

Reflections on Georgia's Western Aspirations (Attitudes towards EU and NATO Integration)

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Abstract

"I am Georgian and, therefore, I am European" (Europe, 2022). Well-known phrase of the former speaker of the Georgian parliament Zurab Zhvania made in 1999 implied the idea that Georgia was supposed to be the part of European Alliance. Since that period, this phrase has been providing different interpretations of Georgian identity. If many Georgians believe in the importance of having closer ties with the West, and see the benefits of it, these aspirations sometimes have transactional undertones (Kakabadze, 2004).

According to the survey conducted in September, 2020 by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) on behalf of Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation for the joint Future of Georgia project, most Georgians still follow Zhvania's lead. Many identify themselves as Europeans and want their country to become a member of both the EU and NATO. Yet their views on Europe remain complex (CRRC-Georgia, 2021).

Interesting is to find out what does it mean to Georgian society to be European? Does this mean an embrace of the social agenda and values of Western Europeans? Or is West merely seen as a protector of Georgians' security? Georgians' answers to these questions are sometimes contradictory, as they seek to establish a special place for themselves on the margins of Europe.

Keywords: EU, Georgia, integration, NATO, West

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Introduction

According to the scholar Adrian Brisku, since the Russian imperial era, for more than a century, Georgian society have been expressing European aspirations. In 1918, after the October Revolution ended the Russian Empire, independent Democratic Republic of Georgia was formed which did not last a long time (Brisku, 2013).

Noe Zhordania (chair the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia) told the deputies of the constituent assembly, "you know that the roads of Georgia and Russia are separated. Our path goes to Europe and Russia's path goes to Asia. I knew that our enemies are saying that we are on the side of Imperialists. So, I have to say here, I prefer western Imperialists to the Eastern fanatics" (Parliament, 1999).

This kind of approach meant a great turnaround of the Georgian social-democrats and "nationalization of socialism", however it was not enough to ensure that the West would identify us in the right way and assist the Georgian Democratic Republic of 1918. The reason of this was the position of the ruling party. Georgian Mensheviks remained International Socialists, in essence - Russophiles, were poorly aware of the national-state interests and were therefore uncomfortable partners for Europe and America.

It's important to mention that there were many obstacles for Georgia on the way to Europe, and this resistance was because of Russia. Another challenge was the fact that Georgia gained independence with the help of Germany and its defeat could ruin the idea of Georgia's independence. Besides, the politicians of the Entente countries were irritated by the Georgian Mensheviks' socialist slogans and their short-sighted policy – when they were unable to achieve desired results with the leading politicians of the European states.

However, all above-mentioned issues were not the reason why we stayed without any support during the aggression of the Communist Russia.

The point is that the foreign policy of any state is stipulated by peculiarity of its internal policy. A social life that Georgia had when it became the first republic, was characterized by the national and social problems of artificial confrontation, internal split, based on the principle of party affiliation – a vicious personnel, policy, absence of national ideology and shared values and as a result of this inability to create a national development plan excluded proper identification of the national energy (Parliament, 1999).

From this point a passiveness of the society was the basis for our weakness, poverty, less efficiency. Because of that, our interests could not be taken into consideration on international arena. If we add to all above-mentioned a wrong foreign policy, it should be understandable why we could not gain the support of Europe and the United States, which would support Georgia's membership in the League. And in case of the Russian attack, Georgia would have been protected.

For the above-mentioned reasons in 1921, occupation and annexation of Georgia by Russia did not cause any affray from the side of the West.

On September 22 of 1922, General Assembly of the League of Nations called the Council to "carefully observe the news of that part of the world (Georgia) and support it to return to normal, peaceful condition in accordance with the international law" (Parliament, 1999).

In reality, they did not do anything beneficial for us. On the contrary, the positions of the Communist Russia in Georgia were becoming stronger and fierce.

League of Nations could not manage and solve the problems faced by Georgia. It was a time when there was no force that could lob the problems faced by Georgia. Neither Europe nor the United States of America expressed interest towards those issues, even the Georgian emigration did not show the effort that would be enough to actualize a question of Georgia in front of the Civilized World of the West.

When the Soviet Union's collapsed in 1991, Georgia achieved a more enduring independence. Country's foreign policy was clearly oriented towards the West. The country's leaders declared an ambition to join Euroatlantic institutions, a process that began with Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe in 1999, when Zhvania made his well-known phrase.

Georgia's Path to the West

According to the survey conducted by Carnegie-Mikeldadze, 78 percent of Georgians believe that becoming the member of the EU is a beneficial for Georgians, as they will become more European. We should remember the period since 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Georgia was enforced to become the member of the Commonwealth of Independent

States (Russian-inspired bloc) in 1993. Georgia by that time viewed the West as a protector, especially in relation to Russia (Lejava, 2021).

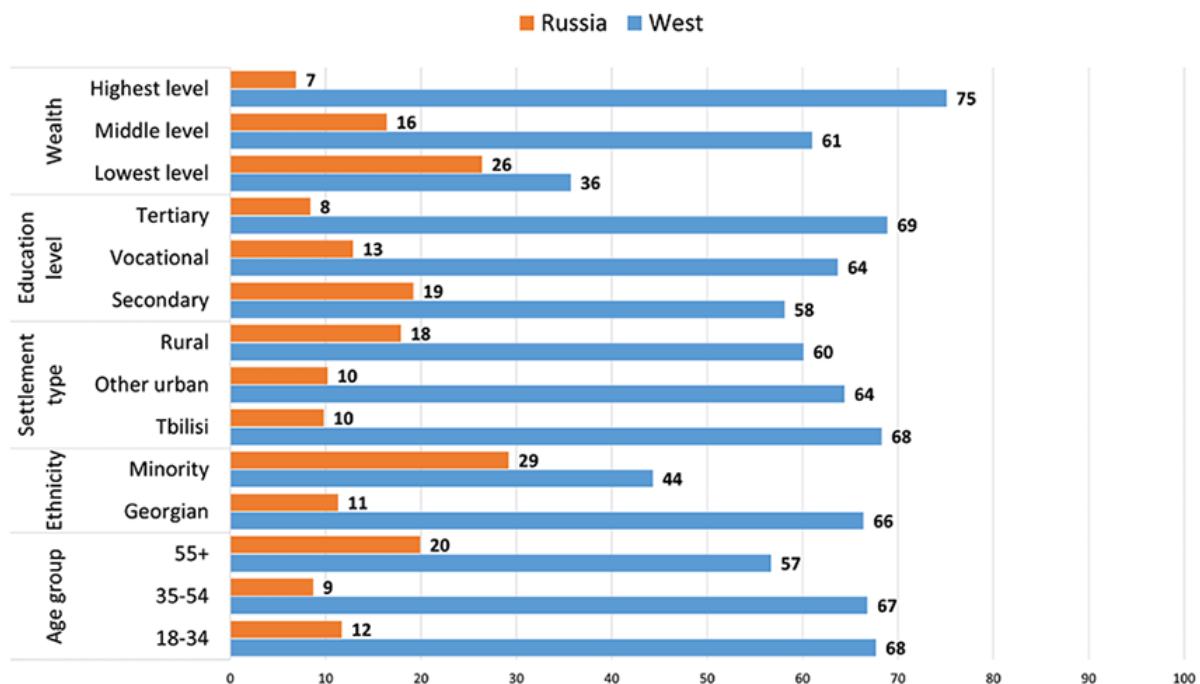
When we speak about Georgian political discourse, it embraces two important actors on the international arena – the European Union and NATO. As Brisku notes, Georgians view Europe as a space created by advanced civilization, a model of modernity and a geopolitical umbrella. Having achieved independence during a time of conflict and threats from Russia, Georgia initially set its sights primarily on NATO as a would-be protector (Brisku, 2013). If we look back at the modern history of Georgia, we can remember that the second president of Georgia – Eduard Shevardnadze first applied to join NATO in 2002. Than his successor, the third president of Georgia Mikheil

Saakashvili followed this suit and made it one of the top priorities of the country. However, Georgian-Russian War of 2008 made Georgian society more skeptical about this issue, for example, according to the poll conducted in 2016 by the Public Opinion Survey Residents of Georgia, more than half of the population answered to the question - when Georgian would join NATO – either “never” or that they did not know (Research, 2016).

The Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey conducted in 2020 illustrates Georgians’ approaches about country’s top foreign supporters. For example, 64 percent of respondents believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a positive development for Georgia. Between 1988 and 1991, Georgians’ paramount political project was leaving the Soviet Union and reclaiming their country’s sovereignty (Lejava, 2021).

FIGURE 1
Georgians' Views of Their Top Foreign Supporters

Who can currently give the best support to Georgia: the EU, the United States, or Russia?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).

NOTE: The survey answers for EU and the United States were combined to give a joint answer, the West.

Taking into consideration the survey results (provided above) show that ethnic minorities living in Georgia have more skeptical attitude about Georgia's path to the West, particularly, we can mention internally displaced persons from the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, also poor population and older population of the country are more suspicious about Georgia's pursuit of Western integration.

According to the Study of the Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives in Political Life of 2019, it is visible that Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Georgia are more isolated while dealing with these issues. According to the study, composing around 13 percent of Georgia's population, these groups suffer from "deep and structural inequality" in large part because many of them do not fluently speak Georgian and therefore face linguistical barriers that provide obstacles for them to exercise their rights. Ethnic minority communities tend to be more receptive to Azerbaijani and Armenian television broadcasts or Russian language sources of information, which (with few exceptions) exude anti-Western sentiments and isolationism (Foundation, 2019).

According to the survey conducted in 2015 by the CRRG, 17 percent of Georgian believe that country's future prospective about its territorial reunification is associated to Euro Atlantic integration (Thorton & Turmanidze, 2015).

There is another issue, that causes some fears among some part of the population, particularly about the clash in social and cultural values between Georgia and the West. As 2020 survey shows, "a substantial minority of respondents (39 percent) believed that the EU poses a threat to Georgian traditions. Many Georgians equate the EU with a modernization

and Westernization project imposed from above, especially after the Western-leaning Rose Revolution of 2003" (Lejava, 2021). This pattern is especially evident on issues related to gender and sexuality—issues that Russia has long been capitalizing on, with its homophobic state policies, as a purported dividing line between its brand of conservatism and supposed Western depravity.

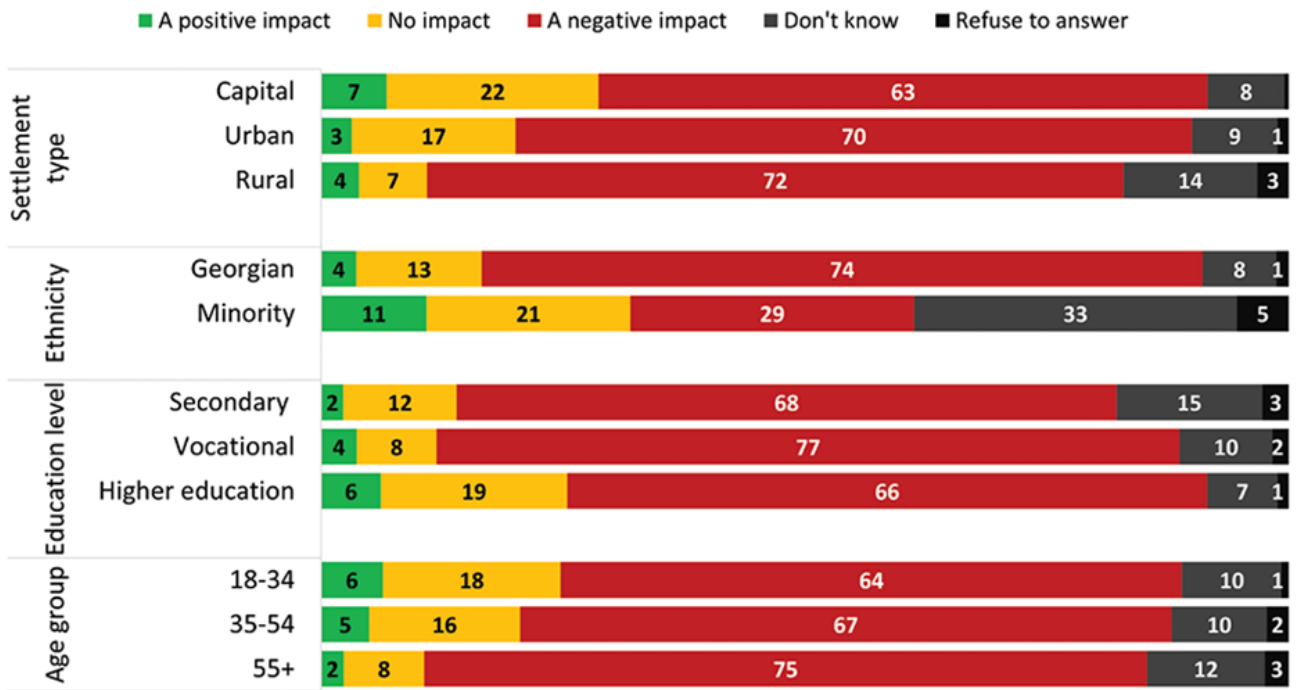
Gender equality is another debatable issue on Georgian political arena, as it is known there are few women in Georgian parliament compared to other European countries. According to Lejava, "in Georgia's October 2020 election, thirty women were elected out of a total of 150 legislators (although those elected on an opposition ticket joined a boycott of the new parliament). When the September 2020 survey was conducted, there were twenty-five women in the previously elected parliament. A total of 46 percent of respondents said that number was too low, 36 percent said it was about right, and 6 percent said it was too high" (Lejava, 2021).

Another vulnerable issue was LGBTQ rights and the notion of having more members of the LGBTQ community in the Georgian parliament.

This is a complex and problematic issue, which does somewhat hinder acceptance of European values in Georgia (see figure 2). That said, these homophobic views do not necessarily make Georgia an outlier compared with other parts of Europe, as similarly negative views on LGBTQ rights are widespread in several other Central and East European countries. These contradictory views raise the question of whether Georgia's European trajectory is as inevitable as many people assume.

FIGURE 2
Georgians' Views on Greater LGBTQ Legislative Representation

What kind of impact would it have if there were more LGBTQ people in parliament?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeladze survey (by CRRC).

Conclusion

Despite its strong will, modern Georgia still faces challenges in terms of becoming a member of EU and NATO. Based on the various surveys discussed above, many Georgians think that country's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations are very extended process and it needs to demonstrate that it will be able to fulfill certain necessary requirements to achieve this desire.

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