



TBILISI's New Year – the Western one – began as always in a welter of extravagant Christmas lights, fireworks and random bangs, feasting among family and friends at long tables crammed with unpronounceable Georgian delicacies, and Facebook posts about dogs abandoned in the streets. The season, including the relentless repetition of Christmas music (Mariah Carey, George Michael, Michael Bublé, John Lennon) in the shops, makes for a month of interminable festivity as Georgians mark both the Gregorian and Julian holidays – a cultural curiosity which is yet another cypher for the competing geopolitical dynamics that have shaped the country's history and now confuse its destiny.

Even in a slow news cycle, the tensions in Georgia's politics were evident. The Prime Minister took out ads on Facebook sending his tidings of joy to the nation's Orthodox Christians – which opposition parties and civil society immediately criticised for his exclusion of minorities. Some days later, when the government decided not to return to Ukraine the missile system Tbilisi had purchased from Kyiv in 2007, the opposition attacked that also. The government remained firm – only humanitarian aid would be given to Georgia's beleaguered near-neighbour – and repeated what became a standard narrative in 2022, that the opposition have been trying to draw Georgia into Europe's war with Russia. All the while, rumbling in the background, was the continued incarceration of Georgia's flamboyant third president, Mikhail 'Misha' Saakashvili, who is said by foreign doctors to be dying of mercury poisoning.

Georgia is a global disinformation hotspot. ISFED, the International Society for Fair Elections, quotes Meta's summary report for 2017-21, which lists Georgia, along with Myanmar, the USA, Brazil and Ukraine, as among "the top five countries where domestic actors carry out information operations in order to manipulate the opinion of the population". The Georgian government recognises Russian efforts, focused on values-based issues like LGBT rights, to destabilise domestic unity and promote anti-Western scepticism but Georgian domestic actors linked to the ruling party, the main opposition party and ultranationalist groups need no instruction in how to play the game. Attacks on Western allies had previously been considered 'a red line', says ISFED; in 2022 that line disappeared.

Three issues dominated Georgia's politics in 2022: Saakashvili's arraignment on charges of abuse of power and his declining health in prison; Russia's invasion of Ukraine; and Georgia's stuttering, ambivalent effort to achieve the status of candidate for membership of the European Union. These issues were different denominations of the same currency, each coin with its own face but all sharing the same headline question on their obverse: what is Georgia, East or West, European or a neo-colonial adjunct to 'Russki Mir'?

Since Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and as every poll of recent years has borne out, the people of Georgia have been abundantly clear that they are European and want to be accepted as fully-fledged members of Europe. Yet in that time each of Georgia's



PAUL BELL

Paul is a strategic communications consultant. A former journalist, he was director of information for the South African commission that oversaw the elections which brought Nelson Mandela to power. Between 2000 and 2012 he led the largest information operations unit in Iraq, worked across the Middle East and North Africa, and became CEO of a leading London strategic communications agency. He currently resides in Tbilisi, Georgia, where he continues to consult and write.



four governments has swung like a pendulum between Europe and Russia. The current Georgian Dream government, in power since 2012 under the patronage of the country's single oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili (who made his billions in Russia), is decidedly hesitant about Europe and keeps a placatory eye on Russia. It is struggling to articulate some kind of 'middle way' that might position Georgia as neither one thing nor the other. If it has a model, it is probably akin to Orbán's Hungary, an illiberal democracy inside the European Union.

This is a high-wire act that the government has sustained only through increasing capture of the judiciary, prosecuting authorities, and oversight institutions such as the Public Defender's Office, and narrative contortions and distortions that in 2022 left foreign diplomats open-mouthed and a weary public increasingly cynical and politically disengaged.

The Saakashvili question dominated the domestic political contest between 2016 and 2021. The modernisation programme of Misha's early years in power had given

"With the continent's bleak economic position, many Africans see a bright future in Europe and supporting Ukraine in war is an opportunity for these young Africans to travel to Europe. That is the extent to which Africans see the war, an avenue for greener pastures in Europe."

way, after Russia's lightning invasion of the Georgian region of South Ossetia in 2008, to a period of repression in which thousands of his opponents were jailed, before his government was swept out by Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition in 2012. Since then, elections have been driven by a narrative that characterises Misha's entire presidency as 'the bloody nine years' and promotes the fear that should his party, the United National Movement, return to power, it will usher in a new period of repression and corruption.

In late November 2021, when any immediate 'danger' was already past after local government elections two months earlier, Georgian Dream's chair and framer-in-chief, summed up the party's narrative on Saakashvili after he had spoken from the dock the previous day: "Yesterday, we saw the former dictator who misses the excess power that he had in the past and that he abused for years. We all remember the crimes he committed and most importantly, besides having committed the crimes in the past, he still remains dangerous to the public... Torture, inhuman treatment, rape, racketeering, seizing media, monopolization, ceding the territories – this is a small list of those gravest crimes Mikheil Saakashvili, his regime and a political party named the United National Movement committed in the past. Our country and our people do not deserve the reoccurrence [of these crimes] and naturally, these crimes will never reoccur." While Saakashvili's excesses are a matter of record, Georgian Dream has tried to erase all memory of his heroic modernisation programme, on which they have failed to capitalise.

But with Saakashvili locked up, the issue shifting to his health, and more importantly, the public's attention moving to the war in Ukraine, the force of that narrative has begun to wane. Indeed, the Ukraine invasion changed everything.

The war shocked Georgians, they remember Russian soldiers hacking 21 Georgian protestors to death less than 500 metres from their parliament in 1989, and the boom of nearby Russian artillery that could be heard in Tbilisi during the lightning invasion of 2008. Russia's occupation of 20% of Georgia's territory rankles in the breasts of citizens – as much for their powerlessness to end it as for the fact itself. When the Russians struck at Ukraine, Georgians came out on to the streets of Tbilisi in their thousands to condemn it and the capital became a sea of supporting blue and yellow. In those early months, they feared that if Russia succeeded, they might well be next. In the event, Russia had no need of tanks to reoccupy Georgia; its citizens came instead, in their tens of thousands, with dollars that added to an inflationary boom, especially in rentals and food prices.

The war did not sharpen the Georgian public's appetite for NATO; instead it fixed on the European Union. NATO remains a part of the majority 'Euro-Atlantic aspiration' but most Georgians know the issue is a red rag to the Bear and that in the event of an attack, membership would not be much use. With them in deep and angry sympathy with the Ukrainians, the government came under pressure to declare its position on the war and took refuge in careful neutrality, calling for peace and negotiation. As Russia's Ukraine campaign faltered, fears of



invasion faded. But pressure on the government doubled when the EU agreed to fast-track applications to upgrade Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to candidate status. Now the government was really on the spot: any advance towards EU membership would have wide public support but it would demand a series of reforms to justice and electoral systems that risked undermining the ruling party's grip on power. It would also agitate Eurosceptics on the right and far right.

There was no choice but to not make a choice. Instead, Georgian Dream faced both ways at once. They engaged with the EU application process and said they wanted it to succeed. At the same time they launched a vitriolic campaign against the EU and the US ambassador, accusing them of not respecting Georgia's sovereignty and unique cultural identity. Then, as the war in Ukraine intensified, they switched tack and accused the opposition and Western diplomats of trying to drag Georgia into 'Europe's war'. They went as far as to siphon off four of their own MPs into a splinter group whose task was to drive this narrative and that of a Western diplomatic conspiracy in which UNM, was framed as 'the party of war' – a theme the government took up with gusto. Brussels and Washington responded to this narrative assault with robust rebuttals; there is no evidence that the Georgian public were in any way convinced by it; and by year-end the atmosphere had begun to cool. So for now Georgian Dream has had its way; the EU has not advanced Georgia's application beyond acknowledging its 'European orientation'.

Can this last? Can the Georgian government keep up this Janus-face and hang on? For now, probably yes. The population is exhausted by the lingering effects of the pandemic, high inflation (food and housing are up by 15-25%), unemployment and a raft of other systemic problems in education and health care. Meanwhile the government engages in boosterism about an 'economic recovery' based on Russian immigration. And it is expanding its political payroll with handouts to the needy and close to inflation-busting wage increases to a burgeoning civil service – a latter day 'golden fleece' at the expense of the poor. This year the opposition parties will have to consider whether they can sufficiently sublimate their egos to the need for a unified challenge to the ruling party in 2024. That seems like a long shot.

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As for Georgia's European destiny, the EU has positioned itself as sympathetic to majority Georgian aspirations while maintaining careful and very patient pressure on the government for the necessary reforms that are a precondition to candidate status – in order to avoid any appearance of trying to drive a wedge between the people and their elected government. Right wing opposition to Euro-Atlanticism, which includes the ruling pro-Russian faction within the Georgian Orthodox Church, is very much within the frame of culture war, e.g. the corrosive impact of European 'sexual licence' and other forms of 'corruption' on Georgian 'morality'. The Brussels Qatar bribery scandal of late 2022 was gleefully seized on as typical.