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Open-Door Country

The Place and Role of Georgia

Maxime Gauin

The formal award of official EU candidate country status to Georgia in December 2023, the Armenia-Georgia agreement of January 2024, and the warm Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani meeting in March 2024 confirm and even reinforce the singular position of Georgia in the South Caucasus. This essay examines the origins and current aspects of the place and role occupied by Tbilisi in the region, and how this has come to be seen as an advantage by the most relevant external players. Georgia is the ‘open-door country’ of the Silk Road region.

Background

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the territory inhabited by ethnic-Georgians was an integral part of a broader

struggle involving three empires: the Ottoman, the Persian, and the Russian. The first two were rival Muslim (Sunni and Shia, respectively) polities that had each seen better days; the third was a dynamic, rising Orthodox power making strategic inroads throughout the South Caucasus (and elsewhere). Some Georgian leaders still ruled over their territories more or less independently in various fragmented kingdoms and principalities, including Kartli-Kakheti, whose capital was Tbilisi. After its sacking by the Persians in 1795, a power vacuum ensued, coupled with various internecine revolts and succession struggles. This enabled Russia to justify its violation of the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783), which had guaranteed this small kingdom’s territorial integrity and the continued reign of the ruling dynasty under the status of an imperial protectorate.

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Between 1800 and 1803, Russia consolidated its hold on that part of the Georgian lands. Then, in 1810, it annexed another Georgian kingdom, Imereti, in 1810. This was followed by the Treaty of Gulistan (1813),

which saw Persia formally ceding much of its Georgian territories to Russia—a de jure acknowledgment of the reality on the ground. The remaining parts of modern-day Georgia were gradually absorbed into the Russian Empire thanks in large part to a series of victories over the Ottoman Empire—e.g., the port city of Poti in 1829, the Principality of Guria in 1829, Svaneti in 1858, Mingrelia in 1867—culminating in the ceding of Adjara in 1878 at the Congress of Berlin.

Whatever else drove the policy of Russia in the South Caucasus, it did see itself as defending Georgians, which in turn necessitated the incorporation of their lands into the empire: any strategic alternative, given geopolitical realities, would have resulted in those same lands falling into the hands of either the Ottomans or Persians. Russian strategic thinking neither left open

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the possibility of independent Georgian polities nor the restoration of a consolidated Georgian state governed independently by a native sovereign. By the time the Russians had completed

their expansion into the South Caucasus, all Georgians came to live under one sovereign for the first time in centuries.

The incorporation of the Georgian nobility into the Russian aristocracy speaks to the ‘defending Georgians’ point, particularly when contrasted with the fate of Armenian and Azerbaijani elites during the same period. Perhaps this contrast had something to do with the fact that Georgians, unlike their Armenian and Azerbaijani neighbors, were Orthodox Christians, as were the overwhelming majority of Russian imperial elites. The fact that Stalin remains the only uncontested non-Slavic ruler of Russia in history since the Mongol occupation came to an end should also be taken as a piece of evidence in a later historical context, notwithstanding the obvious ironies.

It should also be noted that Russian rule over Georgia sometimes yielded to local sensitivities. For example, the abolishment of serfdom in the Russian heartland took place in 1861 but waited until 1865 to decree the same in the Georgian lands, with the implementation process lasting into the 1870s. This made Georgia the last place in Europe to end slavery, except for the Ottoman Empire.

The continuity of Russian rule was broken for a short period during the civil war that began after the Bolshevik Revolution. Georgian representatives to the parliament of the newly-established Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (it lasted little over a month in the spring of 1918) met alone and declared Georgian independence.

Unlike Armenia, Georgia settled its territorial disagreements with Azerbaijan peacefully and then, in 1919, signed a military alliance with Baku against both the (White) Volunteer Army of Anton Denikin and the Bolsheviks. Despite the Armenian-Georgian war of December 1918 (provoked by Armenia and won by Georgia), Tbilisi proposed to Yerevan (in vain, as it turned out) to join a regional alliance. Instead, Armenia sought one with Denikin and, later, an

understanding with the Bolsheviks. Meanwhile, much better settled in France than the Armenian nationalists, Georgian representatives lobbied in the West—including against Armenian nationalist claims toward Türkiye and Azerbaijan—with the hope of forcing a South Caucasian rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Georgia's independence was recognized by the Bolshevik regime in the Treaty of Moscow (1920) that it signed with Georgia. This treaty was violated by Lenin at the urging of Stalin and other Georgian Bolsheviks the very next year when the Red Army took Tbilisi and declared the establishment of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in February 1921. This did not stop anti-communist Georgians from revolting in May-December 1921 and then again in August-September 1924 (similar to how anti-communist Azerbaijanis revolted in Ganja in May 1920, in Lankaran in July-December of the same year, and in Shusha in the spring of 1921, or to the uprising that took place in Yerevan in February-April 1921). All such and similar revolts were crushed. Then, the religious persecution during the Stalinist period was particularly harsh, not unlike the purge of Georgian writers in 1937 (both the national church and the artists being particularly

important in the preservation of the national feeling).

Meanwhile, together with Bolshevik-occupied Armenia and Azerbaijan, the three new Soviet Socialist Republics were united into what was called the Federative Union of Socialist Soviet Republics of Transcaucasia in March 1922, which became one of the four founding republics of the Soviet Union in December 1922. In December 1936, Transcaucasia was dissolved, and Georgia (together with Armenia and Azerbaijan) regained republic status within the Soviet Union. And so it remained until the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Georgian strivings for independence gained ground in 1987, with one focal point of resistance to Soviet rule being the Ilia Tshavtchavadze Society (named in tribute to a prince who played a key role in the revival of the Georgian national idea in the nineteenth century). The Soviet repression of 8-9 April 1989 resulted in 20 official deaths (the killing largely took place with shovels and toxic gas) and 200 wounded. Although this pales in comparison to the Red Army's massacre in Baku on 20 January 1990 (officially 147 killed, 4 disappeared, and 744 wounded), it was still a considerable figure. It can be called a shared fate.

Not unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia too suffered from Moscow-backed separatism in the early 1990s with the war in Abkhazia, an autonomous republic located in the north of the country. The separatist movement was materially helped by Boris Yeltsin's Russia (this is especially visible by the presence of T-72 tanks and Grad rocket launchers) and included Armenian volunteers, especially those of the Bagramyan Battalion (named in tribute to Marshal Ivan Bagramyan, deceased in 1982, who justified Stalin's purges as late as 1970). The Bagramyan Battalion fought irregular Georgian forces as late as 1998. The 1992-1993 war cost the lives of about 30,000 persons and resulted in the expulsion of 250,000 ethnic-Georgians (about 45 percent of the population in 1991). The Yeltsin's support was particularly ironical, as 60 percent of Abkhazians had been deported by the Tsar's government during the 1860s, and as the Abkhazian language regressed from 1945 to 1978, the softening of Soviet policy in the late 1970s was due to a divide-and-rule policy more than anything else.

Today, Georgia is inhabited by sizeable ethnic-Armenian and ethnic-Azerbaijani minorities, respectively making up 4.5 and 6.3 percent of the population. Indeed, Georgia never tried

to ethnically cleanse its minorities, unlike Armenia (it is presently the most ethnically homogeneous country on the European continent). There were massacres of Muslims in Georgia in 1915, but they were committed by the Russian army, and a deportation of Meskhetian Turks did take place in Georgia in 1944, but this was Stalin's decision.

Georgia co-founded the GUAM in 1997, together with Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Moldova—three countries that, at the time, each faced problems of Russian-backed separatism, with the fourth fearing to face a similar situation one day. On 10 October 1997, the joint communiqué of the meeting of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, held in Strasbourg, announced the following:

[The] leaders of the four nations were unanimous in assessing threats and risk for the European, as well as for the regional securities. They agreed that the process of integration into Trans-Atlantic and European structures could to a considerable extent reduce these threats and risks. In this connection, they underlined the prospects of the four nations' cooperation within the framework of the OSCE, [and] other European and Atlantic structures, including the recently established

Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace NATO Program. [...] The President unanimously upheld the need for combating aggressive nationalism, separatism, and international terrorism.

The GUAM platform of cooperation has contributed to the rapprochement of its members to each other, but also (crucially) to the West. In the case of Georgia, this opening was reinforced by the 2003 Rose Revolution. However, President Mikheil Saakashvili overestimated the tangible results of this opening in 2008, when he tried to recover control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian troops took reprisal action in South Ossetia (and other parts of Georgia, withdrawing only in 2010). Georgia severed its diplomatic relations with Russia and left the Commonwealth of Independent States, arguing that Moscow had violated—for the second time—Article 5 of the Alma-Ata Declaration (“The High Contracting Parties acknowledge and respect each other’s territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders within the Commonwealth”).

As the war progressed and Saakashvili appealed to the West for assistance, some in Europe and America wanted to answer

the call forcefully. In her memoir, then-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote about a National Security Council meeting on 12 August 2008 chaired by U.S. National Security Adviser Steve Hadley:

The session was a bit unruly, with a fair amount of chest beating about the Russians. At one point Steve Hadley intervened, something he rarely did. There was all kind of loose talk about what threats the United States might make. “I want to ask a question,” he said in his low-key way. “Are we prepared to go to war with Russia over Georgia?” That quieted the room, and we settled into a more productive conversation of what we could do. [...] We sent humanitarian supplies by military transport—a visible statement of support that might at least back Moscow off. And we decided that I’d go to Georgia.

She does not add that neither the United States nor the European Union chose, at the time, to sanction Russia.

Saakashvili was far from an ideal president—in her memoirs, titled *No Higher Honor* (2011), Rice characterizes him as a “capricious, emotional [...] American-educated firebrand.” But the absence of a dissuasive reaction to Russia’s actions explains, at least

in part, the Georgian electorate’s decision to abandon him and his party in favor of their main rival, Georgian Dream, in 2012 (55 percent against 40.3 percent) and its campaign promise of “de-escalation.”

Georgia’s Importance for Azerbaijan

The most obvious aspect of the Georgia-Azerbaijan relationship is energy. Across the decades, the Baku-Tbilisi-Supsa oil pipeline (1999), the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (2005), the South Caucasus gas pipeline (2006), and the TANAP gas pipeline (2018) have been built and unveiled. Practically all the hydrocarbons exported by Azerbaijan to Türkiye, Europe, Israel, and elsewhere pass through Georgia, and Tbilisi depends on Baku for most of Georgia’s oil and gas supplies. Around 90 percent of the gas consumed in the country originates in Azerbaijan, which comes out to about 17 percent of Azerbaijan’s total gas exports.

Another key aspect is connectivity. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway (826 km, including 500 km in Azerbaijan), which took a decade to build, was inaugurated in

2017. The unveiling of the BTK and TANAP are among the main reasons why the outcome of the Second Karabakh War was completely different from the April 2016 Four-Day War. Indeed, these works reinforced the Azerbaijani economy, while the decrease in oil prices and the imposition of successive waves of sanctions by the West against Moscow starting in 2014 weakened the Russian one.

The Georgian economy has incontrovertibly profited from the opening of this strategic railway line. For example, the value of products exported by Georgia to Azerbaijan increased by 28.2 percent from 2022 to 2023, amounting to \$862.07 million (14.2 percent of its total exports). BTK is a strategic economic lifeline for Georgia.

Baku and Tbilisi want to make this increase in trade sustainable and flourishing, and thus it is not surprising that Azerbaijan has made sure it regularly informs Georgia about developments in the talks concerning the Zangezur Corridor (but also the alternative Aras Corridor, which will loop below Armenian territory through Iran). The point is that these southern routes are understood by both countries as being complementary to the northern one, which passes through Georgia.

Politically speaking, Georgia has always been consistent in supporting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. In April 2023, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated the following:

The Georgian side does not recognize the so-called independence of Nagorno Karabakh and therefore does not recognize the second round of the so-called presidential elections held in this region of Azerbaijan. Georgia supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders and supports the peaceful settlement of conflict based on the principles and norms of international law.

The most decisive moment in this context was, of course, the Second Karabakh War, for at least two reasons. First, Georgia's political support (not unlike that of Ukraine and Israel) was a strong reply to Armenian nationalist propagandists, who tried to describe the conflict as one based primarily on religion. Secondly, and more concretely, as President Ilham Aliyev explained at ADA University on 29 April 2022:

We asked our Georgian friends to close the airspace, and they did. Also, we asked our Georgian friends to block the land route from Russia to Georgia to transport weapons to Armenia, and they did it also. And we are grateful.

During the Second Karabakh War, Georgian customs officials seized Russian armored vehicles, as there was at least one attempt to send such equipment despite the ban on the transfer of military material to Armenia. This was only logical, given the fact that Turkish-Georgian-Azerbaijani military cooperation was raised to a higher level as early as 2014 (i.e., the year Russian troops re-entered Crimea and the Donbass), with a consequential meeting of the defense ministers of the three countries taking place in Azerbaijan's Nakhchivan exclave. They decided, among other things, to organize at least one joint military exercise every year, and agreed on joint product developments for their respective defense industries. For obvious reasons, the first exercises focused on the protection of oil and gas pipelines, but, since 2017, their scope has been expanded.

The liberation of Karabakh in 2020 and the extinguishment of the ethnic-Armenian secessionist entity in September 2023 changed nothing to this military cooperation. Quite the contrary, in October 2023, the annual joint exercise took place in Baku—more precisely at the Center for War Games of the Military Administration Institute of the National Defense University

of Azerbaijan. It focused on the protection of the BTC pipeline and the BTK railway. Yet, considering the reinforcement of the links between Georgia and NATO since 2008 (see below), Georgia's participation has a special importance for Azerbaijan.

For various reasons—the details of which are beyond the scope of this essay—the likelihood of Georgia serving as a facilitator in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process increased in the wake of the liberation of Khankendi and its neighborhood in September 2023. Thus, on 8 October 2023, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated the following in a joint conference with his “dear friend, Mr. Ilham Aliyev”:

I once again informed Mr. President that we support Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. We are grateful to Azerbaijan, which, in turn, always supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. We have also confirmed that we have great hopes that Azerbaijan and Armenia sign a peace agreement. From this point of view, our views on the peace agenda in the South Caucasus fully coincide. We do hope that peace in this region will be sustainable and serve the prosperity of our countries, as well as the people of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia.

More recently, in February 2024, it was announced that Ameriabank, one of Armenia's main banks (its total assets are estimated to be \$3.4 billion) was to be sold to the Bank of Georgia, an Anglo-Georgian company, for the price of \$303.6 million. Yet, almost half of its shares are currently possessed by Russian-Armenian oligarch Ruben Vardanyan, a former "State Minister" of the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic." He is currently in jail in Baku, having been arrested after the liberation of Khankendi and its neighborhood. The Azerbaijani government is quite likely aware of this transaction and has made no negative comment on the sale. This shows the importance of Georgia for both sides, lending credence to my characterization of Georgia as the Silk Road region's open-door country.

Georgia's Importance for Armenia

In recent years, the relationship between Georgia and Armenia has improved, both politically and economically. There was a crisis between Yerevan and Tbilisi in 2008-2009 and then, to a lesser extent, another one in 2018 (i.e., during

the presidency of the Khankendi-born Serzh Sargsyan) and again in 2020 (in the context of the Second Karabakh War) concerning the Armenian minority in Georgia, but these tensions now belong to the past. Similarly, the "republics" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were the only ones to "recognize" the secessionist regime that used to be based in Khankendi, which reciprocally "recognized" them, but Azerbaijan's successful anti-terrorist measure in September 2023 precipitated the formal dissolution of that separatist entity. Notably, the Armenian army did not fire a single shot during this operation, in absolute contrast with its conduct in the Second Karabakh War.

Two months after this last victory and one month after Pashinyan affixed his signature on the Grenada declaration—this document represents the first written Armenian political commitment to the number of square kilometers Yerevan recognizes as constituting Azerbaijani sovereign territory (it includes the whole of Karabakh and the eight villages still under Armenian occupation)—a question was posed to him on Armenia's official position regarding Georgia's secessionist territories on 24

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November 2023. Pashinyan's answer was clear and unambiguous: "We fully and unequivocally defend the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, and democracy of Georgia."

In this context, the word "defend" should be interpreted as being stronger than its usual alternative ("recognize"). It thus seems unlikely that Pashinyan chose it by chance; the same can be said for the words that followed, including "unity," "sovereignty," and "territorial integrity." In the context of Armenia-Georgia relations, this wording is unprecedented. For instance, Armenia had voted against all resolutions in the UN General Assembly in favor of the Georgian refugees prior to 2019—and since this date, Yerevan has abstained from participating in the vote on such and similar resolutions.

Pashinyan's statement is even more remarkable given the existence of a sizeable ethnic-Armenian minority in Abkhazia. Not surprisingly, it was badly perceived by the separatists of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The "president" of South Ossetia even said: "We are not interested in the opinion of the Armenian Prime Minister, who left Nagorno-Karabakh in the most difficult situation. He betrayed his own people."

However, such reactions left him unimpressed, and Pashinyan signed a strategic partnership agreement with Georgia in January 2024. The exact text does not seem to have been made public and, anyway (as always with such agreements), its worth will be determined by what the signatories make of it. The most relevant comment, perhaps, from the Armenian side is from an answer given by Nikol Pashinyan to a question in the Armenian Parliament: "We really worked very intensively in recent years to create that political content in our relations." The use of the word "years" shows that the agreement is the outcome of rather lengthy negotiations, perhaps since 2021.

The economic dimension of the Armenia-Georgia relationship is also clear. In 2023, Armenia was the second-largest destination for Georgian exports. Besides those, virtually all Turkish exports to Armenia pass through Georgia, as the land border between these two countries has been closed since 1993 (due to Turkish solidarity with Azerbaijan). Here we can mention also that although flights between Istanbul and Yerevan resumed in February 2022, they were suspended in April 2023 due to the unveiling in Yerevan of a monument glorifying Operation Nemesis—a terrorist program

that was active between 1920 and 1922, having been orchestrated by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation to assassinate Ottoman and Azerbaijani it held responsible for the events of 1915-1916 and 1918.

In the south, Iran remains under Western and UN Security Council sanctions. For as long as these have been in place, Armenia has helped Iran to bypass them, notwithstanding the fact that this illegal activity has proven to be mediocally effective for the Armenian economy. In other words, there is a non-economic incentive at play in Armenia's conduct.

Indeed, after a November 2018 visit of officials from the U.S. Departments of State and Treasury in Yerevan "to discuss Iran sanctions policies with counterparts in the Armenian government and business community," the Director of the CIA himself traveled to Armenia in July 2022 to issue an in-person warning to Yerevan to cease its ongoing support for the actions of the Iranian and Russian governments to evade sanctions.

It should also be noted that the land trade route between Armenia and Russia goes through Georgia. In September 2022, the U.S. Treasury Department

sanctioned an Armenian company, TAKO, for this reason. This was followed by the sanction of another one, Medisar, in May 2023. But as Orkhan Baghirov wrote in the Winter 2023-2024 edition of *Baku Dialogues*,

Armenia's substantial and strategic economic reliance on Russia, which is evident across trade, energy, food security, transport, and various other vital sectors, has intensified of late, particularly since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite Yerevan's recent political posturing against Russia, Armenia's economic ties to Russia have deepened, driven by the prospect of increased income amid the conflict. To put it bluntly, Armenia is an economic beneficiary of the conflict over Ukraine; indeed, the longer the conflict lasts and the Western sanctions against Russia are maintained, the better it will be for Armenia.

Still, both the bilateral trade with Georgia and the use of Georgia as an open door to Türkiye and the European Union are among the most promising perspectives for the Armenian economy. The strategic partnership between Armenia and Georgia can help in this regard.

Politically speaking, this strategic partnership also has clear advantages for Armenia. Georgia enjoys the trust of both Azerbaijan and

Türkiye. Either as a mediator or as a facilitator, Tbilisi can contribute to the peace process and could only gain an advantage in doing so—even more now given that Armenia "defends" the territorial integrity of its northern neighbor and has politically recognized, in a written form, that of Azerbaijan. The U.S. government openly favors the rapprochement between Georgia and Armenia, especially via the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA).

Coming back to Georgia's possible role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, we can note that on 8 October 2023 Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili welcomed President Ilham Aliyev to Tbilisi and stated, during the aforementioned joint press conference, that

We have always been impartial here in Georgia and are ready to contribute to this issue today. We want to be a mediator in this matter and are ready to offer any friendly format. Our future should be peaceful and stable, and all three countries of the South Caucasus should address regional issues themselves.

His Azerbaijani guest answered positively. The Armenian government did not explicitly respond, but the signature of the strategic partnership some months later allows one to think that Yerevan

is considering such a role for Tbilisi. Even more recently, on 15 March 2024, during the meeting of Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Turkish foreign ministers held in Baku, Minister Ilia Darchiashvili reiterated this proposal.

Earlier in the same month, the Rondeli Foundation, a Georgian think tank (established in 1998 with the support of the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), invited Farid Shafiyev, Chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) and Areg Kochinyan, President of the Research Center on Security Policy (RCSP) and a former spokesman of the Security Council of Armenia (2018-2020), to speak at the same session of its annual security conference.

The session was eloquently titled: "The South Caucasus: Can the New Connectivity Opportunity Transform the Region?" Not surprisingly, Kochinyan had previously stated that, in order to end Russia's dominant political, security, and economic role in Armenia, peace agreements had to be forged with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

As noted by Tbilisi-based journalist Onnik James Krikorian put it on Twitter that day, "Thanks to

@RondeliSecConf for the panel. More of the same in Tbilisi, please. It still remains the only location where such events can happen on a semi-regular basis.”

Georgia in the Eyes of the EU and NATO

The usual pathway for post-communist European countries to anchor their relationship with Western institutions has been to join NATO first and the EU second. For instance, Poland, Czechia, and Hungary joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004; the three Baltic states became member states of NATO in March 2004 and the EU in May of the same year; Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. Georgia initially planned to follow this path, then inverted its priorities after its August 2008 war with Russia. The two aspirations converged around 2014, in a different context. To get at this, we need to go back to the historical record.

Georgia was an inaugural partner of NATO’s Partnership for Peace (this took place in March 1994). According to NATO,

Activities on offer under the PFP programme touch on virtually every field of NATO activity,

including defence-related work, defence reform, defence policy and planning, civil-military relations, education and training, military-to-military cooperation and exercises, civil emergency response, and cooperation on science and environmental issues.

Regardless of this ambitious formulation, Georgia-NATO cooperation through PfP remained at a relatively low level for years, partly because of the NATO candidacies of countries such as Poland and the Baltic states, partly because of Georgia’s limited military budget, and partly because the Western governments found wise, at that time, to search for compromises with Russia.

The most bitterly felt aspect—from the Georgian point of view—of this search for compromise was the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, when the Georgian candidacy was welcomed, but without a timeline and without starting the actual candidacy procedure (the exact formulation of the Summit’s declaration was as follows: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.”).

Saakashvili grossly overestimated the value of this statement, which came several months before the renewal of hostilities between his country and Russia, which was triggered by his attempt to forcibly recover control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—notwithstanding the fact that this was in full conformity with international law (e.g., the Alma-Ata Declaration, the Helsinki Final Act, and the UN Charter). Clearly, his actions were used by the Kremlin as a pretext for invasion. Condoleezza Rice recalls a meeting with Saakashvili on 10 July 2004 in which she told him,

“Mr. President, whatever you do, don’t let the Russians provoke you. You remember when President [George W.] Bush said that Moscow would try to get you to do something stupid. And don’t engage Russian military forces. No one will come to your aid, and you will lose,” I said sternly.

The situation started changing after the August 2008 invasion. In September 2008, a NATO-Georgia Commission was established, and then a NATO Liaison Office was set up two years later. Not surprisingly, at the September 2014 NATO Wales Summit (which took place after Russian troops re-entered Crimea and the Donbass), something called the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) of measures was adopted in order

to improve the capacities of the Georgian military. A second SNGP was adopted in December 2020. These SNGPs cover strategic and operational planning, aviation, air defense, maritime security, strategic communications, special operations, cyber defense, etc.

Among the most tangible effects of the SNGPs, we can list joint exercises (this began in 2015), the establishment of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre the same year, and tailor-made seminars to teach NATO military doctrines and operational planning processes.

Moreover, the sale of radars and anti-aircraft missiles by France beginning in 2015, of anti-tank missiles and guided bombs (JDAMs) by the U.S. (since 2018) and of anti-aircraft missiles by Israel, particularly in 2021 (as well as the local production of Israeli-designed drones and assault rifles since the same year), provided Georgia with the start of a NATO-standard arsenal.

It is probably not a coincidence that the trilateral joint exercises between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye also started in 2014.

Then, in June 2022, at the end of the Madrid Summit, NATO announced:

In light of the changed security environment in Europe, we have decided on new measures to step up tailored political and practical support to partners, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova. We will work with them to build their integrity and resilience, develop capabilities, and uphold their political independence.

The organization later explained that this “tailored political and practical support” represents both an intensification of political dialogue with Tbilisi and an acceleration of the project to replace Georgia’s Soviet- and Russian-made military equipment with NATO-made materials.

A certain parallel can be made concerning Georgia’s relationship with the EU. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, Tbilisi took active measures to make itself more attractive to Brussels in preparation (it was hoped) for a formal offer to commence accession negotiations. For example, between 2004 and 2007, 1,200 Georgian high civil servants were sentenced for corruption; during the same period, the government implemented a radical renewal of the police force and practices. In 2002, the World Bank had rated Georgia below Nigeria for the climate of business; in 2007, Georgia was considered better in this regard than ten EU member states.

Yet, Georgia also faced challenges, starting with its crisis with Russia in 2006. Moscow had decided on an aerial blockade of the country and pushed for a “referendum of self-determination” in South Ossetia. This took place against the backdrop of discussions between Georgia and the EU on signing an Association Agreement. These talks began in late 2004 but ended up being signed only a full decade later. The clashes in Tbilisi with those accused of preparing a coup that would have benefitted Moscow at the end of 2007 and the controversial result of the January 2008 election that saw Saakashvili retain power are insufficient grounds for justifying such a long delay.

Be that as it may, the year 2023 was a turning point in relations between Georgia and the EU, as the country’s candidacy for membership in the EU, which had been formally presented in March 2022 was officially accepted in December 2023. The EU Commission’s report marked full satisfaction with the improvements made by Tbilisi in the justice (“this priority is completed”) and gender equality categories (same assessment); Brussels also assessed positively the transparency of public finances—to cite only three key examples.

Unless something changes radically, however, the accession process could take quite a long time to reach its endpoint. In fact, there is no guarantee of a positive outcome (i.e., accession to the EU), as the example of both Türkiye and the Western Balkans makes clear. The more technical questions about the rapidity of the reform process in Georgia are unlikely to be the sole criteria to measure progress on the road that could end with an accession offer. There is also the political issue of the evolution of the EU itself.

Moreover, Georgia has acted ambiguously in the context of the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia. “We do not impose sanctions against Russia, but we will do everything so that our territory is not used for circumventing sanctions,” Georgia’s Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stressed in early March 2024. But as early as March 2022, the Georgian government announced that it was “in full compliance with the financial sanctions imposed by the international community” against Russia. And in August 2023 Tbilisi banned the re-export to Russia and Belarus of Western-imported cars. At the same time, the numbers just don’t lie: Georgia’s trade turnover with Russia has

increased markedly since the start of the Ukraine war.

However, one cannot downplay the symbolism of the fact that the first visit of the country’s new prime minister, Irakli Kobakhidze, was to Brussels, where both the EU and NATO are headquartered. This took place in February 2024. During this visit, he expressed Georgia’s support for Ukraine: “Once again, I express my solidarity with our friendly Ukrainian people, who fell victim to Russian military aggression.”

Even before this visit, he had placed “the integration to the European Union” at the top of his priorities. Georgia has also welcomed more than 24,000 Ukrainian refugees, securing for them the provision of various economic and social services. Moreover, 25 units of high-power generators were provided to Ukraine by the Georgian government in December 2022, and 338 smaller units arrived the same month, by private initiatives. This is not inconsiderable. The Western wish to see Georgia doing more to support Ukraine is understandable, but it seems obvious that, for instance, the way to obtain the end of Tbilisi-Moscow flights lies in the West providing adequate economic compensation.

Still, the overall trend seems clear: both the EU and NATO have intensified their presence in Georgia since 2022. Concerning the EU, the acceptance of Georgia's candidacy in December 2023

has been characterized by Victor Kipiani, chair of the Georgian think-tank Geocase, as proof of the "intention of the European Union to abandon the so-called 'deaf defense' and move to a 'strategic counterattack' in our complex Caucasus region."

Conclusion

Despite considerable external constraints, internal troubles, secessionist movements, and a lack of natural resources, Georgia has been remarkably successful in transforming itself into

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a viable state (notwithstanding the occupation of 22 percent of its territory) that delivers concrete results to its citizens whilst serving as a trusted regional connectivity partner. As noted above, Georgia is now in-

controvertibly the Silk Road region's open-door country.

Moreover, its strategic importance is now understood by the West and across the Silk Road region, particularly by its two South Caucasus neighbors. After all, being courted by the West and Russia at the same time is not a negative characteristic for a possible host of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. When it comes to this part of the world, what could be more important than lending support for a sustainable pathway to safety, security, and prosperity for all its inhabitants? **BD**

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