



GEORGIAN DRIFT

THE CRISIS OF GEORGIA'S WAY WESTWARDS

Maciej Falkowski

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Contents

SUMMARY /5

I. GEORGIA BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT /8

II. THE SUCCESSES OF GEORGIA'S WESTWARD COURSE /13

1. Saakashvili's reforms /13

2. The Georgian Dream continues the pro-Western course /16

3. Western involvement /18

4. The impact of Georgia's reforms on the post-Soviet area /20

III. THE CRISIS /22

1. Chronic problems with democracy /22

2. Symptoms of the pro-Western course slipping into crisis /25

3. Causes of the crisis /36

IV. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE /48

SUMMARY

1. Georgia is an exceptional post-Soviet country. Like the Baltic states, it has consistently and clearly declared that its aim is to shed Russian influence and integrate with the Euro-Atlantic structures. No other post-Soviet society has been so firmly pro-Western as the Georgians. After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia decided to go out on a limb, openly opposing Russia and entering the path of radical – and effective – pro-Western reforms, which until recently seemed irreversible. During Mikheil Saakashvili’s rule (2004–2013), Georgia was a centre of attention for the West (both the United States and the European Union), whose political and financial involvement in furthering the European project in Georgia was immense.
2. The initial concerns about a likely change of Georgia’s foreign policy priorities following the rise to power of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his coalition the Georgian Dream (2012–2013) did not materialise, and, in the internal dimension, Georgia did not break with the legacy of the Rose Revolution either. Moreover, the country made a huge leap towards closer integration with the West by signing, in June 2014, the Association Agreement with the European Union (including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, DCFTA). In December 2015 Brussels announced that the EU would abolish visas for Georgians in 2016. In the aftermath of the NATO summit in Newport (September 2014), a NATO training centre was also opened in Georgia, enabling closer co-operation between Tbilisi and the North-Atlantic Alliance.
3. Nevertheless, for several years Georgia has been experiencing processes which may be interpreted as symptoms of a deepening, multidimensional social and political crisis. They mainly concern the internal situation, but have also affected foreign policy. Reforms have lost momentum, stagnation has set in, and in some areas the situation has begun to revert to the

pre-revolution status (including rising crime levels, corruption and nepotism). The Georgian political system has found itself in a serious crisis, while society has become increasingly frustrated and apathetic, mainly because people's standards of living have been stagnating. This political and social malaise has been breeding Euro-scepticism and disenchantment with the West, while pro-Russian forces, openly contesting the foreign policy line that Georgia has been pursuing to date and calling for a turn towards Russia, have been gaining prominence. The signals coming from the government in this regard have also been ambiguous.

4. The cause of the crisis in which Georgia has found itself concerns the fact that the Georgian Dream lacks a clear vision for the country; the ruling group's internal disparity and opaque style of governance have also played a role. Other factors underlying the crisis include economic difficulties and the stagnating standards of living. However, Georgia's crisis is also related to the worsening geopolitical environment around Georgia, and especially the West's policy towards this particular country and the entire post-Soviet area. This policy has been defensive and the West's involvement in the area has been diminishing, as evidenced by the fact that countries like Georgia have been denied prospects of membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures and the significance of the Eastern Partnership has been waning. Russia's actions have also been a factor, albeit of a secondary and lesser importance. Moscow has indeed been pursuing an aggressive policy aimed at reintegrating the post-Soviet area (with Ukraine as the most important front), and has been using soft power in the relations with Georgia in an effort to undermine pro-Western sentiments. While it is not possible for Russia to win broad support in Georgia, its policy has contributed to the negative tendencies there.
5. A country that had been firmly navigating westwards, Georgia has now started drifting and slipping into malaise. This

risks reversing what the country has achieved so far in the internal dimension, increasing social and political instability and triggering a crisis in the pro-Western vector of Tbilisi's foreign policy. While that may not necessarily mean a turn towards Russia, in the present situation it has been easier for Moscow to pursue its own interest in the South Caucasus area. A collapse of the European project in Georgia would entail grave consequences for the country itself and beyond. Such a turn would harm the pro-European aspirations of countries like Ukraine or Moldova. Should Tbilisi's pro-Western course become reversed or permanently stagnant, that would also mean a failure of the West (including the EU), whose political and financial involvement in Georgia after 2003 was immense. Finally, it would also mean a failure of the EU's policy and further problems in its immediate neighbourhood.

I. GEORGIA BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Since Georgia regained independence in 1991, the country has been pursuing a pro-Western foreign policy, irrespective of the changing governments and internal and external circumstances. It had declared that its strategic objective was to join the European Union and NATO. Pro-Western concepts first surfaced in Georgian political discourse towards the end of the Soviet era and were closely linked with the country's aspiration to quit the USSR and regain independence. This pro-Western course has from the very beginning been the cornerstone of independent Georgia's foreign policy and a fundamental principle of its political conceptions and statehood. Underlying this course was not only a calculation of national interests, but also the tradition of the independent Democratic Georgian Republic which existed in the years 1918–1921 (until the Bolshevik aggression as a result of which Georgia was incorporated into Soviet Russia), and the deeply held conviction that, in cultural and civilizational terms, Georgia belonged in Europe with which it shared a common, Christian heritage. Georgia's pro-European sentiment has been organically anti-Russian and has been built in opposition to Russia – the Georgians see Russia as an antithesis of Europe, despite their own cultural and religious proximity to Russia (Orthodoxy), which they do not deny, and the many positive historical associations dating back to the Tsarist and Soviet times. The dominant Georgian narrative sees Russia with its imperialism as the main obstacle on the country's way to Europe, a threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and an epitome of backwardness, in contrast to the West, which is associated with progressiveness.

However, the notion that Georgia has been anti-Russian for centuries, which has been promoted in public discourse in Georgia (apparently mainly for external consumption), is not true. Beginning in the second half of the 18th century, when Georgian territory first came within the orbit of Russian influence, and then throughout the 19th century, the dominant sentiment in Georgia was favourable

towards Russia and the Russians: Georgia was a loyal province (Tbilisi, called Tiflis at that time, was the capital of the Russian Caucasus) and Georgian elites participated in the political, economic and cultural life of the Romanov empire. At that historical juncture the alternative, which the Georgians had experienced for centuries, was Turkish and Persian influence, from which Russia had helped the Georgians to liberate themselves. The Georgians perceived Russia at that time as a European empire and the only alternative to the Islamic world. Thus, Russia was seen as a substitute for Europe, the only accessible centre of civilizational progress, and the antithesis of “Asian” backwardness and despotism (the Christian Armenians viewed Russia in a similar way).

Anti-Russian tendencies first surfaced in the period after the fall of the Tsars and in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. They were also linked to the emergence of the European alternative, to which both the Whites and the Bolsheviks posed a threat. The conquest of the Democratic Georgian Republic by Bolshevik Russia (1921), the emigration of political elites and the establishment of Soviet Georgia put an end to the hopes for independence. In the years that followed, Georgians gradually came to terms with the Soviet state (a process in which repression also played a role), and then came to identify with the Soviet Union, as a result of which there were no anti-Russian sentiments (nb., the fact that most Georgians have a positive attitude towards Stalin stems from their strong identification with the USSR). This was not merely a consequence of the absence of a political alternative and Soviet society’s isolation from the external world. Georgia and its people benefited from the Soviet system. In the political dimension, Georgia was a separate republic governed by a local party nomenklatura, with Georgian as the official language. Its territory included a number of territories also claimed by Armenia and Azerbaijan,¹ as well as Abkhazia, whose elites aspired

¹ Including the Armenian-populated Javakheti or the Azeri-populated Kvemo-Kartli. The fact that there are large Armenian and Azeri minorities in Geor-

to the status of a Soviet Union member in its own right.² Other important factors that contributed to Georgia's successful integration with the Soviet Union concerned universal service in the Soviet army and a human resources policy that offered promotion opportunities to non-Russians, too. While the capture of Georgia by the Bolsheviks meant repression for many members of the intelligentsia and the aristocracy, the Soviet era brought civilizational advancement for the majority of the population. The Georgians also appreciated the economic stability, which became particularly noticeable in the 1960s, and their standards of living, which were higher than in many other republics. This helped to erode the memories of the repression of the 1920s and 1930s and overshadowed the negative impact of the attempts at imposing Russian as the official language in the Georgian SSR (1978).³

A radical change of attitudes towards Russia came with the new developments in the region: the process of perestroika, the emergence of the Georgian independence movement (whose orientation was anti-Russian), the breakup of the USSR and the emergence of the Western alternative, as well as the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (to which Moscow actively contributed by supporting the separatists). The rise of anti-Russian sentiments was also fuelled by an event which has since become symbolic: the brutal crushing of an independence demonstration in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989 by Soviet soldiers, in which at least 19 people were killed. It is characteristic, though, that the aversion to Russia, which was

gia while Armenia and Azerbaijan have no Georgian minorities (except for a handful of villages in Azerbaijan) demonstrates that Soviet decisions concerning territorial divisions were favourable to the Georgian SSR.

² In the years 1921–1931 Abkhazia was a separate Soviet republic (the Abkhazian SSR). However, in 1931 it was incorporated into the Georgian SSR as the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Republic.

³ Throughout the Soviet period, local languages (written in the Georgian and Armenian script, respectively) were the only official languages in the Georgian SSR and the Armenian SSR. In the other republics Russian was an official language alongside the local languages.

widespread in Georgia, did not transform into a common aversion to the Russian people or Russian language and culture.

Over the last twenty-five years, Georgians have been very consistent in their societal civilizational and political choices. While there have always been pro-Russian politicians and political groups on the Georgian political scene, they have always been marginal. It would be difficult to discuss pro-Western leanings in the case of the first Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991–1992) because he was focused on the internal situation (keeping power, countering separatism, promoting Georgian nationalism), while making efforts to obtain recognition of Georgia's independence by other countries. However, his policy was certainly anti-Russian. Eduard Shevardnadze (1992–2003), who had served as the Soviet minister of foreign affairs in the years 1985–1990, was the first Georgian leader to develop contacts with the West, although he also strove to take Russia's interests into account (for instance he had to make Georgia a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States). It was during his term that Georgia first took steps with a view to building pipelines to transport Caspian energy resources via Georgian territory while bypassing Russia (the Baku–Supsa oil pipeline was built in 1999, and the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline started in 2002). Georgia was also one of the founding members of the anti-Russian GUAM organisation (1997)⁴ and started military co-operation with the United States (US military advisers arrived in Georgia in 2001). Under the rule of the United National Movement (UNM) of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia started pursuing an uncompromisingly pro-Western policy: it launched a program of radical internal reforms, declared that it would seek membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures and openly challenged Russia. When the Georgian Dream won the parliamentary elections

⁴ The Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development was established in 1997. Its founding members included Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, hence the acronym GUAM. In 1999 Uzbekistan joined the organisation, but it withdrew in 2005 (in 1999–2005 the organisation was called GUUAM).

in 2012 it continued along the pro-Western course, and it was under Giorgi Margvelashvili, the Georgian Dream president elected a year later, that Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the European Union (June 2014).

The pro-Western course enjoys massive popular backing in Georgia because it is based on social consensus (most Georgians are in favour of joining the EU and NATO⁵). However, it should be noted that while this is clearly a dominant attitude among the elites, the wider public is more likely to cherish friendly attitudes towards Russia and a Soviet nostalgia. This is due mainly to the growing disenchantment with the West related to the stagnating standards of living in recent years and the hopes that improving relations with Russia could bring some positive change in this regard.

⁵ According to public opinion polls conducted in April 2015 by the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) 68% of Georgians were in favour of joining the EU and 65% were in favour of joining NATO; <http://www.civil.ge/files/files/2015/NDI-Poll-April2015.pdf>
A poll conducted by the same institution in November 2015 showed that 69% of respondents were in favour of integration with NATO and 58% were in favour of integration with the EU; https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Winter%20poll_2015_Public%20presentation_ENG_version%20FINAL_o.pdf

II. THE SUCCESSES OF GEORGIA'S WESTWARD COURSE

1. Saakashvili's reforms

Until the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia's pro-Western declarations seemed to be political fiction. Georgia was a failed state ridden by corruption, whose government was unable to fulfil its basic functions or control its territory, and was struggling with unresolved separatist conflicts (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and enormous crime levels. When Saakashvili's team came to power, the situation changed radically. At that time Georgia undertook the most courageous, effective and momentous reform experiment in the entire post-Soviet area (except for what happened in the Baltic states), buttressed by huge political, financial and expert backing from the West (especially the United States, the country that became the patron of Saakashvili's reforms) and effective co-operation between Georgia and the West.

The reforms implemented in the years 2003–2012 were not so much about democratisation as modernisation, because of the nature of challenges facing the Georgian leadership at that time. The main problem was not lack of democracy (Georgia under Shevardnadze was not an authoritarian state), but rather the dysfunction of the state and the disastrous economic situation. Thus, Saakashvili decided to base his political programme on three pillars: reconstruction of state institutions (including the army), economic liberalisation, and measures to improve Georgia's international image. These were put into practice, under Saakashvili's leadership, by a strongly ideologically motivated, tight-knit team of reformers who deeply believed in the justness of their mission, and many of whom had lived in Western states for longer periods.

As part of the first pillar, reforms were implemented in the police (the traffic police force was disbanded, thousands of functionaries were replaced by new hires, and salaries were increased

several-fold), the army (with substantial support from the United States⁶) and in other enforcement bodies. The government unrelentingly fought corruption and organised crime (the most influential mafia leaders were either imprisoned or forced to leave the country⁷), the civil service was staffed with new people, functionality was restored to the administration, the quality of public services improved considerably and the state started to regularly pay out salaries, pensions and disability allowances. Renovation of the crumbling infrastructure commenced (including roads, railways, public buildings and energy grids). The central government also regained control of those regions which were only loosely controlled under Shevardnadze (Ajaria, Samtskhe-Javakheti). Finally, Georgia managed to end its dependence on Russian gas supplies as it started buying gas from Azerbaijan.

Equally important were the liberal economic reforms, which were closer to the American model than to European solutions.⁸ The most important ones included repairing the tax system (substantially lower taxes and more effective tax collection), deregulation (slashing the number of licences and permits required to do business), mass privatisation of state assets, adoption of a liberal labour code,⁹ and measures to attract foreign investments

⁶ The participation of Georgian soldiers in operations in Iraq (as part of military co-operation with the US) and in Afghanistan (as part of NATO's mission) was an important element of the modernisation and efforts to build closer co-operation between the Georgian army and the USA/NATO.

⁷ Mostly to Europe (France, Spain, Italy) and Russia. Massive imprisonments of criminals and people with links to criminal circles were possible thanks to the adoption of unique anti-mafia rules into the criminal code, under which the very fact of belonging to such a fraternities was criminalised.

⁸ The reforms were developed by the economy minister Kakha Bendukidze, an advocate of an ultra-liberal economic model.

⁹ The labour code adopted in 2006 was one of the most liberal in the world. It only regulated workers' minimum age (16 years), weekly working time (41 hours) and leave rights (24 days a year). All the remaining questions (including the type and terms of labour contracts) could be freely agreed between the employer and the employee. Facing international criticism, the code was amended in 2013.

(facilitations for investors, allowing foreign operators to buy land in Georgia, abolition of visas for nationals of most states), which propelled economic development. The economic reforms implemented after 2003 were so courageous that they came to be known as the “Georgian model of liberalisation”.

Creating a positive international image of Georgia was also an important element of Saakashvili’s strategy – the objective was to attract support from the West and bring investors and tourists to the country. In part, Georgia owed its new recognisability to the figure of its president, a charismatic leader whose actions and statements were all over the world media. However, a number of government projects also contributed to boosting the country’s image (including the promotion of Georgia in Western media, the renovation of buildings or the – often extravagant – investment projects in Batumi, Tbilisi, Mtskheta and other cities).

While Saakashvili’s rule was marred by a number of negative elements (including authoritarian methods; see the chapter on “Chronic problems with democracy”, p. 22, for more information) its bottom line was certainly positive. The state started functioning again and regained its authority in the eyes of the people. The economy boomed as a result of the internal liberalisation and the influx of foreign investments, recording economic growth of around 10% in GDP in 2005.¹⁰ Georgia’s international image improved considerably, as evidenced by its surge in the rankings of international organisations. In 2006 and 2008 the World Bank awarded Georgia the prestigious title of the world’s leading economic reformer, and in 2010 the country ranked 11th in the “Doing Business” report (up from position 112 in 2005). Georgia also advanced from position 113 to position 34 in the economic freedom ranking by the Heritage Foundation and the *Wall Street Journal* in

¹⁰ In 2002 Georgia’s GDP increased by 5.5%, followed by 11.1% in 2003, 5.9% in 2004, 9.6% in 2005, 9.35 in 2006, and 12.4% in 2007. In the same period (2003-2007) accumulated economic growth reached around 110%; figures of www.geostat.ge

2012, and climbed from position 124 to position 52 in Transparency International's ranking in the same period. The influx of foreign investment¹¹ and international tourists¹² was a tangible measure of the improvement in Georgia's international image.

2. The Georgian Dream continues the pro-Western course

The change of government that occurred in the years 2012–2013 was the first one in Georgia's post-Soviet history that took place through democratic elections. While the firm position of the West and concerns about its possible criticism did contribute to the fact that the transfer of power occurred democratically and Saakashvili's team did not contest the election result, the ballot was nonetheless a successfully passed test for Georgia and a strong proof that pro-Western sentiments were deeply rooted in both political camps.

Despite the initial fears, Georgia's foreign and internal policy priorities did not change after the Georgian Dream movement rose to power. In the external dimension, continued rapprochement with the West and Euro-Atlantic aspirations remained a priority (although since the Russian-Georgian war, the vector of Georgia's foreign policy had shifted away from the United States towards Europe). Thanks to the Eastern Partnership programme initiated in 2009, Tbilisi was able to institutionalise its co-operation with the European Union, an ambition that materialised in June 2014 with the signature of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA.¹³

¹¹ In 2005 Georgia received US\$ 449 million in FDI, followed by US\$ 1.19 billion in 2006 and US\$ 2.014 billion in 2007. In the years that followed, the volume of FDI decreased – to US\$ 1.56 billion in 2008 and US\$ 658 million in 2009; http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=140&lang=eng

¹² 298 thousand international tourists visited Georgia in 2002, by 2005 this number had increased to 560 thousand to rise again to 1.05 million in 2007, 2.03 million in 2010 and 5.3 million in 2013; <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.ARVL>

¹³ Both entered into force already in September 2014. The ratification process by the EU national parliaments was completed in December 2015.

Negotiations are also underway to exempt Georgian nationals from the EU visa regime, which will most likely take place in 2016.¹⁴ Finally, the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), which was established after the war in 2008, is still operating in Georgia and monitoring compliance with the agreement, negotiated by Brussels (or in fact by France, then holding the EU presidency), which ended the Russian-Georgian war.¹⁵

The Georgian Dream government has continued to co-operate with NATO, and has repeatedly declared that Tbilisi's objective was to join the Alliance. The tangible manifestations of this co-operation included further involvement of Georgian troops in the NATO operation in Afghanistan and the launch of the NATO-Georgia Training Centre in w Krtsanisi near Tbilisi (August 2015).¹⁶

Despite its negative attitude towards the previous government, also in the internal dimension, the Georgian Dream coalition has not rejected the legacy of the Rose Revolution. While the reforms have lost some of their momentum, they are continuing. In some cases, reforms are also being implemented in areas which drew criticism from the West during Saakashvili's rule (e.g. the Interior Ministry, the Prosecutor's Office, healthcare). Observers of the Georgian political scene have been emphasising that the country

¹⁴ On 18 December 2015 the European Commission recommended abolishing the visa regime for the nationals of Georgia and Ukraine as both countries had met the conditions set by the European Union; http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6368_en.htm

¹⁵ The EUMM has a permanent staff of 205 delegated officials from the EU countries, including 30 persons from Romania, 21 from Poland and Sweden each, and 17 from the Czech Republic, according to 2015 figures. In the same year the mission had a budget of EUR 18.3 million. Operating from its three bases in Mtskheta, Gori and Zugdidi, the mission patrols conflict zones in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the adjacent Georgian territories (the Russian side is not co-operating with the mission and has denied its representatives access to the territory of both regions); http://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm/facts_and_figures

¹⁶ The Centre is part of a Georgian army training centre; it is not a separate unit; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28528>

has also become more democratic and the ‘revolutionary’ model of state governance, based on improvisation and arbitrary decisions made in a narrow circle, is now a matter of the past. Moreover, freedom of the media has improved in the initial period of Ivanishvili’s rule, non-governmental organisations now enjoy more freedom and reports of police lawlessness or mistreatment of inmates have become much less frequent.

3. Western involvement

The reforms in Georgia would not have been possible without the support from and involvement of the West, and especially Washington and the EU, as well as individual Western states including Poland. Neither could they have taken place without the effective collaboration between Georgia and the West. Western assistance consisted of political and economic-financial support as well as expert knowledge, and its scale was such that the West should be regarded as Georgia’s patron during that period.

For many years Georgia stood high on the political agenda of the West, which directly and unequivocally supported the Georgian leadership and its actions, although it was not uncritical and at crucial moments, e.g. during the opposition demonstrations crushed in 2007 or ahead of the elections in 2012, intervened directly, persuading the Georgian leadership into taking a specific course of action.

The most significant political measures taken by the West included granting Georgia (and Ukraine) NATO membership prospects at the Alliance summit in Bucharest (2008); the inclusion of Georgia into the European Neighbourhood Policy (2005) and the Eastern Partnership (2009), the signature of the Association Agreement with the EU (2014), as well as the political involvement of Brussels in ending the war with Russia and the deployment of the EUMM afterwards. Support for Georgia was expressed through frequent visits by Western leaders, including US president George Bush in

2005, or presidents Lech Kaczyński of Poland, Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine and Valdas Adamkus of Lithuania during the war with Russia (August 2008). It is significant that the West did not withdraw its support for Georgia after the Russian-Georgian war, despite its doubts as to who opened fire first and its reluctance to confront Russia.¹⁷

Expert and financial support was equally important. According to World Bank figures, in the years 2004–2013 Georgia received US\$ 5.663 billion in Official Development Assistance (the highest amounts was transferred in 2009). In the years 2007–2013 the European Union provided EUR 452 million under the ENPI programme (budget support, communication and energy infrastructure development, support for the private sector, internally displaced persons, etc.), while the US provided US\$ 395 million via the Millennium Challenge Corporation (2005–2010). In October 2008 a conference of donors was held in Brussels, in which the participants (USA, EU, EBRD, World Bank and others) adopted a package of post-war assistance for Georgia worth US\$ 4.5 billion. Georgia also benefited from Western assistance in the form of expert support (which concerned mainly the implementation of reforms, adaptation to EU and NATO standards, etc.) and training for the civil service and state functionaries. Hundreds of development projects have been implemented year after year by Western development agencies, embassies and non-governmental organisations (in areas such as infrastructure, regional development,

¹⁷ The special commission appointed by the EU and led by the Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini found that the armed operations started with the shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian army during the night of 7-8 August 2008. However, the commission also concluded that those events could not be considered in isolation from the developments of previous days and weeks, when the Russian side and the Ossetian separatists had staged numerous provocations; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_09_09_iiffmgc_report.pdf

Saakashvili's political opponents in Georgia have been accusing him of starting the war and of acting on a Russian provocation.

assistance to disadvantaged social groups, entrepreneurship support, agriculture support, etc.).

Security is a particularly important area in which Georgia has benefited from Western support (in this case coming mainly from the United States). The USA's flagship projects in this respect included: the Georgia Train and Equip Programme (GTEP) initiated in 2002 and the Sustainment and Stability Operations Program (SSOP; in place since 2005). As part of these programmes, the United States has funded reforms in the Georgian army, provided equipment and training of soldiers and officers. The involvement of Georgian troops in the NATO mission in Afghanistan has also been an important element of Western-Georgian military co-operation (the Georgian contribution stands at 11 thousand troops so far; the Georgian contingent is currently the mission's second largest after the US force). The same applies to Georgia's involvement in Iraq.

4. The impact of Georgia's reforms on the post-Soviet area

The significance of the Georgian reforms is not limited to Georgia alone. The Rose Revolution, the first of a series of so-called colour revolutions in the post-Soviet area, and the processes that took place in its aftermath, provided inspiration and models for other post-Soviet states and societies, and demonstrated that countries struggling with Soviet legacy could undergo effective transformations. They paved the way for the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Maidan (2013) in Ukraine, the protests against rigged presidential elections in Armenia (2008), and the pro-Western reforms in Moldova. They also provided an impulse which led to the inclusion of post-Soviet states into the European Neighbourhood Policy and the creation of the Eastern Partnership. The current leadership of Ukraine has been taking its cues from Georgia's experiences, which proves that this is indeed how Georgia is seen in the post-Soviet area (the Ukrainians have invited Georgian politicians and

officials, including Mikheil Saakashvili himself, who became the governor of the Odessa oblast in early 2015, to share their knowledge and help in the implementation of reforms).¹⁸

By adopting a firmly pro-Western course, the Georgians took a huge risk. Their choice meant an open confrontation with Russia, for which Georgia paid a price: it found itself at war with Russia in 2008, Moscow then recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Georgia lost control of these territories,¹⁹ having previously lost access to the Russian market (in 2006 Russia imposed an embargo on Georgian imports). Georgia was the first former Soviet country other than the Baltic states to take such a radical course, symbolised by its withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Independent States in 2009. The other states including Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Kazakhstan for years tried to navigate between the West and Russia, a practice first rejected by post-Maidan Ukraine, which has decided to stay on its pro-Western course despite the loss of Crimea and the Russian-instigated war in Donbas. Georgia's example and success have been a source of inspiration for the Ukrainians in this regard also.

¹⁸ Former Georgian officials currently working in Ukraine also include the former minister for health Sandro Kvitashvili (who heads the Ukrainian Ministry of Health), the former deputy interior minister Eka Zguladze (who now holds an equivalent post in Ukraine) or the former chief of the Georgian Police Academy Khatia Dekanoidze (currently serving as chief of the Ukrainian police).

¹⁹ Before 2008, the Georgian government controlled the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia and in Ossetia, the separatists had only very loose control of many Georgian-populated villages. In the aftermath of the war operations, the Abkhazian forces seized Kodori and Ossetian troops took control of Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia. This resulted in an exodus of several thousand Georgians from the territories in question.

III. THE CRISIS

The reforms and successes are only part of the picture, however, because from the beginning Georgia also experienced internal problems and tensions, stemming mainly from the difficult domestic situation (the Soviet legacy, consequences of the state's disintegration in the 1990s, the rapid pace of radical top-down reforms, and the leadership's arrogance and refusal to take the opposition into account), as well as external circumstances (the tense relations with Russia). The most serious problems concerned undemocratic practices, typical of the Saakashvili period, but also present during the rule of Georgian Dream. Nevertheless, those problems did not undermine Georgia's pro-Western course, which remained stable. The current situation in Georgia seems to be different, however. Tendencies and phenomena can be observed in the country's social and political life that point to a deepening crisis within the pro-Western approach. The most important ones concern changes in foreign policy, stagnating reforms, growing disenchantment with the West, increased activity of pro-Russian organisations, and symptoms suggesting that Georgia may be reverting to the condition in which it was prior to the Rose Revolution, such as corruption and nepotism.

1. Chronic problems with democracy

Accusations concerning the government's use of authoritarian methods were a staple allegation against Saakashvili's team. This was due to the hierarchy of priorities adopted by the Georgian leadership, in which repairing and modernising the country was seen as more important than democratisation. The undemocratic practices employed by the Georgian government included abuse of power by the enforcement bodies (especially the Interior Ministry under the leadership of Vano Merabishvili, as well as the prison service) which employed drastic and sometimes illegal measures against people regarded as a threat to the country's internal stability (mainly criminals, but in some cases also political

opponents of the regime), as well as massive surveillance. The problems mostly affected the overcrowded detention facilities and prisons where torture was frequently used. Saakashvili's record was marred by the forceful suppression of an opposition demonstration in autumn 2007 and the introduction of state of emergency for two weeks.²⁰ The Saakashvili team have also been accused of curbing media freedom (e.g. through the temporary closing down of the Imedi and Kavkasia televisions in 2007), forcing entrepreneurs to finance the state's projects, tolerating corruption in elite circles (e.g. in the form of privileges for entrepreneurs with links to the government) and *de facto* monopolies, and not respecting private property (asset confiscation). The fact that the courts were not independent and pliant in relations with the prosecution was also a major problem.

The issues described above were also reflected in Georgia's position in international rankings (as were the positive effects of reforms). For instance, in the US Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, Georgia was described as a hybrid regime with strong government control of the media, opaque decision making processes and a *de facto* single-party political system. The authoritarian tendencies and methods incompatible with democratic principles were also criticised by the West, for example in the periodic EU reports on Georgia's progress in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Georgian Dream came to power promising to fight Saakashvili's police state – a pledge that considerably contributed to its success at the ballot box (as did the publication of footage showing torture in prisons).²¹ Nonetheless, Ivanishvili's team has also repeatedly resorted to methods that were doubtful from the point of view of

²⁰ In order to undo the negative consequences of the 2007 political crisis and regain democratic legitimacy, Saakashvili stepped down and called an early presidential election in January 2008, which he won by a majority of 53%.

²¹ The scandal related to the footage, which was published shortly before the parliamentary elections in 2012, has been dubbed the "Georgian Abu Ghraib".

a democratic state, and – like the United National Movement – has been criticised for this by the West. The force binding the Georgian Dream coalition together and its main objective had been not so much to implement a specific political programme as to oust the United National Movement and hold it to account. As a result, political revanchism that exploited state institutions and media witch-hunts became the driving force of Georgian Dream’s internal policy. As the most visible manifestation of this tendency, numerous politically motivated lawsuits were filed against high-ranking members of the former leadership (including Saakashvili himself, who had to emigrate after an arrest warrant was issued against him; in December 2015 the Georgian government stripped him of Georgian citizenship after he had assumed Ukrainian citizenship). Some of these lawsuits ended with long imprisonment sentences (meted out to the Interior Ministry chief Vano Merabishvili, defence minister Bacho Akhalaia and the mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava among others; in total around 100 former officials were sued).

The witch-hunt against the UNM gained momentum in Autumn 2015. At that time the government took or inspired a number of actions targeting the opposition, including the publication of materials discrediting the previous government (new videos showing inmates being tortured in 2011) and acts of vandalism against UNM offices in several cities of Georgia during anti-opposition demonstrations (October 2015). The latter acts had been orchestrated by youth organisations with links to the government. The National Security Service of Georgia has also opened an investigation into the opposition’s alleged plot to carry out a coup, based on recordings of Saakashvili’s conversations with UNM politicians.²² Statements by the then prime minister Irakli Garibashvili, who

²² In telephone conversations with the member of UNM leadership Giga Bokeria and the chief the Rustavi-2 television associated with UNM Nika Gvaramia, Saakashvili reportedly encouraged the two politicians to resist the government, should it try to seize the television’s buildings. The recordings were published by one of Ukraine’s internet portals.

said that the United National Movement was a “criminal organisation” for which there should be no place in Georgian politics, further added to the tension.

Georgian Dream has also taken measures to limit the independence of the media. In 2012, entrepreneurs with links to the government took over control of the the Imedi television, and in 2014 the Maestro network found itself in a similar situation. In August 2015, facing pressure from the government, Imedi stopped broadcasting popular political debates which also included opposition representatives. However, the most widely commented case concerned the Rustavi-2 television station associated with UNM, which the government took over control in the aftermath of a politically-motivated lawsuit (August–November 2015).²³

2. Symptoms of the pro-Western course slipping into crisis

2.1. Foreign policy adjustment under Georgian Dream

The Georgian Dream coalition has continued the pro-Western foreign policy, although, as far as relations with Russia are concerned, its policy has been different from that pursued by Saakashvili. It is a priority for the government to normalise relations with Russia and not provoke Moscow, irrespective of the hostile actions it takes. Tbilisi has been trying not to raise the Abkhazia and South Ossetian issues on its own initiative, and has responded with routine protests only to Russia’s provocations (such as Moscow’s signature of alliance treaties with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in the years

²³ In August 2015 the television’s former owner Kibar Khalvashi, an entrepreneur with links to the Georgian Dream, filed a lawsuit demanding the 2006 sale transaction to be nullified and the television’s assets sold at that time to be returned, claiming that president Saakashvili had forced him to sell them at reduced prices. The court granted his request, nullified the transaction and at the same time ordered the television chief Nika Gvaramia to be dismissed. The ruling attracted international criticism and several days later the court repealed the decision concerning the chief and restored Gvaramia to his post.

2012–2015 or the construction of abatis and the frequent moving of border posts at the administrative border of South Ossetia).²⁴ The Georgian government has also been very circumspect as far as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is concerned.²⁵ While Georgia and Russia still have not resumed their diplomatic relations broken in 2008, they have been involved in political dialogue at the level of special envoys, commenced in December 2012 (where Georgia is represented by its prime minister Zurab Abashidze and Russia by its deputy foreign minister Grigory Karasin). The dialogue has already produced some tangible results, for instance direct flights between Russia and Georgia have resumed, Moscow has lifted its embargo on imports from Georgia, and has promised to liberalise the visa regime for Georgian nationals. The United National Movement has criticised the dialogue, claiming that it amounted to capitulation by Georgian Dream, and has pointed out that the restoration of Russian-Georgian relations mainly benefited Moscow as it served to make Georgia dependent on Russia once more.²⁶

The increasing co-operation with Russia in such sensitive areas as energy and transport has also been a source of domestic concern. A daughter company of Russia's Rosneft has acquired a 49% stake in the Poti sea port (the stake was sold by a private company but

²⁴ The moving of the border is a major problem for the local population, and especially farmers who have fields on both sides of the border. Russian soldiers and members of Ossetian armed groups often detain inhabitants of Georgian villages in the border zone, who then end up in prison in Tskhinvali (and the EUMM then mediates their release).

²⁵ One of the reasons is that many members of the Saakashvili team are now involved in Ukraine as officials or advisers to the Ukrainian government.

²⁶ Wine exports may serve as an example of this mechanism. After Russia imposed an embargo on Georgian products, Georgia successfully managed to re-orientate its exports (it started selling mainly to the EU). When the Russian ban on imports was lifted, the situation reverted to the pre-2006 status. As a result, as of 2013 Russia was the destination for 50% for Georgia's entire wine exports and was the fifth largest recipient of Georgian exports in general (up from position 11 in 2012). In the aftermath of the recession in Russia in 2015, Georgian exports to the Russian Federation decreased by 47.1% in the first 9 months of the year.

the government could have blocked the transaction²⁷), negotiations with Russia's Gazprom have been underway since October 2015 concerning the possibility for Georgia to start buying Russian gas,²⁸ and Tbilisi has been sending unclear signals concerning the possible unblocking of the railway line from Russia via Abkhazia to Tbilisi and Yerevan, which has been closed since 1992.²⁹

The lifting of the restrictions on Russian television broadcasting, which had been in place since 2008, was a friendly gesture to Russia, which at the same time did not serve the pro-Western option because it opened new possibilities for Russian propaganda. The Georgian secret services have also been less active and mass surveillance less widespread, which has produced a similar effect: while it broadened civil liberties, it made it easier for the pro-Russian groups in Georgia to act and co-operate with the Russian side.

Some members of the ruling team have been sending contradictory signals concerning the possibility of a radical re-orientation of Georgia's foreign policy. While he was still prime minister, Ivanishvili said for instance that he would not rule out the option of Georgia joining the Eurasian Economic Union, and foreign minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili (prime minister since December 2015) argued in September 2015 that it was necessary to intensify co-operation with partners in the "Eurasian continent" and diversify Georgia's foreign policy. Zurab Abashidze's statement to the

²⁷ For more information, see: Marek Matusiak, Rosneft to invest in Georgia, *OSW Analyses*; <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-01-14/rosneft-to-invest-georgia>

²⁸ Public opinion was surprised by the meetings between the energy minister Kakha Kaladze and the Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller. The government said that the two parties were negotiating terms of the transit of Russian gas to Armenia and the possibility of barter settlements (in the form of gas supplies). However, in one of his interviews Ivanishvili said that Georgia was too heavily dependent on gas from Azerbaijan, and diversification of supplies would be beneficial.

²⁹ <http://publicdialogues.info/en/Paata%20Zakareishvili%3A%20The%20New%20Government%20of%20Georgia%20is%20a%20Chance%20for%20Russia%20to%20Normalize%20Its%20Relations%20with%20Georgia>

effect that Georgia's signature of the Association Agreement with the European Union had been done in consultation with Russia also led to some embarrassment,³⁰ and there are politicians in the government coalition (e.g. Gogi Topadze, the leader of the Party of Industrialists) who are quite open about their pro-Russian and anti-Western views.³¹

From the point of view of foreign policy, it was symptomatic and significant when the Georgian Dream leadership provoked the Free Democrats party of Irakli Alasania to quit the government coalition (November 2014). Members of the Free Democrats held the posts of foreign minister (Maia Panjikidze), minister for European integration (Alexi Petriashvili) and defence minister (Alasania). Thus, the party was in fact in charge of the Euro-Atlantic policy and was trusted by partners in the West, and its exit from the government coalition was perceived as a worrying signal with regard to the future direction of Tbilisi's foreign policy.³²

It appears that underlying Georgian Dream's conciliatory policy towards Russia is political realism, i.e. the belief that it is necessary to build proper relations with the northern neighbour. It is more important, however, that Ivanishvili's party wishes to be seen as an antithesis of the (ostensibly anti-Russian) Saakashvili's

³⁰ <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=618198>

³¹ http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43672&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=108bo483c8232c18eb533a928fb748cc#.VioYp37hDcs

³² Their exit from the coalition was preceded by detentions and accusations of corruption against some high-ranking officials and officers at the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff, voiced during Alasania's tour of European states. An additional element in the scandal, which casts doubt on the Georgian Dream's pro-Western stance, concerns the fact that the government withdrew Alasania's authorisation to conclude a deal with the French side for the purchase of an air and tank defence system. The minister nonetheless signed the agreement, and upon his return announced that the Free Democrats were leaving the coalition. See e.g. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/11/13/is-georgia-slipping-away/>; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27751>

regime both in internal policy, and in the external dimension (it is the paradigm on which Ivanishvili has built his party's political programme). This policy has been criticised by the pro-Western opposition, whose members have accused the government of political naiveté in relations with Russia, and has given rise to suspicions about Georgian Dream's real intentions (is it covertly pro-Russian, or maybe even acting on orders from Moscow?). In this context people have been calling into doubt the unclear and ambiguous political views, the Russian past and links to Russia of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the governing camp's informal leader, who made a fortune in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s.³³ His opponents have pointed out that Ivanishvili knows little about the West, does not understand it and has no extensive contacts there. At the same time he knows very well how Russian politics and business work, has many contacts in the Russian elite, and the Russian mentality and perception of the world are closer to him than the Western approach. He may therefore be more susceptible to Russian influence. In the wider public, it is even commonly believed that Ivanishvili is "Moscow's man".

2.2. Stagnating reforms

The Ivanishvili camp has not abandoned the programme of modernisation reforms, but its implementation has been stagnating. Moreover, many reforms have been implemented in the legislative dimension only, and have had little impact on reality. Saakashvili's team had a clearly defined and bold (even if often controversial and grandiose) vision of how to transform the country, which was widely publicised at home and abroad. His program of revolutionary reforms was implemented energetically by a strongly motivated, well-integrated team convinced that it had a historical mission to accomplish and was led by a charismatic leader. Georgian Dream's internal policy lacks such characteristics. It is inert,

³³ See e.g. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23761199.2013.11417276>

unenthusiastic and lacks clarity as to the direction in which the country should be heading.

Georgia has been experiencing certain worrying tendencies, some of which could be interpreted as symptoms of the country regressing in areas in which improvement was achieved during Saakashvili's rule: i.e. cases of corruption and nepotism in the lower ranks of power,³⁴ or mass dismissals of officials and functionaries hired before 2012 and re-hiring of those who lost their positions as part of the fight against corruption in the wake of the Rose Revolution. Levels of common crime have also increased, mainly as a result of the 2013 amnesty under which 17 thousand people, i.e. three quarters of all inmates, were released from prisons, and softer prison regimes, including in relation to the mafia organisations.³⁵ According to some sources, the government has also begun to support the creation of organisations (mostly youth organisations, such as the Free Generation) and informal groupings of retired enforcement functionaries, former members of paramilitary formations of former prison inmates and criminals. These groups have been used in various political ploys against the opposition.³⁶

³⁴ In a poll conducted in February 2015 by the International Republican Institute 35% of respondents said that with regard to corruption, the situation had deteriorated, while 15% said it had improved; http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_o.pdf

³⁵ As a result of which the imprisoned mafia bosses (*vory v zakone* in Russian) re-established contacts with criminals at large and were able to lead mafia groups again; <http://ru.rfi.fr/kavkaz/20140920-v-gruzii-sporyat-o-tom-kto-vinovat-v-roste-prestupnosti>. As many as 62% of respondents in the International Republican Institute poll of February 2015 said that the crime situation had deteriorated while only 11% believed it had improved); http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_o.pdf. A poll conducted by NDI in April 2015 delivered similar results with 48% of respondents saying that crime levels had increased and 6% - that it had fallen; https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF_o.pdf

³⁶ For instance, the Mkhedrioni formation, which operated in the early 1990s and was involved in the civil war in Georgia and the war in Abkhazia; <http://www.apsny.ge/analytics/1444883122.php>

2.3. Rising conservative sentiments and growing tensions

During Georgian Dream's rule the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has always held strong sway in Georgia, gained even more influence over politics and public opinion, especially among the most conservative sections of society.³⁷ One of the underlying causes concerns the difference between Saakashvili's and Ivanishvili's perception of the Church. The latter, despite describing himself as an atheist, maintains close links to the Church, shares its views on many issues and considers it to be the government's ally (as does Vladimir Putin in Russia). The Church, kept away from politics under Saakashvili, now also enjoys much more autonomy and freedom to come up with its own social and political initiatives. The Orthodox Church officially supports Georgia's pro-Western aspirations but in practice many in the clergy see the West and its liberal values as a threat to Georgian identity, cherishing and emphasising a religious and civilizational proximity to the Russian Orthodox Church, with which the Georgian Church maintains close relations. Patriarch Ilia II, who enjoys great authority in Georgia,³⁸ has repeatedly called for reconciliation with Russia. Representatives of the Church and numerous Orthodox organisations and communities are very active in public life, and hold much sway over the public (the patriarch himself is commonly regarded as the most authoritative figure in Georgia).³⁹ These groups thus have a major influence on public opinion, which often adversely affects Georgia's attitude

³⁷ The proposal put forward by patriarch Ilia II for a legal bill that would grant the Georgian Orthodox Church the authority to pardon convicted individuals (December 2015) is a symptomatic example of the Orthodox Church's rising influence. The patriarch has since withdrawn the proposal, which the prime minister nonetheless considered to be a good idea.

³⁸ See e.g.: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/gry/?act=news&div=60240>

³⁹ The Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution in Georgia. As many as 91% of respondents in a February 2015 poll by the International Republican Institute held positive views of the Church's activities; http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_o.pdf; the other most trusted institutions included the army, the media and the police.

towards the West. In many situations (especially when it comes to reducing Western values to the defence of sexual minority rights) the Church may in fact be seen as an instrument of Russian propaganda.⁴⁰

The Church and the conservative Orthodox communities have been gaining more and more influence in parallel with the rise of nationalist sentiments and intolerance towards other religions and sexual minorities, especially among the younger generation. This trend has led to several widely commented cases of religious conflicts (especially Orthodox-Muslim) in local communities, mostly in western Georgia (Ajaria, Guria, Samtskhe-Javakheti)⁴¹. Another striking incident concerned the use of violence against a small demonstration of LGBT activists by defenders of traditional values taking part in a counter-demonstration led by Orthodox clergymen, which brought together several tens of thousand people (May 2013)⁴². The radicalisation of Muslim youths (especially in the Chechen-populated Pankisi Gorge) is also a major problem, as a result of which local conflicts have been exacerbated and many young people have left for Syria to join the jihad (between 50 to 200 Georgian nationals are believed to be currently fighting in Syria, mostly of Chechen origin). The latter problem, however, is related not so much to the internal situation in Georgia, as to the developments in the Middle East and the difficult economic situation in Pankisi.⁴³ Still, it is a fact that during UNM's rule, the

⁴⁰ For instance, European liberal values were much criticised on the occasion of the heated debate over the adoption of a highly contested anti-discrimination bill, which Georgia was required to enact prior to the signature of the Association Agreement with the EU; <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/20133.html>

⁴¹ For example, the conflicts in Kobuleti (over the construction of a madrassa), in the Chelo villages in Ajaria (where people protested against the construction of a minaret) or in Adigeni in Samtskhe-Javakheti (a conflict over the construction of a mosque).

⁴² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22565723>

⁴³ For more information, see: Maciej Falkowski, Józef Lang, Homo Jihadicus: Islam in the former USSR and the phenomenon of the post-Soviet militants in

state reacted to such phenomena much more decisively in order to prevent them from escalating.

2.4. Growing influence of pro-Russian groups

The recently stepped up activity of pro-Russian communities, including both old and new organisations and political parties, is a new phenomenon in Georgia. The pro-Russian community includes:

- political parties (e.g. the Democratic Movement – United Georgia of Nino Burjanadze, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia led by David Tarkhan-Mouravi, the Labour Party of Shalva Natelashvili, and Free Georgia of Kakha Kukava);
- non-governmental organisations (e.g. the Eurasian Choice of Georgia of Archil Chkoidze and the Eurasian Institute of Gulbaat Rtskhiladze);
- the media (e.g. Sputnik Georgia or Georgia and the World).⁴⁴

Many of them operate under the Eurasian identity, in line with the priorities and the propaganda tone of Russia's reintegration strategy for the post-Soviet area. They call for a break with the West and want the Euro-Atlantic aspirations to be scrapped and relations with Russia to be normalised. In some cases they even argue that Georgia should be incorporated into the Kremlin's integration projects.

The pro-Russian parties and organisations have been very active in the media, they have organised research and press conferences, demonstrations, and have conducted their own public opinion

Syria and Iraq, *OSW Report*, September 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/homojihadicus.pdf>

⁴⁴ <http://sputnik-georgia.ru/>; <http://www.geworld.ge>

polls.⁴⁵ According to some sources, their representatives have been travelling around the country, telling people that association with the EU would have negative consequences for Georgian society.⁴⁶ They have also been promoting the view that Georgia could regain control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in return for entering the Russian sphere of influence.⁴⁷ Russian support for these organisations, in the form of financial and media assistance, has been rather discreet. The Democratic Movement is the only exception, as its leader Nino Burjanadze frequently travels to Moscow and meets high-ranking Russian politicians.⁴⁸

The pro-Russian community is fragmented, internally divided and ridden by conflicts (for instance over the funding from Russia). While its influence should not be overestimated, it has nonetheless become an audible voice in Georgia's political life, while during the UNM's rule the pro-Russian option was marginal and barely noticeable. In the 2013 presidential election, Nino Burjanadze garnered 10% of the vote, and the result of her party in the 2014 local elections was similar (with the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia gaining 4.7%). In most recent polls, total support for the pro-Russian parties ranges between 12% and 16%, which means they could make it into parliament.⁴⁹ The fact that a mas-

⁴⁵ For example, the Eurasian Institute has conducted a poll which showed that only 32% of Georgians supported integration with NATO, while as many as 40% were against; <http://www.vestikavkaza.ru/articles/U-gruzin-net-nepriyazni-k-Rossii.html>

⁴⁶ <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1915893.html#ixzz3Y8Itpoej>

⁴⁷ See e.g.: <http://sputnik-georgia.ru/politics/20151219/229528650.html>

⁴⁸ In July 2015 Burjanadze met with the Russian Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin and the Russian deputy foreign minister Grigory Karasin, among others; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28423>

⁴⁹ According to a February 2015 poll by the International Republican Institute the Labour Party could expect to gain 6% of the vote, while the Alliance of Patriots and Nino Burjanadze's group could get 5% each; http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_o.pdf; a poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute in August 2015 showed 5% of support for the Alliance of Patriots, 4% for the Labour Party and 3% for Burjanadze's party; https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_August_2015_Survey_public%20Political_ENG_vf.pdf

sive majority of people in Georgia have no clear political preferences expands their room for manoeuvre. This situation may lead to a fragmented parliament after the elections due to take place in autumn 2016 and force the main political forces to co-operate with the pro-Russian groups and take their views on foreign policy into account.⁵⁰

While the pro-Russian groups have been increasingly active, a noticeable albeit slow spread of pro-Russian sentiments may be observed among the general public. Supporters of the pro-Western option were shocked by the results of an opinion poll conducted by the US National Democracy Institute in April 2015, which showed that as many as 31% of respondents were for Georgia entering the Eurasian Union (with 41% against; in previous polls conducted in April and August 2014 the Eurasian option was backed by 16% and 20% of respondents, respectively, and in later polls from August and November 2015 – 28% and 24%, respectively)⁵¹. The number of people who believe that Georgia would gain more if it rejected the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy vector and normalised relations with Russian instead of pursuing European integration has also been increasing: in April 2014 this view was shared by 20% of respondents, compared to 30% in August 2015.⁵² Moreover, while a decisive majority (around 80%) of Georgians consider Russia to be a threat, believe that Russia has a negative influence on Georgia

⁵⁰ The results of by-elections that took place in October 2015 in the single-mandate constituency of Sagarejo (eastern Georgia) may suggest that pro-Russian groups could get good showings in the parliamentary elections to be held in autumn 2016. It was held because the Sagarejo deputy Tina Khidasheli was appointed minister for defence, and had to resign from her seat in parliament. The Georgian Dream candidate Tamar Khidasheli (the minister's relative) garnered 49% of the vote, while the Patriots' Alliance candidate Irma Inashvili, who campaigned under anti-Western slogans, came in with a showing of 45%. The remaining political groups had boycotted the ballot; <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28728>

⁵¹ <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

⁵² https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_August_2015%20survey_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF.pdf

or side with Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict,⁵³ they are also overwhelmingly for the normalisation of relations with Russia and support the government's steps in this direction.

3. Causes of the crisis

3.1. Internal political crisis

One of the causes of the crisis of Georgia's pro-Western course concerns a multidimensional, deepening internal political crisis. Its elements include the opaque political system created by Georgian Dream, the ruling party's lack of vision for the country, and a deep decline in the public's confidence in the political class.

Georgia's key figure is the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder and sponsor of the Georgian Dream movement. Even though he does not hold any official function, he is the *éminence grise* of Georgian politics, taking key decisions and steering the government from behind the scenes. He also supervises the activities of high-ranking state officials, including president Margvelashvili, whom he often reprimands. As a result, the decision-making process in Georgia is opaque and politicians holding top posts (including the former prime minister Irakli Garibashvili and the current head of government Giorgi Kvirikashvili) are *de facto* figureheads. At the same time, Ivanishvili can hardly be described as charismatic, and the fact that he does not hold any official position makes him politically unaccountable.

It has also been increasingly clear that the Georgian Dream coalition is internally divided. In November 2014, the Free Democrats

⁵³ In April 2014, 62% of Georgians believed that Russia was responsible for the Crimea crisis (while 15% said it had been Ukraine's fault), and 66% condemned the annexation of Crimea, although only 46% believed that the Georgian government should take any action in support of Ukraine other than verbal protest; https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Georgia_August-2014-survey_Public-Issues_ENG_vf.pdf

quit the coalition, and a conflict surfaced between, on the one hand, Ivanishvili and his protégé, the then prime minister Garibashvili, and on the other, the president, who in many situations had distanced himself from the Georgian Dream leaders and criticised them openly. The fact that the coalition lacks internal cohesion and consensus as far as foreign policy is concerned is also visible in the openly anti-Western statements by some politicians (e.g. the leaders of Party of Industrialists – Gogi Topadze and Zurab Tkemaladze) and in the tense relations with one of the coalition members, the Republican Party of David Usupashvili (the parliament speaker) and the leadership of Georgian Dream.

Moreover, the ruling group has no clear vision of the country's future course and individual politicians do not seem to be guided by any particular political ideology; this also applies to Ivanishvili who has never articulated his political views. President Giorgi Margvelashvili, who strives to preserve the independence of the president's office and act as a guardian of democratic principles and the country's pro-Western foreign policy course, is the only exception here. However, as he has no political camp of his own, his position is weak.

The Georgian party system is also in crisis. Created *ad hoc* in the run-up to the 2012 parliamentary elections and individually controlled by Ivanishvili, the Georgian Dream movement has not developed into a full-fledged political party with central and regional structures, a clear political programme, leaders, etc. The United National Movement, too, has been undergoing a crisis in its programme and personnel, and since December 2015 has been led by a collective body (Saakashvili had to resign as party leader after he was stripped of Georgian citizenship). However, despite having quit his post, Saakashvili is still trying to control his party remotely, which has been generating internal conflicts.

The crisis of the political scene is reflected in public opinion polls. According to a poll conducted by NDI in October 2015, as many

as 60% of respondents could not name a party for which they would be willing to vote. Meanwhile, the government's dwindling popularity has not yet translated into better showings by the opposition: only 16% of respondents said they supported Georgian Dream (down from 24% in April 2015 and 54.9% in 2012 parliamentary elections), and only 10% supported UNM (down from 15% and 40%, respectively).⁵⁴ The pro-Russian parties are the only ones to have reported a slight improvement in their showing. The unprecedented decline of trust in political parties and the fact that people do not feel represented by them are indicative of a deep crisis of confidence in the political class. This situation opens new opportunities for populist groups and leaders who may emerge and disrupt the Georgian political scene ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections.

3.2. Economic problems and social apathy

Despite the country's economic success after 2003 (which Georgia owes to reforms, the fact that it effectively restored the state's functionality, introduced a liberal economic package and managed to attract foreign direct investments) neither UNM nor Georgian Dream have been able to resolve the country's chronic economic and social woes. The most important problems concern persistent high unemployment of around 15% overall and as as much as 30% in the young generation,⁵⁵ as well as low wages (the average wage in 2014 was GEL 818, i.e. around US\$ 340). The structure of employment is also a major problem, with 53% of the population working in agriculture, which accounts for a mere 10% of GDP. Remittances from migrant workers abroad continue to play an important role

⁵⁴ https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Winter%20poll_2015_Public%20presentation_ENG_version%20FINAL_o.pdf

⁵⁵ Real unemployment is higher because all rural inhabitants who own land are automatically considered to be employed, which is often not the case. Opinion polls are also symptomatic in this respect: a majority of respondents (more than 60%) consider themselves to be "unemployed", which may suggest that they have no permanent jobs; <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

in the economy, accounting for 12% of GDP.⁵⁶ More than 14% of Georgia's population live below the poverty line and the majority have experienced no improvement in their standards of living (or have even reported worse living conditions in recent months⁵⁷), even though Georgia's *per capita* income has been slowly rising (from US\$ 1763 in 2006 to US\$ 3676 in 2014). However, wealth is not distributed evenly. Huge emigration numbers testify to the difficult economic situation of the Georgians: according to the latest census, Georgia's population has shrunk from 4.4 million in 2002 to 3.7 million in 2014, (by 14.7%), mainly as a result of emigration (and the population of rural areas has shrunk even more, by more than 23.8%).⁵⁸

Moreover, in 2015 Georgia's economic performance started deteriorating. GDP increased by a mere 2.5% according to preliminary estimates and the volume of trade decreased by 13% year on year, with trade exchange with the Commonwealth of Independent States declining by as much as 22% in the first nine months. Exports dropped by 23% in 2015, with exports to the CIS down by 44% (by 47.1% to Russia and by 53.2% to Azerbaijan in the first three quarters). Meanwhile, imports declined by 10% and remittances from Georgians working abroad fell by 25% (by 39% in the case of Russia, which accounts for around 40% of total remittances). The influx of foreign direct investments has also been slower: in the third quarter of 2015 FDI amounted to US\$ 1.019 million, a decline of 17.2% year on year. Georgia has also been downgraded in the World Bank's Doing Business ranking (albeit it still ranks quite high): it ranked 8th in 2013, 15th in 2014 and 24th in 2015.

⁵⁶ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>

⁵⁷ In a poll conducted by the NDI in August 2015, 43% of respondents said that their living conditions had deteriorated in the preceding year (9% reported an improvement and 47% said there had been no change); https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_August_2015%20survey_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF.pdf

⁵⁸ http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/According%20to%20preliminary%20results%20of%20the%202014%20population%20census%20Final.pdf

The depreciation of the Georgian lari, which has been underway since November 2014, has also been an important economic and social issue, caused by low oil prices in global markets and the recession or economic difficulties experienced by Georgia's main trading partners (the Georgian currency lost 28.3% against the dollar in 2015). This is a major internal problem that has been affecting nearly everyone in Georgia as people's purchasing power has decreased due to more expensive imports and the fact that the economy is strongly tied to the dollar. The depreciation of the lari has in turn triggered faster inflation – the inflation rate year on year was 4.9% in 2015, compared to 3.1% in 2015.

Both the United National Movement and Georgian Dream have been criticised for their economic policies. Saakashvili has been accused of making the economy excessively dependent on foreign investments, assistance and loans, which did little to increase employment. He has been criticised for undertaking many costly investments that were pointless from an economic point of view (and moreover, were not carried out by Georgian companies but rather by foreign, mostly Turkish, construction contractors). It has also been argued that the liberalisation mainly benefited large companies rather than small family businesses. Critics of Ivanishvili's economic policy, on the other hand, have been pointing out that his rectification of some of the liberal solutions adopted after 2003 (e.g. the labour code amendment, the ban on land sale to foreign operators and a more restrictive visa policy) have hit entrepreneurs and discouraged investors, thus slowing down economic development. The government has also been accused of increasing social spending via populist measures.

However, the main source of Georgia's economic problems should not be located in the mistakes made by this or the previous government (the economic policies of both have been similar despite some differences). The root of the problems lies in objective limitations and chronic internal problems, i.e. primarily the consequences of the economic collapse that followed the break-up of the

USSR, a small internal market, public poverty, as well as external factors beyond the government's control, such as the global financial crisis, a deteriorating situation in global markets or the recession in Russia (which was one of the main causes of the problems in 2015). Starting from 2014, the Georgian economy has also been adversely affected by some of the short-term effects of the DCFTA concluded with the EU (the need to adopt a number of EU regulations, e.g. labour legislation, or the increase in electricity prices for households), which may yield a positive effect on Georgia's economic situation only in the longer term.

Nonetheless, the economic difficulties have directly influenced perceptions within society, both in the domestic dimension (Georgian Dream's waning popularity), and with regard to external relations. Georgians expect the rapprochement with the West, and especially with the European Union, to lead to an improvement of their standards of living, as the success of the initial years of reforms has kindled a hope that things would improve. The absence of a positive change thus breeds Eurosceptic sentiments: between April 2014 and August 2015 the percentage of people who believed that Georgia would gain more from European integration than it would from quitting the pro-Western course decreased from nearly 60% to 45%.⁵⁹

Alongside the negative tendencies in politics and the economy, pessimism and social apathy have been growing in Georgia, as clearly evidenced by public opinion polls. In November 2015 as many as 44% of respondents said that Georgia was heading in the wrong direction, 18% said it was going in the right direction, and 31% – that the situation appeared unchanged⁶⁰ (back in August 2014 the proportions were almost the reverse, and in November

⁵⁹ https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_August_2015%20survey_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF.pdf

⁶⁰ https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Winter%20poll_2015_Public%20presentation_ENG_version%20FINAL_o.pdf

2013, 53% of respondents believed that the country was heading in the right direction, 9% thought it was going in the wrong direction, and 28% said they were not seeing any change⁶¹). Respondents in a February 2015 poll by the International Republican Institute were equally pessimistic (55% on the pessimist side, with 25% on the optimist side)⁶².

3.3. Disenchantment with the West

The causes of the Georgian crisis should not be located only in unfavourable internal dynamics. The international context in which Georgia has found itself is also significant and it is not the same as it was several years ago.

Under Saakashvili, and especially during his first term, Georgia as well as the other post-Soviet states, and even some Central Asian countries, were at the centre of attention of the West, i.e. especially the United States and, to a lesser extent, the European Union. The increased Western involvement was related to a number of factors including the series of pro-Western revolutions in these countries (which started with the events in Georgia in 2003) and the hopes that the post-Soviet states would quickly transform and democratise, and that it would be possible to export Azeri and Central Asian energy resources to Europe while bypassing Russia. The Western involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq was also important in this regard (the Caucasus was then seen as an important transport corridor), as was the relatively weak and less assertive Russian policy in this area. Western support and sympathy, which the Georgians could clearly see, plus the US and EU assistance visible everywhere and the EU's declarations about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic prospects, together with the positive and

⁶¹ <https://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Public-Attitudes-Poll-121813-ENG.pdf>

⁶² http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_o.pdf. In November 2012 (immediately after the parliamentary elections) 63% were optimistic and only 12% were pessimistic.

noticeable effects of Saakashvili's reforms, all translated into massive enthusiasm for the West, which the Georgians commonly idealised.

This situation started to change with the onset of the war in 2008. The Georgians were disappointed by the fact that the United States did not back them militarily in the face of Russian aggression. Over time – and owing in no small extent to open declarations by Western politicians who dispelled any illusions that the Georgians could hold in this respect⁶³ – Georgians also started to realise that integration with NATO and the European Union would not happen in the foreseeable future and that co-operation with the Alliance would not lead to Georgia regaining control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (while the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest did declare that the path to membership could hypothetically be open to Georgia, the country has still not been granted its MAP, i.e. Membership Action Plan). The government has represented the signature of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA as a success and a step towards Europe, but the public at large do not understand the idea of the Eastern Partnership. The Georgians felt disappointed when it turned out that participation in the Eastern Partnership did not mean automatic abolition of visas and accession to the European Union. Contrary to their initial hopes, Georgians, who unwittingly applied Soviet and Russian clichés to the West, had to realise that the Eastern Partnership was not a geopolitical project aimed mainly at building a European sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union and entering into a rivalry with Russia. At the same time, the West noticeably lost interest in Georgia as it became focused on its own internal problems such as the financial crisis, the Greek problem, the migration crisis, the situation in the Middle East and, in the case of the United States, also the Pacific region.

⁶³ For example, the statement by the US President Barack Obama who said in March 2014 that Georgia and Ukraine were not on path to NATO membership.

The image of the West in the eyes of Georgians has also been deteriorating due to a conflict of values: liberal European values versus conservative Georgian values. This conflict is not only a product of successful Russian propaganda which reduces the choice between the West and Russia to an alleged choice between extreme liberalism and so-called traditional values, but also the fact that the Western states and organisations have put socially sensitive issues (such as sexual minority rights) high on the agenda of their relations with Georgia. The Georgian people have also struggled to understand why most official European actors distanced themselves from their Christian heritage, which Georgians see as a foundation of European identity, and they get irritated when further assistance to Georgia is offered on the condition that Georgians themselves accept such liberal values.

As a result, the West has been gradually de-mythologised in Georgia and people have become disenchanted with its policy, which many of them regard as political ingratitude: Georgia has sacrificed Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the name of integration with the West, vexed its relations with Russia, sent thousand of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan⁶⁴ and met the conditions set by the EU, but in return it has obtained neither security guarantees nor membership prospects or a promise of regaining control of the breakaway provinces, or universal prosperity – all that it got is a promise of visa abolition and vaguely conceivable future benefits from the DCFTA. The growing disenchantment with the West is reflected in public opinion polls: between November 2013 and August 2015, the number of people supporting integration with the EU decreased from 85% to 61% (while the number of opponents increased from 10% to 21%), while the percentage of those supporting integration with NATO dropped from 81% to 69%.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ In Iraq, 3 Georgian soldiers have died, and 31 have been killed in Afghanistan (the largest single loss of life was the death of 7 troops in a suicide bomb attack in June 2013).

⁶⁵ <https://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Public-Attitudes-Poll-121813-ENG.pdf>; https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_August_2015%20survey_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF.pdf

3.4. The Russian alternative

In this context, the notion that Georgia made a mistake by openly confronting Russia, with which it should instead have developed proper relations, has become increasingly popular. This idea was first introduced into public discourse by Georgian Dream back in 2012, and contributed to that group's surge in opinion polls (alongside the accusations of authoritarianism levelled against the Saakashvili regime). The change of attitudes towards Russia observed in some sections of society (and to a lesser extent also among the elite) stems not so much from deeply held ideological sympathies with Russia as from a specifically understood pragmatism, resignation and a sense that there is no way out from the situation in which Georgia has found itself. In view of the absence of prospects of integration with the West, some sections of the public in Georgia have started to regard the confrontation with Russia as political adventurism for which Georgia paid more than it gained. The perception, shared by most Georgians, of a cultural proximity with Russia (Orthodoxy, shared history) started to gain more prominence in public discourse, strengthened by Georgians' generally positive attitude towards Russians as people and the Russian culture (despite the majority's negative view of the Russian state and government). Such opinions have enjoyed a positive reception, especially among the middle and older generations which remember the Soviet era with nostalgia and still maintain extensive contacts with Russians or family members living in Russia. Finally, an argument that convinces many people, especially in the provinces, concerns the prospect of the economic situation improving as a result of Russia's decision to open its market to Georgian goods (agricultural products in the first instance) and the hypothetical possibility for Georgians to go to Russia to work (as the European Union's labour market remains closed).

Those processes have been furthered by the actions taken by Russia *vis-à-vis* Georgia and other post-Soviet states with a view to rebuilding Russian influence in the area, through a policy of fear,

among other measures. On the one hand, Russia has taken aggressive steps such as the annexation of Crimea, the instigation of the conflict in Donbas, the threats against Kazakhstan, the development of military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the deployment of barbed wire fences around the latter, pressure on Azerbaijan to join the Eurasian Union, the military intervention in Syria, etc. On the other hand, it has been sending a positive message referring to cultural proximity and shared conservative values (presented in opposition to the “rotten” liberalism of the West). This message also includes potential economic benefits from participation in the huge common market and access to the Russian labour market, as well as political benefits (different for different countries, with Russia offering Baku a hypothetical possibility of regaining control of Karabakh, or promising to defend Central Asia against the Islamic threat). Both types of actions have been accompanied by massive propaganda whose tone has been predominantly anti-Western, but also in the case of Georgia anti-Turkish.⁶⁶ This propaganda relies on Russian and local mass media, usually financed and controlled by Moscow, and soft power measures such as student exchanges, conferences, cultural events, etc.).

In the case of Georgia, the lifting of the embargo on Georgian goods after Georgian Dream’s election victory, the re-opening of direct air connections and the visa liberalisation in 2015, combined with a pledge to abolish visas altogether, have also played an important role, and so has the new positive or neutral attitude towards Georgians in Russia (Georgian nationals faced repression from Russian state institutions and were depicted in a negative way in

⁶⁶ The Russian media and pro-Russian groups in Georgia have been promoting the view that a creeping annexation of Ajaria by Turkey is imminent, pointing to the region’s ever stronger economic ties with Turkey, the activities of Turkish organisations (including religious organisations and charities), and the fact that Turks have recently been settling in Batumi, etc. The aim is to create a perception that, in view of the Turkish threat, Georgia should turn to Russia.

the media during the Saakashvili period). While apparently contradictory, these two courses of action add up to a coherent and understandable message in the post-Soviet area. On the one hand, they intensify the sense of helplessness *vis-à-vis* Russia, and on the other – kindle expectations of concrete benefits to be gained if the countries concerned enter the Russian sphere of influence again. In the case of Georgia, this method seems to be generating some positive results (the rising pro-Russian sentiments), although Russia's policy should not be regarded as the main cause of the crisis of Georgia's pro-Western course. It has been secondary to Georgia's internal processes, including political and economic problems and stagnating reforms, as well as disillusionment with the West.

IV. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The crisis experienced by Georgia is deep and multidimensional. It is not limited to internal political perturbations or social and economic problems, but underpinning it there is also a crisis in the state's strategic vision. Its scale is not alarming yet, but the tendencies that have been apparent for several years are nonetheless worrying, even if they are not easily discernible to external observers due to their evolutionary and inconspicuous nature.

It seems unlikely that Georgia should suddenly change its pro-Western course, mainly because pro-Western sentiments are still dominant among the elite and the wider society. Moreover, even though the rise of friendly attitudes towards Russia is a fact, its scale is still limited, and the disenchantment with the West has not automatically translated into greater popularity of the pro-Russian option. Moscow's soft power may achieve something in Georgia, but it will not be in a position to remove the greatest obstacle standing in the way of Russia's policy (an obstacle of Russia's own making, for that matter), i.e. the the question of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The loss of these two provinces has been contemporary Georgia's greatest trauma, and, had Moscow not recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia's chances of dragging Georgia into its sphere of influence would now be incomparably greater. Moreover, if Moscow (or a Georgian government favourably disposed towards Russia) took more decisive measures to subjugate Georgia, it would most probably meet a solid wall of resistance. Unrest could break out, possibly in the form of a "Georgian Maidan", and the positive capital that Russia has built in Georgia in recent years would be wasted.

As the crisis worsens, Georgia will more probably experience a slow de-Europeanisation, sliding deeper into political malaise, social apathy and internal fragmentation. In the geopolitical

dimension it will likely become a no-man's land between Europe and Russia, a pro-Western country at the level of official declarations but in reality gradually imploding and drifting towards the Russian political and civilizational sphere. While a turn towards Moscow is highly unlikely to happen, this situation may give Russia more room for manoeuvre in Georgia (by engendering instability, among other factors). This process may accelerate if the conflicts in Georgia's political scene deepen ahead of the coming parliamentary elections (autumn 2016), which may lead to the emergence of populist groups, make the political struggle more violent or even lead to internal destabilisation. The scenario in which Georgia's pro-Western stance will slowly erode is all the more likely to materialise because the international context in which Georgia exists will probably not change. This refers mainly to the fact that the West is not prepared to step up its involvement in the South Caucasus, enter into a geopolitical rivalry with Russia in the post-Soviet area or offer membership prospects to the states there. Without relativizing Georgia's internal situation (including the significance of the effort made by the Georgians and the need to continue the reforms), this context seems to be decisive at this stage as far as future developments in Georgia are concerned.

Such a debacle of the European project in Georgia, which cannot be ruled out, would not simply represent a failure for Georgians. Owing to the symbolic importance of Georgia in the post-Soviet area, much larger than its actual size and potential, the country's decision to abandon its westward course would negatively impact those other countries in a similar situation, especially Ukraine and Moldova, and would threaten to undo the already uncertain chances of a democratic transition in the area. In the geopolitical dimension, this would amount to a reversal of the processes that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Losing Georgia, a country that managed to make a huge civilizational leap under the West's auspices, and the Georgians, who are still one of the most enthusiastically pro-Western nations, would be a painful

defeat for Europe. It could speed up the European Union's transformation into an isolated fortress surrounded by unstable territories, unable to positively influence its own neighbourhood, defensive and afraid of the external world.

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