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Reaching across the Atlantic to Support Resilient Self-Defence for Georgia

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Abstract

The Eastern Partnership and closer integration with European Union (EU) Member States has had an undeniable impact on democratization and economic progress for Georgia. Brussels has demonstrated its commitment to support Georgia's security and territorial integrity through the EU's third-party mediation role during the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and its ongoing unarmed civilian border monitoring mission. However, the EU contends with disparities between and contestations from its Member States regarding collective defence and security decisions. Therefore, support from other actors is also critical for establishing resilient defence capacity in Georgia. Georgia's participation with NATO and bilateral agreement with the United States offer valuable means through which Georgia can meet its security and defence objectives. This article discusses these partnerships in order to show that they provide a unique contribution that is necessary for establishing resilience in Georgia's security and defence capacity alongside the democratic, political, and economic objectives of the EU–Georgia partnership.

Introduction

Georgia has closely aligned itself with EU norms and standards since joining the Eastern Partnership in 2009. Additionally, the EU offered to be the sole third-party mediator during the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and still monitors borders, although from an unarmed position via a peacekeeping mandate.¹ The close relationship and strategic partnership between Georgia and the EU has been an important priority for both sides. Nevertheless, the lack of immediate EU accession prospects has led the Georgian government to take more control over its European integration, and insist on better, or more concrete, recognition of its democratization and economic progress from Brussels (Makszimov 2021). Given the unexpected and divergent outcomes of the Eastern Partnership instrument, the initial ambitions for EU Membership for Eastern Partner countries have lately been

called into question (Kakachia et al. 2021; Lebanidze 2020). Not all the Eastern Partners have the same concerns, opportunities, or interests, and this is reflected in the different paths the partnership processes have taken.

For Georgia, the push to become an EU Member State can be explained not only by economic benefits, but also the pressing security concerns with regard to Russian aggression and continued occupation of Georgian territory. Support for these concerns from the EU is critical. However, the EU's internal defence and security policy mechanisms are prone to longstanding contestations, and at times disparity between Member States, that can cause delays or stalls in decision-making (Maurer/ Wright 2020 2021). Therefore, it is not able to target increasing military or defence capacity abroad as would a state-level actor or security-oriented organisation.

1 European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, <https://www.eumm.eu>. For their mandate, see 'Our Mandate', https://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm/mandate.

Roughly fifteen years before the 2009 launch of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia formalized its partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Georgia also formally entered a strategic partnership with the United States of America (U.S.) in the same year that the Eastern Partnership was enforced. These decisions were fundamentally important to Georgia's ability to protect and defend itself, and key factors in Georgia's realignment with its Euro-Atlantic allies since its independence. This article discusses how, in addition to the EU's contributions to Georgia, those from the U.S. and NATO are also critical and directly support Georgia's defence and security priorities.

U.S.–Georgia relations: A Practical Approach to Supporting Georgia's Security and Defence Capacity

In his inaugural address, former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili strategically affirmed Georgia's return to a 'western' version of democracy, claiming that Georgia's 'steady course is towards European integration'.² Saakashvili also set a precedent to join NATO as a full, official member, naming memberships with the EU, NATO, and other European and Euro-Atlantic intergovernmental organisations with equal importance, considering Georgia to be equally qualified for such memberships (Smolnik 2020; Welt 2010). President Salome Zurbishvili, in office as of 2018, additionally expressed a belief that Georgia belongs in the EU as a distinctly *European* institution; however, she recalled Georgia's substantial participation and contributions to NATO efforts, stating, 'Georgia has never been closer to NATO'³ (see also Gotev 2019).

While not a full NATO member, Georgia joined the NATO Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, thus securing a place in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council,⁴ with the U.S. acting as a key supporter for Georgia's NATO participation and involvement (Smolnik 2020; Socor 2018). While the EU and its Member States have stepped up to support Georgia since its independence in 1991, the U.S. has also been a strategic and supportive partner (Smolnik 2020; USDS 2020; Welt 2010). Consequently, the U.S.–Georgia partnership process is an important foreign influence in Georgia. The Defense Cooperation Agreement between the U.S. and Georgia was signed in 2002, and the U.S.–Georgia Charter

on Strategic Partnership was established in 2009—the same year the Eastern Partnership entered into force.

The U.S.–Georgia Charter features four core areas of cooperation built from the 'shared beliefs' between the two countries: (1) defence and security, (2) economy, trade and energy, (3) strengthening democracy, and (4) civil and cultural exchange (USDS 2009). The Charter is not a legalised or wholly conditional instrument, and generally covers a wide range of issues and opportunities for cooperation. Its flexibility corroborates a feasible level of openness in case of government or institutional change in either country. It additionally emphasises shared goals for Georgia as a European nation. The Charter's Principles of Partnership explicitly state that a Georgia 'capable of responsible self-defence, contributes to ... a Europe whole, free and at peace' and emphasises a shared goal for "the full integration of Georgia into European and transatlantic political, economic, security, and defense institutions as Georgia meets the necessary standards' (USDS 2009).

Georgia demonstrates a strong appreciation for the U.S. as a key strategic partner. Georgia has partnered with the U.S. and NATO on many military operations since the 1990s, including in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, where, for the latter, Georgia was the largest non-NATO contributor of military personnel, and deployed the most troops per capita than any country (USDS 2020). The U.S. has also provided substantial financial support and training for Georgia's military, forming close alliances between the two countries' armed forces with the aim to support Georgia's territorial integrity against Russia (USDS 2009, 2020). A full-scale direct training initiative between the U.S. and Georgian armed forces was established via the Georgia Defense Readiness Program (GDRP) in 2018 (USDS 2020). In order to sustain and amplify the progress made with the GDRP, as well as to strengthen organisational coordination with NATO, the Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative formally began in December 2021 (Garamone 2021).⁵ Reiterating the U.S.–Georgia Charter, the security initiative's next phase further targets a future in which Georgia is highly capable of self-defence. While the EU acted as the third-party mediator during the 2008 Russia–Georgia war and monitors borders still, it does not have its own army, as such. Alternatively, as a nation-state, the U.S. is the strategic partner that is

2 'Georgia Swears in New President', BBC News, 25 January 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3426977.stm> (accessed 16 February 2022); 'EU integration a key aim of Saakashvili', Irish Times, 26 January 2004, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/eu-integration-a-key-aim-of-saakashvili-1.1131478> (accessed 16 February 2022).

3 'President Zurbishvili Talks EU, NATO Integration, Occupied Territories', Civil.ge, 13 October 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/374893> (accessed 12 February 2022).

4 'Relations with Georgia', NATO Topics: Partnership and Cooperation, Relations with individual partner countries, 12 April 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm (accessed 10 May 2022).

5 'Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiatives: Fact Sheet', U.S. European Command Public Affairs, 14 October 2021, <https://www.eucom.mil/document/41687/gddee-public-fact-sheet.pdf> (accessed 16 February 2022).

best equipped and more capable of providing direct assistance and hands-on cooperation aimed towards preparing Georgia to defend itself.

Furthermore, the U.S. has not been silent regarding what it considers to be less-than-sterling human rights and democracy norms in Georgia (Smolnik 2020; USDS 2019a). However, rather than attempt to closely manage the country's democratic progress or development, the U.S. continues to offer precisely what it promised in the 2009 Charter, which was neither overly ambitious, out of immediate reach, nor excessive for U.S. resources (USDS 2009, 2019b). Still, the U.S. also provides financial assistance and support for Georgia's democratic transition, has established closely monitored economic bilateral relations, and supports Georgian participation in other multilateral organisations (Smolnik 2020; USDS 2009). The EU's physical proximity to Georgia may support their border-monitoring mission,⁶ but the U.S. has made clear its support for Georgia against Russian aggression (USDS 2009, 2020). Unlike the EU's incentivised yet conditional and more normative approach to partnership with Georgia, the U.S. has kept its support well defined and tangible from a shorter-term perspective that does not require comprehensive reforms or deep integration in order to produce the targeted positive outcomes. Therefore, strong Euro-Atlantic ties taken all together are necessary to fully appreciate and accurately portray the impacts of the support given towards Georgia's transition.

The U.S. appears to be glad to share the responsibility with the EU to support democracy, stability, and progress for Georgia and the broader former Soviet space (DOD 2018: 2, 10; Smolnik 2020; The White House 2017: 25–26, 46–47). The differences in approaches suggest that the U.S., secure in its military ability and the economic opportunities it offers, seems to avoid an ambitious or highly conditional partnership framework. While the EU's evolving partnership with Georgia was initiated in view of potential membership, which would necessitate comprehensive reforms and policy integration (Haukkala 2011), for the U.S. it is enough that the two actors profess shared goals. Similar reforms are required before securing full NATO membership as well, and continued defence cooperation with the U.S.

About the Author

Tiffany G. Williams is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Caucasus Studies at Friedrich Schiller University Jena. Her postdoctoral work focuses on resilience in EU-funded public administration support initiatives implemented in the South Caucasus. She earned her PhD at the University of Vienna while a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow at the Institut für Höhere Studien, and earned a Master of Public Administration at Cornell University.

allows Georgia to demonstrate its potential. The U.S.–Georgia partnership framework has demonstrated consistent, stable, and resilient outcomes for the positive relations between the two countries, and has allowed Georgia to bolster its Euro-Atlantic and global cooperation while navigating its path towards its targeted EU and NATO memberships.

Conclusion

Although the U.S. has stated that it prefers formerly Soviet countries, like Georgia, to establish stable democratic governance systems, its partnership agreement with Georgia is designed with just the essential elements in order to avoid impractical promises from either side. Given the prominence of the U.S. as a global actor, this partnership approach is in Georgia's best interest because it assumes a position that can directly contribute to both the security and defence objectives of NATO and the EU–Georgia partnership's focus on democratization, cultural exchange, and economic progress.

Conflict with Russia may have led Georgia to rely on more physically approximate support that the EU volunteered to provide in the form of third-party mediation during the 2008 war with Russia, and later with the border-monitoring mission. No other institution or allied country has similarly provided support entailing physical presence. It is also notable that while Georgian troops have been included in U.S.-led coalition operations and NATO missions, these deployments were stationed outside of Georgia and outside of the Caucasus. Given Russian occupation of Georgian territory, and the EU's border-monitoring mission as the sole third-party border control, Georgia may likely rely on the EU's physical presence on a long-term basis to further deter Russia (see Lebanidze et al. in this volume). Georgia will likely continue to maintain a close partnership with the EU for economic, political, and security reasons, yet its EU partnership agreement—and potential EU Membership—is just part of the country's broader global perspective. Georgia's steady relations and partnership with the U.S. and involvement with NATO provide the critical links that strengthen its Euro-Atlantic ties and support its participation in the global system.

6 European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia website, <https://www.eumm.eu>. See also Welt 2010.

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