

A New Strategy that Deters and Promotes - Framing the EU's Actions in the South Caucasus



Shalva Dzebisashvili

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia

Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

For more information, please visit

www.gip.ge

About the Author

Shalva Dzebisashvili is Associate Professor and Head of the Political Science and International Relations Programs at the University of Georgia. Being a GEM-EU Erasmus Mundus doctoral fellow, Shalva Dzebisashvili successfully defended his thesis in January 2016 and received his doctoral degree from the Free University Brussels (Belgium) and the Bielefeld University (Germany). In 2008–2009, he successfully completed his Master’s degree in Strategic Security Studies at the National Defense University (NDU, Washington) and worked as a Defense Advisor of the Georgian Ministry of Defense at the Georgian Mission to NATO (Brussels). From 2003 to 2012 and from 2017 to June 2019, he held senior positions in the Defense Policy and Planning Department of the Georgian Ministry of Defense. He is a member of several research organizations, notably the UGSP (the University of Georgia Security Platform), and author of numerous publications. Shalva Dzebisashvili is currently involved in the international collaborative research project “Institutional Transformation and Social Practices in the Countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia,” funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.



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Executive summary

The problem for the EU as an independent geopolitical player has long been discussed in academic and policy related literature. The enlargement process itself inherently deepened the quest for a more visible European footprint globally, and especially in its immediate neighborhood. At the same time the South Caucasus, a region long regarded as a buffer-zone between Russia, Europe and other “big players”, has been increasingly articulating its interest for a more European footprint. By opening negotiations on membership with Ukraine and granting Georgia candidacy status, as well as hailing Armenia’s interest in a European perspective, Brussels, in fact, has made a clear geopolitical claim and questioned the existing format of cooperation such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Hence, this article examines the dilemmas facing the forming of a more clear-cut and articulated EU-strategy in the South Caucasus region, and suggests several policy changes that would bring far more clarity to the strategic objectives of the EU and better security in achieving these objectives, i.e. securing its footprint in the region.

Key Words: EU, South Caucasus, Strategy, Security, Membership

Introduction

As Germany's chancellor Olaf Scholz declared on Oct. 16, 2022, the voice of Europe must be heard from Lisbon to Tbilisi, and the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, welcomed Georgia in December 2023 as a future member of the European family, making a clear geopolitical statement and indicating the EU's new approach, that of regarding the South Caucasus region, as being within its geographic and political realm (Doborjginidze, 2023). The new reality was made possible not only by the granting of EU-candidacy status to Georgia, but it was essentially preconditioned by the quick military victory of Azerbaijan over the Armenian forces in the separatist region of Karabakh, which restored the territorial integrity for which Baku had been working hard for the last 30 years, effectively eliminating one of the major sources of instability and discord in the region. The vision of Russia as the military protector of the Armenian nation was shattered, forcing Yerevan first, to come to terms with Baku and Ankara, and second, to start looking for better security alternatives, notably the EU. Consequently, Armenia froze its membership in the Russia-led collective defence alliance - the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) - initiated peace talks with Azerbaijan and expressed openly its desire to enter more close cooperation with the EU (Reuters, 2024).

Given the huge geopolitical impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the entire post-soviet area (not to speak of globally), the positioning of the EU towards its future plans in the South Caucasus requires more clarity and even more elaboration. It is urgently necessary, since the Putin regime has never abandoned its imperial vision of the entire South Caucasus becoming part of a new Russian empire, and the controlled internal discourse in the Russian media frequently calls for "abolishing borders with Armenia, i.e. obviously with Georgia", as the natural corridor connecting Russia with Armenia (Kazanskyi, 2024).

Hence, the existing mechanisms of close cooperation between the EU and South Caucasus countries, such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), in the general context of neighborhood policy have become increasingly questionable, due to an ever growing gap between the political reality and security on the ground and the objectives of EaP, which were formulated long before the dramatic geopolitical events of 2022. A new European Strategy that is more assertive and no longer relies solely on the display of soft power is increasingly rational and justified. In a very "bold", to put it mildly, statement the former U.S. president Donald Trump in July 2018 labeled the EU as one of the greatest foes of America, and, according to many sources, including his former national security advisor John Bolton, actively considered pulling the US out of NATO (Alfaro, 2022). It requires no additional intellectual effort to understand the gravity of the consequences of such a decision to the EU, its security posture, and its commitments to forming one of the global power centers. The risk of renewed American isolationism points even more to a serious need for a more independent European military capacity to deal with conventional threats in Europe.

Consequently, this paper attempts to suggest a new EU-strategy towards the South Caucasus region, based on the objective necessity of applying a combined approach with an increasing role for security projection. This would not only provide a much higher level of credibility to the EU's regional commitments, but promote regional stability, allow a tailored approach to each country and significantly support local efforts to increase democratic as well as state/society resilience in times of crises. The objective of this article is not to dive deeply into local political intricacies and assess local government's actions that either align with or seek to sabotage Europeanization efforts. Rather we will focus on and rationalize several key elements of the suggested new strategy, especially those that will help enhance the EU's regional posture (and the impact on countries' politics) with the positive side-effect of solving the dilemma of EU-NATO military cooperation.

Has There Ever Been an EU-strategy in the South Caucasus?

The European approach to the region has been largely defined within the greater (geographical) scope of the Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership (EaP which has been in force since 2009 and is centered around the topics of citizens mobility, transport, energy and environment (EU External Action, 2022). The EU doubled down and initiated the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Georgia in 2016. This, along with the multiple benefits of economic cooperation, and the granting of vis- free travel for Georgian citizens in 2017 (NATO & EU Info Center, 2024), were two major pillars of cooperation, i.e. European priorities can easily be identified here. On the one hand, the EU places special emphasis on democracy, rule of law, human rights, and good governance (transparency and accountability). On the other, projects that support energy and transport connectivity (undersea cable, ferries etc.) as well as support to SMEs, sustainable development and environment protection, constitute the second pillar of European interests in Georgia (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, 2023). In fact, significant efforts are directed to the development of energy infrastructure, its efficiency, introduction of energy standards and, most importantly, the alignment with key EU energy legislation (EU4Georgia, 2024). Azerbaijan managed to establish itself primarily as a strategic energy partner to Europe (via the southern gas corridor and oil supplies), and Armenia received relatively less attention in democratic governance and economic cooperation due to its close political (security) and economic ties to Russia (member of CSTO and the Eurasian Economic and Customs Union).

Although a first attempt to reflect on regional security developments was made in 2008, when the EUMM (EU-Monitoring Mission) was sent to Georgia to observe the occupation line in the aftermath of Russian aggression, the real security *force majeure* arrived as Azerbaijan liberated the Karabakh region from Armenian forces in 2020, and Russia started its *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation) against Ukraine. A spontaneous reaction in Brussels was to copy its practice in Georgia and send a monitoring mission to Armenia, the EUMA (EU-Mission in Armenia), but it came to realise that the Minsk Group no longer provided a good platform for solving territorial problems between Baku and Yerevan (EU External Action, 2022). It became more than evident that a new security vision, a new kind of security role-model for the EU, was needed: first - to coordinate EU-member states interests/policies in the region (i.e. to avoid local animosity, similar those formed between Paris and Baku); and second - to formulate and propose more effective and lasting solutions for regional security and stability. The latter obviously implies a far more (pro)active role for the EU in the South Caucasus, to which Anders Fogh Rasmussen was pointing as he pledged in French LeMond an independent and much bolder security role in the region for the EU to mediate lasting peace (Rasmussen, 2024).

Given the huge geopolitical and security implications of Russian aggression in Ukraine for all the south Caucasus republics (threat of a renewed occupation), and the decision of the European Commission to grant candidacy status to Georgia, the need for a coherent EU-security strategy in the region becomes more than evident. The European political concept that geographically includes Georgia, which was confirmed by the decision to grant candidacy status (not, by the way, in recognition for achievements of the Georgian government), is in fact, nothing less than a clear geopolitical claim. Geopolitical claims, however, in turn degrade to the level of wishful thinking if not held together by strong security arrangements.

In the past, the EU clearly preferred the carrots of soft power, such as economic, infrastructure and society-related cooperation, to advance its goals, largely defined as the promotion of general stability in its periphery (European Council, 2009). Coined as the concept of conditionality, the prospect of membership could theoretically motivate local political stakeholders to advance democratic reforms and implement a large variety of cooperation commitments (primarily of normative/legal and technical nature) agreed in EaP and AA-frameworks. Yet without the clear promise of membership, little implementation of the given commitments can be expected (Checkel, 2000). Therefore, even within the EAP or AA conditions the degree of compliance, i.e. successful completion of agreed objectives, could not serve as a basis for solid optimism. Not least, membership of a political alliance that can hardly provide any meaningful military assistance and security guarantees to candidates on the path to membership (to secure the membership process itself) can become an even greater risk, thus reducing the chances of meeting the conditions for cooperation.

Intuitively the EU understood the inherent problem and decided to center its attention (even after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014) solely on the concept of resilience by copying (although belated) the NATO-approach of instituting general requirements to its member states in key sectors of state activities (baseline requirements) (European Commission, 2024). Only in 2020 did the Strategic Foresight Report – 2020 recognize the resilience concept as a new compass for EU policies, and in 2023 the Critical Entities Resilience Directive was issued (European Commission, 2023). As for the need of taking strategic positioning, the EU continues rather to choose vague wording and instead of directly pointing to Russia as its major adversary, prefers to focus on sustainability goals and the so-called global battles of narratives as the major areas, where actions have to be initiated (European Commission, 2023). The European concept of resilience is decoupled from the general understanding of strategy and strategic action, and solely relates to the ability of critical entities to withstand all hazards “whether natural or man-made, accidental or intentional” (CER, 2024). This is very problematic, since watering down the critical and clear link between a strategic threat and the need to provide everything to counter it, while remaining resilient to counterattacks (i.e. in state of war) in the wide spectrum of state and societal activities, will inevitably lead to false objectives and failed strategic policies.

In its Strategic Compass, adopted in 2022, the EU clearly identified Georgia and the other countries of the South Caucasus as facing “direct threats to their sovereignty and territorial integrity by extensive use of military instruments and hybrid tactics.” (by Russia – author) (EU External Action, 2022). However, despite declaring its “unwavering support for, and commitment to, their sovereignty and territorial integrity”, the EU is very measured in strategic messaging and promises as it puts it, deployment of the various tools to increase resilience and cooperation in countering hybrid threats, disinformation, and cybersecurity (Strategic Compass, 56). Consequently, an obvious discrepancy can be identified, in which the strategic objective of enlargement is being reinforced, and therefore candidacy status granted to Georgia, yet no adequate security strategy, within which the European geopolitical claims could be secured, has been formed and put on table.

This is a challenge, if not the biggest problem for the EU as an independent geopolitical player. Inability to support strategic claims with respective security and military measures, as well as resources, will inevitably lead to actions devised on abstract assumptions and strategic failures. A more assertive Europe in the South Caucasus implies no acceptance of geopolitical buffer zones, and this, is directly interpreted in the Kremlin as an indication of the EU’s weakness and a de facto invitation to invade. A need for more western deterrence in the region is increasingly evident. No wonder the degree of Georgia’s alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP) statements and the Council’s decisions remains pretty low (44% in August 2023) given the complete absence of the mentioned deterrence (European Commission, 2023). Nonetheless, the recent meeting of the Armenia’s prime minister Pashinyan in Brussels with Ursula von der Leyen, Josep Borell and Antony Blinken and the political endorsement of the increased European aspiration of Armenia, could indicate that slowly, but still very much in process, a new EU geopolitical stance is forming in the South Caucasus.

A New Approach to the South Caucasus - More Resolve, i.e. More Deterrence

The worst thing the EU could do is to fall back again into denying reality and lapsing into wishful thinking by not realizing that in the South Caucasus it is not merely in competition with Russia on the various cooperation mechanisms but, quite to the contrary as the Russian Leadership is openly claiming, as it is in direct war (with the West) (Reuters, 2024). The Union needs to devise a new strategy by which it might successfully coordinate the different interests (policies) of its member states and formulate more effective and lasting solutions for regional stability and security. It has to be acknowledged, finally, that contrary to the situation in the 90ies, when Russia posed no serious threat to the EU and the membership processes for

the potential EU candidates required no extraordinary efforts for enhancing their security, the situation today is completely different. The problem of conditionality that implies the impossibility of compliance on the side of a candidate country if the membership is not guaranteed, is even more deteriorating (Checkel, 2000). As already mentioned, membership of a political alliance that can barely provide any meaningful military assistance or security guarantees to candidates on the path to membership (to secure the membership process itself) can create an even greater security risk, reducing in that way the chances of meeting cooperation commitments. Hence, a strategy that is featured by hesitance, uncertainty and halfhearted measures is no longer sustainable, and creates the danger of institutional entropy, motivating Russia to plan and execute more bold attacks on the EU, both externally and internally.

Since Russian strategic logic and thinking focuses on securing its core interests in the “near abroad” by coercive and military means first, and then by adjusting political mechanisms to the reality created on the ground, the EU-modus operandi of devising political mechanisms first, with almost no reference to potential (credible) security mechanisms, effectively creates de-facto buffer zones adjacent to Russia, i.e. a window of opportunity for the Kremlin to act decisively and turn the regional situation radically in its favor. This situation must be avoided as it is similar to that created by the NATO Bucharest Summit declaration in April 2008, which showed disunity and NATO’s hesitance on the granting of MAP to the Ukraine and Georgia, and was quickly exploited by Russia against Georgia (by launching a war). Geopolitics and Realpolitik are back again, and this should be recognized.

In fact, the EU Strategic Compass document openly favors more clarity in strategic objectives and quick, decisive actions when facing crises, as well as a robust and flexible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)-mandates (Strategic Compass, 12; 16). The EU’s Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), a 5K strong deployable taskforce, planned to become operational by 2025, has therefore to be viewed as the key mechanism for security provision and deterrence in Europe (Strategic Compass, 31). Since the historical evidence of successful deterrence models undoubtedly speaks for the need of credible military capabilities and potential of “present-in-place”, as well as effective communication of the resolve to use them if necessary, the RDC deployment in Georgia must be backed by the option of Nato Defence Force (NRF) reinforcement. This is by no means a secret to experts, who highlight the logical need for bringing the NRF component into discussion, due to the limited capacity of RDC (i.e. EU Battlegroups - BGs) to remain combat ready in a prolonged high intensity conventional war (Kerttunen, 2010). Initially this can be done by establishing a permanent training and exercise mission (EU-PTEM-G) in the country, which will integrate the RDC element and consider the potential extension of its mission to Armenia (EU-PTEM-A). By doing that the RDC is turning into an effective deterrent and stability factor (supported by NRF) in the European zone of responsibility, and contributing significantly to clarifying the operational concepts, missions, and decision-making (military cooperation) dilemma existing between EU and NATO.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Tough times require bold decisions. The strategic interests of the EU in the South Caucasus are to secure Georgia's membership, to protect it from destructive external factors, to provide more stability in the region, facilitate peace, and ensure inter and intra regional economic cooperation. Thus, to provide for a positive outcome, the following policy recommendations should be formulated:

- Initiate gradual deployment of RDC/Initial Entry Force (IEF) in Georgia to provide a high level of deterrence and communicate political resolve and capabilities. Repeating the mistakes created by the outdated MAP framework must be rejected as it provides for no additional security guarantees. (as was clearly recognized by Finland and Sweden, who in similar circumstances opted instead for direct membership).
- The sense of security created by guaranteeing the path of membership (via enhancing the level of deterrence) will itself have an immense positive effect for local political life. It will completely shift political and societal energy towards democratic (institutional) consolidation and away from the existing political modus operandi, which balances European requirements with the silent acceptance of Russian demands, i.e. growing democratic backsliding and authoritarianism, out of fear of Russian punishment.
- This could trigger additional efforts to promote democracy, in which the EU can provide immense expertise and support. The EU could push the enhancing internal party democracy as well as reviving party politics on regional and local levels. This can only be achieved through effective political and administrative decentralization of state governance (more autonomy, and more resources for municipalities and regions).

These four priorities, under the slogan of *more security for more democracy* in Georgia, will radiate strong signals to Armenia and Azerbaijan, thus helping build strategic alternatives. More democratic reforms and a stronger EU security presence in Armenia will be very difficult to achieve if a European "foothold" is not first secured and guaranteed in Georgia. Being, de-facto, the geographic bottleneck of the region, western access to South Caucasus, as well as to Central Asia, can only be provided through Georgia. This is, of course, well understood by Russia. Therefore, whether it is the prospects of solving the border and territorial disputes between Baku and Yerevan, or the options of enhanced regional cooperation between the three South Caucasus-countries, no viable plans or actions can be launched without turning Georgia into the European bridgehead in the region. Once this is established, the chances of far more intensive cooperation and of integrational projects/policies being implemented in the region will get

incomparably higher, (albeit in a rather more functional manner similar to the EU in areas such as transport, energy, finances and market, etc). Not to forget that the prospect of a more integrated and more peaceful South Caucasus is in US interests as well, as strongly highlighted recently by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Brussels when meeting his European and Armenian counterparts (US Department of State, 2024).

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