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The Turkey-Russia Power Play Unfolding: Can Georgia Weather the “Frenemies” Trap?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION. TURKEY’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SOUTH CAUCASUS SINCE THE DEMISE OF THE SOVIET UNION	4
LESSONS FROM THE SOUTH CAUCASUS - LIMITATIONS FOR TURKEY’S DOMINATION	6
Attempts to Redraw the Division Lines	6
Turkey & post-2014 Black Sea Security: Accommodating Russia or Preventing the “Russian Lake”?	8
ON THE CROSSROADS OF THE TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GEORGIA	11
Opportunities for Georgia	11
Potential Challenges for Georgia	14
STRATEGIC HEDGING FOR SMALL STATES: LESSONS FOR GEORGIA	17
Exploring the Concept & Scenarios to Latch on	17
Strategic Hedging - A Check-List for Georgia	19
CONCLUDING REMARKS	22
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	23

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The developments resulting from Russia and Turkey's turbulent relations have been shaping the political, economic and security landscape in the post-Cold War South Caucasus for three decades already. For Georgia it is a necessity to pursue a delicate maneuver due to the circumstances of its strategic partnership with Turkey, while simultaneously struggling to address Russia's assertive and uncompromising stance towards Tbilisi. Both Turkey and Russia are increasingly anti-Western, nativist and authoritarian, testing Turkey's allegiance to its NATO commitments and decades-long partnership with the EU, as well as the existing security architecture in the Black Sea basin.

This policy paper argues that the tactical and "unequal partnership" of Turkey and Russia highlights the urgent need for Georgia to prevent being entrapped in the "accordion effect" and left without any room for maneuver. The strategic decision must be undertaken in a timely manner. The stakes are high for Tbilisi, as the absence of consistent long-term goals leads to adopting a reactionary line towards Ankara's and Moscow's decisions. Hence, the analysis puts forward opportunities and risks to be taken into account stemming from the long-term patterns of Russia and Turkey's competition in the region. The recommendations for the Georgian Government suggest priority of economic pragmatism, strategic partnership diversification, military modernization and proactive foreign policy stance of Georgia in its neighborhood as the avenues for successful hedging and promotion of its long-term national interests.

Keywords: Strategic Hedging, Turkey-Russia competition, South Caucasus security, Black Sea security, diversification of partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Small states face a narrow set of options and far more formidable challenges selecting a strategy to pursue in order to effectively promote their national interests, build peaceful and pragmatic relations in the immediate neighborhood and avoid irritation of regional powers. Georgia is sandwiched between Turkey and Russia, both distinguished with centuries-old rivalry and record of competition and cooperation. For both, the South Caucasus is an essential component of their own power status. Due to its core role in the diversification of energy supplies to Europe as part of its Southern Corridor, the South Caucasus has been of strategic interest for the United States (U.S.) as well as the European Union (EU).

For Turkey, throughout the Cold War the South Caucasus as well as Central Asia, previously traditional spheres of competition with the Russian Empire, lost their salience against the burgeoning economic and political-military cooperation with the West. Nevertheless, during the Gorbachev era Turkey-Russia relations received a fresh impetus. Ankara's outreach to Central Asia embarked upon Kazakhstan's location as a connecting link to strategic transportation routes with China¹. Already upon the demise of the Soviet Union, Turkey made a decisive turn from being an inward-looking, passive, regional player, under the security umbrella of US and NATO and allied with the West, to embracing a proactive "neo-Ottomanist" foreign policy under Turgut Ozal (1989-1993). In the case of the South Caucasus this failed to go beyond mere rhetoric. The conflicts in Abkhazia (1992-1993) and Nagorno Karabakh (1992-1994) further prevented Turkey's return to the region and kept it from competing with Russia on equal terms. Yet, Ankara's emboldened stance towards the South Caucasus made it a competitor in the eyes of Moscow.

Throughout 1990s a weaker Russia empowered Turkey to boost bilateral trade relations and embrace the Eurasian turn as the starting point for pragmatic cooperation. Despite expectations, Turkey's limits in filling in the power vacuum in the South Caucasus became clear by the end of 1990s. By the 2000s, stemming from disappointment of dimming prospects for further EU integration² and its irritation with the US 2003 Iraq intervention, Ankara turned increasingly to the South Caucasus and Central Asia as the outlets

¹ Eleni Fotiou (2009) "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform": What is at Stake for Regional Cooperation? ICBSS Policy Brief [online] Available at:

https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/104737/PB_16.pdf [Accessed on April 25, 2020]

² "Agenda 2000" did not envisage the EU membership perspectives for Turkey

for its power projection. The new foreign policy era in Turkey started with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power in 2002 and Ahmet Davutoglu's ascendance to the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs. Turkey launched a multivector policy towards its neighbours in the Middle East, Balkans as well as South Caucasus with the "zero-problem with neighbors" policy, as part of its "Strategic Depth" ("Stratejik Derinlik") approach.

According to this foreign policy strategy, Turkey's role would take a U-turn from a reactionary one to that of preemptor of crises before they emerge. Ankara would make use of its unique location in the intersection of multiple regions with divergent identities. This resulted in Turkey pursuing simultaneously the full membership request in the EU, enhancing economic cooperation with the South Caucasus as well as Central Asia and making the Middle East a priority region, including lifting visa restrictions and introducing free trade agreements with Middle Eastern countries. "The Strategic Depth" approach in South Caucasus implied maximizing available foreign policy strategies without irritating Russia and questioning its dominant stance in the region. Hence, Turkey puts emphasis on economic cooperation, and developing strategic transportation networks, where Georgia plays the core role as the "no-alternative" linking route. Since the Revolution of Roses in Georgia in 2003, Turkey experienced an uneasy challenge of presenting itself as a viable ally of US and NATO, as well as trying not to provoke Russian suspicions about its stance.

For instance, throughout 1990s and on the brink of 2000s along with the Western and NATO partners Turkey assisted Georgia in bringing its military in compliance with the NATO standards including restructuring military, building military academia. Georgian troops in Kosovo were supervised by Turkish command, Ankara demonstrated support for Georgia through the renewed military and industrial cooperation agreement of 2001 against the background of Pankisi Gorge tensions as well as Russia's accusations of support for Chechen rebels³. The breakthrough for Georgia was launching of the Train and Equip Program by US with participation of Turkey in 2002. In the case of Russia, the "maximum cooperation" strategy contributed to Turkey delicately distancing itself from taking sides in the August 2008 war. Ankara showed that it was not

³ Mitat Celikpala (2005) From A Weak State to a Failed One? Turkish Yearbook [online] Available at: https://www.academia.edu/704799/From_a_Failed_State_to_a_Weak_One_Georgia_and_Turkish_Georgian_Relations [Accessed on April 5, 2020]

willing to risk developing trade ties with Russia and its strategic partnership with the US and EU over the conflict. The gesture paid off on behalf of the Kremlin through relaxing tensions, adding to tourist flows and large-scale energy cooperation ⁴ between the two ⁵ countries. The underlying rationale of the first two decades of Turkey's engagement with the South Caucasus as a pragmatic junior partner would continue further into next decade.

LESSONS FROM THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: LIMITATIONS FOR TURKEY'S REGIONAL DIMINATION

Attempts to Redraw the Division Lines

The region's complex character is emphasized through diverse foreign policy orientations of its states, with Georgia embedding a pro-Western course aimed at Euro-Atlantic integration; Armenia being absorbed by Russia's economic and security integration projects; and Azerbaijan walking the thin rope of "balancing" between maintaining ties with Russia and the risk of escalating conflict with Armenia. Turkey has never recognized the independence Georgia's breakaway regions, however it has been maintaining active links with Abkhazia through its own diaspora, as well as supporting a direct maritime route, and assisting illicit Abkhaz imports to Turkey and vice versa through establishing subsidiary companies. Apart from the conflicts mentioned, for Russia, domination in the South Caucasus is the key to stability in its explosive North Caucasian republics.

Turkey's attempts to give impetus to its stalled relations with Armenia⁶ were limited from the very beginning by Turkey and Azerbaijan's "One Nation, Two Countries" approach, making Turkey's role of neutral arbiter or careful balancer impossible. Turkey's recognition of Armenia's borders is based on a set of preconditions which Yerevan refuses to adhere to,

⁴ Despite the failure of the South Stream Project (2014) to transport Russian gas to the EU through Turkey's Black Sea waters, the Blue Stream pipeline has been functioning since 2003 and Turkstream (previously Turkish Stream) inaugurated in January 2020 (although with interruptions due to the November 2016 SU-24 shootdown incident).

⁵ Mustafa Akyol (Jun. 29, 2016) The Problem With Turkey's 'Zero Problems' Plan [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/11/15/why-turkey-turned-away-from-syria/the-problem-with-turkeys-zero-problems-plan> [Accessed on Dec. 21, 2019]

⁶ Since 1993 the border is closed between the two countries due to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

namely the policy of refusing worldwide recognition of the 1915 massacres of Armenians by the Ottomans as a genocide; withdrawal of Armenian forces from the territories of Azerbaijan; and, recognition of the land boundaries according to the Moscow and Kars treaties (1921) respectively by Armenia. The rapprochement between the two countries was enhanced by the events of the August 2008 war, as well as the issue of Georgia's breakaway territories as a source of permanent instability and potential disruption to Turkey's energy transportation network from the Caspian. The Sargsyan-Gül "football diplomacy" of 2008-2009, a never-ratified border treaty, and the intentions to temporarily leave outside the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh from the agenda of the bilateral normalization process, finally turned into a row of mutual recriminations that undermined rapprochement⁷.

Turkey's refreshed foreign policy vision towards the South Caucasus has not so far achieved the major goal of turning Turkey into a major player. Ankara's maneuvering options are still limited. Furthermore, Turkey's failed efforts to open a new page of relations with Armenia, as well as Azerbaijan's pragmatic balancing act towards Russia, in spite of its strategic partnership and cultural and historical affinity with Turkey, has further stressed the Ankara's narrow range of options⁸. Along with the absence of challengers to its domination in the South Caucasus, Moscow has been benefiting from the West's tacit recognition of its own geopolitical disadvantage in the region, in particular since the Russia-Georgia war of 2008. Turkey's "Strategic Depth" approach has not managed to resolve the major goal of transforming the South Caucasus landscape and distribution of power capabilities.

⁷ Hasmik Mkrtchyan (2018) Armenia scraps deal with Turkey designed to normalize relations, Reuters [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-turkey/armenia-scrap-deal-with-turkey-designed-to-normalize-relations-idUSKCN1GD5BX> [Accessed on: April 20th. 2020]

⁸Ali Askerov (2017) Turkey's Zero Problems with the Neighbors Policy: Was it Realistic? Contemporary Review of the Middle East, 4 (2) 1-19,

TURKEY & POST-2014 BLACK SEA SECURITY: ACCOMMODATING RUSSIA OR PREVENTING THE “RUSSIAN LAKE”?

Ankara’s posture in the South Caucasus should be analyzed in a tight connection to the Black Sea security issue. Up until the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Turkey’s “Karadeniz” hegemonic stance outscored Russia’s capabilities. Nonetheless, Turkey’s posture as the major regional power has become doubtful after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and its integration with Russia’s Southern Military District. Russia’s de-facto coastline has increased to 25% of the Black Sea’s total seashore and almost equals Turkey’s share⁹. Moscow’s military build-up in the Black Sea is strengthened by its military bases in Armenia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, significantly limiting Ankara’s power projection in the area. The combined Regional Air Defense System agreement with Armenia on the protection of its airspace, not including Nagorno-Karabakh, cements Russia’s positions in the South Caucasus and virtually integrates Armenia’s airspace into the Kremlin’s intelligence and full capability air defense system¹⁰. These developments proved that Turkey’s dominant position in the Black Sea has fallen prey to its mild stance towards Russia’s assertive behavior. Hence, NATO’s reaffirmation of its Open Door Approach for Georgia and Ukraine is significantly weakened by Russia’s energy infrastructure in the Black Sea, exacerbating tensions, and mutual suspicions among the littoral states¹¹. Moscow further benefits from the lack of overlapping interests between Black Sea actors, as well as Ukraine’s vulnerable status after the Crimea annexation and beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine¹².

Turkey’s efforts to position itself as an equal heavyweight to Russia were further inhibited after the 2015 November SU-24 fighter jet incident. The Kremlin was not hesitant to put more than two decades of relations to the test having launched a massive retaliatory campaign against Turkish food

⁹ Gönül Tol (Nov. 2019) Balance in the Black Sea: The complex dynamic between Turkey, Russia, and NATO, Middle East Institute <https://www.mei.edu/publications/balance-black-sea-complex-dynamic-between-turkey-russia-and-nato> [Accessed on: April 24th. 2020]

¹⁰ Armenia ratifies agreement on joint air-defense system with Russia (July, 2016) [online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-russia-defence/armenia-ratifies-agreement-on-joint-air-defense-system-with-russia-idUSKCN0ZG2AS> [Accessed on: April 24th. 2020]

¹¹ Turkey’s Akkuyu nuclear power station next to Mersin being fully funded by Russia’s Rosatom based on the 2010 contract.

¹² Anonymous. Personal Interview. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. February, 2020.

products, construction workers, freezing the construction of Turkish Stream pipeline, and forcing the collapse of the Turkish tourist industry (35% decline)¹³. In terms of economic cooperation, Russia outperforms Turkey in terms of its exports and despite the 100 billion USD projected trade turnover between the two countries, it has never reached even 30 billion USD¹⁴ (Figure 1). Turkey's trade with Russia has been import-driven with roughly 5 times more of imports from Russia over Turkey's exports. According to Russia's Integrated Foreign Economic Information Portal, trade turnover balance with Turkey occupies only 6th place in its total trade turnover throughout 2017-2019, behind China, Germany, the Netherlands, Belarus and USA, which makes the Kremlin's economic sanctions and embargoes on Turkey for "misbehaving" relatively painless for Russia's economy¹⁵.



Figure 1. Compiled based on the data of Turkish Statistical Institute (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu)

At the same time, Turkey's dependence on Russian gas supplies and imports should not be approached one-sidedly, as for Russia Turkey is the second largest market for deliveries after Germany.¹⁶ In 2016,

¹³ Russia's Putin lifts ban on charter holidays to Turkey (30 June 2016) [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36676516> [Accessed on: Dec.18th. 2019]

¹⁴ РИА Новости (08.01.2020) Россия и Турция намерены достичь торгового оборота в \$100 миллиардов [online] Available at: <https://ria.ru/20200108/1563190650.html> [Accessed on: April 30, 2020]

¹⁵ Внешняя торговля России в 2017-2019 гг. [online] Available at: http://www.ved.gov.ru/monitoring/foreign_trade_statistics/countries_breakdown/ [Accessed on: April 12, 2020]

¹⁶ Gazprom Delivery Statistics (2020) Gas Supplies to Europe [online] Available at: <http://www.gazpromexport.ru/en/statistics/> [Accessed on: May 5, 2020]

disagreements over gas prices between Turkish BOTAŞ and Russia's Gazprom increased tensions between Russia and Turkey resulting in Ankara's appeal against Russia at the International Chamber of Commerce¹⁷. The significance of both countries' energy relations became visible during the post-Su 24 fighter-jet crisis as energy cooperation remained untouched by Russian sanctions. Having overcome the crisis, Turkey and Russia seemed to experience another uncertain "honeymoon period" with their geopolitical ambitions enhanced by cooperation on political solutions for Syria in the framework of Astana Talks launched in January 2017 and "cold shaky peace" in Libya's civil war. These episodes showcase Russia's assertive stance when it comes to supporting its long-term ally Syria and prioritizing its own national interests. Russian actions in Syria and Libya has put Turkey's patience to the test, especially over the last few months as tensions between the two escalated in Syria's Idlib province. Russian plans to make strategic gains of Libya's energy resources and its deep-sea ports are also raising alarms in Ankara, which is worried that Russia is eventually aiming at getting leverage over Europe and the Mediterranean.¹⁸

In 2016, Recep Tayyip Erdogan alarmed the international community, and NATO in particular, when he said that the Black Sea was under the threat of turning in to a "Russian lake"¹⁹. Turkey's open criticism of Russia's Black Sea military buildup and further provocations took the world community by surprise. Ankara's policy of opposition to a presence of any outside power in the Black Sea has dated back to the 1938 Montreux Convention suddenly seemed to be compromised under the threat of a Russian Black Sea takeover. Turkey's 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit coincided with Romania's quest for a NATO Black Sea Fleet, which is by far the staunchest supporter of NATO's enhanced presence in the Black Sea basin. Romania's activism led to the establishment of the Bucharest Format consisting of 9 NATO member states and the introduction of the axis of Baltic-Black Sea states cooperation. Unfortunately, Turkey has not yet joined the cooperation agreement which demonstrates its mercantilist approach to

¹⁷ Daily Sabah (May, 2018) Turkey, Russia ink pipeline agreement, end gas dispute [online] Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2018/05/28/turkey-russia-ink-pipeline-agreement-end-gas-dispute> [Accessed on: April 27, 2020]

¹⁸ 33 Turkish Soldiers Killed in Syrian air raid in Idlib, Aljazeera (28.02.2020). Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/turkish-soldiers-killed-air-raid-syria-idlib-200227211119672.html> [Accessed on Feb.28th 2020]

¹⁹ Bahar Bakir (July, 2016) NATO liderlerinin Varşova gündemi Karadeniz ve terör, Haberturk [online] Available at: <https://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/1263563-nato-liderlerinin-varsova-gundemi-karadeniz-ve-teror> [Accessed on: April 27th. 2020]

criticizing Russia in times of crisis and praising it in times of “bilateral honeymoon”. Bulgaria has also taken a more cautious stance to the project. As another consequence of the post-2014 realities in the Black Sea, the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) was introduced by NATO as part of its strengthening the eastern flanks policy, though focusing mostly on training and reassurance, unlike the NATO presence in the Baltic sea.

As a backdrop to these developments, Georgia is facing the “accordion effect”, being squeezed between Russia and Turkey throughout periods of cooperation and rivalry where Tbilisi risks being only an observer. The doubtful fruits of the normalization policy waged by the Georgian government towards Russia, only reveal Tbilisi’s strategic weakness in dealing with Moscow, and decrease trust in the government’s ability to adequately address continuing illegal detentions, deaths of the Georgian nationals and borderization. However, current situation offers opportunities and challenges to be considered by the Georgian government.

ON THE CROSSROADS OF TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GEORGIA

Opportunities for Georgia

First, the much discussed rapprochement between Turkey and Russia is *situational and tactical*, lacking any long-term strategy or common interests. Turkey is a NATO member-state, which so far does not exhibit any interest in joining Russian-led integration initiatives, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Ankara supports Tbilisi’s NATO membership aspirations, which was reaffirmed by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu at the Davos Economic Forum²⁰. Despite the recent deterioration of Turkey’s relations with US as NATO members, attempts to tone down the S-400 crisis on both flanks are already visible 21.

²⁰ Georgia thanks Turkey for pushing NATO membership (23.01.2020)
<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/georgia-thanks-turkey-for-pushing-nato-membership/1711744>

21 Kommersant. (14.11.2019). “США и Турция не знают, как быть с российскими комплексами” (“US and Turkey do not know what to be done with the Russian defense systems”). Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4157672>. [Accessed: 4 December 2019].

Georgia has managed to preserve a delicate balancing position between the US and Turkey even while the EU has strongly opposed Turkey's military actions in Syria²². In addition, Ankara has already announced postponing the deployment of S-400s due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially pronounced has been Turkey's assistance to the US in fighting the pandemic, which has not gone unnoticed in Washington. Istanbul's overtures to the latter could be conditioned by the recent incident when 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in Syria by the Syrian air force and the lack of reaction on behalf of Russia and its underestimation of the refugee issue as of critical importance for Turkey's domestic security. Hence, diverse priorities between Turkey and Russia over the continuation of the war in Syria and support prevented a "three-year honeymoon" from lasting longer.

Second, Turkey and Russia's leverage in Georgia is segmented. Ankara positions itself as the regional power assigning priority to pragmatic economic cooperation and developing strategic partnership with Georgia through enhanced trade, energy and transportation cooperation. Turkey's soft power implementation suffers of wary attitudes of the Georgian population towards its values, whereas Russia takes the lead in both economic and soft power leverage. At the same time, the economic realm is where Moscow and Ankara are potential competitors, and this is where *Georgia should use its leverage as a strategic location on the Russia-Armenia and Turkey-Azerbaijan nexus in terms of transportation, trade, and transit of energy resources* ²³. Inauguration of the TANAP gas pipeline project, the announcement of the trilateral energy corridor between Georgia, Turkey and Azerbaijan ²⁴, plus the already existing Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline strengthen Tbilisi and Ankara's strategic cooperation, reaffirming support for economic pragmatism.

²² Giorgi Menabde (23.10.2019) Turkish Military Operation in Syria Complicates Georgia's Foreign Policy [online] Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/turkish-military-operation-in-syria-complicates-georgias-foreign-policy/> Accessed on: March 30th, 2020

²³ Anonymous. Personal Interview. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. February, 2020

²⁴ Georgia-Turkey-Azerbaijan sign 2020-2022 action plan for sectoral cooperation (23.12.2019) <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/3509> Accessed on

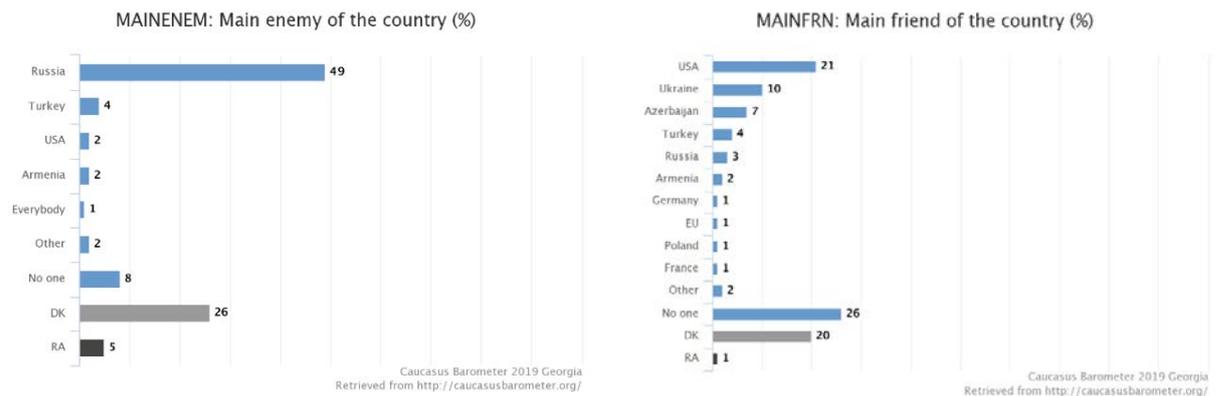


Figure 2. Georgia. Main Enemy of the country. Main Friend of the Country. Caucasus Barometer 2019 ²⁵

Third, even in the so-called honeymoon period, Turkey and Russia were ready to rip side-benefits of regional developments. Turkey openly praised its tourism industry's benefits due to Russia's flight ban to Georgia as the result of June 2019 protests in Tbilisi²⁶. Making use of Turkey's value and ideology-free policy, Tbilisi does not bear pressure from Ankara's meddling in its domestic affairs, allowing it to focus on multidimensional cooperation. Finally, the authoritarian turn and assertive behavior towards the West on behalf of both Turkey and Russia, combined with their rapprochement, could be utilized by the Georgian government as additional evidence for an intensified dialogue with the EU and US. With this aim Tbilisi should be willing to demonstrate *its determination to genuinely proceed with democratic reforms*. Georgia is the only country able to assume its role as a key player for any regional projects led by the EU. This is especially relevant taking into account Turkey's fracture with Brussels over the Syria-related refugee crisis, unfavorable public opinion in the EU on Turkey's domestic developments, as well as the latter's increasing authoritarianism²⁷.

²⁵ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2019) "[MAINFRN – Main Friend of the Country; MAINENM – Main Enemy of the Country]". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on [Accessed Feb.27th 2020]

²⁶ Aksam. 8 July 2019. "Putin'in Gürcistan Kararı Türkiye'ye Yaradı". [online] Available at: <https://www.aksam.com.tr/ekonomi/putinin-gurcistan-karari-turkiyeye-yaradi/haber-987381>. [Accessed on Dec. 4, 2019].

²⁷ Deutsche Welle (16.04.2020) Opinion: EU, Turkey need each other and a new refugee deal [online] Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-eu-turkey-need-each-other-and-a-new-refugee-deal/a-53131851> [Accessed on April 17th, 2020]

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES FOR GEORGIA

Despite these opportunities even more challenges arise out of Turkey and Russia's uneasy relationship which must be kept in plain sight. First, the above mentioned opportunity might easily turn into a challenge for Georgia, as Tbilisi is in the spotlight for keeping up with promises on ongoing electoral reform process, including enhancing parliamentary oversight, as well as judicial transparency, to name a few. Georgia's Western partners are keeping a close eye on the Georgian Dream-led government's decisions. There are already increasing voices of criticism for Georgia's stalled democratic progress²⁸. In case the Georgian government fails to address these concerns, the EU and US might downgrade Georgia in their list of priorities for democratic promotion²⁹. As a result, the West's lack of engagement with the region might further result in decreasing funding and political support for Georgia's fragile democracy. Secondly, Russia's hegemonic stance in the South Caucasus is an unsurmountable barrier for Turkey's foreign policy implementation in the region. Both countries' priority is to distance the West from any major decisions in the region. Turkey might be openly supporting Georgia's integration into NATO, however it is not likely for Turkey to support Georgia's EU Accession without itself being the first to do so. Another worrying sign is Turkey's population holding unfavorable views of the role of NATO according to Pew Research Center data. Indeed, twice as many people in Turkey think of NATO unfavorably compared to those holding positive perceptions.

28 Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze (2019) Georgia's Dangerous Slide Away From Democracy [online] Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/80542> [Accessed on: Jan. 15 2020]

29 Anonymous. Personal Interview, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) expert. February 2020.

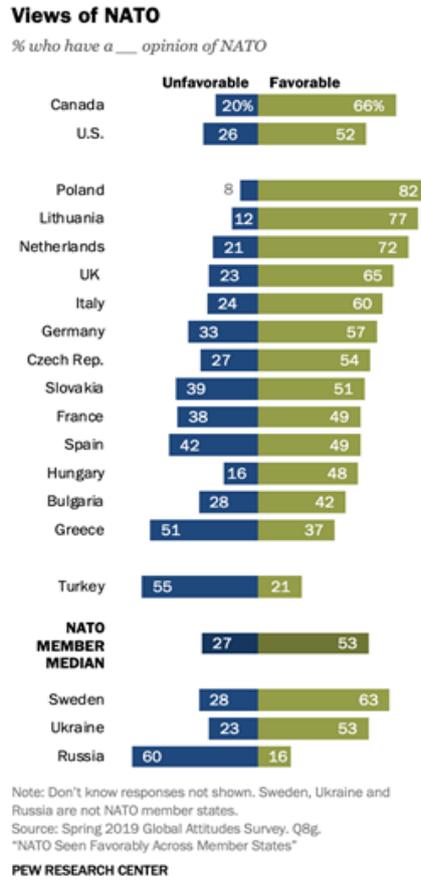


Figure 3. Views of NATO, Pew Research Center, 2020

Thirdly, while reaffirming its unconditional support for Georgia's territorial integrity and keeping in place trade embargo and sanctions, Turkey has been actively engaged with Abkhazia through its roughly half million diaspora.³⁰ The latter is represented by the Federation of Abkhaz Cultural Centers (Abkhazfed) involved in direct cooperation with the authorities of the breakaway Republic. The organization has been preserving a wise balance between its loyalty to Turkey, while at the same time avoiding irritating the Kremlin's. This demonstrates that Moscow has the upper-hand in Abkhazia's domestic and external affairs. Members of the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey are involved in waging business relations with Abkhazia through infrastructural projects, trade in fruits, vegetables and the lease of fishing vessels. Being in possession of so-called double citizenship (Abkhazian passport along with the Turkish one) has helped overcome sanctions introduced by Abkhazia against Turkey under the

³⁰ İstanbul ve Marmara, Ege, Akdeniz, Karadeniz Bölgeleri Deniz Ticaret Odası (28.06.2018) Türkiye ile Abhazya Arasında Doğrudan Ticaret [online] Available at: <https://www.denizticaretodasi.org.tr/tr/sirkuler/turkiye-ile-abhazya-arasinda-dogrudan-ticaret-10068> [Accessed on: April 15 2020]

Kremlin's pressure campaign after the 2015 crisis led to a deterioration in bilateral relations. Turkey's stance towards Abkhazia, formally emphasizing support for Georgia's territorial integrity while turning a blind eye on diaspora channels of trade and cultural relations, stresses Tbilisi's further isolation.

Fourth, Turkish-led military cooperation projects in the South Caucasus, such as the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia triangle, are limited by Ankara's unwillingness to irritate Russia. Hence, the much advertised project falls short of a military alliance able to challenge Moscow's dominance in the South Caucasus. Against these developments, in December 2019 Turkey and Georgia agreed upon an assistance package of 100 mln lira to Georgia's Ministry of Defense with the view of supporting the country's logistic infrastructure³¹. 2019 witnessed a 37.8% increase in sales of Turkish defense products to Georgia in comparison to the previous year³². Ankara contributes greatly to Georgia's military training exercises under NATO auspices. However, these efforts alone fail to decrease Tbilisi's vulnerability towards the Kremlin's assertiveness, let alone Russia's announcement of a military modernization campaign in Abkhazia³³.

Finally, both Russia and Turkey view the Black Sea basin as of foremost geostrategic significance. Since the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia has strengthened its posture in the region, installing S-400 long-range surface-to-air (SAM) defense systems in Turkey and in Crimea (since August 2016), as well as S-300 defense systems in Abkhazia. As a result, Georgia's maritime security is deteriorating³⁴. Moscow successfully makes use of Ankara's failed attempts to turn the

³¹ საქართველოს თავდაცვის სამინისტრო (25.12.2019) ირაკლი გარიბაშვილი ოფიციალური ვიზიტის ფარგლებში თურქ კოლეგას შეხვდა [online] Available at: <https://mod.gov.ge/ge/news/read/7676/irakli-garibashvili-oficialuri-vizitis-farglebshi-turq-kolegas-shexvda> [Accessed on April 2nd, 2020]

³² Emil Avdaliani (2019) Turkey to Seek Larger Role in Black Sea and South Caucasus [online] Available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/04/02/turkey-to-seek-larger-role-in-the-black-sea-and-the-south-caucasus/> [Accessed on Feb 20th, 2020]

³³ Georgi Gotev (24.09.2019) Russia to fund modernisation of army in occupied Georgian region, Euractiv [online] Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/russia-to-fund-modernisation-of-army-in-occupied-georgian-region/> [Accessed on April 5th, 2020]

³⁴ ზურაბ ბატიშვილი (15.07.2019) ჩვენთვის ძალზედ არასასურველი იქნება აშშ-სა და თურქეთს შორის დაძაბულობა, თუ თურქეთი არ იქნება ნატოს წევრი და იგი დიად წავა აშშ-ს და დასავლეთის ინტერესების წინააღმდეგ [online] Available at: <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/556195-zurab-batiashvili-chventvis-zalzed-arasasurveili-ikneba-ashsh-sa-da-turkets-shoris-dazabuloba-tu-turketi-ar-ikneba-natos-cevri-dajigi-giad-cava-ashsh-s-da-dasavletis-interesebis-cinaagmdeg/> (Accessed on Dec.25, 2019)

Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) into an influential regional structure. The latter avoids directly criticizing Russia as it benefits from the energy transportation projects and aims to stay a major partner for Moscow in the Black Sea region. Turkey's goals are less of long-standing partnerships and more about the potential benefits for its interests as a transportation hub for both the EU and Russia 35.

STRATEGIC HEDGING FOR SMALL STATES: LESSONS FOR GEORGIA

Exploring the Concept & Scenarios to Latch on

The opportunities and challenges for Georgia emerging out of Turkey-Russia relations highlight the urgent need for the effective policy to avoid being left without any room for maneuver. The stakes are high. The absence of a consistent long-term strategy will lead to adopting a reactionary line towards Turkey-Russia decisions. Aligning with other countries against the prevailing threat through a *bandwagoning strategy* or *balancing against strategy* would not bear fruits; otherwise strong institutional support is required on behalf of the forums which Georgia is currently a part of, namely the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, EaP multilateral dimension projects, Black Sea Synergy, NATO-Georgia Commission, CoE, OSCE, UN Platforms, Geneva International Discussions as well as ad hoc platforms on boosting sectoral cooperation and the creation of free trade areas with countries such as Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan etc.

Hence, Georgia could gain lessons from other state's experiences. Southeast Asia offers an engaging laboratory with diverse strategies elaborated in the conditions of both China's rise and US presence. Especially instructive is Vietnam's strategy of hedging, involving *limited bandwagoning*, *economic pragmatism*, *dominance denial* and *indirect balancing*³⁶. Further steps envisage the middle ground between bandwagoning and balancing strategies; formulating and maintaining long-term interests; minimizing long-term threats and maximizing long-term opportunities; emphasis on increasing

35 Anonymous. Personal Interview, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) expert. February 2020.

36 Van der Vennet, N., Salman, M. Strategic Hedging and Changes in Geopolitical Capabilities for Second-Tier States. *Chin. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 4, 86–134 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-018-0111-5>

profile in international organizations. The departure point for hedging is *detecting the risks* (see above Opportunities and Challenges for Georgia) which pose a long-term challenge for a country's ability to pursue its national interests. In the case of Vietnam, the legacy of the border war with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979 and continuous tensions over the South China Sea³⁷ have left a continuous imprint on its bilateral relations with China. The Chinese economy is incomparable to the Vietnamese one. In a quest to block alternative partnerships, Beijing sabotaged Vietnam's deals with British Petroleum and ExxonMobil on the exploration of oil and gas due to territorial claims in the South China Sea, which have since been tabled. Hanoi received a warning that already existing economic trade deals with China may be under threat. Hedging on behalf of Vietnam allows it to realize that China is too big and important to ignore or block. At the same time, inaction would leave Vietnam without any other options apart from bandwagoning.

As in the case of Georgia, Vietnam found itself with a limited set of foreign policy options. Nevertheless, it has used its ASEAN membership as a departure point for the East Asia Summit in 2019. The latter enhances partnerships with Japan, India, Russia as well as China. By enlarging the number of potential participants outside ASEAN and offering a platform for discussion of regional processes, Vietnam demonstrates a proactive stance simultaneously offsetting risks to maintain its own welfare, territorial integrity and maritime security. Otherwise, the survival of its one-party authoritarian rule would be placed in doubt. Vietnam also embarked upon a policy of economic liberalization and military modernization with Russia, the US, France and Sweden being the major partners. As a result, Vietnam is already at similar levels of military expenditures to that of Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand.

A similar strategy of hedging is pursued by Oman, which is striving to preserve its security cooperation with the US, while at the same time engaging with Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. The case of Belarus is of relevance for Georgia as well, as its rift with Russia in favor of bolder cooperation with the EU has been surprising to say the least. Despite

³⁷ South China Sea (SCS) is regarded as the second most used sea lane worldwide, Paracel and Spratly archipelagos are claimed by both PRC and Vietnam. China established its new administrative district of Sansha covering 90% of the SCS and although counteracted Vietnam's claims to the UN Commission on Limits to Continental Shelves in 2012.

its over-reliance on Russia, Belarus has never recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or the annexation of Crimea³⁸. The war in eastern Ukraine became a turning point for Belarus to assume the posture of mediator and offer good services for Minsk negotiations as well as Trilateral Contact Group meetings to take place. Unlike Georgia, Belarus does not suffer from territorial conflicts with Russia, however it is integrated into the network of Russian-led security and economic integration projects, such as the CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union³⁹. Recent tensions between Belarus and Russia, in terms of the stalled Union State project and disparity in oil and gas prices, have proved the need for Minsk to search for alternative outlets for partnerships, such as China and its Belt and Road Initiative. While the future of Belarus-EU cooperation framework has been blurred due to fears that the EU might not favor Lukashenka staying in power and push for democratic reforms, limited dialogue with the EU has been part of Belarus's attempt to reduce its dependence over Russia and establish diversified partnerships.

All of these examples show how strategic hedging might become a starting point for a small state, like Georgia, to gradually depart from the orbit of a hegemon and invest in diversified partnerships without too high a cost for distancing.

STRATEGIC HEDGING - A CHECK-LIST FOR GEORGIA

Taking seriously the need to *diversify partnerships and embark upon the policy of economic pragmatism* is the starting point to pursue effective hedging for Tbilisi. This posture allows recognizing the significance of trade turnover with both Turkey and Russia, while at the same time decreasing over-dependence on the latter. So far, the pattern is rather worrying, with Turkey's share in external trade turnover with Georgia slightly decreasing in comparison to Russia's more than twofold increase. The same concerns hold for Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Germany with a decrease in the share of Georgia's overall trade turnover throughout the last 6 years⁴⁰. While the

³⁸ Pavel Felgenhauer (Feb., 2020) Moscow's Rift With Minsk Reaches Critical Point, Eurasia Daily Monitor , Vol. 17, Issue 16 [online] Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/moscows-rift-with-minsk-reaches-critical-point/> [Accessed on March. 19, 2020]

³⁹ Yauheni Preiherman (Feb.2019) Belarus Finds its Foreign Policy Stride, Minsk Dialogue [online] Available at: <https://minskdialogue.by/en/research/opinions/belarus-finds-its-foreign-policy-stride> [Accessed on Feb. 19, 2020]

⁴⁰ External Trade Tendencies in Georgia (2013-2018), Geostat [online] Available at: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/35/external-trade> [Accessed on Dec. 24, 2019]

total EU market share is on the rise for Georgia, already occupying the 2nd place after the CIS countries, the increase in Russia's share of trade turnover should be taken as a challenge of strategic importance, especially if Georgia aims to leave enough room for maneuvering and embark upon further diversification of its partnerships. Under the auspices of cooperation with the EU, Georgia takes part in EU-led crisis management missions/operations, enhances implementation of the Strategic Defense Review (SDR), and deepens cooperation with the EU within the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) framework.

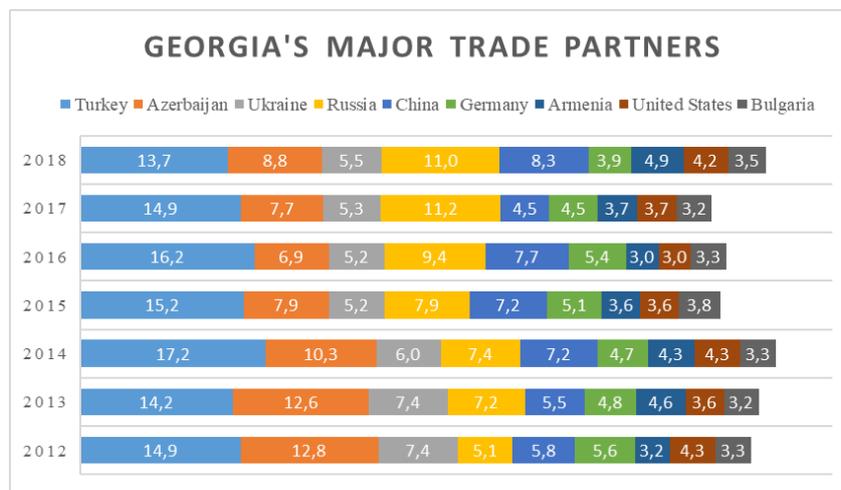


Figure 4. Georgia's Major Partners – Trade turnover, mln USD (2012-2018)
Compiled based on data from Geostat.ge

Out of the existing institutional arrangements which Georgia is part of, none so far allows to guarantee a much desired umbrella protecting Georgia from Russia and Turkey's regional power play. This includes the EU's Eastern Partnership, which does not offer the membership perspective for EaP countries in the foreseeable future. At the same time, the Eastern Partnership endorses Georgia to position itself, not only as the essential part of the South Caucasus, but also as part of Eastern Europe, along with Ukraine and Moldova. This status brings Tbilisi closer to Brussels in terms of policy priorities and funding assigned. Georgia benefits from over 100 mln Euro in annual assistance from the EU. It also declares the EU and NATO membership as the goal in the framework of its 2019-2022 Foreign policy Strategy⁴¹. Tbilisi's firm aspirations for membership status in the EU

⁴¹ European Union. External Action (2018) Georgia and the EU [online] Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/49070/Georgia%20and%20the%20EU [Accessed on Feb.20,2020]

stand in stark contrast to Armenia's and Azerbaijan's ambivalent and slowly progressing "country-specific" agreements with EU.

In terms of Black Sea security, among the six littoral states, Georgia has been playing a minor role in its security architecture, with its Black Sea navy consolidated into the Coast Guard of Georgia in 2009 acting under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Georgia should prove itself able and willing to invest in the need for a unified stance in light of Russia's increasing presence in the Black Sea. A concern shared by all littoral states. Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey top the list of countries where Georgia's militaries participate in trainings and exercises, along with the Baltic countries and Poland⁴². This geometry of Black Sea countries – the Baltic states and Poland - include Georgia as well as Ukraine as non-member NATO allies. Joining the strategic circle of NATO member-states further upgrades Tbilisi's strategic importance as the outpost of the South Caucasus and entrance to the Caspian. Georgia and Azerbaijan form the lynchpin of the corridor from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and further to the EU.

Turkey's NATO membership is the key to Georgia's increased profile in the Black Sea basin as well as NATO-led cooperation projects. Ankara views Tbilisi as the guarantee of its own energy framework, hence it would continue to contribute to Georgia's security. The bilateral cooperation between Turkey and Georgia is already cemented by the large-scale infrastructural projects as TANAP and TAP, BTC oil pipeline, BTE gas route as well as the BTK railway project. Georgia is seen by Turkey as an indivisible part of the trilateral strategic and sectoral cooperation with Azerbaijan⁴³, although several contradictions within this arrangement are still unresolved in terms of cultural heritage and border issues including David Gareji. Launched in 2012, the trilateral defense cooperation between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan has already laid the groundwork for the annual Caucasus Eagle exercises and established long-term cooperation between the armed forces of the three states. As an outcome of the 2014 NATO Wales summit, Georgia was granted the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, which increased defense capabilities, resilience and interoperability. The NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center was established in 2015, hosting a permanent NATO Expert Team based in Georgia. The next year the Defense

⁴² Ministry of Defence of Georgia, Bilateral Defense Cooperation [online] Available at: <https://mod.gov.ge/en/page/40/bilateral-defence-cooperation> [Accessed on March 18, 2020]

⁴³ Anadolu Post (Dec 23, 2019) Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia Sign Tbilisi Statement [online] Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-azerbaijan-georgia-sign-tbilisi-statement/1682158> [Accessed on Feb. 18, 2020]

Institution Building School project was launched under the supervision of Germany with contribution on behalf of Slovakia and the Netherlands. Being incorporated into BLACKSEAFOR and the US European Command-led “Georgia Train and Equip Program” and the “Georgia Capabilities Enhancement Program” assisted greatly in the modernization of the Georgian military⁴⁴.

Georgia is also in a favorable position in terms of its bilateral relations with Armenia, putting emphasis on support for the EU and NATO intensified cooperation. Tbilisi’s role in the Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor from Iran through Armenia and Georgia is of particular significance. While both countries face a growing necessity to search for diverse trade outlets, Georgia is the option not to ignore for any South Caucasus player, whether it is Azerbaijan, Armenia or Turkey.⁴⁵ *In spite of limitations existing on the path of strategic hedging*, this foreign policy strategy offers a viable scenario to follow for Georgia in order to decrease its dependence on Russia, which is not subject to change in the future. Tbilisi has already laid down the foundation for diversifying its partnerships and is deserving of praise on behalf of the West. The recommendations below offer avenues for an effective hedging strategy to be undertaken by the Georgian Government.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present policy paper addresses opportunities and challenges for Georgia emerging out of Turkey-Russia nexus in the South Caucasus. The tumultuous character of bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow creates difficult circumstances for Tbilisi’s maneuvering and ability to build a long-term effective foreign policy strategy. Furthermore, Turkey’s junior player role in the South Caucasus has been constant, failing to transform the regional geometry. Under these conditions, strategic hedging offers the most beneficial option for a small state to pursue, putting emphasis on economic pragmatism, diversifying strategic partnerships, military modernization and increasing proactive stance at international discussion forums. In the existing conditions, no equal option to Turkey and Russia exists for Georgia to undertake so far. This is especially relevant in terms of

⁴⁴ Alexandros Petersen, Black Sea Security: The NATO Imperative, Wilson Center [online] Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/black-sea-security-the-nato-imperative> [Accessed on Feb. 18, 2020]

⁴⁵ Benyamin Poghosyan (March, 2018) The Rationale behind Armenia-Georgia Strategic Partnership [online] Available at: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/9390/The-Rationale-behind-Armenia-Georgia-Strategic-Partnership> [Accessed on: Feb. 21, 2020]

the EU's internal challenges caused by Brexit and rising authoritarianism trends among its Eastern European member-states. At the same time, both EU and NATO regard Georgia as the lynchpin of any strategic projects occurring in the South Caucasus, which Tbilisi should make use of. Georgia's value-free relations with Turkey, and its pragmatic stance to sectoral cooperation, decrease the chance for rifts between the two. Democratic reforms under the auspices of the Eastern Partnership should be enhanced with diverse multilateral cooperation platforms that include Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine, many of which are already underway.

RECCOMENDATIONS:

- For an effective hedging strategy, the Georgian government should depart from its current reactive stance and move towards a proactive line of foreign policy behavior. This implies initiating regional platforms that establish permanent opportunities for ongoing discussions in the long run; and, detect new areas for deepening economic cooperation that can, in turn, enhance high-level political dialogue.
 - ✓ The Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral partnership offers good practice for launching similar dialogues;
 - ✓ Declarations of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to join efforts in achieving full access to the EU single market should be taken as an opportunity to initiate the permanent functioning subregional platform (similar to that of the Visegrad Group);
 - ✓ Another case to look after is the Free Trade Agreement between Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Azerbaijan on the creation of the unified trade agreement in December 2019.
- The Government of Georgia should invest in launching a campaign to promote a *reliable partner image* regionally and worldwide when it comes to transportation, energy transit, electricity export, alternative sources of energy and maritime cooperation projects in the South Caucasus. Focusing on a "*reliable partner*" image promotion at the international discussion platforms will decrease its dependence on its external partners, first and foremost Russia, even if to a minimal degree. Meanwhile, the efforts will be of limited impact, unless Georgia's Western partners, US, NATO and the EU demonstrate the political will to hold Russia's provocations checked.

- Diversification of partnerships should be the cornerstone for Georgia's hedging strategy. China is a partner to look for as part of its Belt and Road projects. Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus with which a free-trade area is initiated. At the same time, increasing economic dependence on any of the partners, will make hedging efforts futile. Hence, economic partnerships should be further enhanced with already existing partners like Azerbaijan, EU countries (Germany and Bulgaria in particular) and the US;
- Georgia is an inherent part of the Black Sea security architecture, therefore, bringing partnerships with Bulgaria, Romania to a new level is of a strategic importance in addition to already existing partnerships with Turkey and Ukraine, as the countries mentioned above are NATO members or aspire to become as such. Georgia's enhanced cooperation with these countries in terms of military modernization, would contribute to its strengthened posture in the Black Sea region.
- Tbilisi should use its unique location as the entrance point of the South Caucasus to the Black Sea to initiate the littoral states' unified stance and the need for enhanced Black Sea security dialogue. Turning more cautious players such as Bulgaria and Turkey to the idea of NATO's enhanced presence in the region would contribute to Georgia's own advantage vis-à-vis Russia;

Georgia's commitment to improve its democratic performance is the key guarantee for convincing its EU and US counterparts to increase their strategic support and funding for Georgia. With this goal in mind, timely decisions should be taken and commitment demonstrated towards Brussels in the area of judicial transparency, strengthening parliamentary oversight instruments, and refurbishing electoral legislation.

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