

POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá / Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies

URL časopisu / URL of the journal: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

Autor(i) / Author(s): Julien Arnoult
Článok / Article: A Specific Strategy to Close Ties With the EU: The Case of Georgia
Vydavateľ / Publisher: Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica / Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – UMB Banská Bystrica

Odporúčaná forma citácie článku / Recommended form for quotation of the article:

ARNOULT, J. 2014. A Specific Strategy to Close Ties With the EU: The Case of Georgia. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Roč. 17, č. 2, 2014. ISSN 1335 – 2741, s. 75-90. Dostupné na internete:

<http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk/userfiles/file/2_2014/ARNOULT.pdf>.

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A SPECIFIC STRATEGY TO CLOSE TIES WITH THE EU: THE CASE OF GEORGIA

Julien Arnoult*

ABSTRACT

Establishing an administrative body dedicated to European integration is the favourite option chosen by European Union (EU) member states prior to their accession. Since the political change of 2004, Georgia is European-oriented and still expressing its will for joining the EU. In this regard, Georgia has created a Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. However, the Tbilisi-based authorities have not applied yet, and the Brussels-based institutions do not consider its partner as a potential candidate. In fact, the Transcaucasian Republic considers itself as a European nation and is subsequently looking for closing ties with the EU, which is considered as a shield against the Russian threat. Therefore, the ministry's goals are the Europeanization of Georgia as well as gaining value in the EU's eyes. The following article is written from an administrative point of view, with an analysis of the structure of European and Georgian ministries, and interviews with Georgian officials.

Key words: European Integration, Georgia, Eastern Partnership, EU Enlargement, Government structure

Introduction

When someone is walking down the street or watching television in Georgia, one might think, at first sight, that this country is a member of the European Union (EU), since the EU and Georgian national flags are everywhere standing side by side... which is common practice in the EU member states. In fact, there is long-standing confusion behind this situation.

First of all, there is no clear definition of “Europe”, and Georgia is playing with this uncertainty. The EU comprises 28 member states, which define themselves as “Europe”, despite the fact that the EU does not cover the entire European continent nor the 44 unanimously recognised states that have their capital city located in

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Europe as well. Moreover, the EU borders go beyond the “Old Continent” and are twofold: the outermost regions under the sovereignty of a member state, and Cyprus, and an island state located in Asia. As a result, Cyprus is a relevant precedent to convince the EU to accept Georgian membership, as the Transcaucasian nation considers its culture to be part of a wider European culture.

Secondly, Georgia is classified as a Western Asian country by the United Nations (UN) (UN Statistics, 2013) and yet has no border with any EU member state. Nevertheless, some political clues led one to think that Georgia belongs to Europe: since 1992 it has been a member of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and of the Council of Europe and its parent bodies since 1999 (the flag consisting of a circle of twelve golden stars on an azure background was adopted by the Council of Europe before being the symbol of the EU and its previous bodies), as well as non-European states in both cases. These memberships argue in favour of a European Integration for Georgia in an undefined future for both of the two partners. Moreover, Georgia considers itself to be politically identified with other European nations since the Transcaucasian Republic is a target of EU policies (Serrano, 2011, p. 169), such as the oil and natural gas supply and transport (from the Caspian Sea) strategy, the assistance programs and missions, and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP – an EU policy based on a cooperation framework with countries of Northern Africa, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus).

A Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration (MEEAI) was established in 2004 in Georgia by the newly elected and pro-Western President, **Mikheil Saakashvili**, following the Rose Revolution. The title of this ministry is clear about Georgian broader intentions: they are willing to be a part of Western integration and collective security projects, while joining NATO and the EU. However, the two Brussels-based organisations are quite different: the EU has an economic, political, and normative ambition, while NATO has a military and strategic one. But the Tbilisi-based Government has been more EU-oriented since April 2008 (when Georgia’s application for NATO Membership Action Plan, which can be considered as a major step before an official candidacy to NATO, was vetoed at the Bucharest Summit.) Despite this, joining NATO remains a top priority for Georgia. Within the **Irakli Garibashvili**-led Cabinet (in office since Nov. 20th, 2013), as well as within the previous Cabinet, both MEEAI State Minister **Alex Petriashvili**, and MEEAI Deputy Ministers David Dondua and Mariam Rakviashvili, have a NATO-oriented diplomatic background. That is why the MEEAI’s title was not changed.

For these reasons, this article is solely focused on the department dealing with the EU, despite the fact that the EU and NATO integration processes often have a close schedule.

Before joining the EU, a line ministry or a Secretary of State devoted to European Integration, or together with another policy area, is established by a candidate state. Yet, Georgia did not officially apply. Such a ministry has already been created by former candidate States, but it was always temporary and this model was not automatically followed.

What does Georgia expect from the EU and European integration, while it is not a candidate state and at the same it is time following the path paved by previous candidate States? And what are the MEEAI's true goals?

Most studies related to Georgia, and specifically EU-Georgia relations, have an International Relations or Geopolitics point of view, in particular in the scope of Russia's influence and security issues. In opposition to mainstream analyses, this article has adopted an administrative point of view, while studying the EU-Georgia relations in the scope of a Georgian Ministry. The methodology is as follows: analysis of the structure of European and Georgian ministries, analysis of data, and interviews with its officials.

1 A ministry with clear goals alongside an unclear edge Georgia: a specific case in European integration history?

Denmark was the first and only state of the 1973 Enlargement to set up a ministry aiming for European integration. Within the second **Krag** Cabinet (Sep. 26, 1964 – Feb. 2, 1968), **Ivar Nørgaard**, the Minister of Economy, was the first incumbent to be additionally appointed on June 1, 1967 as the Minister of European Market Affairs, six years before Denmark joined the European Economic Community (EEC) and the parent European bodies in 1973. In other words, he was the Minister for European Communities (EC) Affairs and in particular for its Common Market. However, the Danish scope was broader than the sole EEC: The United Kingdom, also applying for the EEC, was a major export partner of Denmark, especially for agriculture. This results time after time in a wider Ministry for Trade, Nordic Affairs, and External Economic Affairs. The position was removed with the end of the **Jørgensen** Cabinet (Oct. 5, 1972 – Dec. 19, 1973).

Greece was the first country to establish a true ministry dedicated to European Affairs within the seventh **K. Karamanlís** Cabinet (July 28, 1977 – Oct. 5, 1980) two years after Greece officially applied to join the EC. **George**

Kontogeorgou was the only Minister (without portfolio) to hold the position, which was removed nine days after Greece joined the EC, in January 1981. European integration was the obvious goal of this ministry, although its official name did not suggest so. The Spanish government followed the Greek model, but this ministry was stubbed out five years before Spain joined the EC in January 1986.

Portugal was the first state to turn the corner of European integration into a two-step momentum while drafting the present ministry model. At first, a Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and European Integration was subordinated to the Prime Minister Office within the **Mota Pinto** Cabinet (Nov. 21, 1978 – Aug. 31, 1979). José de Matos Torres assumed office, one year and half after Portugal officially applied to join the EC. In addition to this position, Manuel **Jacinto Nunes** was Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs and European Integration. From then on, European integration was higher ranked within the first **Pinto Balsemão** Cabinet (Jan. 12, 1981 – Sep. 8, 1981). It resulted in an independent and line ministry devoted to this sector, held by **Álvaro Barreto**. Furthermore, a Secretary of State for European Integration was affiliated and assumed by **Joaquim Ferreira do Amaral**. The two ministries were removed four years before Portugal became an EC member state.

The Portuguese precedent served as an example for Central and Eastern European countries, especially for Poland and Romania starting in 1992, followed by Bulgaria in 1997, then by Croatia and Hungary (surprisingly, a Ministry for European Integration, without portfolio, was set up within the first **Gyurcsány** Cabinet after Hungary acceded to EU membership in 2004). Some countries also gave a high rank within the government structure, such as Slovakia and then Poland, prior to 2004 enlargement. Candidate countries or “potential candidate” countries (which are the official term used by EU institutions designating countries that are not yet recognised as candidates and that are seriously considered for membership on mid-term) did so as well, with or without official application: FYR-Macedonia, Georgia, Ukraine, Albania, Kosovo, Moldova and finally Serbia.

The establishment of a ministry devoted to European integration has greatly varied. It has depended on various reasons, such as government dismissal, government reshuffle, ministry merger, ministry division and subordination. Subsequently, the sector of European integration has also disappeared, moved to another affiliation and had a diverse order of preference. That is the reason why only cases that are a starting point are mentioned above.

In Hungary within the first **Orbán** Cabinet (Jul. 8, 1998 – May 5, 2002), there was also a particular kind of ministry related to European integration: a body without portfolio for managing the PHARE program (transition and pre-

accession funding and assistance program). **Imre Boros** was the only Minister to assume the office. This ministry has no precedent in Government history, neither in Hungary nor in Europe, and was not renewed in the following cabinets. It was both an operation and mission body that seems to resemble the Georgian MEEAI.

A new political balance in Europe led Georgia to create the MEEAI in December 2004, as **Lela Garsevanishvili** of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)¹ explains: “*it was mainly due to the new developments in the EU and the biggest enlargement in 2004 and the following development of the ENP. [...] The EU got a new face and we wanted to efficiently develop some coordination structures. That is the reason why we have conducted several study visits to new EU member countries, such as Estonia in 2010 for example, in order to know how they implemented their task and their coordination in the European integration process. Since Estonia is a former Soviet country and now an EU member [...], it is a good example. From the MFA point of view, this is an effective way to accomplish this process*”. There are two complementary ways of understanding this momentum. Firstly, EU policy is reshaped due to a new neighbourhood as well as a new balance of power within the EU and new interests advocated by the EU new member states. Secondly, the accession process for Central and Eastern European countries was long; therefore Georgia is preparing and anticipating a future enlargement heading east.

2 The MEEAI, a ministry like any other?

The title of the MEEAI leads one to think of **Edgard Pisani**'s analysis about categories of public administration: task force administration (*administration de mission*), which is in charge of a specific mission, and the business-running administration (*administration de gestion*). Consequently, this ministry seems to belong to the first category. Edgard Pisani explains further: “*The task force administration is adjusted to an issue, a period, a place; it has a location and a specialization; it must be dismantled at the time when the problem is solved. [...] The task force administration requires long-term programs; it requires a sole command as well as a sole budget*” (Pisani, 1956, p. 324). A priori, a ministry dedicated to European integration should stand until Georgia joins the EU. Also, it should be so for the two other task force mission

¹ Lela Garsevanishvili is Head of the Division for EU-Georgia Cooperation, Department of European Integration, at the MFA.

ministries (over 20 ministries, including the Prime Minister): the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality (formerly known as Ministry for Reintegration (of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees. So far, this has been not the case in the other European countries, as mentioned above. Moreover, European integration is not only limited to EU membership, but it is also a multi-scale project. In the scope of a vertical analysis, European integration is related to renewal, deepening mutation, and extension of cooperation, policies and programs: this is what Western European countries and Turkey have chosen to do. In the scope of a horizontal analysis, European integration may concern all fields where the EU has a competence or where action on a continental-scale is required. However, European integration means nothing but long-term EU membership in Georgian officials' mind.

Coordination is a key aspect of **Edgard Pisani's** analysis. Of all the tasks that the MEEAI is faced with, coordination plays a major role in its dealings with the EU. The MEEAI's main duty is related to the coordination of activities related to EU integration at the Government, ministries, and administrative agencies levels: coordination of EU-Georgia Action Plan implementation and follow up within the framework of the ENP, cooperation assistance within the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EP)² policy and coordination of EU assistance and programs. The detailed MEEAI tasks description leads to this conclusion: it is a coordinating and cross-disciplinary body dedicated to incorporating EU programs, action projects and funding. This process is similar to the adoption of the *Acquis communautaire*, just as official candidate states do before joining the EU. David Cadier and Florent Parmentier make a similar analysis about the EP in the chapter concerning the free trade agreement: "*The rational principle is based on harmonization of law swap, that is to say taking over the *acquis communautaire* as well as the expansion of administrative capacities, in exchange for a wider opening of the EU internal market. This results in a huge (and costly) adjustment effort from the economic operators of the neighboring*

² EP is a specific initiative within the framework of the ENP for establishing an Association Agreement with former Soviet republics of Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine) and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia). The EP covers six areas: democracy, good governance and stability (12 chapters); economic integration and convergence with EU policies (11 chapters); energy security (5 chapters); contacts between people (9 chapters); interaction with other stakeholders (4 chapters); horizontal cooperation (3 chapters).

countries, in various fields such as phytosanitary, environmental and social standards, as well as certification of industrial products.” (Cadier, Parmentier, 2011, p. 599) This pattern is typical of the way the EU deals with its close and less powerful partner countries. The latter must adapt its legislation or pass new laws that are in line with EU decisions. On the opposite side, the EU never changes its laws, claiming that the decision-making process within the EU and between member states is very complex; consequently, a decision cannot be modified. That is perhaps the reason why the MEEAI minister and its deputy ministers all have a diplomatic background in international negotiation skills, and have assumed administrative or political responsibilities prior to their appointment.

The MEEAI actions go beyond operations targeting the EU. This body is a true repository of EU actions and plays a challenging go-between role. Firstly, the ministry provides practical and regulatory assistance to bodies targeted by EU programs. Secondly, the MEEAI holds a central position while monitoring ministries' actions in respecting international agreements. **Eka Sepashvili**³ of the MEEAI describes further: “*We are collecting all the information from the ministries about what they have done within the year in regards to the European integration process [...] and forming one single report that is the ENP implementation report by the Government of Georgia [...]. The other task is to coordinate line ministries to participate in the ENP thematic platform [...]. For line ministries, we are sometimes consulting, giving advice, and working together [...]. Ministry representatives ask how a report should be prepared, what activity should be included, and what should the format be. It is sometimes a technical issue and sometimes a conceptual issue [...]. Our task is to have a broader outlook of the country*”. The MEEAI is more than a coordination body; it appears to be a guiding ministry. In this case, a guiding role is twofold: it is the top stage of coordination as well as it surpasses the coordination framework.

In fact, setting up a coordinating body has always been linked to a significant and deeper relationship with the EU. **Virginie Lanceron** explains this general development: “*this Europeanization process results in establishing bodies dedicated to a dynamic dialogue between the EU level and the national level; this interaction is a fundamental part of the EU's way of working*” (2008, p. 407). This is available for the EU member states, candidate states, and

³ Eka Sepashvili, Ph. D., is Chief Adviser to the State Minister at the Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration.

“potential candidates” and undefined candidates such as Georgia. Consequently, MEEAI’s coordinating task might be considered as a strong political, administrative and legal symbol, and an item of Europeanization. Nevertheless, the linking role between the EU level and the national level is sometimes operated by the MFA: it is responsible for negotiating with the EU. There is also a Department of European Integration within the MFA, alongside a Department of Security Policy and Euro-Atlantic Integration. Georgia applies unofficial but practical division of work: the MEEAI activities are Georgia-oriented while the MFA deals with external relations. In practice, the division of work is even more pragmatic: task distribution depends on case and necessity. **Eka Sepashvili** gives an example: *“we are sometimes representing Georgia with international forums, seminars, and conferences. Sometimes the MFA is not able or does not wish for us to be present because we are the main coordinator for the EP (for its bilateral or multilateral dimensions)”*. This MEEAI in opposite direction serves as a key support for the MFA. **Lela Garsevanishvili** explains how close the MEEAI-MFA cooperation is: *“we have the ENP action plan, that we have to implement, and sometimes we need overall information, to know where we stand, [the MEEAI] has this information [...] whatever information is needed, we go in that direction to find it. Any negotiation or agreement we start, they coordinate the line ministries to make sure that they do their job. We involve [the MEEAI] at every stage”*.

The MEEAI plays a leading role within the inter-ministerial Committee for European Integration. The Prime Minister is the chairperson, but the duties of secretary and guidance are assumed by the MEEAI. Eka Sepashvili describes how it works: *“this committee meets to solve issues that we cannot treat ourselves. [...] We call and chair the committee in order to find a common position. If the decision has to be made at a higher level, by the Deputy Ministers or at the Ministers’ levels for example, the Prime Minister chairs and decides on a particular issue”*. This procedure provides a political weight in regards to technical decisions, (because the MEEAI has merged two administrative models together), when coordination is assumed by a ministry or only by an interministerial committee, instead of deciding which option to take.

The coordinating role assumed by the MIEEA may seem obvious when it deals with administrative bodies involved with European programs. There are two exceptions, which depend on skills and technical complexity of the dossier, **Eka Sepashvili** explains further: *“for the Association Agreement, the MFA is the main coordinator; our ministry is the chief negotiator for certain parts, whereas*

for the establishment of the Deep and Complete free trade Agreement (DCFTA), the Ministry of Economy is coordinator". Pragmatism prevails at last.

3 The long-term impact of the MEEAI

A constant and gradual rapprochement with the EU

Euro-Georgian relations are summarised here below while highlighting the most salient facts. The goal is to provide elements for understanding the point of view of both parties in order to put their actions into perspective.

Until the EU enlarged geographically for the seventh time in its history, Georgia was merely considered by the EU as an oil and gas transit country. Moreover, in Europeans' eyes, Georgia was a part of the Russian sphere of influence, like any former Soviet country. While Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007, Georgia became a neighbouring state of the EU, since they both have access to the Black Sea, as does Turkey, whose official EU application was accepted two decades before. As a result, Georgia entered into the EU sphere of interest. This accomplishment was supported and relayed by the EU member states, which were under Soviet control. It became even more prominent due to the Five-Days War in August 2008, when the Presidency of the Council of the EU (assumed by France during this semester) went out in front mediation between Russia and Georgia, resulting in a lightning settlement and expression of the EU soft power located on the south-side of the Russian border⁴.

Since September 2008, the EU has deployed and renewed every year the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM)⁵. This mission, which was a specific request of Russia as well, offers the EU an intimate and an unprecedented picture of a partner country. According to Torsten Derrik of the EUMM, *"Before the EUMM was established, Brussels didn't know much about Georgia. Now, we are really informed [...]. I think there is more substance and good impressions, and we have gained interest from both sides, which makes*

⁴ Prior to the Russo-Georgian War, EU actions just led a cooperation and assistance mission in 2004 (EUJUST Themis) and have been appointing a High Representative for the South Caucasus since 2003, who now have turned to a High Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia since 2008.

⁵ According to the Council Joint Action 2008/736/PESC the EUMM contributes to stabilisation, normalisation and confidence building whilst also contributing to informing European policy in support of a durable political solution for Georgia.

things maybe more difficult, in particular for Georgia, because they really have to deliver. But on the other hand, the EU also has a great commitment and responsibility to take into consideration the wishes or long-term aims of Georgia. We greatly assist the decision makers in Brussels in this regard, because we can provide a lot of information”.

Indeed, the monitors (about two hundred) are in a good position for gauging the country as well as estimating how cooperation is running in the field, with both the EU, Georgia, and the former belligerents. Indirectly, daily observation deals with various issues such as police, military, cooperation with local authorities, justice, rule of law, minority rights, access to basic needs, education, etc. So we ended up with the endured “eye of Moscow” being replaced with the chosen “eye of Brussels”.

Due to these events, the EU decided the Transcaucasian Republic is to be a part of a tightened cooperation framework: it results in the EP within the ENP. This EU policy is a kind of antechamber that is ignoring candidate countries’ further needs and aspirations: it is a waiting room without seating for waiting, where no one knows what to expect and for how long. Because the road paving-process is interrupted by a large obstacle (the EU-Russia relations): the EU strengthens ties with Georgia, but this development cannot be a major bone of contention between the two powers, as they share higher political and energy interests. For example, the newly appointed **Ivanishvili** Cabinet was pushed by Brussels to accept Russian membership in the World Trade Organisation in late October 2011 (Miller, Lomadze, 2011); the Georgian decision was also part of its new policy toward Russia. According to David Cadier and Florent Parmentier, this tendency is also true for the EP, which is the overwhelming cooperation framework: *“the fact is that the EP has reduced the political dimension, as much as it can, in part not to offend Russia’s sensibilities as a regional power”* (Cadier, Parmentier, 2011, p. 600).

From Tbilisi-based authorities’ point of view, the EU commitment contributes to saving its precarious independence and stability. The Russian Federation steered the independence of Georgian breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and erected large military bases there. Ethnic minorities (Armenians and Azeris in particular) are not integrated into the Georgian society and live in border regions where the Russian language is the *lingua franca*. Above all, Georgia does not belong to any defensive alliance. Still remaining in the minds of Georgian leaders and politicians is a fear of abandonment to their fate. If we take an example from history, such as the Democratic Republic of

Georgia (1918-1921), it was removed from the map due to a lack of external support and a hostile neighbourhood. In addition, Georgia was economically weakened in 2006, when the Moscow-based authorities expelled Georgian workers coupled until mid-2013 with an embargo against Georgian wines and mineral waters (the Russian market was their main outlet). Looking for both political and economic rapprochement with the EU subsequently contributes to their goal of independence, which is shared by the population (Muller, 2011, pp. 73-78).

Currently, the EU is the only international organisation operating in Georgia after the concomitant withdrawal of the UN in Abkhazia and the OSCE in South Ossetia in the summer of 2009, after Russia vetoed a renewal of their mandates. A decision is relatively easier to make inside the EU, as it comprises only 28 members and no hostile country with veto power. Confidence in the EU is also strengthened by the EUMM, whose actions are clearly visible by regular citizens: it is merely a civilian mission and not a peacekeeping mission or response operation. However, it fulfils this defensive role indirectly: it is the epitome of the EU soft power. Georgians, both officials and citizens perceive it as a shield⁶. This Georgian feeling demonstrates a threefold paradox. Firstly, the “European protection” is provided only because a part of its territory was taken away (despite the fact that Georgia lost control on Abkhazia and South Ossetia two decades ago). Secondly, a withdrawal of the EU is likely to occur if Georgia recovered the two breakaway regions. Last but not least, the serious and significant rapprochement with the EU came into force and was made possible due to the weakening of the Transcaucasian Republic.

4 A full European integration out of reach

Prime Minister **Bidzina Ivanishvili** (Oct. 25, 2012 – Nov. 20, 2013), now leader of the ruling political party, the Georgian Dream, reaffirmed in June 2013 its commitment for a European destiny while stating: “*if there is a process that must be slowed down, it will be the one with Russia because our priority is the*

⁶ Arnoult Julien. Interviews conducted in September 2011, March and September 2012 in the region of Shida Kartli with refugees from South Ossetia, both Georgians and Ossetians, humanitarian NGOs staff, and in Tbilisi with members of the Government (Defense, Refugees) and heads of department (Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). However, this qualitative panel cannot be considered as a representative sample.

integration into NATO and Europe”, with the goal of transforming the country into “a democracy and an economy of European type” (Genté, 2013). From the beginning of the legislative campaign of 2012 and since then, **Bidzina Ivanishvili** has repeatedly said that he is European-oriented, contrary to the “pro-Russian” image given by the Western press and his political opponents. In his mind, European integration must be nothing but paired with an absolutely necessary re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia: he considers it essential due to the pivotal role this neighbouring state plays in the fate of Georgia. Notwithstanding the willingness of the former Head of the Government to move closer to Russia, there is consequently a trans-partisan continuity on this issue, since the previous ruling party (the UNM) claimed the same purpose.

This ministry is the result of a true political expression and therefore matches **Edgard Pisani**’s analysis: “[Task force administration] is based on a movement of thought coming from either a man or a team. Business-running administration is a judge; task force administration mission is an actor. The first one is rational (Cartesian), the other one is concrete; the functions of the first one are neutral, the functions of the second one have obvious political aspects; the first one may turn into a corps, or at least a ‘power’, the second one is directly dependent on the Government which provides resources and an authority that is outside the scope of ordinary law” (1956, p. 325). Prior to the political change of October 2012, the MIEEA Minister held a high rank in the government structure following: he was Deputy Prime Minister and number 2 of the Government within the **Merabishvili** Cabinet (July 4, 2012 – Oct. 25, 2012). He is now a State Minister and holds the fourth rank, coming after the Deputy Prime Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development and the Deputy Prime Minister for Energy. Despite this new ranking, the MEEAI keeps having a high position and working on a top priority mission. According to **Eka Sepashvili**, being a State Minister has the same importance as a Deputy Prime Minister in practice.

Could Georgia push on a further integration with the EU? Satisfaction prevails among Georgian officials about the process. **Lela Garsevanishvili** explains the new outlook: “the ENP was good when it started, it was a new initiative. Our cooperation with the EU evolved quite easily. [...] The EP offered a more concrete perspective than the ENP [...]. EP is the major framework, under the umbrella of the ENP, but the ENP covers countries that are quite different, that is the reason why we do not focus on it”. **Eka Sepashvili** gives a complementary vision: “So far, the EP is a good framework for cooperation

because it has an individual approach towards the country [...]. We will be given more support from the EU side if we provide and conduct more in the direction that we agreed on. [...] Of course, our final aim is to be a member of the EU, but so far we have to fulfil our commitment [...], it is a time consuming process [...]. Our final aim is to be a member of the EU, but we don't speak for this short or middle term because we know that it is not realistic. On the other hand, the EU is not ready to absorb new countries". Beyond the partnership between the two sides, Georgia is not classified by the EU as a "potential candidate": the road to Brussels is an endless journey. This is also why political realism overall prevails.

Furthermore, economic performances lead Georgians to keep cautious. These are an implicit criteria for membership, especially as *"this condition has never been so strictly understood"* (Blumann, Dubouis, 2013) as the democratic one can be. According to Eurostat data⁷, the Transcaucasian Republic had dynamic growth in 2011, with a forecast of 7%, in comparison with the tiny EU performance of 1.6%. But there are huge disparities in terms of the standard of living. Eurostat estimated GDP per capita of € 2,309 (current prices) in Georgia for the same year, which is two times higher than in 2005. But it reaches only 9.2% of the EU average level of € 25,200. Georgia is more than two times poorer than Bulgaria, which is the poorest EU member state with a GDP per capita of € 5,200. Income level has never been a condition for acceding the EU, nevertheless, the Tbilisi-based Government is in fact waiting for something else but membership.

On the trade side, bilateral trade does not reflect the integrative ambition of both partners. However, the flow of goods and investments is factually and cognitively a basic element that leads to strengthened ties in the history of European integration. Georgians were aware of this, as they recognised the fundamental role played by trade. Indeed, Georgian officials claim the paternity for including the free trade component in their general negotiations with the EU, according to **Eka Sepashvili** and **Giorgi Kacharava** of the MFA⁸: they asked for the possibility of studying a free trade framework, which was satisfied and then has been transformed into an effective negotiation framework.

Based on figures provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the EU accounted for only 17.8% of the entire Georgian foreign trade, which is

⁷ Provisional data. Eurostat, "ENP countries: GDP and main aggregates", Dec. 6, 2012, & Eurostat, Real GDP growth rate – volume, July 10, 2013.

⁸ Giorgi Kacharava is Deputy Director, Department of European Integration, at the MFA.

USD 4.7 billion over the first half of 2013. The EU ranked in third position, after the former Soviet Union, which remains a major partner with a market share of 33.1%, and before Turkey, counting for 14.7%. The previous decade confirms this tenuous development between the two entities. Indeed, the EU market share has gone down, from 32.6% in 2003 to 27.2% in 2012, while over the same period, Georgia has multiplied by 6.4 in international exchange, from USD 1.6 billion to USD 10,22 billion. This weakness is particularly highlighted by the trade balance, as the Transcaucasian Republic imported 3.3 times more than it exported in 2012. Furthermore, among the six countries participating in the EP, Georgia is the one least integrated in Europe. Based on data provided by The Directorate-General for Trade in the European Commission for 2012, 53% of Moldovan trade is EU-oriented, which is the highest level among EP countries, while Georgia has the lowest level, with 26.6%. Even Belarus, a faithful partner of the Russian Federation, has a higher level of trade with the EU, which is 28.9%.

Only foreign direct investment from the EU rose over the period, from 28.17% of USD 340 million received by Georgia in 2003 to 46.48% of USD 865.2 million dollars in 2012 (provisional figures).

At the summit of the EP held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on November 28 and 29, 2013, Georgia (together with Moldova) initialled the Association Agreement with the EU, of which the DCFTA is a part. It is therefore crucial for two reasons. It would enable both partners to strengthen economic ties, which are still negligible, and in parallel break relatively those with the post-Soviet space. In this regard, the Transcaucasian Republic may gain value and importance in the EU's eyes.

Conclusion

Is Georgia walking on the road that leads to being one of the European countries that are now EU members and built up on administrative body dedicated to European integration? At first sight, a positive answer might be given. But the reality leads to an opposite conclusion. Georgia does not really walk in their footsteps in the scope of a membership with neither a task force ministry nor an inter-ministerial commission. The Transcaucasian Republic created a structure that aims to come closer to the EU instead of outright integration; "an engagement offer" with Brussels is likely to upgrade it significantly. In this regard, Georgia invented a model for non-candidate

countries, with a real guiding ministry.

A ministry with one single task or with a few tasks would be likely good enough to implement and internalise EU policies, such as a “Ministry of EP” or “Ministry for EU assistance and funding”. Hungary made that choice before acceding the EU, as well as Latvia after membership with a Ministry for EU Funds (without portfolio) within the second **Kalvītis** Cabinet (Nov. 7, 2006 – Dec. 12, 2007) as well as the second **Godmanis** Cabinet (Dec. 12, 2007 – Feb. 20, 2009).

Indeed, the EP is just one more step on the road of closer EU-Georgia relations. However, from the Tbilisi-based authorities, the MIEEA responds a wider institutional logic: going beyond EU offers, and making its society and administration more “Europeanized”. This pledge of commitment is a message addressed both to itself and to Europe.

But Georgia is seating in a very uncomfortable chair. It established a ministry dedicated to European integration in order to strengthen ties, even though EU has little to offer the Transcaucasian Republic in return. In addition, this latter officially asks for nothing and at the same time spreads the word it yearns to join the EU. Indeed, Georgia is aware it has a long way ahead before it can become a member state, and knows that the EU is indeterminate about an expansion toward “Far East”.

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Interviews

- Interview with Eka SEPASHVILI, Ph. D., Chief Adviser to the State Minister, Office of the State Minister of Georgia on European and Europ-Atlantic Integration. The interview took place in Tbilisi, Oct. 29, 2013.
- Interview with Lela GARSEVANISHVILI, Head of the Division for EU-Georgia Cooperation, Department of European Integration, MFA. The interview took place in Tbilisi, Oct. 29, 2013.
- Interview with Giorgi KACHARAVA, Deputy Director, Department of European Integration, MFA. The interview took place in Tbilisi, Oct. 29, 2013.