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# A Country on the Verge: The Case for Supporting Georgia

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## Preface

Georgia's path to democracy has been nothing but sinuous. Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, which marked the end of the Soviet era, the country has seen major progress, intertwined with concerning setbacks. Protests and political negotiations following the October 2020 parliamentary elections reveal a political system that remains captured by individuals, is still plagued by corruption, and hardly represents the interests of Georgian citizens. This state of affairs impacts Georgia's relation with the West, integration with which its people still solidly aspire. It particularly affects its relations with the United States, not long ago a staunch ally of the country.

Georgia was a success story for the first few years of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency and, as a result of this promising start, became a darling of U.S. policy in the region. Russia's invasion in 2008 has kept the country high on the transatlantic agenda. So has Georgia's insistence to join NATO, one way or another, sooner better than later. It is for the country's strategic importance as a Western ally in a troubled and Russia-dominated neighborhood that the United States needs to continue its close relation with Georgia, tailoring its policies to help advance democracy there and contain backsliding.

This very timely report thoroughly substantiates the efforts Georgia has made toward democracy as well as its repeated setbacks, identifying the factors that contribute to its current decline as well as the best policy actions that the United States should take toward the country.

As the authors explain, in addition to internal factors—a political sphere tightly controlled by a few people, corruption, and attempts to control the media, among others—there are external ones that test Georgia's fragile democracy. First and foremost is the country's neighbor to the north, Russia, which takes any and all steps to ensure an illiberal periphery that insulates it from the democratic world. From invading the country to infiltrating its political life, Russia has used an entire arsenal to keep Georgia as little democratic as possible and away from the West.

Just like in the other countries in Russia's neighborhood, it is the strong will of citizens to have their country aligned to Western values and institutions that is the most serious obstacle to Russia-promoted illiberalism. Georgians remain deeply committed to European and transatlantic institutions, despite the strong Russian propaganda decrying alleged Western decay.

It is the strong belief of Georgians in Western values that merit a better, more efficient policy of the West toward the country. The United States could do little to help Georgia if it acted alone. Close cooperation with the EU is not only desirable but necessary. To its merit, the EU has taken a strong stance on latest developments in Georgia—the imperfect elections, the arrest of the opposition leader Nika Melia, and the failure of

repeated negotiations between government and opposition on new elections. It called out violations of democratic norms and urged the Georgian political parties to reach “a wide consensus” ahead of the Eu-Georgia Association Council meeting this week.

The urgency of events in Georgia should trigger a more determined response from the United States and the EU. We should not get Georgia off our minds just yet.

**Alina Inayeh**

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## Authors' Note

As this goes to print, the United States has been experiencing extraordinary challenges at home. Before the November 3 presidential election, Donald Trump sought to discredit and delegitimize any outcome that would have him on the losing side. After the election, Trump and his supporters spewed forth disinformation and outright lies in claiming that he had won, and that any claims of victory by Joe Biden were built on fraud. Dozens of court decisions rebuffed Trump's efforts to override the election. On January 6, the date Congress was to certify Biden's victory, Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, resulting in an attempted insurrection and an unprecedented attack on the seat of U.S. democracy. The recent weeks and January 6 in particular mark one of the darkest periods in U.S. history. And yet hours after the desecration of the Capitol, the House and Senate returned to certify the results of the election. Soon after, the House voted to impeach Trump, though the Senate fell 10 votes short of convicting him. On January 20, on the same steps that only two weeks before had witnessed an attempted insurrection, Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Our problems in the United States are not over, by any means, but we have turned a new page.

Acknowledging this means that any critique we offer of developments in Georgia comes with an extra dose of humility. We hope our Georgian readers appreciate that we offer them our perspective, not pretending that we live in a perfect democracy ourselves, but as longstanding friends of Georgia who seek to urge the country to remain on a democratic, prosperous, and secure path.

## Introduction

In the center of old town Tbilisi stand several ancient caravanserais. Inns for travelers, they are a legacy of Tbilisi's strategic location on the medieval Silk Road to Europe. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Georgia continues to serve as a Western gateway for trade from Central Asia. Across the country stretch pipelines, railways, and highways for those goods and resources en route to the Black Sea and beyond. Georgia is even more strategically important to the West now, as it is the only economically viable east-west route that does not transit Russia or Iran. While not an official member of the Three Seas Initiative,<sup>1</sup> it is a key player in the Black Sea region and has the potential to play a critical role in enhancing security and development there.

In addition to its strategic location, Georgia also serves as an extraordinary strategic partner. With NATO and EU membership its top foreign policy priority, the country has answered nearly every call from both organizations, despite not yet being a member in either, to serve in peacekeeping and combat missions. Georgians have served without caveats side by side with U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have paid the ultimate price – most U.S. ambassadors have had the sad duty of meeting the caskets of brave Georgians, flown in from South Asia by U.S. Air Force C-130s.

While NATO and the EU drag out the debate on enlargement, Russia continues to use military force to assert what it considers to be its prerogatives in the South Caucasus. The Russian military is strengthening its positions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, occupying some 20 percent of Georgia's territory, in places only a few hundred meters from the country's main transport artery, the East-West Highway, and the railroad and pipelines that run alongside it. In addition, since last November when Moscow arranged a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan—both neighbors of Georgia—Russian troops now enforce the peace over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The messages of Russia to its neighbors to the south are unmistakable – to Armenia and Azerbaijan, if you want peace and stability, look north, not west; and to Georgia, we can kill your dream of Euro-Atlantic integration in a matter of hours.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin has never wanted to see Georgia succeed as a vibrant democracy. As in Ukraine, he wants to prevent the establishment there of a pluralist and transparent democracy that could serve as a countermodel to his autocratic, kleptocratic regime. This is because, despite the significant challenges it faces, Georgia stands out in Eurasia for having made the most progress toward democracy. It is often described as an island of democracy amid a sea of authoritarianism. The country has experienced its share of turmoil, but it also has seen elections in 2012 and 2013 that led to peaceful transfers of power.

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1 Three Seas Initiative, [“The Next Three Seas Summit will be in Bulgaria in June 2021.”](#) 2021.

Unlike its neighbors, Georgia has made tremendous progress in building democratic institutions, addressing corruption, and nurturing civil society and a diverse media environment. None of these advances is irreversible, however, and each is threatened by internal and external forces. In fact, the controversy over last year's parliamentary elections and the stalemate between the party in power, Georgian Dream, and the opposition risks damaging Georgia's reputation as an island of democracy. Both sides need to work toward compromise, as described in the next chapter. Otherwise, the country is in danger of appearing in the eyes of the West to be no different than others in the region.

The 2020 parliamentary elections were not the first to be problematic; the 2018 presidential election suffered from serious flaws as well, and there have been issues with elections before that. The problem of state capture is growing, too, and the country can even less afford turning into a kleptocratic system with the coronavirus pandemic's impact on the economy. In this regard especially, the role of oligarch and former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who leads Georgian Dream, remains the source of great controversy.

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Still, compared to other countries in the region, Georgia has stood out. Russia under Putin is a deeply entrenched authoritarian state that poses a direct threat to its southern neighbor and its aspirations to develop into a successful, democratic, European-oriented state. It has also been de facto annexing the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia since its invasion of Georgia in 2008. Turkey, despite being a member of NATO, is under the increasingly authoritarian leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose muscle-flexing in the broader region risks conflict with Russia and other countries. Erdoğan's support for Azerbaijan in its renewed fighting with Armenia last fall risks embroiling the region in a wider conflict, especially if the Russian-brokered truce does not hold. Georgia could suffer in such a scenario.

Armenia experienced a revolution in 2018 that ended the increasingly corrupt and authoritarian reign of Serzh Sargsyan, offering new hope that the country may be heading into a more democratic direction. But its clashes with Azerbaijan threaten to scuttle the progress made under Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, whose political future in the aftermath of the latest fighting is in serious jeopardy. Azerbaijan has endured nearly three decades of repressive, corrupt rule under the Aliyev family, first under Haidar and then to this day under his son, Ilham. Unlike Georgia, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan has demonstrated much interest in deepening ties with the Euro-Atlantic community.

In 2013, Armenia, under pressure from Putin, reversed plans to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, much like Ukraine did under President Viktor Yanukovich. Unlike in Kyiv, however, the reaction in Yerevan was rather muted. Four years later, Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU without much fanfare—or protest from Moscow.

Armenia is largely beholden to Russia for its security and is a member of two Russian-led entities – the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Membership in the former

largely precludes any possibility that Armenia could pursue joining the European Union, and membership in the latter rules out any prospect of one day joining NATO. Georgia is a member of neither organization (it also withdrew from another Russia-led body, the Commonwealth of Independent States, in 2008).

While Azerbaijan is neither in the EEU nor in the CSTO, its abysmal human rights record makes it difficult to deepen ties with the West, despite the country's importance as an energy producer.

The latest round of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan was a reminder that Georgia, in addition to being the lone democracy in the region, is surrounded by sources of instability.

Comparing Georgia to these other countries has its limitations, however. Aside from Turkey, which is a member of NATO and has been in endless accession discussions with the EU, none of them aspires to become members of these Euro-Atlantic institutions. Georgia has a clear Western orientation and thus should be compared to existing NATO and EU member states. By this standard, it has more work to do – but the West has an interest, even a responsibility, to help it, too.

## **2020: Three Tests for Georgia**

In 2020, Georgia's young democracy faced three different tests: critical parliamentary elections, the coronavirus pandemic, and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.

### *Parliamentary Elections*

As discussed in the next chapter, the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2020 were not without serious problems. Georgian Dream spun positive aspects of different election observers' assessments but largely left out the criticism from reputable groups like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and domestic groups like Transparency International. Both the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) issued reports critical of the conduct of the election.

NDI's report issued soon after the first round stated:

Irregularities in results protocols, widespread reports of potentially intimidating behavior in or around polling stations, delays in the publication of results, and persistent perceptions of pre-election abuses of power detracted from notable improvements in the legal framework and administrative procedures for Georgia's October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections. As the results of the first round are finalized and the country heads to run-off elections on November 21, government leaders and election authorities will need to take extraordinary steps to ensure public confidence in the overall process and final results.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> National Democratic Institute, "[Georgia Election Watch Report on October 31, 2020 Parliamentary Elections](#)," November 2, 2020.

IRI came to similar conclusions:

Although Georgia's elections were held according to the country's laws and in a peaceful environment, irregularities before and on Election Day affected the integrity of the electoral process. Observers' concerns included the alleged misuse of state administrative resources, voter intimidation, vote buying, the manipulation of precinct-level summary protocols and a results management process that failed to meet international standards.<sup>3</sup>

In protest over allegations of electoral fraud and abuse, the opposition boycotted the second round and to date has refused to take up its seats in the new parliament. It has called for new elections and the firing of the head of the Central Election Commission. Georgian Dream has not made any serious attempts to find a compromise. This has so far led to a one-party parliament and political stalemate, neither of which is good for the country or its standing in the West.

### *The Coronavirus Pandemic*

In the spring of 2020, Georgia did a better job than most countries in avoiding a major coronavirus outbreak. The economic toll from what essentially was an extended lockdown in the spring was significant, however.<sup>4</sup> In the fall, though, the country suffered a strong wave, with more cases than Armenia, a country with a million fewer people, and roughly as many as in Azerbaijan, with 2.5 times the population of Georgia.<sup>5</sup> Georgia had been a leader in containing the spread of the virus and aiding those who had been infected during the first wave, but the second wave has left it reeling economically and health-wise.

The preventive shutdown of Georgia's borders earlier in the year exacted a significant toll on the economy. Tourism, key to many Georgians' livelihoods, has been devastated, with many foreigners unable to travel to visit and partake in the famous Georgian hospitality. The second wave is making the situation even more dire, with travel restrictions still in place.

The timing of the coronavirus wave, just weeks before the elections, was not good for Georgian Dream. Until then, the government it led had received high marks for its handling of the pandemic. The surge in cases likely dampened that support. Fear of contagion kept most election-day international monitors away, including those of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (which, however, deployed a slimmed-down long-term mission). This potentially opened the way for mischief at the polls. In the lead-up to voting day, observers cited, among other concerns, abuse of administrative resources in favor of Georgian Dream. This became the source of opposition complaints after the election.

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3 International Republican Institute, "[IRI Releases Georgia Technical Assessment Mission Interim Report](#)," November 16, 2020.

4 L'ubica Polláková, "[South Caucasus States Set to Diverge Further due to COVID-19](#)," Chatham House, June 4, 2020.

5 Worldometer, "[COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic](#)," March 12, 2021.

## *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*

The third test for Georgia came when fighting erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in late September. Georgia has sizable minorities of Armenians and Azerbaijanis living within its borders: 6.3 percent of the population identifies as Azeri and 4.5 percent as Armenian.<sup>6</sup> Armenia is heavily dependent on Russia for its security, including arms supply, as Azerbaijan is on Turkey. Because neither combatant has any significant borders with its ally, Georgia risks becoming a land and/or air bridge for Russian and Turkish shipments of supplies.

Even more worrisome, Russia has treaty obligations to come to Armenia's aid should it come under attack (though this does not apply to Nagorno-Karabakh). This would risk embroiling Georgia against its will in the war and causing violent clashes between its substantial Azeri and Armenian minorities. Should the latest Russian-brokered truce fall apart, any escalation of the conflict that might include Turkey, Russia, or even Iran could be devastating militarily and economically to the region, Georgia included. At the same time, the deployment of nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeeping troops to Nagorno-Karabakh increases Moscow's footprint in the South Caucasus, which should not sit well in Tbilisi.

## **The Problem to the North**

Russia looms over Georgia in many ways. Its creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia poses a constant threat to Georgia's control over its land and resources. Putin's personal feud with former president Mikheil Saakashvili could risk inflaming the situation if the latter comes back to Georgia in any capacity. The Georgian Dream-led government, with Ivanishvili largely calling the shots, has pursued better relations with Russia compared to the previous government, sparking criticism in some corners that the authorities have not been tough enough in pushing back against annexation or Russian interference in Georgian affairs. Several fringe parties are openly pro-Russian, but none has been able to get beyond a very small level of support. That should not be surprising given Russia's invasion of the country more than a dozen years ago.

This report looks at Georgia's relationships with Russia and the West. It argues that the West cannot take for granted that the country will always remain pro-Western, especially if many of its citizens do not see much interest and progress coming from Europe and the United States. Georgians have contributed in significant ways to international peacekeeping operations and have benefitted from agreements with the EU, including visa liberalization. But many hope for more, including security guarantees that would be obtained through membership of NATO. Absent serious progress on that front, more Georgians might decide that geography dictates they need to make the best of the relationship with Russia. The renewed fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan has heightened Georgia's sense of vulnerability.

The report also looks at the development of Georgian democracy since 1991. As noted earlier, it is remarkable how far Georgia has come despite occasionally concerning tendencies toward personalized, one-party rule.

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<sup>6</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "[The World Factbook: Georgia](#)," March 6, 2021.

This is especially notable in light of how little progress its immediate neighbors have made. Nevertheless, it is not a given that Georgia's democratic institutions will continue to grow and strengthen. The prospect of admission into NATO and the EU, with their requirements of adherence to specific democratic norms, remains the best incentive for the country to stay on a democratic path. While popular support for joining the West will likely sag with little short-term prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration, a more engaged United States can help keep Georgia on a pro-Western, democratic trajectory.

After analyzing Georgia's democracy, its challenging relationship with Russia, and its up-and-down relationship with the West, the report offers recommendations rooted in the belief that a more active role and presence in Georgia serves the national interests of the United States as well as benefiting Georgia and the wider region. Perhaps more than in any other country in the region, the United States carries great weight and influence in the country. Exercising that influence will be important for Georgia to continue on its democratic, Western-oriented path. At the same time, the country faces ongoing challenges from Russia, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a nearby conflict that could spill across its borders, as well as domestic turmoil. U.S. support for Georgia and engagement in the region can serve as a stabilizing force and a healthy counterbalance to outside players, whether Russia, Iran, or Turkey. A vibrant, democratic, Western-oriented Georgia eventually will redound to the benefit of the whole region and of the United States' interests.

In 2021, Georgia is at a strategic pivot point—on the verge between pluralism or one-party rule, and between integration with the democratic community or accommodation with Russia. Its future lies in Georgians' hands first and foremost. But the United States, by engaging more actively, can help tip the balance in the right direction and neutralize those forces that do not wish Georgia well. Its support through robust security, economic, and political assistance will make a positive difference and produce dividends for a long time for both countries.

## Georgian Democracy since 1991

*“Our life today and our life in the future...is indissolubly tied to the West, and no force can break this bond.” Noe Jordania, President, first Georgian Republic, 1919<sup>1</sup>*

When their country became independent in 1991, Georgians called it the Restoration of Independence. Georgia first became a sovereign nation in 1918, breaking away from Russian rule that had lasted since 1801. Before then, the country we now call Georgia consisted of several regional kingdoms. However, this first period of independence was short-lived, with the Red Army invading and Soviet rule established in 1921.

Since 1991, Georgia has suffered secession, civil war, regime change, and another Russian invasion. There have also been ups and downs in its democratic development. But one constant has remained: public support for joining the West. Polls conducted by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute show consistently that a large majority of Georgians, around 75 percent, agrees that the country should join the European Union and NATO. That support has stayed strong despite Russia’s clear willingness to use force to prevent Georgia’s membership in those organizations.

Georgia’s steady European vocation can be explained in part by security concerns. Over the centuries, Georgian kingdoms have suffered from threats and invasions from the east (by Persians), the west (by Ottomans), and most recently the north (by Russians). In 1787, Georgian King Erakle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk with Russia, which committed the latter to coming to Georgia’s defense in the event of invasion. In 1795, Persia invaded but Russia did not respond. Tbilisi was captured and burnt to the ground. In 1801, Russian Tsar Paul annexed Georgia, which became part of the Russian empire. Given that history, and the long decades of Soviet rule, it is not surprising that Georgians would seek security guarantees from the West.

But Georgia’s European vocation runs much deeper. Cultural and religious ties with Western civilization go back several thousand years. Starting with Pompey the Great’s Caucasus campaign in 67 BC, for centuries much of present-day Georgia was a part of the Roman empire. Georgian King Mirian III adopted Christianity as a state religion in 327, over fifty years before it was established as the empire’s official religion.

For Georgians, independence in 1991 brought not just renewed sovereignty over their own affairs. It also gave them the opportunity to renew connections with the West long denied by the Soviet regime, and to integrate finally with Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jones, [“Remembering Georgia’s First Republic.”](#) Civil.ge, May 25, 2018.

Georgia's path to Europe has not been smooth. Russia has obstructed its desire to join NATO and the EU, and the West's enlargement fatigue has slowed this prospect too. Georgia has adopted Western norms of governance, but the experience of centuries of autocratic rule has played a role in preventing the roots of democratic institutions from taking hold more deeply. To paraphrase an old Soviet maxim, since 1991 Georgia has been democratic in form, but not always in substance.

### The Shevardnadze Era, 1992–2003

When former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze arrived in Tbilisi on March 7, 1992, he was met by two Georgian warlords: Tengiz Kitovani, chief of the Georgian National Guard, and Djaba Ioseliani, head of the militia group Mkhedroni (Knights). They were two of three members of the unelected Military Council that had taken power in January after months of civil war to remove Georgia's first elected post-Soviet president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. With his extreme ethnic nationalism and anti-democratic methods, he had driven the country to the point of collapse.<sup>2</sup> Joined by the third member of the Military Council, former prime minister Tengiz Sigua, they invited Shevardnadze to become chairman of the council.

Shevardnadze set for himself two goals: laying the foundations of a market economy and establishing the institutions needed for a normal democracy.<sup>3</sup> He was only partially successful in attaining either.

Shevardnadze faced a harrowing situation. He compared himself to the chief of the only fire brigade in a city "where fires are breaking out all over."<sup>4</sup> It was difficult to juggle and prioritize the many crises demanding his attention. Economically, there was disastrous deindustrialization and hyperinflation in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system. Perhaps more challenging, the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had taken up arms against Georgian rule with the support of Russian troops and weapons. A third region, Adjara, refused to recognize the central government and was run by a corrupt governor.

In the absence of a sufficiently equipped army, Shevardnadze was dependent on Kitovani and Ioseliani to address the fighting in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both warlords ran black-market networks accountable to no one. Shevardnadze's *laissez-faire* approach to corruption—he told U.S. Secretary of State James Baker that his "hands were tied" while the fighting continued—would, in the end, fatally weaken him.

By 1995, however, Shevardnadze had put Georgia on a more sustainable path. Leveraging his contacts with Western leaders from his time as the Soviet Union's foreign minister, he was able to gain recognition and massive economic aid. He pushed through a new constitution, which emulated much of the U.S. system (it was drafted with the help of U.S. and European NGOs). In November 1995, he was won the presidential election with a 77 percent majority. With a mandate from the voters, he was able to dismantle the militias and prosecute and imprison Kitovani and Ioseliani.

2 Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 134.

3 Eduard Shevardnadze, *Kogda Rukhnul Zheleznyi Zanaves* (in Russian), Yeltsin Center, 2009, p. 28.

4 *Ibid.* p. 286.

Shevardnadze supported liberal legislation guaranteeing freedom of speech and of the press, but, perhaps as a legacy of his Soviet background, he did little to decentralize government power or encourage the growth of civil society (local NGOs depended on international donors to survive). Governors and other local leaders were appointed, not elected. Perhaps most concerning, political participation was very weak. Few believed they could exert any influence on the government. A 2002 poll showed that only 3.6 percent of Georgians had contacted parliament or a ministry that year, and only 3.9 percent had taken part in any collective action to effect change.<sup>5</sup>

By 2003, the Shevardnadze government was adrift and wracked by charges of corruption. Public distrust of the government was high. Things came to a head in the November 2 parliamentary elections. The independent television station Rustavi 2 announced the results of exit polls showing that the opposition National Movement party, headed by the young politician Mikheil Saakashvili, had won the most seats. Soon after, this was contradicted by the Central Electoral Commission, which put Shevardnadze's For A New Georgia in first place. Soon, large crowds gathered in central Tbilisi to protest what appeared to be the government's election fraud.

Many faulted Shevardnadze for refusing to open a dialogue with Saakashvili and the other leaders of the protests, which were broadcast live on Rustavi 2. Instead, he chose to go to Batumi, the capital of Adjara, whose corrupt governor, Aslan Abashidze, had given him an ultimatum: either accept the fraudulent results of the elections, which would also give Abashidze's party many more seats than it deserved in parliament, or else Abashidze would announce that Adjara was seceding. Shevardnadze decided that, after the separatist wars of the 1990s, he could not allow further disintegration of the country. He chose not to contest the obviously fraudulent results.<sup>6</sup>

This further undermined Shevardnadze with the protestors. On November 22, he tried to convene the newly elected parliament, but his speech in the parliament building was interrupted by a group of opposition members chanting "Resign! Resign!" Led by Saakashvili carrying a rose, the group forced Shevardnadze off the stage. Saakashvili dramatically took his place and declared the parliament illegal, while finishing Shevardnadze's still warm tea on the lectern.<sup>7</sup> Shevardnadze resigned soon after and in January Saakashvili won a special presidential election with 96 percent of the vote.

## The Saakashvili Era, 2004–2012

Educated in the United States, Saakashvili was fluent in English and eager to project the image of a strong, Western-oriented politician. He strengthened the powers of the presidency. He insisted on constitutional amendments to transform Georgia from a semi-parliamentary system to a strongly presidential one. By so doing, he stripped parliament of much of its power over the executive.

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5 Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History since Independence*, I.B Tauris, 2013.

6 Shevardnadze, *Kogda Rukhnul Zheleznyi Zanaves*, pp. 33-34.

7 De Waal, *The Caucasus*, p. 193.

Knowing that pervasive corruption had fatally undermined Shevardnadze's government, he moved quickly to address the problem. He fired large numbers of corrupt policemen and reformed the rules of the civil service to make bribe-taking virtually impossible. Newly constituted law-enforcement forces arrested and detained many former ministers and businessmen, often in front of television cameras. Accused of corruption, most were compelled to pay millions of dollars in fines to the state treasury. These actions were often carried out without due process, but were nevertheless very popular with most Georgians, who had long suffered at the hands of bribe seekers.<sup>8</sup> By May 2004, public pressure, encouraged and abetted by Saakashvili, led to the ouster of Abashidze, who was forced to flee from Adjara to Russia to avoid prosecution for corruption.

***In addition to rooting out corruption and Russian influence, Saakashvili's other great achievement in those early years was the transformation of the economy.***

Saakashvili also moved quickly to purge the government of Russian-influenced officials left over from the Shevardnadze era. For example, when he first met the Russian president in 2004, Putin explicitly told him to take particular care of Minister of State Security Valeri Khaburdzania, whose relationship with the Russian secret services was known to Western governments. Instead, Saakashvili fired him immediately.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to rooting out corruption and Russian influence, Saakashvili's other great achievement in those early years was the transformation of the economy. He simplified the tax code and drastically cut regulations for businesses and investors. By July 2006, increased revenues grew the state budget from \$350 million to \$3 billion. His government was able to build schools, roads, and other infrastructure. The private sector boomed: according to the World Bank, GDP increased by over 12 percent in 2007. This was partially due to Saakashvili's intense efforts to attract foreign direct investments, which increased from \$330 million to \$1.9 billion between 2003 and 2007.

Saakashvili constantly courted Western media and other influencers. He portrayed Georgia and its "Rose Revolution" as an unalloyed success story. Not discouraging the contrast to the growing authoritarianism in Russia and elsewhere in the region, he made it clear he wanted the world to see Georgia as a Western country rather than as a former Soviet state. His romance of the West reached a peak in May 2005, when President George W. Bush visited Tbilisi. Standing next to Saakashvili, Bush told the crowd gathered on Freedom Square:

You gathered here armed with nothing but roses and the power of your convictions, and you claimed your liberty. And because you acted, Georgia is today both sovereign and free, and a beacon for liberty for this region and the world.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Ibid., p. 195.

9 Svante Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (eds.), *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and its Discontents*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and the Silk Road Studies Program, 2014, p. 64.

10 BBC News, "[Text: Bush's Speech in Georgia](#)," May 10, 2005.

Saakashvili made joining the EU and NATO a top priority for Georgia. These organizations' strict accession requirements in terms of adhering to Western democratic standards gave civil society leverage to keep Saakashvili and his government on a path toward a transparent and accountable government.

But Saakashvili was hardly a Thomas Jefferson of the Caucasus. He placed a higher priority on using his powers to build a strong state than on guaranteeing individual freedoms. And he had a grandiose vision of his own role in history. He told the *Financial Times* in July 2004:

People compare my style with that of JFK, but in terms of substance, I feel much closer to Ataturk or Ben Gurion, or General de Gaulle—people who had to build nation states. Shevardnadze had a chance to become a founding father of the nation, but he missed that chance, so I now have this honor to become one, along with my friends.<sup>11</sup>

Because of his desire for Georgia to join NATO and the EU, Saakashvili was careful to adhere broadly to the democratic norms required for membership. His level-headed prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, kept him from giving in to some of his more autocratic inclinations. After Zhvania's death in February 2005, Saakashvili began to do so more and more.

While strengthening the legal framework for journalism (decriminalizing defamation and making it difficult to bring libel charges against journalists), Saakashvili also moved to ensure that editorial control of television was in friendly hands. Media owners he did not trust had difficulty obtaining or keeping licenses: during his presidency, twelve television channels changed ownership, usually as the result of the government's illegal or questionable removal of broadcast licenses.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Saakashvili was hardly a Thomas Jefferson of the Caucasus.***

Saakashvili was also accused of intimidating and jailing political opponents. The opposition and Western governments began to grow uneasy with his heavy-handedness. This grew into a crisis in the fall of 2007, when his former defense minister, Irakli Okruashvili, accused Saakashvili of plotting the murder of the owner of Imedi, the leading opposition television station that had been critical of the government. Instead of launching an investigation, the government arrested Okruashvili and accused him of extortion and money laundering.

The move prompted mass protests; on November 2 the crowds in central Tbilisi grew to 50,000. The protesters called for the immediate release of those they called political prisoners and for new parliamentary elections to be held in early 2008.

Although the protests were largely peaceful, the government declared a state of emergency and used “violent and excessive force”<sup>13</sup> to break them up. The police used tear gas and rubber bullets, and in some cases pursued

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<sup>11</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, “How to be a Founding Father,” *Financial Times*, October 7, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, *Georgia*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, “[Crossing the Line](#),” December 19, 2007.

people down streets to beat them even after they had dispersed. After clearing protestors in central Tbilisi, hundreds of police raided the offices of Imedi. They forced the journalists to lie on the floor at gunpoint, smashed equipment, and took the station off the air. (It came back on the air a few months later, but with a more pro-government editorial policy.)

The United States and the EU were quick to condemn the violence. On November 8, the United States called on Saakashvili “to lift the state of emergency and restore all media broadcasts,” which were “necessary to restore [...] democratic conditions.”<sup>14</sup> The same day, in part to defuse the crisis with the opposition and with the West, Saakashvili announced a snap presidential election for early January and parliamentary elections to follow in spring. Saakashvili and United National Movement (UNM) won both, although opposition politicians claimed bringing the elections forward did not allow them the opportunity to campaign properly.

Saakashvili continued to make political use of the judiciary and the security forces during his second term. By 2012, the year of parliamentary elections, he was increasingly exploiting government resources to intimidate and silence the opposition. The judicial system acquitted less than 1 percent of cases, and the prison population was one of the largest per capita in the world.

The UNM had looked on track to win the elections, but in the end it was done in by its record of abuse of power. On September 18, a scandal broke that turned the tide. TV channels showed footage of horrific abuse and torture by Saakashvili’s security forces in a prison. On October 1, the opposition Georgian Dream coalition won 85 of 150 seats in parliament. Saakashvili’s last contribution to Georgia’s democratic development was to step down when his term ended in 2013, making it one of the few countries in the post-Soviet space to transfer power peacefully and democratically.

### **The Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream Era, 2012–present**

In 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition consisted of the party of the same name, led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, and five other parties, most prominently the liberal democratic, pro-Western Free Democrats and Republican Party. The coalition came together mostly to defeat Saakashvili’s UNM, but it also advocated a more generous social safety net and a more pragmatic approach toward relations with Russia.

Before the elections, Saakashvili had pushed through legislation to transfer powers from the president to parliament and the prime minister—mostly to enable him to continue in power as prime minister when his term-limited time as president ended in 2013. With Ivanishvili as prime minister in its first year, the Georgian Dream government continued this shift to make governance more consensual and inclusive. The coalition stayed together in office for three years. Leaders from the Republican Party and the Free Democrats had prominent roles, with Davit Usupashvili as speaker of parliament and Irakli Alasania as minister of defense among others.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The Georgian Dream government continued strong support for EU and NATO integration, and made some real progress in both directions. At the its summit in Wales in 2014, NATO extended to Georgia a substantial package of measures to strengthen its ability to defend itself and advance its preparations for membership. That same year, the European Parliament approved an Association Agreement with the country, the most important feature of which is a free trade agreement with the EU.

But as time passed, the Georgian Dream government began to adopt an all-too-familiar approach of consolidating as much power in its hands as it could. Leading UNM figures were subjected to investigations, prosecutions, and in some cases imprisonment, including former interior minister Vano Merabishvili and Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava. Saakashvili was given two jail sentences in absentia. In 2015, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili called UNM a “criminal organization” that “has no right to remain in politics,” suggesting that he considered even belonging to UNM a prosecutable offense.<sup>15</sup>

The government also put pressure on Rustavi 2, the leading independent, and pro-opposition, television channel. It supported initiatives to change its anti-government editorial policy. When the courts finally approved transfer of the station’s ownership to someone more amenable to the government in 2019 (after a two-year stay of judgment ordered by the European Court of Human Rights), the new owner, Kibar Khalvashi, fired or forced out pro-opposition editors and journalists. According to the U.S. State Department, although the channel remained critical of the government, “it employed milder language” when it did.<sup>16</sup>

***There was also a steady move from consensus-driven coalition government toward one-party rule.***

There was also a steady move from consensus-driven coalition government toward one-party rule. In the run-up to the fall 2016 elections, the Free Democrats and the Republican Party chose not to run with Georgian Dream, even though their chances of reaching on their own the 5 percent threshold to win seats were slim. Three days before the voting, Saakashvili, by then living in Ukraine, addressed a large crowd in central Tbilisi via video, promising “to return to victorious Georgia.” This backfired and voters chose stability over a politician whose time had passed. Georgian Dream gained a veto-proof majority in parliament with only 48 percent of the votes. UNM received 27 percent, and only one other party, the anti-Western Alliance of Patriots, reached the 5 percent threshold. The number of seats Georgian Dream held did not come close to reflecting the vote. Because of the hybrid system of seat apportionment (majoritarian plus proportional), Georgian Dream gained 30 seats (from 85 to 115) and UNM lost 38 (from 65 to 27).

In recent years there have been signs that, with its supermajority in parliament, Georgian Dream has been attempting to take control of the judiciary too. According to the U.S. State Department’s *Human Rights Report for 2019*, NGOs and the international community have

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15 Civil.ge, “PM: UNM Has ‘No Right to Remain in Politics,’” October 22, 2015.

16 U.S. Department of State, “2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia,” undated.

continued to raise concerns regarding a lack of judicial independence. [Their concerns have included] the influence of a group of judges primarily consisting of High Council of Justice members and court chairs [who] allegedly stifled critical opinions within the judiciary and obstructed proposals to strengthen judicial independence. Other problems they highlighted included the impact of the High Council's powers on the independence of individual judges, manipulation of the case distribution system, a lack of transparency in the High Council's activities, and shortcomings in the High Council's appointments of judges and court chairpersons.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of concrete actions to address the problem led to accusations that the government was preventing reform to control judicial outcomes. In a September 2019 statement, sixteen NGOs criticized the government for failing to demonstrate sufficient political will to strengthen judicial independence, asserting that “since 2015 diligent efforts have been made to ensure strengthening and extending the influence of the so-called dominant group of corrupt and compromised judges.”<sup>18</sup>

Many call Ivanishvili the country's de facto leader, despite having no other official position than that of chair of Georgian Dream. His personal wealth is equivalent to around one-third of Georgia's annual gross domestic product. He gained it with his business and investment activities in Russia in the 1990s. Though he claims to have divested himself from all his Russian investments, the source of his wealth fuels suspicions that he is still beholden to Moscow or even carrying out its bidding.

Many claim that Ivanishvili is keeping his grip on the judiciary and other institutions to protect his power and his wealth as well as those of his friends and allies. As an example, in July 2019, the prosecutor general charged TBC Bank cofounder Mamuka Khazaradze with laundering money in 2008 while at the bank. Khazaradze denied the charges and claimed that Ivanishvili was targeting him because of his plans to establish an opposition party. Soon after, he founded the Lelo party to challenge Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

***Many claim that Ivanishvili is keeping his grip on the judiciary and other institutions to protect his power and his wealth as well as those of his friends and allies.***

The government doubled down against Khazaradze in early 2020, withdrawing its support for his biggest project, the \$2.5 billion deep-sea port in Anaklia on the Black Sea.<sup>19</sup> The Anaklia Development Consortium, which includes the U.S. company SSA Marine, claimed that the government cancelled its contract because of “close financial interests between high-level people connected to Georgian Dream” and the neighboring port of Poti, which could be negatively impacted by a larger deep-sea port in Anaklia. Two members of the Supervisory Board of the Poti port, David Ebralidze and Ivane Chkhartishvili, are closely associated with Ivanishvili.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze, “Georgia Cancels Contract for Black Sea Megaport,” *Eurasianet*, January 9, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Anaklia Development Consortium, “Government Actions and Words Appear to Show its Support for Poti at the Expense of Anaklia,” October 27, 2020.

Such apparent political manipulation of decisions of the executive and judiciary has economic consequences. For one, it discourages foreign direct investment and, in turn, stifles the country's growth. According to Freedom House's 2018 *Freedom in the World Report*, "despite ongoing judicial reforms, executive and legislative interference in the courts remains a substantial problem, as does corruption and a lack of transparency and professionalism surrounding judicial proceedings." According to the U.S. State Department, the law guarantees due process, but this protection is not always respected in practice.<sup>21</sup>

***According to the U.S. State Department, the law guarantees due process, but this protection is not always respected in practice.***

Georgian courts have ruled against foreign companies, including U.S. ones, and in favor of the government and/or local businessmen. In 2017, a court inflicted punitive environmental fines on Georgian American Alloys (GAA), a Miami-based mining company that at the time represented the largest U.S. investment in the country. It also imposed a local administrator who was given access to the company's bank accounts and the authority to run every aspect of the business. GAA claimed that this amounted to expropriation.<sup>22</sup> That same year, in a case accusing Philip Morris of dumping, a court instructed the U.S. corporation to pay damages of up to 93 million Georgian Lari (approximately \$29 million) in favor of JSC Tbilisi Tobacco, another firm associated with Chkhar-tshvili. Transparency International concluded that the ruling "raise[d] legitimate questions in relation to the objective examination of the case and reaffirm[ed] doubts in relation to the partiality of the Court."<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, there have been cases when the government has been forced to back down in response to internal and external pressure. In June 2019, thousands took to the streets to protest Georgian Dream's invitation to a Communist member of Russia's Duma, Sergey Gavrillov, to address the parliament. Violence broke out and the government used excessive force. It was forced to apologize and make concessions—most importantly, changing the electoral rules to allow the opposition the possibility of gaining more seats in the next parliamentary elections. On March 8, 2020, the U.S. and EU ambassadors brokered an agreement among Georgian Dream and leading opposition parties to establish a more equitable system of apportioning seats, in time for the 2020 elections.<sup>24</sup>

The elections resulted again in a Georgian Dream victory, but the results of the first round in October showed that the opposition would have more seats because of the new electoral rules. Nevertheless, evidence of fraud caused uproar among all parties that had crossed the threshold to enter parliament. They announced that unless their demands were fulfilled, they would boycott the second round and the new parliament. Those demands included new elections, the resignation of the head of the Central Electoral Commission, and the release of those who had been arrested on political charges in connection with the elections.

21 U.S. Department of State, "2019 Investment Climate Statements: Georgia," undated.

22 Ken Stier, "The Dangers of Doing Business Abroad," Miami Herald, September 13, 2017.

23 Transparency International Georgia, "The Court Decision on the Imposition of up to GEL 93 Million on Philip Morris Raises Questions," March 30, 2017.

24 The agreement became law on June 29. Nearly half the seats under the previous law were given to single-mandate districts, a system that greatly favored the incumbent candidates from the ruling party. Under the new law, in 2020 the number of single-mandate seats was reduced from 73 to 30, and in 2024 they will be reduced to zero. The goal was a more representative and pluralistic parliament.

March 2021

The OSCE-led International Election Observation Mission assessed that while the first round of the elections “were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected, [...] pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process.”<sup>25</sup> Local watchdog groups went into further detail, claiming that there were numerous incidents of “attacks on journalists and [...] monitoring organizations, voter bribing, [...] confrontations outside polling stations, [and] inaccuracies in the vote tally protocols.” They also drew attention to the “unfounded refusal of district electoral commissions to uphold the complaints requesting ballot recounts.”<sup>26</sup> According to European Georgia, a leading opposition party, courts dismissed 99 percent of the requests for recounts.<sup>27</sup>

Virtually all parties agree that Georgian Dream received the most votes. The opposition argues, however, that Georgian Dream used fraud to give it an additional 7–8 percent—a bump that gave it enough seats to form a government on its own. Despite this, the consensus among Western governments has been that, while there were irregularities in the conduct of the elections, these were “not sufficient to invalidate the results.”<sup>28</sup> The EU delegation in Tbilisi suggested that the opposition parties should take up their seats in the new parliament and “use the mandates entrusted to them by the citizens of Georgia to address outstanding political issues.”<sup>29</sup> The observer mission of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on the opposition to take up its seats “for the sake of Georgia’s democratic consolidation.”<sup>30</sup>

International calls on the opposition parties to abandon their boycott, without corresponding public pressure on Georgian Dream to take the complaints seriously, did not put the government in any mood to compromise. For example, regarding the demand to replace the head of the Central Commission, Georgian Dream Executive Director Irakli Kobakhidze said that this position was not a political appointment and therefore could not be a part of a political agreement. He also called the demand for new elections a “red line” for the party that could not be a subject for negotiation.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The crisis around the 2020 elections amounted to a stress test for Georgia’s young democracy.***

In the second round in November, the opposition parties maintained their boycott and Georgian Dream won the remaining seats. On December 11, the newly formed parliament met, with only Georgian Dream deputies taking up their seats. In January, six non-Georgian Dream lawmakers broke with their parties’ boycott, and joined the parliament. The remaining sixty seats officially allocated to the opposition remain empty.

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25 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “[Georgia, Parliamentary Elections, 31 October 2020: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions](#),” November 1, 2020.

26 Transparency International Georgia, “[Nongovernmental Organizations Are Calling on Political Parties To Resolve Crisis Through Dialogue](#),” November 9, 2020.

27 Tabula, “[Kapanadze: In 99% of Cases, the Courts did not Satisfy the Request to Recount the Precincts](#),” November 11, 2020.

28 U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, “[U.S. Embassy Statement on Georgia’s Parliamentary Elections](#),” November 1, 2020.

29 European Union, “[EU Delegation Comments on Georgia’s 2020 Parliamentary Elections](#),” November 22, 2020.

30 Civil.ge, “[PACE Co-rapporteurs Call on Parties to Enter Parliament](#),” November 24, 2020.

31 Civil.ge, “[Archive: Parliamentary Elections October 31, 2020](#),” November 24, 2020.

The crisis around the 2020 elections amounted to a stress test for Georgia's young democracy. It exposed two significant flaws: the ruling party's zero-sum urge to consolidate power and not compromise, and the lack of trust in an independent judiciary.

Power consolidation is nothing new in Georgia and may even be something marginally acceptable to Georgians. As seen under Shevardnadze and Saakashvili, power tends to accrue around a strong leader. In a 2006 poll, 63.5 percent of Georgians said that a strong leader "unimpeded by parliament or elections" was either a "good" or "very good" idea.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Shevardnadze and Saakashvili, however, Ivanishvili is not elected and therefore not accountable to the voters. Georgian Dream, which rose in 2012 sharing power with several other pro-Western parties, now seems beholden to an unelected leader who "maintain[s] a de facto veto power over major government decisions from behind the scenes."<sup>33</sup> This represents a classic case of state capture.

The inability of Georgian Dream and the opposition parties to find common ground has led to a one-party parliament. This is unprecedented in the post-1991 era and is not acceptable in a democracy under any circumstances. It will lead to political instability in a region that is already unstable and subject to predatory and illiberal external forces. Georgia already faces an existential threat to its sovereignty from Putin's Russia. Internal political deadlock and stalemate only open more opportunities for Putin to undermine it.

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32 Quoted in Stephen Jones and Neil MacFarlane (eds.), *Georgia: From Autocracy to Democracy*, University of Toronto Press, 2020, p. 28. Ivanishvili announced on January 11, 2021, that he was withdrawing from politics. This is a welcome development, although it should be noted that he made similar assurances after the 2016 elections, only to reinsert himself into politics a year later.

33 Ibid., p. 32.

## Putin's Assault on Georgia's Sovereignty

*"I cannot even imagine how our country can be secure unless Russia becomes a democratic country." Georgia's former president Eduard Shevardnadze<sup>1</sup>*

Western leaders had high hopes for cooperation with Russia when Vladimir Putin was elected president in 2000, having been picked by Boris Yeltsin as his successor. He was the first leader to call President George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks and offered Russia's assistance. Over the objections of several advisors, he supported the idea of the United States using bases in Central Asia to prosecute Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

In those first years, Putin talked about Russia's shared interests with Europe. In a speech to Germany's parliament in 2001, he said his country was "central to European civilization in both political and economic terms." He claimed that "the key goal of Russian domestic policy is first and foremost to ensure democratic rights and freedoms." He also told the audience that Russia supported European integration and looked to it "with hope."<sup>2</sup>

Putin even spoke positively about NATO, claiming to be open to membership for Russia in meetings with President Bill Clinton and NATO Secretary General George Robertson in 2000. In October 2001, *The Washington Post* reported: "President Vladimir Putin declared [in Brussels] that Russia is prepared to reconsider its opposition to NATO expansion into states of the former Soviet Union as part of a transformation in its security relationship with Europe."<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt of Belgium, which held the presidency of the EU Council, called Putin's remarks "a gigantic step forward" toward a new strategic partnership between Russia and the EU.<sup>4</sup> U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Putin's statements "mark a fundamental change in the way we all see security [...] What this shows is that indeed we're all in this together and we can only help ourselves by helping each other."<sup>5</sup>

By 2007, however, Putin's tone had changed dramatically. At the Munich Security Conference, he dropped all pretense of trying to move Russia closer to the Western community.<sup>6</sup> Before an audience that included

1 Shevardnadze, *Kogda rukhnul zhelezneyi zhanaves*, p. 373

2 Vladimir Putin, "[Speech in the Bundestag of the Federal Republic of Germany](#)," Office of the President of Russia, September 25, 2001.

3 William Drozdiak, "[Putin Eases Stance On NATO Expansion](#)," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2001.

4 *Ibid.*

5 U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, October 4, 2001.

6 Vladimir Putin, "[Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy](#)," Office of the President of Russia, February 10, 2007.

senior officials from North America and Europe, he railed against what he called the United States' attempt to create a "unipolar world—a world where there is one master, one sovereign." He called plans to accept new members that had applied to join NATO "a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust." He claimed another instrument for promoting Euro-Atlantic integration, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was "a vulgar tool designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries." And he strongly suggested that it no longer suited Russian interests to remain in the largest agreement to limit weapons and troops on the continent, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE).

Soon after his Munich speech, Putin took the first steps to pivot away from Euro-Atlantic institutions and toward creating and reinforcing Russia-centric ones. In July, Russia announced that it would "suspend" its participation in the CFE Treaty—effectively pulling out of what many called "the cornerstone of European security."<sup>7</sup> That same month, Russia created a Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, the first component of what would evolve into the Eurasian Economic Union.

*In Putin's mind, decisions by other powers are not made  
over the objections of the regional hegemon.*

It is not clear whether Putin was serious in those first few years about joining NATO and other Euro-Atlantic structures and instruments, or whether he was simply waiting for Russia to be militarily and economically strong enough to coerce its neighbors to join political-military structures where it was "master and sovereign." What is clear is that, starting in 2007, his public stance toward Russia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and the idea of adopting the West's political values changed dramatically.

What happened? For one thing, Putin was shaken by what he saw as the failure to be properly consulted on the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and NATO's decision to accept the three Baltic states into the alliance in 2004. Of the two, the latter was more unacceptable. In Putin's mind, decisions by other powers are not made over the objections of the regional hegemon. He could not imagine that this was anything else but simply ordered up by the United States—the idea that the Baltic states aspired to join the alliance was alien to him. For Putin, NATO was a tool of the "unipolar power" for encircling Russia and encroaching on its sphere of influence. He also saw NATO's plan to create a missile defense system in Central Europe as a further attempt to deny the Kremlin its right to have a say in the security decisions of its former Warsaw Pact allies.

In addition, Putin believed that Russia as a great power could not subsume its security interests into a multi-lateral organization of equals. As one senior Russian diplomat said in 1999, "great powers [...] do not dissolve into international unions—they build them around themselves."<sup>8</sup> For Putin, security for Russia lies in asserting its dominion over its neighbors when it sees fit. He sees Russia as historically entitled to dictate the foreign policy of its neighbors within a sphere of influence.

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7 Arms Control Association, "[The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty and the Adapted CFE Treaty at a Glance](#)," August 2017.

8 Starr and Cornell, *Putin's Grand Strategy*, p. 16.

Only the most fevered nationalist would believe that NATO would invade Russia unprovoked and seize its territory. But in Putin's circle the choice of a former Soviet state to join the West presents a threat to Russia's security. Moscow could guarantee its own security only by coercing its neighbors to reintegrate with a Russia-dominated space—or at least convince them to give up joining the main “adversary,” NATO.

It was Georgia's misfortune to push for NATO membership at a time when Russia was beginning its efforts to reclaim the status of great power and regional hegemon, and able and willing to use all its tools—including military force—to dictate the foreign policy choices of its neighbors.

President Eduard Shevardnadze first put forward the idea of membership for Georgia in 2002 at a NATO summit. But it was President Mikheil Saakashvili who made joining NATO and the EU the centerpiece of his foreign policy. Western support for Saakashvili's Rose Revolution, which was followed a year later by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, also fed Putin's fear that the next target for these “color revolutions,” which he saw as fomented by the United States, would be Russia itself.

Saakashvili's efforts to join NATO coincided with President George W. Bush's second-term Freedom Agenda. Many saw this new foreign policy priority as nothing more than a retroactive attempt to justify the invasion of Iraq, given that the original justification—the presence of weapons of mass destruction—turned out not to be valid. Putin interpreted the Freedom Agenda as another effort by Washington to undermine him and impose the U.S. political system on Russia and its neighbors. It also gave him more incentive to try, as the tsars did, to “gather the lands” around Russia to provide a buffer against the designs of his adversaries.

None of this likely mattered to Saakashvili. What was important for him was that the United States' policy to push out the boundaries of freedom and democracy matched perfectly his goal to integrate Georgia with the two main Euro-Atlantic institutions. With Bush on his side, it was an opportunity to push even harder to merge his country with the West.

## **2008—Georgia's Year of Living Dangerously**

In early 2008, the United States' attention was focused less on the former Soviet space than on the Balkans—specifically Kosovo, over 1,000 U.S. troops were still stationed as part of NATO's stabilization force. Years of UN-mediated talks between Belgrade and Pristina had not resolved the problem of Kosovo's status, and the diplomatic path showed little prospect of success. Washington was looking for a way out. So, when in February Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia, the United States, together with much of Europe, immediately recognized it. They did so over the strenuous objections of Russia, which for centuries has had close cultural and religious ties with Serbia and saw it as an ally. It condemned the recognition and had previously explicitly linked its response to Georgia's aspirations to join NATO. The chief of the General Staff, General Yuriy Baluyevsky, warned in December 2007 that recognition of Kosovo would lead to a chain reaction in Russia's periphery, including the Caucasus:

If we cross the Rubicon and Kosovo gains independent status tomorrow, frankly speaking, I expect this independence to echo in other regions as well, including those close to Russia's borders. You perfectly

understand what I mean—I mean Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestar [the Russian enclave in Moldova].<sup>9</sup>

Also in February 2008, Saakashvili traveled to Washington, where Bush promised him to push hard for Georgia's acceptance into NATO. After the meeting, Saakashvili said this had been “one of the most successful visits during my presidency,” and said he did not know of any other leader of a small country with the access to the administration that he had.<sup>10</sup>

Russia wasted no time taking steps to punish Saakashvili for his NATO push. On March 6, Russia announced that it was unilaterally abolishing its participation in a trade embargo imposed in 1996 against Abkhazia by the Commonwealth of Independent States, and that it considered itself free to establish direct contacts with the de facto authorities there, ignoring Tbilisi's sovereignty over the regions completely. The date Putin chose to make this announcement was probably not accidental—NATO members had scheduled a debate on that day on whether to offer Georgia an MAP.<sup>11</sup> Russia's Duma followed up on March 21 with a resolution calling for recognition of the independence of both breakaway regions from Georgia.

These actions, coming weeks before the April 3–4 Bucharest summit, were clearly intended to show NATO members the seriousness of Russia's concerns about extending an MAP to Georgia. To mollify those concerns, the alliance invited Putin to attend a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the summit.

### ***Russia wasted no time taking steps to punish Saakashvili for his NATO push.***

Putin came to Bucharest with one main goal: to prevent the alliance from agreeing to extend MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine. The NATO members failed to agree to do so, but they settled on a compromise that inserted a phrase in the summit's final statement that said: “we agree today that Georgia and Ukraine shall become members of NATO.”

Putin was taken aback by this declaration and in his remarks to the NATO-Russia Council session, he strongly suggested that Russia held the key to resolving the separatist issue in Georgia, saying that “to solve those issues, [Georgia] does not need to enter NATO.” He was even more explicit in dismissing Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, describing it as an artificial creation—“not even a country.” Putin noted that there were large parts of Ukraine with a majority of ethnic Russians, asserting “Who can say we do not have interests there?”<sup>12</sup>

After the Bucharest summit, Putin quickly made provocative moves against Georgia that, in retrospect, were clearly meant to goad Saakashvili into starting a conflict, which would give Russia the excuse to invade. The goal was to show that Russia could not accept that any of the post-Soviet states had a sovereign right to join

9 Ronald Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 106-107.

10 Helene Cooper, C.J. Chivers and Clifford J. Levy, “[U.S. Watched as a Squabble Turned Into a Showdown](#),” *New York Times*, August 17, 2008.

11 Ahto Lobjakas, “[Georgia: Tbilisi Outraged at Moscow Withdrawal from Abkhaz Sanctions Treaty](#),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 7, 2008.

12 Asmus, *A Little War*, pp. 135-136.

the West. By violating their territorial integrity and calling into question their international borders, Russia would undermine their NATO aspirations.

Georgia was the more attractive target to show Russia's neighbors the costs of aspiring to break free of its grip. It is much smaller than Ukraine, and its leader seemed easier to provoke. Saakashvili and Georgia had the added advantage of being much closer to Bush, who had visited Tbilisi in 2005 and remains the only U.S. president to visit a non-Baltic post-Soviet state outside of Russia. For Putin, Georgia was a double win—he could teach his neighbors and the United States a much-needed lesson.

***Georgia was the more attractive target to show Russia's neighbors  
the costs of aspiring to break free of its grip.***

After the Bucharest summit, Bush recognized that relations with Russia were deteriorating and he traveled to Sochi to try to reassure Putin that the West had no designs on undermining Russian security. However, days after the that meeting, Russia began incrementally increasing the seriousness of its actions designed to poke Georgia into starting a conflict against the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia:

- On April 16, all Russian government agencies were authorized to conduct official business with the authorities in both separatist regions, a de facto violation of Georgian sovereignty.
- On April 20, a Russian fighter shot down a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle over Abkhazia.
- On May 30, Russia announced it was sending in additional military units to repair the railroad line into Abkhazia. (As one Georgian official put it, “you don’t have troops repair train tracks unless you’re planning to invade” with heavy armor).<sup>13</sup>
- In early July, Russian military aircraft began regular violations of Georgian airspace.
- On July 15, Russia started a large-scale military exercise called Kavkaz 2008, With 8,000 troops deployed near the border with Georgia.
- On August 1, South Ossetia’s separatists began shelling Georgian villages in and around the breakaway region.
- On August 4, Russia’s 58<sup>th</sup> Army took up positions in the vicinity of the Roki tunnel, Russia’s only border crossing through the Caucasus range into South Ossetia.

U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who visited Tbilisi in July, urged Saakashvili not to rise to the Russian bait. By August 7, the situation was becoming untenable for Georgia’s president. In a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

desperate bid to restart talks with Russia, he announced a ceasefire, but later that day he gave orders for the army to move into South Ossetia, destroy its artillery, and occupy the “capital,” Tskhinvali. Saakashvili claimed that he gave the order after South Ossetian forces broke the ceasefire by shelling three Georgian villages near Tskhinvali, but international monitors there reported that the situation in the area was quiet until Georgian artillery opened up on the city.<sup>14</sup>

It was a catastrophic decision. Russian troops and heavy equipment poured through the Roki tunnel and quickly ejected Georgian troops from South Ossetia. On August 8, Russia began air operations, flying over 400 sorties over Georgia proper, and two days later it launched an invasion of Abkhazia. It is estimated that Russia sent in around 40,000 troops—more than three times the size of Georgia’s army. It was clear its war aims were not just defending the separatist regions but regime change in Tbilisi, something that Putin confirmed on August 12 when he said he wanted “to hang Saakashvili by the balls.”

Russian units were deep into undisputed Georgian territory and seemed poised to take Tbilisi. They were stopped when President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, which held the presidency of the EU Council at the time, brokered a ceasefire on August 12. The agreement included a pledge for both sides to withdraw to their original positions before the war—a pledge that Russia has yet to uphold. While Russia withdrew its troops and equipment from Georgia-controlled areas, it left those in place in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which it recognized as sovereign states on August 25. The Russian military today occupies 20 percent of Georgian territory. To underline its capability to violate Georgia’s sovereignty whenever it chooses, Russia’s border guards periodically push out its “border” fences deeper into Georgian-controlled territory.

Russia’s troops remain occupiers in Georgia, as they do in Ukraine, to ensure that Putin’s Russia maintains veto power over both countries’ sovereign decisions to join the West.

### **Russia’s Efforts to Maintain an Illiberal Periphery**

Deterring neighbors from escaping Russia’s dominance is not Putin’s only goal. He also wants to ensure that there is no virtuous counterexample to his authoritarian model of governance in the country’s periphery. This means undermining democracy in Georgia and elsewhere.

Putin’s strategy is to promote the idea that his style of governance is more effective than the West’s, and to perpetuate the myth of a “post-Soviet civilization,” distinctively different from European notions of liberal governance and a culture of tolerance. Because of these deep differences, by this logic, Western democracy is inherently unacceptable and doomed to fail in Russia and other post-Soviet states. A Russia bordered on many sides by countries that have joined the community of liberal democracies would be an isolated Russia. Russians would question why they could not have the same rights as their neighbors, leading to a collapse of support for Putin’s regime.

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 217-18.

Putin provided the ideology behind maintaining an illiberal region with Russia as the hegemon with the proposal of a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), composed of former states of the Soviet Union. Writing in 2011, he envisioned “a powerful supranational association” as a counterbalance to the Euro-Atlantic community and the Asia-Pacific one. He wrote the EEU should be “capable of becoming one of the poles of the modern world,” with Moscow calling the shots, just as Washington and Brussels did, as he saw it, in NATO and the EU.<sup>15</sup>

The biggest difference between the EU and NATO on one hand and the EEU on the other is that the Western organizations require states first to apply for membership, and then to reform their system of governance and adopt certain democratic values in order to gain admission. The EEU does not require the adoption of any standards or values. All that is required is the acceptance of Russian primacy in the post-Soviet region. There is also little that is voluntary about joining the EEU. In several cases, Russia has used outright threats to coerce countries in Eurasia to join.<sup>16</sup>

***Russian influence in Georgia has expanded in part because  
the Georgian Dream government has opened up to it.***

The idea of “Eurasianism” also provides a matrix of values and traditions distinctive from the West. The concept of Eurasian civilization and Russia’s unique contributions to it are nothing new—Putin adopted the idea from several minor thinkers of the early twentieth century. The idea that liberal democracy is alien to the post-Soviet space, or Eurasia, obviously appeals to illiberal leaders like him. In this view, as Alexander Lukin, the vice president of Russia’s Diplomatic Academy, has written,

The culture and values of many former Soviet republics really do differ from those of the West. [These countries] reject Western permissiveness and moral relativism, and not for some pragmatic reason, but because they find such notions sinful. [They] see euthanasia, homosexuality, and other practices [...] as representing not progress but a regression to pagan times. Viewed through this lens, Western society is more than imperfect; it is the very center of sin.<sup>17</sup>

While the great majority of Georgians support liberal democratic reforms, the country’s population is also deeply traditional and conservative, especially outside urban areas. This provides Russia with opportunities to call into question Georgia’s aspirations to become a liberal democracy, and, by so doing, influence public opinion and divide society by promoting the idea that European values are not Georgian values.

Russian influence in Georgia has expanded in part because the Georgian Dream government has opened up to it. In the aftermath of the 2008 war, the Saakashvili government treated Russia as a pariah. It closed the

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15 Vladimir Putin, “[A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making](#),” Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, October 2, 2011.

16 Starr and Cornell, Putin’s Grand Strategy, p. 55.

17 Alexander Lukin, “What the Kremlin is Thinking,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014.

country off from nearly all forms of Russian influence—cultural, political, and economic.<sup>18</sup> When it took office in 2012, the Georgian Dream government, for understandable reasons, wanted to establish more pragmatic relations with Russia. It restored diplomatic channels (short of full diplomatic relations) and reopened the country to Russia. The most visible aspect of this was the flood of Russian tourists—over a million a year by early 2019, bringing much needed revenue for Georgia.

But the opening also allowed Russia to use direct means to influence Georgian politics and society. Russian-language media are marginal in Georgia, but most Georgians believe that many Georgian-language media outlets are on the Russian payroll. Some have demonstrable Russian ties, either financial or by using Russian content: most prominently, the newspapers *Asaval-Dasavali* and *Georgia and the World*, TV Obieqtivi, and the online Sakinformi. TV Obieqtivi is associated with the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) party, which is represented in parliament.

A recent report by the Media Development Foundation, a Tbilisi-based NGO that monitors media freedom and accountability, identifies malign messages spread by these outlets:<sup>19</sup>

- The United States undermines Georgian sovereignty by meddling in the government’s decision-making process.
- Georgia’s prime value to the United States is as a base from which potentially to attack Russia.
- Europe is attempting to impose on Georgian society liberal values such as tolerance of homosexuality and pedophilia.
- Liberal, secular democracy is alien to Georgian traditions and is less effective than Russia’s authoritarian model.
- Pursuing alignment with the United States and Europe is futile as they have no intention of accepting Georgia into NATO and the EU.
- If Georgia wishes to regain its territorial integrity and protect itself from “perverse” Western values, it must abandon its Western aspirations and engage with Russia.

Two parties, the APG and the Democratic Movement, have made accommodation with Russia and rejection of NATO and EU membership part of their official policy. The former speaker of parliament and Democratic Movement leader, Nino Burjanadze, was the first Georgian politician to meet Putin after the 2008 war and she continues to visit Moscow. The APG general secretary, Irma Inashvili, also visits Moscow frequently (most recently in July 2019), and her party colleagues loudly promote the anti-Western line. For example, the APG

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18 Nina Jankowicz, *How to Lose an Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of War* (E-book), I.B. Tauris, June 11, 2020.

19 Media Development Foundation, “[News, Multimedia and Statements Archive](#),” undated.

political director, Giorgi Maghlakedlidze, has publicly repeated the Russian lie suggesting that the U.S.-supported Lugar Laboratory in Tbilisi is a bioweapons facility.

The Kremlin has provided direct financial and political support to the APG, which takes firm stances against NATO membership and for accommodation with Russia, according to the Russian NGO in exile Dossier Center.<sup>20</sup> Dossier Center has published documentation of a plan by the Russian academic Sergey Mikheyev, who was banned from visiting the EU for his anti-democratic activities, to promote the APG in the 2020 elections. The budget, mainly for travel and per diem for consultants and trainers, was presented to Putin's Presidential Administration and carries a \$700,000 price tag.

Dossier Center also obtained evidence of a much larger budget request of \$8.4 million reportedly from the APG to Politsecrets, a Russian political consultancy associated with Mikheyev. Half of this budget was dedicated to the production of video spots. The document also included a political strategy for the APG by the consultancy's director, Vera Blashenkova, who has helped the campaigns of several Kremlin-backed politicians in Russia. In it, she provides media talking points for the APG (for example, "in order to obtain material support from the Americans, [our opponents] have agreed to experiment on our children with programs for early sex education, the development of more tolerance for homosexuality, etc.").

Dossier Center alleges that these projects to support the APG are coordinated by the Directorate for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries in Russia's Presidential Administration. The main contacts there are supposedly Colonel Valeriy Maksimov of the Federal Security Service and a military intelligence official, Valeriy Chernyshev.<sup>21</sup> APG General Secretary Inashvili called the report "absurd," but did note her party had engaged the services of an unnamed Russian agency for the elections campaign, in addition to those of four U.S. and two Israeli companies.

***Russia has also supported Georgian NGOs that work to undermine support for Western values and to promote cultural ties with Russia.***

Russia has also supported Georgian NGOs that work to undermine support for Western values and to promote cultural ties with Russia. The report mentioned above by the Media Development Foundation identifies three anti-Western organizations—the Primakov Center, the Eurasian Institute, and the Global Research Center—as having Russian ties.<sup>22</sup> The Russian government openly supports 46 entities in Georgia through its Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation, Putin's main open vehicle for projecting Russian soft power. An important component of Russkiy Mir's mission is to push the idea that Russia is a powerful defender of Orthodox values against Western secularism. The director of the Primakov Center, former Democratic Movement politician Dimitri Lortkipanidze, has called on Georgians to fight against "the establishment of liberalism and of the

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<sup>20</sup> Dossier Center, "[Part One: Elections in Georgia](#)," undated.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, "[Anti-Western Propaganda](#)," Media Development Foundation, 2018.

tyranny of anti-Orthodox forces in Georgia.”<sup>23</sup> Cartu Bank, established and influenced by Bidzina Ivanishvili, has co-financed some Russkiy Mir projects in Georgia.<sup>24</sup>

A February 2020 report by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS) claimed that the anti-Western extremist group Georgian March “plays a major role” in spreading Russian malign information. Georgian March is most notorious for organizing demonstrations that turned violent, targeting ethnic and LGBT minorities. According to EFIS, the group’s activities are aimed at “rattling public support for joining the European Union and NATO, as well as creating internal tensions and escalating conflict within Georgian society.” EFIS claimed that several leaders of Georgian March had ties to Russia and its “influence activities.”<sup>25</sup>

Top figures of the Georgian Dream government speak out strongly and consistently for Georgia’s Western orientation. Nevertheless, other elements of the government and the party send mixed messages about NATO and the country’s relationship with Russia and the United States. Former Georgian Dream member of parliament Zaza Papuashvili has called into question Georgia’s policy of seeking NATO membership:

Let [those bigger countries] deal with Russia. [...] Why should I jump in front of the tanks and be killed? Must I be annihilated to give other countries the chance to show how badly Russia treats little Georgia? Is that my job [as a politician]?<sup>26</sup>

In December 2019, faked accounts traced to Georgia Dream, some of which shared articles that had a specifically anti-American sentiment,<sup>27</sup> were removed by Facebook. The government continues to support certain pro-Russian media outlets by providing them with advertising revenue and giving them interviews.

Opposition parties have jumped on these examples of Georgian Dream’s support for anti-Western views. The perception that the party is at best trying to appease Russia, and at worst may be working for Russian interests, helped fuel public outrage in June 2019. As noted above, Georgian Dream parliamentary leaders invited a member of the Russian Duma, Sergey Gavrilov, to address an assembly of legislators from Orthodox Christian countries held in Georgia’s parliament. The sight of a Russian holding forth from the seat of Georgian power led to mass protests against malign Russian influence. In turn, Russia criticized what it called Georgia’s “Russophobic hysteria,” and insisted on an apology. When none was forthcoming, the Kremlin utilized a common tool to punish its neighbors for not toeing the line: economic coercion. It cancelled all flights from Russia to Georgia, essentially cutting off Russian tourism, a major source of income for Georgia. Other forms of economic coercion, not just in Georgia but elsewhere in Russia’s periphery, include trade embargoes, cutting off energy or energy subsidies, and withdrawal of economic and security aid.

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23 Ibid.

24 Jankowicz, *How to Lose and Information War*.

25 Civil.ge, “[Estonian Intelligence Service Report: Russia Stepped up Pressure on Georgia in 2019](#),” February 17, 2020.

26 Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda*.

27 DFR Lab, “[Inauthentic Pages Linked to Majority Government Taken Down in Georgia](#),” December 20, 2019.

Russia seems to be applying pressure to ensure Georgia does not stray too far from its economic and political orbit. In 2019, the Georgian government undermined two projects that would have improved regional connectivity and reinforced an east-west trade and information corridor. The first was the Anaklia deep-water port project, which would have created thousands of jobs and allowed Georgia to become a major maritime hub in the trade between Europe and Asia. As noted above, the government essentially sunk the deal when it refused to underwrite loans from investors and international development organizations. In the second, the government reversed a deal with an Azeri company that wants to build a digital corridor of fiber-optic cable from Asia to Europe, further promoting the region's digital independence from Russia. While there is no proof of direct Russian threats in either case, the country that benefits most from the decision to torpedo these projects is Russia.<sup>28</sup>

***At times, Russia issues warnings that it is willing to use military force against Georgia again.***

But the biggest threat to Georgian sovereignty comes not from economic coercion. That is rather the existential threat posed by Russia's military presence in the occupied areas and across the border. Georgia's experience in 2008 and that of Ukraine in 2014 showed that Russian military intervention is not an idle threat.

At times, Russia issues warnings that it is willing to use military force against Georgia again. The goal is to deter the country from making sovereign foreign policy choices that the Kremlin does not like. For example, in February 2019, after meeting with a senior Georgian diplomat, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigoriy Karasin said:

We are trying to call on Georgia to avoid unpleasant surprises in our relationship. The thing is, more and more we are seeing the NATO agenda in Georgia's foreign policy. We are increasingly seeing [Georgia's leaders] talk about moving more quickly toward NATO, about the so-called 'Russian threat against all of democratic Europe,' etc. Naturally, this bothers us. Rather often we see large NATO exercises there, and Georgia encourages the participation of other regional countries, such as Armenia.

Tbilisi has to choose between creating a favorable atmosphere in the south Caucasus or joining NATO's agenda. [Trying to do both] will be difficult and fraught with serious consequences. Clearly, if such NATO activities continue to develop, sooner or later this will lead to problems. We all remember how the problems in Ukraine started. This is absolutely the situation we're facing here.<sup>29</sup>

This threat to violate Georgian sovereignty, and to upset what stability there is in the South Caucasus, received little notice. It also appeared to move Russia's supposed red line for triggering action. Where once it called NATO membership unacceptable, it now appears to warn that some undefined increased cooperation with NATO would cause it to invade.

28 Ben Hodges, "[The Curtain Could Fall on Belarus, But Georgia May Take its Place](#)," The Hill, August 25, 2001.

29 Kommersant, "[We Strive to Urge Georgia to Ensure that there Are no Unpleasant Surprises](#)," February 27, 2019.

In 1990, the United States, Canada, and Europe (including the Soviet Union) signed the Charter of Paris. They pledged “to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State,” and agreed to “fully recognize the freedom of States to choose their own security arrangements.”<sup>30</sup> This was meant to signal that all were abandoning the idea of spheres of influence.

Putin has rejected these principles. Again and again, he has asserted Russia’s claims to a sphere of influence where it has a veto over the decisions of its neighbors. He has never accepted the idea that the members of NATO and the EU voluntarily applied to join these organizations, and that they make decisions based on the consensus of all, not on the wishes of one “unipolar power.” He can only conceive of them participating in an organization that Russia dominates.

Self-assured democracies do not threaten to use military force against another democratic state because it does not follow their dictates. It appears that Eduard Shevardnadze was right that Georgia will enjoy true security only when Russia becomes a democracy.

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30 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “[Charter of Paris for a New Europe](#),” 1990.

## Georgia and the West

In contrast with neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia, especially after the Rose Revolution of 2003, has pursued deeper integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. This includes a strong desire, supported by a large majority of the population, to join the European Union and NATO. As far back as 2007, Georgia has sought a Membership Action Plan (MAP) from NATO. In lieu of that, the alliance at its summit in Bucharest in 2008 pledged that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members of NATO,” though it did not specify when or how.<sup>1</sup> NATO member states declared:

NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations. We welcome the democratic reforms in Ukraine and Georgia and look forward to free and fair parliamentary elections in Georgia in May. MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership. Today we make clear that we support these countries’ applications for MAP. Therefore we will now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications. We have asked Foreign Ministers to make a first assessment of progress at their December 2008 meeting. Foreign Ministers have the authority to decide on the MAP applications of Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

Support for pursuing NATO membership continued after the 2012 and 2013 parliamentary and presidential elections that saw the transfer of power from the United National Movement (UNM) to Georgian Dream. While some might argue that the determination to join has diminished under Georgian Dream, the government’s official position supports pursuing membership in NATO. Moreover, popular support remains high, with some 78 percent of Georgians saying they want to see Georgia join the alliance.<sup>3</sup>

Georgians see NATO membership as much needed protection against further Russian aggression, as a plurality cites defense and security benefits from joining NATO. For many, it also would represent validation that Georgia is becoming a normal European country, like the Baltic states and former Warsaw Pact countries. Their interest in membership also is driven by a desire to avoid being consigned to, if not a de facto Russian sphere of influence, at least to a dangerous gray zone.

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1 NATO, “[Official Text: Bucharest Summit Declaration.](#)” Heads of State and Government meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Bucharest, Romania, April 3, 2008.

2 Ibid.

3 Rasa Alisauskiene, “[Public Opinion Survey - Residents of Georgia.](#)” Center for Insights in Survey Research of the International Republican Institute, August 4, 2020.

Accordingly, support for NATO membership has been strong for a long time, even before Russia's invasion in 2008. Ever since, backing among Georgians for joining the alliance has stayed high. Eighty-seven percent of Georgians said they supported joining NATO in September 2008, a month after Russia's invasion.<sup>4</sup> Disappointed that NATO did not come to Georgia's rescue after the invasion, support for joining ebbed somewhat over the next year, to as low as 68 percent in the summer of 2009. But it rebounded into the 70 percent range in 2010 and, aside from a slight drop to 69 percent in the summer of 2019, has stayed above 70 percent.<sup>5</sup>

The renewed conflict last year between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh and fear of spillover effects, notwithstanding the Russia-orchestrated ceasefire, are likely to boost support for NATO membership. Even before hostilities erupted, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels and reaffirmed the government's commitment to "deepening cooperation between NATO and Georgia."<sup>6</sup> In its first meeting since the 2020 elections, the new parliament, controlled exclusively by Georgian Dream, reaffirmed membership in the EU and NATO, along with the "de-occupation" of Georgian territory by Russian forces as foreign policy priorities.<sup>7</sup>

***Georgia has direct experience in dealing with various forms of Russian aggression that is valuable to NATO.***

Georgia has direct experience in dealing with various forms of Russian aggression that is valuable to NATO. It also participates in international operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Its military is under civilian control, a key requirement for membership. And yet the obstacles to Georgia's joining the alliance are significant, not least because 20 percent of its territory is occupied by Russia. How could NATO possibly consider extending membership to Georgia in light of this fact, skeptics wonder? The flip side of that question is whether, by denying Georgia—and Ukraine—the possibility to become members, NATO in effect grants Russia a de facto veto over these two countries' aspirations? Is there a risk that by rejecting Georgia's pursuit of membership, NATO might inadvertently encourage Moscow to engage in similar aggressive behavior to block other countries' Euro-Atlantic aspirations? Would not calls for "permanent neutrality" for Georgia and Ukraine, as well as for other possible aspirants, reward Putin's dangerous behavior?<sup>8</sup> There are arguments to be made on both sides of this debate. At a minimum, Georgians and Ukrainians ask that no decisions about their country be made without them.

The 1995 NATO study that became the basis for the enlargement process set the requirement for aspiring states to settle all territorial conflicts with their neighbors, though no such requirement exists in the alliance's original treaty signed in 1949.<sup>9</sup> Since then, Russia has fostered and perpetuated territorial conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova essentially as a long-term insurance policy against their becoming NATO (or

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Jens Stoltenberg, "[Remarks by NATO Secretary General](#)," joint press point with the Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Gakharia, September 29, 2020.

7 Foreign Relations Committee, "[Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Foreign Policy of Georgia](#)," December 30, 2020.

8 Michael E. O'Hanlon, "[Beyond NATO: A New Security Architecture for Eastern Europe](#)," Brookings, 2017.

9 NATO, "[Study on NATO Enlargement](#)," September 3, 1995.

even EU) members. One can argue that this NATO requirement for membership has incentivized Russia to occupy territory of its neighbors. The West's challenge is to change the incentives so that the costs of occupation far outweigh the benefits.

There is a legitimate concern about the defensibility of Georgia and extension of the Article 5 security guarantees in the NATO Charter, yet similar concerns were raised about the Baltic states after they joined the alliance in 2004. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are arguably the most exposed among existing members. None of them had border agreements with Russia at the time they joined, and yet none of them has been invaded militarily since joining, though Estonia was the target of a Russian cyberattack in 2007 and all three are targets of Russian disinformation and corruption. Their membership in NATO has contributed to regional stability, overcoming initial concerns of some Western policymakers that including them into the alliance would be too destabilizing and provocative vis-à-vis Moscow. In retrospect, had those concerns won the day, the Baltic region arguably would be in greater danger from Russian aggression today.

Germany provides a precedent when it comes to the issue of disputed territory. West Germany became a member of NATO in 1955 notwithstanding the fact that East Germany was behind the Iron Curtain and soon after became a member of the Warsaw Pact. Greece and Turkey were welcomed into NATO despite real tensions and territorial boundary disputes between them, and their inclusion transformed a region of great volatility into one of relative stability during the Cold War. Supporters of Georgia's membership wonder whether the same could happen in the South Caucasus.

NATO and the EU have maintained a decades-old policy of welcoming in new states that satisfy the criteria for joining. Keeping the door open to Georgia does not seem unreasonable to many observers, especially Georgians. And, as a member of NATO, the United States will have significant, albeit not decisive, say in the matter.

### ***Much as with joining NATO, a sizable majority of Georgians backs joining the EU.***

Much as with joining NATO, a sizable majority of Georgians backs joining the EU. In a survey published by the International Republican Institute in the summer of 2020, 87 percent of Georgians said they support joining the EU.<sup>10</sup> They see it as a way to strengthen the economy. The previous government under Saakashvili and the current Georgian Dream one have sought closer ties with the EU. It was during Georgian Dream's first months in office, in November 2013, that the country signed with the EU the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, and an agreement on visa liberalization—a process begun by the previous government.

These agreements are concrete proof that such a Euro-Atlantic orientation produces benefits. Still, the prospect of EU membership remains far off, with no timetable indicating when it might be a possibility. The EU expresses rather vague support for "Georgia's ambitions for closer ties with the EU. The EU and the govern-

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<sup>10</sup> Alisaukiene, Public Opinion Survey.

ment of Georgia agreed to continue to work together towards a further deepening of Georgia's political association and economic integration with the EU.<sup>11</sup> Georgia maintains close contact with the EU as a member of the Eastern Partnership initiative, but the lack of a time frame for when it might be able to begin accession negotiations will almost certainly become a source of disappointment among the population.

The same is true with regard to NATO, where the lack of concrete signs of progress toward membership may eventually sour Georgian attitudes toward the alliance. The hopes among many Georgians that NATO would provide security and defense against further Russian encroachment on their territory have gone unrealized.

In 1992, a year after gaining independence, Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, marking the beginning of its relations with NATO. Two years later, it joined the Partnership for Peace. Amid the first two waves of welcoming new members in 1997 and 2004, including the three Baltic states in the latter, Georgia deepened its ties with the alliance, as the Saakashvili government made this an essential part of its foreign policy. That included the establishment in 2010 of a NATO liaison office in Georgia to “support the country's reform efforts and its programme of cooperation with NATO.”<sup>12</sup> But twelve years after NATO leaders pledged in Bucharest that Georgia would become a member, the lack of tangible progress toward achieving that goal is frustrating to many Georgians, and encourages those who maintain the country would be better off cutting a deal with Russia instead.

Russian disinformation seeks to exploit the lack of clarity from NATO and the EU on Georgia's prospects for membership to sow doubts in the minds of Georgians about the reliability of these Euro-Atlantic institutions. Polling shows only limited drops in support of pursuing either NATO or EU membership, but the West cannot assume that Georgians will remain patient indefinitely, especially when the Kremlin tries to offer them an alternative vision, as incredible as that may seem with Russian forces occupying a fifth of the country. Still, last June 82 percent of Georgians said that Georgia should maintain only a pro-EU and pro-Western posture.<sup>13</sup>

## The Special Relationship with the United States

The United States played a key role in pushing for Georgia's NATO Membership Action Plan in 2008. President George W. Bush had developed a special relationship with Saakashvili over the years and a genuine fondness for Georgia. He was impressed by the Rose Revolution. Educated at Columbia and George Washington universities, Saakashvili was a huge fan of the United States, spoke perfect English, and emerged at a time when Bush was just beginning to formulate his Freedom Agenda. Saakashvili and the popular movement he represented also engendered strong support within the U.S. Congress, including from Senators John McCain and Hillary Clinton. While Georgia under Shevardnadze had been pro-Western for the most part, the country under Saakashvili became “one of the most pro-American countries in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

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11 European Council, “[EU Relations with Georgia](#),” undated.

12 NATO, “[Relations with Georgia](#),” October 21, 2020.

13 Alisauskiene, Public Opinion Survey.

14 Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World*, p. 58.

U.S. relations with Georgia under Shevardnadze had been quite good, and some in Washington were sorry to see him go in 2003. He was admired for his role as foreign minister toward the end of the Soviet Union, including when he resigned in 1990 after warning Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that “dictatorship was coming” to the teetering country. Shevardnadze’s decision to return to his homeland to serve as president brought a level of stability after a period of civil war. From his tenure as Soviet foreign minister, he was a well-known and respected figure in the West and his departure under pressure from Saakashvili was initially met with concern.

It did not take long, however, for Georgia’s new leadership to win over friends and supporters in the United States and elsewhere. Saakashvili’s anti-corruption campaign early in his presidency impressed Western leaders, and Georgia soon became one of the leading recipients of U.S. assistance in the region. Saakashvili and Bush quickly struck up a friendship. Unpopular in several countries in Europe because of the invasion of Iraq, Bush was warmly received when he visited Tbilisi in 2005—despite an assassination attempt while he gave a speech in Freedom Square. A main thoroughfare in Tbilisi was named after the U.S. president. Not even Saakashvili’s declaration of a state of emergency in 2007 dented Bush’s positive feelings toward the Georgian leader and his country.

***Saakashvili’s anti-corruption campaign early in his presidency impressed Western leaders, and Georgia soon became one of the leading recipients of U.S. assistance in the region.***

Thus, when Saakashvili requested an MAP for Georgia, a request also made by the leaders in Ukraine, Bush supported this at the NATO summit. He believed that it took courage for Georgia and Ukraine to do so in the face of Russian opposition. Bush also was impressed by Georgia’s contributions to NATO operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

And yet Bush was unable to overcome German and, to a lesser extent, French opposition to such a move. Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel held a very different view of Saakashvili than Bush did. Her first meeting with him after she became chancellor was described as “a disaster.”<sup>15</sup> She instead negotiated directly with Bush in Bucharest and agreed on the forward-leaning language stating that Georgia would become a member.

The outcome of the Bucharest meeting was a disappointment to Saakashvili; he and other Georgian officials viewed the refusal to offer an MAP as a setback for the country’s aspirations. Analysts disagree on how Russia interpreted the NATO summit. Some believe that the denial of an MAP was read in Moscow as a decrease in the West’s support for Georgia, in which case Russia could get away with settling scores with Saakashvili without worrying about any major consequences. Others claim that the language in the NATO communiqué triggered an angry backlash from Putin, resulting several months later in the decision to invade Georgia. This line of interpretation goes on to note that the Bucharest summit came shortly after the United States and several European countries recognized the independence of Kosovo, which Moscow opposed.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

Whichever interpretation one subscribes to, the fact remains that the West imposed no real penalties on Russia for the invasion of Georgia. There are several explanations for this. Saakashvili acted carelessly in response to Russian and South Ossetian provocations and European leaders, especially, were not inclined to bail him out – though in taking such a position, they were also punishing all Georgians. Some analysts believe that Saakashvili had long planned to retake control over South Ossetia and went too far in the summer of 2008 in carrying out his plans.<sup>16</sup> His actions should not translate into any justification for Putin’s decision, however. In fact, Russia was looking for an opportunity to move against Saakashvili, whom Putin hated, and the Georgian president was not able to tap into a reservoir of support among his European counterparts.

***The fact remains that the West imposed no real penalties  
on Russia for the invasion of Georgia.***

The brevity of the war, with the fighting over in five days, was another factor. Some 40,000 Russian forces overwhelmed the outnumbered and outgunned Georgian side, albeit with significant losses, including nearly three dozen Russian military planes shot down. Had the fighting dragged on, as has happened in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there might have been an opportunity to mobilize a stronger Western response.

Finally, the United States was only three months away from a presidential election and the Bush administration was not in a strong position to mobilize a sizable Western response, especially given that it was bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as saddled with a financial crisis. There was no appetite in Washington for a muscular response.<sup>17</sup> Bush was in Beijing for the Olympics, along with Putin, when the fighting broke out. “I’ve been warning you Saakashvili is hot-blooded,” Bush reportedly said in confronting Putin. Putin retorted by saying, “I’m hot-blooded, too.” “No, Vladimir,” Bush replied, “You’re cold-blooded.”<sup>18</sup>

The United States flew Georgian troops stationed in Iraq back to their country on military aircraft and sent several ships into the Black Sea. In addition, NATO suspended cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council, though NATO foreign ministers decided to resume formal dialogue in March 2009. These steps were not completely irrelevant—and may have encouraged Russia’s pursuit of a rapid ceasefire deal—but the invasion was over two days after the Georgian troops returned.

The invasion of Georgia occurred a year after Russia launched a cyberattack against Estonia, a NATO member. The lack of any response to that attack may well have convinced Putin that he could get away with it. And indeed Russia paid no real price for its actions against Georgia. Aside from the brief suspension of the NATO-Russia Council, the Bush administration suspended high-level contacts and pulled from consideration by the U.S. Senate a civilian nuclear agreement whose approval was unlikely anyway in Bush’s last few months in office. No one proposed expelling Russia from the G-8, let alone imposing sanctions. As the journalist Arkady

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<sup>16</sup> De Waal, *The Caucasus*, p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House*, Random House, 2013, p. 604.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 603.

Ostrovsky has put it, “Russia got away with the Georgia war cost-free, which ultimately contributed to Russian confidence that its later incursions into Ukraine would succeed.”<sup>19</sup>

During the presidential election campaign of 2008, Senator Barack Obama competed with Senator McCain to see who could portray himself as more pro-Georgian and tougher on Russia in response to Putin’s invasion. Both condemned Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

“No matter how this conflict started,” Obama declared four days after the start of the fighting, “[t]here is no possible justification for these attacks.” He went on to say:

Russia’s government must respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and other independent states. Its refusal to do so calls into question its commitment to the responsibilities of membership to organizations such as the OCSE and the Russia-NATO Council, its application to join the WTO and the OECD, and makes it impossible for Congress to enact the civil nuclear agreement. If Russia’s government continues to violate the norms and practices of the international community, the United States and our allies must review all aspects of relations with Russia [...] Russia’s recent choices—not American or European decisions—are threatening this potential and reminding us all that peace and security in Europe cannot be taken for granted.<sup>20</sup>

Obama also sought to keep the door open to a rapprochement. “Let us be clear, no one wants to see another Cold War with Russia,” he said. “The United States and Russia have many mutual interests, and Russia has the potential to become a critical stakeholder in the international system.” It was this approach that Obama adopted upon assuming office in January 2009.

The Obama administration decided it was not its responsibility to impose any costs on Russia for an act that occurred on the watch of its predecessor. Instead, it announced a “reset” policy toward Russia less than a year after the invasion and resumed high-level contacts between the two countries. In contrast to Bush, Obama during his two terms in office paid little attention to developments in Georgia.

### **After Bush, Is Georgia on America’s Mind?**

Eleven days before leaving office, the Bush administration signed the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership<sup>21</sup> to try to signal to the incoming Obama administration the importance it attached to bilateral relationship. The partnership, in turn, produced a commission with working groups on such priority areas as democracy; defense and security; economic, trade and energy issues; and people-to-people and cultural exchanges. While the Obama administration continued the commission and maintained the partnership, the level of U.S. attention dropped considerably.

19 Arkady Ostrovsky, “[For Putin, Disinformation Is Power](#),” New York Times, August 5, 2016.

20 Barack Obama, “[Senator Obama on Russia’s Decision to Recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia](#),” The American Presidency Project, August 26, 2008.

21 U.S. Department of State, “[United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership](#),” January 9, 2009.

Obama and several of his advisers concluded that Bush had over-personalized the relationship with Georgia through his focus on Saakashvili. Accordingly, they took a more distant approach toward the Georgian president and focused instead on improving relations with the Kremlin. Unlike Bush, Obama never visited Georgia while serving as president, though Vice President Joe Biden did. Technical assistance continued and support for Georgia in the U.S. Congress remained high. But the special relationship there had been between Bush and Saakashvili was not sustained with Obama in the White House.

From 2009 until roughly the end of 2011, when the reset policy lost momentum, especially after Putin returned to Russia's presidency, the Obama administration pursued not only a Russia-first approach toward the region, but virtually a Russia-only policy. Attention to other countries, including Georgia, declined so as to avoid irritating a sensitive issue between Moscow and Washington. Obama's refusal to provide lethal military assistance to Ukraine after the illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas disappointed not only Ukrainians but also Georgians, who were hoping to benefit from such assistance in support of their own defensive efforts against Russian aggression.

Biden had traveled to Georgia several times while serving in the U.S. Senate. During his first visit to Tbilisi as vice president in 2009, he declared full U.S. support for Georgia. "We understand that Georgia aspires to join NATO," Biden said. "We fully support that aspiration, and members of parliament, we will work to continue to help you meet the standards of NATO membership." Calling out Russia for its invasion, he urged the "withdrawal of all forces to their pre-conflict positions and ultimately out of [Georgia's] territorial area." He also voiced support for the "journey to a secure, free, democratic, and once again united Georgia."<sup>22</sup>

***With the end of Saakashvili's presidency in 2013, Georgian-U.S. relations took on a more business-like and even less personal quality.***

Despite the positive impression Biden made during his visit, many in Georgia and elsewhere in the region, and even Europe more broadly, worried that the Obama administration would focus extensively on its reset with Russia at the expense of relations with other countries in the region. These concerns were largely borne out. With the end of Saakashvili's presidency in 2013, Georgian-U.S. relations took on a more business-like and even less personal quality. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 led some to reconsider the lack of any serious reaction to Putin's similar move into Georgia six years earlier. The failure to impose any consequences then, some analysts concluded, followed the next year by Obama's reset policy, probably emboldened the Russian leader. In Ukraine's case, however, the West, including the United States, responded quickly with sanctions, which rankled many Georgians who felt a double standard.

Making matters worse for Tbilisi was the fact that the same U.S. officials who had responsibility for relations with Georgia also had responsibility for Ukraine. From 2014, Ukraine consumed most of the time and attention of policymakers in the United States and Europe, while Georgia and other countries in the region took a

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<sup>22</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "[Biden Backs Georgia's NATO Ambitions, Urges Democratic Reforms](#)," July 23, 2009.

back seat. So, even with Saakashvili no longer in the picture, the United States lacked the bandwidth to engage to a significant extent with the new government in Tbilisi.

The preoccupation with Ukraine, understandable though it may have been, opened the door for Russia to engage in creeping annexation in Georgia, with the demarcation line agreed after the 2008 invasion slowly moving further into Georgian-controlled territory. Russia, in other words, continues to pose a threat to the country, and neither the United States nor the EU seems seized with the problem.

At the fifth meeting of the U.S.-Georgia Bilateral Commission in November 2015, the United States was represented by Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is now secretary of state in the Biden administration. He said: “We stand by the commitment we made in Bucharest that Georgia will become a member of NATO and we continue to strongly support its aspirations on this path.” He went on to reaffirm U.S. “support for Georgia’s sovereignty, its territorial integrity, and its independence. Decisions on Georgia’s future should be made the citizens of Georgia and no one else.” Blinken also called for the withdrawal of Russian occupying forces.<sup>23</sup>

The Trump administration got off to a promising start in relations with Georgia when Vice President Mike Pence paid a well-received visit to Tbilisi in 2017. “America stands with Georgia,” Pence said during joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, in which he also condemned Russia’s “aggression” and “occupation” of Georgian territory. “The United States supports Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders,” Pence added. “And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Trump administration got off to a promising start in relations with Georgia when Vice President Mike Pence paid a well-received visit to Tbilisi in 2017.***

“President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO,” Pence added. He went on to say:

[W]e strongly support Georgia’s aspiration to become a member of NATO. And we’ll continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made extraordinary progress – not just in the past 25 years, but over the last five years, there has been significant progress in Georgia that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership.

A few months after Pence’s trip, the Trump administration approved the transfer of lethal weapons, including Javelin missiles, to Georgia and Ukraine.

23 U.S. Embassy Tbilisi, “[Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Georgian Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili](#),” concluding statement, November 2, 2015.

24 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “[Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian ‘Aggression’](#),” August 1, 2017.

Alas, Pence's visit to Georgia was the last one by a senior White House or cabinet-level official until the very end of Trump's presidency, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited last November. Coming between the two rounds of the controversial parliamentary elections, Pompeo's failure to meet with the opposition in addition to his meetings with government officials and the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, along with a short session with civil society representatives, did more harm than good and suggested that the United States was favoring Georgian Dream.<sup>25</sup> Pompeo did not even bother to pay lip service to a request in a much publicized open letter on the eve of his visit from the security and foreign policy community in Georgia seeking his backing for a "permanent presence of American armed forces in Georgia."<sup>26</sup> Many in Georgia were left disappointed with his visit.

When one of the authors of this report, Ian Kelly, departed as U.S. ambassador to Georgia in the spring of 2018, the Trump administration took nearly two years to replace him with a new ambassador, Kelly Dignan. To be fair, the administration's initial choice to be ambassador was rejected by the Georgian authorities, delaying the replacement by at least a year. But Georgian officials struggled to stay on the radar screen of their U.S. counterparts, leading some in Tbilisi to suggest, with help from Russian disinformation, that the United States was no longer a reliable partner. There also was concern in Georgia that Trump's reluctance to criticize Putin might embolden the latter into concluding that he could get away with further aggression against Russia's neighbors.

Contributing to the sense of a disengaged United States was the fact that the latest truce in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was negotiated almost entirely by Russia, with some Turkish involvement. The Minsk Group—the OSCE negotiating mechanism in which the United States and France play a role along with Russia—was nowhere to be found and essentially made irrelevant. The latest round in the conflict and the way it was resolved, with Armenia and Azerbaijan agreeing to a Russian peacekeeping force of nearly 2,000 in Nagorno-Karabakh, affect Georgia's security and aspirations to join the Euro-Atlantic community.

***The United States remains the most powerful Western source  
of influence and support for Tbilisi.***

With this agreement, the only security guarantees are provided by Russia. It now has forces stationed in all three South Caucasus states, with bases in Armenia, peacekeeping forces in Azerbaijan, and occupying forces in Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The West is effectively locked out, weakening its standing in the region and raising questions about its commitment to Georgia's pro-Western aspirations.

Despite the perception that its interest toward Georgia has declined significantly, the United States remains the most powerful Western source of influence and support for Tbilisi. Bipartisan congressional support, in the form of voting sums for developmental assistance, continues at a high level. Some members of Congress, through several critical statements and resolutions, have also made it clear that they are following devel-

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25 David J. Kramer, "[Pompeo Plays Favorites in the Georgia Runoffs](#)," *The Bulwark*, November 17, 2020.

26 Georgian Security and Foreign Policy Community, "[Open Letter: To U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#),"

opments there closely. Georgians remain very pro-American, despite the seeming neglect from successive administrations. They value relations with their European partners, but they view the United States as the main defender against further Russian aggression and the chief advocate on their behalf.

Last June, 65 percent said the United States was Georgia's greatest political partner, while 51 percent said the same about the EU (multiple responses were permitted). By contrast, 82 percent said Russia was the greatest political threat. While 94 percent of Georgians described relations with the United States as "good," 93 percent said the same about relations with the EU, while 84 percent described relations with Russia as "bad."<sup>27</sup>

The Biden administration as well as members of Congress should not take Georgians' pro-American views for granted. Given the outsized influence the United States has in the country, the administration should take advantage of its ability to urge Georgia to stay on a democratic, Euro-Atlantic path, creating an alternative to the prevalent model of governance in the region. Doing so will require elevating Georgia on the list of priority countries in recognition of its contributions to international peacekeeping efforts, resistance to Russian aggression, and its constant pro-American outlook. President Biden seems to understand this, as do the people he has appointed to senior foreign policy positions. The United States can have a major impact in Georgia, and the final part of this report offers recommendations for how to do so.

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<sup>27</sup> Alisauskiene, Public Opinion Survey.

## Recommendations for U.S.-Georgian Relations

Georgia's democratic development and pro-Western stance could wither without more political, economic, and security support from the West. At the same time, internal dynamics threaten the progress the country has made and its ability to stand out in the region for positive reasons. In recent times, Georgia has seemed on the verge of reverting to the regional norm of one-party rule, thus undermining public confidence in accountable government. State capture is a growing problem that will stunt foreign investment if not arrested quickly. But recent history has also proved that insisting on adherence to Western political norms can be successful in stemming this slide toward illiberalism and kleptocracy. Keeping Georgia on the right track will require internal and external actors playing a positive and engaged role. But, ultimately, Georgians bear the bulk of responsibility for addressing their problems and cannot rely on outside players to fix them.

A resilient and secure Georgia can also help stop the South Caucasus's slide toward conflict and great-power predations. Its success matters because the region, beset on all sides by conflict and autocracy, needs a virtuous countermodel. Over the centuries, Georgia has shown a pragmatic tolerance toward other faiths and ethnicities. Its location on the verge of conflict zones is not just a challenge, but also an opportunity to show there can be a different outcome to the region's troubles.

The United States, with its global economic and security responsibilities, has a particular stake in seeing Georgia fulfil its sovereign choice to join the West and to serve as a stable democracy on a critical east-west trade and energy corridor. While the Biden administration faces a vast array of challenges, starting at home, it is important that it also step up U.S. support for Georgia. The United States' influence on the country's political decisions and ability to deter great-power aggression far outstrip that of Europe.

Here we offer specific recommendations to encourage the new administration and the new Congress to support Georgia. Many would work most effectively if done in partnership with European allies. They also entail a vital role for Georgia to play.

The recommendations involve:

- Showing more interest in Georgia's success, including by reinvigorating the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission.
- Encouraging Georgia to stay on the democratic, Western-oriented path.
- Keeping the door open for Georgia to join NATO and the EU.

- Helping Georgia build better checks and balances with strong democratic institutions, such as civil society organizations and independent media.
- Fast-tracking a free trade agreement, to the extent possible.
- Helping Georgia defend itself.
- Pushing back on Russian threats to Georgia.

### **Show Georgia the United States has Skin in the Game**

The Biden administration should demonstrate its support for Georgia by scheduling a high-level visit to the country as early as possible. This could mark the reinvigoration of the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission, started at the end of the Bush administration but largely dormant during the Trump administration. While the pandemic situation in the United States will demand the attention of many senior officials, including the president, Georgia too is experiencing serious challenges from the pandemic and the concomitant economic effects of the response to it. Providing aid targeted to help Georgia deal with the pandemic would go a long way to generate goodwill among the population and save lives. The U.S. Development Finance Corporation can play a critical role in supporting infrastructure projects in the country.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of such support from the West, Putin will seek opportunities to increase Russia's leverage in Georgia, whether through creeping annexation and interference in internal affairs or offering pandemic aid and vaccines. China, too, could seek to fill voids in assistance left by the West.

As the country with the greatest influence in Georgia, the United States needs to exercise that influence, show it cares about Georgia's future, and counter Putin's malevolent efforts. One of the best ways to do this is through regular, senior-level visits to the country. In addition to meeting with their Georgian counterparts, visiting U.S. officials should meet with the opposition, civil society representatives, and media figures to demonstrate that the relationship goes beyond that between the governments. Given the unstable situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, high-level visits to Tbilisi could be combined with stops in Yerevan and Baku.

At the same time, the Biden administration should invite various Georgian counterparts to Washington. Such visits would enable senior Georgian officials to meet not only with administration officials but with interested members of Congress, where there remains strong, bipartisan support for Georgia. Visiting officials could also make the rounds of various think tanks and news outlets to keep attention focused on their country. One of the best ways to get attention in the United States is for Georgia to stand out by staying on a democratic path oriented toward the Euro-Atlantic community—but the opposite is also true. The country could become the focus of criticism from Washington and elsewhere should it stray from this path or raise eyebrows with questionable economic and investment decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, "[Our Work - Eastern Europe and Eurasia](#)," undated.

There is a middle path to find between what some might consider an over-personalized relationship under Presidents Bush and Saakashvili and relative neglect of Georgia during the Obama and Trump administrations.

The United States should also urge more visits from and to Europe and the different Euro-Atlantic institutions—including the EU and NATO—as well as encourage increased targeted assistance from Europe to meet Georgia’s needs. NATO secretaries general have done well in conducting periodic visits to Tbilisi; those should continue as part of the evolution toward eventual NATO membership. The EU and its member states also have critical roles to play and should signal in the clearest terms that Georgia is considered part of Europe.

### **But Offer Some Tough Love, Too**

Polarization in Georgia has become significantly worse. Last year’s parliamentary elections demonstrated this starkly. While recognizing that debate is at the heart of being a democracy, Georgia cannot afford to be crippled by political battles that those with ill intentions can exploit. Instead, the political parties, while maintaining their disagreements and differences, should be able to agree on the need to work on uniting the country and focusing on reforms necessary for eventual EU and NATO membership. U.S. and European officials should state unequivocally that a one-party parliament is not acceptable, and the ruling party and the opposition need to find a compromise over the latest impasse in the wake of the controversy over the parliamentary elections. This will reduce Georgia’s vulnerability and exposure to Russian influence and interference as well as to the actions of pro-Russian parties. At the same time, Georgia should not look to China as an alternative to Russia. The West, not Russia or China, will open more political and economic doors for Georgia.

This means the United States needs to call out Georgia when it strays from the democratic path or facilitates Russian malign influence. There have been concerns about pressure on civil society and the media, and members of Congress in particular have made known their concerns about Georgian Dream’s perceived readiness to encourage Russian investment. Criticism from Congress over the past year has gotten the attention of officials in Tbilisi, but it should be interpreted as a sign that Washington is paying attention and wants what is best for the country. Concerns in Washington about a slowdown, or even reversal, in Georgia’s progress on political, judicial, and economic reforms contributed to the Senate’s failure last year to pass the House version of the Georgian Support Act.<sup>2</sup> A clear commitment by Georgia to return to the reformist track will help revive prospects for such legislation. Conditioning some assistance on democratic progress would be a good use of U.S. influence and get the attention of Georgian officials.

At the same time, the United States needs to show that more progress in Georgia’s pursuit of NATO membership is possible. If it does not lead the way on this issue with NATO allies, Georgia will remain stuck in the position it currently occupies. The United States should also urge the EU to begin accession negotiations so that agreements reached in the past few years can lead to the real prospect of membership. None of this will happen, however, unless Georgia stays on the right path. The Biden administration plans to host a Summit

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, “[H.R. 598 - Georgia Support Act](#),” 116th Congress, October 23, 2019.

for Democracy in its first year in office;<sup>3</sup> moves that assure Washington that Georgia intends to stay on the democratic path will help the country secure a seat at that table.

## Keep the Door Open to NATO and the EU

NATO and the EU have maintained a decades-old policy of welcoming in new states that satisfy the criteria for joining and are accepted by existing members. This policy should apply to Georgia; to do otherwise would consign it indefinitely to a dangerous gray zone next to Russia. Entry into NATO is not imminent, but it should remain a viable option. As long as a democratic Georgia remains outside of NATO and the EU, the vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace will not be realized.

“For 40 years, the seeds of democracy in Eastern Europe lay dormant,” President George H.W. Bush declared in 1989. “And for 40 years, the world has waited for the Cold War to end [The] passion for freedom cannot be denied forever. The world has waited long enough. The time is right. Let Europe be whole and free.” Bush’s vision responded to the aspirations of Central-Eastern European nations of the Warsaw Pact. Yet two-and-a-half years later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of fifteen newly independent states, the idea of a Europe whole and free took on a whole new dimension.

Central to fulfilling that vision during the 1990s and early 2000s was the effort to build a strategic partnership with Russia in tandem with the enlargement of NATO and the EU to include countries in Europe’s east. Welcoming new members into NATO and the EU incentivized and enabled nations to undertake difficult economic, political, and military reforms. NATO enlargement extended the zone of stability and security toward Europe’s east, and provided an umbrella for unprecedented prosperity there. An open-door policy to NATO and the EU will make the continent overall stronger, more stable, and more prosperous.

Aside from the three Baltic states, left uncertain was what to do with countries along Russia’s border that used to be part of the Soviet Union. That issue came to the fore in 2008, when Ukraine and Georgia sought Membership Action Plans with NATO as a stepping stone to eventual membership. Central European leaders forged forward-leaning language at the NATO summit in Bucharest, which the alliance adopted: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” While failing to begin the membership process for these two countries, that declaration demonstrated that Bush’s concept of a Europe whole and free would not exclude other nations that emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Vice President Mike Pence reiterated the Trump administration’s support for Georgia’s eventual NATO membership during his visit to Tbilisi in 2017. The Biden administration should maintain that position and formulate next steps to bring that goal to fruition. To be clear, Georgia faces challenges to becoming a NATO member especially. It shares a border with only one NATO member state, Turkey, and even that is not reassuring given President Erdoğan’s reckless muscle-flexing of late. Nonetheless, telling Georgia it cannot become

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3 Joseph R. Biden, “[Why America Must Lead Again](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2020.

a member until Russia ends its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would simply cede to Moscow a veto over Tbilisi's aspirations. Georgia's membership in NATO could help it consolidate reforms, strengthen the alliance, and help stabilize the Black Sea region. Until then, the United States could ramp up bilateral security assistance while managing Georgia's NATO membership expectations.

Similarly, the EU, notwithstanding clear enlargement fatigue, should keep its door open, too. Any effective strategy to support sustainable a free-market democracy in Georgia will require a coordinated effort by Georgians to pursue the reforms required to join not only the EU but also NATO, coupled with a coordinated strategy by the United States and the EU to support this process. EU assistance to Georgia's agricultural sector has provided a helpful boost to its exports. More could be done in educational support, including more funding for Western academic programs. This is a logical follow-on to the agreements Georgia signed with the EU in 2013.

### **Support Georgia's Democratic Progress and Civil Society**

Following last year's parliamentary elections, the United States, working closely with its European allies, should increase assistance to ensure Georgia remains on the democratic path. This helps it stand out from among its neighbors. Civil society, which has acted as a vital check on the government and as a provider to many in society, needs support and special attention and protection from any pressure, whether from official or non-official circles.

Georgia's recent slide toward one-party rule has meant the weakening of the kinds of institutions a democracy needs to provide checks and balances against the power of executive. U.S. support should focus on rebuilding and strengthening the independence of those institutions, especially the judiciary, free media, civil society organizations, and a multiparty parliament.

Selective prosecutions of political opponents or business rivals not only threaten the integrity of the judicial system, they also pose major obstacles to increased foreign investment. The United States should assist in developing a Western-style arbitration system to assure investors of security of their investments. The court system needs further reform to reduce the perception that courts are not independent and respond directly or indirectly to powerful business and government forces. One way to prevent this perception is the assignment of cases to judges randomly.

Independent Georgian media also need support. Digital media is the main source of news and information for many Georgians, but sustaining it is proving difficult. More traditional media are facing financial challenges as well, and they too need support. Particular emphasis should be placed on training of investigative journalists and regional media, whose work is critical to ensure good governance. Efforts to combat disinformation—and Georgia is the target of plenty of that from Russia—also need assistance.

Civil society is the backbone of the country. Non-governmental organizations need financial support. At the same time, it is important that they disclose their sources of support and maintain full transparency. This will

help dispel the disinformation and conspiracy theories that allege without any evidence that they are fronts for special interests.

As things stand now, the parliament cannot carry out its critical role as a check against executive power. The agreement in 2020, mediated by the U.S. and EU missions in Tbilisi to introduce fully proportional representation by 2024, was a great step forward in creating a more robust multiparty parliament. The current impasse, where the opposition has boycotted parliament to protest election irregularities, is a tremendous step backward. The United States and EU should use their leverage again to ensure another agreement to bring into parliament a broad spectrum of bona fide forces that are able to hold the government accountable.<sup>4</sup>

The parliament also needs the resources, particularly in terms of staffing, to exercise its proper oversight role. In addition, recent experience of Russian interference has showed that parties need to be more transparent when it comes to their funding. Legislation outlawing foreign funding for parties should be given more teeth, and allegations that fringe parties receive Russian money need to be investigated.

Exchange programs and educational linkages help Georgia integrate with the West and should be ramped up. It is the most pro-American country in the region and investing in its future generations will pay dividends. Special attention should be devoted to preparing the next generation to join the 21<sup>st</sup> century information economy.

## Negotiate a Free Trade Agreement

Few actions would demonstrate clear U.S. support for Georgia more than negotiating and concluding a free trade agreement. The EU's Deep Comprehensive and Free Trade Area agreement was a major boost to Georgia, and a comparable accord with the United States would provide additional impetus to the economy and encourage further U.S. investment. It also would signal a strengthened U.S. commitment to Georgia's economic as well as political success. Last October, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative announced that Georgia had met all the standards necessary to maintain preferential trade status with the United States, citing the improvement in the protection of worker rights.<sup>5</sup>

A free trade agreement might facilitate U.S. investment in projects that have become unnecessary sources of controversy, including the Anaklia port project. This project would enhance Georgia's role as a critical southern trade and energy corridor. Having U.S. or European investment in such projects would minimize the risk that Russian and/or Chinese funding would step in, with all the problems that come from either source. It would also serve as a model for Armenia and Azerbaijan to diversify their options for investment.

Free trade agreements with the United States and the EU could serve as magnets for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to rejoin the rest of the country. Investing in Georgia's economic success would incentivize those living

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4 Many thanks to Miriam Lanskoj for helping us articulate this position.

5 Office of the United States Trade Representative, "[USTR Announces GSP Enforcement Action, Country Successes and New Eligibility Reviews](#)," press release, October 30, 2020.

in those breakaway regions to avoid being left out of a thriving Georgia. That, in turn, could contribute to resolution of these long-festering crises. At the same time, the Biden administration will face many demands when it comes to free trade agreements. Georgia should certainly be on the list but will not be at the top of it; accordingly, managing expectations will be important.

### **Help Georgia Defend Itself**

The Trump administration made the right decision to allow Georgia and Ukraine to obtain lethal military assistance, including Javelin missiles. The Biden administration should continue the policy of providing to Georgia the equipment and materiel it needs to defend itself against further Russian aggression. While the country would not be able to fend off for long a full-scale Russian military invasion, the more ability it has to impose costs on any potential invading force, the more this will make the Kremlin think twice before launching a repeat of its 2008 actions.

NATO's next steps toward closer cooperation with Georgia should include more initiatives for maritime security in the Black Sea. Consistent with deepening ties with NATO, the United States and its allies should establish a Black Sea Security Hub with alliance standards. This not only would help Georgia but also would move it closer to eventual membership. The United States should increase its naval training and exercises with Georgian forces and encourage other NATO members to do the same.

As part of this enhanced defense relationship, the United States, working with fellow NATO members, should establish a cybersecurity center in Georgia, comparable to the one created in Estonia. The Biden administration should encourage Estonia and other countries in Europe with a good track record in fending off cyberattacks and pushing back against Russian disinformation and propaganda to help Georgia and the region.

During his visit to Tbilisi last November, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo did not address the request of Georgia's security and foreign policy community seeking the establishment of a permanent U.S. military presence in the country.<sup>6</sup> A similar request is likely to be made of the Biden administration, which should be ready to engage with Georgian officials about the possibility, even if it is a long shot. Such a presence, however small, would help deter any further Russian aggression against Georgia, even if it does not include the Article 5 security guarantees that come with membership in NATO. One relatively easy step would be the extension and expansion of the U.S. Army's in-country train-and-equip program, the Georgia Defense Readiness Program, which is due to expire at the end of this year.

### **Get Tougher with Russia Over Georgia**

The West did virtually nothing in response to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. Not only did that likely embolden Putin into thinking he could try the same thing in Ukraine six years later, the lack of any response betrayed Georgia. Granted, the country was not covered by NATO's Article 5, but it expected more from the

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<sup>6</sup> Georgian Security and Foreign Policy Community, Open Letter.

international community in response to this blatant violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which continues to this day.

In contrast to 2008, the West imposed serious sanctions on Russia after its illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas. The Biden administration should make clear that Russia's creeping annexation of Georgian-controlled territory will incur sanctions coordinated with European allies. The only way to stop Russian moves into Georgia is to raise the costs involved. Strong pushback is necessary for Putin to calculate that continuing such actions against Georgia is not worth the price.

The Biden administration has its hands full with many domestic and foreign policy exigencies. Georgia will not be at the top of the list, but the best way for it to get the attention of the administration, and the new Congress, is to stand out by succeeding.

Finally, Georgia should no longer be viewed merely through the prism of a South Caucasus wracked with conflict and dysfunction. Rather, it should be seen as a critical player in insuring the growth and independence of the Black Sea region. Georgia is key to an area that, in the wake of Russia's attempts to annex swathes of it and dominate the rest of it, has taken on increased strategic importance for the United States and Europe. Those looking for Georgia's geographic links with the EU and NATO should look to its Black Sea littoral.

Georgia and the United States have a strong track record of cooperation and have proven to be important partners and allies. The opportunity to take the relationship to even higher and more productive levels exists if both sides seize the moment.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

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