



ლევან მიქელაძის სახელობის ფონდი  
THE LEVAN MIKELADZE FOUNDATION

APRIL 2021

THE FUTURE OF GEORGIA PROJECT

# Georgia's Unfinished Search for Its Place in Europe

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*This article is the first of five in a series for the Future of Georgia project run by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation analyzing contentious issues in Georgian society.*

“I am Georgian and, therefore, I am European.” Zurab Zhvania, the former speaker of the Georgian parliament, uttered [this oft-quoted phrase](#) in 1999 in a speech marking Georgia’s accession to the Council of Europe. Zhvania was encapsulating the idea that Georgia is meant to be part of Europe, or the fact that the country is engaged in a political project of Euroatlantic integration. His words equating being Georgian with being European were intended to convey both a desire and a confirmation of reality. Ever since then, the phrase has allowed for a broad interpretation of [Georgia’s identity](#). While many Georgians see the benefits of closer ties with the West, these aspirations have often had transactional, ambivalent undertones.

September 2020 [survey findings](#) by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) on behalf of Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation for the joint Future of Georgia project confirm that most Georgians still follow Zhvania’s lead.<sup>1</sup> Many identify themselves as Europeans and want to see their country become a member of both the EU and NATO. Yet their views on Europe remain complex.

What does it mean to Georgian society to be European? Does this mean an embrace of the social agenda and values of Western Europeans? Or is Europe merely seen as a protector of Georgians’ security, a counterweight to Russia or Turkey? Georgians’ answers to these questions are sometimes contradictory, as they seek to establish a special place for themselves on the margins of Europe.

For more than a century, since the Russian imperial era, Georgian cultural and political elites have harbored



“bittersweet” European **aspirations**, as scholar Adrian Brisku put it. In 1918, soon after the October Revolution ended the Russian Empire, the short-lived independent Democratic Republic of Georgia was formed. Prime minister Noe Zhordania, a social democrat, tried to accentuate the **identity of the new Georgian state** by emphasizing its differences from both Bolshevism and Asia. He stated, “To let Bolshevism into [the country] means to drive the free and democratic Georgia to an untimely grave, detach it permanently from Europe and throw it into the hands of Asian zealots. . . . ‘Europe or Asia’ is the question we are facing, and I hereby repeat even louder and [more] firmly what I voiced from this lectern on January 14—we choose Europe, European democracy.” Yet in the spring of 1921, the Bolsheviks’ Red Army killed off Georgia’s young republic.

In the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, Georgia achieved a more enduring independence. Although the new state’s domestic policy choices fluctuated, its foreign policy compass was again steadily oriented toward the West. The country’s leaders declared an ambition to join Euroatlantic institutions, a process that began with Georgia’s accession to the Council of Europe in 1999, when Zhvania uttered his memorable phrase. Yet, just as with Georgia’s First Republic a century ago, the Georgia of today continues to define its European destiny in rather grand but often negative terms, as the choice made by a country on the edge of Europe to reject the paths taken by neighbors like Russia, Turkey, or Iran.

Despite its ambitions, modern Georgia still seems to be waiting for a full embrace with Europe. Its European aspirations seem to many of its citizens to be an endlessly protracted project. Although the prospect of

stronger ties with Europe occasionally gives Georgians a glimpse of hope for the future, it often seems as elusive as the supposedly bright future promised by the failed communism of the Soviet Union decades ago.

## THE QUEST FOR A PROTECTOR

Most Georgians enthusiastically think of being European as a positive attribute. According to the Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey, 78 percent of them say they believe that joining the EU is a good idea because “Georgians will become more European.” Yet this statement undoubtedly means different things to different people. Struggling to cope with the aftermath of civil and territorial wars in the 1990s and with Georgia’s enforced 1993 accession to the Russian-inspired bloc, the Commonwealth of Independent States, Georgians viewed the West, first and foremost, as a protector, especially vis-à-vis Russia.

These perceptions have also nurtured an illusion that the West bears a moral duty of solidarity toward Georgians as inhabitants of an ancient Christian nation. One strain of Georgian thought takes pride in the country being on the periphery of Europe, visualizing it as an outpost and defender of European civilization. In seeking to overcome a peripheral fate, Georgian political elites have frequently **reassured** themselves, ordinary Georgians, and Western partners alike that they are “the most ancient Europeans,” in the words of scholar Giorgi Maisuradze.

In other words, some Georgians believe that Georgia can compensate for lagging behind the West in terms of modernization by possessing ancient and Christian

traditions. They assert a more conservative, backward-looking notion of what it means to be European than would be recognizable to most Western Europeans, with their predominantly secular values. Yet this Christian and European conception of Georgia also is meant to distinguish the country from its regional neighbors. Georgia's Western aspirations are not premised only on the idea of escaping from a destructive Russia. These aspirations also imply a distancing from the neighboring, mostly Muslim ethnic groups in the mountains of the North Caucasus and from Azerbaijan and Turkey, whose Islamic traditions are overlaid with a comparatively secular culture.

Georgian political discourse tends to portray the West mostly in terms of two desirable actors—the supranational EU and NATO. According to Brisku, Georgians [view Europe](#) as a space created by advanced civilization, a model of modernity, and a geopolitical umbrella. Having achieved independence during a time of conflict and threats from Russia, Georgia initially set its sights primarily on NATO as a would-be protector. In 2002, then president Eduard Shevardnadze first applied to join NATO. His successor, Mikheil Saakashvili then followed suit in making NATO membership a foreign policy priority, even though many doubted it would ever become a reality, especially after the Georgia-Russia War of 2008. In a [2016 poll](#), for instance, when respondents were asked when Georgia would join NATO, more than half answered either “never” or that they did not know.

An earlier [2015 CRRC survey](#) suggests that a pro-European outlook did not fade after the Georgian Dream party defeated Saakashvili's party and took office in 2012. The majority of the population (61 percent)

still supported Georgia's aspiration for EU membership in 2015, in spite of the eurozone and migration crises that have occupied the EU over the years. The Georgian Dream government made good on this desire when it signed an Association Agreement and an agreement to join the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which came into force in 2016.

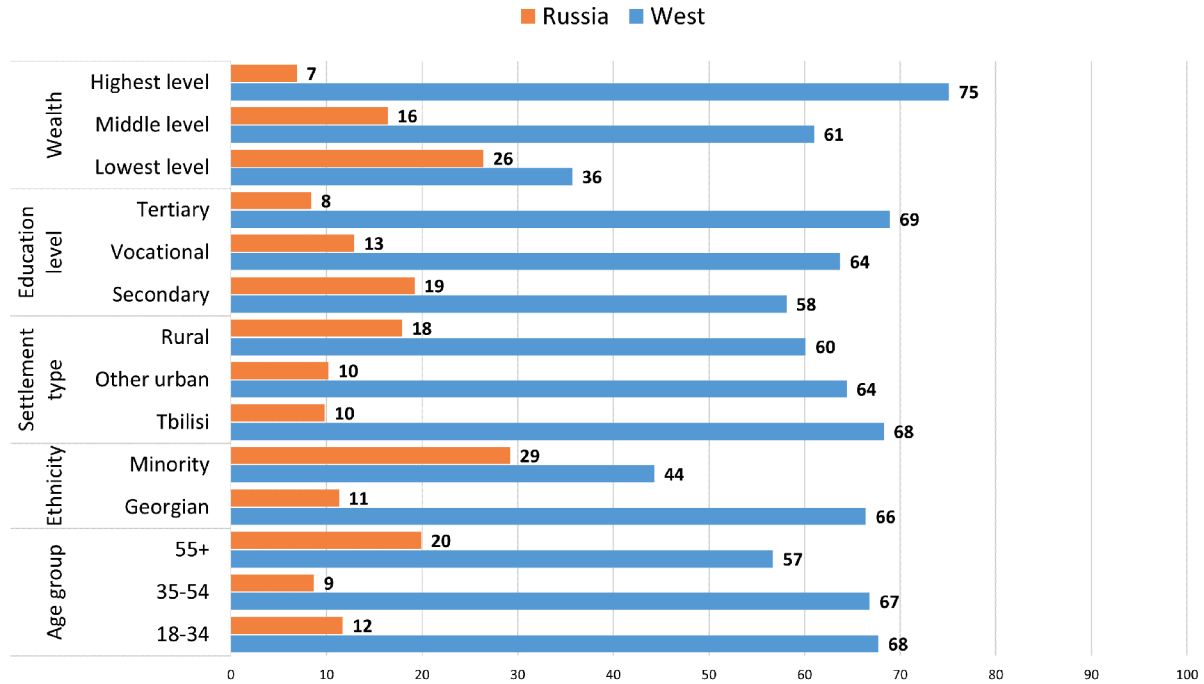
The Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey illustrates the public's support for these ambitions. Notably, 64 percent of respondents believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a positive development for Georgia. Between 1988 and 1991, Georgians' paramount political project was leaving the Soviet Union and reclaiming their country's sovereignty. Most Georgians have remained faithful to that ideal of independence, despite repeated socioeconomic shockwaves and political instability during which only a few managed to maintain or gain economic security. Throughout this whole period, Georgian political elites have explicitly linked this sovereignty project to Western support and integration. On one level, then, it is intuitive that the survey found that roughly 63 percent of Georgian respondents believed the West to be the best supporter of Georgia, while only 13 percent favored Russia (see figure 1 for a more detailed breakdown).

In 2021, Georgia is mired in a deep domestic political crisis following disputes over the 2020 parliamentary elections. Many citizens are weary of the protracted crisis between the government and the opposition. As external actors from the West take the lead in [mediating](#) the domestic conflict, many are wondering whether the Georgian government's rigid behavior could lead the country off a Euroatlantic path.



FIGURE 1  
**Georgians' Views of Their Top Foreign Supporters**

Who can currently give the best support to Georgia: the EU, the United States, or Russia?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.

### THE LIMITS OF AFFINITY

Georgians' views on fostering closer links to Europe are not unanimous. There are signs of deeper ambivalence about the West in some pockets of Georgian society. The survey results in figure 1 show how the elite-disseminated message of the benefits of a Western trajectory has resonated much more strongly with some groups more than others. Unsurprisingly, the most positive attitudes toward the West are found among urban respondents whose educational background and/or economic standing have exposed them to the benefits offered by the West or allow them to travel to Western countries.

Less advantaged groups are more ambivalent about Europe. Representatives of Georgia's ethnic minorities and internally displaced persons from the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well those who are poorer and older, tend to be more skeptical. This spread of responses reflects Georgia's history over the past thirty years and perceived societal divisions between the apparent winners and losers of the country's pursuit of Western integration.

In particular, the survey reflects the isolation and discrimination that continue to affect Georgia's ethnic minorities, primarily its large Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. Comprising around 13 percent of

Georgia's [population](#), these groups [suffer from](#) “deep and structural inequality” in large part because many of them do not fluently speak Georgian (the state language) and therefore face linguistical barriers that hamper them from exercising their rights. Ethnic minority communities tend to be more receptive to Azerbaijani and Armenian television broadcasts or Russian language sources of information, which (with few exceptions) exude anti-Western sentiments and isolationism.

Strikingly, the survey shows that most Georgians do not regard better legislative representation for these ethnic minority communities as a national priority—and by implication they do not view this goal as an essential part of the country's European trajectory. Instead, they appear to privilege an ethnic (not civic) conception of Georgian citizenship. Only 14 percent of ethnic Georgians answered that an increase in the number of ethnic minority parliamentarians would be positive, while the corresponding figure for the minorities themselves was 60 percent. The September 2020 survey question on greater representation for ethnic minorities was posed before the last elections, when there were [eleven legislators](#) from ethnic minorities out of a total of 150 (7.3 percent). In the 2020 elections, only [six legislators](#) from ethnic minorities were elected (4 percent).

Moreover, if Georgians are given a hypothetical choice, they strongly prioritize the issue of recovering lost territories over Euroatlantic integration. The survey shows that almost all Georgians share a commitment to reclaiming the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which de facto seceded from Georgia in the early 1990s. Asked to choose between European integration and territorial integrity, more than three quarters of respondents to the 2020 survey consistently favored reclaiming the lost territories. Importantly, there were no significant differences between urban and rural populations on this point. Just 13 percent of respondents prioritized EU and NATO membership more highly.

These findings appear to contradict an assumption widely held by both Georgian political elites and civil society groups, namely that, if Georgia [draws closer](#) to Europe, that will help peacefully resolve these conflicts and convince the societies of the breakaway territories to return to the fold and switch their gaze from Russia toward the West. Yet the [2015 CRRC survey](#) found that only 17 percent of Georgians themselves believe that the country's prospects of territorial reunification are linked to European integration.

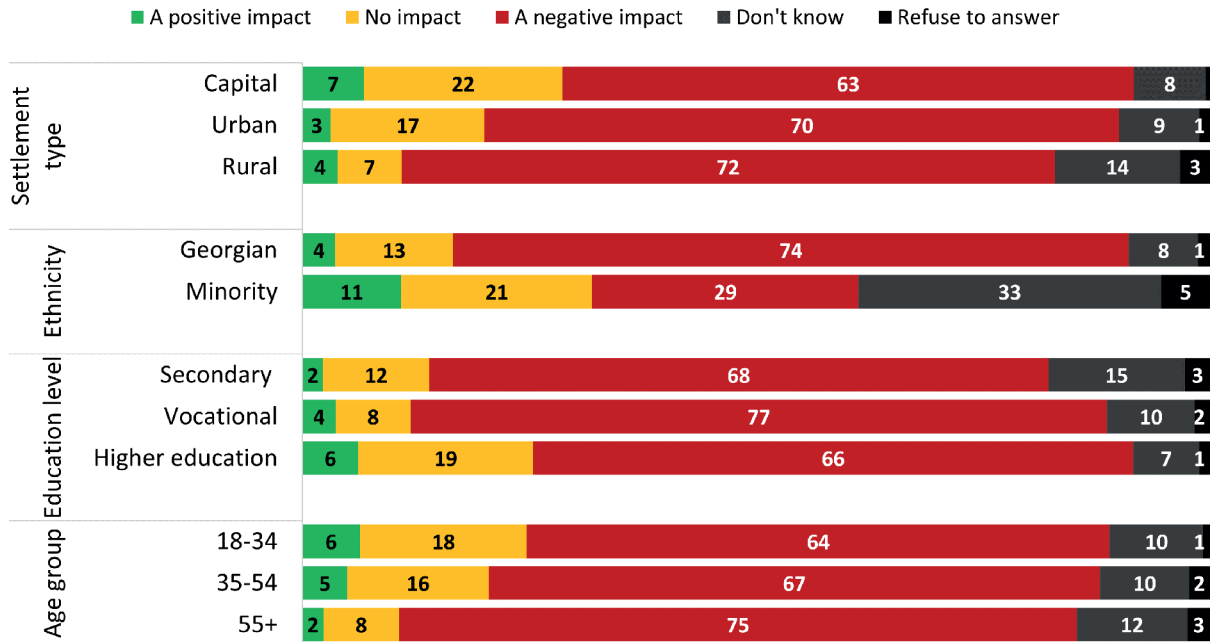
Many Georgians also exhibit fears of a clash in social and cultural values between Georgia and Europe. The 2020 survey shows that a substantial minority of respondents (39 percent) believed that the EU poses a threat to Georgian traditions. Many Georgians equate the EU with a modernization and Westernization project imposed from above, especially after the Western-leaning Rose Revolution of 2003. This pattern is especially evident on issues related to gender and sexuality—issues that Russia has long been capitalizing on, with its homophobic state policies, as a purported dividing line between its brand of conservatism and supposed Western depravity. This discourse affects cultural life in Georgia as well, largely through the Georgian Orthodox Church, which closely follows its Russian counterpart.

On the matter of gender equality in terms of political representation, Georgia has few women in its parliament compared to other European countries (on average). In Georgia's October 2020 election, [thirty women](#) were elected out of a total of 150 legislators (although those elected on an opposition ticket joined a boycott of the new parliament). When the September 2020 survey was conducted, there were twenty-five women in the previously elected parliament. A total of 46 percent of respondents said that number was too low, 36 percent said it was about right, and 6 percent said it was too high.



FIGURE 2  
**Georgians' Views on Greater LGBTQ Legislative Representation**

What kind of impact would it have if there were more LGBTQ people in parliament?



**SOURCE:** September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.

Respondents were much more suspicious on issues of LGBTQ rights. Homophobia is still rampant in Georgia. The survey elicited overwhelmingly negative responses, for instance, to the notion of having more members of the LGBTQ community in the Georgian parliament, including among younger urban respondents. This is a complex and problematic issue, which does somewhat hinder acceptance of European values in Georgia (see figure 2). That said, these homophobic views do not necessarily make Georgia an outlier compared with other parts of Europe, as similarly [negative views](#) on LGBTQ rights are widespread in several other Central and East European countries. These contradictory views raise the question of whether Georgia's European trajectory is as inevitable as many people assume.

Georgian elites have sometimes sent mixed messages about the country's affinity for Europe too. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, the newly elected president, Saakashvili, in his [inaugural speech](#), specifically prioritized Georgia's integration in Euroatlantic structures and created a dedicated cabinet portfolio to this end. Nonetheless, Saakashvili's government also included radical neoliberal economic reformers, especially Kakha Bendukidze, the minister of economy (2004) and state minister for reform coordination (2004–2008). Bendukidze categorically dismissed EU-promoted ideas of a social agenda or the common good. Instead, he and others like him promoted the development models of places with semi-autocratic governance structures such as Hong Kong, [Singapore](#),

and Dubai as worthy of emulation rather than the EU's model of a regulated, Western-style economic bloc.

For its part, the EU has also consistently displayed strategic ambiguity toward the South Caucasus in general and Georgia in particular. Leaving aside the question of the region's geographical location on the edge of Europe, before 2003, the EU's institutions (especially the European Commission) were wary of the entrenched corruption, chaotic governance, and unresolved conflicts that characterized all three South Caucasus countries. Since then, the EU has increasingly taken on the role of the main external agent of Georgia's democratic modernization and political consolidation. Brussels has supported the country's democratic development with humanitarian, financial, and institutional instruments—even though EU officials have tended to pay far less attention to regional security issues in the South Caucasus.

A lingering sense of EU diffidence has never really gone away—for one chief reason. Despite a much-closer relationship, European elites have refrained from offering Georgia the chief prize it craves, namely EU membership. This has weakened European leverage in Georgia and has slowed the pace of political change in Georgia.

Even so, Georgia's desired rapprochement with Western institutions has helped inspire limited reforms within the country. As a precondition for Georgia's Council of Europe membership in 1999, the authorities had to launch significant reforms that probably would not have happened otherwise. As Ana Diakonidze has noted, the same motivation operated in the run-up to Georgia's accession to the EU's preferential trade zone, the DCFTA, and before Georgians were granted visa waivers to visit the EU. Yet even though these motivational inducements have played an important role, European stakeholders have often endorsed superficial actions, without observing a deeper commitment to change.

The biggest changes have taken place outside government. Support for Georgian civil society and NGOs has been beefed up since the launch of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and has further deepened within the framework of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. This partnership framework and donor support have helped build direct relationships between Georgian civil society organizations and EU stakeholders. These NGOs promote a pro-Western discourse, monitor the Georgian authorities' efforts to harmonize their policies with EU standards, and pressure their government when it does not fully follow through.

## EVER WAITING FOR A RETURN TO EUROPE FROM THE PERIPHERY

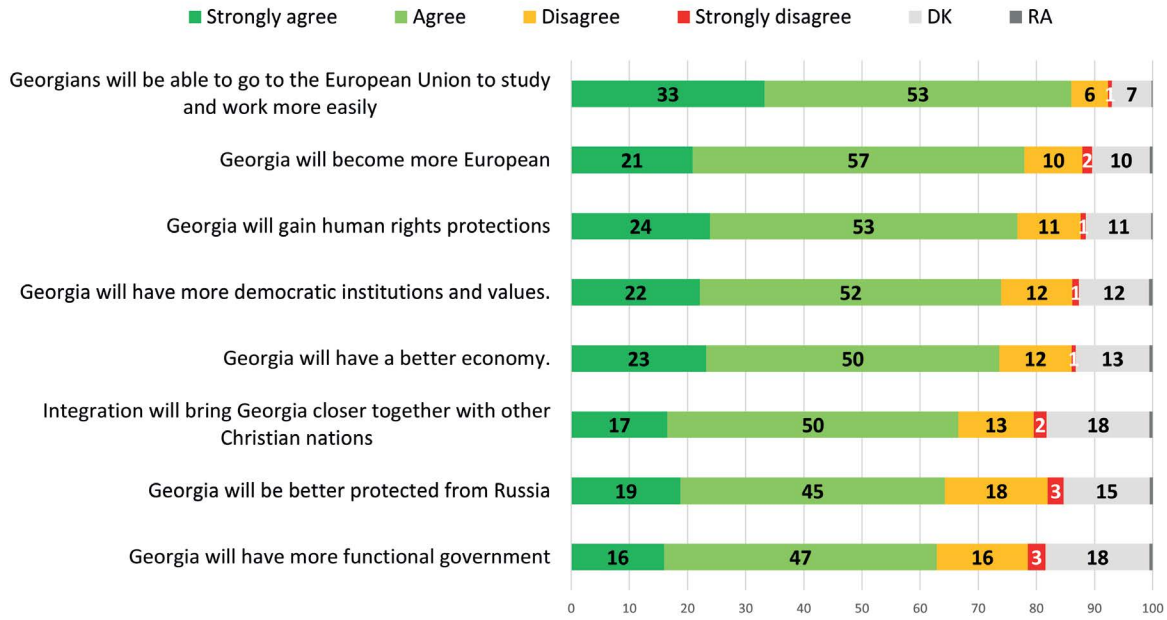
“Georgia, welcome back home,” one EU official declared as Georgia acceded to the Council of Europe in 1999. However mellifluous these oft-quoted words may sound to Georgians' ears, their country's long road to European integration does not yet constitute Václav Havel's famous notion of a “return to Europe.” Despite some signs of progress, the eagerness of Georgian elites to be and to be seen as Europeans is driven less by a sense of belonging to the West and more by a constant historical need to find a loyal external protector and secure other perceived benefits (see figure 3).

Overall, it seems that general support in Georgia for European integration stems more from expectations of economic prosperity than an endorsement of European values. Western aspirations are mostly a strategic project of Georgia's political elites, the benefits of which from time to time, unlike those of the trickle-down economy, find their way down to the masses. Tellingly, Georgia's official document outlining its 2019–2022 foreign policy strategy mentions the country's aspiration to EU membership, even though the EU itself has made no such commitment. Georgian citizens evidently believe



FIGURE 3  
**Georgians' Views on the Benefits of European Integration**

Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about potential outcomes of Georgia's further integration into the European Union.



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey.

that the door to the EU is not closed for Georgia—but not fully open either. Yet they retain a degree of Europe-centered romanticism and optimism, despite all the domestic political problems that Georgia still faces.

The inherent contradictions here are well illustrated by a high-profile NGO-led awareness campaign designed to inform Georgians of “the benefits of integration with European and Euroatlantic organizations and with the *developed world*” and to encourage their participation in the “*correct comprehension and promotion of Western values*” (emphasis added). The savvy campaign’s motto adroitly turned the words on the Georgian coat of arms—“Strength is in Unity”—into an allusive pro-European slogan with connotations of protection and security: “Strength is in Europe.”

The campaign enlisted celebrities and influential Georgians to reinforce this messaging. A campaign-linked January 2019 Facebook post featuring distinguished diplomat Gela Charkviani stated, “NATO is a collective James Bond who protects the free West from the imperialist intentions of the East.” That said, it remains unclear how much such elite-driven messaging resonates with ordinary Georgians. Georgian NGOs and their Western partners have long acknowledged that civil society barely represents large parts of the Georgian population, and this gap has yet to be filled, according to Kornely Kakachia and Bidzina Lebadidze.

On the centennial of Russia’s conquest of their first independent state, modern-day Georgians still lament the elusive nature of their quest for closer ties with



Europe. Georgia's elites still tend to view their country's geographic location and geopolitical fortunes with the same despair author [Mikheil Javakhisvili](#) evoked in his 1924 novel, *Kvachi Kvanchantiradze*. Standing at the Black Sea port of Batumi, the book's protagonist bids a sad farewell to British battleships leaving the port in 1920, abandoning Georgia's independent republic to an uncertain fate: "Europe has left and, again, we are all alone in Asia. These ships have taken away our last shreds of hope and left us independence!"

The task of turning romantic notions of Europe into more concrete realities will fall to the next generation of Georgians, born in the post-Soviet era of independence. If they can devise an effective political project, they may be able to [mark out](#) "a place for Georgia in a globalised placelessness" following their predecessors' departure from the post-Soviet space. Otherwise, if there is no willingness or capacity to overcome a [peripheral consciousness](#), their country's identity will be defined more narrowly. Looking ahead, one option is that Georgia will be marked on the geopolitical map as a connecting, yet marginal corridor between East and West. Another option is that its status will be signified by a spatial metaphor, as [Europe's balcony](#), a picturesque feature overlooking the rest of the world but not fully inside the European home.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nino Lejava** is the founder and executive director of Melani Publishing, an enterprise that supports female authors and promotes cultural exchange via translations. She previously worked for many years at the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

*The Future of Georgia project is run by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation, with financial support from the Government Offices of Sweden and imminent financial support from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

## NOTES

- 1 Any unsourced figures are taken from the September 2020 CRRC survey.

*For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by [real-colored text](#).*

