



“Domine, quo vadis?” - Georgian Vulnerability to the EU’s Uncertain Future

Tatia Dolidze¹

– *“Domine, quo vadis?”*

(Lord, where are you going?)

– *“Eo Romam iterum crucifigi”*

("I am going to Rome to be crucified again")

Apocryphal Acts of Peter

Europe is both celebrating and commiserating the 60th [anniversary](#) of the Rome treaties as it coincides with the biggest identity crisis the Union has witnessed since the signing of those treaties. On March 25, 2017, heads of state and government and the presidents of the EU institutions met in Rome for a summit to adopt a [declaration](#) on the future of Europe – a future which now looks uncertain.

Encouraged by the Brexit vote and further validated by Donald Trump’s presidential election win, nationalistic sentiments have spread across the Euro-Atlantic area in a “domino effect.” Europe’s modern nationalism follows the Anglo-American beat (“America first”; “Take back control”) and is populist, anti-Islam, anti-migrant, and anti-EU.

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Now, all eyes are on the French presidential elections in April, the outcome of which is expected to determine whether Brexit remains sui generis or sets a precedent feared by Europhiles. Either France in one month, or Germany with the outcome of its federal elections in September, is to decide the fate of the Union.

With the two countries being historically central to the European integration process, Frexit and/or Dexit (Deutschland leaving) would mean so much more than simply the next round of exit(s). Pro-EU leaders have to come out as winners in both of these key elections if the idea of “ever-closer union” is to survive. There is a substantial external demand for that result, too.

Politically and militarily abused by the Russian Federation, Georgia has sought its place under the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella, which involves both NATO and the EU as security actors of the hard and soft varieties, respectively. If now the EU is to collapse and the US to shift its loyalties, this post-Soviet, West-looking country that has gone “all-in” for its Euro-Atlantic future, is to suffer.

In another scenario, which ends in victory for the Europhiles and supra-nationalists, the current crisis could trigger a new wave of integration with an active “widening” component. In that case, Georgia could promote itself as new blood needed to revive the stagnating European project.

Hop-On Hop-Off Europe

President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, summarized the risks currently facing Europe in [a letter entitled](#) “United we stand, divided we fall”, which was sent to the heads of each EU member state ahead of the recent Malta summit.

Tusk’s letter refers to the new geopolitical state of affairs shaped by Russia's aggression in what it considers its “near abroad” and even further, and how whimsical the US has become. It also touches upon internal European problems such as the rise of nationalism and xenophobia in European societies and polities, and populism gaining ground among political elites. Finally, the president expresses hope that the remaining 27 member states are ready and willing to stay united.

Indeed, the Union has become too vulnerable to the uncertainty brought on by the populist wave washing over Europe. The Union’s political ecosystem is becoming more intergovernmental (versus supra-nationalist), less regulated (against organizational rules), less predictable (rejecting against accountability to the community), and could distress the broader international system by rearranging the balance of power.

Only as one can the EU be as powerful of an international actor as—or “fully independent” from—Russia, China and the US, a fact rightfully noted by Tusk in the same letter. The ramifications will also be substantial for Georgia, which sees itself *fully independent* and prosperous only within the European Union, and safe only as a member of NATO.

The French elections could throw cold water on Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Given the fact that France has always been no less problematic of a EU member than Britain, a presidential victory of the populist candidate Marine Le Pen—who is a proponent of Frexit—is not something unimaginable. It was just a dozen years ago that the French people voted down a Constitution for Europe.

Neither is such a nationalist turn inconceivable in Germany, where the inflow of migrants has caused public resentment especially after the shameful truck attack at the Berlin Christmas market turned out to have been executed by a Tunisian asylum seeker. Pro-immigration Chancellor Angela Merkel’s center-right Christian Democrats grappling with a challenge from the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany party.

Notably, Le Pen losing the French elections would not automatically translate into a victory for the idea of Europe, as the decisive word would still be left for Germany to say. However, Le Pen winning the elections could be fatal for the Union even without German voters affirming it a few months later.

Yet, from today’s perspective, the future of Europe is not as dark as it seemed almost a year ago when Brexit threatened to initiate a new era of nationalist “domino effect.” Fortunately for Europhiles, not as many dominos as predicted fell as a result. Austria and the Netherlands are the first, the latest (respectively), and the most important examples.

1. [Austrian voters](#) have voted down Eurosceptic, anti-migrant and anti-Islam candidate Norbert Hofer as the first far-right president of an EU member state. Instead, voters chose Alexander Van der Bellen, a left-leaning pro-European figure who epitomizes remnants of the charm the EU has left.
2. The results of the [Dutch general elections](#) on March 15, 2017 were expected to demonstrate the next successful populist takeover, but much to the supra-nationalists’ relief, Geert Wilders, the Dutch version of Donald Trump, lost to his liberal counterpart Mark Rutte.

It seems that mainstream, pro-EU parties have not yet lost their appeal to the publics that still appear receptive to liberal, inclusive, pro-globalisation ideas. The above two cases

offer reasons to believe Europe will eventually find its way out of nationalist, populist, anti-EU, anti-immigration, anti-Islam path.

However, the [populist-nationalist tendency](#) is evident, and its underlying rationale cannot be ignored if Europe wants to avoid further aftershocks: the national-conservative Sweden Democrats, who have roots in the Swedish fascist movement, are the third-largest party in the Riksdag; the ultranationalist Golden Dawn came third in Greek parliamentary elections; the right-wing populist True Finns joined the government coalition; the nativist Danish People's Party is the second-largest in Denmark; and Italy's neo-fascist Lega Nord ranks fourth (13 percent) on polls for Italian public support.

The Brexit, Eurozone, and refugee crises are individual emergencies, but all can be combined into a single European identity crisis stemming from leadership problems. The EU has structural problems that became apparent when it succeeded neither in preventing nor in effectively responding to influxes of migrants, terrorist attacks or economic and social grievances.

Such failures are what has handed power to all the above-mentioned nationalist-populist parties. Anti-globalists might be wrong in believing that globalisation forces work only in favor of elites, but they're correct in sensing that the masses feel that way. European leaders need to connect to the European popular concerns, which is not only a moral imperative, but a pragmatic move during a period of intense backlash against globalization. After all, responsive democracy is what the idea of Europe is all about.

European Georgia on Delay

Georgians were finally granted [visa-free travel](#) in the Schengen area, which takes effect on March 28. Ironically, however, this unprecedented success on Georgia's path toward integration into the EU comes at a time when the latter institution may well be disintegrating. Even without painting an apocalyptic picture of Europe (which would invalidate visa liberalization as the most promising tool of political leverage over the separatist regions Georgia has held since the conflicts arose), it's evident that domestic political circumstances in numerous EU member states threaten to disrupt Georgia's European future.

The logic behind Georgia's fears is simple. Being an EU and NATO aspirant with 20 percent of its territory under Russian occupation, Georgia is looking to the West for its security assurances in the widest understanding of the term. Now, as anti-EU, or at minimum, Eurosceptic sentiments, have gained political ground in the Union and the US,

prospects of Georgia's successful Euro-Atlantic integration are shrinking. European public opinion is shifting in favor of "less Europe" and thus is currently not supportive to the ideas of neither "deepening" nor "widening" of the EU.

The Georgian authorities will have an even harder time than before gaining political support in Europe for full membership. Still more, to Georgia, Europe is a model of lasting peace and prosperity, and the US—a bastion of democracy backed up by the military might capable of counterbalancing Russia. With the EU and the US no longer displaying these characteristics, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration would lose its value anyway.

Interestingly, emerging populist leaders in Europe tend to be not only Eurosceptic but also friendly to Moscow. For example, the French far-right presidential candidate Le Pen, who wants to take France out of the EU, Eurozone, and Schengen area, also stands for closer links with Russia including the recognition of Crimea as a Russian territory and the removal of related sanctions. On March 24, 2017, Le Pen even [paid a visit](#) to the Russian President Putin in Kremlin, reaffirming her pro-Russian political stance. Such possible "partnerships" with Russia carry risks for Georgia which is in need of the continuous international support for its territorial integrity, something which is being undermined by the Russian Federation.

Likewise, if there is to be a Russian-American détente, Georgian security interests will fall victim to it. [Russia's interference](#) in the US presidential elections to support Trump indicates that Moscow foresaw changes in the political landscape that are favorable to its geopolitical interests. Georgia fears a worst-case scenario of the US recognizing Russia's privileged influence in its "near abroad." [Russian-American rapprochement](#) would also mean Georgia-NATO relations coming to a halt as the US support has always been the engine of Georgia's NATO integration, which Russia perceives as a direct threat to its security.

In terms of Georgia's NATO membership perspective, Europe, in contrast to America, has traditionally been wary of provoking Russia. Even in 2008, before nationalism became a trend in Europe and notwithstanding pressure from the US side, [France and Germany blocked](#) Georgia's NATO membership bid at the Bucharest summit. Against this background, the possibility of special relationships between Russia and NATO's leading members in Europe is alarming for Georgia.

What's more, NATO's European members recently [received reprimands from Trump](#) over their allegedly deficient financial contributions to the organization's budget in contrast to the substantial spending on the US side. Soon followed a warning that if

repayments are not made, Europe would have to rely on its own military power. Consequently, if the US abandons the European security system while the EU is busy dealing with the internal chaos, Georgia would be left for Russia to engulf.

Yet, Trump's new approach to NATO might just be a business-like fine-tuning exercise that could even assist European integration process by reviving the long-abandoned idea of a European Defense Community. The crisis of Euro-Atlantic relations could result in Europe building its own military potency independent from the US. Though given the drastic intergovernmentalist turn in the Europe's approach to integration, it will be as challenging as ever for Europhile leaders to push that idea through.

Comfort can be taken in the fact that Trump does not necessarily put all his words in action or can't afford to. Fortunately for Georgia, there are influential domestic factors that constrain the US president's political choices. Besides, the Georgian side has already [met with the Americans](#) on the level of foreign minister and secretary of state, signaling the continuation of the existing framework of relations.

With regards to the internal implications, as supportive as Georgian society is of the country's pro-European political trajectory, it's still susceptible to the overall trend toward nationalism. Case in point, in [2016 parliamentary elections](#), the right-wing populist Alliance of Patriots became one of only three parties to enter the Georgian parliament, while long-established liberal counterparts failed to pass the five percent threshold.

The populist "Patriots" advocate the protection of Georgia's culture, values, traditions, and everything else considered pristine by the Georgian Orthodox Church, from libertines. They are also Eurosceptic, but only to an extent. For now, no political party in Georgia can afford to be openly anti-EU or pro-Russian, especially given the merriment visa liberalization has brought. However, if the next milestone is not set and met, the standstill on the way towards the EU might allow such sentiments to rise.

All things considered, for the time being, the key to the security guarantees for Georgia lies in the hands of individual nation-states, which means that advanced bilateral diplomacy needs to be put to work. Georgia should intensify its existing partnerships while also looking for the possibilities to enlarge its group of friends. It is only with the support of the US and the major European states – within the EU and NATO formats or on the bilateral level – that Georgia can secure its decent future safe from Russia's intrusive hands.

Still, it must not be forgotten that the European integration is a history of crises and compromises. The Union's ability to rise as a phoenix from the ashes must not be

underestimated. Europe will never be the same after Brexit, but it could be better. The crisis is a good chance for the EU to address the democratic deficit, gain further attractiveness by becoming more flexible and by staying open to deepening and widening. The window of opportunity for Georgia's European aspirations can still open.

Finally, even if the EU were doomed, Georgians could always find consolation in the belief that the democratic reforms their country undertook on its way towards European integration were worth the effort anyway.

GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

