



Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Georgia's Regional Balancing Act

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As a small state in an unstable neighbourhood, Georgia faces significant external challenges to its ongoing democratisation and Europeanisation projects. The environment in its immediate neighbourhood has become increasingly unfavourable with a rise in illiberalism² across the wider Caucasus, reflecting broader global trends. In recent months both the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, have won their fourth terms of office, whilst in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues to consolidate his already strong grip on power. Armenia has provided a small ray of democratic hope after Serzh Sargsyan was forced to resign as the newly installed prime minister in Armenia (after two consecutive terms as president), following the #RejectSerzh movement and widespread popular protests.

These illiberal trends, combined with the region's complex geopolitics, threaten to undermine Georgia's domestic democratic consolidation and thwart its European ambitions. This necessitates a delicate balancing act, reflected in the dynamics at play in its foreign policy: on the one hand, a pragmatic approach is very much in evidence, demonstrated by its growing trilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and attempts to re-engage Russia. On the other hand, this pragmatism is balanced by a continued emphasis on the country's Europeanisation, including a commitment to democratic values and the pursuit of closer ties with European organisations such as the EU and NATO. This enduring tension in foreign policy between pragmatism, which emphasises material interests, power and the pursuit of the national interest, and idealism poses a challenge for many states as they attempt to balance their declared ideals with other areas of policy such as economic statecraft and security

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² Liberal forms of governance are broadly understood to be based on liberal democracy: a democratic system of government in which individual rights and freedoms (such as freedom of expression and belief, freedom of movement, women's and family rights etc.) are officially recognised and protected, and the exercise of political power is limited by the rule of law. Illiberal forms of governance are varied and range from dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, where strict obedience to a leader/regime is enforced at the expense of individual freedoms and democratic processes, to partial or illiberal democracies, a system where elections take place, but individual liberties are weak.

policies. The authoritarian environment in Georgia's immediate neighbourhood makes the pursuit of such a balance even more challenging. This paper explores the growing trilateral cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey against the backdrop of Georgian efforts to construct a new regional identity for itself.

Intensifying Trilateralism

Georgia considers neighbouring Azerbaijan and Turkey to be its leading regional partners and has developed strategic partnerships with both countries. Whilst Tbilisi has ambitious aspirations regarding further integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, in the wake of the 2008 war with Russia it had to focus on its relations with other states in the southern Caucasus, notably Azerbaijan and Turkey, both of which are key trade partners. Azerbaijan has become the monopoly supplier of natural gas to the country and is also one of the largest foreign investors in Georgia, followed by Turkey.³ A formal trilateral cooperation arrangement between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey was initiated in May 2012, although years of cooperation had already resulted in the successful implementation of infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan export oil pipelines, as well as the South Caucasus (BTE) gas pipeline. Trilateral ties were further strengthened in May 2017 with an agreement to boost military ties, including the holding of joint military exercises and extended cooperation between the General Staffs of the three armed forces.

This enduring trilateralism stands out amongst a series of failed regional initiatives in the South Caucasus. A key reason for the success of this format is that the three countries have developed their trilateral strategic cooperation within a framework of common interests, which to date has included the implementation of regional energy and transportation infrastructure projects, which capitalise on the location of the South Caucasus region to consolidate its role as a major transit route between East and West. There are clear mutual dependencies between the three: Georgia's geographical location (combined with regional tensions) means that it is pivotal for Azerbaijan's export of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea region to Europe, as well as Turkey's desire to become a regional energy hub.⁴ For its part, Georgia benefits from transit tariffs that support its economic development and has ambitions of establishing the country as a transport hub between Europe and Asia, a goal that was boosted in October 2017 with the inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, which links Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey.

Pragmatism and a geopolitical approach are at the heart of Georgia's deepening ties with Azerbaijan and Turkey. However, there is concern that Georgia's increasing economic and political reliance on its two illiberal neighbours is undermining its ability to adhere to declared

³ According to the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, in 2018 Azerbaijan will provide 99.6 per cent of the 2.7 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas Georgia will consume. For FDI statistics see *Geostat, National Statistics Office of Georgia*, http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=2231&lang=eng.

⁴ Georgia will also be a crucial component of the next major pipeline project, the EU's Southern Corridor, which is focused on securing sufficient supplies of natural gas. It lies on the route of the US\$7bn, 2,000-km Trans-Anatolian (TANAP) gas pipeline from Azerbaijan to Turkey, the first step in the creation of the Southern Corridor. TANAP will connect with the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) at the Turkish border to transport Azeri gas to Italy via Greece and Albania.

ideals such as its commitment to democratic values and human rights norms. As Larsen states, the 2017 cases of Turkish teacher Mustafa Emre Chabuk and the extrajudicial detention of Azerbaijani opposition journalist Afgan Mukhtarli have raised questions about the Georgian government's ability to resist pressure from its neighbours.⁵ With the quadrilateral meeting that took place between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Iran in March 2018 potentially signalling the emergence of a new regional cooperation format,⁶ Georgia's commitment to liberal democratic norms and values is likely to come under even greater pressure in future.

In search of a new regional identity?

Trilateralism is indicative of Tbilisi's appreciation of its tricky geopolitical situation and the strategic realities of its geographic location, which cannot be altered. Whilst its geographic realities are fixed, identities are more fluid. Since independence in 1991, and particularly since the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia has sought to construct a European identity for itself, explicitly differentiating itself from its Caucasian neighbourhood and the wider post-Soviet space. The notion of Georgia 'returning' to Europe and the West has become a common theme in Georgian political and popular discourse, part of the process of constructing a European identity. The central role of self-identity in the development of the Georgian state was highlighted by President Giorgi Margvelashvili in his first annual state of the nation address, when he stressed that 'Georgians with their individual self-identity are Europeans and part of Western civilisation'.⁷ There is generally no distinction made between Europe and the West: the two terms tend to be used interchangeably, emphasising the sense of moving away from the past, which is connected with Russia and the post-Soviet space, towards a Western future and modernity. Ó Beacháin and Coene argue that Europe is seen as a symbol of hope, prosperity and quality, contrasting with the counter-concepts of Asia and Russia.⁸

Geographically, Georgia is located on the periphery of Europe, sitting at the crossroads between Europe and Asia. However, whilst the geographical dimension is important in attempts to define Europe and whether Georgia constitutes a 'European' country, it has been argued that Europe is not a precise geographical expression, but also has an important cultural component, that it is an 'idea', a civilisation and a set of norms and values.⁹ This suggests that European identity is based on a shared commitment to the principles of liberal democracy, the rule of law and market economic principles. The Georgian political rhetoric of 'returning

⁵ Joseph Larsen, 'Good Fences Make Good Neighbours: How Georgia Can Resist Authoritarian Pressure', *Policy Brief*, Georgian Institute of Politics, February 2018, www.gip.ge.

⁶ The four states signed an agreement to develop cooperation in a variety of areas, including infrastructure, transport and agriculture. Ali Mustafayev, 'Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran, Georgia FMs sign joint declaration in Baku', *Trend news agency*, 15 March 2018, https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2873449.html?mc_cid=df0946b564&mc_eid=b7db4de0aa

⁷ President Giorgi Margvelashvili, 'The State of the Nation Address', 21 February 2014, *The Administration of the President of Georgia*, <https://www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/Documents/AnnualReports?p=8674&i=1> [accessed 17 November 2014]

⁸ Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Frederik Coene, 'Go West: Georgia's European identity and its role in domestic politics and foreign policy objectives', *Nationalities Papers*, 42:6 (2014), pp. 923-941.

⁹ See for example Richard Swedberg, 'The Idea of 'Europe' and the Origins of the European Union – a sociological approach' *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, JG 23, Heft 5, Oktober 1994, pp. 378-387. Georgia's sense of being 'European' and belonging to the 'western civilisation' is connected in part to its Christian roots. Religion is a key component of Georgian national identity and, historically, Orthodox Christianity provided an identity and ideology that delineated Georgians from their Muslim and Armenian neighbours.

to Europe’ tends to focus on the cultural and civilizational aspects of Europe and being European, whilst its actions focus on gaining membership of key European institutions, the EU and NATO. This institutional understanding of what it means to be European suggests that a country can become ‘European’ by joining key regional institutions.¹⁰ It also explains the language used over Brexit: the UK is frequently described as ‘leaving’ Europe, which is impossible in the geographical sense of the term, but makes sense if an institutional definition of Europe is applied. Georgia’s commitment to Europeanisation, and consequently its commitment to upholding the liberal democratic norms and values that are associated with this, is being tested by the challenges of its illiberal neighbourhood. Although it may choose to construct a different identity for itself based on its European narrative, it cannot change the reality of its geographical location and circumstance.

As demonstrated by the debate over what constitutes ‘Europe’, there is little consensus with regards to what constitutes a ‘region’ and the concept remains contested. Part of the problem in establishing an unambiguous definition is the fact that any particular region is constantly evolving; thus, the defining factors are impermanent. Most definitions stipulate geographical contiguity as a prerequisite, whilst a degree of interconnection¹¹ and interaction between states is also a common theme, as well as some sense of awareness of belonging to a particular ‘region’. Interconnectedness between neighbouring states can be based on a variety of factors: historical or cultural affinities; trade and economic cooperation; security interdependence and even so-called ‘imagined communities’. The trilateralism between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey thus has clear regional attributes, despite Georgia’s efforts to divorce its identity from its Caucasian neighbourhood.

The wider context

It is not just in Georgia’s immediate neighbourhood that the rise of illiberalism is of concern. There is evidence that illiberal and authoritarian forms of governance are on the rise across the globe, prompting fears of an ‘authoritarian resurgence’, an anti-democratic reversal after years of the pre-eminence of the liberal democratic model.¹² According to Freedom House, there has been a decade-long decrease in global freedom, with 105 countries seeing some sort of reversal during that period.¹³ In 2014, Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, suggested that it was time for Hungary to ‘abandon liberal methods and principles’ and begin developing a new ‘illiberal’ state, arguing that that the liberal-democratic model had performed poorly compared to authoritarian and illiberal states during the 2008 global financial crisis.¹⁴ European liberalism is also under a threat not witnessed since the Second World War, with the rise of extreme right-wing parties in Greece, Switzerland, Austria and

¹⁰ Institutional membership brings specific requirements in terms of political and economic development.

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¹² Michael Boyle, ‘The Coming Illiberal Order’, *Survival*, 58:2 (2016), pp. 35-66.

¹³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2017*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

¹⁴ Boyle, *op. cit.*

Germany, as well as the electoral successes of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Marine Le Pen's Front National in France and Poland's Law and Justice Party.

Western democracies and European organisations such as the EU and NATO cannot afford to be complacent about their influence in Georgia nor the potential challenge from the rise in illiberalism. Powers such as Russia and China are now able to provide material support to countries in a way they haven't be able to previously, thereby undermining Western influence and conditionality.¹⁵ The advance of illiberalism across the wider Caucasus region facilitates the consolidation of Russian influence: Moscow, Baku, Ankara and Tehran share a common suspicion of Western efforts to promote democratic forms of governance around the world and have a mutual fear of 'coloured revolutions', which are perceived to be sponsored by external forces. The leaders of all four countries are keen to maintain their grip on power and will take steps to mitigate any challenge to regime stability. Recent events in Armenia are likely to have caused deep unease in Moscow, as Sargsyan seemingly bowed to pressure from protestors angry about his attempts to ignore democratic process.

Georgia faces a significant challenge moving forward as it attempts to maintain a balance between dealing with the strategic realities conferred by its fixed geographic location and its ambitions of developing a European identity in a challenging neighbourhood. It needs to ensure that it strikes a balance between interests and principles to ensure it does not have to choose between security and the pursuit of democracy. It will face difficult headwinds, but needs to guard against domestic backsliding and pressure from less democratic neighbours. Achieving its ambitions of closer integration with European institutions requires not only the social construction of a new identity, but also adherence to liberal democratic norms and values, along with reform and regulatory restructuring in a range of spheres.

¹⁵ Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'The Evolution of Autocracy: Why Authoritarianism is Becoming More Formidable', *Survival*, 59:5 (2017), pp. 57-68.

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