

EU Strategic Flexibility and Georgia

Ever since 2003, the EU has expressed a tangible interest in both the application of military power in its immediate neighbourhood and as a mechanism to achieve strategic objectives. This is made evident by, among other things, the launch of EUFOR BiH and the publication of the European Neighbourhood Policy.¹ These phenomena, particularly when examined in tandem with modern events, single out Georgia as a nation with unique significance to EU strategic doctrines. Not only has the EU publicly identified the Caucasus as a region of interest for its own strategic initiatives, but the neighbouring Middle East also occupies a position of extreme importance too, as made evident by both the volume and role of EU military operations there.² Indeed, events such as the war against IS, the conflict in Yemen and the activities of regional terrorist organisations have all escalated the importance of a strong military presence in the region for actors such as the EU. More recently, France in particular has sought to exert its influence over the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh with a general perception of French, and larger EU, responses to the fighting as one of the less influential voices over the course of events. This is in no small part due to the limited presence of both actors in the region.³ Thus, there is a strong case for the EU to strengthen its ties with Georgia, not only because of the express interest of Georgia in seeking membership of the union, but also so as to address the evident gap in EU strategic flexibility that results from its lack of presence in the Caucasus.

The EU has, historically, been an organisation which has focused on one issue above all others: trade. It should come as no surprise then, that when EU representatives met with their Georgian counterparts on 21 November 2019 at the 'Highest Level Sectoral Dialogue', economics took centre stage.⁴ However, in recent years the EU's attitude towards force projection as a bloc has begun to change. EU military operations such as Irini and Sophia in the Mediterranean have demonstrated a will to act militarily in response to crises in the EU's immediate neighbourhood – in this case Libya – as well as to do so autonomously from NATO; and even in contention with key NATO members such as Turkey. Thus, with the multitude of security issues which the EU is being forced to confront, many of which originate in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, increasing European strategic flexibility in these regions has become an ever increasing priority.

It is here that Georgia comes in. Georgia is the most stable Transcaucasus democracy and the highest scoring former Soviet state on the 'Westernisation Index' that is not already a member of the EU.⁵ Not only does Georgia have existing arrangements with the EU, not least of which is a declaration of prospective membership of the union, but the nation also offers European strategic thinkers access to the Caucasus region and a gateway into the Middle East. It almost sounds too good to be true, and certainly the extent to which the opportunities that Georgia offers the EU, as regards strategic axioms, could be capitalised upon remains open to interpretation. However this is not to say that increased engagement with Georgia at the strategic level would be without obstacles. Indeed, whenever one mentions increased Western engagement with Georgia it also becomes necessary to address the seemingly unsolvable and controversial issues of the breakaway states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

1 European Neighbourhood Policy [online] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/european-neighbourhood-policy_en Accessed: 17/3/21

2 Ibid

3 Ozcan, Y. (2020) 'French National Assembly Approves Decision on Karabakh' [online] *Anadolu Agency*, 12 December, Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/french-national-assembly-approves-decision-on-karabakh/2065200> Accessed: 21/3/21

4 Gogolashvili, K. (2019) 'The Highest Level Security Dialogue Between Georgia and the European Union' [online] *Rondeli Foundation*, 22 January, Available at: <https://www.gfsis.org/blog/view/919> Accessed: 2/3/21

5 Batiashvili, Z. (2018) 'Georgia's position in the Westernisation Index 2018' [online] *Rondeli Foundation*, 19 July, Available at: <https://www.gfsis.org/blog/view/853> Accessed: 5/3/21

The prevailing school of thought when it comes to increased strategic engagement with Georgia has been to emphasise the negative consequences of the estrangement of Russia through a potential perceived encirclement. This argument, however, is not unique to the Georgian context. Indeed, it has been applied to both the cases of Ukraine and the Baltic states with a degree of variation in the ramifications of military actions. In both examples there is a fear that either increasing the presence of NATO assets in the Baltic, or expediting the rate of Ukrainian alignment with the EU, will provoke Russia into drastic actions which must be avoided at all costs. ⁶ This logic is also applied to the case of Georgia through the observation that the Georgian breakaway states are largely supported by Russian military resources, and that threatening an increased Western military presence in the vicinity will lead to inevitable clashes. However, as the example of Ukraine revealed in 2014, there are also consequences for failing to act. Indeed, there is very limited evidence to suggest that Russia is likely to behave aggressively as a direct response to actions from the West, and a very significant example of the type of behaviour that can be expected from Russia as a result of inaction. Further, it is largely inconsequential in this regard whether or not Russia chose to act the way it did in Ukraine out of opportunism, overconfidence or out of the knowledge that the response from the West would be as reserved as it was. What matters is that sitting on the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia generates no tangible positive progress for Georgia, the EU, NATO or the West as a whole, and leaves the door open to the ever present threat of potential Russian escalation. ⁷ All the while, the opportunities that strategic cooperation with Georgia could bring remain unexplored and, substantially, wasted.

Strategic coordination with Georgia opens up many new possibilities for European military planning. One example of such would be massively increased coordination with aligned forces in the fight against IS; with one actor – the Kurds – playing a huge role there. Kurdish forces have been at the receiving end of many European arms shipments to the region and have been praised in assemblies and legislatures across the EU for their role in the fight against IS. ⁸ Ensuring that further deliveries of arms arrive at their intended targets and enhancing Europe's voice in the future of the Kurdish people are both current and conspicuous objectives of EU foreign policy as well as having the potential to be keystone developmental targets of EU strategic doctrines. ⁹ All of this, of course, begs the question of the Turkish response, with further implications of larger consequences for the EU-NATO relationship. However, current EU policies of sending arms to Kurdish forces is already inimical with Turkish foreign policy. Further, there have been numerous and escalating scuffles between the Turkish Navy and the forces of EUNAVFOR Irini in the Mediterranean over the importation of arms to the Turkish backed Libyan National Army. ¹⁰ This, again, appears to echo the sentiment of the EU not wishing to provoke tensions and therefore settling for a disadvantageous status quo which is open to escalation by the other side. In addition to this, the threat of another isolationist US, under either a potential second Trump presidency in 2024 or simply as an evidently popular policy from a future president, remains. Under this hypothetical yet plausible circumstance the reliability of the NATO partnership for strictly European strategic objectives is evidently diminished and the need for an enhanced and reinvigorated programme for EU strategic flexibility and efficacy becomes ever more important.

6 (2017) Georgia Needs Europe's Normative Force [online] Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/109> Accessed 7/3/21

7 Botchorishvili, M. (2020) 'Time to Turn Georgia's European Dream into Reality' [online] 23 October, Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/377098> Accessed: 7/3/21

8 Blackford, I. (2019) Prime Ministers Questions Minutes [online] Available at: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2019-10-23c.963.7> Accessed: 21/3/21

9 (2019) European Arms and Turkey's Attack on Syrian Kurds – An Explainer [online] Available at: <https://www.guengl.eu/issues/explainers/european-arms-turkeys-attack-on-syrian-kurds-an-explainer/> Accessed: 4/4/21

10 (2020) Libya: Operation IRINI Inspected a Turkish-flagged Vessel [online] Available at: <https://www.operationirini.eu/libya-operation-irini-inspected-turkish-flagged-vessel/> Accessed: 2/4/21

Indeed, this plays into the larger narrative of the so-called EU-NATO conundrum whereby much of the EU's strategic flexibility and operational capacity is predicated on the existence and availability of NATO assets.¹¹ Therefore, EU strategic culture is largely based on that of NATO, and only capable of autonomous action when so desired by NATO. Thus, if the previously expressed objectives from the EU, to increase its military capabilities and to act with increasing autonomy from NATO are to be believed, then Georgia – where integration talks into NATO have stalled – marks a critical step forward. The collapse of the Iran nuclear deal, despite no evidence from the European signatories of a desire for such a scenario, is further evidence of the negative consequences upon EU strategic flexibility that are a result of the EU-NATO conundrum.¹² Further increasing coordination with Georgia would also have the effect of significantly enhancing the EU's clout in the event of a renegotiation of the Iran nuclear deal, or in any subsequent talks or substitute arrangements. Such an arrangement with Georgia would also simultaneously decrease the reliance on NATO and increase the logistical capabilities of ongoing EU operations in nearby regions such as EUBAM Rafah, EUPOL COPPS and EUAM Iraq.

Georgia's geography as the gateway to the Middle East has further potential benefits for the EU in the form of decreasing the need of EU members' intelligence services to rely on actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. These nations have provided key intelligence to European intelligence agencies in the fight against regional terrorist organisations and the flow of terrorists attempting to enter into Europe.¹³ Indeed, the importance of the aspect of intelligence sharing in these relationships to many EU member nations has left the door open to exploitation. This helps to explain why many Western actors are so closely aligned with states such as Saudi Arabia despite consistent issues with human rights abuses and alleged war crimes. Developing the EU's relationship with Georgia would contribute to a decreasing reliance on these states and would be to the mutual benefit and stability of both mainland Europe as well as the Caucasus region. Further, Georgia offers the capacity to place EU assets including border forces, police, justice, peacekeeping, military and normative or civilian operations closer to the heart of crises which the EU has previously expressed a keen interest in, such as the Syrian and Yemeni Civil Wars, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the migrant crisis.

Much of this analysis, thus far, has focused on the importance of Georgia as a state that is near to the Middle East. However, contemporary events in the form of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has shed more light on the significance of the Caucasus region. The 2020 conflict represents the culmination of tensions which date back to the 1980s and represents the second major war between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the region. In the original 1992 conflict, over one million inhabitants of both nations were displaced creating, essentially, a lesser known migrant crisis. Many of those who were displaced found refuge in neighbouring Georgia as well as Russia; however significant numbers of refugees were forced to travel as far as Belarus and even applied for asylum in EU states.¹⁴ This line of enquiry may first appear to act as evidence against further integration of Georgia as it brings this crisis closer to the EU's borders and has the potential to cause old arguments to resurface over the status of refugee relocation throughout the EU once they arrive in Georgia. However, much of the crisis surrounding the displacement of peoples in the original

11 Simón, L. (2016) 'The EU-NATO Conundrum in Context: Bringing the State Back in', in Galbreath, D. J. and Gebhard, C. (Eds.), (2016), *Cooperation or Conflict? Problematizing Organizational Overlap in Europe*, New York: Routledge, pp. 99-120.

12 Darmanin, J. (2021) 'Iran Rejects EU Invite for Nuclear Deal Meeting', *Politico*, 1 March, Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/iran-rejects-eu-invite-for-nuclear-deal-meeting/> Accessed: 21/3/21

13 (2019) You Never Listen to Me: the European-Saudi Relationship After Khashoggi [online] 2 May, Available at: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2019/you-never-listen-me-european-saudi-relationship-after> Accessed: 28/3/21

14 (1996) Publication for the CIS Conference (Displacement in the CIS) – Conflicts in the Caucasus [online] Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/refugeemag/3b5583fd4/unhcr-publication-cis-conference-displacement-cis-conflicts-caucasus.html> Accessed: 21/3/21

conflict was mitigated because the EU, among others, was able to act a mediator and to ensure that significant numbers of those displaced were able to return to Armenia or Azerbaijan. While the consequences of the 2020 conflict have yet to become evident, the influence of the EU over the shape and outcome of the fighting and subsequent peace appears to be far less significant than was the case in 1994.¹⁵ Thus, while the scale of a potential second migrant crisis resulting from this conflict remains unclear, the EU's ability to mitigate the ramifications upon its own internal stability lies largely in the hands of Turkey and Russia, the two major brokers of the new peace deal.¹⁶ Without renewed influence in the Caucasus region, in the form of increased strategic flexibility provided through agreement with Georgia, the EU remains susceptible to the whims of Russia and Turkey, with the latter already effectively applying the consequences of the Syrian refugee crisis so as to achieve policy objectives at the expense of the EU.

It appears easy to dismiss Georgia's case for membership into the EU, especially given that there are examples which have been ongoing for far longer, such as Bosnia, or cases from larger and more developed nations such as Ukraine. However, Georgia's situation offers unique advantages to European policy makers and strategic thinkers which should not be so easily dismissed. The current state of almost perpetual limbo for both the EU and Georgia serves neither while continuing to perpetuate the appearance of the EU as strategically hesitant, inept and indecisive. Tackling this

15 Connelly, A. (2020) 'Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees See Little Chance of Returning Home After Peace Deal' [online] *Politico*, 30 November, Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/nagorno-karabakh-refugees-see-little-chance-of-returning-home-after-peace-deal/> Accessed: 3/4/21

16 Delcour, L. Groeneveld, J. and Stöber, S. (2021) 'Why is Georgia on EU's Mind?' [online] 18 March, Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/406912> Accessed: 22/3/21