

GEORGIA'S POLITICAL IDENTITY & MIDDLE CORRIDOR

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Abstract

This paper considers a wider Black Sea Region for Georgia's identity search considering Georgia's geopolitical location, its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and its main value for the region and beyond – all features for a successful transit hub. It is even more relevant in the context of the current geopolitical changes and an increased focus on Middle Corridor. Georgia's complex political geography has always been and will stay a reality that we cannot avoid on multiple levels – be it politics, economy, or identity. Georgia like many other post-Soviet countries has number of identities, and it will be ready to embrace its regional identity to the extent it does not raise eyebrows on the ultimate goal – whether Georgia is Western enough or not. Georgian people have made their choice: For the vast majority it's a pro-Western orientation. The Middle Corridor, also called TITR (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), is a trade route from Southeast Asia and China to Europe via Kazakhstan, Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. It is an alternative to the Northern Corridor, to the north through Russia, and the Ocean Route to the south, via the Suez Canal. Geographically, the Middle Corridor is the shortest route between Western China and Europe. International Sanctions on Russia and COVID-19 before that make Middle Corridor a safer and better option for trade. Main question of the paper is whether the Middle Corridor be enough for tying Georgia closer to its wider region or not. Based on different intergroup approaches developed in social psychology (e.g., Social Identity Theory, Realistic Conflict Theory), political identities refer to identification with and meaning attributed to membership in politically relevant groups, including political parties and national, ethnic, linguistic, or gender groups. A key concept in this intergroup approach to political psychology is political identity. This paper argues that (i) Georgia's political identity is strongly tied with its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and (ii) Georgia will embrace its regional identity if it sees the perspective of strengthening its political identity.

Keywords: *Political psychology, middle corridor, political identity, Georgia, Euro-Integration.*

1. Introduction

Writing over two decades ago, Stuart Hall (1991) first told the story of European identity as contradictory processes of marking symbolic boundaries and constructing symbolic frontiers between inside and outside, interior and exterior, belonging and otherness, which are central to any account of the political psychology of the European integration. However, no systematic attempt has been made to weave the stories of the European identity together with those of European integration using political psychology (Manners, 2018). Given that marking inside and outside, interior and exterior, belonging and otherness are both political and psychological processes, this absence of engagement seems problematic.

Georgia could be a good case study to highlight this engagement.

Georgia's complex political geography has always been and will stay a reality that we cannot avoid on multiple levels – be it politics, economy, or identity (Kvanchilashvili, & Pirtskhalava, 2023). The global changes that the COVID-19 and Russia's War in Ukraine has caused, pushes Georgia to balance its regional integration with its ultimate goal to become a member of the EU. Today, Georgia holds the EU candidate country status bringing it closer to opening negotiations for its EU membership, which makes the nature and possible impact of its effort to balance between regional and Euro-Atlantic values something that needs to be watched closely.

Middle Corridor could be one factor amplifying Georgia's need for perfect balance.

The so-called "Middle Corridor" is a Trans-Caspian logistics route that connects Asia with Europe, bypassing Russia. Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the sanctions imposed and the resulting obstruction of the transport route via Russia, the Middle Corridor is becoming increasingly important. A multimodal land-and-sea transport route is stretching from China through Kazakhstan, and

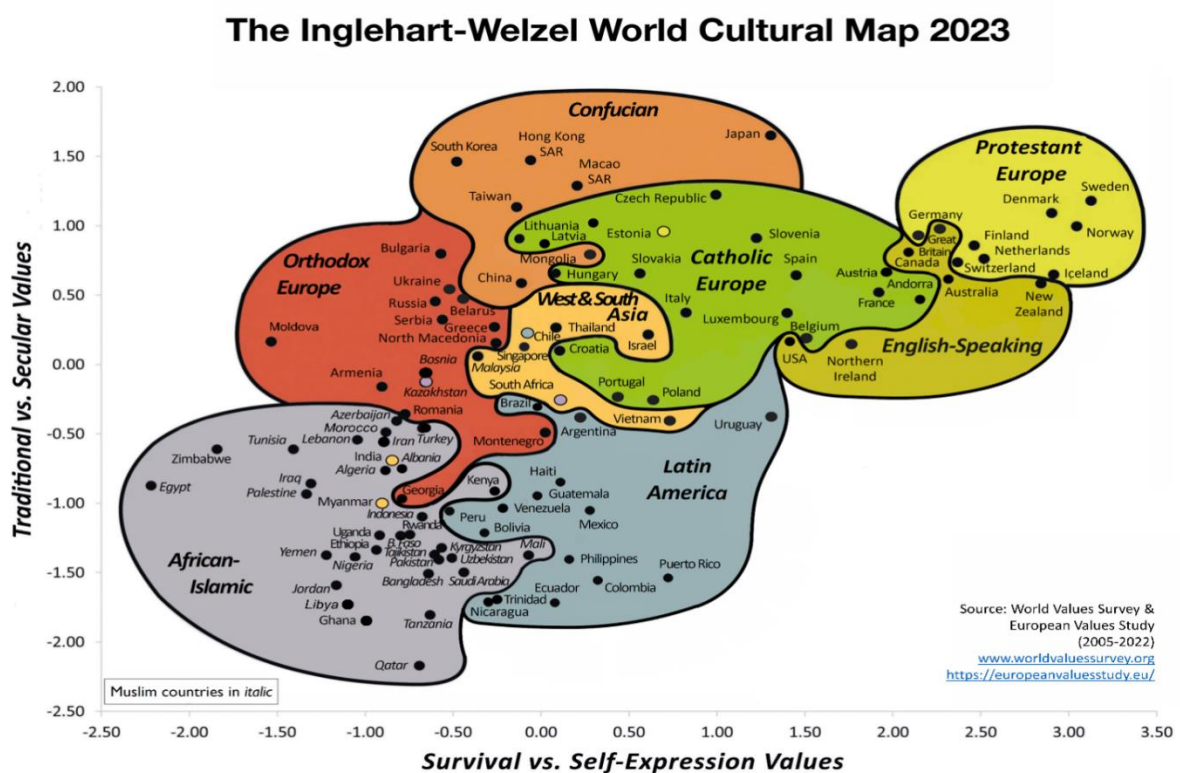
partly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and across the Caspian Sea, through Azerbaijan and Georgia, to the Black Sea. The route consists of about 4,250 km of rail lines, and about 500 km of seaway. Afterwards, two paths lead to the Europe via Turkey and the Black Sea, respectively. From a European perspective, it also offers access to the growing markets of Central Asia and the Caucasus region, as well as faster access to the Middle East, North Africa and the European Mediterranean region via the ports in Georgia and Turkey.

Middle Corridor and the recent reshuffling of the trading routes might be one factor where Georgia uses its values on the one hand, to secure its role in the wider Black Sea region and on the other, to continue its Euro-Integration path that the majority of Georgian citizens have steadily chosen.

2. Findings and discussion

As the World Cultural Map shows, Georgia is closer to the countries along the Middle Corridor in traditional and survival values as opposed to secular-rational and self-expression values that are more common to the EU countries of Georgia's aspiration.

Figure 1. Inglehart-Welzel World Culture Map 2023.



Traditional values emphasize the importance of religion, parent-child ties, deference to authority and traditional family values. People who embrace these values also reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia and suicide. These societies have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook. Survival values place emphasis on economic and physical security. It is linked with a relatively ethnocentric outlook and low levels of trust and tolerance. These values are referred to as materialist values. [https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=findings].

Secular-rational values have the opposite preferences to the traditional values. These societies place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority. Divorce, abortion, euthanasia and suicide are seen as relatively acceptable. (Suicide is not necessarily more common.)

Self-expression values give high priority to environmental protection, growing tolerance of foreigners, gays and lesbians and gender equality, and rising demands for participation in decision-making in economic and political life. These values are referred to post-materialist values [https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=findings].

According to Inglehart [European Values Study 2017-2022], advanced Western societies experience a shift from materialist to post-materialist values. Material values express the need for economic and financial security, societal stability, personal safety, and law and order. Post-materialist

values refer to the need for political freedom and participation, self-actualization, personal relationships, creativity, and care for the environment.

One important finding is that both – Materialist vs. Post-Materialist and Autonomy Indexes for Georgia show the value transition process.

- **Materialist vs. Post Materialist Index:** Materialist – 42.8%; Mixed – 51.7%; Post Materialist – 0.8%
- **Autonomy Index:** Obedience – Religious Faith – 28.8%; Mixed – 38.5%; Determination-Perseverance – 32.7%

Operational Code analysis also reflects this mixed nature of Georgia’s value shift in that its philosophical beliefs not always match its instrumental beliefs – confidence in the EU showing a higher consistency.

Table 1. Philosophical Beliefs vs. Instrumental Beliefs.

Philosophical Beliefs		Instrumental Beliefs	
Confidence in Democracy	79.3%	Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections	53.8%
Importance of Democracy	54.1%	People obey their leaders	11.3%
Confidence in Politics	38.7%	Would never attend peaceful demonstrations	60.6%
		Would never join strikes	80%
Confidence in Churches	87.1%	Membership of Churches or Religious Organizations	Not a member – 79% Inactive member – 14.1%
		Attendance of Religious Services	Only on Special Holidays – 25.5%
Confidence in the EU	47.6%	I see myself as the citizen of the EU	41.3%

Another finding is that current (immediate) economic situation impacts Georgia’s diagonal move on the World Cultural Map. The sharpest shift towards traditional and survival values for Georgia happened during pandemic [WVS 2005-2020 / Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, 2020]. Since then, Georgia has not returned to its highest position on the World Cultural Map’s diagonal: From 2005 to 2009, Georgia had the trajectory towards secular-rational and self-expression values, and it was ahead of its two neighbors in the South Caucasus – Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Georgia associates development of the Middle Corridor concept primarily with its economic development. So do the main strategic partners of Georgia supporting the country.

“I took the note of the role and ambition that Georgia has in becoming a hub and a key participant, a key player in the Silk Road. I believe that this is an opportunity that the government will not lose. I am convinced in the political buy-in in this one, because there are a number of projects that the realization of which will make a difference in Georgia’s economic growth and the prosperity of the people. Just picking one or two: we are talking about connecting Georgia with Azerbaijan in a bigger context and there are infrastructure projects that we discussed like the railway, or the Anaklia Port, the airport. I can imagine that the realization of these projects will bring new skills, new economic impetus in the country.” Alkis Drakinos - Director, Regional Head of Caucasus, EBRD [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svM95UUQeuo>].

“This region has been having multi-crisis, poly-crisis I would say. As we know there are geopolitical tensions but also after COVID, we noticed a huge issue about supply chains followed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We saw huge differences in trade flows and lots of challenges in gas supply to Europe and also Europe deciding to de-couple from Russian energy market; so, energy prices increased creating huge energy crisis. Georgia in particular is a country that has been thinking about – because of its geopolitical situation – how to bring countries together around major infrastructure – Georgia being at the center of an important region trying to get countries to have a common vision. I’m starting to hear a common around the connectivity, around regional energy trade, around the middle corridor for logistics and trade facilitation, and also the opportunities around digitization, which we think at the World Bank will create huge impetus for job creation for economic growth”... Charles J. Cormier - Regional Director

for Infrastructure for ECA, WB [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbG7u5aOdWc>]

“My impression was of the strategic importance of what the country – Georgia – means and the strategic importance for the economic development of Georgia and the Caucasus and the Western Asian countries. The Middle Corridor is definitely a strategic infrastructure that can enhance cooperation and develop and foster the economic development, trade and investment and can bring not only public but also private capital at place to help the sustainable development of the whole region” ... Roberta

Casali - VP, ADB [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yau37axZQg0>]

According to the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map, following an increase in standards of living, and a transit from development country via industrialization to post-industrial knowledge society (in line with the expectations of Georgia’s strategic partners stemming from the opportunities the Middle Corridor poses for Georgia) , a country tends to move diagonally in the direction from lower-left corner (poor) to upper-right corner (rich), indicating a transit in both dimensions. This is where most of EU countries are positioned on the World Cultural Map. This is where Georgia views itself.

Towards this end, Georgia will be ready to embrace its regional identity to the extent it does not raise eyebrows on the ultimate goal – whether Georgia is Western enough or not (Kvanchilashvili, & Pirtskhalava, 2023). It is expected that Georgia identifies with the Black Sea Region only if it plays a role in its daily life. Middle Corridor leaves the room for Georgia to remain in its value comfort zone to view the Black Sea region as the means of utilizing its main- transit role and contributing to the economic development, on the one hand and on the other, doing so without narrowing down to only Black Sea Regional cooperation but rather as means to connect East with West – namely, with Europe.

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