

Faith No More: The Knock-On Price of Abandoning Ukraine

The war is still raging in Ukraine, and as 2024 dawns, the international headlines are increasingly gloomy. Combat has ground down to the slog of a war of attrition. Ukrainian defenders are dying, and their nations' will to fight needs to be rekindled. But the opposite is happening. The partisan bickering in the United States has drained its war coffers, and the brinkmanship by the “Kremlin’s Trojan horse,” Viktor Orbán, did the same for the European Union. The upcoming European Parliament elections, the subsequent re-forging of the Commission, and, even more importantly, the US Presidential elections have put Ukraine’s allies in a risk- and action-averse mode. The expert community started to ponder the [“price of losing Ukraine.”](#)

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As a seasoned expert on Russian and US foreign policy, Fiona Hill has [convincingly argued](#): “We’ve now reached a tipping point between whether Ukraine continues to win in terms of having sufficient fighting power to stave Russia off or whether it actually starts to lose because it doesn’t have the equipment, the heavy weaponry, the ammunition.”



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Therein lies the key reflection: if Ukraine is forced into negotiating on Moscow's terms once again, into conceding part of its territory to an aggressor, that would only happen because the collective West, and the United States, in particular, stepped back from supporting Kyiv in a winnable fight.

The consequences for Ukraine will be dire. It may falter economically and politically or hold on with the sheer grit and perseverance it has shown before. But whatever Ukraine does, the recusal of the West from backing its ally in the fight would have profound and dire geopolitical, moral, and practical implications for Georgia and Russia's other neighbors outside of the NATO shield.

As this publication has written before, Georgia's current administration is already on the path of accommodating Russia economically and politically and has de-coupled from the liberal Western ideologically. While this strategy partly and perhaps even dominantly reflects

the [pragmatic self-interest](#) of the ruling oligarch, some in Georgia's foreign policy and political establishment also genuinely believe it is in the national interest as the only way to avoid direct confrontation with Russia. They consider that the significant but distant returns from an alignment with the West are far outweighed by the costs (punishment, to borrow the words of former Prime Minister) that Moscow can inflict in the short-term perspective.

Resistance Is Foolish?

Hope is the combustible that drives the engine of progress. The Kremlin's work in its neighborhood was previously [compared](#) to that of the ghoulish Dementors from J.K. Rowling's bestselling Harry Potter fantasy series, who are depicted in the book as literally sucking hope and joy from their victims to subjugate them and making them docile, passive.

If Georgia's newly minted candidacy to the European Union were to transform into something more tangible, it would require a considerable adjustment from Georgians at all levels. Certainly, democratization and the rule of law are apparent priorities for Brussels, but transposing the *acquis* also means numerous adaptations in the economy and the way of doing things, from agriculture to how the city elevators are managed. This change is costly. It upsets the power relations in



innumerable ways. The botched or rushed efforts at societal transformation can backfire – as Georgia’s previous pro-reform administration had found out, to its political and personal peril.

To back reforms and sustain the adjustments they require, society at large needs hope and a visible horizon of tangible success in individual, societal, and national terms. Georgia’s former Ambassador to the EU, Natalie Sabanadze, [wrote](#) recently that Georgia’s “democratization became inseparable from its Westernization” from the early days of its restored independence in 1991. We may add that the aim of recognition as a member of the Western family of nations has been the beacon for transformation even before, during the brief period of independence in 1918-1921.

Of course, there are tangible economic and social benefits to be drawn from EU membership, as the EU information campaigns often tell Georgians. But that objective also has an irrational, emotional element, with the power to bring people to the streets and [resist water cannons](#) with the EU flag in their hands.

This is the sentiment that is shared in Ukraine, where people stood shoulder to shoulder with the same EU flags on Maidan and resisted bullets. That hope, mixed with anger at the aggressor, still drives Ukraine’s resistance, just like it drove Georgia’s reforms earlier and nu-

merous protests demanding political transformation through the past decades. Against the reforms necessary for EU membership are the formidable challenges of oligarchic control, corruption, administrative sclerosis, institutional weakness, and gaps in education and infrastructure. But in a much more damaging way, in Georgia, the home-grown narratives of cynicism are poised to destroy hope, polarize the extremes, and foment civic apathy among the majority. These narratives are fortified by the (un)healthy dollop of anti-Western propaganda fanned by pro-Russian actors. Kyiv’s lack of progress on the front and each misstep of Western allies are amplified by the Kremlin’s mouthpieces.

One part of that mortifying narrative is more traditional. It raises the slimy specter of the West’s moral decay, the incompatibility of family and Orthodox Christian values with those of the decadent “LGBT West,” something that Vladimir Putin himself spoke about on the eve of the invasion.

But another, perhaps more potent, narrative speaks about the perfidy, cupidity, and duplicity of the West. According to this worldview, the collective West likes to preach human rights and democratic values, but it is just as corrupt, ruthless, and self-interested as Russia. If you have to choose between two comparable evils, choose the one that is physically closer to

you and could hurt you more, the Kremlin tells the average Georgian Joe. It is a gangster's proposition, to be sure, but made no less convincing by that.

If the United States and Europe opt out of Ukraine now, after so much resistance and sacrifice that the Ukrainian people have shown, simply because of their internal politicking, what is a pro-Western politician or activist to say to the Georgian voter to convince them to stay the course?! After all, Georgia has adapted itself to conquerors before. Is it not foolish to die resisting when you know the help is not forthcoming? Is it not wiser to survive and keep whatever of your identity, culture, and language that is possible while adapting? The pragmatic choice seems simple to make. It is also what Russia wants its neighbors to believe.

Slipping Into Shadows

If the West pushes Ukraine to sign the harmful deal at the negotiating table with the aggressor, Georgia would simply fade into the Kremlin's shadow, EU candidacy or not. To begin with, it is already halfway there. Only the heroic and – to many – surprising resistance from the street has [prevented](#) the ruling party from enacting repressive laws that would have curbed free media and civil society.

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Georgia's pro-Western attitude is generalized, but it may also be shallow. The group willing to actively defend this choice is within 10-12%, according to the unpublished polling of the Georgian CSOs' stratcom, an informal group that tracks political attitudes. Only up to 20-23% of voters are willing to back pro-Western parties. However, security concerns dominate, and Russia's aggression is perceived with justified fear. Even in the generally pro-Western crowd, doubts are lingering on whether "traditional Georgian values" are compatible with European ways.

If the Western allies are proven unwilling to keep backing Ukraine, this will kick the ground from under the feet of pro-European Georgian activists who base their ideological legitimacy on two related tenets.

One is the professed cultural and political affinity with Europe, a foundational narrative since the thought about its modern nationhood in the late 19th century started to germinate and later gave birth to its independent statehood.



Another is security-related and paints the West as the preferred ally and protector against Georgia's predatory regional neighbors. In collective memory, that idea dates to the 17th century when the Georgian King is said to have first sought protection from France. Russia was then considered the second-best alternative to Europe as a fellow Christian nation against predominantly Muslim regional powers.

When Georgia's Social-Democratic Government in 1918-1921 sought membership in the League of Nations and military alliances first with Germany and then the UK, it also sought protection from Bolshevik Russia. In modern times, for similar reasons, Georgia has become the leading mil-

itary reformer and dedicated contributor to NATO-led missions in Kosovo and Iraq and the US-led mission to Afghanistan.

Getting under the Western security shield is perceived as a preferred way to gain a clear pathway to growth, prosperity, and stability.

The Kremlin cannot deny the easily observable economic advantage that the West has over Russia in terms of the quality of life. But it has been actively chipping away at the ideological tenets. The cultural affinity narrative is being weakened by embedding the thought that Orthodox values (whatever they may be) are incompatible with Western ones. Championed by the Georgian Orthodox Church, this school of thought has become [the ideological mainstay pushed](#) by the ruling party.

Regarding Georgia getting the Western security shield, Russia clearly stated its opposition. It acted upon its words in 2008 when NATO dawdled on its decision to grant the membership action plan (MAP) to Georgia (and Ukraine). Recently, the ruling party leaders have increasingly cast that episode as a betrayal and thus justified their reluctance to support Ukraine. The Parliamentary speaker said: "Georgia was subject to unfair, almost hypocritical treatment...despite Georgia's precarious existence under the foreign occupation and daily experience of threats and ha-

rassment, the West remained unfazed.”

If Ukraine is left without the critical means to liberate its occupied land, it would signify that Russia manages to alter the strategic posture of Washington and Brussels despite their pledges of support to Kyiv “whatever it takes.”

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Russia’s demonstration of its capability to alter the will of the US is likely to detonate the tenets of Georgia’s pro-Western affinity. The Russian narrative about Western duplicity would be proven correct. Once the faith in the feasibility of entering the common security space is gone, so will the sentiments of affinity.

Moscow would not have to occupy Georgia militarily. Its European dream will crumble, and [“the Kremlin’s silent victory”](#) – already in the offing – will be complete.

What About Ukraine?

Just like Ukraine’s trajectory during this year would be detrimental to Georgia’s political future, the path that Georgia traveled after the defeat in 2008 should be instructive for Western policymakers.

Russia managed to defeat Georgia’s mili-

tary quickly in 2008 and occupied the two provinces of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. But contrary to the fears (and hopes?) of some, Georgia’s statehood did not crumble, and the major force of the army was preserved. The European Union and the US gave the country an economic and financial lifeline that limited the damage and kept the economy working.

But hope and the country’s sense of purpose were lost. With reforms relying more on individual enthusiasm than institutional strength, the reform drive has faltered. In 2012, Georgians voted for the political force that promised: “to take Georgia off the map of the contest between Russia and the West.” Through subsequent electoral cycles, the Georgian Dream has downshifted further away from dynamism, essentially plunging the country into immobilism, with periodic flashes of reactionary decisions that have now put Georgia ideologically closer to Hungary or Serbia.

Ukraine is a larger country; it has already paid a terrible cost to human lives through its wrecked infrastructural and industrial base. A nation that feels victorious can brave the difficult times and even take the amputation of some of its lands if it perceives that the peaceful future of its children is assured. But if this conflict is frozen at today’s lines, and Ukraine does not get the tangible security umbrella under

which to shelter, there can be no assurance of peace in Ukraine or beyond.

Will Europe or the United States commit the boots on the ground to protect Ukraine and pay the potential blood cost? When they could not muster the courage to pay for the war effort in kind? If the an-

swer to that question is negative, Ukraine will quietly slip under Russia's shadow, too. To paraphrase the poet, it has gone raging into that dark night, but that darkness will now be at Europe's inner gate. ■