



Georgian-Greek Relations: Building a Strategic Dimension

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Summary

- The cordial bilateral relations between Greece and Georgia are mostly centered on the culture and education domains, with less progress achieved in the areas of the economy, foreign policy, and security.
- Greece can emerge as Georgia's key supporter in its EU membership aspirations, with Greek experts and diplomatic circles contributing their experience to the country's EU integration process.
- This support can be realized at both high and low levels, through EU Twinning projects and results-oriented memoranda between state institutions to import best practices, so Georgia can successfully carry out the required democratization reforms and implement the EU Association Agreement effectively.
- As the international system becomes more multipolar and the strategic significance of the Black Sea and Caucasus regions increases, Greece and Georgia should work to deepen their ties and build interest-oriented synergies in order to forge a strategic alliance.
- The promotion of Western and European interests can be significantly aided by a democratic Georgia on the road to European integration and a resurgent Greece with a stronger regional presence in the Black Sea and Caucasus.

Culture and education are the two key areas of their cooperation.

Georgian-Greek relations are positively influenced by religion, with Orthodox Christianity serving as a common religious denomination and cultural identity marker for the majority of Georgians and Greeks.

Greece has been providing support for Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures ever since Georgia set European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) memberships as its key strategic priorities.

20 April 2022 marked the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Georgia and Greece. Relations between Tbilisi and Athens are deep and exist on multiple levels. There have been Greeks living in the territory of modern-day Georgia since ancient [times](#), while Georgians make up the third-largest immigrant community in [Greece](#).

Georgia regained its sovereignty in 1991, and Greece was one of the first states to establish an embassy in Tbilisi, in 1995, and provided Georgia with financial and political assistance in developing its foreign diplomatic activities. Today, however, setting this modern history to one side, although the two nations have signed a number of bilateral agreements, their bilateral relations are dominated by low politics. Culture and education are the two key areas of their cooperation, which includes components of Greek and Georgian language learning activities; cooperation between national archives, cultural organizations, and book publishing companies; scholarships for Georgian students; and the sponsorship of the Institute of Classical, Byzantine, and Modern Greek Studies at Tbilisi State University and the chairs of Hellenic Studies at Akhaltsikhe and Batumi Universities. Cooperation also includes an employment element, with the Greek merchant marine actively involved in the employment of Georgian personnel, as well as the high labor migration of Georgians to Greece. In addition, Georgian-Greek relations are [positively influenced](#) by religion, with Orthodox Christianity serving as a common religious denomination and cultural identity marker for the majority of Georgians and [Greeks](#).

Greece has been providing support for Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures ever since Georgia set European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) memberships as its key strategic priorities, while representatives of the Greek diplomatic and academic community are actively involved in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration process. In this respect, Dimitris Avramopoulos, who served as EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs, and Citizenship between 2014 and 2019, played an important role the EU's decision to grant Georgia visa liberalization in 2017. Within the framework provided for by the new visa-free regime, Greece was the first country visited by a Georgian delegation led by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Kvirikashvili underlined the symbolism of the visit, emphasizing the ancient bonds connecting Georgia and Greece, as well as the fact that Georgia had signed its Association Agreement with the EU during Greece's presidency of the European Council. In the same year, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias visited Tbilisi and met with his counterpart, Mikheil Janelidze. In his statements, Kotzias stated his strong conviction that Georgia is a European [country](#), adding:

"Relations between Greece and Georgia are strategic. A strategic relationship means that we will both try to deepen our relationship in all sectors: in education, the economy, research, energy and other fields. A strategic relationship means that we will do whatever we can to bring Georgia closer to the EU, and to transfer to you our experience and knowledge as an old member of the EU, but that we will also learn from you, from your experiences."

For his part, Janelidze's rhetoric was equally positive: "We have a very strong advocate of our European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and that is Greece."

Nevertheless, little has transpired since 2017 to justify these ambitious statements. Apart from the operation of inter-parliamentary "Friendship Groups," communication has been somewhat restrained, with the pandemic being only partly to blame. This passivity was slightly reversed in 2021-2022 as offline and online inter-parliamentary contact was resumed with a focus on cultural, educational, artistic and scientific partnerships, education reform, and more comprehensive parliamentary cooperation. In addition, on

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Furthermore, in the context of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Athens could undertake a key role in shaping the strategic shifts across the region.

21 September 2022, Georgian Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili met with his Greek counterpart Nikos Dendias within the framework of the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly. Darchiashvili thanked Greece for its firm support of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the country's European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

On a high-politics level, Georgia's Defense Minister, Juansher Burchuladze, visited his Greek counterpart, Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos, last year (2021). They discussed the partnership between Georgia and NATO, the implementation of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), Black Sea security, and the importance of NATO's active participation in this process. Within the framework of the meeting, the ministers signed a 2021 bilateral cooperation plan which defined the areas of cooperation between their nations and the associated activities. One of the memoranda provided for a cadet exchange, whereby Georgian students take a training course at the Hellenic Naval Academy.

From a strategic point of view, Greece has a clear interest in strengthening its presence and deepening relations with allied states in the Black Sea and the Caucasus, whereas Georgia is motivated by its desire to strengthen relations with EU and NATO member states. Given Georgia's European aspirations and its integration process, which is ongoing as it now has a European perspective, Greece, as an EU and NATO member state, has several diplomatic and political levers it can employ to support Georgia and affirm their traditional friendship. In this context, Greek representatives at the European Parliament and European Council could robustly support EU membership for Georgia. Georgia, for its part, could help promote Greek economic and diplomatic interests in the Black Sea and the Caucasus, and thus facilitate the growth of Greece's regional influence. A Strategic Cooperation Council could be established to identify the fields in which cooperation could be enhanced and deepened.

At the moment, the strategic priority regions in Greek foreign policy are Southeastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean; the Black Sea and the Caucasus could become important additions, given Greece's deep historic, economic, and cultural ties with the area. While the Black Sea was once a route to "somewhere else," it is now a key juncture. Furthermore, in the context of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Athens could undertake a key role in in shaping the shifts in strategy adopted by players across the region. This would necessitate a more active foreign and security policy aligned with the growing interest and engagement of both the EU and the US in the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Greece supports policies within the EU that not only advance the economic well-being of these areas, but also bring them closer to Europe. In doing so, Greece has played a role in developing the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and is a supporter of both the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Black Sea Synergy. Given that Athens has always been one of the most outspoken supporters of the EU membership perspective of Southeastern European states, Greece could play a more active role in supporting the EaP states (Georgia, plus Ukraine and Moldova) with their EU aspirations.

On a domestic level, Greece can export inter alia good practices through the EU Twinning projects and, by establishing partnerships between its own and Georgia's state bodies and private organizations, build ambitious institutional and sectoral ties that will contribute per se to the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement on the institutional level. There are already two important precedents for this: (I) the "Enhancing Accounting and Audit Quality in Georgia" twinning project implemented in 2019 by the Center of International and European Economic Law in cooperation with the Hellenic Accounting and Auditing Standards Oversight Board, whose beneficiary was the Ministry

of Finance of Georgia; and (II) memoranda of cooperation between the Georgian and Greek Ministries of Defense.

Establishing a Georgian-Greek Chamber of Commerce would also be very useful for promoting bilateral trade and investment opportunities.

Although the parties have displayed an encouraging degree of cooperation in the fields of culture and education, this now needs to be expanded and deepened. In addition, given that Georgia has no land border with the EU, to which it is physically linked by the Black Sea, the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) provides instruments that could be used to deepen bilateral relations and sectoral cooperation, although these are currently underused. However, the BSEC's efforts to encourage regional collaboration have made only modest headway, mostly due to its limited resources and the heterogeneity of its membership. In fact, there is no special form of bilateral cooperation between Greece and Georgia within the BSEC format. Obviously, more work is necessary here, and the platform should be instrumentalized in a more efficient manner. Also, within the BSEC framework, Tbilisi and Athens should revitalize their ties to boost interregional cooperation in the fields of research and development. This could be done through two BSEC-related, Greece-based bodies: the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank and the International Center for Black Sea Studies. Establishing a Georgian-Greek Chamber of Commerce would also be very useful for promoting bilateral trade and investment opportunities. Research and academic collaboration between the two countries' leading institutions would also help to strengthen bilateral cooperation ties at the societal level. Tourism can become another area of mutually beneficial collaboration, which could simultaneously build societal bridges and deepen people-to-people ties. Given Greece's capacity and resources in the merchant marine and shipping, cooperation in these domains could help capacity-building in Georgia, particularly in respect of the Georgian State Maritime Academy in Batumi.

The threat of war proliferation was highlighted by September 2022's Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia and served as a reminder to the EU of the need to strengthen its engagement with the region with the aim of promoting respect for international law, peace and stability and preventing the complete destabilization of the Black Sea and Caucasus regions.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought the Black Sea and the Caucasus back to the forefront of international politics after Russia's military aggression and creeping occupation of Georgia in 2008 and the Second Karabakh War of 2020. The threat of proliferation was highlighted by September 2022's Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia and served as a reminder to the EU of the need to strengthen its engagement with the region with the aim of promoting respect for international law, peace and stability and preventing the complete destabilization of the Black Sea and Caucasus regions. Such a strategy requires the EU to end its reliance on Russian energy resources, which boosts Georgia's role in Europe's energy security structure significantly. As EU leaders actively seek solutions to avoid energy crises and given that Caspian resources could help relieve energy supply shortages in Europe, Georgia could play a more active role in bringing the EU and the Caspian Sea basin closer together, specifically in terms of liquefied natural gas (LNG), the transmission of electricity, renewable energy, and the transition to a "green economy."

Given this significant potential, much needs to be done to connect Athens and Tbilisi at both a state and societal level in a more practical and effective manner. As the international system becomes increasingly multipolar and the Black Sea and Caucasus regions grow in strategic importance, Greece and Georgia should seek to strengthen their ties and generate result-oriented synergies to develop a strategic partnership. A democratic Georgia en route to European integration and a resurgent Greece playing a stronger regional role in the Black Sea and the Caucasus while advocating the integration of the region into the European family, could make a powerful joint contribution to the promotion of Western and European interests, regional stability, and prosperity.

Recommendations for Georgia-Greece relations

- Intensify high-level, parliamentary, governmental, and intersectoral meetings between Georgia and Greece, in order to fully develop the potential of a currently neglected partnership, with the aim of developing synergies based on common strategic interests. A Strategic Co-operation Council could help promote relations on multiple levels.
- Promote Georgian-Greek strategic goals using EU and regional organization instruments (such as the BSEC). Within the BSEC framework, Georgia and Greece should revitalize their bilateral ties to boost interregional to further their cooperation. This can be done through two BSEC-related, Greece-based bodies: the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank and the International Center for Black Sea Studies.
- Maximize the two nations' existing potential against a backdrop of relatively low levels of trade, economic, and tourism cooperation. Establishing a Greek-Georgian Chamber of Commerce would be very useful in this context.
- Greece can emerge as a key supporter of Georgia's democratic consolidation and European future, leveraging its experience in Southeastern Europe.
- Georgia can become a base for developing Greek diplomatic and economic interests in the Black Sea and Caucasus regions.