



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და სავაჭრო-პოლიტიკური ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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ARCHIL GEGESHIDZE



EXPERT OPINION

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Georgia's Foreign Policy Challenges in the Medium Term*

Despite initial scepticism from some in the international community, the new ruling elite that gained power following the 2012 parliamentary elections has remained true to Georgia's strategic choice. In fact, its objective is now to boost Georgia's level of democratic development by securing its deserved place within the cherished European family. Foreign policy targets and milestones are being developed in line with this aim. However, although power has formally changed hands following these elections, the process is not complete. It continues against a complex background of political and legal obstacles and is in danger of stalling. "Tinkering" with Georgia's constitution in recent years led to a highly unusual political situation emerging immediately after the elections. Although the ruling party significantly did admit defeat and the president promised not to stand in the way of the victorious coalition taking power, until the next presidential elections are held, politics will continue to be dominated by the coexistence of two adversarial political forces. After just two weeks following the elections, this process of so-called "cohabitation" came to a standstill, bogged down, amongst other things, by the dismissal of "politically engaged" ambassadors in the capitals of leading Western countries. This deprived the new government of a significant resource in the form of loyal embassies to promote its foreign policy interests in major partner countries. It meant that the new government has had to work extra hard to rid itself of the profane stigma of a "Russian project" by which it was labelled by its former main rival during the election campaign, the United National Movement (UNM). During the election campaign the former ruling party under the leadership of the Georgian President unlawfully used all available state resources to demonise its rival - and it appears to have partially achieved its aim. It managed in particular to persuade some of the political establishment and much of the Western media that "Georgian Dream", headed by its leader, was a pro-Russian political force and, upon rising to power, would undoubtedly abandon the country's Western course. As a result, the new authorities, unlike Saakashvili's team during

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the “Rose Revolution”, have not enjoyed the confidence of the Western powers as they take office, which is so essential for any government in the beginning of its tenure, particularly one that is in some respects relatively inexperienced. This lack of confidence has meant that the Ivanishvili government has faced, amongst other things, open suspicion and even protest from the West over the criminal prosecution of members of the former authorities. The president and leaders of the UNM have manipulated sophisticated PR techniques and their sustained connections to present these moves as politicised and have even managed to convince a significant section of the international public that this is the case. Although almost no-one inside Georgia questions the decision to initiate criminal proceedings against these former officials, this issue has turned into a problem in the international arena, weakening the position of the Ivanishvili government and complicating its prospects of mounting an effective response to other challenges in the short and medium term. In the short term, in particular, this situation could be exploited in negotiations by some difficult partners. Thus, in response to Tbilisi’s proposal to “settle” relations, Moscow requested “more concrete steps”, and subsequently demanded “to see new realities in the form of independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia”. Despite the fact that later on Moscow agreed to the initiation of direct consultations without any preconditions, no easy process awaits in the future, since the “red lines” immediately declared within the political positions of the parties significantly restrict space for any substantial convergence. For their part, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sides “responded” to the initiatives of the new State Minister for conflict issues by hardening their positions, including within the Geneva talks.

These and other examples clearly demonstrate that these partners intend to wait for a more favourable moment when the authorities in Georgia will, supposedly, be more vulnerable. Given this, it will be of crucial importance how “cohabitation” plays out: will the process end peacefully or will it break down and lead to a political crisis? Another crucial factor will be the extent to which the new authorities manage to achieve initial successes in fulfilling their promises to restore justice and improve the socio-economic conditions. Success here would certainly strengthen the starting positions of the new authorities both in their foreign policy and internal endeavours.

In the medium term the principal challenges relate to external factors, the emergence and development of which are outside Georgia's control. Much will be determined by the balance of power between the West and Russia and, consequently, the quality of their relations. This will determine Georgia's ability to accommodate two different foreign policy vectors: membership of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and the normalisation of relations with Russia. This is the most serious challenge, to which the Georgian government will have to direct its efforts in the next few years.

An escalation of tension within the region over the same period cannot be ruled out, in particular an exacerbation of the situation around Nagorno-Karabakh. The possible resumption of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia would cause irreversible damage to the geo-economy of the entire region, including the transit systems crossing Georgian territory, although this is unlikely. Furthermore, it is yet unknown how Russia would act in such a situation and whether it would resort to aggressive action in relation to Georgia's national interests.

Another event which could pose a challenge for Georgia's security in the medium term is instability resulting from a potential conflict between the West and Iran. Depending on the specific geography of the conflict and how the Iranian authorities interpret Tbilisi's role in it, Georgia could be subject to various types of threats, thus it would have to find a "golden mean" in the crisis which could well be difficult. Russia might conceivably exploit such a situation to attempt to make gains that are not in Georgia's national interest.

Yet another potential challenge for Georgia could well be a periodic "conflict spillover" from the North Caucasus. This would involve impromptu infiltration into Georgian territory by informal military units, each causing difficulties of varying degrees of severity in border areas and friction in relations with the Kremlin.

Meantime, the Georgian authorities need not be overly concerned over the sustainability of its policy of non-recognition of its breakaway regions, although the foreign ministry needs to remain alert and pro-active.

The change of government following the parliamentary elections has opened a slight window of opportunity to resolve some key difficulties over Georgia's external relations. However it is not possible to make firm predictions since there are a large number of variables that either currently affect developments or will do so in the future. New issues may arise for which reliable and clear solutions are hard to find. The following deliberation is not intended to give competent answers to specific questions. Rather it offers rationalizations subject to extensive discussion.

1. How will the current nature of “cohabitation” affect the prospects of Georgia joining Euro-Atlanticist organisations?

Criticism of the Georgian authorities by Western governments and the media over continuing arrests of officials from the former regime has been voiced in the past and continues to emerge from time to time. Given NATO's reluctance for geopolitical reasons to accept Georgia as a member, speculation around the events within the country may be seized on as an additional excuse to “postpone” decisions. With regard to the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union, this, despite the aforementioned, is likely to be signed in 2013. Based on the nature of “cohabitation”, Georgia's bilateral relations with the United States and other Western countries have virtually remained unaltered and are unlikely to do so in the future.

2. To what extent are the initiatives/signals of the Georgian government sufficient for the normalisation of bilateral relations with Russia?

Although Russia has less interest in extricating bilateral relations from their current stalemate than Georgia, it is still in its interests to maintain the appearance of good relations providing this does not damage its own political interests. It will therefore enter into mutually advantageous agreements, particularly since the democratic change in government in Georgia will make it difficult for it to reject initiatives and proposals emanating from Tbilisi. However, it should also be noted that reference must not be made to a comprehensive settlement of relations. The incompatibility of the two countries' fundamental in-

terests renders this impossible. In this case, the objective must be the relative improvement of existing relations, which would, if not completely, at least partially reduce the risk of the recurrence of military confrontation.

3. **To what extent are the initiatives/signals of the Georgian government sufficient for launching a direct dialogue with the authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia?**

The fact that the government of Georgia now consists of people with liberal views on conflict opens up an opportunity for the restoration of direct contacts between Tbilisi and Sukhumi/Tskhinvali. At the same time, unrealistic expectations in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali that Tbilisi will make “unilateral concessions” may result in disillusionment among local elites and a corresponding fall in enthusiasm for bilateral dialogue. However, if the current “window of opportunity” closes, it is unlikely that any better prospects for establishing dialogue will arise in the foreseeable future.

4. **How will Russia respond to the realistic prospect of Georgia (and other post-Soviet countries) joining the European Union?**

Since as things stand Russia is not concerned over Georgia joining NATO under existing complex geopolitical conditions, it is not particularly worried about the rapprochement between Georgia and other post-Soviet countries with the European Union since the EU’s strict membership requirements delay the prospect of accession indefinitely. At the same time the process of rapprochement could accelerate, particularly after the signing of Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova and potentially Ukraine and Armenia. This would at least threaten the Kremlin’s plans to create a Eurasian Union based on a common economic space. As soon as it realises that this is a realistic prospect, Moscow will begin a series of measures to prevent it.

* * *

The new authorities in Georgia have inherited a complex situation. On the one hand, Georgia enjoys strong political support from the Western community; while on the other hand, the crisis in relations with Russia

threatens the security and stable development of the country. The new authorities are facing a further dilemma: whether to continue to prosecute former officials and thereby risk its reputation in the eyes of Western partners, or end the process of restoring justice, and thereby risk losing the sympathy of its own electorate. The only way to resolve this dilemma is to comply with the letter and spirit of the rule of law, all the more since the international community's demands of the incumbent authorities are extremely high. Clearly, provided the new government can deal with what is certainly an unusual challenge, it will be able to count on greater support from its partners on other foreign policy issues.