

# Georgia's Integration into the EU: After the Riga Summit?

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Sarah Lain\*

Georgia has made significant progress in its move towards European integration. The EU has fully supported this decision, but the Ukraine crisis has served as a stark reminder of the security risks facing Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries in terms of their economic and political choices. The EU should be more nuanced in its approach to Georgia to ensure its own de-politicization of the issue and greater clarity around what it is, and is not, aiming to achieve through European integration initiatives. This paper suggests that this should not only be to combat Russian false messaging on the issue, but also to reassure the Georgian people of why they are committing to the EaP. As a corollary, the EaP strategy should also make a greater connection between economic stability and increased resilience against certain security threats. Georgia is now facing a somewhat uncertain political future domestically due to the parliamentary elections in 2016. Without an attempt at a more defined strategy, therefore, the EU could risk greater disillusionment within Georgia as to the benefits of the EaP.



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### *Introduction*

Georgia is generally seen as a success story in terms of its efforts to reform a system historically plagued by corruption and inefficiency. In particular, Georgia has shown commitment and a degree of political will that is to date incomparable with other former Soviet states to implementing reforms and adjustments for further European integration as part of its participation in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP). A milestone in its relations with the EU was the signing of the Association Agreement (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), in June 2014. Economically, Georgia has shown visible progress in its efforts towards integration and is working towards a visa liberalization program. It has also coupled this with initiatives to improve the investment climate and attract foreign investment. Georgia still arguably has more work to do on the political front, as concerns remain over the politicization of decision-making and weaknesses in the judicial system.

The Riga Summit of May 2015, an appraisal of the standing of the EaP, praised Georgia for its achievements within the European integration framework through economic and political reform. However, it was clear that this event was overshadowed by events in Ukraine, highlighting the security risks facing EaP countries by a frequently politicized choice between the East and the West. This summit was an opportunity for the EU to strengthen its message as to the benefits of the EaP program; highlight its true aims; dispel Russian accusations where appropriate of it being a zero-sum choice; and provide reassurance as to why countries should commit to it. This appears to be a missed opportunity, however, as it instead concentrated on the typical broad statements about technical standards and 'reaffirmations' of previously agreed upon commitments.

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There are clearly security implications that the EaP does not, and cannot, address for Georgia, particularly in its relationship with Russia. However, a clearer message on how the aims and desired outcomes of the program could help secure at least greater economic strength would better serve the expectations of the EU within Georgia, as well as Georgia's understanding of the potential conse-

quences of its economic and political choices. This would also serve to weaken some of the political arguments Russia is making around the exclusivity of European integration it sees as so detrimental to its own interests.

This paper seeks to understand where Georgia has converted commitment into concrete results in its efforts towards economic integration with Europe, but it also highlights the areas where Georgia's progress has been lacking. This mainly pertains to political reform, which has been a persistent challenge for the country. Most importantly, however, the paper examines the EU's communication strategy and response to the challenges that Georgia faces in its efforts to integrate, both internally and from external forces. The Ukraine crisis has shown the vulnerabilities that the EaP countries can face, and Europe needs to have a robust response to ensure a clear understanding of the facts, benefits and potential limitations of European integration. This would help debunk many of the criticisms of the EaP that Russia has made in the wake of Ukraine crises, aimed at reducing support for the EU's initiative. This paper will thus set out how the EaP might address Russia's criticisms in a more effective manner to combat potential growth in disillusionment within Georgia.

### *Economic Integration Success*

Georgia has made significant progress in implementing the economic adaptations required by these agreements for further integration with Europe. Georgia has centralized the customs authorities responsible for issuing certificates necessary for applying for AA/DCFTA-based duty-free access to the EU market. The Georgian government has amended its Food Safety, Veterinary and Plant Protection Code to make it compliant with EU requirements. The government also adopted a law on competition broadly in line with EU competition legislation. Georgia has made particular progress in agriculture, which is one of the most promising sectors for foreign investment and boosting exports to the European market. The government launched the 'Produce in Georgia Program', which supports local agri-processing and industrial production by providing loans, infrastructure support and the consulting services. In October 2014 the government created the Agriculture Cooperatives Development Agency, which conducts information campaigns on cooperatives among small

farmers.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Georgia is taking full advantage of the EU support provided to restructure aspects of the economy.

Georgia has already reaped some benefits from closer economic integration with Europe. Georgia has identified agriculture, beverages, machinery and chemicals as key areas of economic strength it should promote to Europe. Tariff-free access to the European market will greatly benefit these exports to the EU as part of the DCFTA. Georgia's exports to the EU rose by 12% in the first six months of the free trade agreement, with exports of some products, such as hazelnuts and copper, doubling or even tripling in that time.<sup>2</sup> Georgia's GDP is expected to see 4.3% growth in the long run.<sup>3</sup>

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Georgia has also been working to improve the country's investment climate and making it more attractive to foreign investors. Georgia ranked 24<sup>th</sup> out of 189 in the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business' survey, a position it has maintained for two consecutive years.<sup>4</sup> It ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> out of 172 in the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the Georgian government has worked towards creating a liberal tax regime under a unified system, with only six flat taxes, including a corporate profit tax of 15%.<sup>6</sup> It has opened up dedicated organizations to support and encourage domestic and foreign business investment initiatives. These include Enterprise Georgia, which is housed under the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development and targeted at SMEs and export promotion, and the Georgian National Investment Agency, which seeks to attract greater foreign direct investment and is run under

1 European Commission (2014) *Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia: Progress in 2014 and recommendations for action*. Brussels. Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/georgia-enp-report-2015\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/georgia-enp-report-2015_en.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

2 European Commission (2015) *EU-Georgia Trade: Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)*. Available at: [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/may/tradoc\\_153435.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/may/tradoc_153435.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

3 European Parliament (2015) *When choosing means losing: The Eastern partners, the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union*. Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/549026/EXPO\\_STUD\(2015\)549026\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/549026/EXPO_STUD(2015)549026_EN.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

4 World Bank Group (2015) *Economy Rankings*. Available at: <http://www.doingbusiness.org/rankings> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

5 2015 Index of Economic Freedom (2015) *Country Risks*. Available at: <http://www.heritage.org/index/ranking> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

6 Invest in Georgia (2015) *Taxation*. Available at: <http://investingeorgia.org/en/georgia/taxation> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

the Prime Minister's office.

Georgia's broader investment activities also show an increasing awareness of its economic potential. The recent listing of Georgia Healthcare, a Georgian medical insurance and hospital provider, demonstrates the country's expanding ambitions to have an international footprint in the business world.<sup>7</sup> Tbilisi recently hosted the Silk Road Forum, the first Chinese state-sponsored event on China's Silk Road Economic Belt policy held outside of China. This demonstrated recognition of the opportunities presented by the offer of Chinese investment, and Georgia's ability to publicly showcase investment potential to foreign investors. This is more than many Western European countries have done in terms of reaching out to China in its offering of investment.

Not all of the economic adjustments required by the EU will necessarily be easy, and potential issues with further economic integration have been raised. One concern has been that there would be an increase in imports from the EU to Georgia, putting added pressure on domestic Georgian producers. There is little evidence of this so far, as the EU noted that there has been "no sudden increase of EU exports to Georgia."<sup>8</sup> A second concern is that further European integration also does not necessarily provide guarantees that its benefits will extend to all layers of society. Less affluent groups might arguably benefit less from the DCFTA. A study conducted in 2009 estimated that integration would result in a decrease of 1.2% in the disposable income of the population's lowest quintile.<sup>9</sup> This also highlights a continued challenge facing many foreign businesses operating in Georgia around skills gaps within the population and underdeveloped training programs. Moreover, the cost of raising norms and technical regulation to European standards will be high, although the EU pledged 410 million EUR for 2014-2017 to assist the reform process.<sup>10</sup>

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7 Agenda.ge (2015) *Georgia Healthcare Group appears on London Stock Exchange*. Available at: <http://agenda.ge/news/46746/eng> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

8 European Commission (2015) *EU-Georgia Trade: Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA)*. Available at: [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/may/tradoc\\_153435.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/may/tradoc_153435.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

9 Acorys (2012) *Trade Sustainability Impact Assessment in support of negotiation of a DCFTA between the EU and Georgia and the Republic of Moldova*. Available at: [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2012/november/tradoc\\_150105.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2012/november/tradoc_150105.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

10 European Commission (2015) *The Eastern Partnership – a policy that delivers*. Available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-15-5019\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5019_en.htm) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

One criticism of the Association Agreement is that by placing such stringent technical norms on Georgian goods and services, it will exclude Georgia from trade with other partners. This is a particularly vocal argument emanating from Russia, which will be discussed below.

As with any reform process, there is certainly progress still to be made. Georgia is still facing some key issues, mainly political in nature, that are negatively affecting its reputation both from a European integration and foreign investment perspective.

### *More Work to be Done*

Based on its experience after the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia is often cited as a country that can offer lessons to Ukraine in its struggle to overhaul a legacy of a kleptocratic officials and a corrupt political and economic system. Georgia has already provided Ukraine with some constructive assistance, namely in the shape of political advisors and templates for effective anti-corruption approaches. Moreover, Georgia has worked through many of the issues Ukraine is currently facing. Georgia initiated constitutional reform to improve transparency and governance standards by creating the State Constitutional Commission; the power of the president has been reduced in favor of parliament to guard against an overly-dominant executive; there have been amendments to the Law on Common Courts aimed at ensuring greater independence for judges; the National Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan have been adopted; the media environment has been diversified; and an anti-discrimination law was adopted.<sup>11</sup> Targeted efforts have been made on anti-corruption reform, particularly within the Ministry of Interior and the police, which were historically perceived to be highly corrupt institutions.<sup>12</sup> This perception was in part why post-2003 the police force was a focus for immediate reform, in order to restore public confidence.<sup>13</sup> Further reform in the judicial sector to prevent po-

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11 European Commission (2014) *Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia: Progress in 2014 and recommendations for action*. Brussels. Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/georgia-enp-report-2015\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/georgia-enp-report-2015_en.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

12 Transparency International (2014) *Assessment of the Performance of the Ministry of Interior after November 2012*. Available at: <http://www.transparency.ge/en/node/4168> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

13 Kakachia, K. and O'Shea, L. (2012) 'Why does police reform appear to have been more successful in Georgia than in Kyrgyzstan or Russia?' *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, Issue 13. Available at: <http://pipss.revues.org/3964> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

litical influence, however, is one of the key remaining areas to be addressed by the Georgian government as part of the European integration process.

One of the key problem areas highlighted by the European Commission in March 2015 was reform of the Prosecutor's Office, which has also recently been highlighted as a major issue for Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> The government has been quick to respond to this criticism, and it submitted amendments on the Law on the Prosecutor's Office to the Venice Commission in May 2015. Key changes were made regarding the selection process of the Chief Prosecutor. Previously, the Chief Prosecutor was appointed and dismissed by the Prime Minister, at the request of the Minister of Justice, which made the system vulnerable to politicization. The new bill, which passed its first reading in July 2015 in Georgia's parliament, aims to de-centralize this decision-making process. The Minister of Justice will nominate a candidate based on consultations with external specialists from the legal community and civil society; the newly created Prosecutorial Council (composed of the Justice Minister as an ex-officio member, peer-elected prosecutors, judges, MPs and civil society) assesses the candidate; a desirable candidate is submitted to Government, and if the Government consents then the Parliament makes a final decision.<sup>15</sup> The overarching aim is to increase the independence and autonomy of the Chief Prosecutor, which is also reflected in an amendment ensuring the non-renewable, six-year term of the Chief Prosecutor's appointment.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this positive step, the legislation still does not provide sufficient guarantees of de-politicization, which is an on-going concern in Georgia's justice system. Even the latest bill, which was revised in light of certain Venice Commission recommendations, does not go far enough

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14 KyivPost (2015) *Shokin, embattled prosecutor general, faces new accusations as scuttling Anti-Corruption Bureau's work*. Available at: <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/kyiv-post-plus/shokin-embattled-prosecutor-general-accused-of-scuttling-anti-corruption-bureaus-work-396761.html> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

15 Civil.ge (2015) *Bill on Prosecutor's Office Reform Passed with First Reading*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28464> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

16 Council of Europe, European Commission for Democracy through Law (2015) *Preliminary Joint Opinion on the Draft Amendments to the Law on the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia*. Strasbourg, Warsaw. Available at: [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2015\)014-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2015)014-e) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

on this issue. The selection criteria for Chief Prosecutor candidates need to be clearer in legislation, providing for transparent, skills-based and meritocratic requirements. Professionalization of staff working within the Prosecutor's Office is crucial. Moreover, the executive branch continues to play a stronger than recommended role in candidate selection. The Venice Commission stated that "the procedure for appointing the Chief Prosecutor as set out in the Draft Law involves too many decision-making bodies. In particular, it is unclear why the Government, which the Minister of Justice is part of, would need to accept a candidate who has already been nominated by the Minister and approved by the Prosecutorial Council. It is the opinion of the Venice Commission...that the executive branch already exercises its influence sufficiently at the nomination stage through the Minister."<sup>17</sup> The Coalition for Independent and Transparent Judiciary, which is a body of civil society representatives lobbying for judicial reform, has stated its concern that the Georgian government has 'not heeded' recommendations to lessen political influence in appointing the Chief Prosecutor or better balance the role of the Minister of Justice in the selection process.<sup>18</sup>

As Thomas Hammarberg has noted, politicization of justice is not a new accusation against the government of Georgia, and it has repeatedly been raised by civil society and international observers.<sup>19</sup> Although legislation and constitutional amendments are the foundation of reform, and Georgia has made some substantial progress towards both, implementation of the changes and enforcement are the keys to combatting this issue. Striving to change attitudes within the political elites towards corruption is essential. Reformed legislation alone is not enough. This impedes Georgia's reform process.

In March 2015, parliament approved Nino Gvenetadze as the new Supreme Court Chairman. This sparked criticism, in part due to Gvenetadze's former membership of the Republican Party - part

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Transparency International, (2015) *Statement of the Coalition regarding the preliminary joint opinion on the prosecution reform*. Available at: <http://www.transparency.ge/en/node/5391> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Hammarberg, T. (2013) 'Georgia in Transition: report on human rights dimension: background, steps and remaining challenges' Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/virtual\\_library/cooperation\\_sectors/georgia\\_in\\_transition-hammarberg.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/documents/virtual_library/cooperation_sectors/georgia_in_transition-hammarberg.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

of the ruling Georgian Dream coalition - and the fact that she was a judge during Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency.<sup>20</sup> Recent accusations of politically motivated arrests amongst Ministry of Defense officials by the Prosecutor's Office highlights an issue of balance that needs to be struck between the Chief Prosecutor's right to 'independence' from government interference and their ability to abuse their position. Former pro-Western Defense Minister Irakli Alasania was dismissed in November 2014 after claiming that a corruption investigation launched by the Prosecutor's Office into Ministry of Defense officials was "obviously politically motivated" and an "attack on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic choice" by those opposed to Georgia's integration with Western partners.<sup>21</sup> Civil society criticized the Prosecutor's Office for failing to disclose all evidence, claiming that some information was classified as a state secret.<sup>22</sup> In turn, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili claimed that Alasania was 'politicizing' defense matters.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not this decision by the Prosecutor's Office was politically motivated is unclear, but this reflects how even the accusation of politicization itself can be used as a tool against opponents. Recent accusations around political motivations behind a court decision to freeze a majority shareholder's stake in the opposition-minded Rustavi 2 channel will be of concern to Western policymakers.<sup>24</sup>

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The European Commission and other analysts<sup>25</sup> have highlighted that in addition to the judicial sector, further priority reforms are required for public administration and local government. Further reforms to tackle corruption, political party financing, nepotism in the civil service and the lack of accountability for abuses com-

20 Kurashvili, T. and Zasztowt (2015) 'Georgia after the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit', The Polish Institute of International Affairs: Policy Paper, PISM, May 2015, No 17 (119) Available at: [http://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=19843](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19843) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

21 Agenda.ge (2014) *Details of Defence Ministry's procurement case declassified*. Available at: <http://agenda.ge/news/25159/eng> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

22 Transparency International (2014) *CSOs respond to Ministry of Defense arrests*. Available at: <http://www.transparency.ge/en/node/4781> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

23 Reuters (2014) *Georgia's premier sacks pro-Western defence minister*. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/11/04/uk-georgia-minister-sacking-idUKKBN0I01YE20141104> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

24 Eurasia.org (2015) *Georgia: Political Storm Brewing Over Future of National Broadcaster Rustavi*. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/75356> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

25 Kurashvili, T. and Zasztowt (2015) 'Georgia after the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit', The Polish Institute of International Affairs: Policy Paper, PISM, May 2015, No 17 (119) Available at: [http://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=19843](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19843) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

mitted by law enforcement authorities were also cited by the European Commission.<sup>26</sup> These are certainly crucial areas for ensuring transparency and fair governance, but the further reform and de-politicization of the judiciary should be prioritized. Without a strong judiciary, these other reforms are less likely to be effective. Moreover, apart from legislation and constitutional reform, mechanisms to ensure effective enforcement and checks and balances of the system itself are necessary. Without the real threat of legal repercussions for violations, there is less likelihood for success in other areas of reform.

### *The Message from Europe*

The EU has been clear on where Georgia has made improvements within the EU integration framework and where it sees the need for more work. Some of this progress was highlighted at the EaP Riga Summit of 21-22 May 2015. Officials praised Georgia's engagement with the E5P (the Eastern Europe Energy Efficiency and Environment Partnership), and welcomed Georgia's contribution to the EU Military Operation and its commitment to the EU Military Advisory Mission in Central African Republic. It recognized Georgia's progress on implementing the Visa Liberation Action Plans, and welcomed the next steps in implementing the program's second phase.

The event was understandably overshadowed by the dramatic events in Ukraine. The Maidan protests, which led to a change in government, the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-backed war in Eastern Ukraine, served as a stark reminder of some of the difficulties facing EaP countries when the choice to pursue European integration becomes politicized. Georgia is no stranger to this. In June 2014, prior to signing its own DCFTA with the EU, the speaker of the Georgian parliament David Usupashvili admitted that Georgia was expecting a 'backlash' from Russia over its plans to integrate further with the EU.<sup>27</sup> It also acted as a reminder of the deficiencies of the EaP program, in terms of demonstrating an understanding of the specific cultural context

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<sup>26</sup> European Commission (2014) *Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia: Progress in 2014 and recommendations for action*. Brussels. Available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/georgia-enp-report-2015\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/2015/georgia-enp-report-2015_en.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Financial Times (2014) *Georgia ready for EU deal 'complications' from Russia*. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2596fc62-f302-11e3-a3f8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3t6Ro9A00> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

of each country, the potential security implications of an economic choice, and providing clear information on its approach.

The Riga Summit was somewhat disappointing in its lack of substantive reassurance for its partners in light of Ukraine. It served more as a confidence-building exercise, concentrating on ‘reaffirming’ the group’s commitment to the partnership. This is illustrative of a negative trait of the EaP in a broader sense, with its tendency towards technocratic and otherwise general statements about its regional aim and methodology. There is certainly more that the EU could do further in clarifying its role in terms of the benefits that the EaP and associated reforms could provide the Georgian population, particularly for the benefit of countering Russian criticism.

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If the purpose and aims of the EaP are not made clear, the EU risks of losing support simply through disillusionment and a lack of understanding within the EaP countries themselves. As a former European Parliament member noted, “the people of the eastern partner countries need to see direct benefits, instead of bureaucratic exercise of imposing new requirements stemming from hundreds of EU laws.”<sup>28</sup> This lack of detail and clarity is epitomized in the joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit. The majority of the declaration consists of participants’ ‘reconfirming’, ‘recommitting’ and ‘reaffirming’ their commitment to things they had already agreed to do under the EaP framework.<sup>29</sup> Given that this is the key information output of the Summit, the declaration gives little in terms of substantive information regarding progress and the benefits that the EaP relationship brings to participants. There is little likelihood that people from the EaP countries will sit down and read the thousands of pages that make up the Association Agreement, covering ‘core reforms’, such as public governance and justice, ‘values’, such as democracy and the rule of law, and modernizing trade relations.<sup>30</sup>

28 The Parliament Magazine (2015) *Russia is pushing the eastern partners for EU relationship*. Available at: <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/opinion/russia-punishing-eastern-partners-eu-relationship> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

29 European Council (2015) *Eastern Partnership summit, Riga*. Available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/05/21-22/> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

30 European Commission (2014) *The EU’s Association Agreements with Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine*. Available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-14-430\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-430_en.htm) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

Therefore, better communication on this is required if there is to be genuine support for the initiative, instead of fostering the idea that signing the Association Agreement provides any ‘quick fix’ or an automatic path to EU membership.

In Georgia itself, although there is high support for Western integration, this support may suffer if the purpose of the EaP and Association Agreement are not well understood. In a poll conducted in April 2015 by the National Endowment for Democracy, 68% people surveyed approved the government’s signing an Association Agreement with the EU, while 31% support joining the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>31</sup> In August 2014, after Georgia signed the EU Association Agreement, this support stood at 69% for the Association Agreement, and 20% agreed or strongly agreed that Georgia should join the EEU.<sup>32</sup> Although this demonstrates a rise in interest in EEU membership, some analysts have pointed out that support, or lack thereof, for certain initiatives may simply arise from a lack of clarity over the purpose and benefits of the EaP, which in turn can lead to mistrust. As Martin Muller, who measured public opinion toward the EU in Georgia in 2013, has stated, “a lack of information about a certain subject often translates into suspicion and reservation. It is, therefore, a common assumption in studies of attitudes that a higher level of knowledge is connected to a more positive attitude toward a subject. This correlation has been confirmed for support of EU membership and European orientation.”

*The aim of the EaP, and potential benefits that Georgia will receive, need to be made clearer.* | The aim of the EaP, and potential benefits that Georgia will receive, need to be made clearer. The Riga summit did highlight, for example, a new program whereby Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova will receive €2 billion from the EU to help small businesses under the ‘Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Facility for Small and Medium Enterprises’.<sup>33</sup> However, the creation of such mechanisms is aimed at providing countries with the tools to achieve the real goal of the EaP. The aim is to assist Georgia in building up its own expertise to boost

31 National Demographic Institute (2015) *Public attitudes in Georgia*. Available at: [https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April%202015%20Poll\\_Public%20Issues\\_ENG\\_VF\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI%20Georgia_April%202015%20Poll_Public%20Issues_ENG_VF_0.pdf) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

32 *Ibid.*

33 European Commission (2015) *EU to unlock €2 billion worth of investment for small businesses in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine*. Available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-5012\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5012_en.htm) (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

its economic and political development, in turn securitizing its economy. The EaP intends to give Georgia the support required for it to take responsibility, and be accountable, for itself. This will in part be done by expanding opportunities to diversify trade and investment, building up economic strength. Democratization and strengthening the rule of law, in the EU's view, will also help strength Georgia's resilience against economic or political turmoil. This should be communicated more effectively to member states.

Communicating what the EaP is *not* trying to do is also important. The EU is not suggesting that it becomes a patron or protector of Georgia, as has been the case historically with Moscow towards the former Soviet republics. This difference should be made clear. As one EU official has said, the EaP risks losing support as it demands “the expectation of serious reforms, but little concrete in response”, while Russia offers “cash with no strings attached when it comes to domestic policy, only foreign policy.”<sup>34</sup> Clarity over the response is required. EU membership is not even the ultimate guarantee in the event that all reforms are carried out. As Angela Merkel said on arriving at the summit, “the Eastern Partnership is not an instrument for enlargement of the European Union, but it is an instrument of rapprochement with the European Union.”<sup>35</sup>

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### *The EaP and Russia*

Russia has not hidden its criticism of the Eastern Partnership, and in particular Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova's interest in economic and political integration with Europe. In 2009, Sergei Lavrov explicitly shared Russia's interpretation of the EaP: “we are accused of having spheres of influence. But what is the Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to extend the EU's sphere of influence...”<sup>36</sup> Lavrov asked his Polish counterpart at the

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34 The Guardian (2015) *EU summit pledges €1.8 bn to Ukraine but Russia remains elephant in the room*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/eu-summit-riga-pledges-18bn-ukraine-russia-elephant-in-room> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

35 EUobserver (2015) *Ex-Soviet States accept limited EU perspective*. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/128799> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

36 EUobserver (2015) *EU expanding its 'sphere of influence,' Russia says*. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/27827> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

time, Radoslav Sikorskiy, for assurances that the EaP does not constitute an ‘anti-Russian’ project.<sup>37</sup> More recently, in light of events in Ukraine, Russia has also broadly criticized what it perceives to be the EU’s ‘politicization’ of the choice between integration with Europe versus other partners. Russia maintains that by joining the Association Agreement, countries are automatically excluded from freer trade with Russia and membership of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Russia has often used its own economic leverage to protest against Georgia’s pro-Western stance. In 2006 Russia banned imports of Georgian wine and mineral water, claiming contamination.

Although Russia has its own agenda in accusing the EU of using the EaP to extend its ‘sphere of influence’ further into the former Soviet space, they do highlight the shortcomings of the EU in its EaP project. As mentioned, improvements to the EaP’s communication strategy to both member states and the rest of Europe are necessary. For example, Russia has concentrated on the fact that the EU system precludes Georgia’s EEU membership. The EU has never provided an adequate response to this, noting that the high external tariff barriers demanded by the EEU itself in fact make membership of any other free trade zone or body challenging. The EU has also failed to highlight that signing the Association Agreements still allows for trade with other post-Soviet trade spaces, such as the CIS Free Trade Area, although Georgia is no longer a member of it. It is true that agreeing to parts of the Association Agreement does mean committing to standards and regulations that may be incompatible with other trade zones. The EU has been slow to explain this, which has led to a perceived lack of understanding within the EU as to what the consequences of the EaP in fact are; this has strengthened Russia’s argument. Honest assessments of both the potential benefits and the limitations of joining the Association Agreement should be provided.

Russia’s reaction has also been underestimated; this could have been better understood by the EU and again, better explained. Although the EU has made efforts to engage with Russia over Ukraine’s Association Agreement, this appears reactive. In light of the Ukraine crisis, this may not have necessarily made a difference, but public coverage of Russia’s commentary and criti-

<sup>37</sup> Rossiya Segodnya (2009) *Votochnoe Partnerstvo uzhe stanovitsya bremenim dlya ES*. Available at: <http://inosmi.ru/world/20090508/248965.html> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

cism far outweighs any EU response. As one senior EU official has stated, “the EU will never allow a third country to dictate the policy it has towards other countries. However, we will act more carefully with regard to Russia in the future. Perhaps there was not enough carefulness, not enough outreach, not enough dialogue before.”<sup>38</sup>

### *Georgia’s European Future? A Concluding Appraisal*

Along with Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia is one of the three EaP countries that has clearly expressed, and acted upon, its desire to integrate further with Europe, both politically and economically. Even back in 1999, Georgia’s identification with Europe was clear, as then Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania told the Council of Europe “I am Georgian, and therefore I am European.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Georgia has made progress in developing closer ties to Europe, particularly on the economic front, Tbilisi still faces domestic political challenges. This not only detracts from the success of European integration, as defined by the EU, but it also weakens Georgia’s institutional framework. This increases its vulnerabilities in the face of external threats, including from neighbors wishing to prevent Georgia’s closer relations with the EU. In Georgia’s defense, however, the EU has not responded adequately to external security threats faced by Georgia and other EaP countries, including those that have been economic in nature, from Russia in particular. Arguably, security is beyond the remit of the EaP, but the EU should better communicate the linkage between a robust economic system, accompanied by rule of law, and resilience against outside threats. Improved messaging on these issues with EaP countries will also result in better communication with Russia on EU integration.

This desire to move closer to the EU has led Russia to perceive the initiative as polarizing, viewed as an attempt by the EU to further encroach on Russia’s self-declared

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38 EurActiv (2015) *Two tier Eastern Partnership on the table at Riga summit*. Available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/europes-east/two-tier-eastern-partnership-table-riga-summit-314726> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

39 <http://www.georgianjournal.ge/politics/25618-i-am-georgian-and-therefore-i-am-european-zurab-zhvanias-historic-speech-at-the-european-council.html> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

sphere of influence. This view refuses to accept that Georgia has a choice in deciding, or that shortcomings in Russia's own policies have affected this choice. At the same time, the EU has failed to properly explain the goals of the EU partnership or address concerns about what practical implications it has within the individual context of Georgia.

Ideally, EaP countries will enhance trade with the EU, whilst also building up institutional capacity and economic diversity to continue trading with other partners, such as Russia. Russia itself has complicated this relationship with its use of trade as a political weapon against Georgia. But the material benefits of trade with Russia are clear, and it is not in Georgia's interests to cut itself off from partners. After the embargo on Georgian products was lifted, exports to Russia quadrupled from \$45m in 2010 to \$190m in 2013.<sup>40</sup> Economic diversification is key for Georgia, which is in part what the EaP is helping Georgia to achieve by improving the quality of its exports.

The EU has acknowledged that it needs to re-examine the EaP in its current format, which is a hugely positive step. This was reflected in a recent request for review initiated by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. This request recognized how detrimental the limited understanding of each EaP country has been.<sup>41</sup> Input from Georgia itself on the shape of its EU bilateral and regional relations is important, and perhaps a broader discussion about the security that economic stability and diversification can provide could become a bigger part of the EaP discussion in this context. The EU-Georgia partnership is likely to remain strong. Georgia must of course take responsibility for its own affairs, but the EU must enhance its understanding of the domestic political and economic context, as well as Georgia's other external relations, in order to tailor its approach. This would instill more confidence than large summits with vaguely defined goals, which from Russia's perspective must look like the formation of a new bloc counter to its interests.

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40 Financial Times (2014) *Georgia, Moldova to sign EU association*. Available at: <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2014/06/26/georgia-moldova-to-sign-eu-association-agreements/> (Accessed: 2 December 2015).

41 European Commission (2015) *Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy: the EU launches a consultation on the future of its relations with neighbouring countries*. Available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-4548\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-4548_en.htm); (Accessed: 2 December 2015).