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Russia's Policy Towards Georgia: Exploring Security and Connectivity Vulnerabilities

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A key country in the Wider Black Sea region

For Russia, Georgia has always been a key country in the South Caucasus and its post-Soviet neighborhood due to its geography and soft power. Because of its geopolitical importance Georgia provides a crucial transit route from Russia to Iran, the Middle East and further to India along the North-South corridor as well as to Turkey. It is an important connection between Europe and Asia, via the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and (Central) Asia with the Trans-Caspian International Transit Route. If you want to disrupt this route also for oil and gas supply to Europe from the Caspian region, you need to control Georgia. Important gas and oil pipelines from the Caspian Sea to Europe cross the country, providing alternatives to the Russian pipeline system. With its access to the Black Sea Georgia is important for trade for other countries of the region to Europe and the Mediterranean.

On soft power, since the Rose Revolution in 2003 Georgia was for some time the most transatlantic and reform-oriented country in the post-Soviet region. This never led to a functioning democracy and did not prevent the current autocratic turn, but it had a strong impact on other post-Soviet countries in showcasing successful reforms are possible. Georgian experts and politicians have played an important role in the reform processes in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Georgia was a success story in fighting small and middle size corruption and building administrative capacities.

While Georgia is key in the South Caucasus, the region is key for Russia to access and project power towards the Black Sea, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. It is a crucial interconnector which Russia can use or disrupt. Moscow's main aim is to control and to keep the region and particularly Georgia in its sphere of influence and to prevent democratization, Western influence or integration with NATO and the EU. Key tools are disinformation and election interference, the use of military force and blackmailing as well as the control over Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia which creates a constant security threat for the country. Russia's approach is a policy of sticks and carrots with sanctions and economic benefits especially for the ruling elites in Georgia.

The end of Russian hegemony

With the large-scale war against Ukraine since February 2022 Russia has lost its role as the regional hegemon in the South Caucasus. Since then, Russia has to bargain with other external actors who are increasingly active in the region like Turkey and Iran. But also regional countries have improved their bargaining position towards Moscow. Since its victory in the second Nagorno Karabakh war in 2020 Azerbaijan (supported by Turkey) is the key actor to shape the regional security order. It did not only take over Nagorno Karabakh in 2023 by military means and forced Karabakh Armenians to leave their ancestral region. It also

negotiated with Russia an early withdrawn of Russian “peacekeeping forces” from the disputed region contrary to the ceasefire agreement from 2020. Since Russia had to refocus its resources to Ukraine, has less capabilities to finance and support the Georgian disputed regions there are growing conflicts with local elites especially in Abkhazia. Furthermore, Moscow withdrawn parts of the Russian troops in both disputed regions from its military basis and sent them together with local armed forces to the frontline in Ukraine.

With the war against Ukraine, Russia’s interests in the South Caucasus are growing while its policy priorities have changed. Russia needs alternative transit routes to new markets and trading partners to circumvent Western sanctions. Since Iran has become a key supporter of Russia in the war against Ukraine, supplying drones, missiles, ammunition, sharing know how in circumventing sanctions, trade routes via the South Caucasus to Iran have become even more important to Moscow. Furthermore, the region is crucial as trading hub to circumvent sanctions. Georgia is here important, because of its geographic location and its close economic and human ties with the EU. Georgia is key for the access to Armenia a direct neighbor of Iran and has a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade agreement (DCFTA) with the EU as well as access to the Black Sea. Therefore, good relations with Georgia and opening of direct connections with the country play an important role for Russian policy. A for Russia cooperative government in Georgia is even more important than before the invasion into Ukraine.

Shaping the European security architecture

The Black Sea region has become crucial for European security since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and changed the security balance in the region through a massive military buildup. For Russian leadership these actions are about the long-term goal of shifting the balance of power in Europe to its advantage and to get other major countries to agree on spheres of influence for a new European security order. Control over the Black Sea is critical for these goals. Engagement with Turkey is here particularly crucial because it controls the access to the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus straights and is a NATO country; Moscow has heavily invested in energy and economic cooperation with Ankara. But this policy is also about projecting power beyond the Black Sea towards the Mediterranean and Middle East. The Syria miliary campaign and Russia’s engagement in Libya were only possible due to its growing military role in the Black Sea and the involvement of its military facilities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In each region Russia had deployed 4500 soldiers which threaten Georgia but are also part of the Russian military and security policy beyond the region. Russia’s dominance in the Black Sea is interlinked with its control over Crimea and Georgian contested regions especially Abkhazia where they control an airport, military training ground and port. A joint Abkhaz-Russian military garrison is deployed close to the Enguri dam on the border to the part of Georgia controlled by Tbilisi. This hydro power station is crucial for the energy supply of Georgia and Abkhazia.



The reconstruction of Ochamchire port in Abkhazia to become a permanent base for parts of Russia's Black Sea Fleet started in late 2023 which can help Russia alleviate pressure on the Black Sea ports in Sevastopol and Novorossiysk, that are under constant Ukrainian military attacks. Because of geographic conditions, Ochamchire will have only limited capacities for the Russian Black Sea fleet, and it is not accessible for big ships. It does not provide a real alternative to the major Russian Black Sea ports. Therefore, Russia's strategic goal is to get access to Georgian ports and infrastructure. China's investment in the Georgian Anaklia Deep Sea port close to the border of Abkhazia can create more maritime infrastructure options for Russia to trade with Turkey and Europe through Georgia. This is at the moment a theoretical option, since it will take years, to build this port. But if China owns this infrastructure, it will be much easier for Russia to use it on one point for civil and military purposes. The Kremlin is interested in leveraging the cooperative Georgian Dream government to secure long term access to Georgian territorial waters and ports in the Black Sea for its military and trade fleet.

Georgia had until recently close security cooperations with NATO and the United States, and Brussels offered in 2023 to become an EU candidate country. The Kremlin's aim is to undermine these relationships and bring Georgia fully back into the Russian orbit. Russia always used a policy of sticks and carrots towards Tbilisi, using security threats and disinformation campaigns to fuel polarization and undermine the country's transatlantic path while offering economic benefits for cooperation. While there were bans of import of wine the most important export product of Georgia and on direct flights in the past when the government in Tbilisi had a more confrontative policy towards Russia, these measures were lifted, when the government became more cooperative. Following the Georgian Dream government's policy of normalization of relations with Moscow since 2012, and especially since its distancing from Europe in recent years, Moscow has offered visa liberalization, the return of direct flights and increased the number of tourists. While direct trade with Russia has only grown to a small extent since the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine, Georgia's trade with Kyrgyzstan grew by 650 percent and with Kazakhstan by 200 percent between 2022 and 2023.¹ Both are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and investigation have shown that they and Azerbaijan are important hubs for goods inflows into Russia coming via Georgia.²

Authoritarianism as an entry point for influence

The ruling Georgian Dream party and its owner Bidzina Ivanishvili want to benefit from their country's location by being open for transit and trade with Europe and China as well as with Russia, Iran and Turkey. Political nonalignment and openness create opportunities to develop Georgia into a transit hub in all directions. For Russia this creates prospects to make greater use of Georgian highways, port and airport infrastructure in the future. With the large-scale invasion in Ukraine Moscow promoted a discussion about opening railway lines between

¹ <https://www.geostat.ge/media/59731/External-Merchandise-Trade-of-Georgia-in-2023.pdf>.

² <https://ifact.ge/en/sanction-evasion/>.



Russia, Abkhazia and Georgia, the only existing railway link between Russia and Georgia from Soviet times.³ This railway line has not been used since the armed conflicts between Georgia and Abkhazia in the beginning of the 1990s. Even if there is no progress on this idea, a more authoritarian Georgian government opens opportunities for new infrastructure cooperation also with the disputed regions, which could increase Russian impact on Georgia. Bidzina Ivanishvili still owns businesses in Russia through offshore companies and relatives as research by Transparency International shows.⁴ As a consequence he is vulnerable and accessible to Russian influence or just has an interest to keep good relations with a country hostile to Georgia.

Russian leadership resume bilateral flights to Georgia in May 2023 has to be seen as part of series of positive signals from Moscow in recent years. President Putin's decree to restart air travel between the two countries - which Moscow had cancelled in 2019 – was combined with another decree introduced 90-day visa-free travel for Georgian citizens. Georgia's refusal to support Western sanctions against Russia, and to close its skies to Russian aircraft, while at the same time increasing trade with Russia has made it easier for Moscow to function under Western restrictions. The introduction of direct flights made it not only easier for people to fly but also for trade between both countries. Georgia has become an important hub for Russian tourists to fly to other destinations in Europe while direct flights from Russian cities have been canceled. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has already referred to Georgia as a friendly country which will benefit from this cooperative approach: "They have trade with Russia, tourism, receive energy. This is in the interests of the Georgian state and people."⁵

Russia's influence in Georgia is growing. The increasingly authoritarian Georgian Dream government has adopted laws inspired by Russian legislations. Examples include the foreign agent law and the anti-LGBT law. Both were passed in 2024 ahead of Georgia's parliamentary election. Increasing high level corruption with the involvement of people close to Bidzina Ivanishvili, informal rule based on personal relations between different key people, decline of rule of law creates an ecosystem in which Russia is increasing its influence.⁶ During the 2024 election campaign there was more interaction and coordination on disinformation between Georgian and Russian officials.⁷ For instance, the Russian security service accused the U.S. of planning a coup against the Georgian government which was also picked up by the ruling Georgian Dream party in their communication.⁸ Cooperation between security and intelligence services in both countries have been growing in recent years. Georgia has

³ <https://eurasianet.org/russias-transport-ambitions-create-new-headaches-in-georgia>.

⁴ <https://transparency.ge/en/post/russian-businesses-bidzina-ivanishvili-and-his-relatives>

⁵ <https://oc-media.org/russias-top-diplomat-compliments-georgia-for-not-irritating-them/>.

⁶ <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/alleged-cases-high-level-corruption-periodically-updated-list>.

⁷ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-is-directly-and-indirectly-meddling-in-georgias-upcoming-election/>.

⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240911135554/http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2024/09/bdipch-obse-stalo-soobshchnikom-ssha-v-destabilizatsii-gruzii.htm>.

imposed greater restrictions on individuals entering the country, which has created problems especially for Russian independent journalists and civil society activists.⁹

While the Georgian Dream government is increasingly undermining Georgia's integration with the EU and shortly after the October 2024 parliamentary election decided to put the EU membership bid on hold until the end of 2028, most Georgians want to join the EU. 86 percent of respondents due to a November 2023 poll by the International Republican Institute supported EU accession. 78 percent were in favour of joining NATO.¹⁰ However, the narrative of a "pro-Russian government versus pro-Western society," which was used in the election campaign by most of the opposition parties, does not reflect the full reality of the current situation and opinion across Georgian society. More than half of the respondents to the above-mentioned poll were still more or less in favour of holding a dialogue with Russia and in good relations with the big neighbour. This is due to the fear of another war as a consequence of the trauma of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the ongoing war in Ukraine, but also the feeling in conservative part of the society that Georgia stands for its own traditions and belongs neither to one or the other culture. Despite the strong Westernization of the Georgian elite, and especially a young urban generation, a large majority of the Georgian society defines itself as belonging to a common, Orthodox civilisational world reflected in the cultural and social conservatism of big parts of the society. Patriarch Ilia II remains the country's greatest authority, enjoying approval by 91 percent of Georgian citizens. The Georgian Orthodox Church ranks second behind the army in terms of public trust in institutions. While Russia is using these sentiments in the Georgian society in its campaigns against a "decadent West" who wants to "colonize" Georgia and undermine its "traditional culture" with its "woke policy", the Georgian Dream government is playing on feelings of fear, adherence to traditional values and support for the sovereignty of Georgia. We can observe here an interplay between the Russian and Georgian Dream governments, which are indirectly supported by the conservative policy of the patriarch. Russia's global cultural war against Western influence is in this sense also conducted in Georgia.

Playing with vulnerabilities

Georgia is a vulnerable country in terms of its socio-economic development and security. Despite a DCFTA and an Association Agreement with the EU, which entered into force in 2016, Georgia's economy and society have not benefited largely from closer economic cooperation with the EU. The main business model for Georgia is the service sector and tourism, which did not lead to growing welfare for most of the society. A vulnerable society is easier to manipulate in exchange for some economic benefits. For many, freedom is less important than the economic situation. Visa liberalization with the EU is seen as beneficial by the leadership since people can leave the country to work in the EU and send remittances back home. Both the ruling elites and Russia benefit from this socio-economic vulnerability, since

⁹ <https://rsf.org/en/georgia-quietly-denying-entry-independent-russian-journalists>.

¹⁰ <https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/>.

it is much easier to create short term benefits for the society around elections and to criticize the limits of benefits for the society in the context of EU rapprochement. Undermining strong societal support for transatlantic integration is a long-term goal of Russian policies in Georgia. This is in line with Bidzina Ivianishvili's interest in stopping any real EU integration while keeping economic benefits for the elites through infrastructure investment and Georgia becoming a trade hub between Europe and Asia. Ivianishvili has to fear that he would lose power in a more competitive and transparent political environment governed by the rule of law, engendered by EU integration.

The Russian-Georgian war in 2008 aimed to stop NATO integration of Georgia. Afterwards Russia has established control over the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which keeps the country vulnerable in terms of its security and territorial integrity. Borderization meaning constantly shifting of the border of the by Russia controlled regions into the by Tbilisi controlled Georgian territory is a constant feature of Russian politics.¹¹ This policy gives Moscow leverage over Tbilisi and the control over the Georgian territories helped in the past to prevent NATO integration. With its invasion in Ukraine Moscow underlined again that it is willing and able to attack any neighboring country. During the 2024 parliamentary election campaign Georgian Dream used the narrative that the West could drag the country into the war in Ukrainian – a fearful prospect for many in the Georgian society. Only Georgia Dream with its hedging policy towards Russia would prevent such a scenario was the other message of the election campaign.

Keeping the West out

Since Russia lost its role as the regional hegemon in the South Caucasus with the war in Ukraine, it has to make more compromises with other actors engaged in the region, such as Turkey, Iran and China. Each seeks to diminish Western influence regionally and globally. Moscow is willing to make compromises if it can keep the West out of the South Caucasus. For this purpose, it supports Turkey's proposed 3+3 platform, which aims to find regional solutions for regional problems bringing together Iran, Russia, Turkey with the three South Caucasian states. Georgia is the only country that resists participating in the format until now, since it does not want to be part of a negotiation format with (the aggressor) Russia and without Western involvement. That might now change after Georgian Dream won for the fourth time the parliamentary election in October 2024 with massive manipulations and is increasingly distancing itself from the U.S. and the EU. The Russian leadership offered Georgia to open an unofficial headquarters of the 3+3 format in Tbilisi.¹²

Russia seeks regional solutions in the Black Sea, without Western participation, as it does in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. In the Black Sea it agreed on this approach with Turkey in the past, the same happened before in the Caspian Sea among the littoral states.¹³

¹¹ <https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Commentary18.pdf>.

¹² <https://oc-media.org/georgia-does-not-rule-participating-in-3-3-platform/>.

¹³ <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/russias-new-strategy-for-caspian-relations/>.



For this goal it needs to prevent NATO and EU integration of Georgia and Ukraine. Since neither the EU nor NATO will give security guarantees to any South Caucasus state, the countries of the region will follow a hedging strategy. This helps to explain the current Georgian Dream policy of improving relations with Russia and at the same time keeping at least rhetorically the transatlantic path open. The more isolated the country is from the EU and the U.S., the better for Moscow, since it will offer economic benefits like more trade, more tourists and more investment for alignment.

Conclusions

With a changing global and regional order influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Gaza-Israel war and the reelection of Donald Trump as U.S. president, transactionalism, regional instability, the power of the strong and the return of force as a key instrument of interest-oriented foreign policy are key global trends which also impact on the South Caucasus. While Russia is occupied by the war in Ukraine and its role as the main regional security actor in the South Caucasus is waning, transactionalism and growing authoritarianism as we can observe it under Georgian Dream rule in the last years in Georgia is keeping its influence on the country at the same time. In Georgia Russia wants to prevent integration with NATO and the EU and undermine any alignment with Western policy. It wants to benefit from Georgia's unique geopolitical position between Russia and the Middle East as well as Europe and Asia while it has an interest to have more access to Georgian infrastructure including in the Black Sea ports. China's growing infrastructure investment also in this region can be beneficial for Russia but might lead also to more economic competition between both countries.

In the global connectivity competition Georgia is a key country. In long-term Moscow wants to reestablish the South Caucasus as its sphere of influence and bring Georgia back into the Russian orbit. It wants to establish transactional platforms like 3+3 to solve regional problems with authoritarian countries without the US or the EU, with countries it can bargain, and which do not challenge the Russian governance model. In Putin's ideal world, all countries of the South Caucasus would also join institutional frameworks like the BRICS, SCO and Eurasian Economic Union, with the aim to create alternatives to U.S. dominated global institutions. How the current Trump administration rapprochement with Russia and the end of USAID will impact on these trends, will have to be seen. It definitely invites the Georgian Dream government to move quicker and harsher forward with its authoritarian turn.

Obviously, the victory of the Georgian Dream party in the 2024 parliamentary election and its systematic shifts towards an authoritarian governance model will play into Russia's interests. But Russia is a declining power lacking the economic and soft power resources to shape the regional order and it has to compete increasingly with other countries like Turkey, China, Iran as well as the EU in its traditional sphere of influence. This will further increase the bargaining position of smaller states like Georgia, which might still do business with Russia but keep the doors open to other actors like China, Arab countries but also the EU. Georgia



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signed a Free Trade Agreement also with China which came into force in the beginning of 2018. While the U.S. is decreasing its presence in the South Caucasus and the EU is undecided how to further develop its neighborhood and foreign policy beyond enlargement, the West is not using Russia's relative weakness in the South Caucasus to further undermine Moscow's role in the wider Black Sea region. At the same time, Moscow is exploring Georgia's vulnerability to increase its impact on this important country in the South Caucasus.