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European Union



May 2022

Georgian Institute of Politics

EXPERT COMMENT

Issue #21

Georgia–Ukraine During the War: What Should Be Done to Reset Relations Between Strategic Partners?

For years, Georgia and Ukraine have been comrades in hardship and misfortune. With a tradition of friendly and strategic relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv, Georgians are following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine with great concern and see the struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty as an analogue of their own fate. However, despite expectations, Georgia's relations with its traditional strategic partner have become notably strained which is like manna from heaven for the Kremlin. Since Russia's invasion, the Government of Georgia has received some deserved domestic and international – including from Ukraine – criticism over its inconsistent support and controversial position. Additionally, both Georgian and Ukrainian political elites use confrontational rhetoric based on a strategy of blaming and shaming.

When an official Georgian parliamentary delegation visited Ukraine on April 16, 2022, there was an expectation that the “misunderstandings” between the two strategic partners would be solved, but that was not the case. As Ukraine recalled its ambassador from Tbilisi strained relations between the two countries continues. At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), selected experts from **Ukraine, Canada** and **Georgia** responded to the following two questions:

1. *What is impending strategic relations between Georgia and Ukraine during the Russian war?*
2. *What should be done to improve relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv?*



Dr. Hanna Shelest,

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Ups and downs in Ukrainian-Georgian relations have been visible for the last three years, caused by domestic issues in both countries, the personality of former Georgian president Saakashvili, and provocative statements by some politicians.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022, the strategic partnership of the two states, confirmed by the respective agreements sign in 2019, did not prove to be viable. De facto, Ukraine saw two levels of engagement. There was full support from Georgian society, which was highly valued, and the somehow dubious position of the Georgian leadership. Recalling 2008, when five presidents visited Tbilisi during the war and additional Ukrainian support for Georgia against Russia, official Kyiv expected the same level of commitments from Tbilisi. Dubious statements about sanctions, opening borders for Russians escaping economic sanctions, initial refusal to visit Ukraine by the Georgian Parliament speaker—these decisions and others undermine bilateral relations. Georgia was also not present at the partners' meeting at the Ramstein military base. Even the quick application for EU membership was seen in Ukraine as an attempt to use a moment created by Ukraine.

Condemnation of aggression is not enough to improve Ukrainian-Georgian relations. The current level is far from the strategic partnership

that the two countries hoped for. This existential war will make Ukrainian officials and the population more emotional, and partners' actions will be considered in terms of black and white without any grey zones. If Georgia would like to restore its strategic partnership with Ukraine and seriously consider EU and NATO integration, it will need to make tough decisions one day. The current stance of returning to business as usual with Ukraine and maintaining a dialogue with Russia will not be acceptable. What is important is that, compared to other countries, Georgian society is supporting a stronger position in this war. At least symbolic sanctions and breaking ties with Russian oligarchs will be a good start.



Dr. Sergiy

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There were a few factors that restrained relations between the two countries. One of them is the case of [former Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili. Ukraine's decision to invite Saakashvili to Ukraine—appointing him as the Head of Odesa oblast administration (2015-2016) during Poroshenko's presidency as well as his return to Ukraine at the invitation of President Zelensky in 2019—poisoned bilateral relations.

The arrest of the former president, a citizen of Ukraine, in Georgia as well as political bias during the court procedures in 2021 made things even worse. Although this factor is not decisive it still matters, at least symbolically. What matters even more is Georgia's position regarding the Russian war against Ukraine. Alleged restrictions on support for Ukraine in the war against Russia and attempts by the Georgian government to assist Russia to avoid the consequences of Western sanctions caused the recall of the Ukrainian ambassador, whereas Georgia's application for EU candidacy following Ukraine's (assessed by many Ukrainian decision-makers as "free-riding") caused a further deterioration of relations.

Significant changes to Georgia's appeasing relations with Russia are needed to improve relations. That may be caused by a change in the elites/regime in any of the countries, which is unlikely at the moment. Another trigger for the improvement of the relations could be European pressure for stronger ties within the Associated Trio. But at this stage, this is also unlikely. Therefore, the only viable driver to improve relations between the countries is civil society cooperation to speed up the reforms.



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During the last three decades, of all the former Soviet states, Georgia was always one of the closest to Ukrainians. This was particularly the case with Ukrainians who were active in civil society, think tanks promoting European integration and pro-Western political parties. Georgian politics has been linked to Ukrainian politics since the Rose Revolution, which took place just months before the Orange Revolution. Georgians also were vocal in their support for the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity. The largest foreign military unit in Ukraine's International Legion fighting the Russian invaders is the Georgian National Legion (GNL), whose volunteers have actually been fighting since 2014. Former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili is a volunteer in the GNL. With such a warm background in Georgian-Ukrainian relations it is very sad that relations have deteriorated. There can only be three reasons for this.

The first is that Ukraine expected Georgia to do more for Ukraine than other South Caucasian countries, all three of which are not imposing sanctions on Russia in response to the invasion. In fact, Azerbaijan is providing the greatest degree of assistance (fuel, ambulances, medical) and President Ilham Aliyev has used the toughest language over the right of countries to restore their territorial integrity. The second is despondency in Georgia over the West's abject failure to support it when Russia invaded in 2008.

Georgians have every right to be angry about this as the West instituted no sanctions against Russia. Ukrainians have a similar right as the sanctions imposed in 2014 in response to the occupation of Crimea and invasion of east Ukraine were pathetic. Despondency in Georgia has helped divide Georgians into “pragmatists” who are in power and do not want to poke the Russian bear by fully supporting Ukraine and “romantics” who believe Georgia should do so. The third is the “pragmatists” in power in Georgia are angry at what they see as a high degree of influence of Saakashvili’s people in Ukraine. Mikhail Saakashvili came into conflict with former President Petro Poroshenko and it is therefore not surprising President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed Saakashvili’s people into his team. But Zelenskyy did this for domestic reasons and not because he is anti-Georgian or hostile to the Georgian leaders currently in power.

Ukraine's strategic partnership risks being undermined in each of its key components, namely trade, security and Euro-Atlantic integration due to Georgia’s reluctance to join international sanctions as well as the trial over Mikheil Saakashvili and jailing of the director of the pro-opposition channel Mtavari, one of Mikheil Saakashvili’s lawyers, Nika Gvaramia. Kyiv views these actions as openly unfriendly gestures. For Ukraine, improving bilateral relations will not take place without Tbilisi changing its position on these issues. In the light of the absence of constructive dialogue, which is overshadowed by mutual accusations, bilateral relations seem to be reaching a historical low.

The previous statement is linked to the NORMALIZATION POLICY WITH RUSSIA. In a word, Georgia's normalization policy did not achieve its goal. On the contrary, it only decreased Georgia's ability to maneuver vis-a-vis Russia and join international sanctions against it. And third, LACK of WEST'S STRATEGIC SUPPORT for GEORGIA also has an impact. The West, namely the US and EU, should not repeat the mistakes of underestimating the consequences of the 2008 Georgian-Russian war. Tbilisi lacks the West’s clear support guaranteeing assistance to Georgia to overcome its dependence on Russia.

The following steps will improve bilateral relations: 1) The Georgian government should declare clear support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and its fight against Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified aggression. Tbilisi should join international sanctions. The Georgian President, Prime Minister and Speaker of the Parliament should pay an official visit to Kyiv to relaunch the damaged partnership. Kyiv, in turn, should express its readiness for a fresh start. 2) Georgia



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Among the factors that obstruct strategic relations between Georgia and Ukraine during the Russian war, I would name the following three: LACK OF AN EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE BETWEEN UKRAINE AND GEORGIA: Georgia and

will not be able to join international sanctions against Russia without Western guarantees of support. Currently, there is a momentum for the West to undermine Russia's hegemony in the South Caucasus and turn the Black Sea area into a

peaceful area of cooperation rather than confrontation.



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B | S | T The Black Sea Trust
for Regional Cooperation
A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND



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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a 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.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union and the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation and the Georgian Institute of Politics.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

"Georgia-Ukraine During the War: What Should Be Done to Reset Relations Between Strategic Partners?", Expert Comment #21, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2022.

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