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On Europeanisation, national sentiments and confused identities in Georgia



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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Georgians' popular online discourses on Europeanisation in the period between Georgia's initialling and signing of the Association Agreement with the EU (November 2013–June 2014). It investigates the ambivalence encountered by Georgians: Despite their long-lasting aspiration towards EU integration, hopes of gaining political security, economic stability, and cultural integration are accompanied by doubts and fears of asymmetric power relations, diminishing national sovereignty, and declining national identity. Despite these doubts, EU integration is considered to be the only right choice for the country, encouraging Georgians, who readily perform their pro-European aspirations on the international "front stage", to push their uncertainties and respective national sentiments to the domestic "backstage".

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1. Introduction

In November 2013 Georgia initialled an Association Agreement with the EU and in December 2013 the EU expressed its desire to speed up the process, which resulted in the signing of the document in June 2014. Banners proudly announcing "Welcome to Georgia - a EU Associated Country" appeared immediately at the country's international airports.

Georgians consider the initialling and signing of the Association Agreement as a logical outcome of their persistent attempt to integrate with the EU. Georgia's aspiration to become a EU member was expressed in the political discourses and public attitudes for a number of years. A more than 15-year-old statement by the then Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania: "I am Georgian, and therefore I am European!" enjoyed widespread public acceptance. The elite discourses emphasised that "a stable Georgian nation would only be able to flourish within a EU context" (Rinnert, 2011: 15). The nationwide representative surveys confirmed that the public attitudes were in compliance with those of the elite. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) surveys showed in this way that more than 80% of the population supported Georgia's integration in the EU (CRRC-Georgia, 2009, 2011, 2013). Hence the Georgian population believed that the signing of the Association Agreement was a true achievement, since it was seen as a way to both guard against the hegemonic ambitions of neighbouring Russia¹ and maintain Georgia's "European" identity (MacFarlane, 2012; German, 2015).

However, the reality is not so simple. While a few years ago more than 80% of the population supported Georgia's integration with the EU, a later nationwide survey revealed that if there were a referendum to decide whether Georgia should become the EU member, 65.1% would vote in favour, 10.5% could not choose and 17.5% did not respond to this question at all (ISSP, 2013); while the latest survey on Knowledge and Attitudes toward the EU in Georgia showed that the portion of those

¹ As the CRRC surveys on Knowledge and Attitudes toward the EU in Georgia 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015 showed, the majority of respondents expected that the EU integration would bring an increased national security and better chances of restoring territorial integrity.

who would vote for EU membership decreased further to 61% (CRRC-Georgia, 2015). If in 2011 22% of Georgians fully trusted and 29% trusted the EU, in 2013 Georgians showed a rather moderate trust (48%), while the proportion of those who fully trusted the EU fell to 4% (Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2013: 31). Furthermore, the Gallup public opinion poll of 2013 revealed that reflecting back on the collapse of the Soviet Union the population of Georgia was rather polarised – 37% believed that it had brought more benefit than harm and 33% saw more harm than benefit for Georgia (Esipova and Ray, 2013); while the CRRC-Georgia survey (2015) on Knowledge and Attitudes toward the EU in Georgia revealed that more than a fourth of the population supported Georgia's membership of the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union. In addition, along with these developments, the most influential social institution in the country – the Georgian Orthodox Church – renewed its attempts to attack the “rotten West” preaching against “Western phenomena” such as homosexual marriages, surrogate mothers, artificial insemination, and others (Catholicos-Patriarch's Christmas Gospel, 2014),² and contributing to the wide dissemination of the view that in order to become a EU member Georgia has to legalize homosexual marriages, which threatens the cultural traditions and religious beliefs and hence national identity.

This paper aims to reveal whether Georgians have really become less enthusiastic about EU integration. If so, how can the declining pro-European attitudes be explained alongside the enduring desire to become closer to the EU? How can one explain that a third of the population considers the breakup of the Soviet Union harmful and supports Georgia's membership of the Eurasian Customs Union alongside the manifested hopes that EU integration will bring much desired security and protection against Russia?

In order to respond to the above questions, the author has analysed Georgians' popular online discourses on Europeanisation. The next section outlines the applied methodology followed by the analysis of discussants' hopes and fears related to Georgia's Europeanisation process. Finally, Georgians' discourses are viewed in the wider context of Central and Eastern European ones in the course of Eastern enlargement.

2. Methodology

The concept of EU integration used here is very close to Merje Kuus's use of the concept of Eastern enlargement, which she treats as “a multilayered sociopolitical process that expands the EU's and NATO's normative space ... [which] started considerably before 2004 and continues today, even if it does not result in the addition of any new member states” (Kuus, 2007:x). In the same vein, I view EU integration as a process of the EU's normative expansion in a particular country, even if it does not provide the latter with a definite perspective of becoming a member state; while I treat Europeanisation as not only a process of implementing the EU's formal and informal rules and standards (Radaelli, 2003) but also the development of “a shared social imaginary” (Taras, 2009:7). Thus, in this paper, I aim to trace the impact of the EU's normative expansion on Georgians' perceptions of Europeanisation and its influence on different aspects of their identity. For this purpose, I study Georgians' popular discourses on Europeanisation sharing the idea that Europeanisation can be viewed as “a set of contested discourses and narratives about the impact of European integration on domestic political change” (Radaelli and Pasquier, 2008:35). Therefore, it is crucial to study diverse national discourses providing legitimacy to Europeanisation or depriving it of such legitimacy.

The analysis of Georgians' popular discourses on Europeanisation is based on two sources: one represents the discussions held on the most popular amateur forum in Georgia – [Tbilisi Forum](#) ([forum.ge](#)), where people of various sociodemographic background discuss the most important developments in the country and outside it, and in response to such events a number of discussion topics are opened on a daily basis. The main limitation, however, is that the forum participants represent predominantly the younger and middle-aged urban population with Internet access, especially from the capital. The forum's largest thematic section entitled “Politics” (consisting of more than 150,000 themes in the studied period) includes, alongside other topics, discussions on Georgians' attitudes towards the EU, EU policy towards Georgia, aspects of Georgian nationalism, the issues of Georgian emigrants, and others. Because of the discussants' immediate reflections on the ongoing events, I was following all the discussions related to EU integration from November 2013, when Georgia initialled the Association Agreement with the EU, until the document was signed in June 2014.

Another source of the data is a Facebook discussion group entitled “National Identity and Europeanisation in Georgia” created by the author on November 3, 2013. The group had 47 members: 18-25-year-old males and females, mainly BA, MA and PhD students of Social Sciences and Humanities at Tbilisi State University. While being a passive observer of the discussions held on the [forum.ge](#), I was posting questions and moderating discussions in the Facebook group, following important happenings and asking the members to reflect on Georgia's westward aspirations and their implications for the country. The two sources allow for a comparison of the perceptions on Europeanisation between a large anonymous group of the forum participants and a closed Facebook group of the younger generation with higher education. The latter represents a category that, according to all the CRRC-Georgia surveys, is the most pro-EU segment of the population. The gathered data have been analysed using qualitative content- and discourse analyses.

The special feature of online discourses is that by introducing new “participant frameworks” (Goffman, 1981) the online media enhances a sense of co-presence and brings its language closer to spoken than written discourse. Hence, the discussions among the forum and Facebook participants were closer to group conversations. This conversation mode and its

² Both the [Catholicos-Patriarch's Christmas Gospel, 2014](#) and some reactions to it of 7 January 2014 are illustrative of the point.

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