



# Georgia and the Eastern Partnership Democratization without Conflict Resolution?

by Jenny Söderström

*Although providing for further integration with EU institutions, the Eastern Partnership does not offer Georgia what the country desires the most: security guarantees and avenues for the restoration of its territorial integrity. There are, however, possibilities for further EU involvement in these spheres, but only if Georgia delivers on democratic reforms. Georgia also needs to see signals from the EU that conflict resolution and security are not out of the picture in the longterm and that the EU leaves the door open for further engagement.*

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched by the European Union in May 2009, as an Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy targeting the EU's six neighbors in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine, all of which have expressed a wish for closer cooperation with the EU. A Polish-Swedish initiative, the EaP is a response to the Union for the Mediterranean, proposed by France as a partnership with the countries bordering the Union in the South. The EaP gained momentum in the wake of the Georgian-Russian war in August 2008, as the EU recognized that the enlargement process has brought along new neighbors, whose security and stability will have an increasing impact on the Union. Hence, the partnership is both an expression of self-interest on the part of the EU and a demand-driven development to accommodate the partner states' desires for EU integration.

The partnership envisages two parallel tracks of cooperation: one bilateral track for the EU's relationship with each partner country and one multilateral cooperation framework. The bilateral cooperation is based on differentiation and conditionality, meaning that each country will be treated according to its own ambition and performance. Its main focus is further integration with the EU through political and economic reforms, with the aim of concluding Association Agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements. The partners' progress towards democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and the principles of market economy are funda-

mental for such agreements. The second track, the multilateral cooperation framework, envisages the participation of the six partner states in multilateral dialogues on various issues, with the aim of promoting regional dialogue and confidence building, as well as the sharing and promotion of best practices among the participants.

## Disappointment in Tbilisi

Although the EaP implies increased EU engagement in Georgia and economic support for reforms, it has caused disappointment in the Georgian government. While providing a possibility for further integration with EU institutions, the partnership does not offer Georgia what the country desires the most: commitments to its security and concrete avenues for the restoration of its territorial integrity. Provisions for conflict resolution and security cooperation were hoped for, if not expected, in Tbilisi, as security considerations are fundamental to Georgia's relations with the EU.

The EU, being seriously divided internally on its policy toward Russia, has not included any concrete prospects for the Union's involvement in conflict resolution or hard security issues in the EaP. While the Russia factor underlies the EU's incentives for closer cooperation with these countries, which Moscow sees as part of its "sphere of influence", it also explains the reluctance of some European countries to draw these post-Soviet states closer. Nevertheless, the goals of the EaP, and the long-term interests of the EU in the Caucasus, cannot be fulfilled without progress on



conflict resolution. As Georgian State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, Giorgi Baramidze, has stated, “it is important not to overlook the security issues, because without durable security and stability, it will be extremely difficult to reach the goals” of the EaP. The EU, on the other hand, continues to rely on the long-term benefits of democratic reforms and European integration as a means to ensure the stability and security that the EaP is supposed to achieve in the partner countries. However, soft power instruments and long-term solutions are seen as insufficient for a country that perceives itself as being under immediate threat.

Preparations for negotiation on the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia are ongoing. However, the lack of prospects for conflict resolution in the EaP and internal division in the EU on its Russia policy risks weakening Georgia’s commitment to reforms. Without further development of the EaP, Georgia might start questioning the EU’s will and intent to actually support the country in its European integration. Events such as the recent Mistral deal between France and Russia, the first instance of a NATO state providing Moscow with large scale military high technology, caused further disappointment in Tbilisi. That France, whose president negotiated the settlement of the conflict in 2008, now sells Mistral warships to Russia, although the country has not yet fulfilled its commitments under the France-brokered peace deal, rightfully raises questions about the EU’s political will and intent concerning its eastern partners and their security. Is it worth implementing costly reforms according to EU regulations, if the EU is not prepared to offer Georgia any assistance in solving its most acute problem – and in addition is arming the enemy?

### Possibilities for Further EU Involvement

Although the EaP does not offer Georgia any explicit guarantees for security or further engagement in conflict resolution, it does leave the door open for development in these fields. *Firstly*, it should be acknowledged that the EaP could not have been pushed through in the EU, had conflict resolution been directly included in the partnership, as Russia-friendly member states would have put a stop to such commitments. However, in a longer term perspective, this does not mean that the EU has closed the door for Georgia on these issues. The EaP should instead be viewed as a platform that has the potential to expand as the in-

tegration process evolves. The EU itself emphasizes that the partnership signals a *long-term* commitment of the EU toward the partner countries, and that it should promote stability and multilateral confidence building as well as the territorial integrity of the partners. As the bilateral track of the EaP is based on the individual states’ ambitions and performance, EU-Georgia relations on security and conflict resolution could develop beyond the EaP without necessarily involving other EaP states. The multilateral working groups, moreover, could serve as good forums for conflict resolution. Such issues are already envisaged as part of the agenda for the multilateral cooperation, and could potentially promote regional cooperation on security issues and peace building, as well as increasing stability in the region as a whole.

Hence, the spirit of the EaP could be said to be more far-reaching than its current format suggests. Georgia has a number of supporters within the EU, e.g., the states that proposed the EaP – Sweden and Poland, which could advance initiatives toward further development of the partnership, with Georgia in the spheres of security and conflict resolution. The Association Agreements, moreover, open up for closer cooperation on security and defense issues. Although the effects of the Lisbon Treaty in these spheres are yet to be seen, it is possible that the new structure will benefit Georgian security, as they might change the ways for decision making on security and defense issues, while also making it easier to expand the EU’s role in these fields.

*Secondly*, the EU already has a large presence in Georgia through its monitoring mission (EUMM), its Special Representative for the Crisis in Georgia (who co-chairs the Geneva talks), its Special Representative for South Caucasus and the EU Delegation to Georgia, which is a big donor supporting not only political and economic reforms, but also conflict resolution and reconstruction in Georgia including Abkhazia. While the EU presence has increased significantly in the aftermath of the war, two other prominent actors in the sphere of conflict resolution, UNOMIG and OSCE, have been forced to withdraw their missions. Considering this, and the fact that the U.S. seems to be taking a step back in Georgia to focus on domestic issues and interventions elsewhere, the EU has both willingly and unwillingly *de facto* assumed a bigger responsibility for Georgia. This has also entailed that the EU is increasingly visible in the country, making it impossible for the Union to stay out of



matters of vital importance to Georgia. Any future crises in Georgia would need and expect EU involvement, and the costs of solving such a crisis will be greater than the cost of preventing it.

*Thirdly*, the long-term gains of political and economic reform should not be neglected, and the benefits of the EU's "soft power" approach should not be underestimated. Even if Georgia finds long-term planning inappropriate for solving what it perceives as an acute crisis, conflict resolution cannot be achieved over night. The military threat from its big neighbor in the north may be immediate, but ultimately there are no quick fixes to restore Georgia's territorial integrity. EU integration is probably the best option for conflict resolution in a longer perspective. True democratic development, economic reconstruction and development, and close ties to Europe can, in the end, prove to be attractive to the leadership and/or populations in the conflict territories. This tie is also acknowledged by the Georgian government.

Finally, closer EU-Georgia cooperation can also have positive effects on conflict resolution by affecting the position and policy of the Georgian government. As the EU offers Georgia more benefits, it also gains leverage over the Georgian leadership, which could be used to push for constructive policy on this issue. Georgia's new strategy toward the breakaway regions is a good first step, and the EU could use its increased political influence and resources in its implementation.

### The Importance of Signaling Intent

There are, hence, possibilities for further EU involvement in the spheres of conflict resolution and security – under certain conditions. In the end, the level of EU support for Georgia and the possibility for further development of relations depends largely on Georgia's own performance. Only if Georgia delivers on the reforms envisaged in the EaP, shows progress toward democracy and is constructive in its own attempts at conflict management will it be possible for the country's supporters in the EU to push for further EU engagement. Recent domestic developments contradicting EU regulations, like the Georgian Liberty Act and the failure to implement food safety regulations, do not serve to this end. If Georgia fails in this respect, it will give additional arguments for the skeptics who want the EU to give less

support to the country, claiming that the Georgian government is more interested in opposing Russia than in democratization and EU integration. The local elections planned for this spring will be a crucial test of Georgia's democratic development and commitment to advance its relationship with the EU.

However, Georgia is not the only actor that needs to convince its partner of its good intentions. Considering the disappointment in the Georgian government with the skirting of security issues in the EaP, the EU also needs to assure Georgia that it will remain a reliable ally. Conflict resolution and democratization are mutually reinforcing and dependent, and the EaP will fail without progress in the peace process, to the detriment of the EU's long-term interests. The EU needs to acknowledge its increased responsibility in the region and also communicate its will and intent to support Georgia also in the spheres left out of the EaP. Georgia needs to see signals from the EU that conflict resolution and security are not completely out of the picture – in the long-term – and that the EU leaves the door open for further engagement.

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