
Russia Out NATO In: Georgia's Perspective on Regional Peace and Security in the South Caucasus

Rusya NATO Dışında: Gürcistan'ın Güney Kafkasya'da Bölgesel Barış ve Güvenlik Perspektifi

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Abstract

Georgia is a small country in an insecure region where military escalation has become a common feature of regional politics. At the same time, it is strategically important for both the West and Russia, which is one of the key causes of instability. The aim of this study is to analyse Georgia's security perspective on regional security in the South Caucasus, which is suggested to be intertwined with its national security perspective. Insecurity and conflict, according to Georgia's security perception, lead to increased Russian interference in the region, which itself is one of the causes of the region's persistent instability. Thus, stability in the South Caucasus is one of Georgia's top priorities in terms of security, which is reflected in Georgia's National Security Concept (NSC) adopted in 2011, and the 2012 Resolution of Basic Directions of Georgia's Foreign Policy. Following Georgia's NSC, this study examines the relationship between Georgia's security expectations and regional geopolitical realities and finds that, although Georgia's current security perception, based on the 2011 NSC, has met national and regional security needs so far, adaptation of the security policy to new circumstances, where Georgia could serve as a connection between the West and the East rather than choosing between them, is required.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Georgian security, regional security, national security concept, Euro-Atlantic Alignment, Russia

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Öz

Gürcistan, askeri tırmanışın bölgesel siyasetin ortak bir özelliği haline geldiği, güvensiz bir bölgede küçük bir ülke. Aynı zamanda istikrarsızlığın temel nedenlerinden biri olan hem Batı hem de Rusya için stratejik öneme sahiptir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Gürcistan'ın ulusal güvenlik perspektifi ile iç içe olması önerilen Güney Kafkasya'da bölgesel güvenlik konusundaki güvenlik perspektifini analiz etmektir. Gürcistan'ın güvenlik algısına göre, güvensizlik ve çatışma, bölgedeki kalıcı istikrarsızlığın nedenlerinden biri olan Rusya'nın bölgeye müdahalesinin artmasına neden oluyor. Bu nedenle, Güney Kafkasya'da istikrar, Gürcistan'ın 2011'de kabul edilen Ulusal Güvenlik Konsepti'nde (MGK) ve Gürcistan'ın Dış Politikasının Temel Yönergelerine ilişkin 2012 Kararında yansıtılan güvenlik açısından Gürcistan'ın en önemli önceliklerinden biridir. Gürcistan'ın NSC'sini takiben, bu çalışma Gürcistan'ın güvenlik beklentileri ile bölgesel jeopolitik gerçekler arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemekte ve Gürcistan'ın 2011 MGK'ya dayalı mevcut güvenlik algısının şimdiye kadar ulusal ve bölgesel güvenlik ihtiyaçlarını karşılamış olmasına rağmen, güvenlik politikasının yeni koşullara uyarlanmasıyla ortaya çıktığını tespit etmektedir. Gürcistan'ın Batı ve Doğu arasında seçim yapmak yerine Batı ile Doğu arasında bir bağlantı görevi görebileceği koşullar gereklidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Güney Kafkasya, Gürcistan güvenliği, bölgesel güvenlik, ulusal güvenlik, Avro-Atlantik Birlik, Rusya

Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, independent Georgia found itself in an extremely volatile environment. Internal insecurity was also evident, and it was this, along with external insecurity, that determined the major factors that shaped Georgia's foreign and security policy priorities. The newly independent Georgian state's top priority was to complete the state-building process, which became one of the main causes of its insecurity. To begin with, Georgia's state-building process was marred by civil wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which culminated in their *de facto* secession in 1990–93. Although it was not officially proclaimed until the war in 2008, Russia's interference in Georgia's internal conflicts posed a long-term threat to the country's stability. Another aspect that has influenced the security perception is regional uncertainty. The conflict between Georgia's two South Caucasian neighbours, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which erupted in the early stages of the Soviet Union's disintegration, was one of the key causes of regional instability, but it was also closely linked to Russian influence. Russian meddling in all regional disputes serves as a reminder to Georgia of Russia's desire to retain power, if not outright supremacy, in the region. The unfinished state-building process, unresolved internal conflicts, and regional instability, as well as Russian power and pressure, are the key determinants of Georgia's security conception, which is expressed in the National Security Concept (NSC) of 2011 and confirmed in the Resolution of Basic Directions of Georgia's Foreign Policy, issued in 2012 by the Georgian parliament. The Euro-Atlantic route was suggested in both documents as a means of protecting Georgia's national security and interests. By striving for eventual membership of the EU and NATO, this ambition went beyond having close ties with the EU, NATO, and the USA. Georgia's National Security Concept was introduced in 2011 and had the aim of adjusting the then-current 2005 document to reflect the significant shifts in Georgian security views concerning Russia as a result of the August 2008 war. This research will look at the relationship between Georgia's security perceptions and regional geopolitical realities to see whether Georgia's current security understanding, based on the 2011 NSC, suits national and regional security needs, or whether it needs to be adjusted to new circumstances. Accordingly, the Securi-

ty Conception of Georgia will be analysed in the light of national and regional realities. The major issues to be highlighted in this regard are the separatist regions of Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, and Georgia's relations with its neighbours in the South Caucasia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the conflict between those two states. Both aspects of Georgian national security are also closely linked to its relations with the Russian Federation and its existence in the region as major actor, which is not welcomed by Georgia. Therefore, both issues will be explained within this perspective. Georgia's preferences in terms of national security, as mentioned in the NSC, and the Euro-Atlantic prospect in terms of EU and NATO relations will also be discussed. Consequently, it will be possible to point out that adapting the security conception and policy to new circumstances is required and thereby conceiving Georgia's role as a link between the West and the East, rather than selecting between the two, will best serve Georgia's interests.

Territorial Integrity in Georgia's Security Conception

The first and foremost principle in the NSC is the restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty, which is linked to Russian interference as the top priority threat and challenge to Georgian security.¹ It has been made clear in the document that *“Ending the occupation of Georgia's territories, the reintegration of people living in these territories, and the restoration of Georgian sovereignty on the whole territory of the country are the most important priorities of the country's national security policy”*² and that Georgia will resist Russian activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with all legitimate and peaceful means.³

The Abkhazian and South Ossetian problems are sources of insecurity not only for Georgia but also for the whole South Caucasian region. Both the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts have their roots in Soviet history when the Soviet Union established both regions' status according to its own nationalities policy: Abkhazia as an autonomous republic and South Ossetia as an autonomous terri-

¹ 'National Security Concept of Georgia', (2011) pp. 5-7.

²Ibid., p. 11.

³Ibid., p. 12.

tory (*oblast*). Following Georgia's independence, the status of both regions became a point of contention within Georgia.

Even during the late Soviet period, South Ossetia was expressing its desire to become an independent republic like Abkhazia or Adjara, which resulted in clashes between Ossetians and Georgians in South Ossetia in 1989. Since a North Ossetia existed within Russian boundaries, independent Georgia opposed the region's autonomy. This option, championed by Russia in particular, became a major roadblock to finding a solution to the crisis. South Ossetia declared its independence from Georgia in September 1990, and the Georgian government replied by rescinding the region's autonomy after Zviad Gamskurdia took power. Armed clashes erupted almost immediately, and they lasted until Russian intervention, which culminated in the signing of the Sochi ceasefire and put an end to the fighting but did not serve as a solution to the problem.

When Mikhail Saakashvili took power, he restored the region's autonomy and tried to monitor the solution process by excluding Russia. South Ossetians rejected Saakashvili's position, resulting in a new round of fighting in the area. On 7–8 August 2008, Russia launched a military operation in South Ossetia that involved land, air, and sea forces. Georgia's bid for Western help was unsuccessful, but a ceasefire was reached between Russia and Georgia thanks to former president of France Nicolas Sarkozy's mediation. Up to now, the Geneva Talks, led by the UN, OSCE, and EU, have failed to find a lasting solution, but no new armed conflicts have erupted in the region. The problem has been exacerbated by Russia's recognition of South Ossetia as an independent state. As a result, the main goal of Georgian foreign and security policy is to prevent other countries from recognizing South Ossetia, as well as, as stated in the NSC, to end Russian occupation and influence.

Abkhazia, like South Ossetia, demanded greater autonomy in 1988, which was met with mass protests. Soviet troops intervened to control the reactionary demonstrations that erupted in Tbilisi. When Abkhazia declared its independence in 1992, clashes erupted, culminating in a ceasefire signed through Russia's mediation. The parties started negotiating under the leadership of the UN and OSCE, as

well as Russia, but despite reaching agreements in 1995 and 1997, these were never enforced. Abkhazia passed the Act of State Independence in 1999, without authorization by Georgia. Although the parties signed a protocol in 2005 to reinforce the ceasefire after the Rose Revolution, it had no effect. Furthermore, the Russian Federation bolstered its support for Abkhazia, thus obstructing any easy compromise. The lack of a solution benefited Russia by allowing it to exert power and control over Georgia. The problem persisted and worsened over time. European powers' mediation attempts yielded no results, and Abkhazia came to the verge of armed conflict by 2008. The war in South Ossetia quickly spread to Abkhazia. Following the 2008 war, Russia, along with South Ossetia, recognized Abkhazia as an independent state.

Even though the Abkhazian and South Ossetian problems seem to be internal disputes, Russia's recognition of their proclaimed independence extends the problems beyond Georgian internal politics to Georgian–Russian relations, and thus regional politics. In 2008, shortly after Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Georgian government passed the Law on Occupied Territories. However, by signing alliance and integration treaties with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia claims to have formed relations based on formal agreements, which Georgia describes as *de facto* annexation. Georgia's main aim is to end the occupation and find a solution while maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity. However, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the degree to which relations are maintained, has established “red lines” that Georgia is unlikely to cross.⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that the main threat for Georgian security, as well as the main objective of its foreign policy identified in the NSC (2011) and the Resolution on Basic Direction of Georgia's Foreign Policy (2013), revolves around Russian–Georgian relations.

Regional Security in Georgia's Security Conception

Relations with Russia affect not only Georgian foreign and security policy, but also the entire South Caucasus region, which Russia

⁴Erik Davtyan, ‘Agency and Perceptions of Smallness: Understanding Georgia's Foreign Policy Behaviour’, *Caucasus Survey*, (2021) p. 13.

considers to be one of its spheres of influence. In this vein, relations between the three South Caucasus countries, along with each country's relations with Russia, have a significant effect on regional security and politics. As a result, improving regional cooperation among Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia is identified as one of Georgia's national security policy priorities in the NSC.⁵

Each of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, the three South Caucasian states, has its own set of issues, especially when it comes to Azerbaijan–Armenia relations. For Georgia, the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, in which Russia is again a key player, is the main obstacle to the three neighbours maintaining good-neighbourly ties. Although Russia's role in the conflict has recently shifted from insistence on its insolubility, for its own benefit, to one that seeks and promotes a settlement, in Georgia's view, Russia's existence as a key player, regardless of the consequences, is a problem in and of itself. In fact, the conflict has not only jeopardized regional stability but also enabled Russia to gain a stronger foothold in the region. Therefore, Georgia, as described by the NSC, strives to strengthen partner relationships, especially by expanding trade ties with Azerbaijan and Armenia in order to keep Russia out of regional dynamics, or at least reduce its power to some extent. Major economic projects in the region are important from the perspective of Georgia not only for economic reasons, but also for security reasons, as they create trust, strengthen cooperation, and pave the way for long-term partnerships.⁶

Regional organizations may have served as platforms for improving cooperation between regional actors at this stage, but they have been transformed to some degree into instruments of geopolitical struggle as a result of regional dynamics.⁷ Following its formation, each of the South Caucasus countries joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but Georgia left after the 2008 war. Georgia and Azerbaijan left the CIS's military branch, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in 1999, while Armenia

⁵ 'National Security Concept of Georgia', p. 17-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ Mitat Çelikpala and Cavid Veliyevi, *Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey: An Example of a Successful Regional Cooperation* (No. 4: CIS Policy Brief, 2015) p. 3.

remains the most involved participant. The Organization for Democratic and Economic Development (GUAM), on the other hand, has emerged as a crucial instrument for coordinating multilateral efforts to achieve Georgia and Azerbaijan's strategic goals, but Armenia is not a member.⁸ While Azerbaijan and Georgia have opted out of the Eurasian Economic Union, Armenia is a member. The three South Caucasus countries have been participants in NATO's Partnership for Peace Program since 1994 and are EU partners through the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), but with varying degrees of commitment.⁹

On the bilateral level, Georgia has managed to establish good relations with its South Caucasian neighbours, despite all obstacles stemming especially from the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Georgia–Azerbaijan relations have been good almost since their independence. Georgia has become an important transit route for Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon exports and the import of western goods, while Azerbaijan supplies Georgia's hydrocarbon needs. However, their alliance, which the NSC refers to as a strategic partnership,¹⁰ is not solely based on economic interdependence. This strategic partnership has a political component that is focused on cooperation in the face of external threats, especially those posed by Russia. In this vein, both countries pursued a balancing and deterrent strategy in the face of such challenges, especially prior to 2003. Beginning with the Rose Revolution and culminating with the 2008 war, Georgia changed its foreign policy, abandoning its balancing policy, while Azerbaijan retained its position. This, however, has not soured ties, owing to the other factors at play.¹¹

As defined in the NSC,¹² “joint energy, transport, and communications projects significantly contribute to the stability and well-being of both countries”; these include the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and

⁸ Mamuka Tsereteli, *Azerbaijan and Georgia: Strategic Partnership for Stability in a Volatile Region* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2013) p. 34.

⁹ Çelikpala and Veliyevi, *Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey: An Example of a Successful Regional Cooperation*, op.cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ ‘National Security Concept of Georgia’, p. 18.

¹¹ Zaur Shiriyev and Kornely Kakachia, ‘Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations: The Foundations and Challenges of the Strategic Alliance’, *SAM Review*, 7-8 (2013) p. 13.

¹² ‘National Security Concept of Georgia’, p. 18.

Baku–Supsa oil pipelines, the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway project, as well as prospective projects within the European energy alignment linking Caspian gas to Europe, such as the White Stream and Azerbaijan–Georgia–Romania Interconnector (AGRI) projects. However, hard security challenges in the region evidently undermine the effectiveness of economic interdependence. Georgia perceives the recent Karabakh war and the trilateral statement signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on 9 November 2020 as challenges to emerging regional realities that are in Russia’s favour. In the current situation, the Euro-Atlantic arrangement appears to be the most viable option for maintaining close cooperation. However, Azerbaijan’s new path that it has been on since 2011, which includes abandoning Euro-Atlantic partnership as a foreign policy priority in favour of joining the Non-Aligned Movement, could be a roadblock to this vision.

Georgia’s ties with Armenia have been less smooth than those with Azerbaijan, but the two countries have managed to maintain positive relations. Armenia’s only transit route to Russia and the West has been through Georgia, as the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict closed Armenia’s borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Trade, transportation networks, and tourism cooperation have all been avenues for the two countries to reinforce their bonds. In fact, Georgia’s efforts to distance itself from Russia’s sphere of influence in the region have resulted in increased cooperation with Armenia.¹³ However, some consequences of the 2020 war between Georgia’s two immediate neighbours seem to be shifting the previously favourable balance in Georgian–Armenian ties. According to the 10 November statement that ended the war, a new corridor would be opened through southern Armenia to link Azerbaijan’s main territory with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. New transportation plans that could alter Armenia’s isolated status were addressed at the first post-war meeting between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia in January 2021.¹⁴ The reopening of rail ties between Armenia and Azerbaijan will provide Armenia with a railway connection to Russia for the first time since

¹³ Philip Remler, *Russia’s Stony Path in the South Caucasus* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020) pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ Joshua Kucera, ‘Leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan Hold First Post-War Meeting’, <<https://eurasianet.org/leaders-of-armenia-and-azerbaijan-hold-first-post-war-meeting>>, (accessed 05.04 2021).

the Soviet Union collapsed, which might at first glance seem to be a setback for Georgian national interests. However, any initiative that has the potential to contribute to regional peace and stability would also benefit Georgian security and interests. Moreover, as Georgia's national security is intertwined with regional security and stability, the security and stability of South Caucasia has ramifications beyond national borders.

The Euro-Atlantic Perspective

The fundamental basis on which the European and Euro-Atlantic frameworks enter the scene for the South Caucasus as a geopolitical player is in the close and inseparable connection of Georgia's security with regional security and stability. Integration into NATO and the European Union, which is listed as one of Georgia's foreign policy priorities in the NSC,¹⁵ is also the key path, in Georgia's opinion, for bringing security and stability to the entire region. As a result, Georgia strives to place its ties with its neighbours in a larger European and Euro-Atlantic framework.

The Georgian stance of opposing Russian influence and developing close relations with the West is not new. Georgia, as a small country dealing not only with separatism but also with political and economic transformations that resulted in an unstable economy, inadequate social services, widespread poverty, corruption, and a lack of democracy, was unable to face Russia alone. It found the alliance it seeks in the West, which could be the only viable alternative to Russia. Interestingly enough, the Western prospect in independent Georgia was introduced by Shevardnadze, who was the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. Even though he secured good relations with Russia based on his former position, he also put forward for Georgia the prospect of becoming part of the West. Indeed, excluding the Soviet period, Georgia had been defining itself in European terms since the 19th century, when Georgia came under Russian rule. The brief experience of independent statehood in the early twentieth century, the Democratic Republic of Georgia, emphasized the European character of Georgia and the Georgians. So, once Georgia became independent again with the fall of the Soviet

¹⁵ 'National Security Concept of Georgia', pp. 15-16.

Union and the clashes subsided in the country, which coincided with a change of leadership, a new vision could be drawn for Georgia along European lines, as also defined in the NSC.¹⁶ During Shevardnadze's presidency, Georgia began to establish not only bilateral but also partnership ties with European countries and organizations. It was in this period that Georgia became a part of the EU's Generalized System of Preferences in 1995 and signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1996, which entered into force in 1999.

Following the Rose Revolution, European rhetoric became even stronger as Saakashvili "put the European integration issue high on the national agenda".¹⁷ One of the first things the new government did was, in 2004, to establish the post of State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration; the country joined the European Neighbourhood Policy in the same year. The European states praised Saakashvili's determination and, in return, provided technical and financial support for the country's economic, political, and democratic reforms. Consequently, the country experienced significant economic growth during this period. With the reforms that were introduced, significant progress and improvements were observed in terms of rights and freedoms in the country. In this period, Freedom House has "consistently awarded Georgia the highest regional scores in terms of its political freedoms and civil liberties."¹⁸ Tarkhan-Mouravi adds another dimension to the support provided by the European states, stating that Georgia's security is also "linked to the significant flows of financial and other assistance coming from the EU and its member states."¹⁹

The support that Western states gave Georgia is also closely related to Caspian energy routes. With the end of the Cold War, Western countries began closely following the developments in the Caspian region as a potential alternative to Russian energy resources and Georgia presented the most feasible route to enable them to avoid

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷ Gia Tarkhan-Mouravi, 'Georgia's European Aspirations and the Eastern Partnership', in Stephen F. Jones (ed.), *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012: The First Georgian Republic and Its Successors* (London-New York: Routledge, 2014) p. 139.

¹⁸ Kevork Oskanian, *Fear, Weakness and Power in the Post-Soviet South Caucasus: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p. 81.

¹⁹ Tarkhan-Mouravi, 'Georgia's European Aspirations and the Eastern Partnership', op.cit., p. 165.

the Russian pipelines, as the Russian monopoly over the region's energy resources had created dependence on Russia. As Tsereteli points out, "nothing makes Georgia more important to the world than its location and transit function [which] connects transatlantic space to Central Asia" via its "existing infrastructure of railroads and [...] Black Sea ports."²⁰

Even though all of these factors and developments have been encouraging for Georgia, it has been accepted from the beginning that full membership to EU was a distant prospect. This was especially the case because of the 2008 war with Russia and because the tendency towards democratization began to falter as Georgia prioritized the strengthening of the state and considered that to be more important than building democratic institutions and supporting political pluralism. This attitude was also closely related to the government's determination to ensure the territorial integrity of the country by all means. But the priorities of the EU were these democratic institutions and a pluralistic society, which the Georgian state failed to create, and this led to setbacks for Georgia's EU membership process. Nevertheless, in 2009, the country was included in the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative along with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, which can be considered as the EU's response to Russia and the war of 2008. In the same year, the Mobility Partnership and the 2010 Visa Facilitation Agreement were signed between Georgia and the EU.

When Saakashvili's United National Movement lost the 2012 elections to Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition, which has also been triumphant in the 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections in the country, there was concern about Georgia's future relations with the EU. Although these remained among Georgia's foreign policy priorities, at least in the NSC,²¹ normalization of relations with Russia was added to the foreign policy agenda after the election of the Georgian Dream government. In the absence of formal diplomatic links with Russia, the government named a special representative for relations with Russia; even joining the Eurasian Union was discussed but received strong opposition. Nevertheless, these efforts

²⁰ Mamuka Tsereteli, 'Georgia as a Geographical Pivot: Past, Present, and Future', op. cit., p.34.

²¹ 'National Security Concept of Georgia', p. 15-16.

did not deter Russia from continuing its efforts to weaken Georgian sovereignty, such as through the borderization issue.²² Moreover, the Georgian Dream party soon expressed its commitment to, and determination to pursue, the country's path to European integration. Indeed, in 2014 the European Union and Georgia signed Georgia's Association Agreement and adopted the Association Agenda. From that point on, Georgia's relation with EU intensified through several meetings and agreements. The peak of this process was visa-free travel for Georgian citizens as of 2017. The objective of pursuing European integration is thus still alive, as is seen in Georgia's announcement, in early 2021, that it plans to formally apply for EU membership in 2024 and its continual underlining that integration with the EU is irreversible for Georgia.

Even though EU membership stands as a major aim, Georgia's main target, in terms of both national and regional security, is NATO membership as a counterbalance to Russia.²³ This was welcomed by NATO, which was interested in the Black Sea and Caucasus, and thus Georgia, in terms of its energy policy. In the anti-Russian atmosphere of the early days of independence in 1992, Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which later became the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and then, in 1994, the Partnership for Peace program. Two years later, it submitted the first Individual Partnership Program to NATO. In 1998, the Georgian diplomatic mission to NATO opened, while the first joint multinational military training took place in Poti in 2001. All of these were during the presidency of Shevardnadze, who, at the same time, tried to maintain stable relations with Russia. After 9/11, Georgia's geopolitical significance to the West grew even further, as military access to Afghanistan and Central Asia became critical. This was seen as an opportunity by Georgia, which was determined to use it as a step towards membership. Accordingly, they joined several NATO missions, including those in Afghanistan.²⁴

Yet, Georgia's relationship with NATO is much more complicated

22 Kornely Kakachia, Salome Minesashvili, and Levan Kakhishvili, 'Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States: Elite Perceptions and Georgia's Foreign Policy Towards Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70/5 (2018), 814-31 pp. 819-20.

23 'National Security Concept of Georgia', p. 15.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

than its relationship with the EU. The first reason is Georgia's inability to meet the organization's standards. This provided a justification for the Georgian government to increase its military spending in order to modernize its army. But it was clear that the real reason for the military expenditure was related to Saakashvili's determination to put an end to the separatist conflicts in the country before the coming elections in 2008. Although Russia's support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia moved Georgia closer to NATO, it also posed the second and most significant obstacle to Georgia's NATO membership. The closer Georgia got to NATO, the more support Russia provided to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. NATO enlargement to the former Soviet Union's territories was unacceptable to Russia, which proclaimed the former Soviet Union's territories its Near Abroad as early as 1993. That is why, by tying the two issues together, Russia has been attempting to prevent Georgia from joining NATO while also retaining its dominance in the region through Abkhazia and South Ossetia in case it failed to prevent Georgia's NATO membership.

The NATO members, especially the European ones, were swayed by Russian opposition to Georgia's NATO membership. At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO decided that Georgia and Ukraine "have made important contributions" and would become members of NATO but did not offer either of them a Membership Action Plan, as some members were concerned about Russia's opposition. This was a disappointment for the majority of Georgians who support NATO membership. The war with Russia in August of the same year only increased this support. Following the war, Russia not only recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states but also gained military bases in both regions. The Russian threat that had occupied the Georgian security agenda since independence had never been so high. Even though the threat had dominated the discourse, an actual war was unexpected. The war also revealed the vulnerability of Georgia. Not only militarily, which would be expected in a war against Russia; it also showed Georgia that it could not count on European states, which refrained from confronting Russia. Except for mediating a ceasefire agreement, including the withdrawal of forces and the opening of peace talks between Russia and Georgia, the EU only expressed concerns about the conflict and condemned Russia's unilateral recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and

South Ossetia. This would give Russia a free hand in the knowledge that the European states would not do much when it came to Russia's activities in the former Soviet arena. Then-President Dmitry Medvedev's statement in 2011, in which he said that, if Russia had not invaded Georgia in 2008, NATO would have expanded by then to admit ex-Soviet republics, defines Russia's perception clearly.²⁵ The Ukrainian crises in 2014 portrayed yet another example of this attitude, even though some serious sanctions were imposed against Russia. Consequently, NATO membership became Georgia's only viable choice for addressing its security concerns.

NATO welcomed Georgia's desire to join NATO and, shortly after the war with Russia, the NATO–Georgia Commission was formed in September 2008 to serve as a forum for political consultations and practical cooperation on both assisting Georgia in achieving its goal of NATO membership and regional security issues of common concern.²⁶ Following that was the NATO Summit in Strasbourg/Kehl in 2009, where NATO representatives reaffirmed their support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty while also stating that Georgia would eventually join the organization, although without specifying a date. Even though there were initial reservations about the rapprochement with Russia, the Georgian Dream government sought NATO membership. However, even though Georgian NATO membership was constantly encouraged, no Membership Action Plan was not offered at any of the NATO summits held during Georgian Dream governments.

Conclusion

From the perspective of Georgia, Russia has been the one preventing the region from achieving stability and peace, and, if NATO were to replace Russia in the region, there would be no more barriers to regional powers resolving their differences by peaceful means. It is for this reason that Georgia's perception of national security is closely linked to regional security. According to the Georgian perspective, Russian presence in the region is rooted in the conflicts that make the

²⁵ Denis Dyomkin, 'Russia Says Georgia War Stopped Nato Expansion', Reuters, 21 November 2011.

²⁶ 'Nato-Georgia Commission', <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52131.htm>, (accessed 07.04 2021).

countries in the region vulnerable and open to Russian influence. In need of support, all parties head to Russia, which is still the strongest actor in the South Caucasus. Therefore, Russian influence could be displaced if these conflicts could be settled peacefully, thus leaving no security gap that Russia could use to infiltrate the region; a perspective that, in turn, is based on the Euro-Atlantic framework. However, recent events in the region as a result of the 2020 Karabakh war, which altered the regional dynamics, have significant ramifications for Georgia's foreign and security policies. As previously mentioned, Georgia has always been careful to remain neutral in the conflict between its two neighbors and has supported a peaceful resolution based on international law principles and greater international participation in the peace process. However, Russia's position during the Second Karabakh War and peace process runs counter to Georgia's expectations. Georgia's borders are now surrounded by Russian forces, indeed, Georgia itself allowed Russia to enter its airspace to transport peacekeepers to Karabakh, a particularly salient move as Georgian skies have been closed to Russian aircraft since 2008. Another aspect of the Karabakh war that sparked Georgian concerns at the outset of the conflict was the possibility of ethnic conflict between Georgia's Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities, as demonstrated by Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities participating in demonstrations and other events to provide direct support to the warring parties during the conflict. Even though the feared conflict was avoided, Georgia still needs a policy to prevent domestic ramifications from the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. All these geopolitical realities, as well as post-conflict trends in both the country and the South Caucasus region, indicate that Georgia's security policy will need to adapt to the new circumstances. In this vein, the idea that Georgia should serve as a connection between West and the East, rather than choosing between them, is gaining traction within the country.

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