

The War in Ukraine and the Implications for Georgia

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If there is truth to the saying that a crisis offers both danger and opportunity, Georgia appears to be in the worst possible position. Its proximity to the conflict in Ukraine, as well as the presence of Russian forces in Georgian territories Moscow has recognized as independent, represent clear and present dangers. However, a fractured internal polity means that Tbilisi has not only struggled to formulate policy and to position itself with the international coalition opposing Russian aggression, but also to further advance its goals of integration into the European Union and NATO, the keys to ensuring its long-term security. This balance is slightly more positive on the economic front: Georgia has the chance to expand its role as a South Caucasus and trans-Caspian trade and transportation hub.



While the Georgian public has been supportive of Ukraine, the government has struggled to strike a balance between taking a principled position and managing the risks of provoking a Russian military response. The Georgian Dream government's current approach to the Ukraine war has been to continue its non-frustration policy towards Russia.ⁱ The government condemned Russia's war in Ukraine and supported resolutions denouncing Russia at the United Nations (UN).ⁱⁱ However, they fell short of imposing economic sanctions. Speaking to reporters in February, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili insisted there was "no threat" against Georgia and suggested that calls from the opposition to join sanctions risked "repeating the tragedy that could not be avoided in 2008."ⁱⁱⁱ



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The Ukrainian government stated this position was “immoral” and decided to recall their ambassador to Georgia.^{iv} Their disappointment is partly due to Ukraine’s vocal support for Georgia in 2008, although no sanctions were imposed against Russia at the time. However, Ukraine’s then-President Viktor Yushchenko travelled to Tbilisi during the war to show support for Georgia’s independence.^v Ukraine does

not feel it has had the same support and as a result, the relationship between the two countries has become increasingly tense.^{vi}

This cautious response to the war has been unpopular with the Georgian people, many of whom believe that their country’s own fate is tied to that of Ukraine.^{vii} March polling data by independent NGO Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC-Georgia) found that 61% of Georgian society believe the government should do more to support Ukraine.^{viii} Georgia has provided humanitarian assistance,^{ix} but CRRC-Georgia found that 97% of Georgians believe they should provide more aid and 96% support accepting more Ukrainian refugees.^x However, the appetite for war is low,^{xi} with only 53% of the population supporting providing Ukraine with military equipment.^{xii}

The failure of Georgian Dream to win public support for its response to the war has also deepened existing domestic political divisions. It has exacerbated the polarization between the ruling party and the main opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM), which has called Georgian Dream the “Russian Dream Party” and accused it of turning Georgia towards a Russian orientation. Nika Melia, the party’s chairman, has called for early elections (the next are due in 2024) to “alleviate the existing political crisis”.^{xiii} However, it is unclear if UNM would be successful: U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) polling data from August shows the opposition with a double-digit deficit in approval, with even its supporters largely unconvinced that the party acts in Georgia’s interests.^{xiv}

Georgian Dream has also found itself entangled in international sanctions, with renewed attention on the continued political influence of its founder, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Despite officially stepping down as head of Georgian Dream in 2021, he is viewed as Georgia’s *de facto* ruler and his network remain in key positions across all major government institutions. Experts blame Ivanishvili for Georgia’s current policy towards Russia. Batu Kutelia, the former Georgian ambassador to the United States, contended that Ivanishvili’s influence has resulted in “pro-Russian, Putin-style, anti-democratic actions.”^{xv} He also pointed towards cronyism within Georgian Dream’s current slate of ministers, many of whom previously served Ivanishvili in a

personal capacity. For example, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili is a close confidant and was named as one of his formal representatives in Ivanishvili's case against Credit Suisse.^{xvi}

Ivanishvili was added to Ukraine's War and Sanctions database on 5 September as an individual "awaiting sanctions."^{xvii} Ukraine alleged that his business interests in Russia^{xviii} and suspected associates in the Kremlin make him "responsible for material or financial support for actions that undermine the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine."^{xix} In response, the Georgian government dismissed the accusations as "ridiculous" and pointed to Ukraine's own problems with corruption.^{xx}

However, it is not only Ukraine that has its sights set on Ivanishvili - in June of this year the European Union (EU) adopted a resolution to consider approving sanctions against him. The resolution noted Ivanishvili's personal and business links to the Kremlin and held him directly responsible for Georgia's backsliding in the areas of media freedom and its ambiguous relations with Russia.^{xxi} Prime Minister Garibashvili wrote an open letter to Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, calling the allegations against Ivanishvili "groundless." Garibashvili accused the EU of deepening polarization and undermining the Georgian system of governance.^{xxii} The EU has yet to come to a decision on sanctions against Ivanishvili.

All of these concerns were cited in the EU's decision not to grant Georgia member candidate status on 17 June. Like Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia applied for early EU membership. However, a number of factors led the EU to reject the application,^{xxiii} including undermined democratic institution building, unresolved socioeconomic problems, and persistent doubts about Tbilisi's commitment to the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and media freedom. The loss of this opportunity for accession to the EU intensified domestic criticism of the government, sparking some of the largest protests in recent history.^{xxiv}

The war in Ukraine is an existential threat to Georgia's political, economic, and military security, not least because what is happening in Ukraine bears similarities to what previously happened in Georgia. Like pre-February 2022 Ukraine, Georgia was already a divided country with Russian-supported breakaway regions. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had already declared independence in 1992^{xxv} and 1993^{xxvi} respectively, although both are internationally recognized as part of Georgia. On 7 August 2008, and despite being warned off this course of action by the United States,^{xxvii} Georgia launched a poorly organized military action into South Ossetia, which was reversed within a matter of days by an overwhelming Russian counterattack.^{xxviii} The aftermath of the conflict saw Russia stationing troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,^{xxix} which then formally recognized their independence on 26 August.

Restoring Abkhazia and South Ossetia to sovereign Georgian control has been a main foreign policy goal of both Georgian Dream (2012-present) and the prior UNM government (2003-2012). The urgency of the issue rests in the risk that Russia may seek to annex the breakaway Georgian territories as it has purported to do with parts of Ukraine. While South Ossetia stepped back from its 13 May announcement that it would hold a referendum on unification with Russia,^{xxx} Putin signed an agreement between South Ossetia and Russia on Dual Citizenship that same month.^{xxx1}

The war in Ukraine has intensified the issue of South Ossetia and Abkhazia within Georgia. There have been appeals for Georgia to take advantage of the current situation and open a “second front” to retake the territories by force.^{xxx2} Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary for the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, called on Georgia to regain control of the territories while Russia is “busy in Ukraine.”^{xxx3} As a result, the Georgian government has accused Ukraine and the United States of trying to “drag it into war.”^{xxx4}

In a comment that appears to have been made in an effort to reduce external pressure or to legitimize Georgian Dream’s current Russia policy, party Chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze suggested that the country hold a referendum on whether Georgia should open a “second front” to see if the population “want a war against Russia.”^{xxx5} The comments have since been disregarded as irony by Kobakhidze, as the Georgian people are “unambiguously” against war - despite the deep resentment in Georgia for the Russian military occupation of these territories. Most importantly, and even given the fact that its forces have benefited from many of the same international training opportunities that have enabled the outnumbered Ukrainian military to “punch above their weight,” there are no guarantees that Georgia’s 37,000-person armed forces would be able to overpower the joint Russian, Abkhaz, and Ossetian forces.^{xxx6} That said, the idea of opening a “second front” is one with the potential to alarm Moscow, which has military bases less than 50 miles from Tbilisi.

Another potential risk to Georgia militarily is its position on the Black Sea. Russia’s Black Sea Fleet is stationed in Sevastopol, Crimea. Due to Ukraine’s counter offensive, both the headquarters and main naval aviation airfield have been attacked.^{xxx7} As a result, it is thought that Russia moved the command of its Black Sea Fleet to Novorossiysk, in Krasnodar Krai, Russia and just north of the Russia-Georgia border.^{xxx8} If the Ukrainian counter-offensive continues to be successful and Russia loses its naval advantage, Georgia’s position on the Black Sea could make it a target, as it is widely believed that guaranteeing the Black Sea Fleet’s base in Crimea was one of the motivations behind the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Whatever the prospects of military action, Russia has amplified its use of disinformation in the hopes of turning Georgian citizens away from the EU, the

United States, and NATO.^{xxxix} One narrative was that the West had abandoned Ukraine and it was fighting alone, suggesting that if Georgia followed Ukraine's path, the same would happen.^{xl} However, Russian disinformation does not appear to be working, with 91% of Georgians believing Russian influence on Georgia to be a negative, in comparison to 87% seeing EU influence as a positive.^{xli}



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Georgia does continue to work actively with the EU^{xlii}, UN^{xliii}, and NATO, all of which have voiced their support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the integration of Georgia into the West.^{xliiv} Georgian Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili reiterated as recently as 20 September that joining NATO was one of the government's main foreign policy priorities and that there could be "no alternative to peace" in the South Caucasus.^{xliv} 68% of Georgians support accession to NATO,^{xlvi} and 53% believe NATO will now provide Georgia greater security, a number that has increased since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.^{xlvii}

While Georgia is unlikely to join as a member in the near term, the country continues to be one of NATO's closest partners.^{xlviii} The main vehicle of cooperation between Georgia and NATO is the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, which aims to enhance the country's defense capabilities and bring it closer to the alliance.^{xlix} This relationship was strengthened at the 2022 NATO Madrid Summit, where Alliance members endorsed a set of tailored support measures for Georgia in response to the external threats and interference in the current security environment resulting from Russia's war in Ukraine.^l

Despite the clear security risks stemming from the war, the current shifting of economic and political partnerships also provides Georgia with economic opportunities. Even with a challenging external environment, the International Monetary Fund increased its forecast growth for Georgia from 3.2% to 9% for this year.^{li}

The ban on cargo transit through Russian territory offers Georgia the prospect of emerging as a major transport hub in the South Caucasus.^{lii} Georgia is well positioned to connect the EU to Central Asia and China and has already seen both an increase in cargo turnover by 1 million tons and an increase in land and sea freight.^{liii} The reorientation of cargo to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), a multinational consortium supported in part by the PRC's Belt-and-Road Initiative,^{liiv} has resulted in the volume of shipments tripling in the first seven

months of 2022.^{lv} This promises opportunities for the countries along the TITR, and they seem keen to capitalize on them. In March 2022, the governments of Georgia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey signed a declaration on improving the transportation potential in the region.^{lvi} Additionally, the EU is now looking to Azerbaijan for its natural gas resources, something that would be difficult without Georgia acting as a transit country.^{lvii} That said, to make the transition from an expedient alternative to a permanent solution, Georgia will need to upgrade its infrastructure. As Democracy Resources Development Centre Executive Director Zaal Anjaparidze notes, Georgia's current transport infrastructure "needs significant improvements to be able to cope with increased cargo turnover," which in turn requires attracting additional international investment.^{lviii}



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In addition, the recovery in tourism, inbound money transfer, and immigration-related flows are major components of Georgia's economic recovery.^{lix} The third component is largely attributed to the inflow of anti-war Russians. Though the number is contested, it is believed that up to 250,000 Russians have entered the country since 24 February, and numbers have skyrocketed since the 21 September announcement of a partial military mobilization.^{lx} For those looking for a way to leave, Georgia is one of the few places open visa-free to Russian nationals. By 27 September, the queue at Russia's border with Georgia had reached 16 kilometres, resulting in people abandoning cars and a wait time of over 24-hours to cross on foot.^{lxi} The influx is causing concern amongst Georgians. However, Vakhtang Gomelauri, the Georgian Minister of Internal Affairs appeared to try and reduce panic. Speaking in a television interview on Rustavi, he stated that in the past week an average of 10,000 Russians

a day had entered Georgia through the Lars checkpoint, but that 60% of arrivals continue their journey elsewhere and leave the country.^{lxii}

This increase in Russian nationals has in turn led to 6,400 Russian companies being registered in Georgia in the March-June period alone – 7 times higher than the annual number of 2021.^{lxiii} 93% of companies registered since March are small sole proprietorships, indicating that the majority of Russian citizens left Russia for Georgia to live and do business.^{lxiv} However, the number of businesses and high income through remittances (USD 678 million between April and June 2022 / USD 1.2 billion between January and June 2022)^{lxv} does increase the risk that Georgia may be used to navigate sanctions against Russia.^{lxvi} Although the influx has helped buoy the economy, it does presents other challenges: tension due to anti-Russian sentiment, fear of Kremlin agents, and rising prices have resulted in requests for the reintroduction of a visa program for Russians.

Key Factors Shaping Future Developments:

- **Georgia's security remains a complex equation balancing sober assessments of current capabilities, clear-eyed understanding of the level and quality of international support and assistance, and meticulous attention to Russian intentions.** The course of the war in Ukraine is central to Georgia's calculus, but it remains to be seen whether Ukrainian success enhances or imperils Georgia's position;
- **External partners have made clear that achieving Georgia's international aspirations requires progress domestically on governance and institution building.** Greater national unity is equally vital to developing a broadly popular approach to the war and support for Ukraine; and
- **Circumstances have opened the door to new economic opportunities, but success in winning investment and developing infrastructure will determine whether Georgia benefits long-term.** Becoming a regional trade and transportation hub will require Georgia to demonstrate its innate advantages even without the current restrictions on alternative routes.

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- ^{xviii} Transparency International, "Russian Business of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Relatives," 27 April 2022, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/russian-businesses-bidzina-ivanishvili-and-his-relatives>
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- ^{xxvii} An unnamed Bush Administration official who travelled with Secretary of State Rice to Georgia in July 2008 told reporters that "[Rice] told [President Saakashvili], in no uncertain terms, that he had to put a non-use-of-force pledge on the table." Helene Cooper and Thom Shanker, "U.S. officials say they warned Georgia to avoid fight," The New York Times, August 13, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/world/europe/13iht-diplo.4.15257727.html>. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried would later testify that ""We had warned the Georgians many times in the previous days and weeks against using force, and on 7 August we warned them repeatedly not to take such a step. We pointed out that the use of force, even in the face of provocations, would lead to disaster." Mike Bowker, "The war in Georgia and the Western response," Central Asian Survey, 30:2 (2011), 204. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2011.570121>.
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