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Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy in Uncertain Times

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Georgia has struggled to achieve its foreign policy goals of restoring its territorial integrity and achieving Euro-Atlantic integration. In recent years, Georgia's relations with the West have cooled somewhat as a result of Georgia's internal problems, while the Georgian Dream government's normalization policy with Russia has led to an increase in Russian influence in the country. In effect, a pro-Western foreign policy was replaced by a balancing approach between Russia and the West. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed the limits of this having-the-cake-and-eating-it approach, which has led to the question whether the GD government lost its foreign policy compass, at a time when its domestic objective to stay in power clashes with the reforms needed to push for EU membership.

Georgia's foreign policy since independence was focused on two main priorities: First, restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty, and second, Euro-Atlantic integration. While there has not been much tension between the two goals, the second goal was also considered as means to achieve the first. However, Euro-Atlantic integration goes beyond instrumental logic and includes strong ideational meaning for the Georgian public and political elite. "Returning to the European family" has been a significant part of the mythos of Georgia's national identity – which even predates territorial conflicts in Georgia and conflictual relations with Russia.



Ukraine Solidarity Protests in Tbilisi, February 26, 2022.

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On the other hand, Russia has been perceived as the main threat to Georgia's sovereignty and national security. Russia's geopolitical dominance in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region are viewed as an obstacle to Georgia's foreign policy objectives, including Euro-Atlantic integration.

Russia as a veto actor is considered to be the main reason behind the stagnation of process of Georgia's NATO integration and the reluctance of the Western partners to engage more with Georgia in areas of security and military cooperation.¹

Georgian Foreign Policy Priorities in the Last Five Years

Over the last five years Georgia's foreign policy formally remained unchanged aiming at European integration and the development of closer relations with NATO and the United States. Georgia recently submitted a formal application for EU membership, thus entering into a new chapter of internal development strongly driven by public opinion: "irreversible Europeanization." Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened a window of opportunity for Tbilisi, and has made the achievement of candidate status with the EU more likely. However, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia has not been able to take full advantage of this chance. Taking into account the recent democratic backsliding in Georgia and the sharp decrease in trust towards the Georgian government, the EU refrained from granting the status of candidate to the country and

posed additional conditions for Tbilisi to qualify for this status. However, in a historic decision, the EU recognized Georgia's European perspective and gave the green light to its membership perspective. Despite this, the decision of the European Council was perceived by many as a missed opportunity. This perception is rooted in the fact that Georgia used to be a frontrunner in the Eastern Partnership project, but it is now one step behind the rest of the "Associated Trio."² It remains to be seen how the Georgian government will manage to fulfil the 12 recommendations to catch up with Ukraine and Moldova to get EU candidate status.

Against this background, Georgia's relations with the West have somewhat cooled down due to continued problems with Georgia's democratization and good governance. Lack of progress in key areas of democracy and rule of law (such as stagnation of reforms in justice system) have been criticized by the West³ and the EU even started resorting to democratic conditionality again,⁴ for example freezing macro-financial assistance to Georgia in 2021.⁵

At the same time, however, the Georgian Dream (GD) government continued its attempts to

¹ Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze, and Shalva Dzebisashvili, "Game of (open) Doors: NATO-Georgian Relations and Challenges for Sustainable Partnership," Policy Paper no.18, Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2020. <https://gip.ge/publication-post/game-of-open-doors-nato-georgian-relations-and-challenges-for-sustainable-partnership/>

² Vano Chkhikvadze, "Georgia's Road to the European Union – Can the Country Catch a Train that has Left the Station," Perspective. Georgian Institute of Politics. July 26, 2022. <https://gip.ge/sakartvelos-gza-evrokavshiriken-daeweva-qveyana-dazrul-matarebels/>

³ "EU Slams Top Court Appointments in Georgia," Civil.ge, December 2, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/459326>

⁴ European Parliament, "Georgia: Leading MEPs react to the refusal of the political parties to reach an agreement" April 1, 2021. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210401IPR01301/georgia-leading-meps-react-to-the-refusal-of-the-parties-to-reach-an-agreement>

⁵ Tornike Mandaria, "Georgia turns down 75 million euros from the EU," *Eurasianet*, September 1, 2021. <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-turns-down-75-million-euros-from-the-eu>

normalize relations with Russia. As a result of GD's normalization policy, Georgia again became dependent on Russian imports and exports and the role of Russia increased in many strategic sectors of the Georgian economy, such as tourism and agriculture.⁶ The Georgian government also adopted an approach of strategic patience towards Russia. The GD kept a low profile in foreign policy issues that have been important to Russia and has attempted not to irritate its bigger neighbor. This has been the case especially with the Russia-Ukraine war when the Georgian government has kept equidistance between Kyiv and Moscow, did not embrace Western sanctions, and avoided loud criticism of Russia's actions.⁷ The GD's Russia-accommodating policy resulted in societal backlashes and domestic political crises in 2019 and 2022. It seems that while the Georgian public is in



President of European Council Charles Michel and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili in April 2021. Photo: Government of Georgia

favor of improving economic relations and people-to-people contacts with Russia, it is strongly against political rapprochement with Russia and the Russia-accommodating policy of the Georgian government.⁸

In sum, while formally there have been no changes in priorities of Georgia's foreign policy, the Georgian government's Russia-accommodating policy and the government's recent and unprecedented anti-western campaign targeting its international partners⁹ resulted in informal tectonic changes and a *de facto* reintroduction of the Russian factor in Georgia's foreign policy decision-making process. It seems that pro-Western foreign policy was replaced by a balancing approach between Russia and the West which still favors the West but acknowledges a need to accommodate Russian interests and concerns.

⁶ Transparency International Georgia. "Georgia's economic dependence on Russia: Trade, tourism, remittances, and Russian companies in Georgia," March 10, 2021. <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-trade-tourism-remittances-and-russian-companies-georgia>

⁷ Nini Gabritchidze, "Amid war, bitter exchanges continue to spoil Tbilisi-Kyiv relations," *Eurasianet*, May 4, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/amid-war-bitter-exchanges-continue-to-spoil-tbilisi-kyiv-relations>

⁸ OC Media, "Georgians want their government to support Ukraine" March 15, 2022. <https://oc-media.org/features/datablog-georgians-want-their-government-to-support-ukraine/>

⁹ Nini Gabritchidze, "Georgian ruling party intensifies attacks against U.S., EU ambassadors," *Eurasianet*, July 25, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-ruling-party-intensifies-attacks-against-us-eu-ambassadors>

Georgian Foreign Policy Perceptions amid Ongoing Geopolitical Shifts in the Region

The current Georgian government sees Russia as an indispensable power in the region and defines its own role accordingly – as a small state which needs to accommodate the main regional hegemon which also happens to be the main source of danger. The Georgian Dream government seems to view the geopolitical shifts prior to Russia-Ukraine war as confirming Russia's geopolitical dominance in the region. While Euro-Atlantic integration is still Georgia's ultimate goal, GD perceives Western actors as lacking the political will and capacity to provide Georgia with security guarantees against Russia.

The GD's changed approach towards Russia from balancing towards accommodation led to a certain schism regarding the foreign policy perceptions within political elites of Georgia. Unlike the Georgian Dream government, the former ruling party (and now the biggest opposition party) United National Movement (UNM) as well as much of the mainstream opposition parties are opposed to the government's cuddly approach towards Russia. Hence, while there seems to be a consensus among the political elite about the irreversibility of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy, the consensus falls apart on the question how to deal with Russia. This has been the main reason why the Georgian parliament failed to adopt a cross-party resolution in support of Ukraine amid the Russia-Ukraine war.¹⁰ At the same time, the main foreign policy direction – integration with Euro-Atlantic structures – remains unchanged and is shared by a majority of

foreign policy elite. However, the extent to which the two vectors (Russia-accommodating posturing and pro-Western foreign policy) are compatible remains to be seen.

Georgia's Regional Focus and Priorities

Georgia's goal of having closer ties with the West, as well as the country's need to maintain balanced relations with its neighbors, are among the factors influencing Georgia's regional foreign and security policy. Georgia is a small country with a compromised security environment and underdeveloped economy. While Georgia's foreign policy has been security-driven due to the presence of territorial conflicts and the occupation of its territory, the country was also looking for beneficial economic ties with external actors to push for its economic development. Georgia's relations with Russia were always torn between Russia's negative impact on Georgia's security and Moscow's economic attraction. Georgia's economic relations with Russia hit their lowest point in 2005-2007 when Russia step by step imposed a full-scale economic and transport embargo on Georgia and economic activities between two countries ground to a halt.¹¹ Georgia tried to diversify its exports from the lost Russian market. Deteriorating economic and societal ties to Russia were accompanied by increasing ties with the EU and as a result the EU became Georgia's top trade partner. Nevertheless, the GD government that came to power in 2012 decided to reset Georgia's economic and people-to-people ties to Russia.

¹⁰ Civil.ge "Georgian Parliament Adopts Resolution Supporting Ukraine, Omits 'Russian Aggression'". February 01, 2022. <https://civil.ge/archives/470322>

¹¹ BBC News "Russia bans Georgia mineral water" May 5, 2006. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4976304.stm>)

As a result, Georgia again became dependent on Russia's market, tourists and strategic goods.¹²

Among other regional actors, Georgia has close strategic partnerships with Turkey and Azerbaijan. The three countries build a significant energy and transport corridor connecting the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to Europe via Turkey and the Black Sea. Turkey is also an important trade partner of Georgia and Azerbaijan is its main source of gas and oil – ensuring Georgia's independence from Russian energy sources. Georgia's relations with Russia's close ally Armenia, by contrast, are relatively modest. The two countries understand each other's foreign policy limitations and nurture pragmatic neighborly relations. Traditionally, Georgia and Ukraine found themselves comrades in both hardship and misfortune. Both still sit outside the European 'zone of democratic peace' – made up mostly of EU and NATO member states – and must therefore adapt their policies to the harsher realities of the former Soviet realm, where power politics dominate. With a tradition of friendly and strategic relations between Tbilisi and Kiev, Georgians followed the Russian invasion in Ukraine with great concern and see the struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty as analogous to their own fate. However, the ambiguous position of present government over the war in Ukraine has strained relations between the two strategic partners.¹³ Among non-regional actors, Georgia has the closest economic relations to China. The two countries signed a free trade agreement in 2017 and China has recently become one of Georgia's key trading partners.¹⁴

¹² National Statistics Office of Georgia, "External Trade" <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/35/external-trade>

Main Strengths of and Challenges to Georgia's Foreign Policy Approach

Over the first thirty years of independence, Georgia's foreign policy has had several major limitations. First, the key issue was a weak state and the authoritarian tendencies of successive Georgian governments since the country's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Weak statehood and authoritarian politics made Georgia unattractive and an unpredictable partner for the West and the international community. As Georgia's degree of relations with the EU, NATO and the U.S. increased qualitatively over the years, so the expectations towards Georgia increased. However, successive Georgian governments failed to live up to these expectations. More recently, since signing the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, the EU and other Western partners expect from Georgia a strong record of good governance and democratic reforms, which the country has not delivered. Neither the UNM government which ruled Georgia from 2003 to 2012 nor the current GD government, in power since 2013, seem to have been ready to conduct genuine democratic and rule of law reforms that would elevate the image of Georgia as a credible and trustworthy partner in increasingly authoritarian and unstable region.

The second weakness has been of an external nature: the presence of Russia as a hostile regional hegemon and, as a result, a hostile external environment. None of the Georgian governments managed to solve this problem. The Russian factor seems also to be a polarizing issue among the Georgian

¹³ Giorgi Lomsadze, "Ukraine recalls ambassador from Georgia," *Eurasianet*, March 1, 2022. (<https://eurasianet.org/ukraine-recalls-ambassador-from-georgia>)

¹⁴ Ibid.

political class, since there is no agreement how to handle it. While the UNM had a more hawkish approach towards Russia, GD decided to appease political Moscow.¹⁵ However, Georgian Dream's cuddly approach to Russia and reluctance to politically side with the West in the Russia-Ukraine conflict may result in Georgia's international isolation and a loss of trust among Georgia's international partners. Therefore, it remains questionable whether GD's Russia-accommodating will be sustainable in the long run and how will it turn out for Georgia.

On the other hand, Georgia's main strength has always been the image of a progressive outpost in an otherwise authoritarian and volatile region. While not a perfect democracy, Georgia has been a front-runner in areas of good governance reforms and in terms of certain democratic credentials (such as having a vibrant civil society and a more advanced democratic culture compared to many countries in the region). Recently this image has been somewhat tarnished however due to the high level of societal polarization and the political immaturity of major political actors. If Georgia can rebound from the recent crisis and strengthen its image as a progressive force in the region, it can significantly boost its foreign policy niche and make itself a valuable partner for the West.

The Way Ahead in Uncertain Times

As a frontline state in the "gray zone" outside the safety of NATO's security umbrella, Georgia faces the daunting tasks of pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, strengthening its democratic resilience, preserving sovereignty, and avoiding Russian aggression at the same time.¹⁶ Amid these challenges, the Georgian government is likely to face two dilemmas in the near future. The first dilemma is of a geopolitical nature: how to strike a balance between its Russia-accommodating approach and Euro-Atlantic integration attempts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed the limits of this having-the-cake-and-eating-it approach. While it is understandable and prudent to have a cautious and somewhat predictable policy towards Russia, the GD government seems to have lost its foreign policy compass during its attempts to appease Russia. GD needs to reassure the international community, and especially its Western partners, that Georgia's commitment to Euro-Atlantic values and European integration remains unchanged.

Related to this is also a second dilemma: the conflictual interplay between the domestic objectives of the ruling party to keep itself in power and Georgia's main foreign policy objective of European integration and EU membership. Georgia's EU membership prospects, which finally were put on the EU's agenda due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, will certainly depend on the Georgian government

¹⁵ Kornely Kakachia, Salome Minesashvili and Levan Kakhishvili, "Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States: Elite Perceptions and Georgia's Foreign Policy Towards Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70 no. 5, 2018, pp. 814-831.

¹⁶ Kakachia Kornely and Shota Kakabadze, "Creeping Finlandization or Prudent Foreign Policy? Georgia's

Strategic Challenges amid the Ukrainian Crisis," PONARS Eurasia memo. March 28, 2022.

(<https://www.ponarseurasia.org/creeping-finlandization-or-prudent-foreign-policy-georgias-strategic-challenges-amid-the-ukrainian-crisis/>)

delivering democratic and rule of law reforms. As Georgia needs to accelerate its Europeanization and democratic transformation, ruling regimes in Georgia were generally reluctant to conduct reforms that would endanger their stay in power. If this trend continues it may further strengthen the cooling of relations between the West and Georgia. The current government will need to break this cycle if it wants to pave the way for Georgia's eventual EU membership. To sum up, Georgia's foreign policy

trajectory within the next five years will be shaped by how the Georgian government will solve these two dilemmas.

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