



Georgia and the EU's Eastern Partnership: a Swedish Perspective

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The 'hybrid war' waged by Russia against Ukraine since 2014, which was preceded by the short-lived Russia-Georgia War in 2008, has exposed the wider conflict between the respective goals and ambitions of the EU and Russia in their shared neighbourhood. The Kremlin's belligerence towards Ukraine brought to the fore limitations of the EU's traditional foreign policy approach – characterized by an emphasis on shared values, international law and norms, and a technocratic approach to reform, and forced EU governments to address the unintended geostrategic implications of the Eastern Partnership program covering Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Sweden's liberal-conservative government was, together with Poland, one of the architects of the EU's Eastern Partnership in 2009 – a political vision which was kept alive also by the Social Democrats after they formed government in 2014, and then again after the 2018 parliamentary elections. The Eastern Partnership enjoys broad parliamentary support, and Sweden's pro-integrationist approach to EU foreign affairs is therefore likely to continue. Notably, Sweden has backed full EU membership as a realistic goal for the Eastern Partnership states; as Sweden's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, noted in 2017: 'the door should be kept open to potential membership for those countries that truly transform.' In November the same year, Margot Wallström visited Georgia together with the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Witold Waszczykowski, as part of the preparations for the yearly high level meeting on the Eastern Partnership.

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‘Ownership’ and ‘Resilience’

A key notion for the Swedish government has been ownership, i.e. the principle that all countries engaged in the Eastern Partnership policies also share the mutual responsibility for the execution of its goals and priorities. The incentive structure is fairly straight-forward, and can be described as one which is flexible and differentiated (with ‘more for more’ and, conversely, ‘less for less’). The key areas for reform are the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and the independence and plurality of the media landscape. The more ambitious reformers, such as Georgia, will be expected to show more concrete development ‘on the ground’ than the Eastern Partnership countries with a less active agenda. In return, the EU will be able to offer Georgia more favorable conditions for cooperation – although important steps were already taken with visa liberalization, free trade and educational opportunities.

A second notion of import is the state resilience. All Eastern Partnership countries face non-negligible challenges in fighting corruption, enforcing private property rights, reforming courts, police and legislature, and building Western-style state capacity. As was noted by Margot Wallström during her 2017 Georgia visit, Sweden supports ‘all the reforms launched in Georgia that are aimed at strengthening democracy and fighting corruption in the region. I want to say that Sweden will continue to support Georgia firmly in the path of integration with the European Union. There are certain areas in which we would expect more noticeable changes. This is a reform of the judicial system, which has already begun. In addition, efforts must be made to achieve gender balance on the political stage, as well as in the development of media freedom. These are areas where the situation will always be of great importance to us. Progress in these issues will be a good sign.’ By and large, the same message had been delivered the year before: ‘We can see a positive development in Georgia. The reform process is making progress, but challenges remain. This is why it is important for Sweden and the EU to continue to support Georgia in its rapprochement to the EU and in order to bring about a well-functioning society free of corruption and with transparent institutions and political processes.’

In February 2019, the Swedish government announced its further commitment to the political development in the EU’s Eastern neighborhood, which includes a more comprehensive agenda for development support and financial aid in order to strengthen democracy, the rule of law, and gender equality. The initiative also has a security dimension, including steps to combat the spread of Russian disinformation

and troll activity through social media and propaganda outlets – an issue which has become increasingly problematic also in the Nordic countries.

Although several or most of the challenges in the region have domestic and historical roots, outside threats to the countries' reform agenda cannot be ignored. The importance of building state resilience was emphasized – in a somewhat roundabout way – in the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on 24 November 2017, which noted 'the importance of strengthening state, economic and societal resilience both in the EU and the partner countries, and the role of the Eastern Partnership in this respect in the European Union's neighborhood as also outlined in the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy and the review of the European Neighborhood Policy.' The declaration also confirmed the non-confrontational action logic of the EU, perhaps in response to Russia which officially has defined the Eastern Partnership as a geostrategic threat to its 'legitimate interests'.

Russia has declared a 'privileged sphere of interest' in its 'near abroad', and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have in common the partial occupation or lack of control over parts of their territories. The Russian military and interior troops currently occupy the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia (since 2008), as well as Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine (since 2014). Russia also maintains a military presence in Moldova's Transnistria, in the wake of the 1992 peace agreement that ended the short war that had started the same year. The conflicts are partially fluid; a 'creeping borderization' by Russian servicemen is ongoing in the Georgian Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia, where, among other things, part of the BP-owned Baku-Supsa pipeline came under Russian occupied territory in 2015. The security threat posed by Russia remains the immediate and most difficult to solve issue for the European community.

In the last years, Sweden's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, has emphasized the Swedish official support for Georgia's territorial integrity, in the EU as well as through other multilateral organizations. In particular, the Swedish government has expressed its concern over the Russian actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Sweden is the second largest contributor to the EU Monitoring Mission in the region. Through the OSCE, Sweden has supported the condemnation of the Russian Duma for its decision to incorporate non-Russian military force structures in South Ossetia with the Russian military. Furthermore, the Swedish government has expressed its concern over the opening of customs offices in connection with the administrative demarcation lines of Abkhazia and South

Ossetia, as well as over the opening of election offices in South Ossetia ahead of the 2018 Russian Presidential election. Sweden has also supported Georgia's resolution initiative in the UN Council for Human Rights, providing a mandate to the UN Commissioner of Human Rights to regularly report on the human rights situation in the two Georgian regions.

New initiatives for cooperation?

The Eastern Partnership countries are far from a coherent group of countries, and there are different ways one can think of splintering the countries into different subgroups. Moldova signed an association agreement with the EU in 2014, but has backtracked on reforms in the last two years. In October 2017, the EU withheld 28 million euros for the revamp of Moldova's justice system, amid concerns about unperturbed political interference in the country's police and court system. Armenia, on other hand, has no association agreement but in July 2018 took a first step in the direction of EU integration with the signing of a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

A further regional fragmentation is, however, unpractical. The Swedish perspective has been that interregional cooperation between the six Eastern Partnership countries will be crucial, not least against the background of the United Kingdom's Brexit and expansion 'fatigue' in the EU. There are different reasons for this. Firstly, because no single Eastern Partnership country will be able to stay on the agenda of the EU for very long. Ukraine, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and hybrid war in Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014, is a case in point: in order to pursue EU integration, a positive agenda will be necessary. A prolonged engagement with the EU based on a negative agenda only will be difficult to sustain. Secondly, regional cooperation between the Eastern Partnership countries can provide a platform for peer learning and efficiency of scale, thus deepening the EU's engagement and commitment. The more successfully countries achieve reform; the more difficult it will be for the EU to ignore their calls for further cooperation.

The EU's Eastern Partnership has achieved notable success: association agreements, lowering of trade barriers, simplification of investments, and visa liberalization. However, the Eastern Partnership should in the meantime not be understood as an instrument, but rather as a policy or initiative. The EU is not a state and is not usually characterized as a major power; it lacks military force and does not have a

unified foreign policy agenda. This specific action logic of the EU has certain implications for the Eastern Partnership countries.

Firstly, reforms in the Eastern Partnership countries need to be understood by local policy makers and the public as a good in itself, rather than something undertaken on behalf of Brussels. However, the more ambitious the reform agenda becomes in a given country, the more difficult it becomes for the EU to ignore its development and demands. The EU, after all, remains internally divided between integrationists and supporters of the status quo. Here, Georgia can already now formulate an agenda post-2020: what are your goals and aspirations? How do these goals speak to the wider European public?

Secondly, the EU is changing, and as no one knows for sure what the EU will look like in 5–10 years from now different models of cooperation can be imagined. Will Georgia seek full EU membership, or perhaps look to the models chosen by Switzerland or Norway? The United Kingdom's Brexit negotiations are currently in disarray, but London's ultimate solution may in the end suggest a second alternative model for what EU cooperation may entail. EU integration is a process that goes both ways, and as the EU is changing, aspiring members may reflect on different possible – but no less viable – modes of cooperation.

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.

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