

The Importance of Being European: Reflections on EU-Georgia Relations

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Abstract EU has long been thought and considered as a strong democracy promoter in its neighbourhood. Even so, it still has repeatedly failed to maintain peace and tranquility, not only in the Southern neighbourhood, but also in the Eastern one, where Georgia is located. Even though the (unresolved) conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia tore down the country, leaving painful consequences behind, Georgia has succeeded into being one of the few EU neighbour countries that has attained a meaningful level of democratic development. This article discusses some highlights of the EU-Georgian relations and examines EU's role as a transformative power in the country.

Keywords: *European Neighbourhood Policy, EU-Georgia relations, democracy, governance, stability*

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1. Introduction

Has the EU really failed in promoting the important values of democracy and rule of law in the neighbourhood countries? Although many researches feel so [1] and maybe righteously, there are a few exceptions that make the difference, like Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Tunisia. The focus of this paper is going to precisely be on Georgia, the borderland region "at the hedge of precipice, (...) a permanently unsettled frontier" [2]. The EU is indeed committed to the promotion of democracy, stability and security in the Caucasian region, stemming as well as one of Georgia's largest donors and aid programmes funder, along with individual member states, [3] but how efficient is this?

The EU has been proud of its "transformational power" as the strongest influence which would change key policy choices in the Caucasus and this has proved to be a powerful tool [4] especially in the beginning of the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (hereinafter ENP). Georgia has been one of the best examples, as Beruchashvili, ex-deputy minister for European Integration has noted: "by including the South Caucasus states into the new European Neighbourhood Policy [...], the EU sent an important message that it is committed to supporting the South Caucasus countries on their way towards building stable societies based on democratic values and provided for a powerful paradigm shift for the foreign policy elite in the South Caucasus. We consider the ENP to be a solid opportunity for further integration into the EU, and a new driving force behind regional integration" [5].

Political rhetoric left aside, Georgia (and all ENP countries) does not have the golden carrot [6] of EU accession and odds say that it will not even be possible in the future. Also, as it stands, the Caucasus countries have very separate views towards the EU, with Georgia already identifying itself as European [7]; while in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the EU has never been consistent in its requirements for democracy [8].

In the following sections, this paper takes a closer look into the developments and challenges of EU-Georgia relations, focusing specifically on an ENP perspective, (section 2) to then examine the real transformative power of the EU in Georgia, highlighting some of the peculiarities of the relationship between the two, as opposed to other democracy-laggards ENP countries (section 3).

2. European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia, Quo Vadis?

Georgia was incorporated in the ENP on June 2004 [9]. After negotiations, Georgia's ENP was signed for five years in 2006 [10]. As far as the EU official communication points out, the ENP is a way to pursue economic integration of the European region, without however extending its political frontier [11]. According to academics however, four aspects may characterize such a policy. Firstly, it can be considered as a substitute to enlargement, secondly as a policy of pre-enlargement, thirdly as an extended buffer zone of influence and fourthly as a re-writing of the Barcelona process [12]. Thus, such a tool was a way for the EU to satisfy a need for new borders and especially to encourage economic integration. In a globalized world, some economic theorists show how beneficial economic

integration might be [13]. The ENP is therefore a way for the UE to both expand its influence, while at the same time being economically pragmatic. Such an improvement in economic relations would allow closer ties between the EU and the beneficial countries.

There is also a foreign policy side to the ENP. It indeed answers the need of friendly relations with the neighbourhood, as put in the Article 8 (1) of the Treaty on European Union, which states: "the Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation" [14]. Consequently, the ENP aims at enhancing economic ties through partnership, and thus creating a friendly belt of neighbours, a friendly buffer zone, in the process. Such a policy targeted two clusters of countries, after the EU officials recognized the limitations of imposing a single regulatory framework across two continents. Many critics indeed emerged from Georgian decision makers as well as academics about the ENP, mainly about two points. The first of disappointment regarding the ENP was how the specificity of the countries was not taken into account. The second point criticized by Georgian authorities as well as academics was the lack of security and conflict resolution inside the ENP. Indeed, "being proud of their long European history, most Georgians found it absurd that the EU developed the same policy for them and non-European states such as Egypt" [15].

Thus the ENP was divided into two offshoots, one in the "South" and one in the "East", after the signature of respectively the Barcelona process in 2008, and the Eastern partnership (EaP) on the 20th of May 2009. The EaP also responded to a demand of counter-balancing the ENP, which was considered as being too centered on the UE's Southern frontiers. The idea of the EaP was introduced by Poland and Sweden at the General affairs and external relation Council in Brussels on the 26th of May 2008 [16]. Such a policy provides better conditionalities which are "carrots enough to do the efforts, which was not the case with the ENP" according to a senior official of the Georgian foreign ministry [15]. The EaP provides indeed the promise of a) a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) b) help regarding administrative capacity, the Comprehensive Institution Building (CIB) c) enhancing energy cooperation d) facilitating visa access [16].

Even though Russia was initially involved inside the EaP, Georgia is part of the cluster of countries involved in the EaP, which should form, "Europe's eastern glacier," [17] together with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. According to Georgian officials, the EaP was better suited than the ENP. This results from the change in the approach, from the ENP's "on size fits all" approach, to the EaP "tailor made approach". Consequently, the principle of differentiation became more credible within the EaP framework [15]. Economically speaking, EU-Georgian relations strengthened. On September 2008, the DCFTA was introduced between the EU and Georgia, as part of the European help post-conflict, and signed in 2014. The DCFTA was summed up as "being developed within the framework of the Eastern Partnership as a specific dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and recognising the common desire of the Parties to further

develop, strengthen and extend their relations in an ambitious and innovative way" [18]. After the conflict in 2008 the EU claimed to be the largest international donor to reconstruction in South Ossetia and Abkhazia [10]. As far as exports are concerned, a significant rise has been shown. According to Eurostat, exports from the 28 member states to the EaP increased from €11.9 billion in 2002 to a peak of €39.5 billion in 2012. On the other side of the EaP, their exportations with the EU member states rocketed as well. For the 2009-2016, a rise of 6, 6% of the exports from Georgia to the EU is observed, and a rise of 109,3% as far as the importations from the EU to Georgia are concerned. This makes Georgia one of the countries that have shown to be the more receptive to the EaP, even being labelled as one of the "good guys" of the ENP by Francesca Mogherini.

Beyond the economic aspect, the EaP and the DCFTA developed such close ties, that the EU allowed what was most demanded by the Georgian population: the access to the Schengen zone in March 2017. As a result, from 28th of March 2017, Georgian citizens holding biometric passports can travel to the Schengen Zone without a visa for a period of 90 days within any 180-day period for purposes other than working. The then Georgian President, Giorgi Margvelashvili, said such a liberalisation was an "enormous achievement." Among all measures vis-à-vis the EU, the visa-free entrance inside Schengen was by far the most popular one, according to the member of the Georgian foreign office we had the chance to interview during our field-trip in Georgia on March 2018.



Image 1. The Tbilisi public service Hall building, with its modern architecture



Image 2. This picture is made inside the building above, where every citizen is able to prepare its passport while drinking a coffee. A start-up-like legislative, meant to exceed European standards.

There, we were lucky enough to interview the French ambassador in the country. He and his assistants were highlighting the fact that Georgian bureaucracy developed strong skills in developing projects fit to receive various European aids. It can easily be concluded that such a skill emerged from the close contacts the Georgian administrations have established with the European legislative corpus. We were also the witness of a particularly interesting visit, inside the Tbilisi New Service Hall, a prestige building aiming at showing the new power and efficiency of the liberal and pro-western government. Such a building concentrates all the government services, so that every citizen can, in one single space, make a new passport, get married, register his/her children etc. The guides of our visit were really eager to show how the Georgian government and population had integrated the rule of law, and even exceeded some European countries in the efficiency of it: a nice wink to the worldwide reputation of the slowness of the French bureaucracy. Such a building was the incarnation of the will of the Georgian government to show its integration of the rule of law.

All in all the ENP had a very wide extent in Georgia, as it allowed to established, step by step deeper legislative and economic cooperation: in 2009 the EaP, in 2014 the DCFTA, and on March 2018, the visa-free entrance inside Schengen area.

3. Europe as Transformative Power in Georgia

ENP's success stories all have in common "pro-democratic reform coalitions" [1]. Börzel and Lebanidze [1] raise the suggestion that further research is needed in explaining the influence of domestic factors in the interaction between the EU and regional powers and this section aims at contributing to the academic debate with the example of Georgia.

The absence of a membership perspective for ENP countries is a dominant reason why the academic literature has come to the conclusion that the EU is an ineffective actor in promoting democracy in the region [1,19,20,21,22]. Nevertheless, the absence of this "golden carrot" of accession, while it undoubtedly has its negative influence on the Europeanisation of the neighbourhood, is not the only factor that explains why some countries has democratised more efficiently than others [1]. The biggest setbacks can be seen within the EU itself in this regard: the lack of its coherence in the different foreign policies directed to different ENP countries testifies this [23,24]. That means that the EU cannot "speak with a single voice," [1] and inconsistently applies democratic conditionality [1]. Börzel and Lebanidze argue that the EU is likely to invoke democratic conditionality only in cases where the dilemma between two factors, democracy and stability, is lacking. In other words, in certain situations, the EU will favour stability over pushing for uncertain democratic change, somehow in violation of its basic principles.

The "democratisation-stability dilemma" is a term described by Jünemann [25] and retaken by Börzel and Lebanidze, which showcases that the main problem of the ENP programme into promoting democracy, was to actually be able to set the right balance between the

(unsure and/or unsafe) democratisation or stability of a country. This was as well the main difference between the ENP directed to Eastern neighbours, as opposed to the ENP in the Southern neighbourhood. According to the European Commission, some acute problems for the EU in recent years, as well as presently, are the migration crisis, terrorism prevention and energy security (European Commission 2015). The most important and affected region in this regard is clearly the Mediterranean, rather than the Caucasus, hence EU's inclination to enter into "Faustian bargains" [1] with authoritarian regimes in the Southern Neighbourhood area. Therefore, the security concerns in this part of the ENP have triumphed over democracy promotion.

In contrast of the Southern neighbourhood, the democratisation-stability dilemma has been less problematic in the Eastern partnership. This said, because of the important differences between Caucasus countries and Russian/post-Soviet influence, the EU still found itself not powerful enough to influence authoritarian regimes in the area. As the example of Armenia shows, the EU preferred to foster stability in a rapidly growing economy, rather than to push its society into democratisation. A slightly similar scenario has been seen in Georgia as well, when the EU stayed passive after authoritarian practices developed by the then president Saakashvili. As far as Azerbaijan is concerned, the EU clearly lacked transformative power in front of an energy-rich country.

But the real stirring power behind EU's influence as a democracy promoter, remain the pro-democratic domestic actors [1]. This is where Georgia stands out from its neighbours. Pro-Western political currents have been in the air since the so-called "Rose Revolution" [4]. Thus, most of Georgian political parties nowadays are pro-European and support Western standards and an eventual EU integration.

The case of Georgia, however, is different than the rest. While Georgian authorities might have by now understood that membership perspectives are currently not possible, they still remain quite positive and optimistic that such an accession will take place sooner or later. It is moreover part of their official foreign policy objectives, and we dare say, the most important for the time being. Thus, the democratic progress of Georgia has been absolutely marked by (however faint) hopes that one day, the country will be a member state of the European Union and the first of the Caucasus to succeed in this objective.

The effectiveness of EU democratic conditionality therefore largely depends on the domestic conditions, which remain the main responsibility of the countries engaged and their respective political elites. The case of Georgia has been one of the most successful until now, especially because of the general dominant feeling in the population that Georgia has meant to be and is European, that it shares the advanced European values and experiences and wishes to become a member sometime in the future [7]. According to Georgian academics as well, "Georgia has historically been trying to achieve European integration." The (sometimes too much) optimistic views of Georgians, however, do not mean that the EU is ready to open its doors to enlargement in the Caucasus, especially when already the Balkans are holding a special

place in the enlargement procedure and are proving themselves as quite challenging. EU's performance as a democratic promoter in the country remains substantial although it would not have been successful if it was not for domestic pro-democratic reforms and commitments. Overall, Georgians should be more proud of themselves and their hard work, rather than proud of EU's attention towards their nation.

4. Conclusions

This paper has put forward some important highlights of the EU-Georgia relations as well as examined the role of EU's transformative power in the country and region with respect to the promotion of democracy, and economic integration. We have argued that the EU is a committed actor into spreading via its normative powers Western values, experiences and best practices, but the efficiency of this commitment differs as a result of various factors. Among these were the domestic pro-democratic actors and civil society in each country, as well as EU's priorities and objectives of a changing landscape of foreign policy. An important proportion of pro-democratic and pro-EU actors in Georgia determined in the end the successive reinforcement of economic and domestic ties with the EU.

The lack of membership perspective, accompanied nevertheless with a strong desire from Georgian authorities to attain it, might thus be an irrelevant factor in our case [1], since Georgia remains optimistic and even strives for EU membership nonetheless. However hypothetical that might be, in the end of the day it reinforces EU's position in the application of the democratic conditionality, working in favour of the Europeanisation of Georgia, a situation that is inevitable if Georgia really wants to be a part of the EU. Hence, if Georgians need a goal to work towards in order to reinforce the country after the notorious conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, this seems to be the right one.

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