

Georgia-Ukraine Rift, GUAM, and Polarization in the Post-Soviet Space

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On 4 December 2024, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced sanctions targeting 19 top members of Georgia's government and security establishment. This decision followed a crackdown on demonstrations and the detention or arrest of some protesters in the wake of Georgia's contested parliamentary elections last October, in which the ruling Georgian Dream party declared victory. This episode, among many others, reflects the continuing evolution of the post-Soviet space.

Relations between Ukraine and Georgia after both became independent at the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 were positive, and after Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution started developing to the strategic level. For instance, during the August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, Ukrainian military personnel operated Georgia's air defense system. However, after Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement lost the 2012 parliamentary elections to Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party, bilateral ties began steadily to decline and then deteriorate. The beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022 further sent Georgia-Ukraine relations to a descent trajectory.

The Sources of the Bilateral Rift

Ukraine reasonably sees its relations with all state (and non-state) actors through the lens of the war with Russia. Kyiv's suspicion of Tbilisi is rooted in an assessment that it has continued gradually to drift back into Russia's sphere of influence. Although surveys clearly indicate that Georgian public opinion expresses sympathy with Ukraine, the Georgian Dream government has been rhetorically cautious in denouncing the Russian

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invasion in any form, as Kyiv has insisted. For instance, Tbilisi did not agree to return Ukraine's previously supplied and now extremely needed air defense systems. The October 2021 technically illegal return and immediate detention to serve a prison sentence (and much-alleged ill-treatment) of Saakashvili to Georgia (who holds Ukrainian citizenship and served in several senior positions in that country after he fell from power in his own), caused a long diplomatic row, which culminated in the May 2023 expulsion of Georgia's ambassador to Ukraine.

Three recent events have amplified Ukraine's assessment of Georgia's gravitation towards Russia. First, the adoption of the On Transparency of Foreign Influence Law, which requires non-governmental and media organizations in the country to officially register themselves as "pursuing the interests of a foreign power" in the event they receive 20 percent or more of their funding from abroad. Second, the government's announced suspension of Georgia's EU accession process until 2028. Third, Georgia's emerging divorce with the United States and the EU. Because of Ukraine's current strategic alignment with the West, Kyiv has followed the American and European reactive pattern, which is particularly manifested in the form of the imposition of sanctions.

On the other hand, the Georgian side is concerned that there is an apparent presence of imported techniques successfully applied during the February 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, which can amplify current domestic tumults and upset Georgian Dream's grip on power. In the government's narrative, some "Western actors" and their "local agents" seek to encourage, support, and achieve "regime change."

Tbilisi is also particularly concerned with the activities of the Georgian Legion, a very capable military formation consisting of several thousand experienced combatants who fight in the ranks of Ukraine's Defense Forces. The logic of this apprehension (which is perhaps amplified by an external actor) is rooted in the assessment that this armed group's return to Georgia could further destabilize the domestic political situation and could even result in an organized attempt to violently overthrow the government.

The Future of GUAM

The developing Georgia-Ukraine rift raises a question about the future path of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM). Established in 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova (hence its acronym)—and for a time augmented by Uzbekistan's membership—this regional framework essentially became an attempt to counterbalance in a soft way Russia's dominance in the formats of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and its general influence in the post-Soviet space. GUAM's initial ambitions included the establishment of a platform for various forms of collective action, ranging from diplomatic activity (e.g., at the UN, especially in relation to the problem of breakaway territories) and peacekeeping to economic cooperation and other issues of reciprocal interest.

In the following decades, GUAM passed through several identity and agenda searching phases, gaining and then losing its second ‘u’ in the process (Uzbekistan joined in 1999 and dropped out in 2005, apparently in the wake of the [Andijan events](#)). Its announced tangible projects (e.g., the establishment of a joint peacekeeping unit and free trade zones) failed to materialize. It is perhaps for that reason that Moscow, which had initially considered GUAM to be a “pro-Western” initiative, has stopped noticing it: the organization’s ineffectiveness lulled those concerns.

Generally, at the current stage, GUAM remains all but a dormant structure consisting of actors with increasingly divergent interests and objectives. It has evolved into an almost exclusively consultative format, focusing on economic cooperation, development, trade, and akin matters. In reality, the Organization’s four member states implement the foregoing areas of cooperation beyond GUAM’s framework and mostly on a bilateral basis, so as to achieve best results. The current crisis in Georgian-Ukrainian relations thickens the uncertainty regarding the future of GUAM. The organization’s member states probably have to take a break to reconsider the pathways of this international platform and reset their objectives.

Post-Soviet Space: From Fragmentation to Polarization

What is more interesting than the fate of a largely somnambular grouping of four post-Soviet states is that the Kyiv-Tbilisi rift reflects yet another stage of the evolution of the post-Soviet space in the past 33 years.

In the 1990s, the major trend was the fragmentation of this space, when the newly independent states survived alone or had to bandwagon exclusively with other post-Soviet countries (GUAM became one such group). In the 2000s and 2010s, some of the post-Soviet states sought ways to engage in recurrent cooperation (e.g., under the aegis of the Eurasian Economic Union, etc.) while others set off on a course to closer rapprochement with the EU and NATO.

However, the onset of the present stage in the conflict over Ukraine became a watershed event that resulted, inter alia, in another round of movement for the actors on the post-Soviet stage. Today, alternative alignments divide and polarize the states belonging to that space. Some line up with Russia (Belarus, to a lesser extent Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and potentially Georgia); others lean toward the Ukrainian posture and the Western camp behind it (Moldova and, most recently, Armenia); the rest keep a balancing neutral course (and unite under the banner of the Organization of Turkic States).

Given the rapidly evolving strategic environment and ongoing dynamics in individual countries in that part of the world, it is safe to suggest that the rearrangement of the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and ideological ground beneath the post-Soviet space is far from complete.