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### **European Integration and Identity Issues in Georgia**

**Abstract:** The purpose of the following paper is to analyze the issues of European Integration and identity in Georgia. On 14 June 2004 after a recommendation made by the Commission the Council decided to offer Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan the opportunity to participate in the European Neighborhood Policy. Georgia has gone through transition period since independence. With history, culture and traditions it has always been part of Europe. Public buildings in the capital of Tbilisi feature EU flags next to Georgian ones, a symbol of Georgia's choices, like the former Prime Minister of Georgia, Zurab Zhvania once said on the occasion of Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe: 'I am Georgian, therefore I am European'.

The European Neighborhood Policy has brought many positive changes for parties involved in it. The partnership is based on respect for democracy and the principles of international law, human rights and market economy. At the General Affairs Council of February 2001 the EU showed its willingness to play a more active political role in South Caucasus. For Georgia and South Caucasus in general it was very important that the EU appointed a Special Representative for the region. The strong commitment of the Georgian authorities to implement reform plans notably in the field of good governance was positively evaluated by the EU. The EU remained committed to supporting Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty as well as peaceful resolution of conflicts. Within the European Neighborhood Policy cultural exchanges between the EU and Georgia have increased. Georgia pursued its approximation and alignment with European standards benefiting from an ongoing twinning project in support of the Bologna Process. Georgian young people and youth organizations continued to benefit from the Youth in Action Program through exchanges, voluntary service and cooperation activities. In June 2010 the first twinning project on cultural heritage conservation started. South Caucasus is an interesting region for the EU. According to Asmus Ronald "in referring to the region, we implicitly refer to the Euro-Asian energy corridor linking the Euro-Atlantic system with Caspian energy supplies and the states of Central Asia." So, the aim of the following paper is to discuss and provide a detailed analysis of European integration and identity issues in Georgia.

**Key words: European, identity, Georgia, culture, integration**

**Main part:** Georgia's European foreign policy choice is often claimed to be the reflection of its national identity, its self-perception as a European nation striving to return to the European family. The repeatedly claimed European identity of Georgia is believed to be source of prevailing Euro-Atlantic aspirations in Georgia's foreign policy orientation.

In the post-Soviet space political culture is considered as a principal explanation for political behavior. Most of the newly established states re-ideologized their politics with an emphasis on liberal and democratic values after gaining independence. This process was reflected in foreign policy, as well as was an instrument for shaping elite legitimacy and state identity (Jones, 2003).

The increased focus on political culture in political science stems from early studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s. Political culture is a collection of "political codes, rules, recipes and assumptions" that shape dominant conceptions in the political environment (Johnston, 1995, p. 45). When related to strategic decisions in politics, political culture is mainly referred to as "strategic culture" or the "ideas about strategic matters" that derive from the intersection of intellect and emotions when blended in experience (Gray, 1999, p. 60). Different states are characterized by different strategic cultures that develop from their early formation periods and "are influenced to some degree by the philosophical, political, cultural and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites" (Johnston, 1995, p. 34). Theories on strategic culture claim that political behavior is always affected by strategic culture as decision-makers, being human beings, cannot help but be cultural agents (Gray, 1999).

Keeping in mind these implications, this paper intends to examine Georgian foreign policy in the national identity context. Its focus falls on the European identity of Georgia with particular emphasis on the aspirations for European integration as a means of realizing its belonging to Europe.

Georgia's "Europeanism" is not a new phenomenon and has occasionally appeared throughout its history. Since the nineteenth century, after the creation of the image of Muslims as the "other" Georgia's belonging to Europe has constantly been underlined. In Soviet times communism was perceived as an "oriental backwardness" vis-a-vis the West. After independence, Georgia declared Western principles as the basis for the country's development. In the "Foreign Policy Strategy" (2006-2009) this priority was justified by Georgia's belonging to Europe in terms of geography, political, cultural and value system. This time the "other" was Russia. The democratic principles that Georgia's future was dedicated to were identified with the West and that is where Georgia belonged. Despite the

fact that this belonging was present in Georgia's political discourse before, it has been emphasized with this intensity after the Rose Revolution (Minesashvili, 2013).

On the basis of an overview of the academic literature on European identity and analysis of public attitudes in Georgia through opinion polls, this paper argues that Georgian society shares the official westward aspiration. Georgia's pro-Westernism is usually understood in terms of one or both of two underlying rationales: cultural affiliation and instrumental gains. According to Ghia Nodia (1998), historically the bottom line of Georgia's quest for a patron in the West was its perception of itself as a western nation. Georgia considered itself to be unlucky being surrounded by Muslim neighbors. Relying on this link, the West was perceived as a patron.

Since gaining independence, Georgia has become a member of western institutions such as the OSCE, World Bank, IMF, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and the Council of Europe. It has signed numerous agreements with Western powers. It has declared its commitment to western values and aspiration to join the EU. Muller claims that Georgians are in "EUphoria" in terms of their aspiration for integration (2011, p. 83). There is a high consensus about the desirability of EU membership. 81% agree that Georgia should be in the EU and only 3% disagree. Likewise 79% would vote for the membership if there was a referendum tomorrow. One out of every two Georgians agrees with former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's statement "I am Georgian and therefore I am European". Muller's ultimate assessment after examining the attitudes of the Georgian society towards the EU emphasizes the point that Georgian society's support for the EU stems from expectations of economic benefits. Consequently, he considers the "Euphoria" process in Georgia to be dependent on the performance of the Union (2011, p.83). As a matter of fact, despite the financial crisis in the EU from 2009 onwards the Georgian population steadily expressed support for integration.

Rohrschneider claims that in the post-communist states political views on integration is hardly affected by only economic, social, institutional or historic circumstances, but by the way elites undertake the issue or how they frame the integration (2006, p. 143). This claim is compatible with the sequence in Georgia. Although support for the West was always present, it has significantly increased since 2004, when the government set integration with the EU as a foreign policy priority and when the European Neighborhood Policy was initiated.

Some scholars claim that "Europeanism" refers to universal values of "Westernism". Those who question whether European identity is a tangible concept share the approach of Europe as a community of diverse cultures and people who are united by political and economic concerns rather than by shared value system. For them Europe is hardly more than

just the sum of national identities, as Europeans differ from each other in all aspects despite some shared heritage and traditions (Smith, 1992). Since the beginning of European integration, the ideology of “Europeanness” as a reflection of common culture was constantly promoted, but was accompanied with difficulties as European history is “plural history of divergences and convergences” (Pocock, 1994, p. 332). Risse argues that, although peoples of Europe feel belonging to their national states, this will not be an obstacle for the increase of European identity, as possession of multiple identities is feasible. A socialization process gradually embeds Europeanness in national identities, but its success strongly depends on institutional performance (Risse, 2005, p. 295).

Proponents of the European identity also differ in characterizing the concept, although they share the idea of common values among Europeans. There are two major notions of the concept ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ depending on whether it contains minimal set of possibly universal values or has a more exclusive character.

‘Thin’ identity comprehends the values associated with ‘moral universalism’ referring to the founding principles of democracy, tolerance and individualism. This universalistic understanding of Europe is very similar to the idea of western liberal values (Delanty, 2002, p.347).

‘Thick’ identity includes not only liberal and democratic values, but some particular features of the European life. It refers to cultural heritage as a basis for European identity. Greek, Roman and Christian notions compose this identity which is accomplished with the Enlightenment (Delanty, 2002, p. 349). Furthermore, the ‘thick’ version of identity goes beyond the normative appeal of the concept and embraces practical ways of European life including the institutional system (p. 351).

Lowenthal (2000), arguing that “Europe” has always been more a mental construct than a geographical or social entity”, underlines three distinctive features before the eighteenth century: Christianity, the rise of the mercantile economy and pan-European expression in art. According to him, later on the consciousness of “Europeanness” started to extend beyond this base embracing ideals of freedom and progress (p. 316).

In his paper “The West Unique, not Universal” Samuel Huntington suggests a comprehensive list of characteristics of the Western civilization stemming from Europe which compose overarching ‘thick’ identity implying universal values within itself. These characteristics can provide a lucid vision for both types of identities. Huntington (1996) considers the classical legacy as the basis for the Western civilization, characteristics of which stem from classical earlier legacies such as Greek philosophy and rationality, Roman law, the Latin language and Christianity. After the sixteenth century Latin gave way to local

languages based on which cultural advancement of each nation took place. Separation of spiritual and temporal authority or secularity is another factor which Huntington considers as unique for the Western civilization and which consequently contributed to development of freedom. Rule of law, inherited from the Romans, became the basis for constitutionalism and the protection of human rights.

Social pluralism and civil society developed from the peculiar class system of Europe. A historically distinctive feature of Europe was found in its diverse autonomous groups not based on blood relationships. Those groups served as the basis for associational pluralism later on. Consequently, representative bodies descended from this tradition of social pluralism. In the course of modernization these bodies evolved into the institutions of modern democracy. All the above features separately contributed to developing a sense of individualism and individual liberties starting from the fifteenth century and quite different from the collectivism that prevailed elsewhere (Huntington, 1996).

All the European institutions such as the EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE do reflect the abovementioned core values. Those are the universal values that as Huntington suggests descend from European heritage and represent a constitutive part of a 'thin' identity. This is the identity perceived as a uniting factor for "Europeans" and accepted as a basis and further goal for their community. Adherence to these values is a requirement for membership.

After signing the Association Agreement Georgia further progressed in adherence to the core European values. Political relations between the European Union and Georgia are based on common interests and values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and social cohesion. Partnership with the European Union plays an important role in the transition process in Georgia. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement is the outcome of the European Neighborhood Policy launched with the objective to bring closer the enlarged EU and its neighbors. It encouraged Georgia's further approximation with European standards.

The idea of "Europeanness" embedded in the institutions of European states can provide a general picture of the concept that was the implicit basis for their creation. The European Union can be considered as the most comprehensive organization among these institutions. But, even in this context, as the Union corresponds to more of a political community nowadays, it exceeds the concept of a shared heritage. This is why Euroenthusiasts advocate for a more 'thin' identity established by European law, politics, the public sphere and civil society institutions (Minesashvili, 2013).

Scholars focusing on the EU claim that the minimum European identity is expressed in the concept of European citizenship based on European constitutional law. The concept is often considered as an expression of a “European soul, a shared feeling of belonging to Europe” (Follesdal, 2001, p. 233). Citizenship is a concept combining two constitutive elements: rights and identity. Not only are rights grounded on specific identity perceptions, but they also modulate, transform and recreate identity. Therefore, the citizenship concept not only expresses the shared identity but individual rights embedded in it are gradually capable of attuning with the mass identity.

The concept of EU citizenship introduced in the Maastricht Treaty represents or at least embraces the opportunity to achieve the realization of European civic identity. A quick glance demonstrates the democratic premise underlying the whole notion of a European identity based on universal values. The individual is the starting point for every entitlement. Empowerment entitlements for individuals prevail over the others, especially in terms of private activity such as protection from intervention from others. A basic value of tolerance furthermore is a priority. Economic, political and social entitlements are crowned by the duties towards others.

The Charter of European Identity (1995) discusses Europe not only in terms of its core values, but its policies and responsibilities claiming that European values stem from the fundamental principles of tolerance, humanity and fraternity that led to the development of “democracy, the recognition of fundamental and human rights and the rule of law”. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) recognizes that the principles of Europe are united by common values and these values place the individual at the heart of the EU’s activities. Universal values are recognized as the basis of the Union in the Lisbon Treaty as well. It states that these values are common to the member states in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. These common values are constantly voiced in the documents shared with other countries, for instance, the European Neighborhood Policy and Eastern Partnership documents underline that all objectives are based on commitment to shared values and Georgia’s commitment to common values is the determinant of the type of future relationship between Georgia and the EU. These documents again list values such as the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, respect for and protection of minorities and principles of the market economy.

Georgia as a member of the Council of Europe shares its core values. Membership of this organization is open only to European states. The primary working area of the Council indicates its dedication to human rights, rule of law and democracy likewise. Human rights

protection by the Council is considered through a Convention covering not only human rights generally but antiracism and tolerance, as well as rights of national minorities. Georgia perceives itself as a European nation. The country achieved progress in approaching European standards especially after signing the Association Agreement. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement is part of a new generation of Association Agreements with Eastern Partnership countries and provides a long-term foundation for future EU-Georgia relations. The European Union contributes to strengthening civil society in Georgia and its role in democracy promotion is very important. Political dialogue and cooperation towards reforms in the framework of the Association Agreement seek to strengthen respect for democratic principles, the rule of law, good governance and human rights including the rights of minorities as enshrined in the core UN and Council of Europe conventions and related protocols. Georgian society passionately aspires to membership in the European Union based on the belief of its importance for Georgia.

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