



Georgia's Europeanization challenged from within: Domestic foreign policy discourses and increasing polarization

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Georgia's foreign policy, especially the implementation of international agreements, is best understood in the context of domestic contestation among alternative foreign policy views.
- Nativist views exert increasing influence on the Georgian public. Georgia's European partners should engage the Georgian public through civil society support and people-to-people contacts, to build trust and facilitate open debate.
- The exclusive character of differing foreign policy positions further fuels the extreme political polarization. The government and opposition should be encouraged to come together over shared democratic values, instead of playing up the differences.
- Pluralism and tolerance should be encouraged in the public and media debate.

Abstract

Georgia has faced multiple political crises in recent years, with competing foreign policy positions featuring in the crisis discourse. Despite majority support, the official pro-Western course, and especially the implementation of value-related policies (e.g. on gender or minority rights), compete with alternative views. This brief outlines the dominant foreign policy position and two alternative views current in Georgian public discourse, and discusses their impact on Georgian politics. Increasing competition challenges implementation of the country's Europeanization and European integration policies. Moreover, the mutually exclusive character of the various foreign policy positions fuels the pre-existing extreme political polarization in Georgia, often resulting in political crises.

Introduction

Georgian politics suffers from frequent crises, some directly or indirectly concerning the country's foreign policy. The most recent controversy over Russia was sparked off in June 2019, when Sergei Gavrillov, a Russian MP from the Communist Party, addressed the meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy (IAO) from the Georgian Parliament Speaker's seat. The incident triggered oppositional rallies in front of the parliament, with protesters accusing the authorities of inviting '[Russian occupiers](#)'. Kremlin responded by framing the event as 'Russophobia' in Georgia; it imposed a ban on flights and discouraged Russians from traveling to Georgia. Even though members of the Georgian Dream (GD) government, including President Zourabichvili, condemned Gavrillov's visit and some MPs resigned, the division has persisted. Significantly, the event and the government's decision to disperse the protests and charge opposition member Nika Melia (UNM) for instigating intrusion into the parliament spurred further accusations of the government as being 'pro-Russian'. Melia's refusal to pay bail became a key factor in the 2020/21 political crisis where the opposition boycotted the parliament after declaring the parliamentary elections flawed. Although the latter crisis was not focused on foreign policy, each side sought to discredit the other by accusations of playing to Russian interests. This brief discusses how competing foreign policy positions in Georgia contribute to the extreme political polarization which is a significant factor in triggering intractable political crises.

After the change of government in 2012, alternatives to the country's pro-Western foreign policy orientation became especially pronounced, establishing their place in public discourse with nationalistic or pro-Russian actors. Relegated to the fringes during the Saakashvili presidency (2004–2013), with the change of government, groups with Western-sceptical views were able to enter public positions and gain publicity. Internal diversions in the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, as well as its normalization policy with Moscow, encouraged groups that espoused foreign policy views more favourable to cooperation with Russia. After the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia gained seats with a nationalistic agenda that included the demand for normalization of relations with Russia. The proliferation and heightened visibility of far-rightist groups increased after 2015 in Georgia. Beyond the political domain, also certain media outlets, NGOs, civil movements and representatives of Georgian Orthodox Church can also be characterized as Western-sceptical.

Three positions on Georgian foreign policy orientation are identified below: Westernizer, Nativist and Accommodationist. Nativists have increasingly challenged the official Westernizer orientation. In addition, various political groups frequently exploit the exclusive character of these positions to discredit their opponents, further fuelling political polarization and driving political crises.

Three visions of Georgian foreign policy

Westernizer

Since 2012, the pro-Western choice has remained the state's primary discourse, shared by the government and the majority in the Parliament, including the ruling party, Georgian Dream (with the exception of specific individuals) as well as the major opposition parties – United National Movement and European Georgia; Republican Party and Free Democrats, which left the Georgian Dream coalition after the 2016 elections; in addition some representatives of academia and civic society, mostly youth and urban dwellers.

Advocates of this position view the West – more specifically Europe – as a value-based foreign policy choice. Georgia's current European aspirations are seen as the continuation of its historical objectives, based on shared culture and values: modern Europe stands as the role model of democracy and civil values. Georgia lagged behind while under Soviet rule, but now has the chance to catch up. These European aspirations are also favoured because of the expected benefits of security, economic and social development as well as the resolution of territorial disputes.

For the Westernizers, Russia, with its undesirable political system, is on the opposite end of the spectrum of values. It is seen as posing a political and military threat to Georgia. Some officials also see Russia's anti-Western propaganda as a threat '[aimed at diverting the country from its pro-European path](#)'. To emphasize the importance of strengthening ties with the West, the conflict in Ukraine is cited as further proof of the Russian threat. Parallels are drawn between the 2008 August Russo–Georgian war and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis as evidence of Russian aggression and geopolitical ambitions in the region. Without Western support, Georgia is seen as being under threat of disappearing '[from the world map](#)'.

The Westernizers hold an exclusivist view of Russian and Western projects. Participation in any Russian project is out of the question. Seeing Russian foreign policy as static and irreversible, they believe that dealing with Moscow is possible for Georgia only if backed by Western support, and by joining larger security or regional networks such as the EU and NATO. Russian-initiated projects, including the Eurasian Economic Union, are branded as Moscow efforts to further dominate its 'near abroad'.

The Westernizers are particularly sensitive about Western acknowledgement of Georgia's [European] aspirations. For instance, Georgian officials framed visa liberalization in 2017 as proof that Georgia remained committed to European values despite its grim geopolitical status: The European Union was presented as a trustworthy partner that kept its promises. In the context of problems within the EU such as Brexit, this group emphasized Georgia's commitment to Europeanism, also in comparison to some EU member-states. According to President Salome Zourabichvili, Brexit creates an opportunity for Georgian EU membership:

[‘there is a logic that a country that has been steadily moving toward and wanting Europe can’t be treated less than the country that’s steadily moving away from Europe.’](#)

Nativists

The Nativist position is shared by most representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church, civil society representatives such as Georgian March, and several media outlets, including Georgia and the World, Asaval-Dasavali and Sakinformi. Radical nationalist groups tend to operate outside the Parliament and the government, with the exception of the political party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. Although these groups enjoy limited political representation, they have significant influence over a public domain that increasingly challenges the Westernizers. Examples include their influence on the anti-discrimination bill in 2014 and the initiation of constitutional amendment in 2018 defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Arguments in support of this position are widely shared in society. According to a 2019 survey, 46% of Georgians think that the EU threatens Georgian traditions.

The Nativists’ scepticism towards the West is mostly connected to religious and nationalistic views. Georgian and European values are seen as polar opposites: Georgians stand out with their unique culture built on orthodoxy, whereas modern Europe is based on pseudo-liberal values. This dichotomy necessarily clashes with a pro-Western foreign policy choice. Georgia–Western relations are deemed humiliating for Georgia, with the West imposing its liberal ideology and suppressing Georgian traditions and spirituality. Same-sex relationships are cited among the ‘immoral’ Western values, posing a threat to the family values of Georgians.

Further, Nativists perceive Muslims (Muslim immigrants in particular) as a threat. The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia holds anti-Turkish views, often portraying Turkey as [a threat and an occupant](#), in response to charges that Russia plays this role. Advocates of the nativist position see EU visa liberalization as a threat, hinting that the EU wants Georgia to open its borders to Muslim migrants who ‘will settle on Georgian soil while Georgians will migrate to Europe to find jobs; thus, migrants will become the majority in Georgia’. This argument is also used to discredit Europe. Brexit is seen as marking the start of Europe’s disintegration – caused by a moral crisis and policies built on multi-cultural values instead of national ones. Thus, the UK has rejected the a-moral EU that threatens Britain’s national values.

Advocates of this group openly oppose a pro-Western foreign policy, or at least translating it into domestic politics, e.g. adopting an anti-discrimination bill. They do not offer a clear-cut foreign policy alternative, but argue that they are pro-Georgian and have no desire to rely on any external actors. However, some Nativists advocate closer ties between Georgia and Russia, given the shared religious adherence and Russia’s resistance to Western values.

Accommodationists

The Accommodationist position is held by several former members of the Georgian Dream (GD) party, including those from *Industry Will Save Georgia*, as well as *Free Georgia* (Kakha Kukava) and *Democratic Movement – United Georgia* (Nino Burjanadze). These parties are mostly marginal, without parliamentary representation. However, by sharing this position with certain GD members, some of these ideas can influence the policy-making process. Moreover, half of the Georgian population thinks that, in addition to maintaining the pro-Western course, Georgia should maintain good relations with Russia.

Advocates of the Accommodationist position claim to have neither a pro-Western nor a pro-Russian position, identifying themselves as pro-Georgian or ‘Eurorealists’ – but Westernizers see them as pro-Russian. Accommodationists also espouse the Nativist argument as to cultural differences with Europe, but find European civil values acceptable. For instance, the above-mentioned political parties deem it essential to maintain national values in a globalizing world – but they also hold that Georgia is part of the European family. Close relations with Europe are justified as regards achieving the European [economic] quality of life, rather than in terms of common values, as argued by the pro-Westerners.

Despite seeking to cultivate good relations with both the West and Russia, the Accommodationists argue that Georgia should view Russia as the more important actor. The European course should not harm Georgia’s relations with Russia, as the EU is perceived as the weaker player. Accommodationists cite the war in Ukraine as an illustration of the EU’s inability to compete with Russia in the post-Soviet space, evidenced by the lack of EU support provided for Ukraine. In case of a conflict with Russia, support cannot be expected from Europe – that became evident during the August war in 2008. For this reason, the major course of Accommodationist foreign policy involves European integration combined with cooperation with Russia. They also believe that restoring territorial integrity is possible only through intensive dialogue and negotiations with Russia. Improving relations with Russia is considered the way to greater economic wellbeing. Visa liberalization, although seen as a positive development, is a minor issue compared to restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity or reinvigorating the economy. Burjanadze has indicated that a [similar ‘free movement’ agreement with Russia would also be important](#).

While these groups share the goal of European integration, closer ties with NATO are branded as a risky policy that could provoke Russia. They hold that, in such a case, [‘Ukraine would be nothing compared to what happens to Georgia’](#), and emphasize the importance of reassuring Russia that Georgia has no intentions of threatening it by allying with the West.

Conclusion

These three Georgian positions on foreign policy differ in their views of the West, interpreting events in such a way that these differences are confirmed, not challenged. Although Georgia is unlikely to change its foreign policy direction in the near future, it may face challenges from within the domestic domain. In politics, Nativists and Accommodationists have remained marginal: in the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Patriots and United Georgia received only 3.1% and 0.9% of the vote, respectively. However, their views enjoy greater prominence in other settings (e.g. civil society); and some of their arguments – especially those of the Nativists, such as the need to protect traditions and religion from European influence – are widely held in Georgian society. This enables advocates of these positions to exercise direct or indirect influence on various aspects of foreign policy – not least when it comes to translating pro-Western policy into domestic politics in Georgia.

Equally important, the sharp distinction between the positions and their exclusive character further fuels political polarization in Georgia. The GD government, even in the context of economic cooperation policy with Russia and with some of its members leaning towards the Accommodationist position, pursues a pro-Western foreign policy aimed at achieving EU and NATO membership. However, the exclusive character of these foreign policy positions allows the political forces to use these discourses to discredit their opponents and deepen the existing political polarization on ideological grounds. Confrontation of this kind readily triggers political crises, but also radically diminishes the prospects of finding a solution – as recent events have shown.

Endnotes

1. This brief is based on S. Minesashvili (2021), Europe in Georgia's identity discourse: Contestation and the impact of external developments. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 54/1–2, pp.128–155. This brief was prepared for the NUPI GEOPATH project, funded by the Research Council of Norway (project no. 287815).
2. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu2019ge/EUTHREAT>
3. Asaval-Dasavali (2017), Chemi evrop'a - dant'es, betovenisa da tomas manis evrop'a aghar arsebobs [My Europe, the Europe of Dante, Beethoven, and Thomas Mann, no longer exists]. 27 March.
4. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf

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