



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR  
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

## RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS AMID RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

IRAKLI SIRBILADZE

# 190

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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## Introduction

Russia's recent aggression against Ukraine has altered the European and, arguably, global security architecture. Not only has the war brought the same old<sup>1</sup> traditional warfare back to the European continent, it has also caused enormous economic, political and human security challenges for Ukraine and the rest of the world.

The consequences of the war extend to Russia's neighbors and affect the nature of their relations with Russia. Amid the war, countries neighboring Russia had to take measures that would, on the one hand, prevent security threats that could have emanated from Russia while, on the other hand, voice their position against Russia's violations of international law in Ukraine and comply with international sanctions regime that the West has imposed on Russia.

The Baltic and Scandinavian states have been more resolute in supporting Ukraine and denouncing Russia's violation of international norms, including through imposing economic sanctions. States that are facing an aggressive Russia – such as Georgia and Moldova – have been more cautious, expressing strong political, diplomatic and humanitarian support to Ukraine but, while compliant with the international sanctions' regime, refraining from imposing economic sanctions on Russia. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaged in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and remained largely distanced from the war although both refraining from condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine at the UN General Assembly. Turkey has played a balancing act by supporting Ukraine, including, militarily, but also distancing itself from Western sanctions on Russia and attempting mediation to end the war. At the start of the war and later following Russia's announcement of a 'partial mobilization,' the emigration of Russian nationals to neighboring states has been increasing. This has aggravated domestic political developments in some countries, particularly Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

For decades, Georgia's relations with Russia have been strained, although some improvements in economic and cultural realms have been noticeable since 2012.<sup>3</sup> Russia's annexation of Crimea and its continued borderization policies in Georgia have proven the impossibility of mending Georgia's political and security ties with Russia. Georgian-Russian relations further deteriorated in 2019 as Russia introduced a flight ban in response to anti-

Russia protests. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been the major recent development, affecting the nature of Russian-Georgian relations and their future.

This opinion paper tries to delve into the impact that Russia's war against Ukraine has on the current and future relations between Russia and Georgia. To do so, the paper first reviews how Russia's war affected the global security architecture. It then examines major trends in Georgian-Russian relations before the war, followed by a discussion of the major contours of Georgia's Russia policy as the war continues. It concludes by outlining the war's implications for Georgia and its relations with Russia.

### **Russia's War Against Ukraine and its Global Implications**

With Russia's war of aggression, the traditional geopolitical rivalry that seemed to recede amid the collapse of the Soviet Union is back in full swing, bringing new security developments to Europe. Russia's war has led to NATO's enlargement to include the historically neutral Finland and Sweden and brought the West and Russia into a non-direct military confrontation as the West extends strong military support to Ukraine to defend itself against Russia. Amid Russia's repeated military failures,<sup>4</sup> it has annexed more Ukrainian territories so that it can claim the right to defend 'new territories,' including through nuclear means. Russia's rhetoric that it could use nuclear weapons threatens global security while fears rise that Russia's military failures in Ukraine could lead to more escalation, not least because Putin could revert to what is called 'gambling for resurrection;' that is, the stage in which continuing to escalate the war is the only way to remain in power.<sup>5</sup> The renewal of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan and between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as Russia is focused on Ukraine shows the fragile nature of security in Eurasia.

The war has also brought to the surface the non-traditional threats in the realms of the economy, energy, migration and hybrid warfare. Russia's war against Ukraine and its instrumentalization of energy resources has led to rises in energy prices and exacerbated the inflationary processes across the US and Europe, leading Western states to reassure domestic markets and phase out dependence on Russian oil and gas.<sup>6</sup> The war caused an international food crisis, affecting countries worldwide.<sup>7</sup> Russian citizens fleeing the war have led to the suspension of the EU's Visa Facilitation Agreement with Russia.<sup>8</sup> The attacks on the gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea

demonstrated the use of hybrid means of warfare to affect the critical infrastructure in the West.

Russia's war against Ukraine also impacted Russia's relations with its neighbors, particularly those that are susceptible to Russia's aggression and are economically dependent on Russia. These states in particular had to, on the one hand, ensure that international law remains upheld and the norm of conquest is not re-legitimized in interstate relations while, on the other hand, engaging with Russia in a manner that complies with the international sanctions regime and prevents Russia's future aggression and its instrumentalization of economic and energy resources to punish those states. The influx of Russian citizens into Armenia, Turkey, Georgia and Kazakhstan caused domestic political and economic anxieties in some of these countries, affecting their future relations with Russia.

Russia's war against Ukraine violated major international norms of non-aggression, the non-use of force against other states and the unacceptability of forcible change of international borders. These not only undermine the rules-based international order but pose challenges to those states, including Georgia, that are facing the threats of separatism, often supported by Russia. Many of the protracted conflicts in Eurasia could be unfreezing, bringing potential security implications for the wider Black Sea states and Europe.

### **Georgia's Russia Policy Before the War**

Since Georgia regained its independence from the Soviet Union, its relations with Russia have been based on mistrust but cognizant of Russia's regional power and its capabilities as well as its role in Georgia's separatist conflicts. Mistrust towards Russia defined the approach of all post-independence governments of Georgia, yet the degree of engagement differed and was reflective of the existing international and domestic political realities. The key cause of mistrust was Russia's attempts to attenuate Georgia's sovereignty – a persistent feature of the Russian Federation's policy toward Georgia.

#### *Georgia's Russia Policy 1992-2003*

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to separatist conflicts in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Russia. The separatist conflicts in Georgia coincided with internal power struggles, leaving Georgia internally

weak and vulnerable and ultimately forced to give in to Russia's coercive diplomacy to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>9</sup>

Unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia – where Russia has been assigned a role of a mediator – and pending issues of the fate of Russia's military bases in Georgia defined Georgian-Russian relations in the first half of the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In the second half of the decade, Georgia's domestic situation relatively stabilized and it started to look to the West more boldly as it joined the Council of Europe and started cooperation with the EU and global institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 1999, it withdrew from the 1992 Treaty on Collective Security/Tashkent Treaty (Modern-day Collective Security Treaty Organization). At the end of the decade, Georgia enmeshed itself in regional energy projects while Russia agreed to withdraw its military bases from Georgia.<sup>11</sup> In 2002, Shevardnadze openly voiced Georgia's desire to become a member of NATO.

As the above description of developments indicates, the early engagement of Shevardnadze's government stemmed from Georgia's internal weaknesses which made it dependent on Russia. Although Georgia's CIS membership was seen as the result of Russia's coercive diplomacy, the government also saw it as a means of securing Russia's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. These hopes, however, have been dashed. As the late Alexander Rondeli remarked, Georgia's withdrawal from the Tashkent Treaty was "mainly because it had failed as a tool for restoring Georgia's territorial integrity."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in 2000, Russia introduced a visa regime with Georgia, although it did not apply to the inhabitants of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia – a move that Georgia saw as attenuation of its sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Tensions between the countries ran high when Russia blamed Georgia for sheltering Chechen fighters on its territory, leading to the violation of Georgia's airspace several times.<sup>14</sup> With US support, Georgia subsequently regained government control in Pankisi.<sup>15</sup>

Amid the growing perception that Russia was intolerant of Georgia's independent foreign policy making, Shevardnadze's government embarked on a pro-Western orientation, although still maintained a cautious approach and refrained from the frequent pronouncement of Western aspirations to not irritate Russia.<sup>16</sup> That changed with Shevardnadze's speech at the NATO

Summit where he voiced Georgia's aspirations to join the Alliance. The speech signified Georgia's clear European and Euro-Atlantic orientation which was picked up and further reinforced by the government led by Mikheil Saakashvili. As Stephen Jones remarks, Shevardnadze's policy of playing "a sophisticated game" with powerful neighbors was reflective of Georgia's dilemma at that time that "the West was desirable but not attainable and Russia was undesirable but not alienable."<sup>17</sup>

### *Georgia's Russia Policy 2004-2012*

With the 2003 Rose Revolution, Shevardnadze was peacefully ousted, bringing into power the government led by Mikheil Saakashvili. As Georgia has already made clear pro-Western overtones, Russia saw the Rose Revolution – which together with Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 were dubbed the 'color revolutions' – as a sign of Western penetration into the region, threatening Russia-led authoritarianism in the former Soviet space. The very fact of the Rose Revolution already made it impossible to chart Georgian-Russian relations on a positive track.

The new government adopted the National Security Concept in 2005 and declared EU and NATO membership as top foreign policy priorities. In 2004, Georgia became part of the EU's Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and advanced cooperation with NATO by launching the Intensified Dialogue in 2006. These foreign policy moves had implications for the evolution of Georgian-Russian relations as Russia saw them detrimental to its efforts to re-assert power in the so-called near abroad. Deterioration in relations became more vivid as Russia imposed economic and energy sanctions on Georgia and deported ethnic Georgians from Russia<sup>18</sup> in response to Georgia's arresting of a Russian military officer on charges of espionage.<sup>19</sup> Georgia doubled down on its Western foreign policy and the relations between the two countries severed to the extent that "in a review of Russia's foreign policy published in March 2007, Georgia was awarded the most negative value amongst all of Russia's international partners."<sup>20</sup> More broadly, Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Conference provided a glimpse of the coming Russian revisionism.

Russian revisionism first manifested itself in the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. Internationally, in February 2008, Western states recognized the independence of Kosovo which Russia staunchly opposed. In April, at the NATO Bucharest Summit, Georgia and Ukraine were denied the



Membership Action Plan but promised that one day they will become members of NATO. Locally, tensions between Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetian de facto authorities and Georgia were building up, first manifested in a major post-1992 escalation in 2004.<sup>21</sup> Hostilities resumed in early August 2008, leading to the war between Russia and its supported separatists and Georgia. The tensions were preceded by Russia's so-called passportization policy which served as a *casus belli* for Russia's subsequent aggression against Georgia alleging to protect Russian citizens and nationals living in the territory. The war lasted for five days, followed by Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Russia's aggression against Georgia is primarily understood as a punishment for Georgia's NATO aspirations as well as a response to the Western decisions to recognize Kosovo's independence and send positive signal to Ukraine and Georgia regarding their potential NATO membership. Other accounts saw Russia's war against Georgia as a localized response to the deteriorating conflict dynamics unfolding between Georgia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia's de facto authorities rather than Russia's wider plan to impose imperial and hierarchical order on the countries forming the so-called near abroad.

With the 2008 war, Georgian-Russian relations entered into a deadlock as security, political and economic relations were effectively frozen. In response to Russia's aggression, Georgia cut diplomatic relations with Russia and left the CIS. The Georgian-Russian engagement continued mostly through conflict resolution formats such as the Geneva International Discussions (GID) and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM). Georgia adopted the Law on Occupied Territories and pursued a strong non-recognition policy to deny legitimacy to Russia's recognition of its territories.

The shift in Georgia's Russia Policy came in 2010 as Georgia restored the operation of the Lars border section with Russia<sup>22</sup> and introduced a visa-free regime for Russian citizens in 2011.<sup>23</sup> In 2011, as part of the wider 'reset' with Russia pursued by the US, Georgia reversed its long-held opposition to Russia's membership in the WTO in exchange for an international monitoring mechanism that would monitor the movement of goods through three trade corridors envisaged by the agreement, allowing Georgia to claim its sovereignty over the occupied territories. While Russia was eventually admitted into the WTO, the agreement that

led to Georgia's change of position remains on the books and lacks practical implementation.<sup>24</sup> The small-step opening to Russia was sustained and further expanded in 2012 by the new government of Georgia.

### *Georgia's Russia Policy Since 2012*

In 2012, Georgia witnessed the first peaceful transfer of power through the ballot box, bringing new developments in both domestic and foreign policy. In the foreign policy realm, the new government has maintained a pro-Western foreign policy orientation but introduced a partial reset in its relations with Russia whereas the economic and cultural relations between the countries would improve while Georgia would strictly adhere to red lines in political and security relations with Russia.

The new Georgian government made the first move toward Russia by appointing the Georgian Prime Minister's Special Representative for Relations with Russia.<sup>25</sup> Russia reciprocated, leading to the establishment of the so-called Karasin-Abashidze talks which limited its mandate to economic, cultural and humanitarian issues. The talks have been ongoing for years with the last meeting being held in November 2021.<sup>26</sup> Amid this, Georgia continued its participation in the conflict resolution mechanisms such as Geneva International Discussions (GID) and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).

The challenges in political and security relations, however, soon reappeared. The so-called borderization practices brought – and continues to bring – devastating humanitarian and security consequences, including the torture and killing of two Georgian citizens – Giga Otkhozoria and Archil Tatunashvili as well as repeated kidnappings of Georgian citizens. In response, the Georgian Parliament adopted the bipartisan resolution condemning the act and mandating the government to adopt the so called Otkhozoria-Tatunashvili List to hold those responsible for human rights violations in the occupied region to account.<sup>27</sup> The deteriorating security developments across occupation line led to a minor escalation in 2019.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the borderization, other developments such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Georgia's new ties with EU and NATO and the domestic political protests in 2019 over the visit of a Russian MP have made it impossible to see any progress in political relations between the two countries.<sup>29</sup> The protests in response to the visit of the Russian MP, in particular, threatened progress in economic and cultural relations as

Russia suspended direct flights to Georgia in response. Although the flight ban continues to this day, it has not affected the continuation of the so-called Karasin-Abashidze talks.<sup>30</sup>

The economic and cultural rapprochement with Russia has led to an increase in Russia's role in the Georgian economy as well as the increase of Russia's soft power in Georgia. Economically, Georgia considerably reversed its energy dependence on Russia, although "its economy still relies heavily on Russia, mainly through foreign trade, remittances and tourism."<sup>31</sup> In terms of soft power, some pro-Russian political forces entered the Georgian Parliament while social actors established a more confident presence in the public domain. This was accompanied by an increase in Russian-led anti-Western disinformation narratives.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, despite the challenging decade internationally and the political and security developments in Georgian-Russian relations, Georgia managed to sustain an initial partial reset in its relations with Russia. However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has brought new political, security and economic challenges possibly affecting the nature of Georgian-Russian relations across domains.

### **Georgia's Russia Policy amid Russia's War Against Ukraine**

Russia's war against Ukraine has presented a dilemma to the government of Georgia as far as its response to the war was concerned. On the one hand, Georgia had to support Ukraine and condemn Russia's aggression and its violation of international law while on the other hand, it had to minimize the security – including economic security – threats coming from Russia. At the same time, it had to seize the strategic opportunities to which the war has led. Such strategic opportunities were the European Union's reversal of its 'enlargement fatigue' and readiness to grant the European Perspective to the so-called Association Trio – Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova and the change of hearts in the West in terms of its military support for Ukraine and possibly other countries facing Russia's aggression.

The Georgian government's response to Russia's war against Ukraine built on and reflected the approach it designed in 2012 to deal with Russia; that is, keeping the economic and people-to-people contacts going while maintaining the status quo in political and security relations. To that end, Georgia has not joined the Western countries to impose bilateral

economic sanctions on Russia. It has, however, remained in compliance with the international sanctions' regime. Notably, Georgia continues aligning with the EU restrictive measures related to annexation of Crimea from 2014 and, from 2022, also related to Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>33</sup> It has not introduced visa restrictions on Russian nationals despite the increasing number of them entering Georgia amid the war.

Georgia provided strong humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and extended political and diplomatic support through international platforms including the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. In terms of security support for Ukraine, Georgia remains vigilant and non-engaged, although it joined the so-called Ukraine Defense Contact Group meetings at the Ramshtein Air Base led by the United States to support Ukraine's war efforts against Russia after some initial hesitation.<sup>34</sup> At times, the domestic political factors have led to heated exchanges among Georgian and Ukrainian politicians.<sup>35</sup> The relations between the two countries worsened as, amid Georgia's decision not to extend its diplomatic support for Ukraine to the realms of the economy and security, Ukraine recalled its ambassador from the country<sup>36</sup> and, recently, introduced sanctions against the family members of Georgia's former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili.<sup>37</sup> The deterioration of relations is further exacerbated by the continued political exchanges between representatives of Ukrainian government and Georgia's ruling party regarding Georgia's occupied territories with the latter holding the opinion that some in the Ukrainian government want "to somehow turn Georgia into a second front."<sup>38</sup> Aprasidze and Gvalia argue that Georgia's balancing behavior towards Russia is conditioned by both the regime survival concerns and the national interest.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of seizing strategic opportunities, together with Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia applied for EU membership while refraining from markedly changing its security and defense policies, particularly vis-à-vis the question of liberating its occupied territories. In terms of the former, Georgia has been granted the European Perspective and has become a potential EU candidate, thus marking a new stage in its relations with the EU. It has participated in a newly launched initiative led by the EU to bring 44 European states together through the European Political Community framework.<sup>40</sup> In terms of the latter, the Georgian government has stressed its adherence to the peaceful resolution of its conflicts with Russia<sup>41</sup> and has not sought to markedly upgrade the degree of security and defense cooperation it has with NATO and the US in light of the changing Western

approaches vis-à-vis Russia. Georgia has so far not followed Ukraine in presenting an application for accelerated membership to NATO. The country has, however, signed the agreement with Turkey to supply Georgia with NATO-standard armored vehicles,<sup>42</sup> received additional defense security assistance from the United States<sup>43</sup> and held traditional joint military exercises with NATO<sup>44</sup> as well as with Turkey and Azerbaijan.<sup>45</sup>

As Russia's war against Ukraine continues, Georgia has to ponder the implications that the war could have on its foreign policy, particularly on its relations with Russia.

### **Russia's War Against Ukraine: Implications for Georgian-Russian Relations**

Russia's war against Ukraine has the following implications for Georgia's foreign policy and its relations with Russia. First, despite its failures in Ukraine, Russia still poses conventional and non-conventional threats to Georgia. Second, Russia's instrumentalization of separatist conflicts, including through direct annexation, is a security and normative challenge for Georgia whose territories are occupied by Russia. Third, amid Western economic sanctions on Russia, Georgia's economic and subsequent political relations with Russia are poised to evolve, although the extent and direction of this evolution remain depended on the outcome of the war and Georgia's domestic political developments. Amid these, Georgia should remain strongly aligned with the West to minimize the security and economic challenges posed by Russia's war against Ukraine while maintaining its strong focus on defense, de-occupation and the peaceful restoration of its territorial integrity.

#### *Conventional and Non-conventional Threats Still Loom Large*

Over the decades, Georgia's security has been threatened by Russia both conventionally and non-conventionally. Militarily and otherwise, Russia supported secessionist groups within Georgia to affect Georgia's domestic and foreign policy decisions. Before 2008, Russia deployed a variety of measures to prevent Georgia's Western aspirations, including politically instrumentalizing economic and energy resources at its disposal. In 2008, Russia's conducted a war of aggression and carried out a cyber-attack against Georgia. Post-2008, Russia has been using the so-called borderization practices to exert pressure on Georgia's foreign policy directions, carrying out concerted disinformation campaigns to thwart

Georgia's Western aspirations, and it has been responsible for numerous cyberattacks against the country. In 2019, in response to protests in Georgia, Russia suspended direct flights to Georgia. In addition, it has used discursive justifications of protecting Russian nationals living abroad to wage war against the country.<sup>46</sup>

Amid Russia's war against Ukraine, both conventional and non-conventional challenges remain. Although Russia's military capabilities are degraded due to its focus on Ukraine, Russia's imperial resurgence also targets Georgia and Moldova and their Western aspirations. Given the first-order priority that Russia assigns to its ambitions of subjugating neighboring states to its will and asserting great power there to diminish further Western (US, NATO, EU) presence in the region, the threats of various kinds Russia can pose to Georgia cannot be underestimated.

Conventionally, the likelihood of Russia provoking military hostilities across the occupation line with Georgian's occupied territories remains, further destabilizing the security environment in the region to, among others, test the resolve of the EU's civilian monitoring mission operating there. Russia's direct military aggression also remains a possibility to prevent further military and political cooperation between NATO and Georgia. Given its pattern of past behavior, Russia is likely to cloak its potential aggressive actions as necessary for the protection of its nationals living in Georgia's occupied territories or Georgia proper or for addressing biological security concerns it voices, seizing on the presence of Lugar Laboratory in Georgia. That said, as Russia's conventional capabilities are being affected by its increasing focus on the war against Ukraine, it can resort to non-conventional measures to achieve its objectives vis-à-vis Georgia.

In terms of non-conventional threats, Georgia can become a victim of Russian-organized cyber-attacks, attacks on its critical infrastructure or the closure of Georgia's access to the Russian market leading to economic insecurities in the country. As attacks on the critical infrastructure across Europe – as well as Russia's targeting of energy infrastructure across Ukrainian cities – demonstrate, failures on the conventional front could lead to Russia's use of non-conventional means to accomplish its objectives.

Russia's objectives vis-à-vis Georgia are to restrain Georgia's independent foreign policy-making and to thwart its ambitions of forging closer ties with the US, NATO and the EU. Georgia's foreign policy decision-makers should make sure that Russia's use of conventional and/or non-

conventional means of influence against Georgia would lead to further Western economic sanctions on Russia. Forging that understanding with the Western partners should be Georgia's key priority as it could serve as a deterrent against Russia's intentions, particularly as Russia's ability to exercise influence in the region is being diminished by its war against Ukraine.

### *Russia's Instrumentalization of Separatist Conflicts: Normative Challenges for Georgia*

Since the restoration of its independence from the Soviet Union, Russia has encouraged and instrumentalized separatist conflicts to maintain its power over its former subjects and prevent their 'dangerous departure' towards the West. As Descalzi points out, in the CIS region "Moscow acts against the central government in all of the conflicts involving a separatist faction."<sup>47</sup> In relation to Georgia, Russia has continued to attenuate Georgia's sovereignty by providing support to separatist forces in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia while at the same time expressing formal support for Georgia's territorial integrity. That changed with the 2008 war as Russia now formally violated Georgia's sovereignty and recognized the independence of Georgian regions to, according to Samkharadze, respond to the West's recognition of Kosovo, prevent Georgia's NATO membership and legitimize the presence of Russian armed forces on the territories of Georgia's occupied regions.<sup>48</sup>

Following the recognition, Russia has not been successful in gathering meaningful international support for its recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. With its military presence in those regions of Georgia 'legally' secured, Russia's post-recognition behavior – expressed primarily through the practices of borderization – was aimed at affecting Georgia's foreign policy objectives.<sup>49</sup> Signing 'interstate treaties' with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia were further aimed at undermining Georgia's territorial integrity. The possibility of Russia's potential annexation of Georgia's regions, particularly Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, serves as a floating influence point against Georgia. These notwithstanding, Georgia has continued to pursue close ties with both the EU and NATO.

The war in Ukraine has posed normative challenges against Georgia as Russia annexed four regions of Ukraine as its war ambitions were curtailed. The likelihood that Russia annexes or upgrades its relations with

Georgia's territories remains, particularly if Russia sees Georgia's further integration with Western security, political and economic institutions becoming irreversible. The likelihood that Belarus might recognize the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia also increased amid Lukashenko's visit to Abkhazia. To ensure that Russia's attempts at annexation lack international legitimacy, Georgia should maintain close partnerships with Western states and make sure that international sanctions are further imposed on Russia in case it moves with the annexation. The same should apply to Belarus in case it recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

### *Future of Georgian-Russian Relations*

Russia's war against Ukraine has not significantly changed the nature of Georgia's engagement with Russia since 2012. Georgia still maintains economic and people-to-people contacts with Russia, although, notably, the meeting between Georgia's Prime Minister's Special Representative for Relations with Russia and his Russian counterpart has not been held since November 2021. Amid the war, Russia's role in Georgia's economy further strengthened as Russians immigrated to Georgia and the flow of the money increased.<sup>50</sup> Fearing Russian retaliation, Georgia has not imposed bilateral economic sanctions, although it remains compliant with the international sanctions' regime.

Politically, relations have been minimized since 2012 due to Russia's and Georgia's disagreements on Georgia's foreign policy aspirations and Russia's role in Georgia's separatist conflicts. Russia's annexation of Crimea led to further political discontent as Georgia consistently supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, including by participating in the Crimea Platform.<sup>51</sup> Russia's signature of the so-called treaties with Georgia's occupied territories and continued borderization practices added to the existing political and security differences. Amid the current war, Georgia has expressed strong political and diplomatic support to Ukraine. Georgia's submission of the EU membership application and the admission of the European Perspective further distanced the country from Russia's sphere of influence.

The future of Georgian-Russian relations depends on the outcome of the war and the domestic political developments unfolding in the country. The most negative outcome of the war for Georgia would be the scenario in which the war's ending limits Ukraine and Georgia's independent foreign



policy decision-making capabilities and their relations with the West. The most desired outcome for Georgia would be Ukraine's victory and its ability to restore de jure control over the occupied and annexed territories which would strengthen the territorial integrity norm. The most realistic possibility, however, lies in between; that is, either the protracted war that lasts for years or a temporary truce and the resumption of hostilities. No matter the outcome of the war, however, Russian-Western relations are going to remain politically contested having implications for Georgian-Russian relations.

The nature of Georgian-Russian relations also depends on the domestic political developments within Georgia. Other things being equal, the current government of Georgia is unlikely to change its approach to Russia which rests on the clear separation of the economic realm from the political one. Georgia's parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2024, would provide a possibility to change Georgia's Russia policy depending on the distribution of power among political players. The observation of Georgia's Russia policy over the last decades points to consistency whereas the change of power leads to a change of strategy on how to deal with Russia although the overarching differences related to Georgia's sovereignty and its Western aspirations remain the basis of Georgia's mistrust towards Russia across the mainstream political parties.

## **Conclusion**

Russia's war against Ukraine has had implications for the traditional and human security in Europe and beyond. War has returned to Europe, bringing human tragedy, economic difficulties and new migration waves. The war has affected the nature of Western engagement with Russia as the West commits to support Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression militarily, politically and economically.

The war has also brought consequences for countries neighboring Russia, affecting the nature of their relations across domains. Countries such as Georgia – as well as Moldova – that lack security guarantees and are vulnerable to Russia's aggression have been particularly affected by the war. In addition to economic and migration consequences of the war, the two countries have to sit on the fence to condemn Russia's aggression and support Ukraine but also take measures that would mitigate Russian threats. Georgia had to also take advantage of strategic opportunities

which it did by applying for the EU membership, securing the European Perspective and embarking on a new stage in its European aspirations.

Since the restoration of its independence, Georgia's relations with Russia have stood on a shaky foundation, characterized by strong mistrust due to Russia's persistent attenuation of Georgia's sovereignty through extending its military and other support to separatist forces and thwarting Georgia's Western aspirations. Georgia's Russia policy across governments remained cognizant of that mistrust; however, each government has pursued its own approach to dealing with Russia, often reflective of international and domestic political contexts of the time.

Georgia's current Russia policy rests on a clear decoupling of economic and politico-security relations. That approach survived not only the challenging decade but also Russia's war against Ukraine. Amid the war, Georgia refrains from taking first escalatory move against Russia particularly in the realm of the economy. It has also refrained from markedly upgrading its military and security cooperation with the West, although continuing its pre-war partnerships. Politically, it remains strongly aligned with Ukraine and the West. This approach is unlikely to change, although Georgia's Russia policy could evolve depending on the outcome of the war and the results of the 2024 parliamentary election in Georgia.

Russia's imperial ambitions against its neighbors make Georgia vulnerable to Russia's conventional and non-conventional threats even if Russia fails to achieve its objectives in its war against Ukraine. The threats vary from direct military aggression to attacks on critical infrastructure and to the closure of Russian market for Georgian products. Annexation and/or upgrade of relations with Georgia's occupied territories poses further normative challenge as does Belarus's potential recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. To counter these threats, Georgia needs to strengthen its security, political and economic ties with the West and prepare ground for the West to impose new package of sanctions on Russia and Belarus in case the threats against Georgia materialize. That would, however, necessitate long-term planning that aims at defending country's sovereignty and territorial integrity and strengthening its economic and societal resilience in the face of the multiple threats.

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