

The Foreign Policy of Post-Soviet Georgia: Strategic Idealism and the Russian Challenge

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This article discusses Georgia's foreign policy in the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR in the early 1990s in regard to its relations with Russia. This perspective reveals the entrenched traditions of strategic idealism in the country's political culture, and argues that this approach has shaped Georgia's foreign policy strategies. On this basis, regardless of the geographic and geopolitical challenges, since the early years of independence, Georgia has remained committed to the pursuit of EU and NATO membership. This Western-oriented geopolitical predisposition caused the gradual deterioration of its ties with Russia, and eventually led to the current deadlock in bilateral relations. Through its analysis of the foreign policy of the Georgian Dream coalition, the article concludes that current relations between Russia and Georgia vacillate between rapprochement and confrontation, jeopardizing the security of the region as a whole.



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Introduction

A country's foreign policy is formed, to a large extent, under the influence of its political culture.¹ Colin Gray asserts that "Everything a security community does, if not a manifestation of political culture [strategic culture in original], is at least an example of behavior effected by culturally shaped, or encultured, people, organizations, procedures, and weapons."² Post-Soviet Georgia's foreign policy has also been shaped by its political culture. Traditionally the Georgian public has had a strong sense of belonging to Western civilization, and this has significantly impacted the country's foreign policy vision. However, Georgia's pro-Western aspirations have historically been challenged by the geopolitical constraints of its location. Surrounded by great powers - with Turkey and Iran to the south and Russia to the north - Georgia, a small South Caucasian country, has always been forced to take the national security concerns of its larger neighbors into account.

Traditionally the Georgian public has had a strong sense of belonging to Western civilization, and this has significantly impacted the country's foreign policy vision.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has used various tools to keep Georgia in its sphere of influence, in order to discourage Tbilisi's pro-Western policies and prevent any attempt of the former to join Euro-Atlantic military and political structures. Georgia holds great strategic importance for Russia for a number of reasons. First, Georgia completes the puzzle of Moscow's control over South Caucasus, the region the Kremlin vows to keep within its sphere of influence at all costs. Second, Georgia's geographic proximity to Russia's unstable North Caucasian territories determines its importance for the Kremlin's national security policy. Last but not least, gas and oil pipelines from Azerbaijan to Turkey pass through the country. Hence, Russia has always tried to retain influence over Tbilisi in order to avert any 'unfriendly' moves by Georgia.

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Russia used to be a key trading partner for Georgia. In the 1990s, Russia's huge market and employment opportunities helped

1 This article subscribes to the definition of political culture by Dennis Kavanagh, who defines it as "a shorthand expression to denote the emotional and attitudinal environment within which the political system operates." See, Kavanagh, D. (1972) *Political Culture*, London: Macmillan, p.10.

2 Gray, S. C. (1999) 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back', *Review of International Studies*, 25(1), p.52.

Georgians to overcome the economic challenges entailed by independence. Russian imports of Georgian commodities and the remittances sent by Georgian migrants working in Russia accounted for a significant share of Georgia's GDP. Before 2006, Russia was Georgia's top trading partner, accounting for almost 20% of Georgia's total trade. Initially, the country was also heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies.

These circumstances rendered the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia's political leaders largely unfeasible. Nevertheless, from the very beginning of its independence the Georgian nation has been undeterred by these geo-economic and geopolitical realities. Like in the 18th century, when royal messenger Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani made a long journey to France as part of Georgia's attempt to seek protection against Persian threats, similarly, in the early stages of the post-independence period, amid ethnic conflicts and mounting hostilities with Russia, Georgia's foreign policy makers were convinced that the West would intervene to rescue them, because Tbilisi's cause was based on international legal principles such as the self-determination of nations.³ In 1998, Ghia Nodia observed that Georgia's efforts towards Western integration went beyond pragmatic reasons such as economic and security concerns. The strategy was also based on the belief that Georgians felt they belonged to Western civilization, and as the West supported just causes, the West was obliged to come to their aid, and would be willing to do so.⁴ Although this expectation was never fulfilled, it has by no means ceased to be a distinctive characteristic of the Georgian political culture. This foreign policy vision, which has remained largely unchanged and continues to influence the formation of international policies of the state, can be characterized as a *strategic idealism*.⁵

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3 Gray, S. C. (1999) 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back', *Review of International Studies*, 25(1), p.52.

4 Gray, S. C. (1999) 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back', *Review of International Studies*, 25(1), p.52.

5 Rondeli, A. (2001) 'The Choice of Independent Georgia', in Chufrin S. (ed.) *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp .195-211.

Formulation of Georgia's Foreign Policy: Between North and West

In the early 1990s, Georgia regained its independence from the USSR along with its two neighbors in the South Caucasus – Azerbaijan and Armenia. On 9 April 1991, Georgia was the second Soviet republic, after Lithuania, to formally declare its complete secession from the Soviet Union. However, the liberation of the small South Caucasian republic was followed by sociopolitical destabilization, civil war and economic collapse. The situation deteriorated further following the growing threats of disintegration, which posed substantial challenges due to the country's unconsolidated society and ethnic complexities.

The first president of independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991-1992), became disillusioned with the West due to the failure to provide tangible support in the war in the secessionist regions of the country, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the final months of his rule, Gamsakhurdia pursued a regional pan-Caucasian policy. His policies led the country to the brink of economic collapse, along with international ostracism against the backdrop of consistent defeats in the war in the breakaway territories.

Gamsakhurdia was ousted through a violent military coup-d'état, which brought the former USSR Foreign Affairs Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to power in 1992. Under Shevardnadze, the geopolitical orientation of the country was re-evaluated. During the early stages of Shevardnadze's presidency, the devastating civil war was ended, Gamsakhurdia's attempt to regain power was put down, and domestic order was re-established. The new government also put an end to the war with South Ossetia and Abkhazia and signed Russian-brokered ceasefire agreements in Sochi on 24 June 1992, which were followed by the deployment of Russian troops to the breakaway regions as peacekeepers.

Unlike his predecessor, who openly called Russia an 'occupying state', Shevardnadze's government took a more balanced, pragmatic approach to foreign policy. He was trying to find a balance between the West and the North. During this period Georgia was simultaneously pursuing Western integration policies at the same time as participating in the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The volume of trade with Russia

was increasing and the regional status-quo was being preserved. The conflicts in the secessionist regions were frozen, and Georgia's territorial integrity was formally supported by Russia. On a number of occasions during those years, Shevardnadze described Russia as Georgia's 'strategic partner'.

Despite the visible rapprochement during that period, there was also a growing anti-Russian sentiment among the publics. This was reflected in the country's official foreign policy narratives. During Shevardnadze's presidency, the major foreign policy documents pointed to Russia's historically hostile attitude towards Georgia. For example, in 1997, an official declaration endorsed by the Parliament stated that: "History confirms that in the past Russia created problems for Georgia, or used whatever means available to exacerbate existing contradictions; and then it had an excuse to resolve them, turning [states] into satellites, or at worst, colonies."⁶

It was at this time that President Shevardnadze put his support behind Georgia's aspirations to join Europe, which he described as "the dream of Georgia's ancestors for centuries."⁷ In the 1990s, he was optimistically considering that "if processes underway in today's world continue at the current pace, membership in all major Euro-Atlantic and European structures will be inevitable for Georgia and the other newly independent states"⁸ He vehemently reaffirmed Georgia's NATO membership objective at the NATO Prague summit in November 2002, declaring that: "the only issue in the recent years against which no reasonable argument has ever been suggested is the Georgian public's perspective on the future of the country's national security, which is widely seen in the context of the country's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. I am happy that at the Summit of the Euro-Atlantic Part-

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6 "Basic Principles of the Sustainability of Social Life, the Strengthening of State Sovereignty and Security, and the Restoration of the Territorial Integrity of Georgia", endorsed by the Georgian Parliament in 1997, quoted in Jones S. and Kakhishvili L. (2013): 'The Interregnum: Georgian Foreign Policy from Independence to the Rose Revolution', in Kakachia K. and Cecire M. (eds.) *Georgian Foreign Policy The Quest For Sustainable Security*. Tbilisi: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V, pp. 83-95.

7 The quote has been taken from E. Shevardnadze's speech at the parliamentary session of 27 May 1997, quoted in Rondeli, A. (2001) 'The Choice of Independent Georgia', in Chufrin S. (ed.) *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 208.

8 The quote has been taken from E. Shevardnadze's address at the Inauguration of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement in Luxembourg, June 1999, quoted in Rondeli, A. (2001) 'The Choice of Independent Georgia', in Chufrin, S. (ed.) *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 208.

nership Council I can declare that Georgia is determined to be a full member of NATO and is resolved to work hard to prepare for this historic mission.”⁹

This foreign policy approach was at odds with the Kremlin’s post-Soviet foreign policy goals, and sowed the seeds of serious conflict. The unfriendly nature of bilateral relations was also reflected in Russia’s decision to impose visa regulations on Georgians in December 2000 for the first time since Tbilisi regained independence, which negatively impacted the Georgian economy. The move complicated life for the thousands of Georgian citizens who worked in Russia and sent remittances to their relatives at home. At that time remittances from Russia accounted for 23% of the country’s total GDP.¹⁰ The exclusion of the inhabitants of secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia from new visa regulations provoked further anti-Russian sentiments in the country.

Against the backdrop of Tbilisi’s overt efforts to acquire NATO membership, relations with Moscow further deteriorated in 2002, when the Russian authorities began distributing Russian passports to the inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By the end of that year up to 90% of South Ossetia’s population and 70% of Abkhazia’s population had acquired Russian citizenship through simplified procedures.¹¹ Russia’s move was apparently aimed at preparing legal ground for some form integration of these provinces into Russia, if Tbilisi went further down the path to NATO membership.

Georgia’s Growing Strategic Idealism: Warring against Russia

Georgia’s Rose Revolution (2003) brought some changes to the country’s foreign policy making. Initially, Moscow did not oppose the overthrow of President Shevardnadze and President Putin noted that the governmental change was “the logical result of serious systemic mistakes in foreign, domestic, and economic

9 NATO INT (2002) *Statement by President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze at the EAPC Summit*. Available at: <http://nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s021122h.htm> (Accessed: 21 August 2015).

10 Lasha, L. and Mirian, T. (2013) ‘Costs and Benefits of Labour Mobility between the EU and the Eastern Partnership Partner Countries - Country Report: Georgia’, *CASE Network Studies and Analyses*, No. 463. Available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2323395> (Accessed: 25 August 2015).

11 IWPR (2002) *Abkhaz rush for Russian passports*. Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/abkhaz-rush-russian-passports> (Accessed: 22 August 2015).

policy”¹² made under the former leadership. After the revolution Saakashvili also praised the mediatory role of the Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov between the government and opposition parties during the revolution and said that: “I simply did not expect it of him. He just arrived and turned the whole situation around, appearing at a meeting of the opposition and expressing support for us”.¹³

These apparently friendly relations continued during the initial months of the new government, which attempted to develop its pro-Western agenda while maintaining amicable relations with Russia. Although the Kremlin was uncertain about the basic orientation of the new Georgian government, initially Moscow pursued a policy of relative compromise. In 2004, Russia did not oppose and even supported Saakashvili’s attempts to establish control over Adjara, which had been under Abashidze’s semi-autonomous governance since 1991. Saakashvili and some MPs thanked Putin for his contribution to the peaceful resolution of the crisis.¹⁴

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Soon Tbilisi’s new political elites threw off the final layers of country’s pragmatic foreign policy and made Euro-Atlantic integration the absolute priority. The obvious geopolitical challenges failed to convince President Saakashvili to limit his pro-Western policies and his increasingly anti-Russian rhetoric. Emboldened by his success in Adjara and underestimating (if not ignoring) the obvious impediments, the Georgian president was convinced that he would be able to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity by securing control over the other secessionist regions. Soon after his accession to the presidency, Mikheil Saakashvili began to challenge the *de facto* independence of Abkhazia (since 1992) and South Ossetia (since 1993). Saakashvili’s determination to change the status quo - ending the 1992 ceasefire agreement that had stopped the war with South Ossetia and brought CIS (primarily Russian) peacekeepers to the region - triggered the era of direct confrontation with Russia. Relations had been steadily deteriorating following the deadly armed clashes in South Ossetia

12 RFE/RL (2003) *Putin calls Georgian President's ouster "logical result"*. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143048.html> (Accessed: 20 August 2015).

13 Ibid.

14 Civil.ge (2004) *MPs grateful for Russia's positive role in Adjara developments*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=6898> (Accessed: 20 August 2015).

after Tbilisi's allegedly anti-criminal operation in the separatist republic in August 2004. Tensions between the two countries further escalated in 2006 following calls by the Georgian parliament for a review of the 1992 agreement and for the withdrawal of all Russian peacekeepers deployed in the conflict zone, on allegations that they are siding with the separatist forces and, therefore, needed to be replaced with an international and 'neutral' force. Both sides continued militarizing and blaming one another for the destabilization of the region. The tensions affected all aspects of bilateral relations. In 2006, Moscow stopped issuing entry visas for Georgian nationals, and cut all air, sea, land and railway links, as well as postal communication with Georgia. In the same year, Moscow suspended the import of Georgia's most important export commodities – Georgian wine, Borjomi mineral water, and agricultural produce. At that time Russia accounted for 89% of Georgian wine exports¹⁵ and imported 50% of its entire mineral water production.¹⁶

The NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania (2–4 April 2008) brought the tensions to their peak. At the summit allies engaged in a heated debate over whether to grant Georgia (and Ukraine) access to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), a program designed to help aspiring countries prepare for eventual membership. Due to the refusal of France and Germany, neither Georgia nor Ukraine was admitted to the MAP process. Instead, the final declaration of the summit indicated in an obscure manner that Georgia and Ukraine would, one day, become members of NATO.

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The Bucharest discussions on Georgian and Ukrainian NATO membership perspectives and the concurrent US-supported recognition of Kosovar independence by around 40 states in early 2008 outraged the Kremlin. In March 2008, Moscow unilaterally lifted the sanctions on Abkhazia that had been agreed by the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1996.¹⁷ In its next move, a few weeks after the Bucharest summit, Russia legalized ties

15 BBC (2006) *Russian wine move draws protests*. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4860454.stm> (Accessed: 21 August 2015).

16 Civil.ge (2006) *Russia targets Borjomi in trade war with Georgia*. Available at: <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12495>, (Accessed: 21 August 2015).

17 Civil.ge (2008) *Russian Deputy Foreign Minister on lifting Abkhaz sanctions*. Available at: <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17373> (Accessed: 22 August 2015).

with the unrecognized republics.¹⁸ The Kremlin's regular warnings¹⁹ that Moscow would do everything to prevent Georgia from becoming a member of the NATO failed to limit the idealist ambitions of Tbilisi.

Saakashvili erroneously believed that the EU and the US would stand with Georgia in a military clash with Russia over the tiny breakaway regions. More dangerously, his populist rhetoric was aimed at persuading the Georgian public of this. Ronald Asmus in his *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* aptly characterizes Saakashvili's pre-war foreign policy as what Richard Nixon once called the 'madman theory' of foreign policy – threatening to act irrationally in order to get someone's attention.²⁰

Saakashvili received continuing warnings from his Western partners, to “avoid a direct military confrontation with Russia at all costs. You cannot prevail. It simply is not possible.”²¹ Nonetheless, he opted to respond with a sudden military attack to Moscow's heavy militarization of the breakaway regions. The five-day Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 ended disastrously for Georgia. Despite Saakashvili's expectations, NATO did not launch a war against Russia to protect Georgia. Consequently, Russia established its unequivocal control over the Georgia's breakaway regions, recognizing the independence of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia republics and underlining the irreversibility of this decision. As Washington's envoy to the Caucasus, Matthew Bryza, reportedly warned Tbilisi before the war, the military clash with Russia destroyed any chance Georgia had of entering NATO.²² But although this strategic idealism had caused huge

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18 Civil.ge (2008) *Russian Foreign Ministry's statement on Putin's instruction to boost ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17593> (Accessed: 21 August 2015).

19 Reuters (2015) *Russia army vows steps if Georgia and Ukraine join NATO*. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/11/us-russia-nato-steps-idUSL1143027920080411> (Accessed: 21 August 2015).

20 Asmus, R. (2010) *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p.10.

21 Reuters (2008) *U.S. says warned Georgia against Russia fight*. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/08/19/us-georgia-ossetia-usa-idUSN1947796120080819> (Accessed 22 August 2015).

22 Spiegel (2010) *Terrible losses overnight: cables track US diplomatic efforts to avert Russian-Georgian conflict*. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/terrible-loses-overnight-cables-track-us-diplomatic-efforts-to-avert-russian-georgian-conflict-a-732294.html> (Accessed on 22 August 2015).

losses²³ to the country, it remained the guiding approach of its foreign policy makers.

In the aftermath of the war, Russia stationed offensive military forces, some of them only about 40 kilometers from Tbilisi, along with thousands of Russian soldiers on Georgia's internationally recognized territories. The ballistic missiles Moscow deployed in the region can reach the majority of Georgian territory, and the sphere of influence of the Russian air defense system extends to all the major airports of Georgia. Following the war, diplomatic ties between the two countries were terminated, and the relations vacillated between confrontation and restricted calls for new political dialogue. Russia held Saakashvili and his administration responsible for war crimes and refused to consider the status of the separatist republics during any negotiations. The Georgian side insisted on the territorial integrity of the country and officially proclaimed the Russian-controlled breakaway regions as 'occupied by Russia'. Thus, the relations between the two countries collapsed into a dramatic stalemate.

*Georgian – Russian Relations after Saakashvili: Between Rap-
prochement and Confrontation*

The Georgian Dream (GD) coalition led by billionaire political novice Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power following the victory in the country's Parliamentary elections on 1 October 2012. Ivanishvili's cabinet reaffirmed the country's NATO and EU aspirations, while also seeking to repair the damaged ties with Russia. Ivanishvili's accession to the leadership was likened by some politicians and experts to presidential election of pro-Russia challenger Viktor Yanukovich, who had defeated the pro-Western incumbent in Ukraine in 2010.²⁴ These beliefs were strengthened following Ivanishvili's statement on national television on 4 September 2013, the day after Armenia proclaimed its decision to join Russia's Eurasian Union. Then he stated that "I am keeping a close eye on it [the Eurasian Union] and we are studying it. At this stage, we have no position at all. If in perspective we see

23 Jamestown Foundation (2008) *Lessons and Losses of Georgia's Five-Day War with Russia*. Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33974#VdhbiPmqkko (Accessed: 22 August 2015).

24 The Daily Beast (2012) *Sunset for Misha? Georgia's pro-Western Mikheil Saakashvili defeated by pro-Russian challenger*. Available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/02/sunset-for-misha-georgia-s-pro-western-mikheil-saakashvili-defeated-by-pro-russian-challenger.html> (Accessed: 22.05.2015).

that it is in our country's strategic interest, then, why not? But at this stage we have no position at all."²⁵

In fact, contrary to common concerns amongst Georgia's pro-Western citizens, the Prime Minister's statement did not indicate any radical pro-Russian shift in foreign policy strategy. This statement accurately exemplifies the coalition's new political strategy, which we can call *strategic obscurantism*.²⁶ While the GD coalition members made it clear on many occasions that normalization of relations with Russia was one of its key priorities, they also declared their aim to deepen EU and NATO integration.²⁷ As the regional realities made these two goals entirely incompatible, the new political elites chose to blur the external view of their foreign policy. Commenting on the new strategy of the Georgian government, Jamestown Foundation concludes that it is "naïve, if not outright dangerous, for the Georgian government to believe that it will be able to normalize relations with Moscow, while keeping Georgia on track to eventually secure NATO membership."²⁸

Despite this obscurantist rhetoric, the new government made some tangible developments in relations with Russia. In fact, the first steps toward rapprochement had been made by Saakashvili's administration in 2011 when Tbilisi agreed to Russia's WTO accession. This was reached after the two sides signed an agreement in November 2011 envisaging the implementation of sophisticated systems to track and audit cargo passing through Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁹ In the next move towards mending the relations, the GD coalition suspended the operation of Georgia's Russian-language channel, launched in 2010 to target audiences mainly in the North Caucasus with anti-Russian narratives.³⁰ The new gov-

The new government also created the position of the Prime Minister's Special Representative for Relations with Russia. Zurab Abashidze, Georgia's ambassador to Russia in 2000 – 2004, was appointed to the post.

25 Euobserver (2013) *Georgia PM says 'why not?' on Eurasian Union*. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/foreign/121315> (Accessed: 22 August 2015).

26 Obscurantism is the practice of deliberately preventing the facts or full details of something from becoming known.

27 Civil.ge (2012) *Founding declaration of the political coalition Georgian Dream*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24467> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

28 Jamestown Foundation (2014) *Georgian government plays an unattainable foreign policy game*. Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42005&cHash=3ca6574bb278f96b1c08704321ef92d6#.Vdl-Zfmqqko (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

29 Civil.ge (2015) *Tbilisi says Georgian, Russian diplomats may meet in August over WTO deal implementation*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28440> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

30 Civil.ge (2012) *GPB, Kanal PIK's managing firm suspend contract*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25371> (Accessed: 23.05.2015).

ernment also created the position of the Prime Minister’s Special Representative for Relations with Russia. Zurab Abashidze, Georgia’s ambassador to Russia in 2000 – 2004, was appointed to the post. In December 2012, Abashidze and Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin met in Switzerland and agreed to continue direct dialogue on trade, economy and humanitarian issues. Soon after this meeting, in 2013, Russia re-opened its market to Georgian products – especially wine, mineral water and fruits. In consequence, the export of Georgian products to Russia increased by 315% (\$144 million USD), while imports rose by 24% (\$116 million USD) in 2013 in comparison to 2012.³¹

The Abashidze – Karasin bilateral talks were meant to support the Geneva consultations. Since October 2008, there have been regular discussions in Geneva between the delegations of Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, the United States and South Ossetia and envoys of the European Union, the UN and the OSCE on security and stability in the South Caucasus. Due to the termination of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia, the Abashidze – Karasin dialogue and Geneva consultations remain the only

In turn, Russian officials, reiterating their position that Russia will not negotiate with Georgia on the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, insist that Tbilisi should accept the status quo. Moscow also declares its readiness to mediate negotiations between the separatist republics and Georgia, an offer Tbilisi adamantly refuses.

formal means of bilateral contact. Georgia has declared the withdrawal of the Russian embassies and armed forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a precondition for restoring diplomatic relations.³² In a recent statement, Georgian PM Garibashvili told the journalists that the existing format for dialogue will remain in place; at present Tbilisi has no plans to revise or expand the dialogue format with Russia.³³ In turn, Russian officials, reiterating their position that Russia will not negotiate with Georgia on the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, insist that Tbilisi should accept the status quo. Moscow also declares its readiness to mediate negotiations between the separatist republics and Georgia, an offer Tbilisi adamantly refuses.

Against this background of possible rapprochement with Russia, the arrests of the high-ranking officials (including former Min-

31 Agende.ge (2014) *Georgia’s exports to Russia increases 315%*. Available at: <http://agenda.ge/news/13266/eng> (Accessed: 24 August 2015).

32 Interfax (2012) *Georgia wants better relations with Russia - foreign minister*. Available at: <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?page=13&id=372608> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

33 TASS (2015) *PM: Georgia will continue its constructive and balanced policy in relations with Russia*. Available at: <http://tass.ru/en/world/809087> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

ister of Defense and Internal Affairs) serving under the former leadership initially damaged ties between the Georgian Dream coalition and NATO. These political developments in the first months of the new government were considered as proof of the pro-Russian position of the new administration. However, the succeeding months have proved that the Georgian government remains committed to the EU and NATO aspirations of the previous governments. Even considering the concerns of some NATO members that Georgia's entry into NATO would provoke a new war with Russia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgian officials say that they are ready to accept NATO membership that is conditional on the exclusion of the two occupied territories from NATO's Article 5 security guarantee until a peaceful solution is reached with Russia.³⁴ To affirm its commitment, Tbilisi also made a 'non-use of force' pledge regarding these territories.³⁵ Georgia is the second largest contributor to NATO training mission in Afghanistan after the United States, with about 885 soldiers. NATO's September 2013 Wales summit recognized Georgia's consistent efforts and ambitious reforms. The summit endorsed a substantial package for Georgia that included defense capacity building, training, exercises, strengthened liaison, and enhanced interoperability opportunities.³⁶ The training center, which was a component of this package, was opened in late August 2015 with the participation of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

Nevertheless, some NATO members are reluctant to grant formal membership prospects to Georgia in the near future; some see this as a potential provocation towards Russia. But the recent developments in Georgian-NATO relations and the Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli's first trip to the United States in her capacity as defense minister indicate that Tbilisi is determined to continue its efforts to join the NATO. During her visit, Khidasheli made it clear that NATO's failure to deliver tangible results on Georgia's membership path at its 2016 summit in Warsaw "will be a very clear message that

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³⁴ The Heritage Foundation (2015) *The perfect opportunity to advance the U.S. – Georgian defense relationship*. Available at: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/08/the-perfect-opportunity-to-advance-the-usgeorgian-defense-relationship> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ NATO (2014) *Wales summit declaration*. Available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm, (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

all those promises” made by the Alliance “are staying just on the paper.”³⁷ Her statement that “after the war in Ukraine it has become absolutely clear that there is no partnership to be expected from Russia”³⁸ signals the deterioration of Tbilisi’s relations with Moscow.

Tbilisi’s continuous enthusiasm for the EU and NATO jeopardizes any chance of a favorable rapprochement with Moscow, and undermines its calls for the normalization of relations. Similarly, Georgia’s ratification of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, which envisaged the creation of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between the EU and Georgia, reignited tensions with Russia. Russia subsequently signed a ‘strategic partnership’ deal with Abkhazia in November 2014. This significantly expanded Moscow’s military and economic control over the breakaway region, and the Georgian officials denounced this as another step towards the “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories.”³⁹ In a further move, Moscow restarted the so-called ‘borderization’ process between the breakaway republics and the rest of Georgia, which had been frozen for around two years. Through ‘borderization’, launched in 2009, Russian-controlled security forces in the breakaway regions have been moving the administrative boundary fence dividing the Russian-controlled region of South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia into the ‘mainland’ Georgia. In the most recent act of this kind in August 2015, the boundary between the sides was moved even further, 500 meters away from Georgia’s E60 Highway, which is the main road linking the Black Sea to Azerbaijan. The new fence placed a 1.6 km segment of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline inside Russian-controlled territory. Thus, the new wave of confrontation between Georgia and Russia signals the further escalation of tensions in the near future. The growing tensions in the region not only create problems for Georgia, but also generate difficulties for its neighboring country Azerbaijan, as Georgia is of great importance for Baku’s energy strategy.

37 Civil.ge (2015) *Georgian Defense Minister urges NATO enlargement*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28511> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

38 Ibid.

39 Civil.ge (2014) *Tbilisi Condemns Russia’s Move to Sign New Treaty with Sokhumi*. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27842> (Accessed: 23 August 2015).

Conclusion

Strategic idealism has been the guiding approach in Georgia's political culture despite the difficulties and losses the country has experienced since independence. In this respect, realization of the EU and NATO aspirations of the Baltic countries serves as a source of inspiration and precedent for the Georgians. Most pro-Western Georgians believe that the geopolitical challenges posed by the country's location are not an insurmountable obstacle in regard to Georgia's EU and NATO integration. However, the reality is that Georgia remains in a considerable distance from membership in either organization. Leaving aside membership, both the EU and NATO hesitate to deepen the integration with Georgia for fear of Russia's response.

Despite this, Georgian officials continue to focus on joining the Euro-Atlantic military and political structures, which aggravates the already inflamed relationship with Russia and causes further territorial losses for the country as seen during the recent 'borderization' process. This also undermines economic development, which could be promoted through intensified trade with both the EU and Russia. Stephan Jones, examining Georgia's political culture of 1990s and early 2000s, writes that for Georgia the West is desirable but not fully attainable, but Russia is undesirable but not fully alienable'.⁴⁰ The situation remains unchanged and needs to be tackled with pragmatism. However, Georgia's recognition of the new status quo and the revival of relations with Moscow under the existing conditions are also considered unacceptable by most Georgians. This indicates that the Georgian-Russian relations have been deadlocked as a result of the war of 2008, which occurred *inter alia* because of the strategic idealism that is so deeply embedded in Georgia's political culture.

40 Jones, S. (2003) 'The role of cultural paradigms in Georgian foreign policy', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 19(3), p. 104.