



Georgia's European Choice During the First Democratic Republic (1918-1921)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted: October 15, 2024

Approved: December 15, 2024

Keywords:

*Georgia, Europe,
Independence, Democracy,
Politics.*

ABSTRACT

For Georgian politicians, the future development of a free country has always been closely linked to the European states. The vision of Georgia's alignment with Europe and its integration into European frameworks dates back to 1918-1921. Considering this fact, Georgia's current aspirations for European integration reflect a desire to return to its natural political and cultural environment.

During the period of 1918-1921, Europeanization was seen as a means of achieving peaceful coexistence, embodying European norms, values, and ideas, while also implementing various structural reforms through cooperation.

The paper aims to analyze, through the study of existing documents, the efforts of Georgia's political leaders to establish security and democratic values in partnership with Europe. This goal was clearly understood, and, for this reason, immediately following the declaration of Georgia's independence on May 26, 1918, the Act of Independence, developed by the National Council of Georgia, became a foundational document. This act outlined the main priorities of the country, rooted in elements of classical European principles, from the form of government to the broad recognition of human rights.

Georgia's Constitution, which followed shortly after, was similarly grounded in European ideals, and clearly demonstrated the country's commitment to democratic development. This constitution is viewed by both foreign and domestic scholars as one of the most progressive of its time.

Despite the varied and often inconsistent trajectories of development in the modern world, Georgia's political and civil approach has remained steadfast and unchanged. Over a century ago, the country sought to preserve and strengthen its political course and direct it towards European political and legal unity. It is an effort that continues to this day.

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Introduction

Georgia's European orientation is a profound historical process that predates even the spread of Christianity in the country, although the advent of Christianity significantly strengthened Georgia's ties with the Christian world of Europe. From that time onward, Georgians chose a clearly pro-Western orientation, and began to distance themselves from the Eastern world. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Georgian nation, with its strong sense of self-consciousness, always considered itself a part of Western civilization and sought to forge connections with European states. The orientation toward Europe was most clearly manifested in 1918-1921, during the period of Georgia's state independence.

In the modern context, Georgia's European choice reflects its commitment to ensuring peace, democracy and the well-being of its people. This includes upholding human dignity, equality, the rule of law, the protection of human rights – especially the rights of minorities, pluralism, non-discrimination, and tolerance, as well as respect for national identity. Notably, Georgia's aspiration for relations with Europe is nothing new: During the First Republic, these ideas were evident in all key political moves made by the country.

The First Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), holds significant historical importance, and its experience continues to shape modern Georgia. This period of independence marked a critical step toward aligning with European political and cultural norms. The legacy of this period requires

renewed understanding, particularly in the context of Georgia's current foreign policy, which is heavily focused on European integration. By analyzing the past, using the politics of memory, greater clarity can be brought to Georgia's European choice, especially as relations with Russia remain complex, and European integration is a central foreign policy goal.

The paper aims to explore Georgia's strongly expressed European orientation in its foreign policy during 1918-1921. Through a historical examination of official documents, memoirs and scientific works, the paper seeks to highlight how this period laid the foundation for Georgia's ongoing pursuit of European integration.

Georgia's Declaration of State Independence

Since the annexation of Georgia, the aspirations of Georgian patriots for the nation's freedom and independence have always been closely linked to Europe. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Georgian Committee in Paris, and their organization "Georgia" played a crucial role in promoting the idea of a free Georgia. In 1907, the Georgian people made a significant appeal to the Hague Peace Conference, petitioning to have Georgia's legal rights restored.

The declaration of Georgia's state independence in 1918 had deep historical roots, shaped by a variety of factors that influenced its emergence. The declaration was not just a product of local circumstances, but was also heavily impacted by the political dynamics

unfolding in international politics at the time. This was closely tied to the cooperation between Georgian politicians and their European counterparts.

The 1917 October Revolution of the Russian Empire fundamentally changed the political life of Georgia, as well as that of Russia. After the coup, "Ozakom" (the Special Committee of Transcaucasia) was dissolved, and the "Commissariat of Transcaucasia" was established. In Georgia, an inter-party committee was created, which convened the National Congress of Georgia on November 17-22, and elected Noe Jordania as its chairman. On November 22, the National Council was elected, placing the Presidium and the Executive Committee under the chairmanship of Jordania. On May 26, 1918, it was the National Council (influenced by external forces) that declared the state independence of Georgia (Sharadze, 2003).

From 1918 to 1921, Georgia's pursuit of a European way of life and politics was intrinsically linked to a peaceful coexistence. This vision involved not only the adoption of norms, rules and democratic principles, but also the implementation of various structural reforms in cooperation with Europe.

A key factor in shaping these ideals was the European education of Georgian politicians active at the time, among them representatives of the Social Democrats, Socialist Federalists and National Democrats, who had graduated from universities in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Russia, which significantly influenced their political perspectives. This education in turn had a significant

impact on the political processes taking place in Georgia, giving the country's leaders the opportunity to put their acquired knowledge and ideals into practice.

These political figures understood the importance of aligning with European values to establish security and democratic principles in Georgia. This is clearly reflected in the Act of Independence developed by the National Council of Georgia immediately after the declaration of independence on May 26, 1918. The document outlined the country's main priorities, such as state sovereignty, democratic governance, permanent neutrality, international peaceful cooperation, good-neighborliness – especially with bordering states, equality of citizens, and respect for human rights and national minorities. These principles mirrored the core tenets of European thought at the time, marking the foundation of Georgia's democratic path.

Modern scholars note that "the Act of Independence shared the advanced European doctrine of the era in the field of basic human rights, to a much greater extent than the European states themselves. This was later reflected in the first constitution, which was particularly innovative in terms of basic rights, and which was even considered "too democratic" for the era" (Gegenava, 2014).

Georgia in The Years of Independence (1918-1921)

Immediately following the declaration of state independence in Georgia, the rul-

ing Social Democrat party found itself facing significant challenges due to the complex domestic and international situation. With scarce resources and no stable economy, they had the heavy responsibility of meeting the needs of the citizens while striving to create a democratic republic based on European values. Despite these difficulties, there was a collective desire among Georgian political leaders to build a state that reflected the ideals of democracy, justice, and cooperation with Europe.

The issue of education has always been central to Georgia's historical development. Indeed, it has been a key focus of analysis for Georgian patriots throughout the centuries, as they understood that the future of the country depended heavily on the education of its people. Based on the wisdom passed down through the ages, including the renowned words of Ilia Chavchavadze that "our country needs European experience, science and education, this should be its gun-weapon" (Chavchavadze, 1985), we can see that the importance of education was deeply ingrained in the national consciousness.

This vision of education was not just theoretical, but was practically applied. Government representatives took great responsibility for the education sector, viewing it as an avenue for sharing European experiences and ensuring that Georgia's educational system aligned with the progressive ideals of the time. One such example is the approach taken in the Social-Democratic Republic of Georgia, where, in 1918, the National Council of Georgia addressed the teaching of religion in

schools with a democratic mindset. This issue was defined by the National Council of Georgia and the Law of the Republic of Georgia on November 26, 1918, before the Constitution was finalized.

According to the law, the teaching of religion was removed from all levels of state and private schools. As established by the law adopted on July 5, 1918, teachers of religion received an allowance following dismissal by the state. If someone expressed a desire to study religion with their own finances, they had the opportunity to do so in the school building, but in such a way that it would not interfere with the regular school curriculum. This democratic approach aligns closely, even more than a century later, with the policies of many modern secular states in Europe, where the state limits its role to regulatory functions, ensuring a peaceful coexistence with religious communities. In such countries, religious education may be allowed in public schools outside of the formal curriculum, typically after school hours.

In addition to these reforms, Georgian educators, cultural leaders, and political figures actively sought creative collaborations with neighboring peoples and other nations. Supported by the government, the Georgian intelligentsia embraced new ideas from abroad, whether in the fields of culture or education (Darchashvili, 2021).

The German-Georgian Cultural Society, founded in July 1918, aimed to foster friendship between the two nations, and promote a mutual cultural exchange and dialogue. These and similar societies played a crucial

role in enhancing the understanding of European influences within Georgia, supporting and solidifying the country's western orientation. It is a fact that from 1918, a short but wonderful era arrived for Georgian culture, seeing Tbilisi become an important and popular center of modernism and avant-garde movements, with flourishing literature, painting, and collaboration efforts between local creatives and foreign famous faces. Mutual recognition and respect reigned (Shvelidze, 2018).

The close cooperation between Georgian and European politicians deserves mention. The visits of influential European politicians to Georgia in 1920 were pivotal for the country's international standing. Karl Kauk, Pierre Renaudel, Emil Vandervelde, Ramsay McDonald, Camille Huysmans made notable statements in Europe praising the principles of the Georgian government – freedom, respect for minority rights, the harmony between urban and rural communities, and more. This served to increase awareness of the Republic of Georgia and played a role in the recognition of Georgia's de jure independence (Javakhishvili, 2003).

The pro-European character of the Georgian state was evident even during the drafting/adoption of the constitution, seeing Georgia announce its choice of democratic development to the entire civilized world. The basic law of the country was a document of European nature, and it is considered one of the most progressive documents of that period, both by contemporary observers and by modern foreign and national experts.

The core principles underpinning the first Constitution of Georgia were the freedom of the nation and the individual. The document, part of the "constitutional wave" seen in international politics (Germany 1919, Austria 1920, Finland 1921, etc.) holds a unique place in the history of world constitutionalism for its adherence to democracy (Matsaberidze, 2021).

The 1921 Constitution of Georgia is a well-rounded and refined legal document that reconciles the experience of world constitutionalism with Georgia's national values. Former Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, noted that the text of the 1921 constitution was "one of the most progressive ones on the European continent." Even then, he recognized such values as freedom, democracy and the rule of law which today's Europe relies on (Demetrashvili, 2005).

In Georgia, the European values of freedom, tolerance and individualism were historically acquired by the population of Georgia. In a democratic state, they were given the opportunity to develop even further. Some Western values were newly introduced to the Georgian reality, and faced initial resistance before gradually taking root. The establishment of a civil society and independent institutions, including unions and associations, marked the growth of democratic norms. The rule of law was effectively implemented (Janelidze, 2018).

Despite numerous difficulties, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was established as a state. It represented "a young democ-

racy, which in its political structure showed a straightforward commitment to democracy and the possibility of common sense” (Matsaberidze, 2008).

Georgia was, in fact, the first European country to have a social-democratic government and a coalition administration, formed by the Social-Democratic Party of Georgia, the Socialist-Federalists, the National-Democratic party, and the Socialist-Revolutionaries. The Social Democrats were the dominant force in executive and legislative power, winning more than 80% of the votes in the first general democratic elections in February 1919 (Iremadze, 2021).

This alignment with European values contributed to the recognition of the Democratic Republic of Georgia by leading European nations as a progressive, pro-European state. Unfortunately, the country’s European path was abruptly interrupted on February 25, 1921, when the Russian government entered Georgia, ending the republic’s pro-European trajectory (Matsaberidze, 2024).

Conclusion

From 1918 to 1921, the Republic of Georgia, in its brief existence, created a valuable experience in democratic development. The country’s European aspirations were further strengthened through cooperation with the European social democrats, who recognized the policies of Georgia’s social democratic movement – international support that helped increase Georgia’s visibility and recognition abroad.

For Georgia, the connection with Europe has always symbolized the rule of law and the establishment of democratic institutions. This relationship promises Georgia a safe, free, and fair environment in which to thrive and prosper. Despite the many obstacles along the way, the fundamental approach remains the same: to maintain and strengthen the political course towards European political-legal unity. This goal has been realized in part through Georgia’s current status as a European Union candidate member, a tangible expression of the country’s pro-European political heritage.

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