

GEORGIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA: CAN THERE BE A BALANCE BETWEEN TRANSACTIONAL AND VALUE-BASED FOREIGN POLICY?



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February 2022 was a decisive month for the global security architecture. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered the foundations of the post-Cold-War order and put existing security paradigms in flux. From the very start of the war, the so-called collective West has expressed its full-fledged support to Ukraine. NATO pledged to stand with Ukraine "as long as it takes" (Sabbagh 2022), while the EU, in an unprecedented geopolitical move, offered candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine and a European perspective for Georgia.

The recent developments suggest that, most likely, neither Russia nor Ukraine is going to back down, leading to protracted warfare. If this is the case, it will further deepen the divide between Russia and the West and create dividing lines between them. Georgia's foreign policy has been significantly affected by those developments. As a small country situated between several regional powers, and with 20% of its internationally recognized territory still occupied by Russia, Georgia has pursued flexible and "pragmatic" foreign policy with its neighbours, including Russia.

Georgia's transactional foreign policy worked well in peacetime, but as the West further isolates Russia, Georgia's diplomatic balancing act is getting harder to pull off. The Georgian government has also attracted criticism with its neutral stance toward the war in Ukraine, rising anti-Western rhetoric by the government and a deepening relationship with Russia. As Russia has become a more dangerous regional bully, the West, particularly the EU, has hardened its foreign policy posturing and securitized its enlargement and neighborhood policies. While Georgia expects candidate status at the end of 2023, the actual accession process will most certainly require Georgia to abandon its current conceptual ambiguity and take a firmer position in the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. Georgia's balancing act toward Russia has become increasingly confusing and unsustainable nearly a year after the invasion.

Meanwhile, the government of the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has faced accusations of appeasing Russia and failing to sufficiently support Ukraine, has not joined international sanctions over fears of negative economic consequences for Georgia. The Georgian government maintained a visa-free regime with Russia and agreed to open direct flights between the two countries (Reuters 2023), which resulted in an influx of thousands of Russian citizens and businesses. Subsequently, economic ties between the two countries have further deepened. As the Georgian government has wanted to sell its foreign policy as an act of pragmatism, and despite short-term benefits that Georgia might be getting from increasing economic relations with Russia, opinion polls repeatedly show that the majority of Georgians support Georgia's pro-European foreign policy and perceive Russia as a threat (IRI 2022, Edison Research 2023).



Moreover, on the one hand, Tbilisi tries to remain committed and aligned with the West as it sees itself as a part of the European family. However, once the leader of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia has taken a different approach toward the EU, and recently, the rate of Tbilisi's alignment with the EU's foreign policy has been falling (Akobia 2023), which could endanger Georgia's further rapprochement with EU. While Western partners are calling Georgia to be in line with EU foreign and security policy and pursue more value-based foreign policy (Stano 2023), it might come at a high economic and security cost for a country that remains vulnerable to Russian pressure and dependent on its market.

Despite these difficulties, Georgia does not have the luxury to focus only on the economic side and disregard the political risks associated with economic rapprochement with Russia. Subsequently, there is a debate in and outside of Georgia on whether the Georgian Dream government abandoned traditional pro-Western, value-based foreign policy utilizing more so-called pragmatic principles with Russia, which some experts believe is a sort of appeasement policy that can be characterized as a bandwagoning by stealth (Lebanidze & Kakachia 2023).

The Georgian Institute of Politics asked two prominent international experts working on Georgia, Prof. S. Neil MacFarlane and Prof. Steven Jones, to contribute to the debate regarding Georgia's foreign policy.

- **Can a small country that is not protected by the NATO security umbrella or an EU member afford to follow a value-based foreign policy?**
- **Is a transactional foreign policy approach justified, and what are the risks and benefits?**

VALUES AND INTERESTS IN GEORGIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

This contribution has two objectives. The first is to interrogate the distinction between values-based and transactional foreign policy, which is empirically and theoretically unsustainable. Professor Jones agrees. The second focuses specifically on Georgian foreign policy, particularly in its relations with the West and Russia. The paper begins by considering whether the distinction between “values-based foreign policy” and “transactional foreign policy” can be operationalised, whether they are mutually exclusive, and whether foreign policy combines elements of both. Can the two categories be reliably distinguished one from the other when “transactional” foreign policy may be driven at least in part by national core values and when seemingly “values-based” foreign policy may be adopted for practical reasons? It concludes by examining Georgia’s policy toward the West and Russia. In particular, it suggests that, in view of increasing Russian aggressiveness in Ukraine and the current dearth of protective alliance arrangements, Georgia should tread a narrow path between the West and Russia. As Professor Jones suggests, this choice is not guaranteed success. But there is no credible alternative, an issue that is revisited in the conclusion.

VALUES AND TRANSACTIONS IN FOREIGN POLICY

What do we mean by a “values-based” foreign policy? Are we talking about values in general, values specific to each country, or Western values: democracy, rights, judicial independence, the independence of media and so forth? A value is whatever is considered “worthy”, “respected” or “right” by a person or group. There is no universally accepted or “objective” set of values. It follows that a values-based foreign policy reflects what a government thinks is worthy or “right”. Turning to the “transactional” aspect, in its basic meaning, a transaction is an exchange between two or more parties. These exchanges can be cooperative, or they can be conflictual. It is worth noting that there is no reference to why a state wants what it wants. For example, the state could choose to do something because it thought it was a “worthy” thing to do, or because it thought it might get something in return. It also follows that a state can act on values and on interests simultaneously. States generally combine transactional and value elements in their foreign policies.

There is a pertinent example in recent Polish foreign policy. Poland has steadily supported Ukraine’s struggle for independence and territorial integrity. This may reflect a basis in values (solidarity, respect for international law), or it might be transactional (it is better to keep Russia away from Russia’s borders; assisting Ukraine’s defence against Russian invasion would serve that purpose). Then, in the face of a war-related glut of Ukrainian grain exports into Poland that damaged the livelihoods of Polish farmers, Warsaw suspended the import of Ukrainian grain into Poland (Brzezinski 2023). So did Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The embargo on Polish grain could be transactional; the Polish government might worry that if they allowed Ukrainian grain exports to destroy their own farmers, their farmers might not vote for them in the next election. Alternatively, it could be values-based; it is worthy to support one’s own people when they are suffering, since the state’s principal responsibility is to protect its own people.

The same might be said of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia. Here, the United States is ostensibly committed to a values agenda of encouraging democracy, the rule of law and the equitable treatment of minorities. It has repeatedly criticised Saudi Arabia along these lines. It is also providing a lot of military equipment and advice to Saudi Arabia to help that country maintain the regional balance against Iran. That may be seen as transactional, or in values terms, it may reflect the state's responsibility to deflect an Iranian threat as part of a values-based policy aimed at protecting America and its people. That is to say, America's policy toward Saudi Arabia may be interpreted as values-based or transactional. In fact, one might consider the entire American values agenda to be somewhat transactional. It is hard to contest that, in the global politics of the last thirty years, the democratic/liberal values agenda is the ideological aspect (Nye 2004) of a quest for hegemony on the part of the United States and the West in general, an instrument in transactional politics. To put it another way, this could be rephrased as a reflection of President Woodrow Wilson's argument that America must make "the world safe for democracy".

What about "small states" next to larger neighbours? Here, a good example is Finland. From 1945 to 2022, Finland simultaneously embraced a values-based agenda of democracy, the rule of law and economic freedom, eventually joining the EU, while conducting a transactional policy toward the USSR, in which Finland traded security policy flexibility (the right of any sovereign state to choose its own security arrangements) for security against an imminent threat from a neighbouring state. It also agreed to the stationing of Soviet forces on Finnish soil. In other words, it appeased the USSR in order for Finland to survive (survival being a core value). Turning to Georgia, it accepts norms related to democracy and human rights. However, in its relationship with Azerbaijan, it ignores them. Azerbaijan provides Georgia with critical energy supplies. Georgia benefits substantially from the transit trade to and through Azerbaijan. Given the size of its military, Azerbaijan poses an implicit threat to Georgian security. The decision to downplay liberal norms in this case is mainly transactional. Then again, this policy developed when Georgia and its population struggled to survive and keep people warm in their houses; there is a value component. This small set of examples suggests a few general conclusions about the distinction between values-based and transactional foreign policy. First, values-based versus transactional foreign policy is not a binary choice; most, if not all, states (large and small) have both values-based and transactional elements in their foreign policies.

Second, it is difficult to disentangle values from transactionality in policy formulation. Third, the dichotomy between values-based and transactional policy presumes a single (Western) values basis for policy. But other nations also have their own particular values, such as survival and promoting the welfare of their own citizens, or, in the case of Russia, China and Iran, the mission of the nation. So, which values are we talking about?

The main problem here is that comparing values-based to transactional foreign policy is like comparing apples to oranges. All foreign policy is transactional. It involves relations with other states, each of which has its own agenda; these agendas combine values, material interests, leadership and public perceptions of the external environment. These agendas produce transactionality and are about finding agreements on common interests, trading on state priorities, and engaging in conflict where differences cannot be resolved through negotiation. The agendas are determined at three levels: 1) external (structural) factors, favoured by neo-realists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) and John Mearsheimer (2001), 2) domestic politics, public opinion and culture (including cultural values) and 3) elite and leadership perceptions and values.¹ These three dimensions are neatly captured in the theoretical apparatus of foreign policy analysis: neorealism, liberalism and constructivism.

1. This breakdown of factors contributing to foreign policy formulation is similar to that provided in Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro, and Steven Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). This work is not purely realist, but combines structural realist, liberal, and constructivist theory.

Implicit in this description is the importance of values both in leadership perceptions and in domestic politics. The importance of these factors varies as circumstances change over time. Where a state faces an imminent and serious threat from another state, the structural level is likely to dominate, along with leadership perception of an external threat. Where such threats are minimal, domestic political-cultural factors become more significant. The balance of causal factors also varies by regime type: authoritarian or autocratic systems diminish the importance of the domestic political level and increase the importance of the elite/leadership factor, as in Russia. Most people in Russia did not care about Ukraine. The boss did. Here we are.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF FOREIGN POLICY IN GEORGIA

Ignored in the discussion of values and transactionality is a concept fundamental to international relations and foreign policy: power. In Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, in the face of their impending destruction by Athens, the Melians appealed to justice. The Athenians responded by asserting that "the standard of justice depends on the equality of power and ... in fact the strong do what they have the power to and the weak accept what they have to accept". (Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 402)² Athens offered a choice for the Melians: surrender and submit to integration into the Athenian Empire or be completely destroyed. Of course, a small state may seek alliances with stronger ones to balance the threat.³ Success in that effort depends on the willingness of balancing actors to provide security guarantees. That was lacking for the small state, Melos. The Melians refused integration into the Athenian Empire. Melos was destroyed; in Thucydides' account, the men were executed, and the women and children were sold into slavery. The choices that large and small states make on major foreign policy issues are or should be strongly affected by their situation at the time and notably by positionality in regional and global distributions of power.

This brings us to Georgia, a small state. Georgia exists in a complicated and problematic geopolitical context. First, its dominant neighbour, Russia, has steadily interfered in Georgia's domestic politics since Georgia's return to sovereign statehood in 1991. It invaded Georgia in 2008, violating the international prohibition on the aggressive use of force. Their violence and the displacement it produced had massive humanitarian consequences for the people of Georgia. Russian policy may have reflected historical nostalgia for the Russian and Soviet empires. It also reflected Russia's hostility to further incursions by Western institutions into what it deemed to be its sphere of special interest, the Near Abroad. That is to say, Russia claimed a veto right over Georgian foreign and security policy on matters of Russian interest.⁴

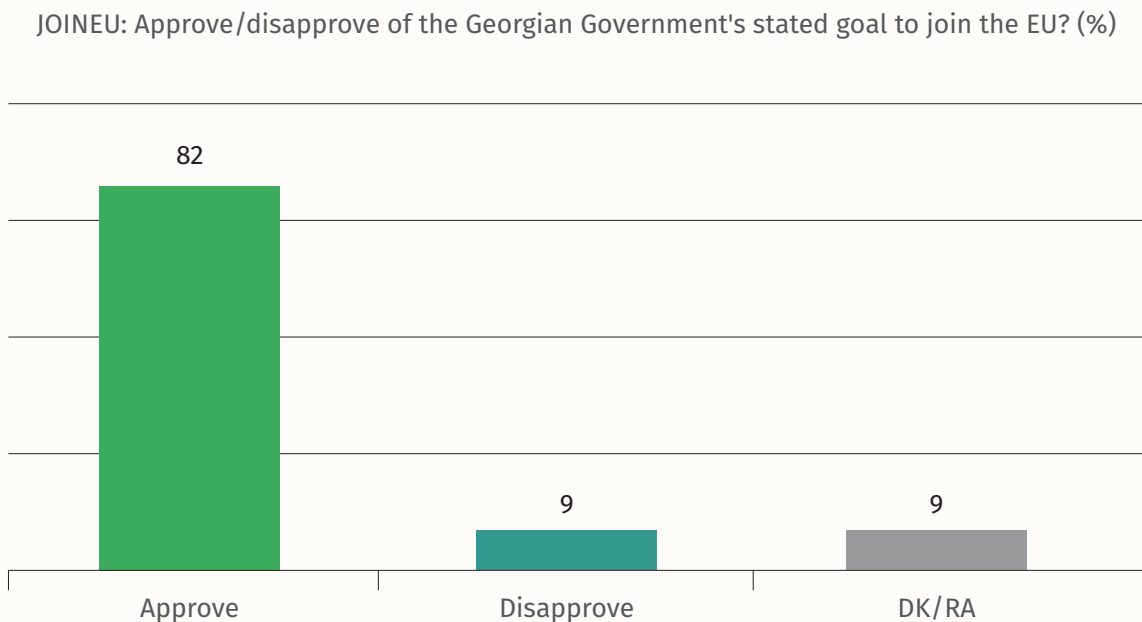
Farther afield are the West and its institutions. Both NATO and the EU have adopted enlargement as a long-term policy for the states in what was the western part of the USSR. In response, Georgia has embraced the Western democratic and liberal values agenda since 2003. Joining the Euro-Atlantic space is a foreign policy requirement of Georgia's constitution. At a popular level, the Georgian population's support for membership in the EU and NATO is very high (Figure 1).

2. There is some doubt about the historical accuracy of the author's account. That does not really matter, because the author presents the dilemma of small isolated states very well.

3. The definitive account of the theory of alliances is Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 1987.

4. This point was made clear in Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference. See the transcript at: <https://russialist.org/transcript-putin-speech-and-the-following-discussion-at-the-munich-conference-on-security-policy/>

Figure 1. Do You Approve or Disapprove of the Georgian Government's Stated Goal to Join the EU?



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2023

Source: NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2023.

Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nm2023ge/JOINEU/>

On the other hand, there appears to be some ambivalence on the part of the current government regarding EU values concerning judicial independence (the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court), political polarization in the parliament and society, the treatment of imprisoned former president Mikheil Saakashvili, "de-oligarchization" initiatives (a veiled reference to the influence of Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgian politics), human rights (notably the controversy over LGBTQ+ issues), media freedom disputes, the nature of civil society and "foreign agent" laws.⁵ These domestic political developments have raised concerns in Western institutions and states as they fly in the face of enlargement requirements for domestic reform.

But formally, the Georgian commitment to candidacy in the EU remains on the books. The EU remains committed in principle to the process. If Georgia satisfactorily addresses the Union's 12 recommendations for the grant of candidate status for EU membership before the end of the year, the prospects for granting candidate status are reasonably good. If the government does not implement those recommendations, prospects are not good. Whatever happens at the candidacy stage, the move from candidacy to membership tends to be a long process and is likely to endure for at least a decade in the case of Georgia.⁶ And candidate status carries no security guarantee.

5. For the full list of EU priorities, see *The Twelve Priorities*, EEAS, 2022.

6. Five of the eight current candidates have been waiting over a decade; one has been waiting for 24 years, see: *Joining the EU*, European Union (europa.eu).

In the case of NATO, Georgia signaled their desire for membership in 2003; that commitment has been sustained ever since. The alliance declared in Bucharest in 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine would be admitted to the alliance but provided no clear path or deadline. The August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, in which the Russians split off 20% of Georgia's territory and then recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states, was likely a direct consequence. Since then, NATO and Georgia have engaged in various special or intensive cooperative arrangements. Although the NATO accession process is more straightforward than that of the EU, full membership and coverage by NATO's security guarantee is also likely to be a long way away.

This leads to a further comment on the values-transactionality question. The West is increasingly entangled in a conflict with Russia over Russia's 2014 interference in Ukraine and the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The Georgian government and those close to it have suggested that the West, and in particular the United States, have urged Georgia to impose sanctions on Russia and to open a "second front" in the Ukraine war.

There are several problems with these claims. Opening a second front of the war from Georgia is problematic. Naval operations would be suicidal, given the capacity of Georgia's naval forces. Land operations would require a forced crossing of the Caucasus Mountains. Georgian forces apparently are configured and equipped for defensive rather than offensive operations. So that, too, would be suicidal unless NATO deployed a large complement of combat troops and air power to Georgia, which they are unlikely to do.

As for sanctions, Georgia has ample and legitimate economic reasons not to impose its own sanctions on Russia since trade and other economic transactions with Russia play a major role in sustaining the Georgian economy. On the basis of publicly available evidence, there has been no official Western demand that Georgia itself impose sanctions on trade, transport and monetary relations with Russia. Moreover, Georgia has agreed not to violate U.S. and EU sanctions on Russia. And Georgia has supported all UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine and calling for Russian withdrawal.

The Government of Georgia and its allies in the Georgian parliament have provided no evidence to support their claims that the United States is exerting serious pressure to get Georgia into the war or to impose punitive sanctions on Russia, while U.S. officials have denied such pressure. Thus, the accusations are not credible. Why Georgian officials make such allegations is likely a matter of domestic politics rather than foreign policy.

Until recently, Georgia has done a reasonably good job in walking the narrow line between the West on the one hand and Russia on the other. Recent events raise new questions. The Russian removal of visa restrictions on Georgian citizens and the decision to resume direct flights from Russia to Georgia are clearly an attempt to pull Georgia farther away from its Western aspirations. These initiatives, which have been warmly greeted by officials of the Georgian government, are fairly obviously an attempt by Russia to seduce Georgia away from its Western orientation.

To summarise, Georgia is situated in a very complex regional geopolitical environment. In particular, it faces a geopolitical conflict between its major strategic threat (Russia) and its major benefactors (the United States, NATO and the EU), concentrated on the war in Ukraine. The Western friends of Georgia have not extended security guarantees to Georgia, and Georgian membership in these institutions is likely a long way away. Absent external protection to balance Russia's overwhelming size, population and remaining military force, Georgia needs to tread a narrow line between the West and Russia. If it moves too far in a westward direction, it risks Russian military retaliation. If it moves too far in a Russian direction, it faces the alienation of its Western partners. The challenge is to do enough to placate each side and to avoid going too far either way.

Kakachia and Lebanidze (2023) argued recently that “a key element of [Georgia’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”. They go on to suggest that Georgia has departed from that tradition by “putting appeasement of Russia’s security concerns at the centre of its foreign policy”. This is a compelling argument.⁷ But, to paraphrase the Melian dialogue, in the absence of credible alliances, a small state faces the choice of appeasement of its threatening and more powerful rival or risking extinction. The West has provided no durable security guarantees, and Georgia’s acceptance into either the EU or NATO is, on the basis of current evidence, a distant prospect. The possibility of conflict with Russia is more imminent. One could argue, therefore, that, in current conditions inflamed by the war in Ukraine, the prudent (and regrettable) option may be some form of “appeasement “. This adjustment responds to specific conditions in the current international and domestic environments. It is highly contested in Georgia, not least by the country’s president (Salome Zourabichvili as cited by Interpressnews 2023). It is, therefore, not permanent.

A FINAL REFLECTION

This paper has questioned the utility of the distinction between values-based and transactional foreign policy in analysing the foreign policy of small states existing between major conflicting great powers, using Georgian foreign policy as an example. Instead, it reverts to a more traditional approach that focuses on serious external threats and what is necessary to mitigate those threats. It suggests that the best of a lot of bad choices is limited accommodation of both contending concentrations of power, without moving too far in either direction. In view of recent developments in Georgian and Russian policy, there is reason for concern both in Georgia and in the West about whether Georgia is getting off the narrow path and leaning (bandwagoning) (Walt, 1987) toward Russia. Going too far in that direction would jeopardise Georgia’s westward opportunities as much as the government’s alleged resistance to the EU’s twelve recommendations does. The movement, if it continues, risks returning Georgia to Russia’s orbit to the detriment of the Georgian state and its population.

As noted earlier, Professor Jones emphasises the previous failure of Georgia’s efforts to accommodate Russia. He suggests a “multi-vector foreign policy focused on the Black Sea Region, which includes Georgia’s immediate neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan, EU countries Rumania and Bulgaria, and potential EU members Turkey, Moldova and Ukraine, along with important neighbors in Central Asia and Iran who seek Black Sea access.” In his view, this “makes more sense in creating national and regional security for Georgia”, given the “fickleness” of the West.

Security cooperation between Georgia’s two Caucasian neighbours is absent, and trilateral collaboration among the three Caucasian states on security matters is scant. Sub-regional security cooperation among Black Sea littoral states is weak, if not absent, given that the direction of Ukrainian, Romanian and Bulgarian foreign policy is directed Westwards toward the EU and NATO. Ukraine is at war with another littoral state (Russia), and Georgia’s existential threat is Russia, which has naval and air superiority in the northern section of the Black Sea.

7. While compelling, this argument suggests that Georgia’s embrace of the West was transactional and not values-based.

Regional security cooperation among Central Asian states occurs within a Russian-centred Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and a Sino-Russian condominium in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China and Iran cooperate on economic and security matters with Russia in its conflict with Ukraine, and they, as well as Central Asian states, can be reasonably certain that Central Asian infrastructural links through Georgia will likely endure whether or not Georgia runs into trouble with Russia. Turkey cooperates with Russia on economic matters. Iran does not cooperate with Georgia on its security. In sum, it is reasonable to conclude that the multi-vector regional security alternative for Georgia does not exist. It does not sound like a good alternative for Georgia.

In fact, there are no definitively positive security alternatives for Georgia. So, the option is not which is best, but which is the best of the worst. Professor Jones's alternative is not promising on the basis of the empirical analysis above. The best of the worst in current circumstances is walking the narrow path between the West and Russia. That may change if Ukraine wins its war. At the moment, there seems to be no quick victory. So, Georgia needs to do its best to manage a very threatening eternal environment. It is hoped that the Georgian government shows acumen and wisdom in navigating the path because nobody else is going to do it for them.

VALUES AND INTERESTS IN GEORGIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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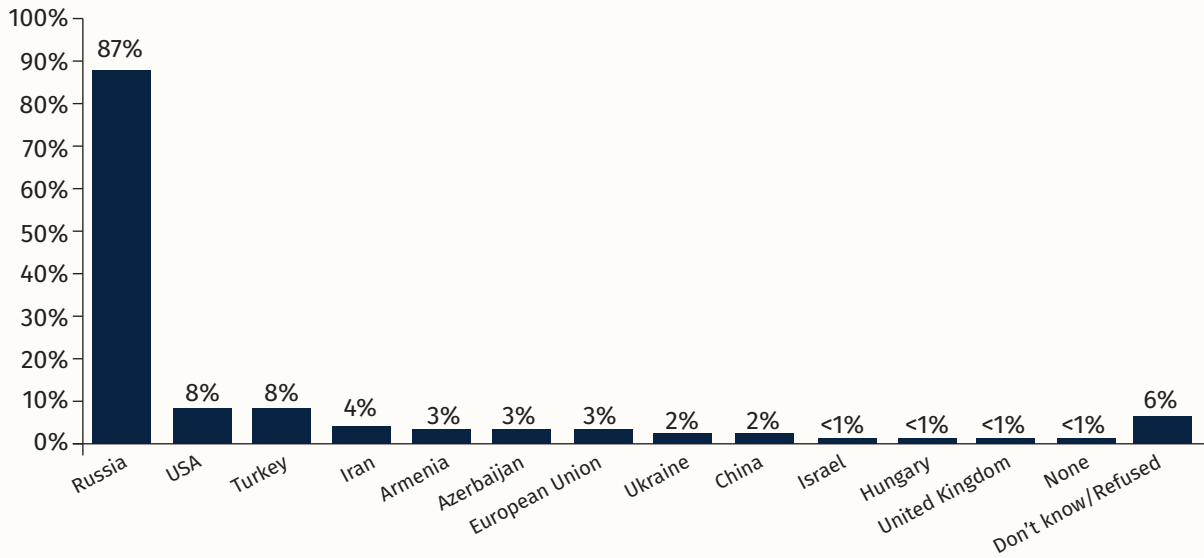
INTRODUCTION

Would Georgia—as a small state caught in the middle of dangerous international rivalry—be better off with a value-based or transactional foreign policy? Professor Macfarlane, in his persuasive and analytical response to this question, points out that distinguishing one approach from the other is a fruitless goal that no Ph.D. student should take on. Most foreign policies are mixes of both “values” and pragmatic “transactions,” and the balance between them changes over time depending on the international balance of power, regime type, domestic reactions, the perceptions of risk by the leaders, and the nature of the threat. Professor Macfarlane provides several examples of actions by Poland, Finland and the United States, which illustrate the ambiguity of the motives and goals of foreign policymakers. He also ponders the nature of “values”. Whose values and what values, he asks? Georgian leaders insist they want integration into NATO and EU but pursue policies that the European leaders themselves describe as incompatible with European values. So what are the Georgian government’s values, are they identifiable—and do they align with European norms and with the values of Georgia’s own citizens?

Despite Professor Macfarlane’s rejection of a binary framework, in the end, he suggests the choice for Georgia is one of either-or. He writes that Georgia needs to “tread a narrow line” between Russia and the West: “If it moves too far in a westward direction, it risks Russian military retaliation. If it moves too far in a Russian direction, it faces the alienation of its Western partners.” No doubt there is room “in between”, but if “military retaliation” is a potential outcome of Georgia’s Western choice, as Professor Macfarlane suggests, then Russia is an existential threat to Georgia as well as to the security of Europe. Russia invaded Georgia twice in the last 100 years (three times if we include Russian military intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s), and its attack on Ukraine indicates it has not given up its imperial aspirations. Listening to Vladimir Putin, we can see they have intensified.

February 2022 was the third time Russia occupied a neighboring state’s territory by military force in just 14 years, undermining a major pillar of international law and establishing a pattern rather than simply an act of expediency. Georgians, according to the latest IRI poll, are aware of the exceptional danger to their own country from Russia. When asked which country represented the “greatest political threat” to Georgia this March (2023), 87% named Russia (Figure 2) (IRI 2023).

Figure 2. Which of These Countries Poses the Greatest Political Threat to Georgia?



Source: IRI: National Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Georgia, March 2023.
Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-public-opinion-survey-of-residents-of-georgi>

I propose three arguments which in the light of the current war on Ukraine, question the realist (and neo-realist) approach to Georgia-Russian relations. In general, I am skeptical of realism and its relatives, which, despite their assertions of *realpolitik* and claims to universalism, are rather simplistic equations of state survival, power, policy and outcome, but which elide the complexities of history, personalities, domestic contexts and values (however we define them). Rational choices are rarely made outside the context of values. Realism is a value that accedes to the idea of dominance by Great Powers in the international system. The realism propelling Russian expansion under Putin is driven by his understanding of history and Russia's rights as a Great Power.

I have three arguments. My first focuses on the historical lessons of the negative outcomes of Russian-Georgian treaty negotiations over the last 200 years or so. My second argues that the Russian war on Ukraine represents a critical turning point in international relations. It will result in a decisive and radical upheaval in Eurasian politics and security. This war challenges the moral underpinnings of an international order that has been in place since the UN Charter was signed in June 1945. These moral underpinnings, despite the Great Powers' habitual willingness to ignore them, are underwritten by innumerable agreements and conventions signed by UN members. The restraints on intervention in the UN Charter are far more important to small states than to the large ones that surround them. The sovereignty of small states depends on them, while Russia's goal is to overturn them. An independent and democratic Georgia will not survive in Russia's new/old international order. My third argument deals with the populist challenges to liberal democracy, both internationally and domestically, which have diminished the accountability of democratically elected leaders to their citizens. This is not a new phenomenon, but it helps explain the divergence between the Georgian government and the Georgian people on policy toward the EU. Georgia is an example of the compatibility of populist electoral mechanics, which sustain elite power at home, and the anti-liberal global order led by Russia abroad. The war against Ukraine is in Putin's mind both a question of the Russian imperial state's survival and the survival of semi-authoritarian states which support Russia's illiberal model. The war is about strengthening populist authoritarianism as much as it is about Putin's perception of Russia's state interests. It is about both values and power.

SOME HISTORY LESSONS

Revanchism, an explicitly stated motive of the Putin regime's imperial expansion against its neighbors, and the brutal war on Ukraine changes the nature of Georgia's choices in the international area, as well as its political calculations about outcomes. Professor Macfarlane's argument stands. Georgia has a choice—a poor one unaligned with its values or goals, perhaps, but one it can make according to its (perceived) interests. That was the view in 1783 when King Irakli II signed the Georgievsk Treaty and Georgia became a Russian protectorate. The Georgian Democratic Republic signed a treaty with Russia in May 1920, hoping to preserve its independence while pursuing an alliance with European states between 1918-21. President Eduard Shevardnadze made the same “balanced” choice when Georgia joined the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1993, and the NATO-sponsored Partnership for Peace in 1994. All these choices were made with the goal of balancing powerful surrounding states, in particular Russia. They were taken in the interests of self-preservation, but none of them, even if they seemed pragmatic at the time, saved Georgia from Russia's imperial ambition and control. History is an important lesson for Georgia and has a long tail. The Russian-Georgian relationship may illustrate that “might is right.” It underlines realism's arguments on the consequences of power asymmetry, but it also suggests that Georgian leaders have failed to modify Russian behavior with pragmatic alliances based on “realism.” This should be a warning to the current government. Realism reminds us that states should not trust the promises of restraint (or, for that matter, the promises of aid) by the Great Powers.

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON UKRAINE

The Russian war on Ukraine underlines Russia's persistent belief in its right to conquer and dominate its neighbors. George Kennan wrote almost 80 years ago: “The jealous and intolerant eye of the Kremlin can distinguish, in the end, only vassals and enemies, and the neighbors of Russia, if they do not wish to be one, must reconcile themselves to being the other”(Zakaria 2014). This may sound like old-fashioned Russophobia, but it is what Putin believes, and it is what Putin's Russia has done, both in the Caucasus and in Eastern Europe. Ukraine is an enemy, and Belarus is a vassal. Putin along with his policy-making elite, will not act any other way until they face a revolution, most likely brought on by a humiliating military defeat. The imperial mentality is so deeply embedded in Russia's political class that its undoing will require a prolonged popular reckoning with the Russian state's brutal past, both domestically and externally. That will only happen, if at all, after the collapse of Putinism. Until then, Georgia, like all small states, is vulnerable. Russia occupies 20% of its territory and can launch provocative scenarios to destabilize Georgia politically and economically. The choice today, as Temuri Yakobashvili, Georgia's former State Minister for Reintegration, put it to me, is starker than ever. Georgia can be an object of foreign policy (equality with other states) or a subject of foreign policy (controlled by a stronger state). The policy of a middle road when dealing with Russia has rarely worked for its smaller neighbors. Professor Macfarlane notes that Finland might be an exception; Finland's agreement of “Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance” with the Soviet Union in April 1948 preserved the country's domestic sovereignty along with deference to the USSR in foreign policy. But even here, Russian power seeped into Finnish domestic policy and constrained open criticism of the USSR. In Georgia's case, the middle road has temporarily mitigated threats but never led to stronger protections against Russia; rather, because of such policies, Georgia has always ended up a subject of Russian foreign policy.

The “narrow path” between conflicting great powers—with Russia occupying its end of the pole—is no longer a realistic choice for Georgia. These arguments do not only relate to the long experience of fickle Russian-Georgian relations but to the question of whether the “in-between” path aligns with Georgian long-term interests as a sovereign state. Russia is not a benign neighbor or one that works within the rules of the international order. Neither does the United States, arguably, but in 2014, Russia established itself as a revisionist power that in principle and practice, rejects the basic parameters of *jus cogens*.⁸ If Russia gains from this war, whether on the battlefield or during peace negotiations, Georgia will almost certainly remain in Russia’s sphere as a “subject” rather than an “object” of foreign policy. The Georgian government’s rhetorical pivot from the West, combined with the “narrow path” of caution and balance with Russia, and its willingness to do business with a pariah state, have already seriously damaged Georgia’s political capital with the EU and United States. Georgia may eventually succeed in becoming an EU candidate, as part of a Ukrainian-Moldova package, but it is no longer in Georgia’s interests to risk alienating Europe for the sake of appeasing Russia, which has historically confined Georgia’s political agency. Russia is in serious geopolitical decline and has been militarily humiliated by Ukraine, a smaller Western neighbor. For Georgia, “balancing” between Russia and the West no longer coincides with the benefits of realism.

Unfortunately, the “West” is no guarantor of Georgian security either. But a clearer and stronger pro-European government in Tbilisi—rather than an “in-between” government—would encourage greater support for Georgia, making it more an “object” of foreign policy, according to former Minister for Reintegration, Temur Yakobashvili. At this stage, Georgia must take advantage of Russia’s decline in the South Caucasus and follow a foreign policy focused on a coalition of states in the Black Sea Region. These include Georgia’s immediate neighbors (Armenia is moving toward a peace treaty with Azerbaijan under EU mediation), EU countries Rumania and Bulgaria, and potential EU members Turkey, Moldova and Ukraine, along with neighboring states in Central Asia and Iran that seek Black Sea access. This regional orientation is not a guarantee of Georgia’s security either, but it makes more sense in terms of values and interests for Georgia than recalibrating relations with Russia and remaining connected to a declining imperial power. Ultimately, the goal must remain entry into the EU and NATO alongside Ukraine and Moldova.

8. In international law, *Jus cogens* norms differ from other norms: they are mandatory, and in most cases, they are considered universal norms. Examples are international laws, treaties and conventions that prohibit crimes against humanity, slavery, and genocide.

SOFT POWER

Professor Macfarlane refers to Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. Nye defines it as "the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2017). This is always one of the most effective instruments in foreign policy for small powers like Georgia (and for larger unions like the EU). Soft power has been crucial to Georgia retaining its status as a potential European state. It has boasted—in some cases justifiably—of its democratic reforms and the end of corruption. It has branded its geography for tourism and for business, a country where East meets West and where the ancient Silk Roads embody Georgia's role in international trade. Georgia has successfully promoted its cultural brand around the globe, whether it is its culinary arts, opera singers, movie makers, or outstanding football players. Georgia, in the 2000s, became one of the most popular postings for foreign diplomats. It represented itself as a staunch ally of liberalism and modernity, embracing the idea of Europeanness as part of its identity and history. Soft power is not a mechanism that will ensure Western protection of Georgia's sovereignty, but Georgian leaders' parroting of Russia's anti-Western rhetoric, as well its policies,⁹ undermines the democratic image Georgia established in the 2000s during the first terms of both Saakashvili (2004-2008) and the Georgian Dream (2012-2016). The delegitimization of Georgia's Europeanness weakens its prime status as an EU candidate, and it could exclude Georgia from its European "home" altogether, and the chance of greater security.

A MORAL CASE?

In the exceptional conditions of a brutal imperial war in Europe, which includes accusations against Russia of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the moral case for resistance to Russia overrides the intellectual debate between liberals and realists as to whether morality should play a role in IR at all. In April 2023, the European Court of Human rights declared Russia guilty of inhumane action against Georgian citizens during the war in 2008. But this does not compare to the moral calamity in Ukraine. The ICC at The Hague accused Putin of war crimes, including the unlawful deportation of children. Murder, rape, targeting of civilians and mass persecution of Ukrainians will likely add to the list of acts we might categorize as crimes against humanity. Half of the world is not interested in this war, and if a country like India decides to support Russia, it will not have a serious impact on India's foreign relations with other states. But for a small state like Georgia, it is a different calculation. Russia's war against Ukraine will have decades of consequences for Europe's economic and political security and its economic and political interaction with Russia. The war will remain in Europeans' historical memory as something resembling the Wehrmacht's genocidal activities against innocent citizens between 1939-45. Georgia's ambivalent position toward Russia, despite its own experience of a Russian invasion in 2008, has already eroded the strong economic and political partnerships Georgia forged with its Central and Eastern European neighbors such as Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic Republics. In Ukraine's war for the "defense of democracy," sovereignty, and the inviolability of borders, the Georgian government's decision to strike a balance, falsely portrayed as a realist approach, has placed itself on the "wrong side" of history, despite its protestations of solidarity with Ukraine. This could affect the future of Georgia's economic and diplomatic partnerships with Europe.

9. An example is the "foreign agents' bill" introduced this spring directed at controlling Georgian civil society.

THE POPULIST ALLIANCE

Over the last decade, populist leaders in Europe and elsewhere have led parties that have benefited from liberalism's failures but have made little improvement in citizen participation in political life. Georgia has been part of populist displays of politics since its independence. This pattern of personality-led parties has led to politicians unburdened by the need to respond to constituents' needs or demands. Around the world, ordinary citizens are rarely expected to influence foreign policy. But in Georgia, there is a "parting of the ways": the population is overwhelmingly pro-European and supportive of EU and NATO. A recent International Republican Institute (IRI) poll on April 25 underlined the high level of popular support for Georgia's EU integration (89 percent fully or somewhat supported the idea; in the case of NATO, 80% were fully or somewhat in support) (Civil.ge 2023). The Georgian government, on the other hand, continues to argue for a "balanced" policy that contradicts the EU's security and foreign policy goals. Georgian government permission for Russian flights into Georgia is a recent example. The first Russian plane landed in Tbilisi on May 19, 2023, and was, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili insisted, part of a pragmatic foreign policy aimed to "save and protect our country" (Civil.ge 2023b). But are such policies "pragmatic", or will the rejection of a strong alliance with Europe and the lack of deeper and more committed ties to its neighborhood lead to a continuation of Georgia's subservience to its northern neighbor? And are these principles of "in between-ness"—keeping the EU at arm's length—what Georgian citizens want? Is the Georgian government doing "a pretty good job of walking this narrow path," as Professor Macfarlane suggests? My answer to all these questions would be no. As a wise adage has it, following the middle of the road is the surest way to get run over.

A FINAL REFLECTION

In January 1920, at a session of the Georgian Constituent Assembly (Georgia's legislature from 1919-21), Giorgi Gvazava, a member of the Georgian National Democratic party, declared Georgia's historical relationship with Russia was "unnatural." He was referring to the imperial relationship and, most probably, to the political and cultural differences between the Russian and Georgian states between 1918-21, when Georgia was pro-European and democratic, and Soviet Russia was anti-European and authoritarian. Whatever one thinks about using the word "unnatural" to describe foreign relations (and realists would argue there is no such thing), it challenges the assumption that Georgia should act within the parameters of geography and accustom itself to a Russian-Georgian relationship of geographical and political dominance. Gvazava's statement reminds us that Russia is only the most recent imperial power to consider Georgia a colony. Before Russia's arrival in the Caucasus at the end of the 18th century, Georgia rulers were culturally and politically closer to the Western Asian empires of the Iranian Safavids and Ottoman Turks (and before that, the Eastern Roman Byzantine Empire). Georgia has not always looked north. The south was no more hospitable for Georgia historically, but it reminds us, especially in a period of major geopolitical change, that the middle way between Russia and the West is not the only way.

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