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U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership: What Now for Public Diplomacy? ^[1]

The decision made by Georgian Dream, Georgia's ruling party, on November 28 to stop the efforts to start the accession negotiations with the EU until 2028, affects the short-range and long-lasting outcomes of the United States' public diplomacy in Georgia.

From a public diplomacy perspective, geopolitics has always been forming the ideological and ideational currents within and around Georgia. Russia's threat to Georgia's domestic, regional, and global security, drives Georgia's geopolitics and the transformations taking place in Georgia and U.S.-Georgia relations. Moreover, geopolitics plays a key role in determining the United States' public diplomacy response to changes in Georgia. In the context of containing Russia's increasing influence and aggression in Georgia, U.S. public diplomacy has an essential mission to play in the region.

Whether through FLEX, UGRAD, Fulbright, or other exchanges and public diplomacy programs, the United States expands opportunities for Georgians to strengthen civil society, advance the rule of law, enhance democratic institutions, and promote economic prosperity. These programs are of vital importance for Georgians to address the struggles and challenges they have been witnessing from the Russian side on the way of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path.

Russia not only poses threats to Georgia, but it represents threats to the West's geopolitical interests. Undermining Georgian democracy is a key element in Russia's broader plan and its objective to regain control of former Soviet regions. This destabilizes the security and stability of the Western world. Therefore, using public diplomacy as a strategic tool to strengthen and reinforce Georgia's determination and institutions is especially important and urgent.

The public diplomacy trajectory in U.S.-Georgia bilateral relations has undergone a recent shift.

For example, in response to the Georgian government's anti-democratic actions and false statements incompatible with membership norms in the EU and NATO, the United States paused more than \$95 million in assistance to the Government of Georgia in the Summer of 2024. However, this action reinforced the central role of public diplomacy in maintaining U.S.-Georgia relations during that politically turbulent time in Georgia. Public diplomacy remained a tactical and coordinated approach for the United States in Georgia. The United States continued to support programs that directly benefit the Georgian people and align with democratic values by strengthening democracy, the rule of law, independent media, and economic development. The U.S. commitment to foster positive relations with the Georgian people and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations affirmed the integral role of people-to-people ties in U.S.-Georgia relations. It also emphasized the potential for fostering a lasting positive impact and strengthening the partnership further.

This decision should be received by the Georgian Dream as a cautionary signal. But, unfortunately, they rejected every possible opportunity, both internal and external, to consolidate Georgia's democracy and deepen its ties with the EU-Atlantic community.

The suspension of the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership on November 30, in response to the Georgian Dream's various anti-democratic actions, takes away public diplomacy opportunities from the Georgian people. Section 5 of the Charter, which involves increasing people-to-people and cultural exchanges, provided a fundamental course to the contemporary U.S. public diplomacy in Georgia. The suspension of this mechanism will have significant implications for U.S.-Georgia relations and Georgia's broader development. The wider consequences may include Georgia's increased vulnerability to external influence and stalled progress in democracy and EU-Atlantic integration.

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Following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, signing this Charter in 2009 brought a new dimension and direction to U.S.-Georgia relations. It showed the United States' ability to make contributions to the continued growth of Georgia's democracy.

But what now for public diplomacy? Which areas of people-to-people ties can be emphasized between the United States and Georgia? What role will it play in bringing dynamism to the future of the United States and Georgia? What are the long-term benefits of it?

Georgia is in turmoil, and requires immediate international action and support. At this moment, unlike any before, the Georgian people should not be left alone on the front line of Russian aggression, influence, and politics. Now more than ever, Georgian people need an enlarged commitment and strengthened ties with the Western world. Now more than ever, Georgian people need an abundance of cultural and social exchange programs. Now more than ever, Georgian people should not be left vulnerable to alternative influencers. Never has there been a time like now when the Georgian people need more support for the nation's process of democratic consolidation and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Given the vast potential and experiences of the United States' public diplomacy in Georgia, it can aid the Georgian people in overcoming current challenges and becoming members of the EU-Atlantic family. Through public diplomacy, the United States is closer to the people of Georgia. And through U.S. public diplomacy, the Georgian people are closer to EU-Atlantic integration.
