



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**GEORGIA AND THE BALTICS:
RELATIONS AMIDST THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

NINO CHANADIRI

185

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN

Georgia and the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – have a history of friendship that is strengthened through the common Soviet past and shared experiences of Russian influence and violence as well as by the common vision of the contemporary Russian threat towards Eastern Europe. All of this creates the shared desire in these countries to put themselves as far from the Russian sphere of influence as possible. The Baltic states along with Ukraine (and Belarus) are neighbors of Russia and the touch point between Europe and Russia¹ while Georgia is located between Russia and Turkey and performs a significant role in linking them. The partnership between Georgia and the Baltic states in terms of decreasing Russian influence in Eastern Europe, as one of the joint aims, requires the cooperation to be on the highest of levels in order for it to be successful. The partnership not only stands on the common past of the four countries but also on their common security visions and shared values which can ultimately contribute to making the partnership stable and long lasting.

The partnership between Georgia and the Baltics has hitherto been strong. The Baltic states have always been important supporters of Georgia and Ukraine both within the EU and NATO and have been voicing the need to support their EU membership and NATO's open door policy vis-à-vis these two countries.² In 2008, after Russia's invasion of Georgia, the leaders of the Baltic states were the greatest supporters of the country and even visited Georgia during the war. The support was expressed not only in their political circles but also by their public. In August 2008, people in the Baltic states were gathering in the streets in a sign of solidarity with Georgia.³ What is more, representatives of the Baltic states have often tried to put Georgia's struggle with Russia into a wider context in order to show a bigger picture of the events to the rest of Europe. Officials and important political figures from the Baltics have been speaking about Georgia, noting that the reactions from the Western world when Georgia was attacked by Russia in 2008 needed to be harsher as this might have helped avoiding Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁴

Amidst the war in Ukraine, the Baltic states have appeared among those whose reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine have been the harshest. Specific steps were taken to support Ukraine and weaken Russia's position so that Moscow becomes unable to sustain the military campaign.

From first glance, the war in Ukraine should have brought Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states closer to each other as it is logical that these countries with such interconnected interests and visions would stand together during this grave crisis for the entire Western world. However, if Baltic-Ukrainian friendship became firmer during the war, Georgia appeared to be more absent from the “team.” There are several reasons for this, including Georgia’s awkward positions vis-à-vis Ukraine, which put where Georgia stands in terms of its civilizational choices under question, as well as the country’s internal political problems that include democratic backsliding and which directly affect Georgia’s international positions and perspectives.

Baltic and Georgian Reactions over Ukraine

After Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine, sentiments started circulating in the Baltics and in Georgia that Russia will not stop with Ukraine if it wins this war. From the very first days of the war, polls showed that the Georgian public was supportive of Ukraine and believed that Georgia can be “next in line.”⁵ However, it is safe to say that this public attitude and support was not necessarily reflected in the decisions of the Georgian government which chose to distance the country from the situation by openly declaring that it would not join the international sanctions against Russia.⁶ Once the Georgian government became aware of the dissatisfaction from Ukraine vis-à-vis Tbilisi’s awkward position, it even started a campaign against certain Ukrainian officials, blaming them for being under the control of certain Georgian opposition parties.⁷

This lack of clear support from Georgia appeared surprising and disappointing for many in other Eastern European countries. Important figures in the Baltic states have been openly expressing their disappointment with Georgia’s positions, especially under the light of its own occupation by Russia and the continued security challenges. The former President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, wrote that it was not understandable how Georgia could expect its own Russian occupation to be condemned when its position about its neighbor’s Russian threat was not clear.⁸ Georgian diplomats with ties in Europe have been also mentioning that despite the still existing general support from the Baltic states, relations have soured recently due to Georgia’s positions over Ukraine.⁹

From the side of the Baltic states, support for Ukraine has been quite large. Despite NATO membership which offers the Baltic states a reason to feel more secure, nothing can be taken for granted after the invasion of Ukraine. The Baltics can also become a target of Russia, especially if Ukraine falls and this has been an important topic in internal arenas in the region as well as internationally. Officials from the Baltic states understand that the region becomes a territory where “NATO, by defending its territory, either succeeds or fails,” as stated by the Latvian foreign minister, should the alliance become directly involved in the war.¹⁰ Thus, supporting Ukraine and putting the effort into ensuring that Russia loses became a moral responsibility and an issue of national security for the Baltic countries.

The fact that the Baltic states were going to help Ukraine militarily became known even before the war¹¹ when concerns were at the highest level that Russia was planning a full-scale invasion amidst Moscow’s military mobilization near the Ukrainian border. After the invasion, Estonia was among the first to demand a no-fly zone over Ukraine¹² and later became the first country which officially recognized Russia’s actions in Ukraine as a genocide.¹³ Generally speaking, the three states have taken similarly harsh steps against Russia in support of Ukraine. They receive significant amounts of Ukrainian refugees, they are abolishing economic and energy ties with Russia¹⁴ and are advocating the continuation and strengthening of EU assistance to Ukraine alongside the actions of Poland.¹⁵

This contrast between the response to the situation in Ukraine from the Baltic states and from Georgia is visible and, as already noted, it has affected attitudes vis-à-vis Georgia’s actual positions and foreign policy directions. As was expected, countries with the same interests and visions should have stood on the same position against Russia and their actions should have been synchronized in order to ensure a weakening of the common rival. The absence of this synchronization from the Georgian side created doubts and raised questions. There was a noteworthy moment in the last months which reflected the reality of the relations within this group of countries when the presidents of the three Baltic states and the president of Poland visited Ukraine and met with the Ukrainian president.¹⁶ This picture of the presidents of mutually friendly countries standing together reminded everyone of the picture from 2008 when the leaders of the same countries visited Georgia during the war in order to express their support. The Ukrainian president was also among them. However, the Georgian representation was not a part of the visit to Kyiv.



Georgia's internal political problems have directly affected its positioning on the international arena in the current period. It is especially true when considering relations with Ukraine. Ukraine's ruling political elite did not appear to be acceptable for the ruling political elite in Georgia because of their connections with the former ruling political party of Georgia. These interparty sentiments affected the relations between the countries in these difficult times for Ukraine when the entire civilized world became united over Ukraine. It did not help Georgia's image even among its friends as the Western position, which includes the position of the Baltics as well, is predominantly and unconditionally pro-Ukrainian. This position from the Western countries, including the Baltics, did lead to making good relations with Ukraine's government which is currently in the war. Therefore, these differences and the divide over Ukraine and its government between the ruling classes in partner countries and in Georgia started to come to the surface.

Democratic Backsliding: An Obstacle in Georgian-Baltic Relations

In addition to the positions over Ukraine, there is another issue for consideration in Georgian-Baltic relations. Georgia's democratic backsliding and inability to perform sufficiently well in terms of the democratic reforms

that are needed to receive candidacy status for EU membership have proven to be an important obstacle in Georgia's relations with its European partners. The EU did not recommend giving Georgia candidacy status (unlike Ukraine and Moldova) until it fulfills conditions related to reforms and the country's democratization as well as its "de-oligarchization."¹⁷

Top political figures from the Baltic states have been repeatedly stressing this issue in their interviews and sometimes even in their letters to the Georgian public. Just days before the EU's recommendations, Georgians received a letter from Lithuanian MEPs discussing the challenges facing democracy in Georgia and their potential to stop Georgia from joining the EU if proper actions are not made.¹⁸ The concerns expressed in the letter were once again about Georgia's positions towards the Ukrainian issue, calling it "difficult to understand." While commenting on Georgia's democratic reforms during a discussion about media freedom in Georgia in the European Parliament in June when a resolution about this topic was adopted, MP from Estonia, Marina Kaljurand, assessed Georgia's success in democratic reforms as "lost momentum" and urged Georgian politicians to take the debate as the "final wake-up call."¹⁹ In response, the reaction from the Georgian government toward these warnings has always been negative. However, it appeared that the EU's recommendations and conditions, whose fulfillment is a pre-condition for Georgia to receive candidacy status for EU membership, reflected the same concerns about Georgia's democratic development.

Perspective for Continued Partnership

As already noted, the support from the Baltics vis-à-vis Georgia and Ukraine emanates from their common past and their shared interest in limiting Russian influence as well as their shared values of democracy. In diplomatic circles, it is widely acknowledged that the Baltic experiences in terms of democratic transition and EU and NATO accession are more than important for Georgia which aims to follow the same path. What is more, it is also widely acknowledged that the Baltic countries have been not only supporting Georgia and Ukraine themselves but they are also trying to persuade others to do the same.²⁰ Some Baltic states, like Estonia, have even been developing special cooperation strategies with Georgia. For example, there is the strategy approved in December 2021 – the Estonia-Georgia Country Strategy 2021-2024 – that aims to help Georgia

in developing democracy and provide support in the fields of education and entrepreneurship.²¹ This kind of cooperation between Georgia and the Baltic states cannot be taken for granted as Georgia continues on its path in building its European relations. Georgia's continued tension with Ukraine in these difficult times does not create a positive image internationally and only deepens the questions among partners as to whether or not the country can be a stable and trustworthy partner on the path of democratic development and distancing itself from Russia. Questions have been raised during the recent period as Georgia's absence from the Eastern European "team" while standing with Ukraine (and thus, on the side of European security) did not go unnoticed.

The desire for democratic changes and following the EU's recommendations about reforms will determine not only Georgia's candidacy for EU membership but also relations with its strongest and closest partners – the Baltic states. It is very important for Georgia to maintain good relations and keep the trust of these states as they have long been the strongest advocates of the country's membership in the EU and in NATO. Without their support in the Euro-Atlantic structures, Georgia's chances will fall even more.

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