



# German Foreign Policy Explained

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Georgia continues to make progress in Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2014 it signed an Association Agreement with the European Union and received a Substantial Package from NATO, and this year its citizens gained the right to travel visa-free within the Schengen area. Given Georgia's foreign policy goals, it's important to take a detailed look at its partners in Europe. Germany is an obvious place to start.

With regard to Georgia's European integration aspirations, Germany is viewed as the most important country in Europe. Although in many cases Germany is just the most visible member of a group of countries, it has a lot of influence of decision-making processes and can certainly be a strong advocate for Georgia's interests within the EU.

If the goal is to establish better ties with Germany and build support for Georgia's interests, it is an unquestionable advantage to gain a deeper understanding of Germany and how Germans perceive themselves and their domestic, situation, as well as external states such as Georgia.

Whereas in the economic and financial spheres Germany is indeed one of the strongest countries in the world, it's not among the most powerful players with respect to diplomatic and military solutions. For example, in contrast to France, the United Kingdom, and Russia, Germany is not a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

That's just one consequence of World War II, which remains very present in the life and consciousness of the German people. Also, Germans remember how it felt to live at the

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very center of the Cold War. This awareness and sense of memory are reasons for its deep-rooted reluctance to engage in military conflicts. Many people were and still are opposed to sending the Bundeswehr (Germany's modern armed forces) abroad.

This historical background is of particular importance with regard to Germany's relations with Russia. Politicians such as former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, whose father fought in Eastern Europe as a soldier of the Wehrmacht, emphasized a special responsibility towards the Russian people as so many were killed due to German aggression during World War II. Other politicians and historians have pointed out that it was not only Russians but Ukrainians, Belarusians, Georgians, and many others who fought in the Red Army and that the Wehrmacht left scorched earth mostly in Ukraine.

Taking this historic responsibility seriously was one reason why the German government took a leading role in negotiating a peace deal for Eastern Ukraine, which to date has only been successful insofar as preventing further expansion of the conflict area. Moreover, Germany was one of the leading countries in pushing for EU sanctions against Russia.

In addition to its efforts on the diplomatic level, the German government sent the Bundeswehr to conduct an air policing mission over the Baltic states and [recently deployed](#) 500 soldiers to Lithuania as part of NATO efforts to reassure its Eastern European members it would deter Russia.

## **Chancellor Merkel - popular abroad, criticized at home**

While Chancellor Angela Merkel is much respected and appreciated for her role in the international arena, her approval ratings at home have fallen over the past two years. This is partly due to dissatisfaction with her foreign policy and partly with her domestic policies.

Various polls show that many Germans are unhappy in general with politicians, institutions, and the media, as in their view they do not pay sufficient attention to the needs of the people.

Although Germany is one of the world's leading economic powers and among the wealthiest countries worldwide, there is widespread discontent among its population. After decades of relative stability and security, wellbeing and optimism, many people now feel uncertain and their future prospects appear clouded. It no longer appears certain whether the next generation will have a better life than that of their parents.

In addition, there is the enormous challenge of integrating the more than one million people who [have arrived](#) in Germany since 2015. While many Germans welcomed the refugees from Syria, others were concerned about thousands of foreigners coming into Germany without being [controlled](#) at the border in summer and fall 2015, who mostly did not speak German language at the time of entering the country and have been brought up in vastly different cultures.

It has been since 2015 that the right-wing populist party *Alternative for Germany* gained approval and even received up to 24 percent of the votes in [elections in federal states](#). Terror attacks in Belgium, France, and Germany itself have added to growing feelings of insecurity and a stronger will to protect and isolate the country.

Moreover, Germans have grown less committed to solidarity, even with people from other European countries. Cohesion inside the EU and NATO is at stake, all the more so since Donald Trump became president of the United States and the United Kingdom prepares to leave the EU. Also, many people are convinced that if Marine Le Pen wins the presidential election in France, it will be the end of the European Union as we know it.

However, even in this worst-case scenario, some European countries will seek to stay united and will need reliable allies in their neighborhood. No country in Europe, not even Germany, is strong enough on its own to safeguard its political, economic, and security interests against a rising China and increasingly aggressive countries such as Russia and Turkey. The closer the political and economic ties with the countries in the vicinity the more stable Europe will be. And some of the major global problems such as migration policy and the fight against terrorism are only solvable in close cooperation with as many countries as possible.

## **A reliable partner in the neighborhood**

Georgia can be a relevant ally for the EU and for Germany. To gain more attention in Germany, it would be advantageous to Georgia and its government to emphasize how important the country can be as a stable and reliable partner.

Georgia is best known in Germany as a travel destination with delicious food, spectacular landscapes, and overwhelming hospitality. Among those more knowledgeable about Eastern Europe, Georgia is mostly seen as one of Russia's small and vulnerable neighbors and a country seeking protection and support. However, many of those who remember

the August War in 2008 recall that it was Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili who pulled the trigger.

In 2016, Georgia's image suffered when German politicians and media reported ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) on Georgian criminal organizations robbing shops and homes. These reports and statements contributed to delays in the visa liberalization process, although only a small number of Georgians applied for asylum in Germany and used the waiting period as a window for committing crimes. Also, the crime groups are seemingly directed not from Georgia but within Western Europe. (Here is one of my reports on the topic: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/georgien-109.html>.)

On the other hand, the German authorities appreciated that the Georgian government reacted strongly and offered to cooperate in finding and apprehending the criminals. In offering cooperation to fight transnational crime, terrorism, and illegal migration, Georgia can present itself as a reliable partner at the gates of the European Union. Project this image would positively address the issues that Europeans are most concerned about at the moment.

In early March 2017, there was a [controversy](#) in Georgia after [media reported](#) that Austria's Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz mentioned Georgia several times when speaking about establishing refugee camps outside the European Union. It turned out that to date there have been no negotiations with the Georgian government on the topic, as representatives of the Georgian government and Austria's ambassador to Georgia, Arad Benko, [made clear](#). And such refugee camps will not be established in exchange for granting visa liberation to Georgia.

Experts and politicians with special knowledge of the region are well aware of Georgia's vulnerability and limited capacities. Politicians in the EU may accordingly ask what Georgia can offer as a member of the European community. Answers to such questions could point out Georgia's strict control of its borders, something which is also important for Europe's security.

## **New perspectives for the European Union**

Less often considered in Western Europe is the fact that Georgia is to date the only country in the region (*Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the Central Asian states included*) still on a path toward democracy and, in certain aspects such as corruption, is a stronger performer than some EU countries. This issue is important when identifying reliable partners for

Germany. It would therefore be concerning if the Georgian government ceased to make progress; for example, by limiting [media freedom](#).

Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU offers the country a way to improve its economic competitiveness and the living conditions of its citizens, for instance by implementing food safety regulations. However, the Association Agreement and participation in the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy were from the beginning seen as solely alternatives to EU membership.

Given the myriad disagreements among EU states and widespread enlargement fatigue, it is not likely the Union will soon admit any new members. Yet, the crisis of the EU offers new opportunities. Chancellor Merkel [recently spoke](#) about a "European Union of different speeds", meaning that some EU states would not be obliged to fulfil all duties, and therefore would not profit from all the Union's advantages.

Already the EU makes possible different levels of integration. Currently, only 19 out of 28 EU member states are included in the euro area. Also, not all EU states are part of the Schengen area, whereas the non-member states Switzerland and Norway do participate in Schengen.

Developing this idea further, one can envision partial membership for countries in the EU's neighborhood. Such a policy would offer Georgia a new perspective and could bring it on a level parallel with Romania or on the outside but as close to the EU as Norway.

## **Strengthening Georgia without provoking Russia**

There are also many open questions regarding the other big Western alliance, NATO. It is not clear how much the United States under President Trump is willing to contribute to the alliance.

Whatever the future of NATO, politicians in Germany see, as mentioned above, a historic responsibility not only toward Russia but even more so toward other Eastern European countries. It was Chancellor Merkel who, during a visit to Tbilisi shortly after the war in 2008, [announced](#) that Georgia would one day become a member of NATO.

Since membership is not in view at the moment, Germany is trying to help Georgia strengthen its defense capacities in such a manner that Russia cannot claim to be provoked by NATO and use it as a pretense for using military force against Georgia. The framework for enhancing Georgia's defense capabilities was extended in 2014 with the

Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, in which NATO countries such as Germany and France cooperate with Georgia.

Aside from this, Germany is [providing](#) a five-month training for Georgian soldiers deployed as a Quick Reaction Force in Northern Afghanistan under the command of the Bundeswehr. When Georgian soldiers helped fight off the Taliban when it attacked the German consulate in Masar-i-Sharif in November 2016, then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier [gave his thanks](#) to the Georgians.

Steinmeier visited Georgia twice during his tenure as foreign minister. His successor, Sigmar Gabriel, who so far is viewed as a [friend](#) of Russian President Vladimir Putin, [excluded](#) any easing of sanctions against Russia as long as the Minsk agreements are not implemented in full. Before making his first visit to Moscow as foreign minister, Gabriel visited Ukraine and Poland.

That can be interpreted as a signal that the German government does not accept the concept of a privileged zone of influence, which the Russian government is claiming at the expense of the sovereignty of its neighboring countries, whether under a government led by Merkel's Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Germany was the first country to recognise Georgia's independence in 1991, and that in 2017 Germany and Georgia celebrated 200 years of cultural and economic ties.

Whoever wins Germany's parliamentary elections in September—and France's presidential elections in April and May—all European countries need reliable and stable partners in the neighborhood. Georgia has the potential to be exactly such a partner.

❖ *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics.*

## **GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)**

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