While Tbilisi's foreign policy remains pro-Western, its anti-Russian rhetoric is significantly reduced in an attempt to keep both sides pleased. As an MP of the ruling coalition puts it, “[d]emand of the Georgian population is Euro integration, visa liberalisation, membership of the EU and improving relations with Russia. It is a very difficult demand [...] like going to McDonalds and ordering everything that is on the menu and things that are not even there”⁵.

The question, however, is the plausibility of such expectations. That is, is it truly possible to follow the European path without juxtaposing Russia's interests and upsetting the political elite in the Kremlin? With Russia's recent actions in Ukraine, together with its accelerated efforts to make the Eurasian Economic Union functional, it is clear that Russia is not going to go back on its claim on the “near abroad” (if it was not already clear enough after Russia engaged in a military conflict with Georgia in 2008 and recognised South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the breakaway regions of Georgia, as independent states).

⁴ Koba Liklikadze, “Ivanishvili: Russia will become member of the EU and NATO as well”, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 7 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/content/interview-bidzina-ivanishvili/25099372.html>

⁵ Interview with Mr. Levan Berdzenishvili, MP (Georgian Dream Coalition), Parliament of Georgia, Kutaisi, 22 July 2014.

Georgia's foreign policy choices since the independence: a brief overview

Ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Georgia's foreign policy has aimed to counter Russia's power at large. The first President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia pushed for a pan-Caucasian policy vis-à-vis a pro-Russian or pro-Western approach. However he was quickly ousted from his post and replaced by former USSR Foreign Affairs Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who attempted to find a balance between West and North. Shevardnadze reached out to the United States as well as to European structures and simultaneously joined the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). It was during his presidency that the Chairman of the Parliament, Zurab Zhvania, famously stated at the Council of Europe: "I am Georgian, and therefore I am European"⁶. With this approach Shevardnadze managed to maintain the status quo; conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia were frozen and Russia formally (however not practically) supported Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Soon after the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia's foreign policy makers abandoned the idea of a Russo-European balance and unequivocally opted for a pro Euro-Atlantic policy. Nonetheless, this shift in policy did not occur suddenly. Initially, the "revolutionary" government attempted to maintain amicable relations with Russia. For example, in February 2004, then-President Saakashvili held his first meeting with Putin, telling him: "I want to become friends with you"⁷. A few months later, Saakashvili

⁶ Stephen Jones, "Role of cultural paradigms in Georgian foreign policy", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2006, pp.83-110.

⁷ "New Georgia 2004-2008," *Liberali*, June 11, 2006. Available at: <http://www.liberali.ge/ge/liberali/articles/100092/>

told Russian newspaper Izvestia: “I trusted him [President Putin] and I was not mistaken. He kept his promises... Putin’s style of thinking is more pragmatic than most of the Western leaders”⁸. However relations came to a halt after the Georgian central government restored its control over the Autonomous Republic of Adjara later that year⁹. As Moskovskaya Pravda wrote: “The events were not a victory for Saakashvili over Abashidze, but for America over Russia. The USA is effectively continuing a carve-up of the Caucasus using its puppets in the region”¹⁰. Clashes between Georgian soldiers and Ossetian militants in August of 2004 brought Georgia to the brink of war with the breakaway region and dealt a final blow to Russo-Georgian relations. In response, Putin cancelled his visit to Georgia that had been planned for September.

Following these events, the Georgian government began to form an ideology that offered to cut any connections with the Soviet past and hence, with Russia. A study of political elites indicates that the ideology of the revolutionary government consisted of three main ideas: firstly, that Georgia was “no longer a post-Soviet” country, secondly, that their post-Revolutionary project was

⁸ “Mikheil Saakashvili: Shevardnadze always laid to Putin,” *Izvestie*, April 12 2004, *Izvestie*. Available at:

<http://izvestia.ru/news/289012#ixzz3PoXoAhDV>

⁹ President of A/R Adjara Aslan Abashidze who ruled in 1992-2004, refused to submit to the new government. He nearly sparked civil war as he created military groupings and had Cholokhi Bridge, connecting Adjara to central Georgia, blown up. Debacles resulted in the “Second Rose Revolution” as the president of A/R Adjara fled to Moscow (where he, reportedly, still resides) and Saakashvili celebrated victory by splashing himself with some seawater in Adjara as he was surrounded by crowds of people.

¹⁰ Quoted in Welan, S., *Georgian authorities wrest back control of Adjara*. Available at: <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2004/05/geor-m11.html>

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to build Georgia into a modern Western state, and lastly, that this could only be achieved through close ties with Euro-Atlantic military and political structures¹¹. These hypotheses are reflected in the National Security Concept (2012-2015) as well as the Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia. According to the National Security Concept: “Georgia strives to become a member of European and Euro-Atlantic Structures, which will enable the country to consolidate democracy, strengthen well-being and security”¹². At the same time, the Concept lists threats coming from Russia among its top challenges (the list includes terrorist attacks organised within the territories occupied by Russia, and the possibility of further occupation)¹³. While a great deal of the document highlights the importance of relations with European and Euro-Atlantic structures, it only briefly mentions Russia “[it] is a desire of Georgia to have good neighbourly relations with Russia based on the principles of equality, which cannot happen without the Russian Federation acknowledging Georgian sovereignty, territorial integrity and de-occupation [of Georgia]”¹⁴. Likewise, the Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy of 2012-2015 highlights the weight laid on Euro-Atlantic integration while downgrading the importance of ties with Russia¹⁵.

¹¹ Giorgi Gvalia et.al, *Political Elites, Ideas and Foreign Policy: Explaining and Understanding the International Behavior of Small States in the Former Soviet Union*, Ilia State University Publication, Tbilisi, 2011.

¹² Georgia Government, *The National Security Concept*, Georgia Government, Tbilisi, 2012 p.15. Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=12

¹³ *Ibid*, p.3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.33.

¹⁵ Georgia Government, *Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy 2012-2015*, Georgia Government, Tbilisi, 2012. Available at: http://mfa.gov.ge/files/709_15575_959168_FPStrategy_FINAL-25.09.12.pdf

The government's striving towards Euro-Atlantic structures was not merely expressed in public speeches or official documents. For instance, one of the major achievements was its fight against petty corruption. By reforming the police and introducing university entrance exams, corruption levels have plummeted. According to a poll in 2013, only 4% of Georgians paid bribes to get public services¹⁶. Moreover, efforts were made to eliminate bureaucratic hurdles to starting a business in Georgia (for example 84 per cent of licensing requirements were eliminated) and the privatisation process was accelerated. Furthermore, before the war in 2008, Saakashvili's administration doubled the number of Georgian troops in Iraq and continued to keep military forces in Kosovo and Afghanistan, hoping these actions would lead to NATO membership¹⁷. Despite the government's high hopes, Georgia was not granted the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Meanwhile, the Kremlin's ambitions to maintain control over its "near abroad" alongside "sloppy" decision-making by Saakashvili's "revolutionary" government finally escalated into the war of August 2008.

Unlike Saakashvili's administration, the current government is pursuing more subtle politics, which bears a resemblance to Shevardnadze's foreign policy. While the country maintains its pro-European (and generally, pro-Western) direction, it is more willing and open to negotiations with Russia. The government rarely opts for anti-Russian rhetoric, and avoids provoking the Kremlin. As a result of this policy, some economic ties were re-established¹⁸. Nevertheless, progress has been limited and diplomatic missions between the countries have not been re-

¹⁶ Department of State, *2014 Investment Climate Statement*, Department of State, June 2014.

¹⁷ Matthew Collins, "Georgia doubles its troops in Iraq", *BBC*, 9 March 2007. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6433289.stm>

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stored. Furthermore, situations might worsen after the signing of the Association Agreement; as Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev highlighted, Russia might undertake “protective measures” if the deal affects its economy¹⁹. While Medvedev only mentioned measures in regard to trade and economic relations, in light of the recent re-entry of Georgian products on the Russian market, this could mean re-occurrence of sanctions on Georgian goods, which would jeopardise relations between the countries even further. Anti-Russian sentiments may also accelerate among the Georgian population as many sympathise with the Ukrainians while the dramatic events take place in Eastern Ukraine. This sentiment may complicate the process of stabilisation of relations with Russia, as the Georgian government will be more conscious in making friendly gestures towards Russia.

The role of national identity in forming foreign policy

For the past two decades, Georgia’s foreign policy makers have been trying to bypass Russian interests and pursue Georgia’s legitimate choice of a European future. The pragmatism of such behaviour can be debated. According to Alexander Rondeli “attempts to integrate their country into European structures is

¹⁸ For instance, as a result of Karasin-Abashidze talks Georgian wine export to Russia resumed in 2013. See “Russia receives first batch of Georgian wine after seven year break”, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 15 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-georgia-wine-returns/25017834.html>

¹⁹ The Voice of Russia, “Russia may ‘take measures’ if Ukraine, Georgia ratify association deals with EU – Medvedev”, *The Voice of Russia*, 7 July 2014. Available at: http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_07_07/Russia-may-take-measures-if-Ukraine-Georgia-ratify-association-deals-with-EU-Medvedev-1018/

often seen as strategic idealism which goes against all geopolitical arguments and even common sense”²⁰. Arguably, the national identity of Georgians and moreover, Georgian political elites influences the foreign policy choices of the Government. Due to its geographical location, the influence of Roman and Byzantine civilisations, and of Christianity which was adopted in the 4th century, many Georgians identify with Europe²¹. This self-perception has influenced the formulation of national interests and foreign policy; “[the] notion that Georgia belonged in “the West” provides a certain foundation for Georgia’s pro-Western orientation and its identity-driven foreign policy”²². The discourse of the “return to Europe” is reflected in public speeches of political leaders, as well as official documents. The Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy of 2012-2015 states: “in terms of geographic, political, cultural and value system, Georgia is an inseparable part of Europe”²³. In accordance with the political elites, the Georgian population is also supportive of this course. About 70% of Georgians back NATO and the European Union, and only 10% oppose it²⁴.

²⁰ Alexander Rondeli, “The Choice of Independent Georgia” in: Gennady Chufrin (ed.), *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001 p. 195.

²¹ Kornely Kakachia “European, Asian or Eurasian? Georgian Identity and the Struggle for Euro-Atlantic Integration” in Kornely Kakachia and Michael Cicere (ed.), *Georgian Foreign Policy: the Quest for Sustainable Security*, Georgian Institute of Politics publication, Tbilisi, 2013, p.44.

²² *Ibid*, p.53.

²³ Georgia Government, *The Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia 2012-2015*, Georgia Government, Tbilisi, 2012, p.11. Available at:

http://mfa.gov.ge/files/709_15575_959168_FPStrategy_FINAL-25.09.12.pdf

²⁴ Ghia Nodia, “Divergent Interests: What Can and Cannot be Achieved in Georgia-Russian Relations”, in Kornely Kakachia and Michael Cicere (ed.), *Georgian Foreign Policy: the Quest for Sustainable Security*, Georgian Institute of Politics publication, Tbilisi, 2013, p.99.

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While the theory that national identity impacts foreign policy choices could be applicable to a certain extent, one should not overlook the impact that the political elites have in shaping this very identity, especially when it comes to transitional countries. According to Lane, in the process of transition elites are the major actors in “constructing and deconstructing collective identities”²⁵. And, admittedly, a large majority of the Georgian political elite (except marginalised parties with little public support²⁶) have been actively engaged in forging this European identity.

Arguably, political elites and, especially, decision-makers have more pragmatic reasons for their foreign policy choices and their behavior is not merely identity driven, therefore it is of a crucial importance to look into the pros and cons of close ties with Russia and the EU (without the assumption of membership in the near future).

What could Russia offer Georgia?

The geo-political order formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been unsatisfactory for the Kremlin. After the breakup of the USSR, the Baltic States promptly slipped away from Moscow’s influence and joined NATO and the EU. Efforts by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to do the same were perceived by the Kremlin as an attempt by the “West” to gain control over Russia’s sphere of influence, which in turn would threaten its national security. Moscow uses “carrots” (subsidies, reduced prices

²⁵ Lane, D., Identity Formation and Political Elites in the Post-Socialist States. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63 (6), 2011, p. 929.

²⁶ For example “Free Georgia” which was promoting the idea of Georgia officially rejecting the policy of Euro-Atlantic integration, gained only 0.3 % at the parliamentary elections of 2012.

on energy resources for its allies) as well as “sticks” (support for military insurgents in Ukraine, deployment of military forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to make sure that the post-Soviet countries remain under Russia’s “patronage”. As Olcott et al point out “Moscow’s bilateral and multilateral ties with the [USSR] successor states, which it chose to call the ‘near abroad’, have proven to be paternalistic at best and clearly adversarial at worst”²⁷. To maintain control, Moscow has repeatedly tried to create organisations set to counter the European Union (the CIS could serve as one example) drawing a border between the West and the East - the Eurasian Customs Union is the most recent attempt.

The Eurasian Customs Union (initially consisting of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and as of 1 January 2015 Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as well) was created in 2010 and would become fully operational in 2015. Unlike its predecessor organisations some authors deem the union more viable “in a region where border management practices and bureaucracies are notoriously inefficient, the union already works reasonably well”²⁸. About 85% of import duties have been already harmonised and the Eurasian Economic Commission has been running the Union since 2012. However the overwhelming economic and political dominance of Russia, which underpins the union, might hamper its further development. It accounts for 86% of the bloc’s GDP and 84% of its population²⁹. Politically as well, Russia lures

²⁷ Olcott, M, A. Aslund and S. Garnett, *Getting it Wrong: Regional Cooperation and the Commonwealth of Independent States*, Washington DC: Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, 1999, p2. Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/GettingWrong_CH1.pdf

²⁸ Iana Dreyer and Nicu Popescu, “The Eurasian Customs Union: the Economics and the Politics”, *Brief Issue*, vol.11, 2014, p.1. Available at: http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_11_Eurasian_Union.pdf

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.2.

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potential members with subsidies and coercion as most of the post-Soviet countries are still quite conscious to join the Eurasian Customs Union. Moreover, the Union is already experiencing obstacles; in December 2014, Belorussian customs officers resumed checking Russian trucks on the border as a response to Russia's tightened control on Belorussian products entering or transiting Russia³⁰.

If successful, the Eurasian Economic Union could be somewhat beneficial for Georgia economically. After all, Russia used to be its top trading partner, accounting for almost 20% of the total trade before 2006. It also used to be the major supplier of energy resources³¹. Opening up the market would boost the country's economy. However due to recent history, Russia seems an unreliable partner to Georgians and for a reason. In the winter of 2006, due to sudden explosions of the pipelines in Southern Russia (which were speculated to be pre-arranged³²), the gas supply was suspended causing an energy crisis in Georgia. It was followed by a full economic embargo the same year. Transportation and postal transfers were also cancelled which hit Georgia's economy dramatically, as a large portion of Georgians depended on remittances sent by their relatives. It took 4 years to recover the pre-embargo mineral water export levels and wine export has not fully caught up yet³³. More importantly, after the war of

³⁰ "Belarus relaunches customs check points on border with Russia," *TASS Russian News Agency*, 8 December 2014. Available at: <http://itar-tass.com/en/russia/765744>

³¹ Giorgi Gvalia et.al, *Political Elites, Ideas and Foreign Policy: Explaining and Understanding the International Behavior of Small States in the Former Soviet Union*, Ilia State University Publication, Tbilisi, 2011, p.51.

³² C.J. Chivers "Pipeline blasts cut Georgia gas supply", *World Security Network*, 23 January 2006. Available at: <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/Other/Chivers-C.J/Pipeline-blasts-cut-Georgia-gas-supply>

2008 Russia has stationed offensive military forces, some of them only about 40 kilometres from Tbilisi. In total, there are about 10 000 Russian soldiers on Georgian territory, ballistic missiles with ranges capable of reaching most of Georgia, and an air defence system that could reach all the major airports of Georgia³⁴.

Despite clear messages from the newly elected Georgian government that Tbilisi was willing to settle relations, Russia's response was restricted. Moreover, it started installing barbed wires along the administrative boundary lines of South Ossetia. The gesture signalled that Moscow would not renegotiate its stance on the occupied territories. Russia's recent activities in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea were deeply alarming for its neighbours. In fact, it might be due to the crisis in Ukraine, that the Georgian government has not been more pro-active towards Russia.

If relations with Russia become "brotherly" again, Georgia can count only on maintaining the status quo with no further interventions from Russia. Moreover, at this stage, allying with Russia would be a risky and unpopular move for the Georgian government. First of all, it would be perceived that Georgia has accepted defeat over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as Russia recognises these territories as independent countries. Secondly, for Georgians, Russia represents the continuation of the Soviet Union or even the Russian empire, which dominates little nations. Hence, choosing Russia over Europe is neither an attrac-

³³ Yigal Schleifer, "Georgia: lifting Russian embargo to have limited economic impact?" *Eurasianet.org*, 14 August 2013. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67391>

³⁴ Giorgi Gvalia et.al, *Political Elites, Ideas and Foreign Policy: Explaining and Understanding the International Behavior of Small States in the Former Soviet Union*, Ilia State University Publication, Tbilisi, 2011, p.41.

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tive nor a financially beneficial foreign policy choice for the Georgian government. Nevertheless, without stable relations with Moscow, security and territorial integrity can yet again be at stake. Without careful political considerations and support from the EU member states those will be rather difficult to achieve.

Benefits from the EU and the Association Agreement

For more than two decades, the EU has been assisting Georgia to reform and run public institutions, to build capacity of state employees, recover the conflict-affected economy, rejuvenate agriculture, etc. Following the war of 2008, the EU allocated 500 million euro to support the country's recovery³⁵. It has also sent the only international monitoring mission to Georgia, which remains in the country and oversees the ceasefire. From 2007 to 2013, Georgia received 452.1 million euro of EU assistance, and is promised to get additionally about 410 million euro until 2017³⁶. For a country with a population of less than five million and a fragile economy, this is substantial support.

The Association Agreement that was signed in June of 2014 promises greater benefits. The document covers a variety of areas such as legislation, trade, economic co-operation, and financial assistance³⁷. One of the most significant aspects of the agreement is that it envisages the creation of a Deep and Com-

³⁵ Delegation to Georgia, *EU Assistance to People Affected by Conflict in Georgia - Overview*, European External Action Service, Tbilisi, 2011. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/projects/conflictassistance_2011overview_en.pdf

³⁶ European External Action Service, *EU- Georgia Relations*, European External Action Service. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/index_en.htm

prehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). After the DCFTA becomes operational, Georgia and the EU will eliminate duties on imports from each other. As a result, Georgia will save 84.2 million euro on imports from the EU. Additionally, Georgian agricultural goods would become more attractive for the European market as the elimination of duties would result in the reduction of prices and the easing of the bureaucracy on the border would stimulate bigger volumes of trade. According to the Memo of the European Commission on the Association Agreement, the EU will be removing customs duties on basic agricultural goods worth of 5.7 million euro and on half a million euro worth of processed agricultural products³⁸. The 2012 report commissioned by the EU estimates that Georgia's exports to the EU will increase by 12% and imports from the EU by 7.5%. Moreover, the EU has adopted a 101 million euro package to support implementation of the DCFTA and medium and small enterprises³⁹.

The financial and political support from the EU even without the promise of immediate membership is substantial. Furthermore, the EU accepts and recognises Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and remains a promoter of human rights, freedom of speech and democracy. Georgia's pro-Western policy should remain firm, however the government should avoid upsetting

³⁷ European Union, *EU-Georgia Association Agreement*, European Union, 2014. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/assoagreement/assoagreement-2013_en.htm

³⁸ European Commission, *EU-Georgia Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Area*, European Union, 2014. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/eap_aa/dcfta_gu_ide_2014_en.pdf

³⁹ "Georgia, EU sign association agreement", *Civil.ge*, 27 June 2014. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27417>

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the Kremlin with unnecessary ‘poking in the eye’, which previous governments often failed not to do. For example Saakashvili has referred to Russia in public speeches as “the last authoritarian empire in the world” and often has referred to Putin as a KGB agent⁴⁰.

Admittedly, it is a very fine line, and will be harder to pursue this goal as Moscow might intensify its pressure on Tbilisi. Without Europe’s firm stance and uncompromising support by it for Georgia, it will be a mission impossible for the government to keep walking this slippery slope. And this would mean moving beyond rhetoric on Russian actions and engaging in negotiations with Moscow, on where the EU stands on specific issues related to Georgia or other Eastern European countries. After all, Europe still has the bargaining chip of a large market where many Russian companies operate as well and which could provide even larger benefits for the Russian economy.

Conclusion

Georgia has proved that it remains dedicated to its pro-Western foreign policy. Despite the fact that the new government demonstrated willingness for dialogue with Russia, limited success has been achieved. The relationship with the northern neighbour remains fragile and the recently signed Association Agreement with the EU might upset the process even further. It is extremely difficult for a small country like Georgia to pursue its own foreign policy goals while Russia aims to strengthen its domination over what the Kremlin defines as its “near abroad”.

⁴⁰ McChesney, A., “Russian delegations walks out during Saakashvili’s ‘crazy’ speech”, *The Moscow Times*, September 27, 2013. Available at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/russias-un-delegation-walks-out-during-saakashvilis-crazy-speech/486649.html>

At this stage:

- Changing the foreign policy direction would be a neither popular nor advantageous move for Georgia as the geo-political interests of Russia make it an unreliable partner. Hitching its star to Russia would confine Georgia to the post-Soviet space for the long-term (if not for good).
- On the other hand, if Georgia remains an economically stable country, dedicated to its pro-Western policy and, more importantly, to European values, it stands a chance of developing into a modern, democratic, European state.
- It will be increasingly difficult for Georgia to retain its pro-Western policy. Therefore, it is of crucial importance that the EU and its member states continue their support and use their diplomatic and economic leverages more efficiently in cases of Russian pressure on Georgia against its will.