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Georgian Foreign Policy after the Ukrainian Crisis

By Lika Merebashvili, Intern, Eastern Europe Studies Centre

Developments in Ukraine from the 2013 “Euromaidan” to the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine are widely referred as the Ukrainian crisis, which emerged as a consequence of the pro-European shift of Ukraine’s foreign policy understood as a threat by Russia to its influence over the Eastern Europe. The recent Russian-Western involvements in Ukraine fomented reconsideration of Georgian foreign policy by the new government of Irakli Garibashvili. However, not all members of the government seem to agree on how the policy should develop. As a result, the problem of poor coordination within the political elite has brought very fragmented and undefined foreign policy in Georgia.

The article shows how the Ukrainian crisis affected the foreign policy of Georgia and why the Garibashvili’s government avoided to actively stand against Russia’s illegal actions in Ukraine. In addition, analysis of the role of the recent governmental shift in Georgia and the examples of its uncoordinated policies are followed by the consequences and prospects in the conclusion.

Governmental Shift and New Foreign Policy Agenda in Georgia

In the late 2012 a newly formed coalition Georgian Dream won over the previously dominant United National Movement (UNM), which was famous for its pro-Western and anti-Russian orientation. Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia remained the main foreign policy priority, but along with the ambitious plan of resuming relations with the Russian Federation.¹ One of the foreign policy promises the Georgian Dream coalition made to win the votes of its constituency during the election was to normalize relations between Russia and Georgia.²

Bidzina Ivanishvili, the then leader of the Georgian Dream and the Prime Minister of Georgia (2012-2013), and his coalition government were successful in resuming relations with Russia: Abashidze-Karasin dialogue format, between Zurab Abashidze, Special Representative of Georgian Prime

¹ “2012 Parliamentary Elections Program of the Georgian Dream Coalition”, [ivote.ge](http://www.ivote.ge/images/doc/pdfs/ocnebis%20saarchevno%20programa.pdf), p. 21, February 2012. Online access: <http://www.ivote.ge/images/doc/pdfs/ocnebis%20saarchevno%20programa.pdf>

² Ibid., p. 22.

Minister for Relations with Russia, and Grigory Karasin, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, was launched shortly after the Georgian Dream came in power; Russian market was opened to Georgian products, foreign direct investment from Russia increased and international flights between the two countries were resumed. Consequently, Russia became the third biggest trading partner for Georgia in the last two years.³

Meanwhile, specific ministries actively engaged in Western-oriented foreign policy. The Ministry of Defense continued strengthening cooperation with NATO. At the 2014 Summit of NATO leaders in Wales Georgia obtained a new cooperation agenda, the so-called “Substantial Package”, which envisages launching of NATO training center in Georgia before September 2015.⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Euro-Atlantic Integration promoted signing of the EU Association Agreement and implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.⁵

Georgian Policy towards the Crisis in Ukraine

When the crisis in Kiev started many expected Georgia to demonstrate firm support to Ukraine as its long-time friendly country. But, largely because of the 2008 war and the subsequent and ongoing borderization policy of Russia, the Georgian government decided to use cautious rhetoric not to provoke Kremlin while simultaneously supporting Ukrainian sovereignty.

Nevertheless, not all officials in Georgia followed the balanced policy approach. Three different types of rhetoric can be identified within the political elite of Georgia: more staunch to Ukraine, anti-Russian and reasonably cautious. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili seems to have had the strictest and even belligerent rhetoric when he blamed the West for not sanctioning Russia back in 2008, believing that the Russian expansion to Ukraine could have been avoided had the international society shown resistance to Russian aggression in Georgia.⁶ The UNM members of the Parliament, as well as the former President Mikheil Saakashvili, criticized the ruling government for turning its back on Ukraine, which they value as one of the most ardent supporters of the territorial integrity of Georgia.⁷ They further suspected the current government for having pro-Kremlin sentiments. The President Giorgi Margvelashvili, however, remained fairly balanced, claiming that Georgia should follow its Western partners and engage in peaceful management of Ukrainian crisis.⁸

³ “რუსეთი საქართველოს სავაჭრო პარტნიორების მთავარ სამეულში შევიდა” (“Russia has Become One of the Three Major Trade Partners of Georgia”), News.ge, February 2015. Online access: <http://news.ge/ge/news/story/125676-ruseti-saqartvelos-savachro-partniorebis-mtavar-sameulshi-shevida>

⁴ “Georgia in NATO Wales Summit Declaration”, Civil.ge, September, 2014. Online access: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27643>

⁵ “საქართველომ და ევროკავშირმა ასოცირების შეთანხმებას მოაწერეს ხელი” (“Georgia and the EU Signed the Association Agreement”), Civil.ge, June 2014. Online access: <http://civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=28403>

⁶ “ირაკლი ღარიბაშვილი - უკრაინის კრიზისი არ იქნებოდა, აგვისტოს ომს რომ მეტი ყურადღება დათმობოდა” (“Irakli Gharibashvili - Ukrainian crisis could have been Avoided if More Attention was Paid to the August War”), Interpressnews, February 2015. Online access: <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/316121-irakli-gharibashvili-ukrainis-krizisi-ar-iqneboda-agvistos-oms-rom-meti-yuradgheba-dathmoboda.html?ar=A>

⁷ “გიგა ბოკერია საქართველოს ხელისუფლებას აკრიტიკებს” (“Giga Bokeria criticizes the Georgian Government”), Timer.ge, February 2015. Online access: <http://www.timer.ge/?p=9539>

⁸ “მარგველაშვილი: თბილისი უკრაინის კრიზისთან მიმართებაში დასავლელ პარტნიორებთან კოორდინირებულად მოქმედებს” (“Margvelashvili – Tbilisi Acts in coordination with its Western Partners with Regard to Ukraine”), Civil.ge, March, 2014. Online access: <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=27942>

However, Georgian government did not join sanctions against Russia until June 19, 2015,⁹ and only provided humanitarian aid and relatively restricted moral support (in the form of carefully formulated official statements) to Ukrainian people.

Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis on the Foreign Policy of Georgia

Georgia, which has focused on ensuring and protecting its territorial integrity ever since becoming independent from the Soviet Union, was deeply disappointed when the international society confined its reaction to Russian expansionism to mere political or economic sanctions. Georgians acknowledged that if Ukraine, a country which is geopolitically more important to the West, is not given substantial help against Russia, Georgia cannot expect Western support in countering the ongoing Russian occupation¹⁰ and in regaining its breakaway territories. The pro-Russian political parties, NGOs and individuals propagated this rhetoric and it led to reconsideration of the foreign policy of Georgia by the population. According to the 2015 March-April survey of National Democratic Institute, public approval of the EU integration decreased from 72 to 68 percent during the last year, while the approval of the Eurasian Economic Union increased from 20 to 31 percent during the same period.¹¹

As the Ukrainian crisis started, NATO and the EU became more inward-looking trying to ensure internal cohesion and security. This negatively affected the prospects of NATO and the EU enlargement. Mostly because, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova were considered together as a group of Eastern Partnership countries aspiring the Euro-Atlantic integration. And, as Ukraine is fighting a war in its Eastern territories, the chances of Georgia and Moldova joining the EU or NATO individually have decreased significantly. At the 2014 EU-US Summit in Brussels, President of the United States Barack Obama stated: “NATO has no short-term plans to have Ukraine and Georgia join.”¹² On their part, the EU officials declared several times during the Vilnius and Riga Summits that the Eastern Partnership is not a format for accession to the EU, and should be understood as a platform for closer relations.¹³ This frustration consequently led to undefined Georgian foreign policy. The West no longer seemed a strong guarantee of Georgian security, especially after Russia signed Strategic Partnership treaties with the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2014 and 2015.¹⁴

⁹ “Georgia joins EU sanctions against Russia”, Interpressnews.ge, July 2015. Online access:

<http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/politicss/70979-georgia-joins-eu-sanctions-against-russia.html>

¹⁰ The latest act of illegal occupation occurred on July 10, 2015, when Russian forces illegally placed signposts of de facto state-border between Georgia and its break-away region of South Ossetia close to the village Tselubani of Gori municipality. As a result, Russian so-called “border guards” occupied 70 percent of the village and took control of the part of Baku-Supsa pipeline operated by British Petroleum. “Russia Creeping Closer”, Georgiatoday.ge, July 2015. Online access: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/646/Russia-Creeping-Closer->

¹¹ “NDI-ის დაკვეთით ჩატარებული საზოგადოებრივი აზრის კვლევა” (“Public Opinion Poll conducted on Behalf of NDI”), Civil.ge, April 2015. Online access: <http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2015/NDI-Poll-April2015-geo.pdf>

¹² “ობამა: 'არც უკრაინა, არც საქართველო ნატოს წევრობის გზაზე არ არიან.’” (“Neither Ukraine, nor Georgia are on the Way of NATO Membership”), Civil.ge, March 2014. Online access: <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=28007>

¹³ “EU says Riga Summit 'not anti-Russia beauty contest’”, BBC News, March 2015. Online access: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32824840>

¹⁴ “რუსეთის ანექსიური პოლიტიკა საქართველოს ოკუპირებული ტერიტორიების მიმართ: ე.წ. სამოკავშირეო ხელშეკრულებების შედარება და პოლიტიკური იმპლიკაციები საქართველოსთვის” (“Russia’s Annexation Policy to the occupied territories of Georgia: Comparative Analysis of the “Strategic Cooperation Agreements” and their Political Implication on Georgia”), National Security Council of Georgia, February 2015. Online access: <http://www.nsc.gov.ge/res/docs/2015020911123310799.pdf>

Nevertheless, the Minister of Defense Tina Khidasheli is strongly insisting on the importance of giving NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia at the upcoming 2016 Summit in Warsaw.¹⁵

Recent developments show very fragmented foreign policy in Georgia because of the inability of Georgian officials to form unified and clear vision when addressing the latest drawbacks that have emerged lately. On the other hand, the government of Georgia seems to trying different tactics to examine opportunities for new policy directions. Yet, the new game lacks a coordinated stand on key foreign policy issues. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Tamar Beruchashvili intensified negotiations for further integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures and announced, in response to the Russia-Abkhazia and Russia-South Ossetia partnership treaties, that the Abashidze-Karasin dialogue format was exhausted. But, Abashidze kept on his unofficial meetings with the Russian ambassador Karasin denying that the format should be cancelled.¹⁶ Another disagreement was related to adoption of the resolution on Ukraine in the Parliament of Georgia on March 6, 2014. The members of the opposition UNM party were ardent supporters of Ukraine and advocated to include in the resolution the paragraph on direct call for international sanctions against Russia.¹⁷ But, the majority and minority groups failed to negotiate on the unified text because the paragraph seemed provocative for the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority group. As a result, the resolution proposed by the Georgian Dream was adopted without the UNM participation in the voting.¹⁸

In addition to these examples in the legislature and the diplomatic service, the lack of coordination is present at the cabinet level as well. For example, while almost absolute majority of Georgian officials kept neutral or non-adversarial language when it came to Russia, the newly appointed Defence Minister Khidasheli kept harsh anti-Russia rhetoric in the majority of her statements. After the meeting with the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the issues related to opening of NATO training center in Georgia, she announced that Georgia should follow its purposeful policy neglecting what President Putin will say in Russia.¹⁹ Majority of the government officials supported relatively bolder policies of Khidasheli, but they avoided to mention Russia in their statements. Khidasheli's hard approach seems very controversial for many in the West. However, the Georgian government hopes to persuade NATO that Russia will not be capable of opening new military fronts on the territory of Georgia. Consequently, they expect that Georgia may obtain MAP or the recognition that it no longer needs MAP for membership at the 2016 Warsaw Summit.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Both the Abashidze-Karasin format and line of communication will be maintained - Zurab Abashidze”, Georgianjournal.ge, January 2015. Online access: <http://www.georgianjournal.ge/politics/29516-both-the-abashidze-karasin-format-and-line-of-communication-will-be-maintained-zurab-abashidze.html>

¹⁷ “Parliament Adopts Resolution on Ukraine, Fails to Show Unanimity”, Civil.ge, March 2014. Online access: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27015>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “თინა ხიდაშელი - რომ ვარსებობთ, ეს უკვე პრობლემაა რუსეთისთვის” (“Tina Khidasheli – The Fact that We Exist is Already a Problem for Russia”), Interpressnews.ge, June 2015. Online access: <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/332552-thina-khidasheli-rom-varsebobth-es-ukve-problemaa-rusethisthvis.html?ar=A>

²⁰ “Official Briefing of the Ministry of Foreign affairs of Georgia”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, July 1, 2015. Online access:

<http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94%E1%83%9D->

Conclusions

Overall, because of the Ukrainian crisis and strained Russian-Western relations, the West removed the question of Georgia's accession to the EU and NATO from the agenda. Still, the National Security Concept²¹ and the Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia define Euro-Atlantic direction as the strategic priority for Georgian foreign policy.²² At the same time, Georgians elected the current government with the expectation of normalizing relations with Russia, which poses a threat to territorial integrity of the country. Considering these circumstances, playing uncertain foreign policy in the short-term perspective might be beneficial for Georgia if it helps to determine how to address the challenges in the long run. Georgian government needs to ensure security of the country, and the most feasible way of improving its defence capabilities is cooperation with NATO. Thus, despite the harsh Russian opposition, the Ministry of Defence opened the NATO-Georgia joint training center in August, 2015.²³ By doing this, Georgia demonstrates capacity and commitment to its security, and hopes to convince the West that Georgia invests in its defence capabilities in order to become the full-fledged NATO member. As a result, the Garibashvili government expects the Alliance to reconsider Georgia's accession.

At this stage, Western countries need to demonstrate that deepening relations with their Eastern partners still represents one of their foreign policy priorities. Both, NATO and the EU disappointed Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine when due to Ukrainian crisis took back their enlargement promises in order to avoid provoking Russia. As a result, Russia became more confident in widening its spheres of influence, while the future and necessity of the EU Eastern Partnership policy became questionable. If NATO and the EU will further keep the doors closed for the aspirant countries, neglecting their membership goals, they will lose these countries' loyalty. Consequently, the Eastern Partnership policy of the EU and NATO will fail, and this will bring a negative effect and damage credibility of both organizations.

<https://mod.gov.ge/assets/up-modul/uploads/pdf/NSC-GEO.pdf>
<http://www.mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/ForeignPolicyStrategy.aspx>
<http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=29419>

²¹ "National Security Concept of Georgia", Ministry of Defense of Georgia, 2011. Online access: <https://mod.gov.ge/assets/up-modul/uploads/pdf/NSC-GEO.pdf>

²² "Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia 2015-2018", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. Online access: <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/ForeignPolicyStrategy.aspx>

²³ "თავდაცვის სამინისტრო: საქართველო ნატოს 2016 წლის სამიტზე MAP-ს მოითხოვს" ("Defense Ministry: Georgia will demand granting MAP at the NATO's 2016 Summit"), Civil.ge, June 2015. Online access: <http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=29419>