

RUSSIA AND GEORGIA: EUROPEAN DESTINIES

Looking beyond the immediate aftermath of the unfortunate war in Georgia, what place are Georgia and Russia, and the breakaway enclaves, to have in Europe? For although this now seems a hopeless paradox, there is an inextricably European future for both Georgia and Russia.

Their futures will not be the same; Moscow was quick to drop the idea of joining the European Union in favour of regaining power on the world stage, while today that goal unites Georgian government and opposition circles alike as their sealed destiny.

Russia and the EU have a shared neighbourhood, unequally drawn to European membership. This is the area on which Russia's European destiny, as well as the EU's Eastern border, will ultimately depend. Moscow's excessive use of military force, its brutal response to Georgia's attempt at territorial reunification through equally unwarranted military force, does not undermine the need and urgency for a European order built on a virtuous circle of interdependence between the EU, Russia, and their shared neighbourhood. Rules and norms must guide their relations if lasting peace and prosperity are to be ensured in the western part of the wider Eurasian continent.

Georgians see membership of the European Union as the logical consequence of their national decision to opt for a democratic regime - a political choice both pro-government and pro-opposition forces describe as part of Tbilisi's Euro-Atlantic posture. Joining the European Union is a perfectly legitimate aspiration, irrespective of considerations of timing and feasibility, and one that is shared by many not least in Abkhazia, where until recently the EU was seen as the best alternative to sovereign pressures from Moscow.



Russia toyed only briefly with the idea of EU membership in the early nineties, when democratic reform was a priority. This would only have been achievable if, as well as attaining full democratic convergence, Russia had been willing to reduce its nuclear power status to the level of that of France or the United Kingdom. This is squarely at odds, however, with Russia's relentlessly pursued dream, even during the Yeltsin years, of regaining world superpower status.

Beyond the present crisis, the European Union must reconcile itself to the idea that it will not be the sole world power in Europe. Russia's place for the time being is of a different nature, and the EU must learn, as it abandons its hopeless efforts to democratise Russia, to manage a relationship whose mutually beneficial effects will spill over into the common neighbourhood. Europe needs a regional system to govern the strong web of continental interdependence that is already in place, from energy and the environment to the economy and the human dimensions of development. This is a precondition to placing the continent on the win-win side of globalisation.

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The strength of economic ties is evident. The EU is Russia's largest trading partner and the main source of foreign direct investment flows, while Russia is the EU's main energy supplier. Economic interdependence is for now governed by a multitude of bilateral agreements that should be merged into a new EU-Russia comprehensive agreement that should in turn evolve into a truly multilateral European regional system.

The kind of Europe where the EU and Russia can harmoniously coexist must be governed in its entirety by a set of norms and rules that will not only bring peace to the whole continent and its mosaic of peoples but transform interdependence into a lever for shared prosperity. A model that privileges human development is essential if the Western part of the Eurasian continent is to reap the benefits of globalisation and successfully confront its challenges.

The first and most basic rule for any European multilateral regional system to be viewed as legitimate by all citizens is the resolute rejection of the use of force. War can no longer be viewed in Clausewitzian terms as a 'natural' pursuit of political interests and goals. The 'nationalist state', which places sovereignty as its core and absolute value, must be abandoned or else the lessons of Europe's harrowing wars and the horrors inflicted on its peoples in the tens of millions – of which the Russians took more than their fair share – will have served no purpose.

The current state of war in Georgia is a sad demonstration that both Russia and Georgia are straying from their European destiny. The attempt to subdue South Ossetia by force and Russia's disproportionate offensive are part of the strange surge in the use of military force to deal with tension and conflict at a time when its inefficacy (leaving aside any considerations of legitimacy) has long been proven, including among leaders who are keen to boast about their democratic credentials.

Such was the case in Iraq, then in Lebanon, now in Georgia. Attempting to integrate South Ossetia or Abkhazia by resorting to military force stands against reason. Could Georgia's leaders really have imagined deadly force would win the hearts and minds of aspiring secessionists? Have the lessons of Serbia's brutal attempt against Kosovo, which ultimately led to US and EU support for unilaterally-declared independence, been entirely forgotten?

Equally, does the Kremlin really think the trust and support of its neighbours, including its EU neighbours, can be won by responding with brute force

to Tbilisi's foolishness? This only stirs anti-Russian feeling, already running high in Georgia and among former members of the defunct Warsaw Pact. Anti-Russian nationalism is a major obstacle to any EU-Russia strategic partnership.

A solution to the current conflicts must be based on an immediate cessation of hostilities and further necessitates a firm pledge not to resort to future violence on the part of all of those involved. Such a pledge in relation to South Ossetia and Abkhazia is crucial. After all, Georgia's European destiny cannot be fulfilled if the country is unable to fully absorb the founding principles of the European Union. The EU's very foundation is the rejection of force to resolve disputes. This brings to the fore the need for Georgia to fully consolidate democracy (and to be able to do so free from foreign coercion). Georgia cannot expect to gain access to the EU through anti-Russian 'Atlanticism'.

Moreover, the inclusion of a fully democratic Georgia into the EU provides a sounder kind of security guarantee than a highly hypothetical membership of NATO, especially if it is sought as a kind of affirmation of a renewed East-West divide, which some minority political trends within the EU would like to see reinstated. This is a dangerous trend that must be stopped. Europe cannot afford fracturing, conflictive 'bipolarity'. A virtuous cycle of interdependence capable of generating a harmonious European order must firmly remain a goal common to all EU members. Indeed, this is the only course that can unite all EU members behind a common policy because it is in line with the EU's best interests. This allows for the EU to effectively support democratic consolidation in the neighbourhood it shares with Russia, as was the case with Ukraine. For this Europe needs to overcome its differences in relation to Russia and understand that stable relations with Russia is a vital European interest. This is particularly important in the efforts to stop the war in Georgia and prevent further humanitarian disasters. The EU must not allow Russia to play Member States against one another.

Russia must be persuaded it has nothing to gain but rather much to lose from a confrontational or bullying attitude towards its neighbours. This spells disaster for a strategic partnership with the EU that Russia's leaders, echoing the equally frequent statements from EU capitals, repeatedly state they are seeking. There can be no virtuous interdependence without Russia understanding the limits of military power. Russia will not become a well-respected, reliable and modern pillar of the European and world order if it persists in denying its former fellow republics the right to choose their own democratic path, even when

it leads to the European Union. This is a precondition to the acceptance of Russia as a reliable global actor working for peace and security in the shared European neighbourhood and beyond, which is undeniably an interest shared by all Europeans.

The European Union must do all in its power to stop the spiral of violence against civilians and provide the necessary peacekeeping forces to provide

humanitarian assistance to Ossetian victims of Tbilisi's offensive and, crucially, Georgians who are now at grave risk from Russian-protected revenge. Further forceful displacements must not be tolerated. Georgia is a land of cultural and religious diversity and coexistence that cannot be allowed to descend, any more than the entire Caucasus, into another hell of ethnic cleansing with its future harvest of hatred and violence.