

Foreign Policy or a Battle Cry?

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What happened in October?

The October 2012 parliamentary election gave Georgia a chance for normal development.

Needless to say, a government assuming power through violence cannot be democratic. Thus, defeating the National Movement through the ballot box instead of a revolution was a positive breakthrough. If we discount the rule of the Mongols and Arabs in Georgia, as well as the ever-memorable Soviet “democratic elections,” the 2012 election campaign and vote counting process were unprecedented in their unethical and morally degenerate character. The pre-election period was a disturbing example of psychological, physical, and financial terror by the authorities.

In this context, the pledge of the new government to follow an evolutionary path with well-thought-out reforms, based on a European democratic formula, look promising.



However, moving beyond the election process to actual governance is difficult, especially from a psychological point of view. Eight months have passed since the election. At this point, the introduction of a renewed free market and the realization of European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, is hindered by the syndrome Georgia always encounters: that of having to make a categorical choice between the East and the West, which has turned into an unfortunate tradition in Georgian – and not only Georgian – politics.

A state, large or small, is often sensitive to conspiracy theories when new geopolitical developments emerge. Under a new democratic regime, foreign policy “naturally” becomes a weapon of domestic struggle; in the case of Georgia, unfortunately it divides the politically active population into “traitors and patriots.” But today we realize (in contrast to the Saakashvili government) that the period of transition in Georgia cannot be put on a fast track; rather we need prudent and calculated steps to avoid political polarization at home.

South Caucasia’s Position in the New Order

A basic mechanism of collective security is absent from the South Caucasus and its neighboring region. Georgian politicians talk of the European Union and the West at least three times a day, yet it is still too early to talk about any real support from Europe. An appeal to follow “the

European path,” whether we know or not what this path is about, and what awaits us at its end, may be attractive, but it raises questions. The world order that existed in the second half of the twentieth century is gone. The Cold War is over, and the rules that determine conduct between countries have changed. And yet we continue to employ Cold War methods, tools, and mentalities to regulate our problems, our inter- state relations, and our conflicts.

But the problem for Georgia – and it is a lesson Bonaparte surely must have learned – is that the outcome of history is determined in large part by geography. Although the Soviet Union has disappeared from the political map, Georgia remains a neighbor of the Russian Federation – an eternal and unalterable fact – and many of our problems are related to this. More importantly we should bear in mind that between Russia and us is the North Caucasus, a complex region and a most painful problem for the Kremlin, both in past and in the present. The North Caucasus is an inextricable piece of the larger Muslim world; all its internal problems and confrontations, are exploited by aggressive Islamic fundamentalists for broader global purposes. We should not forget Georgia’s own (often) bitter historical relations with the North Caucasus. This is all related to our most urgent and difficult problem as twenty percent of our territory is occupied by the Russian Federation in regions adjacent to the North Caucasus. We must seek a way out of this deadlock.

The global political context – the rise of international terrorism and the dramatic reordering of international power – means we should tackle this issue sooner rather than later. The international community faces non-systemic and asymmetric problems, threats previously unknown, like global warming and the rapid spread of new diseases; we are being forced to deal with new challenges with untested methods. The conflicts in the Middle and Near East remain unsolved; the same goes for the headache we call North Korea. The West has no idea what to do with Syria, the Iranian knot has not been untied, and territorial disputes have reemerged in East Asia. And who knows what will be the outcome of the Arab Spring.

Amongst all this global confusion, the European periphery should not be forgotten. It is going through some of the hardest times. The South Caucasus and the Black Sea region have turned into a political and economic *déjà vu*, boxed between two “transitional periods,” resembling in many ways, Eastern and Central Europe after World War II. Our desire “to return to Europe” is actively opposed by a neo-imperial Russian Federation – which has grown more inflexible and aggressive after the August 2008 war. Moscow is unable to perceive its “near abroad” rationally or adequately, and in this strategic confusion, several post-Soviet states are trying to draw closer to the Eurasian space and the European Union at the same time. At this point, the Eurasian track may be more of a hypothetical idea and mostly focused on a loose economic or customs union. But a dual track is technically impossible, and simply not realistic.

Yet the West expects Georgia, in particular, to regulate its relations simultaneously with the European Union and Russia. This is useful for Western states. It will help stabilize the painful issue of Georgian-Russian relations. The West does not want yet another headache; the August 2008 war put its relations with Russia under great stress. Georgia is a thorn in Russian-Western rapprochement, and Georgian-Russian cooperation will make things easier for US policy makers trying to establish a stable relationship with Russia.

The West is currently distracted: there are plenty of headaches in Europe, and centrifugal forces are emerging across the European continent. Washington is looking toward Asia and the Pacific Ocean; China is its number one political priority. Regulating multiple pragmatic and material interests with Russia would allow the West to focus on other more important matters. But if we agree that Georgia is capable of helping solve the issue of the West’s relations with Russia, then we need at minimum a coordinated and clear position on our region from both Brussels and the US, as well as from Moscow. Our partners seem to understand this and yet we remain stranded between declared wishes and half-expressed willingness. There have been numberless verbal

commitments and multiple variegated formats, meetings, and plans, aimed at resetting relations. But are we any further ahead?

The European Union can act. It has shown that in the Balkans, where it is trying to implement institutional integration and newly democratic systems; it has spent millions and strengthened its political and economic connections with states aspiring to EU membership. This is not the case in the South Caucasus, where there is an underdeveloped regional approach uncoordinated with other major players. We understand the South Caucasus is not the Balkans; it differs in geography, history, and in its political prospects. Simply copying other approaches is inadequate. But what lessons can we take from the Balkans, which will work in the South Caucasus?

The mixing of our regional context with geopolitics make solutions difficult but whatever we do should not be taken at home (or abroad) as acts of betrayal against our values. Politics should not be interpreted as a personal whim. Such advice comes from senior Western figures whom representatives of the National Movement have been wooing so hard in the past nine years. We understand the broader issues, but we need to prioritize the local context. This does not suggest isolation; it is a strategy that still leaves Georgia with room for maneuver. There is no exclusive emphasis on regional dimensions. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to contribute to global security and increase our weight as a responsible state abroad. It is precisely a distinguished, critical, and responsible state in the region, like Georgia, that will make its voice heard abroad. This is where our strength lies and not in helping to construct a “New Berlin Wall” between Russia and the West. We need to deal with our problems concretely and directly. We must abandon the rhetoric of grandiose plans. We do not need a reconstructed “Berlin Wall” along Georgia’s borders. What is in it for us? Georgia’s “global role and purpose” depends on the development and the irreversibility of reforms in Georgia itself.

Let us try to introduce European institutions in Georgia. We have not done so yet. Tangible progress in terms of stable statehood and a growing (and more equitable) economy will make the country’s domestic environment attractive. But let us remember who we are doing this for – our citizens. Europeans or Americans can also benefit, but our priority must be ourselves, because we have a good self-interested reason to make our state healthy and secure. Europeans and Americans will provide assistance. They will not do our job for us.

An opportunity is emerging – we can set a precedent and begin to regulate relations with Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. Sabre-rattling has to end because it has brought nothing. Georgia is a small state. Given our country’s geography and the modern world in which we coexist with other states, global security – as opposed to the medieval emphasis on battle cries and defense of the “faith” – must be our agenda. This is most urgent for Georgia. Our path must be based on a win-win strategy; we need to pursue a political trajectory that is local, regional and global.

The South Caucasus is at the crossroads, squeezed between the EU’s Neighborhood Policy and the Russian Federation’s neo-imperialist pretensions. We realize, and so should our Western counterparts, that Georgia’s democratic prospects are tied to the complicated political, economic, and security contexts in our region. Democracy in Georgia will not be secure without Russia’s involvement in “stability building” in the region. Attempts to brush Moscow aside or ignore it can only be categorized as political naivety. This is only underlined by today’s world, when states’ have mutual needs, protection, migration control, or social and demographic problems, such as drug trafficking or AIDS. Traditional global challenges and risks are disappearing. Today, leading countries pragmatic and consider global or joint initiatives, unconstrained by the Cold War style confrontations of the past century. For us, this means that the world does not just comprise two opposing camps of Georgia’s enemies and friends.

It is, rather, a complicated and symbiotic world where we must gain our own foothold; beneficial

alliances as opposed to confrontation. The phrase “You are either with us, or against us” represents political atavism and is dangerous for Georgia. We should always remember that, in the best-case scenario, Georgia can count on friends and partners, not on CPR technicians and intensive care.

From regional to global politics and not vice-versa

The globe’s political and economic rearrangement is underway. Now it is about economic and energy resources; for Georgia, in particular, it’s about the “Three Ts:” that is trade, transit, and tourism. We have a set of intense problems – conflicts, lost territories, and hostile relations with Russia. These problems cannot be solved alone: we should find ways to encourage the West to help us find solutions. It would be easier if the West’s relations with Russia were normalized. Dialogue is a complicated political art. It requires a cooperative counterpart, and avoidance of artificial prolongation of negotiations. Georgia should not be an irritant between the West and Russia. Nothing is guaranteed in politics, givens can only be hypothetical; everything has its strategic price and, in our case, this price is a thousand times higher than prior to the August 2008 war. This is the new reality, which we have to face. We must make a profound effort to create an environment where Russia and the West will not clash, but will rather coordinate their interests. Georgia will benefit from this.

We should create a different, more constructive platform for negotiations. We can establish prospects, no matter how abstract in the beginning, which can then shape solutions. In the realm of diplomacy and foreign affairs, an opportunity is always present, This is why we must make dialogue with the Kremlin easier for our Western friends, supporting both their interests and our issues. This will not be easy due to the divergent interests of the Great Powers, especially, following the 2008 war. We can continue to humiliate the Russian President and label him “Lilliputin” – although we should remember he will likely remain in power for eleven or some more years – or we should engage him as best we can; we cannot wait for the enraged West to wage its mythical war on Russia over the defense of Georgia.

The purpose of the South Caucasus today is to serve as a bridge, and not a buffer zone. The collective security mechanisms in the region, though weak, represent important factors in a broader international context. In today’s changing world order, the South Caucasus is the geographical center of all global security problems. If the Americans are resetting their relations with the Russians, we should be involved. Only then can we define our national priorities and consider any real security guarantees.

Unfortunately, the prospects of accession to the European Union and NATO are distant. Accession to either is attractive, but the goal is aspirational; even if you have been granted MAP or the promise of negotiations on EU accession, be prepared for a long wait. The “open door” Georgia’s active participation in peacemaking operations under the aegis of the NATO alliance.

Legendary American boxer Muhammad Ali once said, “Impossible is not a fact. It is an opinion.” This tells us we must pursue the trajectory of impossible choices, and take advantage of this most complicated moment for the benefit of our country and people. We must define our national policy better, abandon the realm of illusions, and start considering realistic politics. We must make sure all our citizens know that our country’s success in foreign affairs will depend on success at home.

This postulate seems overused and clichéd, but it has been turned upside down in the past nine years; an emphasis has been placed on foreign policy PR. But PR will get us nowhere at home or abroad. Georgia cannot solve its problems by constantly confronting Russia. As the American analyst Paul Goble put it, “Today Russia views Georgia as an obvious enemy, and the West will not rush to rescue Georgia.” It is important to strike a balance. We cannot ignore the interests of a large country like Russia. We should admit that the United States and especially the European

Union are more interested – and rightfully so from a pragmatic point of view – in relations with Moscow than with Tbilisi. It may not reflect our wishes, but this is the reality. We should not confuse the West's empathy with support for the strategic interests of Georgia. Our responsibility right now is to create a stable and safe democratic environment in the South Caucasus, and in Georgia in particular, built upon the rule of law and democratic institutions, as opposed to the whims of one person and his close associates. This is our new paradigm. are the ones who need to develop it. The West can only provide assistance.

The Gordian knot

All these are very difficult national issues. Solving them requires democratic consolidation within our country. The nine-year rule of the National Movement showed. In nine years in power, they seriously compromised democratic values, and tailored them to suit ambiguous interests both at home and abroad. Time will show how successful these semi-democratic reforms were. One philosopher declared: "The end of history marks the beginning of zoology." We have dealt with a political circus for many years, continuing like this means tragedy will wait for us at the end of the tunnel. We can and must avoid it. The ugly dictatorship, the eclectic mix of democracy and dictatorship attempted by President Saakashvili reminds us today of the clumsy and inflexible trap set up by the National Movement to ensnare its followers, part Georgian citizens and Western partners.
