

Introduction

The state of Georgia has the history spanning 3000 years. At different times, in different ways, united Georgia or separate Georgian kingdoms have had active relations both with the leading states of Europe and with the Apostolic See. For centuries, Georgian monarchs and princes actively pursued pro-European foreign policy and promoted European ideas and values within the country. This was done primarily, of course, by promoting the work of Catholic missionaries from Europe. From the beginning of the 19th century, when the Georgian kingdoms became a part of the Russian Empire one by one, Georgia almost completely left the European orbit and came under the tsarist rule. The seventy years of the Soviet rule and later, even with the gaining of independence, the remaining Soviet legacy raised many questions about the issue of Georgia's European identity, and these questions, of course, have definitely not lost their importance today.

The purpose of this short article is to present the main problems in relation to Georgia's European identity and, in this regard, to emphasize the pro-European foreign policy and the main domestic factors affecting this policy. Finally, the main problems and trends related to Georgia's European identity (primarily in the field of its foreign policy) will be explored and the main findings that will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this identity will be presented.

1. Georgia and its European identity

Every country has its own particular national identity. Georgia is a classical case of this. History shows that «down the centuries Georgia or its precursor kindred political units were always in vital interests of the surrounding empires because of the country's geopolitical situation» (Javakhishvili 2019, 1). The struggle of Georgians for physical as well as political survival has always been closely linked to religion; Christianity and the Church played a strong role in shaping national self-consciousness and striving for Europe. In this sense, even today the main trend is that «Georgians' Europeanness is bound up with the Church, which since

the fourth century has been an outpost of Western Christendom in an Islamic world» (Jones 2003, 90). And thus the reality was created that «the Georgian, so constructed, was Christian, European, and a warrior-martyr» (Jones 2003, 91).

Naturally, Georgian-European identity could not be limited to religious and ecclesiastical factors. Cultural values and value systems are important here. This means that for centuries Georgia was close to the European world with its social life, institutions, norms, which were based on the geographical location of the country, religion, art, lifestyle and even the church itself. Thus, the European development of Georgia was determined by historical-cultural and geopolitical factors. The geopolitical location of Georgia, as the eastern bulwark of Christianity, has always played a major role in making the country feel part of the common European space.

Still even in the 5th century, King Vakhtang I Gorgasali of Iberia (Georgian kingdom) left a will «Do not leave the way of the Greeks» (Thebidze 2017). It meant that Georgians should have been faithful to Christianity and the European choice. This mentality and the politics of European identification were more or less relatively strong until the nineteenth century, when the Georgian kingdoms became a part of the Russian Empire. Let us recall the trip of the Georgian royal representative, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, to Europe in the early 18th century, when he tried to save his homeland from the yoke of Persia (By the way, Sulkhan-Saba was one of the most prominent Georgian Catholics, and his diplomatic mission well illustrates Georgia's preference for a pro-European choice). This formation of European identity was not a simple and an easy process, but was directly related to the protection of Christianity by Georgians and their survival as a nation and a country. That was why «Georgia focused on its European identity, which became a major cultural focus of the political discourse that gradually emerged throughout the country's troublesome history and constant struggle for survival amidst various empires» (Kakachia and Minesashvili 2015, 171). The cultural and, in particular, the

religious factor — namely Christianity and, at the same time, the Church - have always held a great weight in defining Georgia's European identity.

No matter how different the political and strategic situation is, it is impossible to completely deny that «the desire to be European and part of Europe is rooted in the Georgian national consciousness. Georgians associate Christianity with Europe, and perhaps naively, count themselves as Europeans» (Rondeli 2001, 206). Georgia's European identity, which was essentially reflected in the orientation of its foreign policy, was a kind of strategic choice which was largely motivated by physical self-preservation, but also by moral foundations (protection of Christianity) and a desire to move forward and develop. Even when the situation in the country was very deplorable, its political elite always emphasized the difficult historical conditions and the fact that Georgia «became separated from European civilization and culture and thus has been unable to move in parallel with European advances» (Kakachia 2012, 6). Naturally, there have always been problems in this regard, as the embodiment of a European identity for a country like Georgia is related to its difficult geopolitical location and the mental readiness of its political elite and society.

2. European identity-driven foreign policy of Georgia

Despite the fact that «for much of recorded history, Georgia was far-off, independent for only short periods, and outside of the “mental map” of Europe» (Beacháin and Coene 2014, 928), even after gaining independence in 1991, Georgia has finally chosen a European orientation in its foreign policy. Of course, in the early years there was a kind of delay, such as the bandwagoning policy towards Russia, but from the second half of the 1990s Georgia's pro-European and pro-American foreign policy course became apparent. The bandwagoning meant bringing Georgia closer (entering the CIS and deploying Russian military bases in the country) to a potential aggressor - Russia - in order to avoid possible military aggression or war from Kremlin in

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the future. In practice it meant that «Georgia's refusal to the bandwagoning strategy in regard to Russia contributed to the country's de facto rapprochement to the West - the United States and the European Union, but also with other European Organizations» (Javakhishvili 2019b, 48). In any case, along with pragmatic political calculations, Georgia's foreign policy course was still motivated by the attractiveness of European values.

The principle of «return to the European family» was one of the strong drivers when the Georgian political elite made foreign policy decisions. Although this issue is less studied, this principle is still actively heard in public policy discussions. European values are of great importance for a major part of Georgian society. Nowadays «for Georgians, the 'return to Europe' has another very important but less researched aspect; the symbolic return to the world of European political values which include, freedom, democracy, justice, solidarity and prosperity. Here we see that a political aspect is added to the religious factor as well. Thus, striving towards European Identity not only means obtaining EU membership but also, and more importantly, sharing European political values and identity» (Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili 2014, 57). Therefore, the foreign policy of Georgia is essentially identity-driven despite the fact that today there are some problems regarding a sincere willingness of the Georgian political elite for integration within European institutions.

Some observers notice that in 1999 the words «I am Georgian and therefore I am European» (Council of Europe 1999) said by the then Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania in the Council of Europe represent «a symbol of the Georgian nation-building framework» (Sikharulidze 2021). In any case, the European Identity of Georgia and its foreign policy is an important part of the country's agenda. There are many problems and challenges facing this policy, but the European orientation still has great support within the country, both among political elites and in society.

3. Domestic factors as problems

Domestic factors are the main determi-

nants of Georgia's European identity. However, not infrequently, they become significant obstacles to the path of the country's European integration. On the one hand, there is the Orthodox Church, which often appears as the architect of Georgian nationalism and as an anti-European wing in the country. It can be said that «“Orthodox” Georgian nationalism focused on primarily cultural issues, such as language, education, the restoration of monuments, literature, film, sport, and, in the last two decades of Soviet power, the Church» (Jones 2006, 255). The Georgian Orthodox Church is

freedom, tolerance, justice, etc., the main part of the society focuses on democracy. In this respect, for example, «perceptions of the EU vary significantly depending on how Georgians rate the state of democracy in the country» (Müller 2011, 75). Support for these values is declining in both political elites and society, which ultimately poses a serious problem for Georgia's "Europeanness" and European identity.

The immaturity of policy-makers, political parties and even legislators is another serious problem in the implementation of Georgia's European-driven for-



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a very influential social actor and a frame-maker of Georgian nationalism the main discourse of which is to maintain national self-sufficiency of Georgia and to exclude the inevitability of Georgia's European identity (against the centuries-old tradition and position of this Church, as a result of almost two centuries of negative influence from the Russian Orthodox Church).

Although there is still strong support for the country's pro-European foreign policy course in Georgia, the perceptions of its citizens are different. As a rule, along with other important values such as

foreign policy. When they do not properly understand the importance of European identity and values in the future development of the country, it sets a serious precedent for discrediting that identity and values. The pro-European foreign policy officially declared by Georgia faces a number of challenges in practice.

4. The role of religion in bringing Georgia closer to Europe

From the very first centuries of Christianity, the main line of Georgia's relations with Europe was its close ties with

the papacy. We see this reality throughout the history of Georgia until it became part of the Russian Empire in the early 19th century. As early as the end of the 6th century, the Catholicos of Kartli Kirion I (596-610) sent a letter to Pope Gregory the Great on religious and organizational issues of the Church. Since that time, the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox monarchs have always had a strong sense of a united Christian Europe, and this was not prevented by the Great Schism (1054). Based on historical sources (Tamarashvili 1902), it is clear that the Georgian Church recognized the primacy of the Pope until the middle of the 13th century.

The Autocephalous Church of Georgia, founded in the 4th century, is one of the oldest churches in the world, and the Georgian nation has always strongly embraced this factor when fighting for national salvation and identity. Georgian national identity owes much to the Georgian Orthodox Church, which was a fully autonomous and self-contained phenomenon. And, most importantly, she has always had a close relationship with the Apostolic See and, thus, embracing the European and common Christian heritage. Such a relationship well illustrated the vicissitudes of Georgian-European identity, in which Georgia, as an Orthodox country, was an authentic part of European Christian civilization.

Conclusion

The formation of Georgia's European identity is a long process. It has its strengths and weaknesses, problems and challenges. Historically, this process has always been closely linked to the common Christian heritage of Georgia and Europe; It should also be noted that Georgia often appealed to the Apostolic See and the Pope to mediate in its relations with Western European countries. The personal political will/readiness of the Georgian monarchs and the pursuit of the survival and development of their own country or kingdom played a major role in this.

The European identity of Georgia and Georgians is often equated with "European choice", "strategic choice" or "civilizational choice", and it is a hot topic of political discourse in the country. In many cases, such a choice, which finds substantial implementation in foreign policy, is highly idealized and that is why there are a number of problems related to it. If in the past Christianity had a

strong link with the European family, today the Georgian Orthodox Church has a strongly anti-European and anti-Western position, and a part of society is still strongly influenced by this institution.

At the same time, Georgia's European identity-driven foreign policy is significantly influenced by domestic factors, which, not infrequently, seem problematic. On the one hand, the political elite and a large part of the society support European values while, on the other hand, they are hesitant about the process of establishing these values. The country's declared pro-European foreign policy does not always have a solid foundation at the domestic level. This is due to the beliefs and perceptions of Georgian political parties, policy-makers and society as a whole, which are often inconsistent with European values.

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