

Lining Georgia's Dowry: Intelligence and Communication

Our editor has been rightly extolling the virtues of love in international affairs. True, the feeling of civilizational, cultural, or other affinities is beneficial in forging regional alliances. For a small and vulnerable nation, being perceived as a part of something larger is a boon – like those fish who puff themselves up when in danger, it helps project strength against predatory neighbors.

But to borrow the wisdom of the immortal Marilyn Monroe, we all lose our (cultural) charms in the end, especially when the going gets tough in the neighborhood. And there may come a time when a state needs a lawyer or a protector of some sort. And at that point, the homegrown diamonds – the sort that harden under pressure – are the (small) state's best friend.



Lucas Cranach, The Procuress (1548).

Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts, Tbilisi



Jaba Devdariani
Contributor

Jaba Devdariani, a seasoned analyst of Georgian and European affairs, has over two decades of experience as an international civil servant and advisor to both international organizations and national governments. His significant roles include leading the political office of OSCE in Belgrade from 2009 to 2011 and serving as the Director for International Organizations (UN, CoE, OSCE) at the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011-2012. Currently, as a volunteer co-editor for Europe Herald, a Civil. ge project (FB/@EuropeHerald), Devdariani dedicates his expertise to elucidating European current affairs for a broader audience.



Georgia's latest [foreign policy strategy](#) (it expired in 2022) considers joining the EU and NATO as key elements to protect the country's sovereignty and restore its territorial integrity. It also says that these tasks should be served by consolidating democracy, ensuring sustainable economic development, and nurturing the country's good image abroad.

But, as you might have guessed, this article is about a calculated geopolitical marriage of interest. Getting under the EU's economic and NATO security umbrella would be grand. But there are no free lunches in foreign policy. Why should the world's richest but increasingly stressed economies and democracies want to let Georgia in and assume the cost?

This article ponders generating the kind of dowry that might entice neighbors and friends without triggering an instinctive grab at the jugular from its neighbors. But how could that dowry chest be best lined?

Passing Rights

Georgia is no stranger to exploiting whatever little it has as a geopolitical advantage. It was Eduard Shevardnadze who grabbed the maxim that it is all about location, location, location and ran away with it. Building the corridor for Central Asian and Azerbaijani oil and gas to get to the Western markets has been the insurance policy that Georgia bought early. Since

successive governments touted Georgia as a "corridor" of all sorts – the "[Middle Corridor](#)" connectivity and the passage of "green" [undersea power cable](#) to Europe from Azerbaijan are just the latest reiterations of this tried-and-tested approach.

Corridors that are securely under unified military guard tend to attract aggressors like flies.

But corridors come with some nasty small print. First, it is always more profitable for one entity to control the whole transportation corridor end-to-end. The famous *Pax Romana* was also an economic phenomenon as it was much more convenient for the Mongols to trade with the Venetians in Great Novgorod rather than on the border somewhere closer to home. This is to say, corridors that are securely under unified military guard tend to attract aggressors like flies. Georgia has learned this to its peril when the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline ended just meters from the Russian occupation line.

Secondly, the corridors need to function under unified trade and customs rules to be profitable, and one country is always better at doing that than a plethora of them. For this reason, Russia remained a preferable transportation route from Central Asia to Europe right up to the moment when it launched itself headlong into an act of military aggression unprecedented in modern Europe for its scale. The ben-

efits that Georgia could – theoretically – reap from the shutdown of that transportation route are certainly temporary. This does not mean it does not warrant to be explored – but one cannot bet one's long-term security on it.

Georgia is perhaps quite well-located but still a tiny segment of any regional or global trade route that may emerge.

Thirdly, Georgia is perhaps quite well-located but still a tiny segment of any regional or global trade route that may emerge. It has the Black Sea at the western end, which is a bit of an obstacle for smooth and unimpeded trade. For the route to work, the entities located at the sending and receiving ends of the corridor must want to trade with one another and – preferably for Georgia's development – legally. Georgia's neighborhood has historically been full of neighbors being nasty to each other, and a brief look at the news suggests that this is not about to change. So, any transport route risks being easily relocated, cut off, or going down when and if conflicts flare.

In other ways, anything Georgia could generate from transit is welcome, but it can only bring limited and fragile cash. If used wisely, the income could (and should) be invested elsewhere towards a more prospective opportunity.

This understanding has brought a new word into Georgian foreign policy vocabulary, which has been repeated ad nauseam. Georgia should become “a hub,” they insist. In the standard version, the talk is of the “logistics hub,” a sort of Amazon warehouse for storing and dispatching the goods. In a most exotic iteration, President Salome Zurabishvili once said her country should become “a hub for religious tourism.” But perhaps let us not hinge our hopes on the pilgrims on the *Chemins de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle* punching in the new itinerary into their trusty navigation devices.

On the surface, being a “hub” has a significant economic advantage to being just “a corridor.” The idea is that various countries trade through you and use your territory to store and process the goods they trade. This may bring in more money, but as anyone stuck in a Tbilisi traffic jam or waiting for the coffee shop to open at 10 am only to realize it does not have any coffee will tell you, logistics are not the professional forte in these parts. Neither does being a “hub” increase your security foreign policy-wise – an add-on bonus to the “corridor,” it suffers from the very same problems. The only advantage is that the costs sunk into developing the reprocessing infrastructure may encourage the partners to care for your security more. But given that the Georgian government intends to bear the investment costs largely, that argument is moot.

It Is What You Do (And the Way That You Do It)

Yet, there is another way to look at the benefits that Georgia's location provides. Yes, hydrocarbons and energy matter, but the world is increasingly about intangibles: services, knowledge, intelligence, and communications. Here, Georgia may excel in a way that makes it a better partner for influential clubs and boosts its standing and security. But to do that, foreign policy thinkers must turn their wary eye away from the drawing boards with pretty (and scary) arrows and look at the most important asset any country has – its people.

The highly networked international crime has fewer prejudices about race, nationality, and religion than the state actors do, and it is (sadly) often first to spot a good business opportunity. And in our affair, too, the unlikely and, honestly, quite unwelcome success of the [call-centers](#) business in Georgia holds an important clue.

Thousands (nobody is sure about the exact numbers) of Georgian youths have apparently been engaged by shadowy actors to call up the European pensionaries and entice them into dubious investment schemes. The international crackdown led by Eurojust – a pan-European prosecutors' hub – brought one such network down, but word of mouth is that others are working, some pursuing more above-

the-board practices.

One notices three important elements in this unfortunate affair: first, Georgian youth apparently speak the European languages well enough to do the job. Second, access to the European markets gives advantages. And third, if intelligence is harnessed, the technology allows it to be successfully up-scaled.

We could easily transpose these elements and make them work for Georgia's foreign policy objectives. If the country wants to join the Euro-Atlantic security alliance, it can bring something very important to the table. Georgia's immediate neighborhood is now a neuralgic point of international security. The Middle East and Eastern Europe – both within arm's reach from Georgia are on fire. The frictions with Türkiye impede the European Union's effectiveness and the US's ability to project power in the region. Iran is a significant regional spoiler. The EU and the US try to play a stabilizing role between Armenia and Azerbaijan but often lack context that undermines their effectiveness.

If Georgia were to play its cards well, it has what is required to become a crucial point of generating knowledge and intelligence in the wider region.

If Georgia were to play its cards well, it has what is required to become a crucial

point of generating knowledge and intelligence in the wider region. The country has fluent, and often native, speakers of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Hebrew, Persian, Russian, and Turkish languages, on top of more than passable fluency in English and other European languages. Living alongside neighbors gives insight into their preferences and *modus operandi*, which is more than just language.

Georgia could become a host – indeed, a “hub” – for generating knowledge on a regional level and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge to the decision-makers in the European and Euro-Atlantic sphere.

With this unique competitive advantage, Georgia could become a host – indeed, a “hub” – for generating knowledge on a regional level and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge to the decision-makers in the European and Euro-Atlantic sphere: in academia, media, and among government actors. Georgia already has a plethora of public and private universities which started to generate quality outputs and position themselves internationally. With a relatively modest investment and a long-term vision, they could become a vibrant basis that would help our partners to know and – importantly – understand the context in the region, which is now being (re)shaped by dramatic and tragic events that are likely to affect the foreign

policy calculus for the decades to come.

Soft power diplomacy and serving as a venue for international dialogue has traditionally been the vein where small states could punch above their geopolitical weight. Just as confrontations in our region mount, the actors need more neutral venues to hobnob both formally and informally. That has been happening in Tbilisi and Georgia’s resorts for years. The time might have come to make it a national foreign policy brand.

The advantage of such a dowry is its uniqueness – it is what you do, it is how you do it, and only Georgia could do it at a scale while being located in the region.

Not So Fast

Obviously, it is easier said than done. In recent decades, Georgia’s foreign policy has been self-centered, not to say self-absorbed. The existential security threat presented by the persisting occupation of its two provinces by Russia has coaxed Tbilisi into accommodation towards the Kremlin and narrowed down its foreign policy agenda. Georgia has been asking things from its friends and partners, and after its military participation in Afghanistan ended, giving back very little in return.

To become a contributor to international security again, not only with brawn but

now increasingly with brains, Georgia needs to free itself from this self-imposed paralysis and start thinking about common needs as the true allies do. In this way, it will enhance its own security without undermining the precarious balance of nurtured friendships in the neighborhood.

Georgia has had one of the highest enrollment rates in the top US universities through various academic programs sponsored by the United States, akin to the famous Fulbright Scholarship.

Investment in knowledge infrastructure and human capital is also crucial. Georgia has had one of the highest enrollment rates in the top US universities through various academic programs sponsored by the United States, akin to the famous Fulbright Scholarship. Georgian students are also ardent consumers of the opportunities to study in Europe under Erasmus+ exchange programs. Sadly, and in a reversal of the trend present in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many more young professionals have been deciding to stay abroad. Harnessing their capital of knowledge and contacts, establishing standing partnerships with European and US think tanks, and convincing them to use Georgia for their field research could bring these people back and form the backbone of academia and foreign service.

Georgia needs to invest in and reinvigorate the once-famous academic institutions known for teaching the mastery of regional languages in order to upgrade and sustain a linguistic and cultural cutting edge.

Finally, to convert all of these into foreign policy “brownie points,” Georgia’s foreign service must (re)gain its standing within Georgia’s civil service, its penchant for excellence, and the respect of its partners.

All of this is a tall order, requiring vision and dedication. But it can be done. And who would not want the bride bringing that kind of intricate dowry?!