

Foreign Orientation as an Identity Factor in the Georgian Governmental Discourse

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Abstract

During the entire history of Georgia, despite the territorial distance, the feeling of rapprochement with Europe and affiliation to its values was always challenging for the Georgian government. This idea is shortly and exhaustively expressed in former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's historic address at the European Council in 1999 when he said: "I am Georgian and therefore I am European" (Jvania, 2013: 1).

Our paper will discuss Georgia's European orientation as a determinant in identity development after regaining independence in 1991. Among the various internal and external difficulties in these days, Georgia also faced the problem of choosing its foreign political orientation. President Shevardnadze once noted, "Economic and political rapprochement with Europe and full integration with it is the main priority of Georgia's foreign political course."¹

We will analyze the attitudes of Georgian presidents toward political orientation. Despite the differences in opinions, one thing is explicit: all of them understood the importance of integration with Europe, and all of them have made some steps toward it, which recently resulted in visa liberalization with EU member countries.

Key Words: Europe, Discourse, Identity, presidents of Georgia; foreign policy

Introduction

In Georgia, since the restoration of independence (1991), one of the main challenges became the issue of nation-building and democratization of the country. Both goals gained equal importance, and both posed significant obstacles ahead. The fundamental idea of the Soviet project was the formation of an "international brotherhood of nations" under the supremacy of big brother, such as Russia. That is why instead of forming a nation-state, the Soviet Union promoted the idea of the supranational identity of the Soviet People based on citizenship as collective action instead of individual participation, as in Western democracies. Soviet authorities created the concept of "self" and "other," which promoted cohesion among the

¹ Interview with E. Shevardnadze, newspaper "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1997, 14.10

members of a soviet union in-group; however, it produced national or ethnic 'others.' This process caused dispersed the nation, encouraging regional and ethnic claims, etc.

Consequently, at the dawn of independence, it was essential to define who we were to consolidate the nation. This process raised questions about what constituted the nation, who was part of it, and who was not, and how the ethnic understanding of 'Georgianness' could be switched with the multi-ethnic space of the Georgian state.

Besides the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, factors such as political conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, alienation between provinces, social-economic crisis, undeveloped political institutions, doubts about foreign policy orientations, etc., influenced the identity formation process. Elites, who had access to the public sphere, faced the task of defining the boundaries of the Georgian nation and of delimitating it from the out-groups, thereby identifying who posed a threat to the well-being of the in-group and which other groups could be perceived as a friend (Abzianidze, 2020).

Since the 1990s, internal and external groups' construction processes and strategies have changed several times. The rulers' background, political legacy, attitude toward previous authorities, foreign policy priorities, and many other factors determine the diverse and dynamic in-group and out-group perception formation process. These changes did not coincide with the shift of the rulers, but we can observe rapid changes even during one government (e.g. President M. Saakashvili's government).

From the early 1990th until today, Georgian political discourse has coexisted from one side, so-called Western, European, and from the other side, non-western/Russian orientation discourses. These discourses have justificatory arguments and represent the response to Georgia's existing political, territorial, and economic problems. The paper's primary goal is not to analyze the concrete steps made toward foreign political orientation. However, we intend to discuss governmental foreign policy orientation discourse, especially toward Europe. The "right" foreign orientation became one of the cornerstones of the construction of contemporary Georgian identity as far as it has been deeply connected with the "Westerner" of Georgia as a political and cultural entity from the beginning. That is why being "Western orientated" meant promoting national sovereignty as a natural result of Western space as a community of sovereign nations.

The research question can be formulated in the following way: How did Georgian post-communist Presidents use foreign Western/European orientation to justify their foreign policies in official/formal discourse?

The research time has been determined the period from regaining independence in 1991 up to 2012, the period of Presidentship of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Mikheil Saakashvili as three decisive political figures of post-communist transformations in Georgia.

The research is based on the qualitative methodology. To analyze the societal context, within the framework of the desk research, four leading Georgian newspapers were analyzed from 1990 until 2012. Among them are „Sakartvelos respublika“ (Georgian Republic), „24 saati“ (24 Hours), Kviris Palitra (Palitra of a week), Rezonansi.

To highlight governmental arguments, we analyzed three presidents' speeches using qualitative content analysis because it is the best technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying particular characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1968). The selected presidents of Georgia are Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Mikheil Saakashvili. Among the hundreds of addresses, we have chosen ten speeches from each, 30

speeches in total. Among the speeches are inauguration addresses of the presidents, addresses to the nation, addresses to international organizations, etc. The highlighted categories of the texts validate the research findings; five in-depth interviews were conducted with the politicians and experts. The Sampling strategy was based on their personal and professional experience.

The contexts of the Presidentships of the given figures were quite different and complex but interconnected at the same time.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991-1992), the first president of Georgia, came to power from the national liberation movement and was the head of the supreme council that declared regaining independence of Georgia in 1991. Correspondingly, he rejected the continuation of the Soviet system and introduced a new process of state-building, which opposed the vision of identity and foreign and domestic policy priorities. However, after the coup d'etat, President Gamsakhurdia's government was changed by the military council, which invited the former. USSR foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze (later elected as a second president of Georgia). Shevardnadze rejected Gamsakhurdia's road of the state building and initiated a new process.

Quite different was the road of President Mikheil Saakashvili. After the Rose Revolution in 2003, he came to power with the highest legitimacy and initiated various social, political, and economic reforms. He neglected Shevardnadze's legacy, evaluated it as failed and inefficient, and declared a new era of state-building. Correspondingly, all presidents had their vision of the identity trajectories equipped with the corresponding markers in the domestic and foreign political arena.

Theoretical scope

Identity-based theoretical explanations of foreign policy have gained popularity among the various political science paradigms. To understand the character of their relationship, we have to analyze both.

The scientific literature demand a "need for research into how identity and foreign policy inform each other" (Kesgin, 2019). According to Hintz, national identity debates can spill over from domestic politics into foreign policy. He envisions foreign policy as a "domestic identity contestation domain" (Hintz, 2018: 4). As soon as the identity template becomes domestically hegemonic and "rejects domestic competition to its alternates, the domestic identity contest moves into foreign policy." In that instance, an alternate identity proposal concludes that pursuing hegemony is costly or "even existential" to its supporters. Thus, according to the inside-out identity contestation theory Hintz develops, elites move that contest into foreign policy when they are blocked from advancing their identity proposals domestically (Kesgin, 2019).

While constructing or developing identity markers, the authority has two main options. The first inclusive civic nationalism arises when general social conditions form a standardized, homogeneous culture that includes not only the elite minority but the entire population (Gellner, 2003). The second type of identity carries many "patterns" in itself. It can be exclusive ethnic nationalism when pursuing cultural identity and delivering it to the people (Hroch, 2007). Accordingly, the government must define the kind of boundaries within which the members of the inner group, or "us," would fall and beyond which the "other" outside groups would remain because "we are what we are; they are not what we are" (Tajfel & Forgas, 1981: 124). These are how to speak about a nation, its boundaries, interests, and aspirations (Brennan, 1990). Thus manifested in text and talk (Van Dijk, 1998). Among the widespread definitions, one of the crucial characteristics of identity is its constructivist character (Smith, 1991; Versluys, 2000;

Castells, 2001). Bauman's concept of identity reinforces this view as a "linguistic construct" (Bauman, 2000). The decisive word in this construction process belongs to the authorities, which consider the 'linguistic construction' of group membership (Kroskrity, 1999: 11) actively using the social interaction process (Davies & Harré, 1990). As a result, we obtain 'established' or 'communicatively produced' identities by using language (Kroskrity, 1999: 112).

The dual identity of Georgians

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and gaining independence, the issue of political orientation has been actively staged in Georgian politics. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was most cautious compared to the whole period concerning the political narrative of Europe, i.e., the West. However, it should also be noted that Gamsakhurdia's government existed for quite a short time - in 1992, his government was restricted by a military coup.

During Zviad Gamsakhurdia's governance, the following directions can be distinguished regarding external orientation: The essential narrative underlines the unity of Caucasian identity and, on this basis, the formation of Caucasian unity. Zviad Gamsakhurdia had a close personal relationship with Jokhar Dudayev, then-president of Chechnya, which was well reflected in the course's formation. Gamsakhurdia often highlights in his speeches and interviews the need for political connections between Circassians and Georgians, Chechens and Georgians, Karachians and Georgians, and the necessity of creating a united coordination center from the Caucasian national movements.²; he emphasizes the genetic unity between Circassians and Georgians; Interesting is the form of appeal as well: he appeals to the Karachays in the following way – 'brothers Karachays.'³.

For the first time, during Gamsakhurdia's governance appears, Turkey's future partner's vision. He speaks about the opening of representatives of Turkey as a strong neighbor and a future ally in Georgia.

As for the West and NATO, the narrative of the first president is more cautious in this regard. For example, he directly expresses no vision of what the relationship between Georgia and NATO should be in the future. Despite the considerable caution, in many public statements or interviews made by Gamsakhurdia, the acceptance is seen in the issue of relation with the West. For example, in one of the interviews given in 1991, we read:

Our only hope is the West - only democracy can protect us. The more they pay attention to Georgia like, for example, the USA Department did, the more guarantees will be that we will soon be able to achieve complete independence and the withdrawal of occupation troops.⁴.

Gamsakhurdia's attitude toward the West and other countries served one essential purpose - recognizing Georgia as an independent state and an object of international law. Zviad Gamsakhurdia also focuses on these issues in the inauguration speech on June 7, 1991, and notes that the events that followed after the Cold War allowed the imperial bonds to be escaped.

² Interview with Z. Gamsakhurdia, "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1991, 23.03.

³ ibid

⁴ Interview with Z. Gamsakhurdia, "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1991, 20.06.

Shaping political orienteers: from Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to Europe

The next stage of our research is the case of the second President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze. His foreign political orientation, especially the first part of his presidency, was significantly defined by the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict of 1992-1993, which by the interference of Russian military forces, resulted in the de-facto loosing of Abkhazia (one of the oldest regions of Georgia). This war and its results have entirely determined Shevardnadze's foreign policy, whatever it was, what he directly was expressing in all his public speeches and interviews. In Shevardnadze's foreign political preferences, we can separate the following stages:

In 1993-1996, CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) was President Shevardnadze's main foreign political orienteer. It was considered the primary tool for the peaceful return of Abkhazia: "CIS may not guarantee security, but it is the only factor of our territorial integrity and legal verification of invading borders."⁵ – stated Shevardnadze in 1994, in the same year Georgia became a member of CIS.

Russia – the next foreign political orienteer- was also discussed as the leading actor in resolving the Abkhazian conflict. If Russia agrees with Abkhazia's status, we can also agree with the status of Russia's regions, especially the status of Chechnya. Though since 1997, together with the narration of CIS's inability as piece defender Shevardnadze began to speak about Chechens as supporters of Georgia's territorial integrity. At the same time, the idea of a "peaceful Caucasus " appeared in his discourse.⁶ Since 1997, the factor of America has also appeared, which he called "a powerful friend."⁷

Considering complex relations with Russia, Georgia's authority began cooperating with Europe more openly. Since 1996, Georgia has joined many international and regional organizations, and Western/European experts have also been actively included in making different legislative documents. Europe became some development model toward which Georgia should go. In addition to practical steps from this period pro-Western/European rhetoric has been strengthened. Shevardnadze has begun intensive discussion of Europe as one of the leading foreign political orienteers of Georgia (after a partnership agreement with Europe in 1996):

Europe is our shelter, the best guarantee of our language and originality... Europe sees, acknowledges, and perceives Georgia as its part. Our nation's aspiration toward Europe is, first of all, a moral choice which also means an economic wealth.⁸

From this period, Europe was conceived as one of the central guarantees of Georgia's independence. Though, Russia's factor is also actual. Even more, while speaking about European orientation, President Shevardnadze did not consider it as changing Georgia's geopolitical direction:

⁵ Interview with E. Shevardnadze, newspaper "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1994, 3.03

⁶ Interview with E. Shevardnadze, newspaper "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1997, 7.01

⁷ Interview with E. Shevardnadze, newspaper "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1997, 22.02

⁸ Interview with E. Shevardnadze, newspaper "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1997, 22.11

Finally, Georgia wants to go the same way as Russia goes... Our course is to live peacefully with all our neighbors, to integrate with the world and European civilization - does Russia not want this, too? ... Full integration with European Union is the main priority of Georgia's foreign policy⁹ – stated Shevardnadze in 1997.

European orientation, as a hegemonic discourse

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, which resulted in Mikheil Saakashvili's coming to power, the discourse of the formation of Georgian identity and the process toward rapprochement with Europe and Euro integration has been strengthened. During the presidency of M. Saakashvili, Europe became the main official, symbolic part of any political act. It was revived, and the idea of establishing the Georgians as the oldest Europeans started circulating. This approach was often used by political elites' representatives, who claimed to popularize Georgia with its ancient European past. So, through Saakashvili's discourse, Georgia acquires an explicitly pro-European identity, and the emphasis on this starts from his coming into power. In this regard, Saakashvili's presidential inauguration speech on January 25, 2004, is very important when he stated:

Georgia has a unique culture. We are not only Europeans but also the oldest Europeans; accordingly, Georgia has its own exceptional place in European civilization. Georgia should become a model of democracy where every citizen will be equal to the law and will have an equal opportunity to achieve success and self-realization.¹⁰

In addition to the official speech disclosed, symbols have gained a significant meaning during Saakashvili's presidency. Since this period in Georgian politics, using different symbols for different purposes started. As an example, we can illustrate the case of the inaugural speech above when Saakashvili raised the flag of the European Union together with Georgia's flag, emphasizing that Georgia is a member of the European family. Part of the same discourse emphasizes European and Western education and the coming of the people with Western education into Georgian politics. Such discourse was reflected in staff changes in politics. As a result, most senior governmental posts have been appointed not older generation, "with Soviet mentality," but those with European education. This generation should have destroyed the old Soviet mentality. It should have built new European values because "the Rose Revolution was the real manifest of European values and liberal democracy, which are the basis for Georgia's ubiquity and culture."¹¹

At the same time, in parallel with European discourse, Saakashvili is more or less cautious about Russia and Georgian-Russian relations. Here it should be mentioned the position of some Russian politicians during the Rose Revolution. Russia's foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, came to Georgia and played a mediatory role between President E. Shevardnadze and his opposition leaders. Subsequently, Saakashvili's rhetoric toward Russia was moderate.

⁹ Interview with E. Shevardnadze, newspaper "Republic of Georgia" (saqartvelos respublika), 1997, 02.12

¹⁰ Mikheil Saakashvili, Inauguration speech in 2004; newspaper "24 Hour" (24 saati), 26.01.2004

¹¹ Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, the newspaper "24 Hour" (24 saati) 29.01.2004

Moreover, Russia was still perceived as the main force that could finally regulate the Abkhazian conflict. This policy was reflected in the meeting of Saakashvili with President Putin in 2004, after which the views expressed against Russia's political leader have been quite positive. So, at this time, in Georgia's official discourse, Russia was perceived not much as the enemy but as the force with which Georgia could achieve some agreements about conflicts in Georgia. Furthermore, like Shevardnadze, Saakashvili emphasized Georgia's pro-EU orientation concerning Russia's example. For example, in 2006, Saakashvili stated that we, Georgians, were going to enter Europe together with Russia.¹²; In 2007, he noted: "We have a lot of unity with Russia. I am sure this anti-western discourse we hear from Russia is temporary. In reality, the elite of Russia wants to see their country as part of Europe."¹³

Since 2008 Saakashvili's discourse has been drastically changed. A few months before the Georgian-Russian war, in the light of increasing tension between the two countries (which resulted in war in August 2008 and ultimately ended by Russia's occupation of South Ossetia, one of the regions of Georgia), Saakashvili is actively trying to establish the dissolution of Europe as a significant ally. Georgia's and Europe's interests are discussed in a close relationship. "This is a decisive moment for Europe and Georgia. Georgia has no longer a territory to be lost.¹⁴". Anti-Soviet narrative is entirely replaced by anti-Russian discourse.

Thus, if at first Shevardnadze and then Saakashvili, although with fewer doses, were trying to maintain moderation in Russia, after the August war in 2008, Russia has gained a negative sense, an unequivocal liability in which the West/Europe discourse has been used only in the context of confrontation with Russia; Europe and the entire West became the only alternative models of civilization and development. "Georgia has no alternative besides Europe. Georgia is an old European country looking forward to returning to its own house.¹⁵". But at the same time, Saakashvili's statements about Europe as "Georgia's house" are superficial, and there is no discuss what Europe is, its values, political and economic system. Europe's political discourse in Saakashvili's speeches has only one central dichotomist dimension - Europe vs. Russia.

Conclusion

After analyzing the political discourse of the presidents of Georgia, we can make some conclusions. First, we must note that despite the differences of opinions, one thing is explicit: Georgia's president's discourses toward foreign political orientation are defined by looking for a powerful ally and its possibility of resolving conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this regard, we can conclude that all of the presidents of Georgia understood the importance of integration with Europe, and all of them have made some steps toward it, which recently resulted in visa liberalization with EU member countries. However, there are differences in the goals of using Europe as the country's political orientation, as well as an understanding of its meaning. Sharp ideological aspects do not mark European/western discourse during Gamsakhurdia's presidency. It may be explained by using Europe as a tool for caring for anti-Soviet politics. Afterward, during Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency, the discourse of Europe/West geopolitical aspects have become hegemonic. It may be explained by the country's assimilation with Western

¹² Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, the newspaper "24 Hour" (24 saati) 12.03. 2003

¹³ Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, the newspaper "24 Hour" (24 saati) 23.07.2008

¹⁴ Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, the newspaper "24 Hour" (24 saati) 23.02.2008

¹⁵ Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, the newspaper "24 Hour" (24 saati) 9.11.2010

organizations and participation in the geostrategic energy - projects; the crucial and drastic change has been made during the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili when West/Europe is understood as the guarantee for security and the symbol of high culture and civilization as well. At the same time, despite the explicit willingness to rapprochement with Europe and its values, social aspects and security themes have not great value. Saakashvili's neoliberal economic course may explain it and its desire to make Georgia a "new Singapore." Finally, from 2012 western and more concretely European discourse while maintaining Europe VS. Russia's dichotomy is marked by its new social welfare and security dimension.

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