

Tbilisi's Transactional Foreign Policy Leads Georgians Astray

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 844

May 2023

Kornely Kakachia¹

Georgian Institute of Politics

Bidzina Lebanidze²

Friedrich Schiller University Jena

Conventional wisdom holds that small states in hostile environments have minimal menus of foreign policy options. This theory is being tested in the countries wedged between Russia and the EU/NATO following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and intensified geopolitical rivalry between Moscow and the West. For its part, Georgia's foreign policy strategy has been the subject of intense [scrutiny](#) and mounting criticism inside and outside of the country in recent years. Before the outbreak of the war, the Black Sea state, squeezed between Russia and Turkey, pursued international relations within a common small-state pattern. It has formally advanced Euro-Atlantic integration aims, close economic and strategic partnerships with neighboring Turkey and Azerbaijan, pragmatic ties with China and Iran, and a Russia-accommodating policy.

However, after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, by and large, Tbilisi has kept an uneasy equidistance from both Moscow and the West. While the Georgian government has not formally joined Western sanctions against Russia, it highlights that it complies with them all and will not allow its territory to be used to circumvent them. At the same time, it has let thousands of Russian citizens and businesses [relocate](#) to Georgia and adopted controversial messaging about the war. All this, together with rising anti-Western narratives promulgated by the ruling Georgian Dream party, strengthens the lean of Georgia's orbit into a Russia-first policy.

Georgia's Failing Balancing Act

At a time when the West has been struggling to find the right responses to resurgent Russian imperialism, the Georgian government has wanted to sell its foreign policy as an act of pragmatism. However, Georgia's balancing act has become increasingly confusing and unsustainable nearly a year after the invasion. As Russia has become a more

¹ Kornely Kakachia is Jean Monnet Chair and Professor of Political Science at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University. Currently he is Visiting Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels.

² Bidzina Lebanidze is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena and Senior Policy Analyst at the Georgian Institute of Politics.

dangerous regional bully, the West – particularly the EU – has hardened its foreign policy posturing and securitized its enlargement and neighborhood policies.

Last June, Georgia finally received its EU accession prospects – largely due to the Russia-Ukraine war – but the actual accession process will most certainly require the country to abandon its current conceptual ambiguity. If Tbilisi receives EU candidate status at the end of this year, it will need to line up its policies with the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Just this month, Oliver Varhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Policy, reaffirmed Georgia’s European path while also [saying](#) that the pace of its integration depends on the implementation of “key reforms.” Georgia would have to take a more firm position in the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West, a position the Georgia Dream government has wanted to avoid.

Georgia’s partners understand the sensitive and complex situation the Georgian Dream party faces as it governs a country that is 20 percent occupied by Russia. However, at times, the government and its proxies often find themselves rhetorically more aligned with the Kremlin’s anti-Western messaging. Their comments frequently lack empathy for Ukraine and Western support initiatives for Kyiv and Ukrainians. The government’s present tactics contradict Georgia’s long-term strategic interests, create some alienation with the West, and damage Tbilisi’s ties to Kyiv – a potential major regional ally. The approach appears to be against public opinion. According to a recent 2023 survey and [report](#) by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRRC), most Georgians support integration within the EU and NATO:

Georgians are not ready to sacrifice Western aspirations, territories, and independence to avoid military aggression from their Northern neighbor. Georgian Dream supporters are more ready to compromise Western orientation for avoiding the war than opposition supporters and non-partisans. On the other hand, younger people, urban populations, and respondents with higher levels of education are less eager to trade the country’s pursuit to the West for hypothetical peace with Russia. [...] Most Georgians assess the role of Ukraine’s President Volodymir Zelenskiy positively, followed by the role of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden. On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belorussian president Alexander Lukashenko are assessed negatively. [*sic*]

Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili [criticized](#) Georgian Dream’s manner and position in a recent speech, saying: “Caution has never excluded either dignity or solidarity.” Tbilisi’s decision to move ahead with the purchase of new metro cars from Russia, the perceived openness of Georgian officials to direct flights with Russia, and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili’s [plans](#) to attend the CPAC Meeting in Budapest are examples of items that have [provoked](#) deeper backlash domestically and [from](#) Western officials. At the same time, [pressure](#) is growing on the EU to prevent states in the wider neighborhood from helping Moscow circumvent sanctions.

Until recently, the West did not pressure Georgia to introduce bilateral sanctions on Russia. However, as Tbilisi entertains the idea of allowing Russia to resume direct flights, Washington and Brussels have [issued](#) warnings about complying with international sanctions. Moreover, Brussels, in a recent report, called on Georgia to align its visa policy with that of the EU, which could result in imposing visa regimes on Russia, Iran, and Turkey. This could create political and economic costs for Georgia, considering that Russia and Turkey are key economic and trade partners. It is worth mentioning, however, that [according](#) to a recent survey, 62 percent of Georgians are ready to sacrifice trade relations with Russia for the sake of EU membership. Moreover, 79 percent of Georgians do not support allowing Russian citizens to “enter Georgia freely without a visa,” “register a business,” or “purchase property.”

Moreover, Georgia’s [declining](#) alignment rate with relevant EU statements and Tbilisi’s liberal trade policy—including its free trade agreement with China—may become a serious concern for the EU in the future. Georgia could manage the negative economic side effects related to its European integration in the longer term. The key question is, however, whether by aligning with EU policies, Georgia could really sleepwalk into a more conflictual relationship with Russia or whether the Georgian leadership is overblowing these security risks to justify their transactional equidistance between Russia and the West.

Domestic Determinants of Transactional Foreign Policy

Even a systemic international relations prism that considers states as monolithic “black boxes” is not enough to explain Georgia’s imprecise foreign policy behavior. The main driver is seemingly domestic policy revolving around the political penchants of the ruling regime and the opposition. One thrust is that the EU accession process requires comprehensive political reforms, which could weaken the ruling government and endanger its grip on power. This dilemma between regime survival and European integration has been a constant feature of Georgian politics over the last thirty years. The hostile tone adopted by Georgian Dream and its proxies toward the West could be an [attempt](#) to avoid the political price for failing to embark on and complete reforms. For example, it deliberately links Georgia’s neutral position toward the war to its failure to receive EU candidacy status.

Prioritization of its own political survival over the country’s European-oriented future is partly shaped by a toxic political culture that promotes a zero-sum-game mentality among political actors. Every power rotation in Georgia has resulted in repressions [against](#) the leaders of the former ruling regime. The country is slated to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024. For today’s leadership, winning next year’s elections is a matter of political and even physical survival. In this spirit, Georgian Dream and its parliamentary allies tried to propose an “unconstitutional” “foreign agents” law [similar](#) to Russia’s legislation. The bill [wanted](#) individuals, organizations, and media that receive

20 percent of their funding from abroad to register as “agents of foreign influence.” Many believe the law aimed to weaken Georgia’s vibrant civil society – the last remaining actor that can check the ruling regime’s authoritarian tendencies – as the country heads toward next year’s voting. Hundreds of Georgian NGOs [signed](#) a letter saying the bill attacked “Georgian values” and “hinders Georgia’s progress towards EU membership.”

The proposed law sparked large-scale demonstrations, and the government had to [back off](#) in the face of mounting domestic and international pressure. However, the process was accompanied by intensified anti-European and anti-Western disinformation campaigns from the representatives of the ruling regime and their supporters. The anti-Western vocabulary of Georgian Dream is broadly based on the Russia-inspired notion of “sovereign democracy,” aimed at insulating the country from the West’s democratic pressure and securing its grip on power.

However, domestic explanations alone are not quite enough to explain the country’s foreign policy behavior. Every domestic crisis or major development in Georgia has had a significant external and regional dimension. For instance, the foreign agent law attempt sparked Western criticism, negative reactions, and political/military threats [from](#) Moscow. Russia’s adverse reaction to the street protests against the bill, and then the government’s withdrawal of it, reminded everyone that Georgia, like Moldova and Ukraine, remains on the Kremlin’s active radar as it tries to maintain its influence over the neighborhood. For most political actors in Georgia, a key issue is how to neutralize the threat of a Russian military intervention while getting closer to the Euro-Atlantic community.

Moreover, Georgia’s domestic crisis is further exacerbated by the failure of Georgian Dream to establish strategic partnership networks in Western countries. While the former government under Mikheil Saakashvili exhibited some authoritarian practices, it was still embedded into the strategic communication sphere of Western actors. On the one hand, this embeddedness allowed the West to put pressure on Saakashvili and forced upon him a democratic power transition in 2012. But it also provided the former president and his party some political hedging while in opposition.

The West was not necessarily more tolerant toward authoritarian transgressions by Saakashvili’s regime, but they allowed him to prioritize illiberal state-building reforms for some time. On the other hand, Georgian Dream lacked the diplomatic capacity and the political will to embark on a similar level of strategic partnership with the West. Therefore, its fear of losing power is extra high because it feels it will be left without external friends while being highly exposed to political and personal vendettas from a new government.

The domestic dimension of Georgia’s foreign policy is just one side of the coin and does not remove the country’s major foreign policy dilemmas. The main dilemma currently is, both for Georgia as a country and its [increasingly](#) authoritarian leadership, whether a

more value-based foreign policy aligned with the EU and a more pragmatic equidistant foreign policy aimed at appeasement of Russia are compatible in the long run. While Georgian politics twirls, Washington continues to stand by. Georgian Foreign Minister Iliia Darchiashvili [confirmed](#) in April that the United States continues to have “open” and “unequivocal” support for Georgia’s European integration. “We have repeatedly heard, and we still hear today, the strong support of the United States when it comes to the European integration of Georgia,” he said.

Lost in Pragmatism

A tension between interest-based pragmatism and values-based idealism is often a serious dilemma for many states. For Georgia, it has not always been the case. A key element of the country’s foreign policy for the last two decades has been the deterrence of Russia via Western integration positions – in other words, to become closely aligned with Western institutions and bilateral partners both strategically and normatively – and to have a dialogue with Russia from a position of strength to solve territorial and other problems. However, the current government seems to have broken with that tradition by putting appeasement of Russia’s security concerns at the center of its foreign policy. In a way, Georgia has developed its own version of a Russia-first policy, which may further alienate Tbilisi from its Western and regional partners alike.

Georgian Dream’s transactional foreign policy not only openly rejects value-based policymaking but considers it harmful to national interests. While the approach may provide short-term benefits, it is inherently fragile as it lacks a strong institutional foundation and neglects long-term strategic vision. Georgia certainly needs some flexibility to mitigate major security risks emanating from Russia as the country lacks a major security umbrella from NATO or even from key bilateral partners like the United States. However, it is highly questionable whether any alignment with Russia will make Georgia more secure and prosperous in years to come, let alone solve its conflicts and other security-related issues. It holds open the gap between Tbilisi and NATO/EU, slowing its Euro-Atlantic course and demoting cooperation between the West and Tbilisi.

Taking the broad view, Georgia represents an interesting case for policy analysts and scholars to observe whether a transactional foreign policy can help ruling regimes in small states navigate through geopolitical turbulence and, at the same time, insulate their grip on power from opposition and external pressure.