

POLICY MEMO

Georgian party political discourse on foreign policy non-alignment: How has the meaning changed since 1992?

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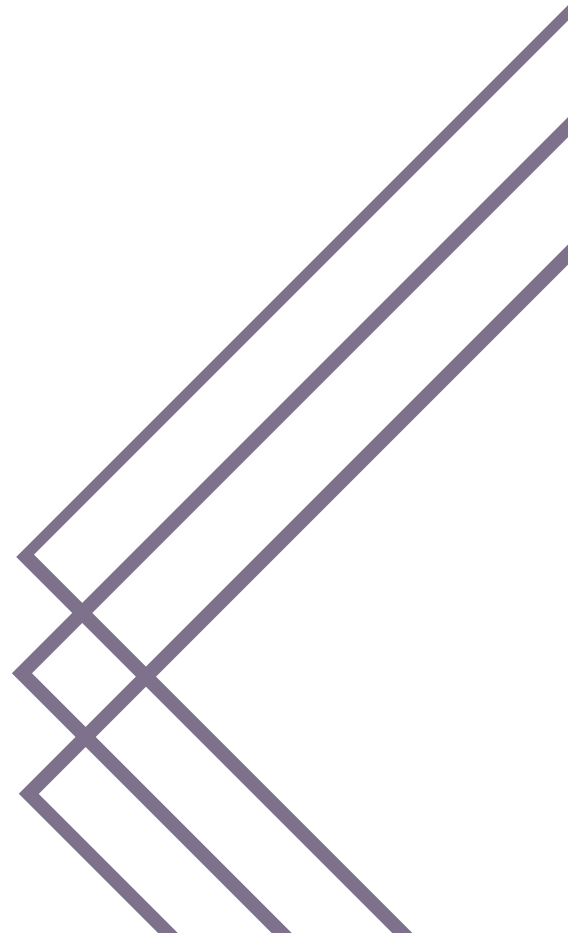
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INTRODUCTION

Issues related to foreign policy become salient on a regular basis in pre-election contexts in Georgia. Against the background of the upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2020, however, at least three parties have started to advocate for military neutrality or non-alignment as an optimal option for Georgian foreign policy. These parties include Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) (see, Patriots.ge 2020), United Georgia (UG) (see, Liberali 2016), and Free Georgia (FG) (see, Freegeorgia.ge 2020). Out of these three APG is the most vocal about the issue of military neutrality and at the same time, is perhaps the most important party of the three. Although all of them are small parties, APG is the only one that managed to overcome the five percent threshold in the 2016 elections and received six seats in the parliament. It can be argued that it is unimportant what such small parties may say about Georgian foreign policy but on the other hand, they influence the political discourse as they go against the mainstream parties. This changing political discourse in its turn can be seen as a first step in modifying the country's foreign policy provided these parties become increasingly influential.

The goal of this memo is not to evaluate the feasibility of Georgia's military neutrality as a foreign policy option (on the viability of neutrality, see, Kakachia, Lebanidze and Dzebisashvili 2020). Rather, it aims to reveal how the idea of neutrality and the meaning behind this seemingly simple concept has changed in Georgian party political discourse over the last three decades. For this purpose, this memo analyzes manifestos of parliamentary parties between 1992 and 2016 (manifestos have been obtained from the Manifesto Project database, see, Volkens et al 2019). Manifestos have been coded and processed using content analysis, which makes it possible to calculate party positions in terms of whether a given political party leans towards alignment or non-alignment and to what extent. The analysis is based on 46 party manifestos spanning seven parliamentary elections illustrating the changing meaning of non-alignment in Georgia party political discourse.

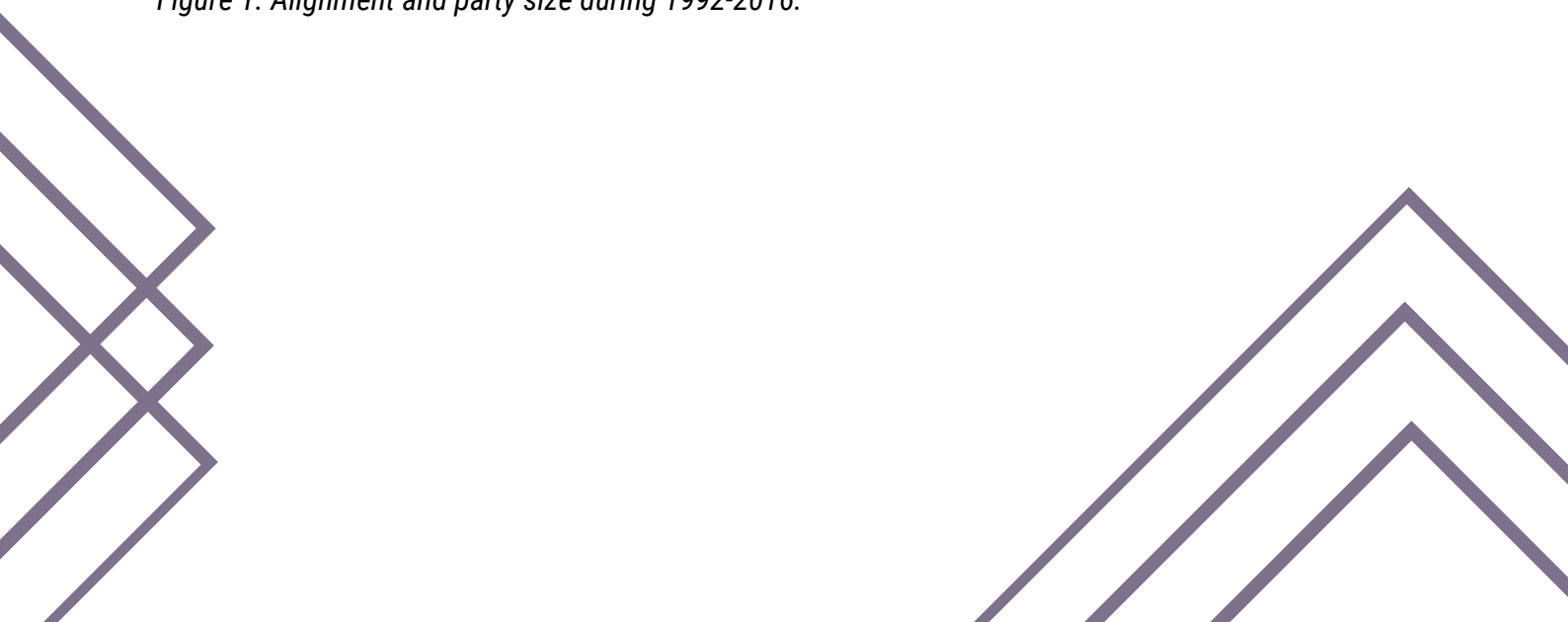
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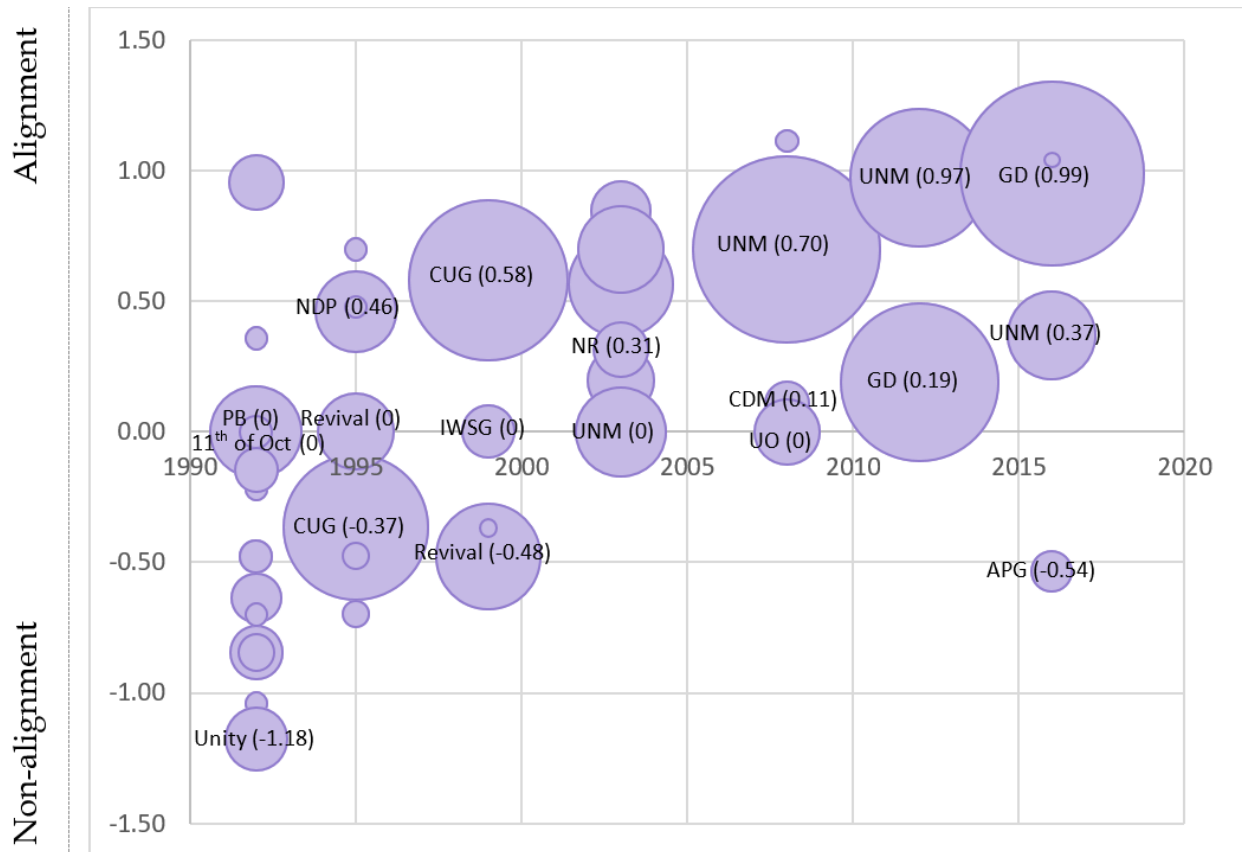
WHERE DO GEORGIAN PARTIES STAND IN TERMS OF NON-ALIGNMENT IN FOREIGN POLICY?

In order to estimate party positions in terms of where they position themselves regarding the issue of non-alignment or neutrality, it is necessary to construct a dimension of competition. This means that one pole of this dimension is an extreme position favoring alignment with one or more foreign power, while the other pole is an extreme position favoring neutrality or not aligning with any foreign power. Considering Georgia's geopolitical location, typically, there are two main concentrations of foreign powers, with which Georgia can align itself. First, is the West, which includes the USA, NATO and the EU, while the second one is Russia. Consequently, it is possible to count positive and negative references to these foreign powers in a given party manifesto. Additionally, some party manifestos put a direct emphasis on the need for Georgia to be a neutral country. Since the goal of the memo is not to identify with which power pole parties want to align, alignment as a position can be conceptualized as a sum of positive references to any of the Western powers or Russia and negative references to neutrality or non-alignment. Non-alignment, however, can be conceptualized in an opposite manner: a sum of negative references to Western powers or Russia as well as positive references to neutrality or non-alignment. To estimate party positions, the frequencies of these references have been counted and logged proportions have been calculated. Logged proportions help diminish the impact of the varied manifesto length on the estimating a position of a given party (see, Lowe et al 2011).

Consequently, party positions can be mapped on a dimension of alignment versus non-alignment across the seven parliamentary elections that have taken place in Georgia between 1992 and 2016 (see, Figure 1). From this mapping a clear pattern emerges. In the first three elections, there is a significant number of parties that favored non-alignment as a foreign policy option for Georgia. At the same time, these parties were not always very small. For example, in 1995 Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), which emerged victorious gaining about half of the parliamentary seats, advocated for non-alignment – a position that the party changed in the next election in 1999. In the three following elections (2003, 2008, and 2012), there was not a single political party that managed to gain seats in the parliament and favored non-alignment. However, in 2016 non-alignment as an issue returned to party competition again advocated by APG.

Figure 1. Alignment and party size during 1992-2016.





Note: Party abbreviations (largest parties of each elections):

- 1992: Peace Bloc (PB), 11th of October, Unity
- 1995 – Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG), National Democratic Party (NDP), Revival
- 1999 – CUG, Revival, Industry Will Save Georgia (IWSG)
- 2003* – United National Movement (UNM), New Rights (NR)
- 2008 – UNM, United Opposition (UO), Christian Democratic Movement (CDM)
- 2012 – Georgian Dream (GD), UNM
- 2016 – GD, UNM, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)

* The parties in 2003 are those that gained seats in the 2004 elections following the Rose Revolution.

Although it is worth exploring why there is a gap of three electoral cycles between 1999 and 2016 in terms of Georgian parties favoring non-alignment, this memo does not go into details to explain the gap. Instead, it argues that the meaning of non-alignment has changed over this period.

HOW HAS THE MEANING OF “NON-ALIGNMENT” CHANGED IN GEORGIAN PARTY POLITICAL DISCOURSE?

The Figure 1 shows that out of 30 party manifestos analyzed for the period of 1992-1999, roughly, half of them supported non-alignment. In 2016, however, only one of four parties did the same. Qualitative analysis of manifestos reveals that in the 1990s non-alignment was an anti-Russian and pro-Western stance for Georgian political parties, while in 2016 non-alignment seems to be an anti-Western and pro-Russian stance.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia had to find its place in the world and a new patron, for which the political elite started looking to the Western powers. However, the fall of communism was unexpected for the West and for some time, there was a confusion about how to proceed with the “end of history”. A clear illustration of this confusion was the so-called “Chicken Kiev” speech of President Bush, which he made in 1991 arguing that the USA would not support “suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred” – the independence movements “who seek ... to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism” (Dahlburg 1991). Consequently, it can be argued that Georgia’s willingness to find a new patron in the West was not met with a lot of enthusiasm. Considering that the political elite in early 1990s grew out of the nationalist pro-independent movement, it is clear that they would not necessarily want to advocate for Russia remaining as the patron of Georgia. However, with the West being reluctant, there was only one option left: neutrality. This situation led parties to focus on two main messages: the need to free Georgia of foreign military bases and personnel and the need to implement a cautious and balanced foreign policy.

Parties such as the Union of Traditionalists, Merab Kostava Society, Social Justice Union, etc. in 1992 all stressed that primary goal of Georgian foreign policy should have been ensuring the “liberation [of Georgia] from foreign military forces” and “turning its [Georgia’s] territory into a neutral zone” by not joining any military bloc. Similarly, Labour Party in 1999 also stressed the importance of neutral foreign policy for restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia. Considering that at the time Russia still maintained military bases even in the Tbilisi-administered territory, the call for freeing the country of foreign militaries is a clear attack against the presence of Russian soldiers in Georgia. Incidentally, this rhetoric ceased once Russian bases left Georgia in mid-2000s.

The second message about non-alignment is characteristic to the Citizens’ Union of Georgia (CUG), which emphasized the need for a “well-reasoned and balanced foreign policy”. This cautiousness, according to the CUG manifesto, is a necessity derived from the geostrategic location of Georgia, which is the only post-Soviet country sandwiched between Russia and Turkey – a NATO ally. This location, according to CUG, is what determines the interest of both Russia and the West in Georgia, which is why Georgia has to have a balanced policy. Considering the geopolitical context in the 1990s and slow shift in Georgia’s foreign policy orientation towards the West under the CUG rule, the discourse on non-alignment among Georgian political parties should be viewed as an anti-Russian position.

Anti-Western non-alignment

In 2016, a small party, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) revived a discussion about Georgia’s non-alignment in foreign policy. However, the reasoning behind advocating for non-alignment is different from what was in the 1990s. The starting point of APG’s reasoning is that Georgia has been trying to become a NATO member for almost two decades and has not yet been successful, which for APG is an indicator that the West is not planning to integrate Georgia under the security umbrella. Even if Georgia becomes a member of NATO, APG argues, it would mean to give up hope of restoration of territorial integrity.

The APG manifesto labels non-alignment as “inevitable” and argues it is “deadly” to even try to pursue a different course of action in foreign policy. Hoping that Georgia will become a NATO ally one day is what APG calls a lie and even if it does happen, it is likely to lead to the disintegration of the country. This leads to the idea that NATO membership and Georgia’s territorial integrity are mutually exclusive ideas and trying to be a part of NATO is likely to lead to another Russo-Georgian war, as a result of which Georgia could lose all hope of restoring its territorial integrity.

APG continues to run on this platform in the upcoming 2020 elections too. It is likely that they will gain some seats in the parliament and they may be joined by one or more parties who share their narrative on non-alignment. These other parties may include United Georgia (UG) and Free Georgia (FG). Both of these parties have claimed that Georgia should not be a member of a military bloc.

Considering that Georgia is not planning to join a Russian-led military bloc, the promise of non-alignment in this context should be viewed as an anti-NATO and most likely an anti-Western position. Therefore, the shift in the meaning of non-alignment between 1990s and 2010s becomes apparent. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse Georgian parties willing to escape Russian influence found the solution, although somewhat shaky perhaps, in non-alignment. However, in today’s Georgia, political parties try to use non-alignment as an intermediate step towards building closer ties with Russia.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHANGING MEANING OF NON-ALIGNMENT

Foreign policy orientation in Georgia is considered a matter of societal consensus – pro-Western orientation is believed to have a high degree of public support and legitimacy. If, however, smaller parties manage to influence the political discourse in a way that delegitimizes the foreign policy choices Georgian governments have consistently been making since the late 1990s and early 2000s, it might become a possibility that the public opinion changes as well.

Public opinion is volatile and requires discursive reproduction so that it remains reinforced over time. However, the public is never entirely in consensus on any issue. There are segments of the society that want to improve Georgian-Russian relations or see close ties with the West as threatening for Georgian national identity or security. There are also parts of the public willing to have closer ties with both the West and Russia. Therefore, parties like APG can use these attitudes as foundations to build more influence through political discourse. With new actors challenging mainstream ideas about foreign policy and claiming that this is what the Georgian people actually want, public opinion comes under pressure. Considering that these parties may gain a parliamentary forum for the next legislative term, their narrative is set to remain visible in the political discourse.

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