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The Georgian challenge, one for Europe

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In the shadow of the Russian war in Ukraine and the debates on the possible outcomes of the conflict and the looming geopolitical realignments, Georgia seems to have fallen off the radar and been relegated to the background of Europe's priorities.

Since gaining independence more than thirty years ago, the country has been forging ahead with determination and boldness on the road to European integration^[1]. Since 1991, Georgia has completed all the stages: Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1999), European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), Eastern Partnership (2009), Association and Free Trade Agreement (2014), visa liberalisation for the Schengen area (2017), inclusion of the objective of European integration in the Constitution (2018), official application for membership of the European Union (2022) and obtaining candidate status (2023). This path has been travelled without pause or reflection, and without hesitation even when Russia, by means of war (1992/1993, 2008) or occupation of parts of the territory, sought to erect obstacles to this progress. This orientation has benefited from the outset and continuously from the support of an immense majority of the population. This majority is based on the conviction of Georgian citizens that only the European and Euro-Atlantic bloc could ultimately ensure the nation's security and independence from its historical enemy. Having completed the stages of the association agreement, Georgia rose to the rank of host power of the Petra Summit (2021), thus launching the trio of Associate Members of the European Union with Ukraine and Moldova and under the auspices of the President of the European Council.

Over the last twenty years, in turn as Minister for Foreign Affairs, leader of the political party 'The Way of Georgia', member of parliament and

then head of state, it has been my responsibility to participate in, support or directly inspire this pro-European path. It is therefore all the more painful to see that, on the verge of accession, Georgia is not only gradually falling behind its two associated partners, but the authorities of the 'Georgian Dream' are turning their backs on the required reforms and looking increasingly towards their Russian neighbour. The breaking point was reached when the prime minister - elected in a vote that was not validated or recognised - decided unilaterally and without any political consultation on 27 November 2024 to halt the process leading to accession negotiations. And thus, placing itself in open breach of the Constitution, which, in Article 78, stipulates: "All the institutions of the country must do their utmost to facilitate and support the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration."

Isolated from its European partners, facing an internal crisis in which the pro-Russian ruling party has been unable to stop the demonstrations and also to govern a country that has been de facto paralysed for a year, and which is becoming more and more repressive with each passing day, Georgia faces an existential challenge. This time it is not a military challenge, but one that takes us back to the Georgia of 1921, democratic and already fiercely European, whose independence and sovereignty were cut short by the invasion of the Russian army... for seventy years! The invasion was not military this time, but its outcome could be equally tragic for a country

^[1] This text was originally published in the 'Schuman Report on Europe, the State of the Union 2025', Editions Hemispheres, May 2025, 296 p.

whose resolve for independence and for Europe is beyond doubt for anyone familiar with the situation.

This current challenge is first and foremost a challenge to the very idea of democracy. In a country where all our Western partners have invested heavily to support the building of democratic institutions, in a country that has made giant strides in this institutional construction thanks to this support institutional construction over the past thirty years, in a country where this journey towards democracy and Europe enjoys the support of a vast majority, that it should be so easy to proceed with a systematic 'unravelling' of the institutional fabric defies reason. In effect, right now there is no longer any independent institution in the country – no justice system, parliament, central bank, electoral administration, local municipalities, regulatory commission or public broadcaster. Henceforth, the single party controls everything and appoints all the key officials in all public sector jobs. The politicisation of the public service is total. Only representatives of the ruling party sit in Parliament, which was elected through heavily rigged elections. There is no debate about the adoption of laws whose sole objective is to strengthen the repressive arsenal and control of civil society. The government has only a symbolic existence, since the executive applies the instructions of a single man, Bidvina Ivanishvili, in whom all powers are concentrated.

Thus, in the blink of an eye, Georgia, once known as a 'beacon of democracy', has been transformed into a Russian-style regime, in which the vertical concentration of power is strictly inspired by the Russian model of power. All the principles set out in the Constitution are now being flouted: freedom of expression, freedom of speech, the right to demonstrate, individual freedoms. The personal data of every Georgian citizen has been exposed and, in all likelihood, exploited in the massive fraud that the 2024 elections have been.

This challenge to democracy is, of course and above all, a challenge for Georgia, which has thus seen itself robbed not only of its elections, but also of its past, with the democratic development of the

last thirty years, its experience of democracy in the years 1918-1921, as well as its centuries-old European aspirations, and also its future, with its historic prospect of joining the European family. The most obvious manifestation of this is evident in the massive and persistent response of the Georgian population, which has been observed day after day since October 2024.

But it is also a challenge for Europe itself.

A CHALLENGE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DEMOCRATIC PROJECT

How can Europe be so committed to the democratic construction of its partners without having adequate instruments to defend its own representatives first? The ambassadors of the European Union have been personally attacked and insulted in turn, then the collective image of the European Union has been called into question while the authorities of the beneficiary country have accused it of having become the '*party of war*', and finally the achievements of its decades-long commitment, that is to say the institutions, have been undermined. How can we trust the instruments of soft power, which are rightly the pride of the European Union, if they cannot prevent the usurpation of power in a small country of 3.7 million inhabitants? Here, Russia is not challenging Europe with its military power, but with its propaganda tools (oligarchs, hidden finances, electoral manipulation). It is up to each of us to imagine the consequences of a defeat of the Western powers on a terrain that was and remains that of Europe par excellence.

A GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGE

The resignation in the face of what is a Russian takeover of Georgia via its intermediaries (Ivanishvili and his party) will have consequences for the more strategic issues facing the European Union: firstly, the issue of enlargement, which appears extremely fragile if a government determined to do everything it can to stay in power and to reject the recommendations of the European institutions to end the process is enough.

Enlargement is no longer to be considered solely from the point of view of the benefits expected by Georgia, but from the point of view of the political needs of the European Union. A powerful Europe, which appears increasingly to be an absolute necessity, depends on its ability to expand its geographical base, to secure its place in the Black Sea, its access to the Caspian Sea and to the resources of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins and of Central Asia. However, one only has to look at the demands of the Trump administration regarding access to raw materials to understand that the European power of tomorrow will also depend on its own access to essential resources. Yet this powerful, enlarged and self-confident Europe is being challenged: what kind of power is it if it can be so easily ousted - without recourse to military force - from one of the areas of its natural expansion. What credibility can be granted to its foreign policy and its ambitions for power?

Georgia occupies an important place in this geostrategic situation. Already in the 19th century, Russian strategists considered control of Georgia to be essential: 'Whoever controls Tbilisi controls the Caucasus,' said General Alexis Yermolov. This axiom remains: the diversification of the Caucasus and its opening up as a transit zone, the settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the normalisation of relations between Erevan and Ankara, but also Armenia's rapprochement with Europe, all presuppose an independent Georgia that has not fallen back into Russia's orbit. The plans of the leaders of the 'Georgian Dream' to install China on the Georgian shore of the Black Sea, in parallel with the Russian plans for a new military base in occupied Abkhazia, are all challenges to the European Union's infrastructure projects on and under the Black Sea. The *de facto* eviction of European and NATO fleets from the Black Sea following the war in Ukraine could become permanent if the western and eastern shores are not secured, i.e. Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia. And if NATO and the European Union do not jointly review their security and cooperation strategy in the Black Sea, which requires a stable, democratic and open Georgia that has not returned to Moscow's sphere of influence and is isolated from the Western world.

AN ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC CHALLENGE

The lack of transparency that now characterises the actions of the Ivanishvili regime poses a new kind of threat to the economy and governance of the European Union. A grey area is forming that allows Russia to circumvent sanctions, a circumvention that is also becoming a source of income for the increasingly isolated Georgian economy, deprived of its traditional resources such as tourism. The range of measures taken includes, on the one hand, the Central Bank directive exempting Georgian citizens from the application of sanctions, subject to validation of the evidence supporting the decision by the Georgian courts; on the other hand, the offshore law allowing Georgian citizens to repatriate assets held in other offshore companies without paying either import duties or taxes on profits until 2030 and, of course, without any control over the origin of these assets. At the end of October 2025, a sanctioned Russian oil tanker docked at the Georgian port of Khulevi to unload 150,000 tonnes of "Siberian Light" crude oil.

This creates a *de facto* (with the connivance of the local authorities) and *de jure* (by virtue of the laws adopted) grey area which can then allow the easy passage of various trafficking operations to or from Europe. Instead of fulfilling its role as a hub for energy and trade between Europe and Central Asia, Georgia is being diverted from its historical function and used to consolidate Russian domination in the region and beyond. The existence of such a grey area at the gateway to Europe also harbours other threats, particularly their use by terrorist groups or criminal gangs. The porous Georgian-Russian border thus allows Russian and Chechen gangs to move freely throughout Georgian territory.

RUSSIA'S HYBRID STRATEGY

The experience of the war against Ukraine has shown Russia the limits of military strategy: despite its presumed superiority in human and material resources, Russia has been unable to achieve its war objectives in three years. The cost incurred in terms of

prestige, human and equipment losses and sanctions is enormous. By comparison, the hybrid strategy applied to Georgia - propaganda, setting up a more or less subservient power, massive manipulation of the elections - has a very low cost and has the merit of being able to be reused in multiple areas. There is no chance coincidence in the fact that this strategy has been attempted in Georgia, Romania and Moldova, in other words the countries bordering the Black Sea. Nor is it a coincidence that the issue of the need for elections in Ukraine is now being reactivated and relayed by all means of propaganda. The Georgian test would take on another dimension. One can imagine how easily elections could be manipulated in a country that has suffered three years of war, is permeable to all forms of propaganda, and is unprepared to defend its vote. Focused on Russia's neighbours and the countries bordering the Black Sea, this hybrid strategy is being tested and can be applied to many other countries that do not fall within the traditional areas of Russian domination. The fact that this hybrid strategy is being tested in its multiple dimensions (electoral manipulation, propaganda, infiltration and domination of ruling circles) should come as no surprise to those who remember that, as early as 2008, Russia had tested its strategy of military aggression against Georgia and then used this experience to modernise its military arsenal. On that occasion, it had also tested the responsiveness of the international community. The test was positive... for Russia: the lack of a major collective response undoubtedly encouraged a second test in Crimea and then paved the way for the open aggression of February 2022. Failure to see how, through these elections - and therefore by using the very instruments of our democracy - Russia has defied the democratic powers, as well as failure to denounce and expose this electoral manipulation and hybrid strategy and prevent it from happening again, is tantamount to giving Moscow a free hand, as in 2008, to pursue and intensify its new strategy.

This existential challenge for Georgia raises questions that go beyond Georgia's fate but appear to be decisive for the Europe that is now taking shape. These are crucial issues for the future of a Europe that

wants to be a power, that must remain independent and acquire strategic autonomy, which should oblige the Member States and the European institutions to engage in strategic reflection: what means should be adopted to prevent the authoritarian drift of countries supported and financed by European budgets? What more flexible decision-making means should be adopted to enable rapid response, whether in terms of sanctions or support for civil society? What means should be adopted to enable more political decisions, such as the non-recognition of manifestly manipulated elections, the non-legitimation of powers imposed by violence, repression and fraud, and the consolidation of democratic forces through strong political support?

These policies cannot remain hostage to a rule of consensus that delays and blocks decisions, prevents responsiveness and impoverishes the range of choices. This means, first of all, a clearer reading of events, an attention that does not begin when the crisis is out in the open or instability has set in.

There is a need to find upstream instruments to prevent unsanctioned democratic abuses, securing elections against increasingly sophisticated methods of fraud (call centres and personal data in Georgia, Tik Tok in Romania, etc.), auditing elections to find out what really happened, reviewing the mandates and resources of election observation missions that no longer have the tools to match the sophistication of fraud.

This also means modernising financial instruments and the speed of allocation according to changing needs and repressive legislation introduced to prevent their distribution (Russian law and variants) and which ultimately aim to sever the links between external partners and civil society. Georgia has also become a testing ground for these isolation tactics.

Europe as a power that seems to be emerging from the current crisis and the shocks it is generating cannot be based solely on the military power that will be built around Franco-British nuclear power, German industry, the Ukrainian army, the cyber capabilities

of the Nordic countries, European fleets and the financing of all of them, etc. It cannot do without its democratic and economic dimensions. Enlargement gave birth to European power, and the military power that is emerging in Europe means continuing to export and defend democracy and consolidating the instruments for defending and spreading democracy. Enlargement as a European civilisational choice has become a necessity and a corollary of both military and political power.

The Georgian case, which may seem far removed from immediate concerns, should not be ignored because it lies at the crossroads between the threats of a Russia seeking new weapons to dominate and expand once again, and the promises of a Europe which, strengthening its ambitions and its resources, will no longer accept being subjected to geographical marginalisation.

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5th President of Georgia

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