

Having your cake and eating it. Georgia, the war in Ukraine and integration with the West

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Georgia's reaction to the war in Ukraine can be called ambivalent. Although Tbilisi condemned the aggression, it has not joined the anti-Russian sanctions. Indeed, according to Kyiv, Georgia has been violating them and allowing Russia to circumvent them, although so far there is no hard evidence of this. Georgia's stance of 'benevolent neutrality' towards the aggressor may be partly explained by the fear of a Russian threat; objectively, however, this stance means *de facto* support for Moscow. In the context of the cooling of relations between Georgia and the West (i.e. the EU & US) observed over the last few years, this raises the question of whether Tbilisi is not carrying out a creeping reorientation of its foreign policy from pro-Western to pro-Russian – something which the Georgian opposition has accused the government of doing. It seems that although at the moment there is no question of a deliberate geopolitical shift, the drift towards Moscow is setting a new tone, and it is becoming increasingly inconvenient for Washington and Brussels to support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

On the rhetorical level, Tbilisi's main priority is still accession to the EU and NATO: in early March Georgia applied for EU membership, together with Ukraine and Moldova. It should be assumed that the Georgian government is being guided by an extreme pragmatism, which in many cases takes the form of open cynicism. The Georgian Dream party, which has been ruling the country since 2012, does not want to bear the social or political costs of reforms (which would risk it losing power), as it realises that integration with the institutional West is not very realistic in the foreseeable future. Cooperating with internationally isolated Russia may bring specific benefits for Tbilisi and is in line with the expectations of the Georgian public, which on the one hand is mostly supportive of Euro-Atlantic integration, while on the other is afraid of Russia and favours maintaining dialogue with Moscow. For these reasons – and also due to the weakness of the opposition – a change of government in Georgia and the return to power of clearly pro-Western forces seem unlikely at present. The strong ties between the Georgian opposition (including former president Mikheil Saakashvili), and the Ukrainian government are an important cause of the cool relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv.



Tbilisi's double game

In response to the Russian invasion, the president, the prime minister and the head of parliament of Georgia declared their solidarity with Ukraine: the prime minister condemned Moscow's actions and called for de-escalation, and the president called the events a joint tragedy for Ukraine and Georgia. Despite these initial reactions (subsequent ones, especially from the prime minister, were already more subdued), Tbilisi did not join the anti-Russian sanctions announced by Western states and institutions. This was allegedly done to avoid drawing the country into an armed conflict: a scenario in which Georgia becomes the next target of a Russian attack is not implausible in the light of the experience of the war between the two countries in 2008 – and the costs for the economy (e.g. tourism), which was already weakened after the pandemic, would be too high.¹ Over the following weeks, Georgia's attitude towards the war (and towards defending Ukraine) became even more ambivalent.

On one hand, Tbilisi spoke out in favour of punishing the aggressor, showing solidarity with Kyiv. On 7 April, Georgia voted in the UN General Assembly to suspend

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Russia's membership of the Human Rights Council;² on 5 May Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili took part in a conference of donors to Ukraine held in Warsaw, and presented data on the aid Georgia had provided;³ and President Salome Zourabichvili has emphasised the community of fate that binds both countries in numerous speeches and interviews⁴ (the president was elected with the support of the ruling Georgian Dream but is not a member of this party; her position has remained clearly pro-Ukrainian, which is why it often diverges from that of the government). It should also be mentioned that (following Ukraine) on 3 March Georgia and Moldova officially applied for EU membership. On the other, however, Tbilisi has also made a number of friendly gestures towards Russia; for example, it denied permission to take off to a charter flight which Georgian volunteers wanted to use to travel to Ukrainian territory in the first days of the war.⁵ The speaker of the Georgian parliament was only able to visit Ukraine thanks to pressure from the opposition, which also sent a separate delegation itself.

Georgia has regularly been accused (above all by the government in Kyiv) of violating sanctions and allowing Russia to circumvent them, although there is no convincing evidence that this is the case. Tbilisi rejects these accusations outright, and maintains that although it has not formally introduced any sanctions, it does respect the internationally accepted arrangements. In a statement from the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine at the beginning of April, it was stated that channels for transporting goods to Russia which are subject to sanctions are being established in Georgia, including military and dual-purpose items, and that “Georgian secret service officers have been instructed by the country's political leadership not to interfere with the activities of smugglers”.⁶ In response, the State Security Service of Georgia, referring to bilateral information

¹ See among others, ‘Гарибашвили: Грузия не будет водить экономические санкции против России’, Эхо Кавказа, 3 April 2022, ekhokavkaza.com.

² Two other countries in the region, Armenia and Azerbaijan, did not take part in the vote. The Central Asian states voted against Russia's exclusion from the Council (only Turkmenistan did not take part in the vote).

³ By the beginning of May, Georgia had sheltered 28,000 citizens of Ukraine and allocated US\$7 million to help the country (and announced the allocation of another US\$7 million).

⁴ See for example ‘Salome Zourabichvili: A sense of solidarity with Ukraine’, Deutsche Welle, 3 May 2022, dw.com/en.

⁵ This resulted in the dismissal of the Ukrainian ambassador from Georgia: see ‘Украина отозвала посла из Грузии’, 1 March 2022, civil.ge. As of 20 May, 11 volunteers from Georgia had been killed in Ukraine. Moreover, several Russia critics of the Kremlin have been refused entry into the country, including journalist Mikhail Fishman from Dozhd' TV.

⁶ ‘Украинская разведка: РФ налаживает канал контрабанды товаров через Грузию’, Эхо Кавказа, 4 April 2022, ekhokavkaza.com.

exchange agreements, asked Kyiv to provide evidence of such a practice.⁷ On 1 May, the Ukrainian Main Directorate of Intelligence renewed the accusations, stating this time that Russia is in talks with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan to re-export sanctioned Russian products to world markets via these three countries. Tbilisi has also denied this accusation: the Ukrainian *chargé d'affaires* was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and asked for an explanation, and the Georgian finance minister argued that re-exporting in this form was not possible due to international monitoring systems.⁸ On 20 May, the head of the Ukrainian Presidential Administration, Andriy Yermak, said in an online interview organised by the Atlantic Council and published on its YouTube channel that Georgia is on the blacklist of countries that are helping Russia to bypass the sanctions. Yermak said that influential Georgian businessmen who own shares of Russian companies are involved in this, but he did not provide any specific data.⁹

On one hand, it can be concluded from the frequency and gravity of the accusations made against Tbilisi that attempts to violate the

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sanctions regime are indeed taking place. One clue to this may be the fact that since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the number of newly registered companies in Georgia has risen by 70% (although this is probably also related to the activity of Russian and Belarusian citizens who oppose the Kremlin’s policy and have decided to settle in this country).¹⁰ Regardless of this, Georgia is actually intensifying its economic contacts with Russia. In the first four months of 2022, imports from Russia to Georgia rose by 27% (compared to the same period in 2021; Georgian exports have fallen by 0.4%).¹¹ In recent years, the Georgian economy’s dependence on its northern neighbour has increased noticeably in various areas, including energy. According to a report in this March from Transparency International Georgia, in 2021, for example, over 23% of the gas Georgia imports (in 2018 it was just 2.8%) and as much as 94% of its wheat came from Russia.¹² On the other hand, some EU countries have also become dependent on Russian raw materials, and the Ukrainian accusations may be intended as a warning, portraying not so much real incidents of abuse as the potential for them to occur (it should be remembered that for Kyiv, expanding and tightening the sanctions imposed on Russia are a *raison d’état*). Even on this basis, however, it must be stated that the kind of double game which Georgia is playing is weakening the anti-Russian front, which in the situation of Moscow’s international isolation constitutes a *de facto* declaration of ‘benevolent neutrality’ towards the aggressor. This has been confirmed by the compliments Russian politicians have paid to Tbilisi.¹³

⁷ ‘Заявление Киева о контрабанде подсанкционных товаров в РФ: СГБ Грузии требует доказательств’, *Эхо Кавказа*, 5 April 2022, ekhokavkaza.com.

⁸ М. Паресишвили, ‘Киев ищет в Грузии российский тыл’, *Эхо Кавказа*, 2 May 2022, ekhokavkaza.com.

⁹ ‘A conversation with Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Andriy Yermak’, Atlantic Council, 20 May 2022, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) (excerpt from 50:35).

¹⁰ М. Паресишвили, ‘Киев ищет в Грузии российский тыл’, *op. cit.* In the first quarter of 2022, 38,000 citizens of the Russian Federation entered Georgia via the land border with Russia, while in the first quarter of 2021 the figure was only 8000. See ‘Число россиян, выехавших в Армению и Грузию, резко возросло’, *Эхо Кавказа*, 2 May 2022, ekhokavkaza.com. Between 24 February and 1 May this year, almost 3400 Russian citizens and almost 2400 Belarusian citizens registered individual economic activity in Georgia (it is not known what kind of activity they conduct or intend to conduct).

¹¹ ‘3,386 Russian entrepreneurs registered in Georgia since Russian invasion of Ukraine’, *Jam News*, 23 May 2022, jam-news.net.

¹² ‘Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia: Trade, tourism, remittances, and Russian companies in Georgia’, Transparency International Georgia, 10 March 2022, [transparency.ge](https://www.transparency.ge).

¹³ These include Grigory Karasin, former long-time deputy chief of Russian diplomacy (he was responsible for dialogue with Georgia after the 2008 war) and currently chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Federation Council, covered by EU sanctions as of 9 March 2022. He called the Georgian response to the sanctions “balanced”, and stated that this fact would not go unnoticed in Russia: for more see ‘Состоялась встреча сенатора с грузинскими политологами’, Совет Федерации Федерального Собрания Российской Федерации, 24 March 2022, council.gov.ru.

A turn to Moscow?

In the context of the response to the war in Ukraine, it is reasonable to ask whether we are dealing with an effective reorientation of Tbilisi's foreign policy. Apart from the Baltic states, Georgia has been the ex-Soviet state which strove most consistently for rapprochement with the West. The pro-Western vector of the country's foreign policy has been maintained by all its rulers since the end of the 20th century. In 2014, Tbilisi signed an association agreement with the EU; in 2017, the EU abolished short-term visas to enter the Schengen area for Georgians; on 17 May 2021, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova established the Association Trio in order to deepen their cooperation on the path towards EU accession. After the war broke out, following Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova applied for EU membership (which Georgia had originally planned to do in 2024).

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sels and Washington, highlighted the slowdown in reforms (primarily in the area of the judiciary), irregularities in successive elections (the government's use of the so-called administrative factor), as well as human rights violations affecting sexual minorities *inter alia*.¹⁴ (In recent years, several attempts have been made in Georgia to build a political force referring to 'traditional values' in the spirit of anti-Western, Putinist conservatism, directly oriented towards Russia). There has been a serious crisis in relations since July 2021, when Georgian Dream withdrew from the agreement of political forces concluded under the aegis of the President of the European Council Charles Michel.¹⁵ The report by the European Parliament in March 2022 which assessed the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement over the past two years concluded that the situation with regard to democratic reforms had deteriorated during that period. It emphasised the arrests of opposition leaders, among other factors.¹⁶

It seems that the elite in Georgia is trying to 'have its cake and eat it'. After the Schengen visas were lifted, there was no big goal left which would have motivated Tbilisi to continue reforms. At the present stage – unless the international situation changes radically – there is no chance of the country gaining EU membership, and the painstaking implementation of the association agreement requires a number of actions potentially involving social costs, which would in turn increase the risk of Georgian Dream losing power. These are costs which it does not want to bear, so it has suspended the reform process; however, it also does not want to give up the current profits resulting from cooperation with the West (in the form of subsidies and aid programmes), and so the Euro-Atlantic direction is still declared a political priority. In mid-May, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met Charles Michel and NATO

¹⁴ For example, on 5 July 2021, numerous acts of violence (beatings, vandalism) took place in Tbilisi against the organisers and alleged participants of the planned Tbilisi Pride march. 60 journalists were also among the victims (one of whom died a few days later). The attackers were people from conservative backgrounds, including those connected to the Georgian Orthodox Church. The West's harsh reaction to such incidents has put the Georgian government in a difficult position; on one hand, it must take into account pressure from Brussels or Washington, and on the other that from its own public, the broad mass of which is socially conservative. See W. Górecki, 'The Autumn of the (Georgian) Patriarch. The role of the Orthodox Church in Georgia and in Georgian politics', *OSW Commentary*, no. 332, 18 May 2020, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁵ This agreement ended (at that stage) the many months of internal stalemate (the opposition parties agreed, on certain conditions, to take the seats in parliament which they had won in the elections in autumn 2020): see W. Górecki, 'Gruzja: narastający kryzys w relacjach z Zachodem' [Georgia: growing crisis in relations with the West], *OSW*, 3 September 2021, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁶ T. Jansen, H. Ahamad Madatali, *Association agreement between the EU and Georgia*, European Parliament, March 2022, europarl.europa.eu.

Chief Jens Stoltenberg, *inter alia*, from whom he received assurances of support for Tbilisi's western aspirations. Diplomatic relations with Russia remain formally broken, and there are no indications that this will change: re-establishing them would mean Georgia's alleged consent to the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Moscow recognises as independent states. However, Tbilisi will most likely not – unless it is forced to do so – give up its contacts with Russia; it may also try to circumvent the anti-Russian sanctions, as that would bring about immediate financial benefits (and probably also personal ones: the people most likely to profit would be businessmen linked to the government).

The opposition claims that Georgian Dream does not really want the country to integrate with the EU and NATO, but is instead seeking rapprochement with Russia.

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They have accused the group's founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, of maintaining his business ties with Moscow (these accusations first arose even before Georgian Dream came to power in the 2012 elections, and have been repeatedly raised since then: Ivanishvili himself claimed that he had liquidated all his Russian interests before those elections). Clues indicating that this may indeed be the case are included in the report by Transparency International Georgia published at the end of this April.¹⁷ At the same time, recordings of Ivanishvili's conversations with the Russian businessman Vladimir Yevtushenkov, who is under Western sanctions, have been released. They indirectly confirmed the existence of these contacts, although they did not contain any evidence of illegal business operations. All this points to Georgia drifting towards Moscow. This includes both Georgia's ever-closer economic relations with Russia and the deteriorating standards of democracy in the country. It can be assumed that this is not a deliberate strategy to change alliances (at least there is no indication of that), but rather a sum of tactical decisions dictated by cynical pragmatism. In practice, however, this means a creeping reorientation of foreign policy – a process which, though, can be stopped and reversed.

'The friend of my enemy'

One of the reasons for the government in Tbilisi's ambivalent attitude towards Ukraine is the strong ties which the Georgian opposition maintains with the government in Kyiv. Former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who is its leading figure, has been in prison since returning home in autumn 2021;¹⁸ he has Ukrainian citizenship, and before his arrival he had headed the National Reform Council in that country, thanks to the nomination of President Volodymyr Zelensky. Georgians from Saakashvili's team are still active in Ukraine. Since March this year, the former deputy interior minister Giorgi Lortkipanidze has been acting as deputy head of Ukrainian counterintelligence,¹⁹ and the former defence minister Irakli Okruashvili is actually fighting in the ranks of the Ukrainian army. At the beginning of April, the Georgian culture minister Thea Tsulukiani said that Ukraine had turned into a haven for criminals who have escaped from Georgia.²⁰ The government has been propagating its own story about the influence that the Georgian opposition could have on Kyiv (for example, by boosting the narrative

¹⁷ 'Russian Businesses of Bidzina Ivanishvili and His Relatives', Transparency International Georgia, 27 April 2022, transparency.ge. Ivanishvili allegedly controls his Russian business through offshore companies, as well as through relatives and proxies.

¹⁸ Saakashvili returned to Georgia in October 2021 after eight years in exile. He was arrested because he still had to serve two judgements sentencing him to several years' imprisonment (the trials were politically motivated); there were cases pending in two further trials, and in addition, he was prosecuted for illegally crossing the state border. See W. Górecki, 'Georgia: elections in the shadow of Saakashvili's return', OSW, 4 October 2021, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁹ N. Gabritchidze, 'Amid war, bitter exchanges continue to spoil Tbilisi-Kyiv relations', Eurasianet, 4 May 2022, eurasianet.org.

²⁰ 'Министр культуры Грузии: Украина стала заповедником для сбежавших криминалов', Эхо Кавказа, 5 April 2022, ekhokavkaza.com. Tsulukiani, as justice minister in 2012–20, was responsible for dealing with Saakashvili and his team.

about Tbilisi's violation of anti-Russian sanctions) as an element of the domestic power struggle, but this is undoubtedly worsening bilateral relations. It should be assumed that Ukraine's victory in the war with Russia would radically strengthen the Georgian opposition, catalysing the growth of pro-Ukrainian sympathies in society.

One way of testing the intentions of the ruling party will be to see what their attitude towards Saakashvili is; his treatment in hospital is going badly, and there are many indications that his health is genuinely deteriorating. The authorities have been taking decisions about him which could be interpreted as harassment. Regardless of the assessment of the former president's possible offenses, the Georgian authorities are obliged to respect his rights, which Western ambassadors accredited in Tbilisi have not hesitated to recall. In addition, on 16 May the Tbilisi court of first instance handed down a sentence of three and a half years' imprisonment (for embezzlement) to Nika Gvaramia, the director of the opposition Mtavari television station, and who in the past was a justice minister and a lawyer for Saakashvili. Amnesty International has identified Gvaramia as a victim of persecution for his views and criticism of the Georgian government.²¹

We may conclude that it is the domestic situation and the internal balance of power that is most strongly affecting Tbilisi's actions

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on the international stage. The longer Georgian Dream remains in power (it is now in the middle of its third term), the more the number of its 'clients', who owe it their jobs and careers, will grow; this in turn will ensure it further electoral successes despite the natural political 'wear and tear'. In a poll by the International Republican Institute in March 2022, 31% of respondents expressed their readiness to vote for the Georgian Dream as their party of the first choice, and 3% as second choice. In the case of the United National Movement, the leading opposition formation founded by Saakashvili, the figures were 16% and 4% respectively; the remaining parties did not receive more than 8% in total.²² Since at least 2019, and the summer protests caused by the scandal when a Russian deputy conducted a meeting from the speaker's chair in the Georgian parliament, there has been a noticeable need for a 'third force'.²³ So far, however, no political project has managed to attract enough supporters (it seems that any such force would have to be pro-Western: the groups calling for closer relations with Russia are unpopular, probably partly because their potential electorate has been 'taken over' by Georgian Dream).

Prospects

The situation as described is uncomfortable for Tbilisi's western partners. Despite Georgia's disloyalty, the EU and the US have been obliged – especially in the current situation of the war in Ukraine – to give it their unconditional support, although the country is no longer acting as a 'Western bridgehead in the South Caucasus' (describing the political evolution of Yerevan, which is important in this context, and to a lesser extent that of Baku goes beyond the scope of this text). This support is still being clearly demonstrated, as evidenced by the West's diplomatic activity towards Georgia, measured in terms of the number of visits, meetings and talks, all of which serve as opportunities to remind the locals of the need to comply with Western standards. 'Abandoning' Georgia would risk its further anti-Western drift – if not towards Russia, then perhaps China or Turkey – and would consequently weaken the Western camp (which, of course, is itself not a homogeneous entity). Moreover,

²¹ 'Вынесение приговора владельцу грузинского оппозиционного СМИ Нике Гварамиа является полилялевевенсанся полилялевевенся', Amnesty International, 17 May 2022, eurasia.amnesty.org.

²² *Public Opinion Survey. Residents of Georgia*, International Republican Institute, March 2022, iri.org.

²³ W. Górecki, 'Georgia: internal tensions and a new crisis in relations with Russia', OSW, 26 June 2019, osw.waw.pl.

it would be a signal to the local society that ‘the West does not want Georgia’; that would certainly be exploited by Russia, which has a powerful soft power tool in the form of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The authorities must take these sentiments into account; hence their concessions towards the more conservative groups of their citizens.

Tbilisi’s pro-Russian drift – even though we should assume it is unintentional – is boosting the opposition, which is gaining grounds by speaking of a ‘betrayal’ of pro-Western ideals. Georgian Dream, despite the specific moves it has made towards Euro-integration (it was the GD government that signed the association agreement with the EU), will always be perceived as less pro-Western than the opposition; and the obstacles on the way to joining the EU and NATO (the aforementioned need for reforms, which risk losing power) tempt it to do business with Moscow for the sake of short-term gains. Therefore, it is difficult to expect any correction to its current course, and this will mean ‘more of the same’ – a real distance from the West, against social expectations and despite a declarative rapprochement with it – as well as deepening cooperation with Russia, albeit without a formal resumption of diplomatic relations.

The policy pursued by Georgian Dream is in line with the expectations of Georgians expressed in the polls. According to the abovementioned poll by the International Republican Institute, 75% of the people support accession to NATO, and up to 88% wish to join the EU (very similar results were obtained in the National Democratic Institute’s research from April this year).²⁴ On the other hand, due to concerns about Russia, a very large proportion of respondents – 62%, according to the IRI poll – support maintaining a dialogue with Moscow (36% of respondents are against), while up to 37% of respondents (NDI) do not support the sanctions imposed on Russia (49% support the policy). Such expectations facilitate the country’s pro-Russian drift. At the same time, these inherent contradictions generate tensions that may – if the political, social and economic factors all come together in the right way – lead to an outbreak of public discontent.

There are many indications that power in Georgia may change hands not through elections, but through street protests that will create a new political force. The duopoly of Georgian Dream and the United National Movement (which dominates the opposition, but is unable to break through the ‘glass ceiling’, and is also associated with the ruling establishment) have occupied most of the political scene, leaving no room for new initiatives. The ruling camp seems to be bolstered by the war in Ukraine; the situation increases the need for stability, which is associated with the current elite. The United National Movement’s successive defeats were rooted *inter alia* in the public fear of the shocks that could arise if politicians close to Saakashvili or Saakashvili himself returned to power. However, as the history of the last thirty years has shown, Georgian political culture allows for the non-electoral replacement of ruling classes. Naturally, it is difficult to specify which combination of factors could lead to such a resolution. However, in view of the likelihood of such a scenario, it appears essential to maintain the highest possible support among Georgians for their country’s Euro-Atlantic integration.

²⁴ *Taking Georgians’ pulse. Findings from February and March 2022 Surveys, and March 2022 Focus Groups*, National Democratic Institute, April 2022, ndi.org.