

THE LIMITATIONS FACED BY GEORGIA IN TERMS OF GEOPOLITICAL OPTIONS

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Abstract: *The recent intensified challenges to Georgia's democratic development, which since the fall of the Soviet Union has been recognized as a democratic beacon among post-Soviet states in Caucasus area for its' continued path towards Euro-Atlantic integration, have in fact revealed to an unprecedented degree, the extreme lack of real geopolitical choices. The story seems as simple as never before, with either an option to enter and embrace the Russian domination zone, or to seize the absolutely unique opportunities for unprecedented rapprochement with the EU and realistic prospects for accession to the European Institutions, as well as for enhancing the multidimensional relationship perspectives already established with the United States, opportunities which, along with other factors, have emerged decisively due to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War. Our academic inquiry also examines the erosion of the concept of neutrality, as well as the Realpolitik discourse.*

Keywords: *Georgia; EU; USA; Russia; limits of the geopolitical choices; erosion of neutrality; pro-Russian isolationism; Realpolitik.*

Introduction

The recent intensification of the challenges to the democratic development faced by Georgia on the path towards democratic development since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been agreed to be in fact unchangeable and lacking any solid alternatives, i.e. – the Euro-Atlantic integration of the post-Soviet country from the South Caucasus, – the variety of issues, controversies, and not rarely a considerable number of crucial inconsistencies.

In recent times, there has been a growing tendency in Georgia to curtail the rights to free expression, free assembly, and the freedom of non-governmental organizations to operate independently. This is occurring in conjunction with a broader trend of questioning the legitimacy of governmental decision-making, which has the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices. With regard to the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of society, such as the LGBTQI+ community, the likelihood of further discrimination, hate speech, hate crime, bullying and other forms of violence is increased. These circumstances are further compounded by a systemic deficit of neutral judges and persistent obstacles in the justice system. There is also a prevalence of nepotism, corruption and increasing political polarization, with oligarchs retaining considerable influence. Furthermore, the centralizing influence of the latter on politics, the dissemination of anti-Western propaganda, and the multitude of challenges the country faces, with the greatest responsibility lying with the government, are all factors that must be considered. These challenges are outlined in the European Commission's Twelve Priorities (The European External Action Service 2022),¹ and Nine Steps (Civil.ge 2023)² reports. In response to Georgia's earlier application for EU candidate status and the subsequent commencement of accession negotiations with the European Community, the priorities and steps outlined by The European External Action Service (2022) and Civil.ge (2023) have been widely perceived as indicative of a democratic backsliding characteristic for contemporary Georgia. However, these steps have also revealed the extreme lack of real geopolitical choices for the country, which has hitherto been unexperienced.

The story truly seems in a way as simple, if not primitive, as never before for Georgia, with either an option to join and re-establish itself under the Russian domination zone, whether welcoming absolutely unique chances for getting unprecedentedly closer to EU and acting in

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¹ The European External Action Service. 2022. "The Twelve Priorities." September 20, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/twelve-priorities_en?s=221

² Civil Georgia. 2023. "EC Spells Out Nine Steps for Georgia to Start Accession Negotiations." Civil Georgia, November 8, 2023. <https://civil.ge/archives/568417>

compliance with the realistic opportunities for even earlier than ever was expected, – eventually successful accession to the European community, as well as for accelerating a wide range of relationship perspectives between Georgia and the United States, following carefully, much pragmatically envisioned, and already designed strategy communicated from the western hemisphere recently (Civil.ge 2024)³, – embracing the chances that de facto occurred along with other factors, decisively due to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian warfare.

Therefore, considering the above-mentioned, the paper aims at trying to look at the dynamics of the latest developments taking place in Georgia and how, at least officially, internal decision-making by the current government of the country considerably exposes the geopolitical limits, and in a way simplicity of the choices between the “evil” and the “good”, as well as the factual erosion of the concept of neutrality. Certainly, such judgment fits well enough withing the Realpolitik discourse which precludes the possibility of sustainable liberal scenarios.

“Black” or “White”?

Even though the current Georgian Government under the leadership of the Georgian Dream Party has not yet officially acknowledged its reservations about the Western orientation of Georgia's foreign policy, it recognizes the unique success the country has achieved on its pro-European path during the GD administration, namely signing the Association Agreement and introducing through it a preferential trade regime - the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) on June 27, 2014 (It has been in force since July 1, 2016), as well as gaining visa liberalization with EU since March 28, 2017, and a development that has been eagerly awaited, the Candidate Status of the European Union in December 2023. In recent times, the card of neutrality, interpreted by many as in fact pro-Russian isolationism, has become a very significant part of the agenda of the Georgian ruling party.

Among the most critically acclaimed initiatives are the abolition of quotas for women MPs (Civil.ge 2024)⁴, the overriding of the Georgian President’s veto on the controversial amendments to the country’s tax code, the so-called “offshore law,” which facilitates the transfer of offshore assets into Georgia (Civil.ge 2024)⁵, In April and May 2024, the Georgian parliament empowered particularly through the means of the constitutional amendments of 2017, transitioning the country towards a parliamentary republic (UNDP, n.d.)⁶, made a series of significant decisions. These decisions were made in a relatively short period of time and were supported by other branches of government as well, namely the executive power through the prime minister and the cabinet of ministers, and the judiciary of Georgia, which has been the target of widespread criticism. In addition to the aforementioned contentious legislative measures, the so-called “Russian Law” has already proven to play a pivotal role as a means for considerable lustration of those in power.

Firstly, it is necessary to identify the major foreign policy priorities among decision-makers as these have the potential to have a direct impact on the external political course of the country, This is a belief that is widely held within the broader Georgian society, particularly among the younger generation, such as students from various universities and even secondary school students, who currently make up the majority of the population protesting against the governmental decision-making. The so-called Gen Z keeps protesting against the adoption of the “Russian Law” since the reintroduction of the bill and subsequent to its’ adoption, protests spanning over a period

³ Civil Georgia. 2024. “«MEGOBARI Act» Envisages Sanctions for Undermining, Injuring Georgian Democracy.” Civil Georgia, May 27, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/609543>

⁴ Civil Georgia. 2024. “Parliament Abolishes Quotas for Women MPs.” Civil Georgia, April 4, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/590165>

⁵ Civil Georgia. 2024. “Parliament Overrides President’s Veto, Adopts ‘Offshore’ Law.” Civil Georgia, May 29, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/610250#:~:text=On%20May%2029%2C%20the%20Georgian,veto%20and%201%20voted%20against>

⁶ United Nations Development Programme. n.d. “Consolidating Parliamentary Democracy in Georgia.” United Nations Development Programme. Accessed June 1, 2024. <https://www.undp.org/georgia/projects/parliament>

of months in 2024, as was the case in March 2023, when the legislative initiative was first introduced, although removed shortly after due to the public outcry.

The “Russian Law” has also served as a significant test for exposing in the circles of Georgian politicians, perhaps the major determinant and core for relevant decision-making – whether voting or protesting against the measure, i.e. – the inner value systems and mindsets, specifically of the supporters of truly of one of the most controversial bills ever, meaning prominently - still quite resilient Soviet mentality of those in the ruling GD party and its allies in the Georgian Parliament, who have officially voted for the adoption of the law in all stages, including the final voting, and throughout all the procedures necessary for the law-making, thus “committing history” so to speak.

The divisive draft law on “foreign agents” was first initiated by the ruling Georgian Dream party in March 2023. At that time, the bill was passed by the Georgian Parliament in the first reading, however was later withdrawn due to mass protests by citizens. In the beginning of April 2024, it became known that the ruling party initiated the consideration of the draft law “On the Transparency of Foreign Influence” for the second time that has been unchanged from the 2023 version, apart from the descriptor (“organization carrying out the interests of a foreign power”), from which the contentious term “agent” has been dropped. Despite the permanent massive protests erupted throughout the country, in the capital city – Tbilisi and regions, gathering tens of thousands since the reintroduction of the controversial bill, with dozens detained in clashes with the police, including media personalities, and in spite of in fact unified critical assessments and calls for withdrawal issued overwhelmingly by the absolute majority of international partners, including the EU and US officials (Gavin 2024)⁷, the Venice Commission - highly authoritative advisory body of the Council of Europe preparing the urgent opinion on the law (Venice Commission 2024)⁸, etc., sometimes with reference to even enacting sanctions and other corresponding measures in case of no rejection of the law, - amidst the ongoing protest demonstrations, - the parliament of Georgia has still passed the contentious law with three hearings, eventually overcoming the presidential veto on May 28, 2024.

Claimed by many in Georgia and outside of it as leading to jeopardizing the country’s path to EU membership and overall Euro-Atlantic integration, the law discussed above obliges media organizations and NGOs to register as in fact foreign agents if they receive more than 20% of their funds from abroad, imposing heavy fines on those who fail to comply. (JAMnews 2024)⁹ Besides the fact that Russian officials have expressed their full support for the law (Civil.ge 2024)¹⁰, it is important to consider that the Georgian version differs significantly from similar documents adopted by Western countries, including the EU (FIDH 2021)¹¹. The law has been labeled a “Russian Law”, considering the fact that it is modelled based on the analogous Russian law (Machalek, n.d.)¹², encompassing similar goals, and “armed” with the sufficient mechanisms for implementation of the authoritarian practices. According to the Georgian authorities, the new measures, which are categorized as falling under the auspices of a “transparency law,” will limit perceived attempts by foreign states to influence domestic politics in the country. (JAMnews

⁷ Gavin, Gabriel. 2024. “Don’t pass ‘foreign agent’ law, top European legal body tells Georgia.” Politico, May 21, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/georgia-europe-georgian-dream-party-foreign-agent-law-venice-commission-reports/>

⁸ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). 2024. “Georgia: Urgent Opinion on the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence.” May 21, 2024. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2024\)013-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2024)013-e)

⁹ JAMnews. 2024. “Georgia’s “foreign agents” law is now a reality. When will it take effect and who will it impact?” JAMnews, May 29, 2024. <https://jam-news.net/what-the-foreign-agents-law-in-georgia-entails/>

¹⁰ Civil Georgia. 2024. “Medvedev Expresses Support to Foreign Agents’ Bill Re-introduced by GD.” Civil Georgia, April 17, 2024. <https://civil.ge/archives/599496>

¹¹ FIDH: International Federation for Human Rights. 2021. “Laws against “foreign agents”: the multi-functional tool of authoritarian regimes.” FIDH: International Federation for Human Rights, November 25, 2021. <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/business-human-rights-environment/laws-against-foreign-agents-the-multi-functional-tool-of>

¹² Machalek, Katherin. n.d. “Factsheet: Russia’s NGO Laws.” Freedom House. Accessed May 31, 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet_0.pdf

2024)¹³ Conversely, as previously noted, the critics have warned that the legislation could significantly restrict freedom of speech, hinder Georgia's application to become a full EU member, and substantially halt the country's progress on its pro-Western path.

Over time, the concept of neutrality, which was initially perceived as a highly complex and challenging proposition, gradually became a prominent tool utilized by pro-Russian groups operating in Georgia. Any initial sympathy towards the concept was largely determined by its association with the issue of sovereignty, which has been a significant factor in the region's geopolitical landscape.

The prevailing macro- and micro-geopolitical factors, which could be largely understood through the lens of the lack of viable geopolitical choices, also played a role in the evolution of neutrality as a tool for influencing public opinion. On the one hand, the current political tensions have emerged due to the critical path of GD, which has led to questioning Georgia's progressive drive towards the West. This has unfolded via the ruling party's controversial and overtly problematic policy decisions in terms of democracy, human rights, an open society, a competitive economy, and Adherence to EU and other Western standards and values made it much easier to grasp the geopolitical limits for Georgia. In essence, there is a choice between the "black" – towards Russia – and the "white" – towards the EU and the West in general.

The Erosion of Neutrality

Concerning the evident lack of real geopolitical choices, it has to be noted that along with what has already been emphasized before, – on the other hands, the ongoing situation escalated to certain heightened level of political crisis in Georgia, at the same time, has also tested the notion of neutrality as at least theoretically viable alternative option, perceived earlier hypothetically by some as if ideally suiting the independent development and positioning of the country, the configuration that has not been visible in more real terms that much though, particularly for the – wider audience in the Georgian society, for quite a long. The unfolded crisis, under the given circumstances, eventually contributed – to the broader discreditation of the very idea of neutrality – for the overwhelming majority of pro-Western citizenry in the country.

Recently, a significant number of countries of a similar size, such as Sweden and Finland, which had traditionally enjoyed the benefits of military neutrality as a guarantee of security for many decades, or even centuries, have eventually applied for NATO membership in May 2022. Finland was the first to be approved for membership, which was granted in April 2023. The country in question has a 1,340 km (832 mile) land border with Russia (Open Access Government 2023)¹⁴. Subsequently, there was also Sweden, which had become a member of the Western military alliance in March 2024. However, this was initially opposed by Turkey and Hungary (Gozzi 2024)¹⁵. This course of action has resulted in compromising the countries' distinguishable, and in many ways precious, neutral position immediately in the aftermath of erupting Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Ellyatt 2022)¹⁶. The example is a noteworthy mention due to the topicality of the issue and as a salient demonstration of the limits in terms of geopolitical choices, in particular, when it comes to a specific location, especially in the case of small states, found in the immediate neighborhood or proximity of Russia actively attempting to revive its imperial and Soviet, i.e. longer historical spheres of influence.

¹³ JAMnews. 2024. "They speak the language of blackmail." Georgia's government response to the US proposal". JAMnews, May 21, 2024. <https://jam-news.net/georgian-dreams-response-to-the-us-proposal/>

¹⁴ Open Access Government. 2023. "Finland joins NATO despite Kremlin's warnings of "countermeasures"." Open Access Government, April 6, 2023. <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/finland-joins-nato-kremins-warnings-counter-measures/156881/>

¹⁵ Gozzi, Laura. 2024. "Sweden formally joins Nato military alliance." BBC, March 7, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68506223>

¹⁶ Ellyatt, Holly. 2022. "Russian forces invade Ukraine." CNBC LLC, February 24, 2022. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/24/russian-forces-invade-ukraine.html>

The Realpolitik Discourse

Furthermore, it is important to note that our analysis and evidence-based claims regarding the limits of geopolitical choices and the erosion of neutrality – in the case of Georgia, a country facing a variety of internal and external challenges, have also suggested analyzing the infamous Realpolitik discourse. This discourse addresses the impact of local, regional, or global processes on international relations and aids analysts in understanding opportunities which arise under the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian War with the purpose of identifying the underlying geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic trends. This rather practical framework is based on a corresponding theory, i.e. the realist approach to international relations, which is currently dominant in terms of sustainability and long-lasting effects. In contrast, liberal scenarios and liberal institutionalism are less functional on the international stage.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the paper, we have attempted to analyze the stream of the latest events, mostly of domestic nature, however not only limited to that, which are occurring in Georgia, and observe the publicly acknowledged and sufficiently critically perceived internal policy decisions made by the current government of the country, – under the leadership of the Georgian Dream party, – significantly reveal the considerable scarcity, as well as certain simplicity of the geopolitical choices between in fact the depicted “evil” on one hands, - understood through the lenses of Georgia’s rapprochement with Russia and joining its anti-Western, isolationist, and anachronistic course.

First of all, in unavoidable confrontation with the security interests of the country, and creating essential threat to even the very basics, like – the independence and sovereignty of the state, on the one hand, and the “good” option, so to speak, – the choice might mean maintaining progress on the demanding but impressively successful integration path of Georgia within the Euro-Atlantic institutions and the Western world overall, on the other.

The factual erosion of the concept of neutrality as one of the alternative models, even in its preliminary stages, – considerably vague and limited theory for the development of the country, has also been concluded as a very important outcome of studying the ongoing multidimensional developments. As a matter of fact, the arguments provided in the paper, remarkably match still dominant – the Realpolitik discourse in global politics, weakening the chances for modern applicability of any viable liberal scenarios and liberal institutionalist approaches.

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