

Chapter 5

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Aspirations: Between Protracted Integration and Managing Expectations

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For nearly two decades Georgia has been working harder than any other country in the post-Soviet space, with the exception of the Baltic states, to develop stable political institutions, sustainable security, and a functioning democratic system. Georgia publicly committed to establishing the rule of law and building democratic institutions many years ago, but the signing of the Association Agreement (AA), with the European Union (EU) on June 27, 2014 made its obligations on human rights, democratization, and good governance legally binding as part of the European integration process. The agreement not only brought Georgia closer to the EU; it also reaffirmed Georgia's position as the center of gravity for Western engagement in the South Caucasus and the area covered by the EU's Eastern Partnership. Establishing a sustainable, law-based system of governance has become central to Georgia's aspirations to become a fully-fledged member of the democratic family of nations, and this goal is repeatedly supported by politicians of all persuasions.

While the signing of the AA with the EU and Brussels' decision to grant a visa-free regime for Georgia and Ukraine are significant steps forward, the country has a credibility problem due to Tbilisi's continued lack of progress in reinforcing its unconsolidated democracy.

The past few years have also brought challenges, including democracy fatigue. While the majority of the population still supports alignment with the West, Euro-Atlantic skepticism is growing due to continuous disappointments, and pro-Russian forces are gaining momentum. Elite and popular attitudes toward the West, especially NATO, are noticeably less sanguine than they were just two years ago.¹ Weakening support for the

¹ According to the Tbilisi-based Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 31 percent of Georgians reported that they will benefit more if the country rejects Euro-Atlantic integration in exchange for better relations with Russia, up from 20 percent in 2014. See "NDI-Commissioned Public Opinion Survey," Civil.ge, January 16, 2017, available at <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29775>.

Euro-Atlantic course can pose a serious problem for the process of democratic consolidation in Georgia, including the institutionalization and maturation of Georgia's democracy. If the West wants Georgia to remain firmly in its camp, it will eventually have to make a serious commitment, rather than calling for vaguely defined close relations. The West's reluctance to get involved in strategic issues may harm both the democratic processes in Georgia and the West's reputation.

This chapter discusses current political challenges in Georgia stemming from the ongoing democratization and Europeanization processes. The chapter argues that while Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration is not in the cards at the moment, the West should strongly support Georgia's irreversible Europeanization and the step-by-step inclusion and close political association of Georgia to the EU and the broader transatlantic community. As there is no clearly defined goal from EU and NATO, the country needs a clear road map from its Western partners on how to move forward without damaging its Euro-Atlantic identity. The chapter also focuses on the flaws of the Georgian government and failures in Western strategy, and proposes some recommendations to fix them. The chapter ends with a list of recommendations addressed to the Georgian government and civil society actors, as well as policy makers in the EU and the West.

Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Prospects and Reality

Georgia looks to the West, yet it seems that constructing a durable democracy and a productive economy in an unstable security environment is a major challenge for the country. Although the current Georgian administration has been less visible on the international stage than its predecessor, Tbilisi is still on track with its Europeanization policy and has started a new chapter of internal development—"irreversible Europeanization."² The main objectives of Tbilisi's self-declared course include closer association with the European Union, obtaining a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO, securing economic support from the West, and instituting a visa-free regime under the Eastern Partnership program. This trajectory is supported by all major political parties in the country. The new course also envisages engagement in constructive dialogue with Russia

² Davit Zalkaliani, "Georgian Foreign Policy in a New Era," Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary, March 18, 2014, available at [https://www.chatham-house.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140318 GeorgianForeignPolicyZalkaliani.pdf](https://www.chatham-house.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/20140318%20GeorgianForeignPolicyZalkaliani.pdf).

without sacrificing Georgia's national interests, but stopping short of formal diplomatic relations with Moscow. This policy, however, is not widely supported by the opposition.³ Overall, although there is no indication that Georgia will become a member of either NATO or the EU in the near future, most Georgians continue to support membership in both organizations, which they perceive not only as a guarantee of security but a symbol of their belonging to the West.⁴

While the country's Western friends expect the Georgian political class to deliver on promises to improve the democratization process, incentives offered by the Euro-Atlantic community are not sufficient, especially as each Western carrot comes with a Russian stick. While few Georgians would disagree that NATO membership is desirable, it is not entirely assured that Western integration will prevail over the issue of territorial integrity. Understanding this reality, the Kremlin tries to exploit any weaknesses in Tbilisi to regain influence over Georgian politics after losing leverage following the 2008 war. As Georgia is not a member of any regional security organization and its NATO prospects remain uncertain, Moscow also attempts to lure Georgia back to its security realm by hinting that some face-saving solutions might be found with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the auspices of the Moscow-sponsored Eurasian Union. As a result of this situation, the Georgian public has been widely exposed to Russian propaganda. A media monitoring report conducted by the Tbilisi-based Media Development Foundation,⁵ which studies anti-Western propaganda, documented a significant increase in the intensity of anti-Western and pro-Russian discourse in Georgian media in the past year.

In this delicate situation, constant and consistent dialogue between Georgia and its Western partners can help ensure that the country remains on the path to democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration regardless of political pressure from the Kremlin. The West also needs to change its government-centered approach and focus more on societal level interac-

³ Kornely Kakachia, "Europeanisation and Georgian Foreign Policy," in *The South Caucasus Between Integration and Fragmentation*, (Brussels: European Policy Center, May 2015), pp. 11–18.

⁴ "Most NATO Members in Eastern Europe See It As Protection," Gallup, February 10, 2017, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx>.

⁵ "Anti-Western Propaganda Media Monitoring Report 2014–2015," available at http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Anti-Western_Propaganda_Media_Monitoring_Report.pdf.

tions. One of the major weaknesses of the current Europeanization process is the gap between Georgian society and the rest of the EU, which exists due to the lack of common experiences and participation in common public debates. Georgia is part of Europe in terms of rhetoric, but in reality there is very limited knowledge and understanding in Georgia about EU realities, European perceptions toward Georgia and the implications of international events/developments to Georgia. The EU is perceived as a foreign policy goal and addressed from the perspective of seeking membership, even though Georgian society could start integration into the NATO/EU public space without formal membership in the political organization by expanding participation in common discussions.

But this also requires the Euro-Atlantic community to take concrete steps to further Georgia's integration with the Alliance and to avoid policies that combine polite assurances in public with private indifference or aversion. If Georgia does not receive some sort of upgrade in its status with NATO or EU in the near future, it may result in a serious blow for the domestic forces that support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. This could also dampen popular enthusiasm for the country's integration with the West, which may lead to the erosion and eventual crumbling of the nationwide consensus on the issue. Georgia needs a political compass or clear road map from its Western partners on how to move forward without damaging its Euro-Atlantic identity.

Strengthening the Democratic Agenda: Democracy and Sustained Reform Matters

Building a modern, sovereign state has been the top priority for the Georgian leadership over the past 25 years, a task which has consumed most of the country's energy and material resources.⁶ As Georgia is proud to be a front-runner in European integration among Eastern partnership countries, the Europeanization of the country has become the principal ideological tool for Georgian political elites. Europeanization is primarily driven by internal dynamics, and it has been one of the few issues the government and the opposition have agreed on. The signature and ratification of the Association Agreement with the EU is seen by Georgia's political elite as a guarantee to cement the country's pro-Western track. It also

⁶ Alexander Kupatadze, "The Quest for Good Governance: Georgia's Break with the Past," *Journal of Democracy* 27(1):110–123.

serves as a modernization action plan, which has a significant impact on the social, economic and political landscape of the country.

In recent years, Georgia has managed to enhance its political plurality. In 2012, for the first time since its independence from the Soviet Union, the country experienced a peaceful transfer of power. The country's party politics are more diverse than ever before, and a transition from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system of government has helped balance the distribution of power, which previously was overly concentrated in the hands of the president. However, Georgia's ability to consolidate its political institutions around a durable democratic culture is uncertain and still faces a number of challenges.⁷ Left unchecked, these challenges could undermine the country's relations with the West, its stability, and the social and economic bases of the Georgian state. Today, when Georgia's drive for Euro-Atlantic integration seems to have stalled, democratic reforms will be critical to Georgia's acceptance in the Euro-Atlantic community.⁸ This raises the question: what should be at the top of the agenda of the Georgian government and public at this point?

While Georgia is far ahead in terms of democratic development compared to its immediate neighbors, the state of Georgian economics, democracy, and political stability is still far from the Western standards it aspires to meet. Although the country's legislative framework has changed significantly in recent years, the application of a democratic electoral process remains a serious problem. The weak delegation of authority, poor communication with the general public, the failure of government agencies to execute the tasks they need to complete, and weak horizontal links between the political institutions all remain problematic. With the current geopolitical uncertainties amid Western strategic and civilizational protectionism, Georgian democracy looks increasingly "like an island, and not the beacon of Western-style liberalism as it was once hailed."⁹ As the country has shown ample commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, a choice that is tied up in the strings of democracy promoting conditionality, large seg-

⁷ David Aprasidze, "State-Building and Democratization in Georgia: Have the Limits Been Reached?" *OSCE Yearbook 2008*, CORE (Centre for OSCE Research), available at <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/08/Aprasidze-en.pdf>.

⁸ "Georgia in the West: A Policy Road Map to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Future," Atlantic Council. October 13, 2011. Available at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/georgia-in-the-west-a-policy-road-map-to-georgias-euroatlantic-future-1>.

⁹ Michael Hikari Cecire, "Georgian Democracy: An Island, Not a Beacon," *New America*, October 13, 2016, available at <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/edition-138/georgian-democracy-island-not-beacon/>.

ments of its population have not seen any benefits from the democratic reforms they keep hearing about. The Georgian Dream government's announced goal is to transform the unconsolidated democratic system into a representative, European-style liberal democracy. This has translated into new concerns over where the government—which enjoys a constitutional supermajority—is headed and how much it can be trusted. The possibility that one party will hold *carte-blanche* is widely feared based on Georgia's recent history as well as some of the government's controversial initiatives.¹⁰ Oppositional forces and civil society have already started to speak up about this potential threat.

Another major obstacle for Georgia to become a European democracy is the persistence of an informal system of political governance, whereby an unaccountable public figure, like former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is believed still to have a say in government decisions, is able to exert undue influence on the government. Ivanishvili, who is outside democratic control and beyond any institutional checks and balances, is believed ultimately to be calling the shots, even though he has not held an official post since he stepped down as prime minister at the end of 2013. The Ivanishvili factor alone makes many Georgians question government transparency. The strongest risk posed to Georgian leadership is the continuing dependence of the nation and its ruling party on the financial resources and the personality of Ivanishvili. Until recently, doubts remained about the government's competence to deal with the opposition responsibly. This concern led to Western officials issuing numerous warnings about selective justice and the persecution of political opponents. This ambiguous situation puts Georgia in a vulnerable position *vis-à-vis* both its commitment to democracy and its foreign policy orientation, and increases regime and institutional uncertainty about the future. As Georgia's democratic transition is still fragile, informal governance and obstacles to the functioning of government branches is a blow to the institution-building process.¹¹ It will be impossible for the country to move to the next stage of democratic development as long as informal governance is a reality and democratic institution-building is undermined by the lack of competent and independent institutions. Such a system of management also runs contrary to European values.

¹⁰ Archil Sikharulidze, "Post-Election Georgia: More Problems to Come?" *New Eastern Europe*, October 27, 2016, available at <http://neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/2166-post-election-georgia-more-problems-to-come>.

¹¹ Jaba Devderiani, "Between Europe and Russia, Oligarchs Rule," *Carnegie Europe*, December, 1, 2016, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/66312>.

Against this background, Georgian society must demonstrate its commitment to further develop its democracy. However, it has become obvious that at present Georgian society lacks both strong political will and experience in democratic governance.¹² There is a lack of know-how on how to organize effective party structures as well as on how to formulate appropriate electoral platforms and build a consensus in a polarized society, which is an essential ingredient of a democratic system.¹³ To date the biggest problem for Georgia's unconsolidated democracy has been the lack of societal forces or a political grouping powerful enough to effectively balance the government.¹⁴ Opposition political parties were not able to offer a challenging political agenda during the election campaign and were incapable of uniting behind a clear program for democratic change. In short, while Georgia has made some progress in recent years with respect to democratic consolidation, there is a growing impression that more must be done to consolidate and institutionalize its democracy. Despite slight improvements on the Democracy Score (improved from 4.64 to 4.61), Georgia's governance is still considered by Freedom House's Regime Classification as a hybrid regime.¹⁵ It is in the interest of the Georgian public to focus on the importance of developing a competitive political landscape by strengthening and democratizing political parties, and deepening their roots in society. It is essential that political parties in the parliament make a genuine commitment to implement key reform priorities. This commitment should go beyond the political parties in parliament and include political parties not represented in parliament, as well as civil society at large. The parliament's strong political will and effective commitment, as well as exercise of its oversight role, are crucial for the implementation of key reform priorities. If Georgia can build a consensus-based society based on a respect for the rule of law, and if it receives assistance from the international community, the country will have a better chance to create a tolerant and pluralistic political culture.

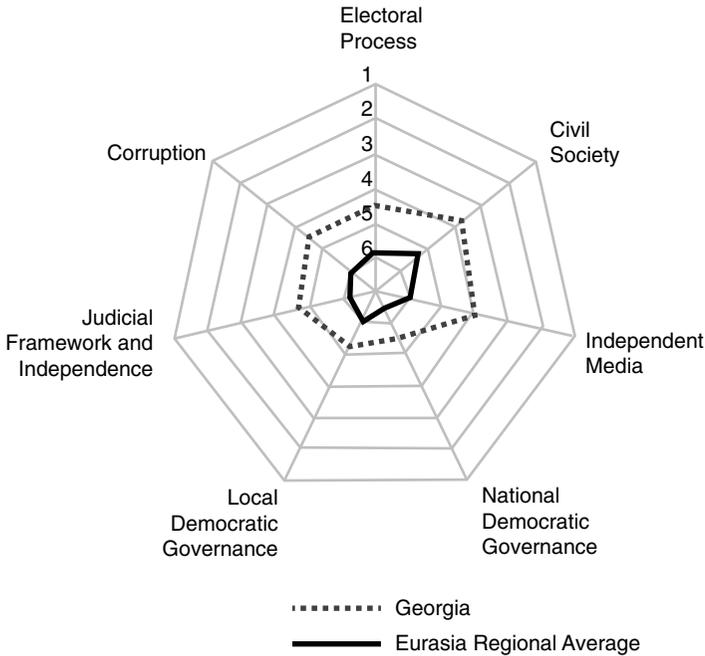
¹² Charles H. Fairbanks Jr., "Georgian Democracy: Seizing or Losing the Chance?" *Journal of Democracy* January 25(1):154–165, available at <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/georgian-democracy-seizing-or-losing-chance>.

¹³ "Extreme Political Polarisation and its Impact on Democracy in Georgia. Summary Report," January 2017, available at: http://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/factfinding_political_polarisation_in_Georgia_summary_en.pdf.

¹⁴ "The First 100 Days of the Georgian Dream Government: A Reality Check," Georgian Institute of Politics report 2017, available at <http://gip.ge/the-first-100-days-of-the-georgian-dream-government-a-reality-check/>.

¹⁵ Freedom House, "Georgia-Nations in Transit. Annual Report, 2016," available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/georgia>.

Figure 1. Democracy, Civil Society and the Rule of Law: Georgia and Eurasia in Comparison



Source: Nations in Transit, Freedom House, 2016. Each spoke of the spider graph represents one category of NIT rated from 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The NIT 2016 ratings reflect the period from January 1 through December 31, 2015.

As EU integration-related reforms are directly related to the development of state capacities in countries like Georgia, the accession carrot continues to be a strong motivation for partner countries to take up new commitments in many areas of integration. According to the last European Commission ENP progress report,¹⁶ while Georgia has acted on most key recommendations, it still needs greater judicial and self-government reform, a stronger investment climate, protection of human rights, and access to economic opportunity for all who seek it. It also needs to develop a more tolerant and pluralistic political culture. Although the progress made by Georgia in fulfilling European standards in the areas outlined by the Action Plan is impressive and a large number of reforms were intro-

¹⁶ ENP Country Progress Report 2014-Georgia. European Commission-Fact Sheet. Brussels, March 25, 2015, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-4686_en.htm.

duced, Georgia, as an EU Partner country, needs to follow the recommendations set by the joint working document developed by European Commission and the European External Action Service for EP countries. This document aims to identify 20 key deliverables for 2020, intended to contribute to the joint work of EU Member States and EP countries and step up actions in four key priority areas: a) economic development and market opportunities; b) strengthening institutions and good governance; c) connectivity, moving towards diversified and vibrant economy, creating favorable conditions to create jobs in new sectors, attracting investments and fostering employability.

In conclusion, to boost Georgia's successful transformation, its policy-makers need to bring the country's style of governance closer to a functional system of checks and balances in which more power resides with the parliament. There are no easy quick fixes to these impediments, as some of them are rooted in Georgian political culture and will take a long time to change. As Georgia's Western partners, the United States and the EU can play a role here by focusing more on Civil Society Organizations (SCO) as the main reform agents. The EU and the United States should increase their leverage to empower citizens and SCOs in their push to reform their own governments. Moreover, the EU should make its assistance to the Georgian government conditional on the sufficient inclusion of citizens' representatives and NGOs in the process of democratic reforms.¹⁷ NGOs can play an important role in monitoring the reform process, using benchmarks highlighted in Eastern partnership roadmap (Electoral standards, Regional and local authorities, Judiciary, Common Foreign and Security Policy, fight against corruption, fight against cybercrime, etc.) to assess the state of progress achieved by Georgia in EU integration affairs and in its implementation of obligations. As participants in the EU's Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, SCOs play some role in ongoing constitutional and electoral reforms, supporting rule of law and freedom of the media. The NGO sector can play a decisive role in combating the influence of anti-Western voices and Russian anti-Western propaganda in Georgia, and advocating for greater accountability, transparency and a reform-oriented agenda. While civil society in Georgia may not be as strong as before the Rose Revolution, the transformational role of civil

¹⁷ Bidzina Lebanidze, "Democracy Under Stress: Western Fatigue, Russian Resurgence, and Their Implications for Democratic Processes in Georgia," Georgian Institute of Politics, Policy brief, February 2016, available at <http://gip.ge/democracy-under-stress-western-fatigue-russian-resurgence-and-their-implications-for-democratic-processes-in-georgia/>.

society seems to be the most important phenomenon for the country and should not be underestimated. Various activists, NGOs and civil society groups have become real players at different levels of authority, including the highest offices in the land. All parties across the political spectrum also need to demonstrate how, by behaving like responsible actors, they can lead the country toward a more stable and peaceful transition aimed to consolidating its infant democratic governance. Though Georgia has maintained a democratic trajectory in its domestic reform process, areas such as media freedom still need improvement. These aspects are especially important because they will set the stage for the political transformation that will follow and the United States and the European Union must redouble their efforts to support Georgia.

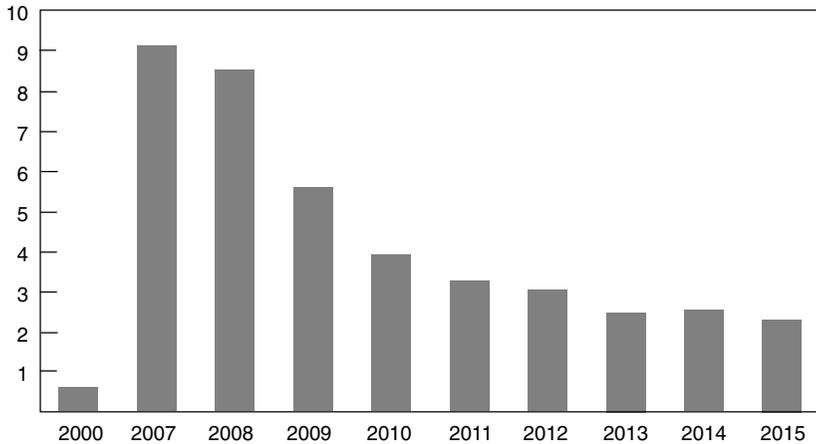
Georgia in the West's Strategic Calculations: Time to Rethink?

Georgia is strategically important for the West, as it “lies on one of the most significant energy transit routes of the post-Cold War era—the southern route for oil and gas exiting the Caspian Basin to Mediterranean, European, and global markets.”¹⁸ Conversely, by pursuing the so-called shelter strategies of bilateral and multilateral alliances, the West remains vital for Georgia's security and development.¹⁹ Securing Georgia as an independent, integrated, stable, and economically successful democracy is in the interests of both NATO and the European Union, as this projects the interests and values of Western countries and institutions toward all intersecting regions.²⁰ Losing Georgia and the South Caucasus in general would be incredibly unhelpful if the West hopes for continued reductions in global petroleum prices, and energy independence from unfriendly, or potentially unfriendly, states. Despite the number of challenges Georgia faces, the country actively contributes to global security and stability through the various actions and measures undertaken in different fields. First of all, Georgia actively contributes to international peace and security

¹⁸ Neal Macfarlane, “Georgia: Risk and Opportunity,” Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, 2008. pp. 1-10, available at https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/cdfai/pages/96/attachments/original/1413689047/Georgia_Risk_and_Opportunity.pdf?1413689047.

¹⁹ Anders Wivel, “Living on the Edge: Georgian Foreign Policy between the West and the Rest,” *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1(1).

²⁰ Dov Lynch, “Why Georgia matters,” Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper No. 86-01, February 2006, available at: <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/why-georgia-matters/>.

Figure 2. Georgia's Military Expenditure (% of GDP)

Data from database: World Development Indicators. Last Updated: 03/23/2017.

thought ISAF to make international security more resilient to adverse developments. In per-capita terms, Georgia's contribution to ISAF was second only to the United States, and the country has consistently spent more than 2 percent of its GDP on defense.²¹

This contribution should enhance stability and security, not only in the Euro-Atlantic area, but also beyond its borders. Georgians have been fighting shoulder to shoulder with allied forces without caveats in the most dangerous region of Afghanistan. In spite of losses, the country remains committed to ISAF as well as to the post-ISAF reality, and has offered to contribute to supporting Afghan National Security Forces. Although Georgia's level of cooperation with NATO is unmatched among the other post-Soviet republics, the stalled process of acquiring MAP is frustrating for the country's elites and public. This is not because Georgia is failing to meet expectations. As former U.S. Ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute noted while still in office,²² Russia and the "strategic envi-

²¹ Military expenditure (% of GDP), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International security, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&series=MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS&country=GEO#>.

²² "No Chance of NATO Expansion for Years, U.S. Ambassador Says," Reuters, World News, April 22, 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-expansion-idUSKCN0XJ1GM>.

ronment” that it created in its neighborhood has “put a break on NATO expansion” for the foreseeable future. As a result many Georgians question NATO’s credibility and value-based approach. Some even think that if the Alliance is truly based on values, NATO would have admitted Georgia several years ago and not Montenegro, which signed an accession protocol in 2016.²³ While Montenegro’s incorporation into NATO sends a positive signal that the door remains open to future aspirants, Georgia skeptics inside NATO claim that Georgia cannot be defended militarily and that inviting Georgia to join would unnecessarily antagonize Russia.²⁴

Consequently, the gradual death of Euro-Atlantic conditionality—the policy linking the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration with substantial local reforms—has left Western states with few means to exercise leverage over Georgia. While both the EU and the United States agree that Georgia, together with Ukraine, is a special case in the post-Soviet space, they do not seem to agree on the geopolitical future of these countries. Both the EU and the United States want to establish a democratically-governed “ring of friends” in post-Soviet space that is not troubled by violent conflicts, dysfunctional societies, and flourishing organized crime. The West has also shown that it is willing to provide Georgia with aid but is unwilling to protect Georgia at any cost.²⁵

The U.S. Approach

The U.S. government and Congress recognize Georgia as an indivisible part of wider Europe, with broad bipartisan support for Georgia in the Senate and the House. The bilateral relationship between the two countries has been strong through many administrations in both Washington and Tbilisi, and the United States has become one of the main international guarantors of Georgia’s sovereignty. Following Russia’s aggression in 2008, \$1 billion in assistance was pledged to Georgia for economic recovery. The United States has expressed strong support for Georgia, which is reflected in the U.S. Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, signed in

²³ Beka Kiria, “NATO Is Giving Montenegro a Chance. Why Not Us?” *The National Interest*, July 7, 2016, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/nato-giving-montenegro-chance-why-not-us-16828>.

²⁴ David J. Kramer and Damon Wilson, “NATO: Don’t Abandon Georgia,” August 7, 2016, available at <http://www.politico.eu/article/nato-should-not-abandon-georgia-uk-referendum-brexit-uncertainty-european-project/>.

²⁵ Stephan F. Jones, *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 244.

January 2009, which states that “our two countries share a vital interest in a strong, independent, sovereign, unified, and democratic Georgia.”²⁶ Donald Trump’s election as U.S. president, however, may bring tremendous uncertainty to Georgia. During his pre-election campaign he made it clear that he is no longer interested in promoting global democracy and hinted that the United States would become less engaged with the rest of the world.

A major foreign policy challenge for Tbilisi will be how the new U.S. Administration will deal with Russia’s new international assertiveness and foreign military adventures. It is incumbent for countries in this region, including Georgia, that enjoy support from Western allies to make it clear that any new U.S.-Russia cooperation should not come at the expense of the interests of friends and allies.²⁷ For instance, after Russia cemented its military presence in the occupied breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and neglected to fulfill its obligations under the agreement it signed at the end of the conflict, many in Tbilisi feared that Washington would throw Georgia under the bus in the name of a new reset with Russia. President Trump has since made a U-turn in foreign policy, however, now describing the NATO alliance as a “bulwark of international peace and security.” Trump admitted that the United States was “not getting along with Russia at all” and that relations between the two global powers may be at an “all-time low,” so earlier fears may have been seem overwrought.²⁸

A deeper problem is the growing number of Europeans calling for a return to business as usual. When taken together, it seems that Western resolve to confront Russia over Georgia or Ukraine is weakening. Apart from the endless arguments over whether granting MAP to Georgia would encourage Russian President Vladimir Putin to further escalate tension with Tbilisi, this unwillingness also stems from the fact that most European governments do not believe Georgia’s territorial integrity matters that much to their own security.

²⁶ “United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership,” Bureau Of European And Eurasian Affairs, January 9, 2009, available at <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/121029.htm>.

²⁷ Donald Rumsfeld, “America’s Vital Interests Are at Stake in Georgia,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2016, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-vital-interests-are-at-stake-in-georgia-1479861103>.

²⁸ “US: ‘We Can’t Have This Relationship with Russia’ Amid Tensions on Syria,” Skynews, April 13, 2017, available at <http://news.sky.com/story/us-we-cant-have-this-relationship-with-russia-amid-tensions-on-syria-10834845>.

Georgia remains a successful example of what can be achieved with the support of EU and NATO, and it remains a model for other countries. Moscow does not seriously accept Tbilisi's assurance that Georgia can be an equally reliable partner for both Russia and the West. Russia's position also makes it clear that Moscow will never, or at least as long as the current regime or one similar to it is in place, be comfortable with a Georgia that either seeks to join NATO, enjoys strong ties to powerful Western countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, or simply wants to chart its own foreign policy course. Finding new approaches to this challenge requires energy, creativity and a willingness to take risks, as well as a few breaks. Georgia's Western partners recommend strategic patience towards Moscow on the road to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. But, without a clear strategic objective, there is little sense to maintaining such patience. Georgia needs to receive a very strong, united message from the new U.S. administration regarding its Euro-Atlantic integration as well as how to deal with expectation management at home (ongoing cooperation to host training exercises with the United States and the United Kingdom is a good step in this direction, but not enough). Moreover, as there still many uncertainties in global politics, the Georgian government must be nimble in its efforts to maintain a close relationship with Washington and prevent Georgia from being a casualty in the budding relations between Presidents Trump and Putin. Whether or not it can accomplish this in the near future will have a tremendous bearing on the future of Georgia's security and, indeed, its sovereignty.

The EU Approach

The recent refugee crisis has profoundly influenced the politics of the European Union at both the supranational level and the level of individual member states. Its repercussions have been strongly felt in southeastern border countries, including Georgia. As Georgia maintains a steady pace towards integrating with European space, and its bold reforms are truly unparalleled in any other country in the vicinity, Brussels is struggling with as-yet obscure efforts to lay down a formidable and far-reaching pan-European project that could include Georgia.²⁹

²⁹ Kakha Gogolashvili, "The EU and Georgia: The Choice is in the Context," Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009, available at <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=170546>.

Interestingly, while Washington sees Georgia as a European country and part of the European security architecture, many in EU member states have a different perception of the role of Georgia in a wider European context. While the EU aims to support democracy to the Eastern Partnership countries, it is denying Georgia the prospect of one day joining the European club.³⁰ Even though successive governments have been outspoken on their intention to become an EU member, the country has never been considered for candidate status. To some, Georgia and the South Caucasus are simply not “Europe.”³¹ Many question the importance of this unstable and conflict-ridden region for Europe. In addition, EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has ruled out further admissions for the duration of his term, saying that the EU needs time to accommodate the last group of new members.³² Moreover, whereas the EU has been willing to assist Georgia in its democratic transition, it has not always invested enough resources to assist the Black Sea country, especially in terms of hard security and territorial conflicts. EU policymakers are especially reluctant to get involved in Georgia’s ongoing tensions with Russia.³³ The EU’s reluctance harms both the democratic processes in Georgia and the West’s reputation, which makes Georgia’s place in Europe and its European perspective the subject of controversy.

European integration perspectives for the Georgian state remain relatively vague, divergent interests and inclinations within the EU are having an impact on security issues, with a clear-cut polarization between core member states and the expansion-driven east European states. Eastern European states have a vision of a wider, more robust and open Europe that surpasses the vision of most EU members. They also have shared aspirations regarding the democratization of Eastern Partnership countries. While their foreign policy and interests might differ significantly in details, they share an attitude of support and camaraderie toward Georgia and other neighbors like Ukraine and Moldova. In the meantime, it seems

³⁰ Felix Kartte, “Russia Beams Message into Georgia: ‘You Belong to Us,’” July 5, 2016, available at <http://www.politico.eu/article/russia-message-to-georgia-you-belong-to-us-eu-allure-waning-tbilisi/>.

³¹ Jos Boonstra, “EU Perception of the Caucasus Must Change,” *The Clarion*, Madrid, October 9, 2015, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28640>.

³² Frank Schimmelfennig, “Juncker’s Enlargement Standstill Threatens the EU’s Credibility,” November 12 2015, available at <http://europesworld.org/2015/11/12/junckers-enlargement-standstill-threatens-the-eus-credibility/#.WI5UBvI96Uk>.

³³ Leonid Litra and Ivane Chkhikvadze, “EU Membership Perspective for Georgia, Moldova, And Ukraine: Impossible, Forgotten, or Hidden?” *Institute of World Policy*, 2016, available at http://pasos.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/EU_Membership-_net_eng.pdf.

that the core European countries, which are still dealing with Brexit and other important issues, may require some respite for sorting out internal challenges and recalibrating an approach to extending further eastward. Due to the current enlargement fatigue among both the population and the political elites of EU member states, the EU may not be able to grant Georgia (and other Eastern Partnership states) a membership perspective in the short or even medium term.³⁴

In this delicate situation, EU partners recommend strategic patience to Tbilisi, and they hope that Georgians will accommodate it responsibly and with an understanding typical for a European nation.³⁵ But that is where the EU approach risks failure: the lack of a full-fledged membership perspective may significantly thwart Georgia's European aspirations. Strategic patience is frustrating in its lack of results. Without a clear strategic objective, such patience does not make sense. At the same time, however, the mentioned respite and recalibration could allow for a pause on the Georgian end too, allowing for a deepening of institutional and civic reforms, enhancing approximation with EU legal requirements and standards, and, most importantly, a much-needed accumulation of wealth and upgrade of living standards to the levels commensurate with those of the member states.

How Can Georgia and the West Move Forward?

Many uncertainties exist in Western politics. For Tbilisi, this means Georgia needs to do more than just secure stronger support from its close partners (the United States, central European and Baltic countries); it also needs to overcome the reluctance of other "Georgia skeptic" member states who seem content with the Alliance's existing composition. Rather than pinning the blame for this on the Europeans, the Georgian government should acknowledge that, over the past decade, it has not done as much to build ties with European partners as it did with the United States. While close relations with Washington are essential, Tbilisi needs to be proactive with specific EU member states to help them overcome any lin-

³⁴ Tania Börzel, "Building Sand Castles? How the EU Seeks to Support the Political Integration of its New Members, Accession Candidates and Eastern Neighbours," IN MAXCAP Working Paper No. 9, 2015, "Maximizing the Integration Capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and Prospects for Enlargement and Beyond." Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

³⁵ Judy Dempsey, "Georgia-Waiting for NATO, Waiting for the EU," April 18, 2016, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=63358>.

gering reservations. The example of Swedish and Polish support in the establishment of the Eastern Partnership indicates that continuous support from European countries on Georgia's path to NATO and EU integration has been, and remains, vital. Despite the fact that membership in the EP did not contain the promise of eventual EU membership, it played an important role in consolidating the pro-European foreign policy vector of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Specifically, Georgia must consolidate its links with Germany, the country that has the most persuasive powers in European affairs. Germany's support of Georgia is essential for its prospective integration with the EU and with NATO.³⁶ Georgian elites still have to make better inroads with Berlin's policymakers. Georgia's quest for a European perspective needs strong backing from at least one EU heavyweight (like Germany or France), just as France pushed for Romanian accession to the EU in 2007. Even though the long-term strategic decision to move closer to the EU and NATO is non-negotiable for Tbilisi, it is not clear that Germany is prepared to play a dedicated role in upholding Georgia's objectives.

While Germany does not principally object to Georgia joining NATO, Berlin has no clear concept of how to deal with Georgia's strategic aspirations to become part of Western institutions. Germany remains unconvinced about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future, especially in regards to granting Georgia a NATO MAP. The German government's reservations put pressure on pro-Western political parties and unintentionally contribute to the increased popularity of Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in Georgia. In general Berlin, together with its European partners, creates uncertainty about Georgia by exercising some ambiguity about the country's European prospects.³⁷ While it remains to be seen what direction the new U.S. Administration will take toward post-Soviet countries, strong transatlantic support could be crucial to revive a German-Georgian strategic partnership. If the new U.S. Administration is particularly keen on sharing the burden of global crisis management, it could outsource some tasks to Germany, its most important partner in Europe, prompting Germany to take the lead in areas such as Georgia's Europeanization project. To date, the West has failed to put forward a

³⁶ "Third Georgian-German Strategic Forum Policy Recommendations and Observations," Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Regional Program Political Dialogue South Caucasus, November 27, 2014, available at http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_39759-544-1-30.pdf?141127125803.

³⁷ Jaba Devdariani, "Germany Undercuts Georgia's European Optimism," June 10, 2016, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=63783>.

cohesive foreign policy on Georgia: the Georgian public sees Germany's changing Russia policy as sobering, and they feel that Germany's strong support for Georgia's Western aspirations is essential, if not vital, for the future of their country.

While European integration has been a mantra in Georgia, the overall focus of the discussion has been either too technical or too high-level and political and, as a result, has failed to put the right emphasis on a wider process of Europeanization that would go beyond specific EU accession or association criteria. The fixation on technocratic benchmarks has not only downplayed dubious local political practices, but has also diluted public commitment to reform. Often forgotten in these discussions is the complex reality of Europeanization as a two-way street, whereby EU-wide challenges and discourses in EU member states impact Europeanization processes in the neighborhood. One of the challenges affecting Georgia and other EP countries is the intellectual disconnect between those societies and the European Union. With the new visa-free regime enforced with the EU, the Georgian government needs to strengthen the country's participation in the common public debate with European counterparts. The government, as well as the NGO sector, should do its best to increase the public's understanding of the European realities and issues that drive public policy in the EU states by engaging in people-to-people dialogue. This is important as the positive developments related to the visa liberalization process have not yet had an impact on the everyday lives of the Georgia people, many of whom still confront widespread unemployment and poverty. More accurate handling and realistic self-assessment of Georgian-EU and NATO-Georgian relations by the government could also contribute to managing high expectations regarding the Euro-Atlantic integration process.³⁸ In addition, the government also needs to continue the ongoing information campaign, which stresses that visa liberalization does not automatically grant the citizens of Georgia access to the EU labor market.

On the other hand, joining the European Economic Area (EEA)—including free labor mobility—might be the best-case middle-term scenario for Georgia. The Georgian government should seek a special

³⁸ Aldis Austers, Ilvija Bruge, and Andris Spruds, eds., "Dilemmas Of Europeanisation: Political Choices And Economic Transformations in the Eastern Partnership Countries," Latvian Institute of International Affairs and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Riga, 2016, available at http://liia.lv/en/publications/dilemmas-of-europeanisation-political-choices-and-economic-transformations-in-the-eastern-partnership-countries-534?get_file=1.

arrangement with the EU that would allow Georgian workers to enter the EU labor market for a limited time of period. As unrealistic as that may seem right now, against the background of the migrant crisis and the rise of far right in the EU countries, in the long term the opening of the EU labor market may prove to be a win-win solution for both parties: aging EU countries will need to develop more sophisticated mechanisms of controlled immigration to sustain their social systems, and Georgia, together with other EP states, can provide low-cost workers with fewer integration problems. To alleviate anxieties among the population in EU member states, additional control mechanisms can be established to put temporal and segmental limits on the labor force coming from the EP states.

As the EU greenlights Georgia's long-awaited visa-free travel, both Washington and Brussels need to make sure this privilege also covers the Russian occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁹ Additionally, Tbilisi has to do its part by constructively participating in the Geneva discussions; enhancing Georgia's engagement policy towards the breakaway regions; and taking pragmatic steps to further open channels of communication, encouraging trade, education, travel, and investment across the administrative boundary line.

Conclusion

Despite the many flaws in its strategy, the West is still the main guarantor of Georgia's democratic consolidation and its unstable security. Georgia is perceived by the EU as a promising neighbor on its eastern frontier: it remains a successful example of what can be achieved with the support of EU and NATO in Eastern Partnership countries. In recent years, Georgia has made major advances in its relations with the EU and Georgia's pro-Western orientation has always enjoyed high approval ratings from the public. Georgian society remains committed to liberal values and democracy despite geopolitical challenges and some disillusionment with Europe. By signing the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union on June 27, 2014, Georgia created a new momentum for Georgia's Europeanization project. Regardless of the fact that the agreement does not guarantee EU membership in the foreseeable future, there is an assumption among the Georgian public that it will create the necessary conditions for

³⁹ "Georgia, Sokhumi, Tskhinvali Reject Tbilisi's EU Visa Liberalization Offer," *Civil.ge*, Tbilisi, February 3, 2017, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29834>.

potential membership negotiations, should the parties be interested in advancing their cooperation. Regional pundits and Georgia watchers agree that the success of the project will be judged by how well the government's politics and agreements are implemented in the country.

Georgia possesses a strong track record with regard to reforms and contributions in North Atlantic security, and the country needs to keep active and be more visible in the international arena so that Georgia is not forgotten by the Euro-Atlantic community, but rather is included and rewarded for the progress it has made. But given the European Union's inward focus and the uncertainties surrounding the new U.S. Administration's policies toward the Eastern Partnership countries, Tbilisi has little choice but to keep its options open to maintain some flexibility in its foreign policy. As the international strategic environment is turning more hostile to value-based policy, Tbilisi has to pursue strategic patience with regard to Euro-Atlantic integration, and should wait for a window of opportunity despite the fact that, at some point, strategic patience for Georgia is little more than a euphemism for doing nothing and hoping for the best.

Georgia's NATO membership has been put on hold, which means it is important for the Georgian government to conduct an effective expectation management policy in order to ensure the continuing support of the population toward the NATO integration process and to forestall disappointment with the Western policy of prolonging membership decisions. In the current reality, when full membership in EU and NATO is not in sight, Georgia should concentrate on two main objectives: further deepening economic integration and achieving free labor mobility with the EU. Moreover, it is high time to concentrate on the implementation of the Association Agreement with EU and continue reforms. The country needs to be at the forefront of democratic reforms and strengthen its image as a bastion of modern democratic reforms—that is the only way to attract the attention of the West. There is also an opportunity for the Georgian government to implement reforms and show Western partners a clear vision of how to achieve a good governance model.

At the same time, further democratization and liberalization—as well as a peaceful end to Georgia's conflicts—are unrealistic without the credible security conditions that would create a new framework for stable domestic development. Georgia still sits outside the European “zone of democratic peace” that is mostly comprised of EU and NATO member states. Georgia's Western friends need to develop a new strategic vision toward the country, as Tbilisi's appetite is growing and the carrots offered by the

Euro-Atlantic community are not enough, especially as each Western carrot comes with a Russian stick. If Georgian security is not sufficiently guaranteed, the situation may reach a point when Georgian public will no longer be able to afford futile enthusiasm. In order to avoid this situation, Georgia needs a political compass, an idea of where it is heading that has been approved by the Western powers. A clear commitment by the EU (and NATO) to accept Georgia's European perspective could be a strong inspirational incentive to stick to democratic reforms even without the immediate accession perspective. However, this must be followed by the step-by-step inclusion and close political association of Georgia to the EU and the broader trans-Atlantic community. Whether or not this can be done in the nearest future will have tremendous bearing on the future security, and indeed sovereignty, of Georgia. It may also settle domestic security fears and act as a deterrent to future conflicts, and could stimulate democratic consolidation in Georgia. The more stable and successful Georgia becomes, the more it will encourage neighboring countries to pursue meaningful democratic reforms.⁴⁰ The obstacles seem insurmountable at times. But, despite these challenges, Georgians must stay the course on the long road to democracy. And the United States and Europe must continue to walk with them. Finding new approaches to this conundrum requires energy, creativity, the willingness to take risks, and a few lucky breaks.

As the EU is not ready to deepen its relations with Partnership countries and is giving no sign that it wants to reciprocate Georgia's "West-ophilia," any further Western policy should consciously pursue the longer-term strategic vision set below. The EU should develop a more differentiated approach to the EP countries that is based less on geography and more on democratic achievements and strategic importance. The EU should wage a battle of narratives to contest Russian propaganda, while also offering new incentives, such as more economic benefits or new and more advanced ways of integration, to stabilize democratization reforms and stipulate the government's continuing adherence to democratic norms. Moreover, the EU should continue financial assistance to Georgia, alongside the IMF, the European Investment Bank and the EBRD. Macroeconomic assistance must be tied to a reform agenda to improve public finance

⁴⁰ "Georgia's Security Challenges and Policy Recommendations," CSIS Policy Brief Number One, July 2012. Available at: https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/legacy_files/files/publication/120716_Georgia_Policy_Brief_One.pdf.

management, increase efficiency of the social safety net, and to adopt policies supporting the implementation of the DCFTA.

Agriculture is a socially important sector of the Georgian economy, as over 42% of the population lives in rural areas. The EU and the European Investment Bank should allocate funding and considerable investment projects. If that succeeds, the sector could play a key role in increasing employment, reducing poverty, and strengthening the country. However, a real improvement in the situation could be brought about by foreign investment, the development of domestic production, increasing exports (including onto EU markets), and finally by opening up the EU's labor market to Georgians. Access to the EU labor market represents the main (and, perhaps, only) channel for an immediate tangible improvement of life for many ordinary Georgians. In addition, Brussels should be more consistent in applying democratizing pressure on the Georgian government to prevent any autocratic backsliding and avoid being identified with officials' misdeeds. While working with government, it is also essential to increase funding for SCOs and make them the main local partners in policy dialogue with the government, both in terms of policy adoption and policy implementation, as well as the reform monitoring process.