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A direct route to engagement

EU efforts in the region need not go via Tbilisi

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The Russian–Georgian war in August 2008 and Russia's decision to recognise the independence of the Georgian breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have fundamentally altered the political balance of what were previously referred to as 'frozen' conflicts. After years of pursuing policies that isolated Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the European Union and the government of Georgia have both announced new strategies towards these regions. Despite certain similarities between the two strategies, however, aligning their instruments and goals will prove difficult given the different political priorities of Brussels and Tbilisi. The EU must prepare to pursue its own engagement strategy regardless of how the Georgian approach is crafted or implemented.

At first glance, the two strategies – 'engagement without recognition', in the EU's case, and Georgia's 'engagement through cooperation' – appear to overlap substantially. Both stress the importance of facilitating contacts between residents of the breakaway territories and the outside world by supporting civil society, the business community and other non-state actors. These 'society-first' approaches also both defer the thorny issue of political status, while emphasising the need to end the territories' isolation and extreme dependence on Russia.

There are also possible synergies between the Georgian and European strategies. If the Abkhaz enjoy more meaningful contact with Georgians and with the EU, then these programmes may slowly shape Abkhazia's political culture into being more western-oriented, independent of Russia and open to pursuing a political solution in good faith. Moreover, a European-centred vector appears to be the only realistic alternative for policymakers in Sukhumi who fear Russia's steady absorption of the region under the legal pretence of Russian–Abkhaz 'bilateral cooperation'.

'Engagement without recognition' is a strategy that the West, including both the EU and the US, should apply out of its own self-interest. The prospect of Russia continuing to tighten its control over Abkhazia while the West remains isolated from it with no political foothold or leverage sets a disastrous precedent for the region, opening the door to other geopolitically motivated 'partial recognitions'. This would reinforce regional instability for the foreseeable future. Although Georgian 'territorial integrity' may be the most desired solution to this problem, it is at best a long-term goal. Focusing too much attention on reaffirming Georgia's territorial sovereignty will push Sukhumi, which remains uninterested in reintegrating into Georgia, further into Russia's orbit.

Georgia's strategy is, naturally, driven by the interests of the Georgian state. These are shaped by domestic political pressures and the task of reintegrating Abkhazia. This, as well as the fact that relations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi have a recently stormy history, suggests that it will be difficult for the Georgian government to find a partner in Sukhumi willing to work on implementing the strategy. It will be even more difficult, given signs that Tbilisi wants to implement its strategy without engaging with Abkhazia's de facto authorities. Many in Abkhazia are, unsurprisingly, suspicious of the new Georgian strategy and view it largely as an attempt to present the West with evidence of a conciliatory stance. Nonetheless, Tbilisi has a real opportunity to demonstrate a renewed commitment to helping the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and should be lauded for reversing its earlier policy of isolation.

In contrast with the Georgian approach, the EU's 'engagement without recognition' is not primarily a strategy for restoring Georgia's territorial integrity but rather a plan to keep Russia's growing influence at bay and make the West relevant in Abkhazia. These are the Western powers' major goals in Abkhazia. When these goals dovetail with those of the Georgian government, the West should cooperate and coordinate with Georgia. But neither Brussels' nor Washington's foreign-policy aims should depend on Tbilisi's approval.

Moreover, given the ever-present possibilities of belligerent rhetoric from Tbilisi or Russian pressure on Sukhumi, Abkhaz concerns about engaging with the Georgian Ministry of Reintegration could quickly stall implementation of the Georgian strategy. Thus, it is critical that the EU strategy continue. The EU should keep Tbilisi informed about its programmes in Abkhazia and its attempts to engage with Sukhumi, but Tbilisi should not be allowed to exercise control over the EU's actions. Europe should certainly encourage Abkhaz participation in the Georgian strategy. It should not, however, link the two strategies by, for example, only offering to work with Abkhaz NGOs, journalists or youth if they are working with Tbilisi.

In short, if the European road to engagement with Sukhumi is to be credible and effective, it should not go through Tbilisi. If contact is mediated by Georgia, it is likely that engagement will be severely stunted, or not occur at all, thus assuring failure of the EU policy.

One of the key goals of 'engagement without recognition' is to strengthen the West's bargaining power with Abkhazia. If the policy is successful, Europe will have stronger ties with Abkhazia which, in turn, could be used to press it to increase its contacts with Georgia, or nudge Sukhumi towards creative legal formulas on the question of status in future negotiations. But that is only imagined leverage that still needs to be earned.

If Europe does not act quickly, Abkhazia will become even more strongly tied to Russia, precluding any change to the status quo. This creates an imperative for Europe and the US to engage Abkhazia and South Ossetia now, while withholding recognition – even though this may create some tension between Georgia and the West.

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