



## Security Perceptions in Georgia

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### **Introduction: Georgia's foreign and security policy since independence**

Survival is often argued to be the major concern of small states' international relations. Georgia is no exception – since it gained independence in the early 1990s, Georgia has had a turbulent history. It has experienced four military conflicts: two wars in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and a civil war in Tbilisi during the early 1990s, and later a brief war with Russia in August 2008. Due to the fact that Russia acts as a patron of Georgia's breakaway regions (following the 2008 August war, Moscow recognized their independence), the most important challenge for Georgia's foreign and security policy during the quarter century of independence has always been finding an optimal way to decrease its vulnerability as opposed to the intimidating military prowess of Russia. In search of such an optimal way, Georgia has had four different political forces governing the country. Each of these four leaderships was associated with a single personality and was greatly influenced by them. Furthermore, each of these leaders has had their own view of how to ensure Georgia's national security.<sup>1</sup>

In the early days of the 1990s when Zviad Gamsakhurdia headed the state as the first president, the outlook of Tbilisi was unique. Gamsakhurdia's vision primarily focused on Georgia's regional integration in the Caucasus. He had close relations with the North Caucasian autonomous republics in Russia, especially with the Chechen leader Jokhar Dudayev. Gamsakhurdia's idea of a 'common Caucasian house' implied that all peoples of the Caucasus, north and south, should have peacefully coexisted with close ties among each other. However, Gamsakhurdia did not manage to implement his vision due to the coup organized by his opponents, after which he had to flee the country and went in exile to the North Caucasus. The coup was followed by chaos and more military conflicts with a high degree of uncertainty about who headed the state.

However, eventually by the mid-1990s Eduard Shevardnadze, a former Soviet Foreign Minister, managed to consolidate his power and stabilize the situation. During Shevardnadze's rule, Georgia started as a devastated country with little potential for independent foreign and security policies. The country hosted Russian military bases not only in the breakaway regions, but also in the

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<sup>1</sup> For more analysis on how personalities have influenced Georgia's foreign policy, please, see: Jones, S. and L. Kakhishvili. 2013. "The interregnum: Georgian foreign policy from independence to Rose Revolution." In: Cecire, M. and K. Kakachia (eds) *Georgia's foreign policy since independence*. Tbilisi: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

territory under the control of the government. As Shevardnadze wrote later in his memoirs, during Georgia was then forced to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, in 1999, Tbilisi opted out of the CSTO and joined the Council of Europe, while remaining a member of the CIS until after the August 2008 war.

The end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s were more successful for Georgia. Tbilisi joined the Council of Europe in 1999, achieved a deal with Russia during the OSCE Istanbul summit in 1999 on the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Georgia, signed an agreement on constructing the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and for the first time officially prioritized relations “with those nations that share its values of democracy, respect for human rights, the market economy, and the free flow of ideas”<sup>2</sup> and integration within “all of the major institutions of the European and Euro-Atlantic communities”<sup>3</sup> over its relations with Russia, the CIS and CSTO. All these developments eventually led to Shevardnadze presenting an official application to the membership in NATO in 2002 just before the end of his leadership in 2003 as a result of the Rose Revolution led by Mikheil Saakashvili.

Mikheil Saakashvili’s trademark on Georgia’s foreign policy was to make Georgia seen and heard on the international arena. His government was so vocal about Georgia’s goal to join NATO and the EU, that often Georgia’s pro-Western foreign policy is associated with Saakashvili, while instead, it originated during the latter period of Shevardnadze’s rule. On the other hand, it was indeed during Saakashvili’s leadership that Georgia was officially promised at the Bucharest summit in April 2008 that Georgia would become a member of the alliance. This promise has been reaffirmed by every NATO summit since then. Saakashvili continued what Shevardnadze started and managed to enforce the obligations Russia took in 1999 about the withdrawal of military bases.

However, Russia maintained its presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The major misfortune for Saakashvili’s foreign policy was the war in August 2008 with Russia.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the war Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus legally breaching Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty that it had previously recognized. Despite the legacy of the war, Georgia moved forward on its path of Western integration eventually upgrading its institutional framework of relationships both with NATO and the EU. This path was taken up by the subsequent government under the leadership of Bidzina Ivanishvili who came to power in 2012 as the prime minister of the country. Ivanishvili’s party, the Georgian Dream, still remains in power even though Ivanishvili stepped down from the position of prime minister.

Yet, it is often believed that Ivanishvili remains the informal leader of the state.<sup>5</sup> Although it was feared that Ivanishvili would return Georgia to the Russian sphere of influence,<sup>6</sup> it has not happened

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<sup>2</sup> Government of Georgia, 2000. *Georgia and the world: a vision and strategy for the future*, [online] Available at: [http://www.parliament.ge/files/1\\_886\\_192675\\_nato\\_vision.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/1_886_192675_nato_vision.pdf) [Accessed 06 January 2013].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed analysis, see: Asmus, R. 2010. *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*. New York: St. Martin’s Press; Cornell, S.E. and S. F. Starr. 2009. *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe.

<sup>5</sup> See: Kakachia, K. and B. Lebanidze. 2017. “Informal Governance and Electorate Perceptions in Hybrid Regimes: The 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia”. *The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 25(4).

<sup>6</sup> See: Cornell, S.E., (2014). “Is Georgia Slipping Away?” *The American Interest*. Available from: <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/11/13/is-georgia-slipping-away/> [11 June 2015]. Dzutsev, V., (2012). “Georgia: The More

and Georgia continued deepening its relations with Western institutions while at the same time adopting the so-called “normalization” policy with Russia that implies restoring trade and economic relations between the two neighbours. Under the leadership of the Georgian Dream (GD) government, Georgia signed the Association Agreement and obtained the visa-free regime with the EU, which can be considered as the major achievements of Georgian foreign policy during the last decade. However, Georgia’s security is far from straightforward, which is why the rest of the report will overview various narratives, dynamics of public opinion, analysis of strategic documents and dynamics of threat perception in the domestic arena.

### Narratives on foreign policy options for Georgia

For years prior to the GD’s coming to power the UNM had been trying to frame Georgian-Russian relations in a way which would not allow even a thought of aligning Georgian and Russian interests. Therefore, if the UNM created a false West-Russia dichotomy, the GD loosened control over the political discourse and in a way opened up a new Pandora’s Box. Pro-Russian actors emerged and proliferated in Georgia – something that would be unimaginable in the Saakashvili era.

Georgia does not have many foreign policy options. Given its size and territorial problems, Georgia essentially has only two choices for alignment: the West or Russia. The Georgian political discourse conducted by the media and politicians often presents Russia and the West as mutually exclusive vectors. However, other possible alternatives exist, including a policy that strikes a balance between the two vectors or a declaration of neutrality. In this regard, for many Georgians, the choice is not only geopolitical but also civilizational. The civilizational choice is related more to values and identity than to *Realpolitik* and thus identity politics plays a primary role in determining the civilizational choice in Georgia.<sup>7</sup> Given that the institutional framework for foreign policy decision-making in Georgia remains weak and that public opinion is always volatile, society has little influence on Georgia’s foreign policy decisions.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Georgia’s foreign policy is largely determined by the values, norms and beliefs of the political elite and by their perceptions of the political context in which Georgia operates. One reason that the political elite plays such a powerful role in Georgian foreign policy – in addition to the fact that foreign policy is generally considered an elite-driven field – may be that the political elite is largely (but not fully) unanimous in terms of values and norms. In contrast, one can find various segments of Georgian society that do not share the views, perceptions or norms of the elite, and thus public opinion is much more diverse than the opinions of the elite.

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Things Change...” *Foreign Policy Journal*. Available from: <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/10/13/georgia-the-more-things-change/> [11 June 2015]. Kakachia, K., (2012). “Georgia’s parliamentary elections: the start of the peaceful transfer of power?” *Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 230. Available from: [http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm\\_230\\_Kakachia\\_Sept2012.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_230_Kakachia_Sept2012.pdf) [11 June 2015].

<sup>7</sup> Gvalia, G., Lebanidze, B., and Iashvili, Z., (2011). *Political Elites, Ideas and Foreign Policy: Explaining and Understanding the International Behavior of Small States in the Former Soviet Union*. Tbilisi: Ilia State University.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, S. and L. Kakhishvili. 2013. “The interregnum: Georgian foreign policy from independence to Rose Revolution.” In: Cecire, M. and K. Kakachia (eds) *Georgia’s foreign policy since independence*. Tbilisi: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

One can identify four categories of foreign policy ideals in the Georgian political discourse.<sup>9</sup> The first category, which can be labeled “pro-Western”, includes people who strongly support Georgia’s integration into the EU and NATO and the strengthening of Georgia’s relations with the USA. People in this category advocate tough reforms, including reforms requested by the EU in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), and employ harsh rhetoric towards Russia. This category represents the dominant narrative and includes most politicians (i.e., people who have served or continue to serve as decision-makers), politicians’ active supporters, and most NGOs.

The second category includes people who do not strongly support either the West or Russia and advocate neutrality or a similar status that will be a consensus between the USA and Russia. These people can be labeled “neutrals” and prefer that Georgia does not align with either Russia or the West. People in the third category can be labeled “pragmatists” and include those who support cooperation with both the West and Russia and advocate a policy that will yield the most benefits for Georgia.

Finally, the fourth category, which can be labeled “pro-Russian”, includes those who strongly believe that Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union are the only acceptable foreign policy option for Georgia. They portray the West as a threat to Georgia’s sovereignty and national identity. Although this last category is the most marginalized one, recent years have seen the emergence of an increasing number of actors that can be labeled as “nativists” or “conservative civil society” and whose agenda closely echoes the political agenda of the anti-Western Russian political discourse.<sup>10</sup>

### **Georgian Strategic documents on foreign and security policy**

Since independence, Georgia has adopted five major conceptual and strategic documents analysis of which demonstrates how threat perception and priorities changed over the course of almost two decades. The examined five documents include the following: Georgia and the World: A Vision and Strategy for the Future<sup>11</sup>; the National Security Concept of Georgia of 2005<sup>12</sup> and 2011<sup>13</sup>; the Foreign Policy Strategy 2006-2009<sup>14</sup>; and the Foreign Policy Strategy 2015-2018.<sup>15</sup>

The earliest document of all, in which Georgia, for the first time, declared that its foreign policy vector was pointing at the West, never mentions the North Caucasus. However, as the document

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of these ideal types, see: Kakhishvili, L. 2016. “Georgia - the choice: perceived west-Russia dichotomy in Georgian politics”. In: Knodt, M. and S. Urdze (eds.), *Caucasus, EU and Russia – Triangular cooperation?* Baden-Baden: Nomos.

<sup>10</sup> See: Nodia, G. 2018. “Nativists Versus Global Liberalism in Georgia”. *Carnegie Europe*, [online] Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/10/04/nativists-versus-global-liberalism-in-georgia-pub-77376>

<sup>11</sup> Government of Georgia, 2000. *Georgia and the world: a vision and strategy for the future*, [online] Available at: [http://www.parliament.ge/files/1\\_886\\_192675\\_nato\\_vision.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/1_886_192675_nato_vision.pdf) [Accessed 06 January 2013].

<sup>12</sup> Government of Georgia, 2005. *National Security Concept of Georgia*, [online] Available at: [http://www.parliament.ge/files/292\\_880\\_927746\\_concept\\_en.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/292_880_927746_concept_en.pdf) [Accessed 06 January 2013].

<sup>13</sup> Government of Georgia, 2011. *National Security Concept of Georgia*, [online] Available at: <http://www.nsc.gov.ge/files/files/National%20Security%20Concept.pdf> [Accessed 06 January 2013].

<sup>14</sup> Government of Georgia, 2006. *Foreign Policy Strategy 2006-2009*, [online] Available at: [http://www.mfa.gov.ge/files/35\\_9440\\_673620\\_11.pdf](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/files/35_9440_673620_11.pdf) [Accessed 06 January 2013].

<sup>15</sup> Government of Georgia, 2006. *Foreign Policy Strategy 2015-2018*, [online] Available at: <http://mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/ForeignPolicyStrategy.aspx> [Accessed 15 June 2016].

lists the challenges Georgia faces, it is emphasized that “Georgia supports international efforts to bring about the peaceful resolution of disputes in surrounding areas, such as Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as further afield”. Discussing the foreign policy goals, especially, “Regional and Sub-Regional Cooperation Initiatives”, the major focus is on the South Caucasus and occasionally on Russia. The 1996 Peaceful Caucasus Initiative (PCI) by president Shevardnadze was aimed at creating “a zone of mutually beneficial cooperation” in the South Caucasus, apparently, excluding Russia from the initiative. With that document, Tbilisi was making first independent steps in strategic culture along with the first declaration of clear foreign policy goals. Therefore, the major focus is in making it clear that Europe, not the Caucasus, CIS or Russia, is the priority of Georgia.

The first National Security Concept of Georgia was adopted in 2005, after the Rose Revolution. The new government tried to introduce the absent strategic culture and clearly prioritize threats to national security and foreign policy issues. Saakashvili’s government put even more emphasis on the West. There are 11 items listed in the section on “threats, risks and challenges to national security”. Top five of them include: the infringement of Georgia’s territorial integrity; the spillover of conflicts from neighbouring states; military intervention; international terrorism; and contraband and transnational organized crime. In the section on foreign relations, Russia comes fifth after the USA, Ukraine, Turkey, and Armenia and Azerbaijan. What is more important, however, is the shifted focus of the document’s section on regional cooperation from the South Caucasus in the 2000 document to the Black Sea region, which clearly demonstrates that the priorities of the Georgian government had shifted towards the West even more by 2005.

In 2006 the Georgian government adopted the Foreign Policy Strategy 2006-2009. The document lists the strategic goals of Georgia’s foreign policy. The goals include regional stability, which comes after territorial integrity and strengthening national security. The most important issue, according to the strategy, is “strengthening international participation in conflict resolution and avoiding new threats in the Black Sea region”. Therefore, the strategy expresses Georgia’s readiness to “actively cooperate in solving the existing conflicts on our territory, as well as in the Caucasus and the wider Black Sea region”.

The focus on the Black Sea region is overwhelming by contrast with the Caucasus. Therefore, it looks like Georgian government was trying to reshape the country’s regional identity from that of Caucasian to the Black Sea region: so that it become a part of the discourse together with Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova and possibly Bulgaria and Romania – by that time the newest EU members. Consequently, Tbilisi’s attention is directed to organisations such as the Community of Democratic Choice (CDC), Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, GUAM and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC); while the Caucasus is disappearing from the list of priorities of the government. Furthermore, even CIS was already downgraded as the strategy openly declared: “Georgia will spare no resources to make the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) an effective organization, capable of solving some of our country’s burning issues. If we do not succeed in attaining this goal, our CIS membership will be reconsidered.” This way, Georgia tried to be “geographically” closer to Western institutions than it actually is.

The second National Security Concept adopted on the eve of 2012, is the last document of the kind so far. This document lists somewhat modified threats as a result of the 2008 war and its

consequences. Top five threats in the list include: the occupation of Georgian territories by the Russian Federation and terrorist acts organized by the Russian Federation from the occupied territories; the risk of renewed military aggression from Russia; the violation of the rights of internally displaced persons and refugees from the occupied territories; conflicts in the Caucasus; and international terrorism and transnational organized crime. Although the territorial integrity of the country and relations with Russia are the top priority of Georgia's national security policy, expressing willingness for having good neighbourly relations with Russia, the document rules out this possibility without "the beginning of de-occupation".

On the other hand, the document introduces a new priority to "deepen and develop relationships with the peoples of the North Caucasus, which will increase their awareness of Georgia's goals and political course, contributing to the creation of an atmosphere of trust, peace, and stability in the Caucasus". However, the concept assumes that achieving this goal is possible even without first reconciling its relations with Russia in general. Consequently, it is obvious that Georgia tried to reach out to the North Caucasian republics bypassing Moscow, which, "appears to be designed to irritate the Russians."<sup>16</sup> Yet, Tbilisi dropped this policy soon after 2012 elections once the GD government came to power.

Finally, the Foreign Policy Strategy for 2015-2018 identifies four broad areas of priorities: sovereignty and territorial integrity; European and Euro-Atlantic integration; democratic development; and economic development. In terms of the regional dimension of the multilateral cooperation, the strategy focuses on two organizations: GUAM and BSEC, which maintain the regional focus on the Black Sea region. Interestingly, in the section on multilateral cooperation the strategy has only two dimensions: global and regional. While GUAM and BSEC are both listed in the regional dimension, the OSCE and the Council of Europe are in the global dimension without mentioning NATO and the EU. This is a departure from the previous strategies, which had three dimensions in multilateral relations: global, regional, *and* (emphasis added) European and Euro-Atlantic structures. The latter dimension covered NATO, the EU, the OSCE, and the CoE in this particular order. This, of course, does not suggest that Georgia is dropping European and Euro-Atlantic structures as its priority but it is still an interesting semantic shift.

## Public opinion

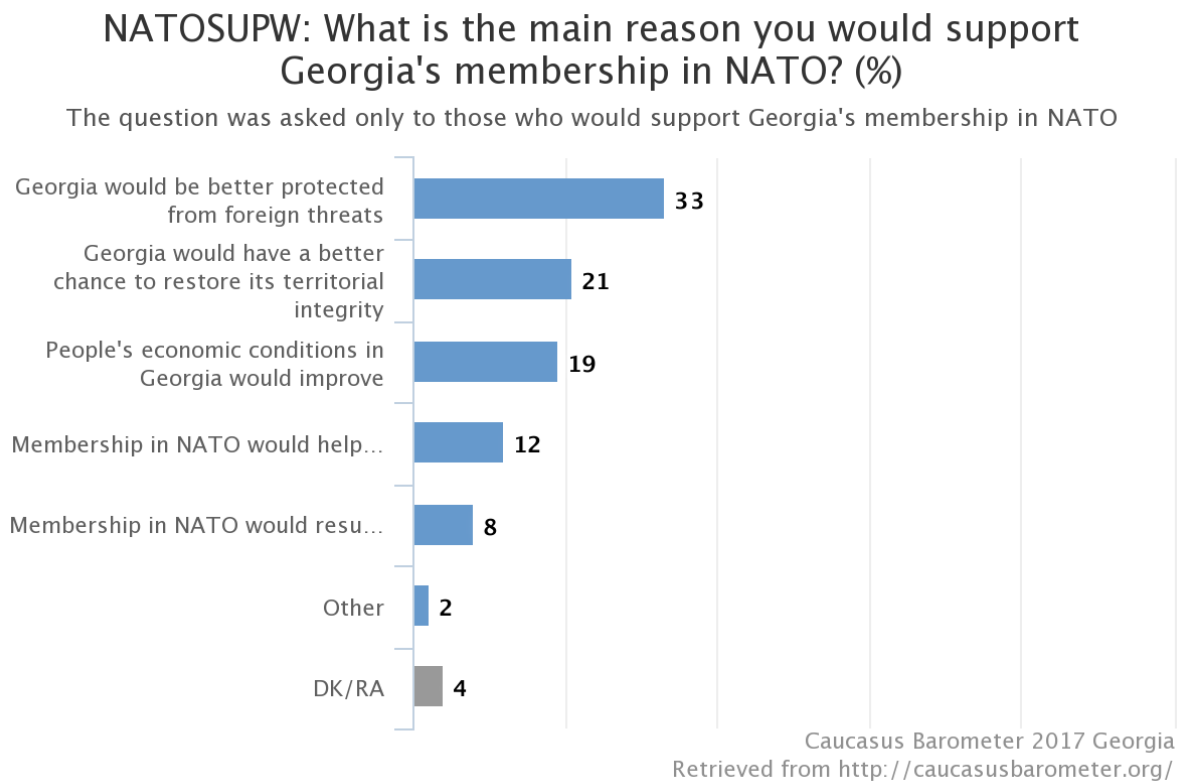
Considering the dominant political discourse on Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy, Georgian public shows strong support for the country's membership in NATO and the EU. The nation-wide public opinion poll commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and conducted by the Caucasus Research Resources Center (CRRC) in June 2018 demonstrates that 75% of Georgians approve of NATO membership, while 17% do not and 9% do not know (DK) or refuse to answer (RA). However, it should be noted that the support levels are higher among young people aged 18-35 – 80%; and lower among older people aged over 55 – 68%. Furthermore, ethnic minority-populated settlements tend to show lower support for NATO than the average nation-wide figure – 49%. There is also almost three times higher uncertainty among minority-populated areas where 26% of respondents do not know or refuse to answer the question.

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<sup>16</sup> MacFarlane, N., 2012. *Georgia: national security concept versus national security*. London: Chatham House. [online] [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/o812pp\\_macfarlane.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/o812pp_macfarlane.pdf) [19/11, 2012]

The primary reasons for supporting NATO membership (see Figure 1 below), according to the 2017 Caucasus Barometer (CB) data, include ensuring national security (Georgia would be better protected from foreign threats), restoring territorial integrity (Georgia would have a better chance to restore its territorial integrity), and improving economic conditions (people's economic conditions in Georgia would improve). On the other hand, the most recurring reason why 17% of Georgians do not approve of Georgia's NATO membership is the belief that it will not bring any benefits to the country (51% of those disapproving the membership).

Figure 1: Main reasons for supporting Georgia's membership in NATO



In line with these data, the 2017 CB suggests that the most frequent response to the question about which country is the main enemy of Georgia is Russia (40%), while 31% do not know or refuse to answer and 21% think Georgia does not have enemies. As for the main friend, the USA leads the rankings with 25%, followed by DK/RA – 26%, and “none” – 17%. Russia is named by only 6% of respondents.

This said, the 2017 CB gives interesting data regarding foreign policy preferences of average Georgians. When respondents are presented with two options of neutrality and alignment with a bloc, the majority choose neutrality – 51% as opposed to 32% for alignment with a bloc (the rest is DK/RA). This can be explained with a few different hypotheses. First, there are political actors that advocate neutrality and/or non-alignment status and the society is influenced by their narrative.

Second, the public never wants confrontations, conflicts, and wars, therefore, they tend to be more open to ways of avoiding conflicts. Considering that Georgia has experienced multiple military conflicts, it is understandable why some Georgians may try to be hopeful about alternative ways of foreign-policy making. Third, the public is more naïve than the political elite when it comes to foreign and security policy and citizens might genuinely believe that if Georgia is neutral all problems will disappear. However, they are not fully aware that neutrality or at least non-alignment, as the cases of Ukraine and Moldova clearly demonstrate, is not a solution to security problems in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, if people are forced to choose a bloc with which they have to align, almost three times more people choose NATO over the CSTO.

### Political elite: perceptions, identities, discourse

On 4 September 2013, then-PM Ivanishvili stated that his government would consider joining the Russian-initiated Eurasian Economic Union should it be in the national interests of Georgia.<sup>17</sup> This statement led to intense negative reactions from the United National Movement politicians and even civil society. Later, on 12 September then-President Saakashvili called Ivanishvili's statement "breaking of the main taboo" of the Georgian politics.<sup>18</sup> This discursive episode symbolizes how overall Georgian political discourse shifted after 2012 elections. The shift in the discourse was manifested in three major directions and can be explained by the varied perceptions and identities of the key members of the two different political forces.<sup>19</sup>

First, the UNM used to internationalize Georgia's problems to put them in the political agenda of West-Russia relations. The GD started to localize Georgia's problems and take more initiative in its hands. Second, the UNM used to demonize Russia's image to create an enemy out of it, while the GD started correcting Russia's previously demonized image. Third, the UNM used to describe Georgia's security environment as the primary determinant of Georgia's foreign policy, while the GD started to put more agency in Georgia's potential to develop an independent foreign policy.

These differences can be found in speeches made for domestic and international audiences, as well as in official documents, e.g. parliamentary resolutions regarding events in Ukraine. Such a shift in the political discourse can be understood through perceptions and identities. Particularly, three major aspects of identities: worldviews or the perceptions of the context; the perceptions of the "other", in this case, Russia; and the perceptions of the "self" or national identity.

While the UNM representatives view Georgia's location as a geopolitical asset, the GD representatives see it as a troubling factor. Consequently, the UNM advocates for a bold foreign policy and the internationalization of Georgia's problems, while the GD emphasizes the need for a careful approach in a sensitive situation, as Russia is an unpredictable actor and cannot be tamed to the wants of Georgia. Both the GD and UNM agree that Georgia is not directly involved in the

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<sup>17</sup> Civil Georgia, 2013. "Ivanishvili 'Clarifies' Eurasian Union Remarks" [online] Available at: <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26419>

<sup>18</sup> Civil Georgia, 2013. "Saakashvili: PM's Eurasian Union Remarks 'Break Main Taboo' of Georgian Politics" [online] Available at: <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26448>

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis on this particular topic, please, see: Kakachia, K., S. Minesashvili, and L. Kakhishvili. 2018. "Change and continuity in the foreign policies of small states: Georgia's policy towards Russia". *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70:5, 814-831, DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2018.1480751



Russian-Western rivalry, however, the UNM representatives argue that Georgia becomes part of this rivalry because of its choice to align itself with the West.

Yet, according to the UNM, Georgia is not the victim of some great power struggle because it aligned itself to the West; Georgia is merely a 'freedom fighter' who must grapple with Russia to guarantee its security and sovereignty. At the same time, the previous UNM government members claim it is essential that Georgia place itself as a 'burning' issue for the West, stressing that Russia is a threat and that Tbilisi performs a containment role in the region. Western interests are considered to coincide with Georgia's on this matter, therefore, maximum effort must be invested to increase the quality and level of these interests through active participation.

The GD leadership, on the other hand, voice a somewhat different position. In order to prevent any possibility of straining relations, they are more inclined to avoid the representation of Georgia as an issue between Russia and the West. But this does not necessarily mean the topic should disappear from the Western agenda. Unlike the UNM, they contend the best solution is for the reconciliation of the West and Russia.

When it comes to the perceptions of Russia, the first important distinction between the UNM and the GD is how they perceive the Russian identity. The UNM members maintain that Russia is not part of the Western civilization and that a major indicator of the Russian identity is imperialist nationalism. Meanwhile, the GD representatives stress Russia's identity crisis, a rarely discussed topic in the contemporary Georgian political debates. The GD seems to recognize the troublesome period of Russia's identity transformation and the need to prove its power. However, the GD members express their optimism for Russia's transformation potential, whereas the UNM is skeptical that the Russian intelligentsia is better than the government and does not believe in the existence of 'two Russias – democratic vs imperialist.' The GD, on the other hand, expresses hope that at some point Russia will be governed on the basis of democratic values. These differences can help understand why the GD stopped the discourse demonizing Russia's image.

Although Georgia is characterized by the UNM and the GD alike as a small state with limited capabilities, the conclusions drawn from this fact vary from the UNM representatives to those of the GD. The previous leadership argued that, as a small country, Georgia is incapable of effective self-defence and must counterbalance Russia through alignment with the West, i.e. NATO and the EU. The GD representatives, although somewhat agreeing with this idea, make a distinction between what Georgia 'wants' and what Georgia 'can do.' They maintain that given the reality, Georgia should be careful on its path towards achieving what it wants.

In this regard, the GD members do acknowledge the need for - and the importance of - Western support, but also advocate efforts to normalize bilateral relations with Russia independently, especially since Georgia is not yet part of any collective defence structure. Even though both camps share the same foreign policy goal of the Euro-Atlantic integration, the method to achieve this is another matter. Both parties do share the opinion that Georgia is incapable of changing Russian foreign policy and that dealing with such a bullying neighbour can be handled effectively only with Western help. Thus, the only prospective way for Georgia is to become part of the larger regional or international security groupings. Whereas the UNM strives to link Georgia solely to the West for

survival, the GD makes more room for independent behaviour, which is characterized by being more cautious without having a guaranteed ally.

### **Threat containment**

Georgia's military doctrine to contain threats facing the country is to increase its defence capabilities in order to decrease vulnerability and increase the costs of invasion by external powers. In this regard, NATO and Georgia have been cooperating closely, especially since the Wales summit in 2014, when Georgia received the so-called NATO-Georgia substantial package. As a result of the implementation of this package, NATO has supported a number of different initiatives and projects in Georgia. At the same time, the USA has removed the de-facto embargo on arms sales with Georgia when Tbilisi purchased US Javelin anti-tank missiles in 2017. Against the background of these developments and the high degree of interoperability of the Georgian army with the NATO forces, Georgia still remains as a small country facing existential external threats, whose security is not guaranteed by any major external actor. As the 2008 August war has demonstrated, in case of a military conflict, Georgia is unlikely to be protected by military means. This is why Georgia seeks full membership in NATO. As a NATO member Georgia would feel more protected. However, complications on the path to membership, related to the political readiness of potential allies, remain unresolved.

On the other hand, the EU can also be a provider of security for Georgia. However, the EU's capacity in this regard is far smaller than that of NATO. Yet, EU membership is also considered to be an important step towards ensuring national security in Georgia. However, the problem is that becoming an EU member is a much longer, more challenging and complicated procedure. If in the case of NATO Georgia already has a promise of membership, in the case of the EU Tbilisi still does not have what is called a European perspective. The lack of certainty about the goals of the Eastern Partnership, which does not imply membership prospects, is considered to be the major weakness of the initiative and the Association Agreement.

Such a "constructive ambiguity" is often thought to be a major factor potentially leading to the fatigue with European integration. On the other hand, it might be possible for Georgia to join the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – a new EU structure to boost the EU's strategic independence.<sup>20</sup> This, however, goes beyond the Eastern Partnership mechanisms and instruments. Overall, although the Eastern Partnership is perceived positively by government structures, mainstream political parties, media and civil society, as it is often argued, Georgia is the country in which the question "what next?" is asked; and, perhaps, the EU needs to come up with an attractive answer.

### **Conclusion**

Georgia's security is a complex phenomenon, which is far from straightforward. Although it is a country that strongly supports a pro-Western foreign policy orientation, there are several different narratives or at least foreign policy options that are still advocated, although to a much lesser degree

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<sup>20</sup> On possible Georgia-EU cooperation formats, including PESCO, please, see: Levanidze, B. and E. Panchulidze. 2018. "Avoiding Gridlock: a Strategy for Georgia to Engage with Eurosceptic Europe". *Georgian Institute of Politics* [online] Available at: <http://gip.ge/avoiding-gridlock-strategy-georgia-engage-eurosceptic-europe/>

than the dominant narrative. The report has also demonstrated how Georgian strategic documents have changed over the past two decades to reflect the various visions with subtle differences that each leadership has brought to the table since Shevardnadze's era.

Somewhat contradictory public opinion polls also help understand why the dominant foreign and security policy narratives should be taken with a grain of salt. Citizens tend to prefer good relations with any external actor, even if the actor is Russia, which they believe is the main enemy of Georgia. The discussion of Georgia's threat perceptions cannot avoid the subtle differences between the way the GD politicians see Georgia, Russia and the outside world and the way their UNM counterparts perceive the same reality. These distinctions help understand how and why the political discourse has changed in Georgia following the 2012 elections.

Finally, the limited mechanisms for threat containment and conflict resolution pose a challenge for Georgia's national security and needs to be addressed with the close assistance of Tbilisi's international partners.

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