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Portugal and Georgia: Starting from Scratch

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In April and May, Georgia's Minister for Foreign Affairs (MFA), Maia Panjikidze, as well as Georgia's State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Alex Petriashvili, made official visits to Lisbon. It is clear that from 2010 onwards, the bilateral relations between Portugal and Georgia have intensified. Indeed, in stark contrast with the past, in the last two years there was a significant increase in the number of direct contacts between politicians and diplomats of the two countries.¹

The contrast could not be greater with the period between 1992 and 2010. In the first 18 years after Georgia's independence there was much less high-level bilateral contacts. Moreover, from 2010 onwards, as if to confirm Tbilisi's interest in strengthening bilateral relations with Portugal, Georgia opened an embassy in Lisbon. Equally important, last year Tbilisi formally requested the status of associated observer of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP).

¹ The facts speak for themselves: in February 2010, Georgia's then-Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze visited Lisbon; in December 2010, Portugal's then-Foreign Minister Luís Amado reciprocated and visited Tbilisi; in March 2011 Georgia's then-Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze visited Lisbon once again; in November 2011 and the 2012 political consultations took place at the level of directors-general of both Ministries of Foreign Affairs, first in Lisbon and then in Tbilisi. Last but not the least, this year Georgia's new MFA and new State Minister came to Lisbon.

Does this mean that we are witnessing a qualitative change, or is it just a passing phase? Put another way, the deepening of bilateral relations between Portugal and Georgia is it sustainable?

In order to try to answer these questions, this paper begins by analyzing the bilateral relationship, as seen from Lisbon, and then performs the same exercise from Tbilisi's point of view. The article concludes by trying to answer the two questions posed earlier and by offering suggestions on the possible future course of the bilateral relationship.

Portugal and Georgia: Starting from Scratch

Over the last two decades, Portuguese diplomacy did not devote significant human or financial resources to the regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia.² The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and the emergence of a new set of sovereign states have given rise to a range of challenges and opportunities to which Portugal paid sporadic attention. In large part, the explanation for this lies in the fact that the Caucasus and Central Asia do not fit in what have been the three priorities of Portuguese foreign policy – transatlantic relations, the Portuguese-

² Regarding Central Asia, see Paulo Gorjão, "Terra Incognita: Portugal and Central Asia" (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 99, June 2012).



speaking countries, and the European Union (EU). Being the two regions on the periphery of the Portuguese foreign policy priorities, the Caucasus and Central Asia remained largely off the radar of Portuguese diplomacy. In a clear sign of Lisbon's low degree of attention to the regions, twenty years after the independence of the former Soviet republics, Portugal did not have a single embassy in the Caucasus or Central Asia. This does not mean that countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have not captured the attention of Portuguese diplomats, especially in the context of the economic diplomacy. But it is evident that Lisbon has not developed a strategic vision about the kind of bilateral and multilateral relationship that it intends to consolidate with the Caucasus and Central Asia. To that end, Portuguese diplomacy to the region is largely shaped by decisions made in Brussels both in the EU and NATO contexts. Thus, in line with EU positions, Portugal supports the territorial integrity of Georgia and does not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Also within the EU context, Portugal supports the strengthening of relations with Georgia in the framework of the Association Agreement being negotiated at this stage, as well as the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). In turn, in the context of NATO, Portugal supports the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia. However, Portuguese diplomacy regards Georgia's claims not only in light of Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, but also in view of the importance of the collective defense, democracy, consensus, cooperative security, outlined in the Perry Principles in 1995.³ In short,

Portugal's interests align more nearly to Georgia's in the context of the EU than NATO.

In light of the above, the limited relevance of diplomatic relations with Georgia is in line with what is happening with the other countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. There is not, therefore, any discrimination in favor of third parties. Without a consolidated strategic agenda in Lisbon, without notorious political and economic interests, in a sense in Portugal has been prevailing the weight of inertia.

From a formal point of view, Portugal established diplomatic relations with Georgia immediately after its independence in 1992. But in the two decades that followed, little or nothing happened bilaterally. Political contacts were virtually nonexistent and economic exchanges lacked significant expression. To that extent, it can be said that the year of 2010 marked a turning point. Thus, the intensification of bilateral political contacts since 2010 could, in theory, open the door to a substantive change in the bilateral relationship. This is at least the current expectation. But rather than a certainty, the deepening of bilateral relations is still a hypothesis waiting to materialize, and will hardly bear fruit without enhancing the political, diplomatic and economic agenda. Therefore, the establishment of the foundations that can sustain a more substantial bilateral relationship is imperative. The signing in 2012 of a convention for the avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income, and a protocol between Camões – Institute for Cooperation and Language – and Georgia's Ivane

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³ In early 1995, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, William Perry, indicated that there were four principles that underpinned NATO's past success: collective defense, democracy, consensus, and cooperative security. Applied to NATO's enlargement, this meant that new members must have forces able to defend the Alliance; be democratic and have free markets, put their forces under civilian

control, protect human rights, and respect the sovereignty of others; accept that intra-Alliance consensus remains fundamental; and possess forces that are interoperable with those of existing NATO members. See William J. Perry, "The Enduring, Dynamic Relationship that is NATO" (Munich Security Conference, 5 February 1995).



Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University is, in a way, a good starting point for building bilateral ties.

Georgia and Portugal: Playing Simultaneously on Three Levels

Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO has been a major foreign policy priority of Tbilisi since the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought to power President Mikheil Saakashvili, and especially after the 2008 war with Russia. However, one question lingers: will the diplomatic priorities established by Saakashvili resist a change of government?

Despite some initial fears, the change of government in Georgia in 2012 did not lead to a realignment of Georgia's foreign policy priorities. In his first foreign visit, in November 2012, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili went to Brussels, and reaffirmed the goal of Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO, while also expressing the wish of better political and diplomatic relations with Russia. In Brussels, Ivanishvili expressed a desire to conclude negotiations on the Association Agreement – DCFTA provisions included – before the next Eastern Partnership summit, scheduled to take place in Vilnius, Lithuania, in November 2013. Moreover, Ivanishvili also stated Georgia's intention to keep to the process of joining NATO, which he called “irreversible”, even though, after the 2008 war with Russia, it is presently in abeyance without concrete prospects to formally begin.

Compared to Lisbon, Tbilisi's relationship with Portugal is much more consolidated. As can be seen from the brief description above, Portugal – a member of the EU and NATO – is at the epicenter of the geopolitical spaces that constitute the current key priorities of Georgia's foreign policy. Thus, Tbilisi's desire to deepen the bilateral relations with Portugal fits into its strategic priorities. Moreover, the deepening relationship with Portugal

must also be understood in light of Georgia's global policy of diplomatic expansion. Since 2010, Tbilisi has established diplomatic relations with dozens of countries

and opened embassies in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, and South Africa. This way, Georgia has not only tried to recruit new allies and international partners, but also it has aimed to close doors to possible recognitions of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In this context, the opening of Georgia's embassy in Lisbon in 2010 was one among several diplomatic salvos made by Tbilisi in recent years. Thus, at this stage, with the exception of Luxembourg and Malta, Georgia has diplomatic missions in all EU member states. Likewise, with the exception of Albania, Croatia and Iceland, Georgia also has diplomatic missions in all NATO countries.

Furthermore, Lisbon appears as a gateway and a useful ally concerning the establishment and deepening of relations with the Portuguese-speaking African countries. According to this strategy, in January 2012 Georgia formally requested the status of associated observer of the CPLP. In order to fulfill the prerequisites required for associated observer status, this year the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University opened a Center for Studies in Portuguese Language and Culture. Of course, the deep-

ening of relations with the CPLP is not a priority comparable to the integration of Georgia into the EU and NATO. In any case, with limited political and financial costs, the CPLP is a gateway to relevant geopolitical spaces and potential partnerships in South America (Brazil), Africa (Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe) and Southeast Asia (Timor-Leste).

Tbilisi's desire to deepen the bilateral relations with Portugal fits into its strategic priorities. Moreover, the deepening relationship with Portugal must also be understood in light of Georgia's global policy of diplomatic expansion. Furthermore, Lisbon appears as a gateway and a useful ally concerning the establishment and deepening of relations with the Portuguese-speaking African countries. According to this strategy, in January 2012 Georgia formally requested the status of associated observer of the CPLP.



Conclusion

At present there is an asymmetry in the bilateral relationship between Portugal and Georgia. One can identify with relative ease the elements that contribute to Georgia's interest in deepening the relationship with Portugal, but the rationale for Portugal is at this stage less clear. Georgia's interest in deepening diplomatic relations with Portugal are mainly political, and result from Tbilisi's prioritization of deepening relations with the EU, NATO and, in a much lower level of significance, with the Lusophone countries. Portugal, meanwhile, still seeks to define and stabilize the content of a political, diplomatic, and economic agenda. In other words, Lisbon is still seeking a coherent strategy for the Caucasus and Central Asia to guide, among others, its relations with Georgia.

Despite this, since 2010 there has been a leap forward in the bilateral relationship. Does this mean that we are witnessing a structural change in the linkages between Portugal and Georgia? And, if so, is it sustainable? Finally, is it possible for the bilateral relationship to become more balanced?

These are the weighty questions to which I do not guarantee a response. However, with the political will recently demonstrated by both countries, a set of initiatives could and should be developed in the short- and medium-term. Multilaterally, the two countries could support each other in their applications to positions within international institutions. For example, Portugal supported the Georgian candidate, George Tugushi, to the Committee against Torture for the 2012-2015 term. In turn, Georgia will support the Portuguese candidacy to the UN Human Rights Council for the 2015-2017 term. Reciprocal approaches like this can and should be repeated whenever possible. The two countries must also maintain the current level

of political and diplomatic regular contacts at the highest political level, and keep up the frequency of high-level visitation. Paulo Portas, Portugal's Foreign Minister, must pay a state visit to Tbilisi this year or next. At the same time, political consultations between both Foreign Ministries must continue. Last but not the least, the two countries need to strengthen economic ties, which are currently miniscule. To this end, the organization of a business forum is a priority. Textiles, renewable energy, agro-industry, and tourism are some of the areas where there is a window of opportunity for increasing commercial exchanges between the two countries.

While in Lisbon, State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration Alex Petriashvili underscored that "in October 2012 Georgia passed a litmus test of holding successful parliamentary elections that marked the first peaceful transition of power".⁴ Although this has been a significant step, Tbilisi has yet to pass Samuel Huntington's famous two-turnover test for democratic consolidation.⁵ Portugal, like its European partners, has interest, and the obligation, to contribute to Georgia's democratic success. With this in mind, is there a better 'carrot' than the promise of a growing European and Euro-Atlantic integration?

4 See Alex Petriashvili, "Challenges and Perspectives: Georgia after the Election in 2012" (*IPRIS Occasional Paper*, No. 7, May 2013), p. 1.

5 "[A] democracy may be viewed as consolidated if the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of the transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election". Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 266-267.

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