



October 2021

Georgian Institute of Politics

# EXPERT INTERVIEW

Issue #10

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## Georgia's Security Options, as a Small State Navigating the Pressures of an Evolving International System

### Expert Interview with Professor Roy Allison

Interview by Marguerite Chapman, GIP Intern

*“Georgia has to engage in a long-term and society-wide effort. Programmes to try and manage the challenges of living beside Russia must be deeply embedded in the state, rather than dependent on the short-term interests of governments, which may undermine such efforts”*

**Roy Allison** is currently Professor of Russian and Eurasian International Relations and Director of the Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre (RESC) at the University of Oxford. Prior to this post, he held a Readership in International Relations at the London School of Economics. He received his doctorate and became an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at St. Antony's College of Oxford University. Previously, he was a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham (1987-99) and Head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) (1993-2005). Between 2001 and 2005 he was also a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for International Studies in the Department of Politics and International Relations, at Oxford University. He has also acted as a Specialist Advisor to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee and Defense Committee and the House of Lords European Union Committee.

Professor Allison's research focuses in particular on the international relations, international law, foreign and security policies of Russia, Ukraine, Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Dr Allison continues to shape the discourse on these subjects, publishing extensively on these issues, including his widely acclaimed 2013 book, *Russia the West and Military Intervention* (2013). His broader interests cover regional conflicts, regionalism, international norms and foreign policy analysis.

GIP has had the honour of interviewing Professor Allison, during which he answered questions relating to security challenges facing Georgia, considering current events such as the Afghanistan withdrawal. During the interview, he placed a particular emphasis on various means at Georgia's disposal for addressing obstacles to its course to western integration, and offered a rich analysis of major security dilemmas implicating the small state.

*GIP: Georgia watchers have pointed to recent developments in the Middle East and now in Afghanistan, as evidence of a general paradigm shift in NATO members' approach to global security, in particular a heightened isolationist posture. Historian Beka Kobakhidze argues that isolationist policies place "far less emphasis on democratisation in the Eastern world". What do you make of this assessment and Georgia's ability to overcome it?*

**RA:** The United States historically has moved in its foreign policy orientation from more to less isolationist. That move to isolationism, or, swing of the pendulum, is less marked in the case of European states. It may be that European states feel their own security and welfare is more immediately tied up with developments on the periphery of Europe, which of course includes Georgia and the South Caucasus. For the United States, that is just another regional theatre of interests. However, those interests are not fixed and can change, depending on the overall focus of American foreign policy. So, the current period is an extension of a long-term shift in emphasis in American foreign policy, away from the European continent as such, towards the Indo-Pacific region. This is something that began years ago; it was obvious during the Obama administration in foreign policy announcements, continued under Trump, and, today, we find much of the same thinking in the Biden administration. Smaller countries can do very little to change such processes. They must adjust and find points of coincidence of interest with Washington, and then argue their case as best as they can. The European states, on the other hand, have been reacting to specific sets of challenges, which rise and decline, around the periphery of Europe. One can point to the migration crisis as one of the most influential

factors for EU states in recent years, simply because of the way in which this issue has intruded into the internal politics of EU states, giving rise to strong domestic counter-reactions. As a result, a number of these states have withdrawn more into the core European shell, if you like.

Nonetheless, the normative commitment to advancing democratisation, good governance, human rights, civil liberties and, so forth, is still very much ingrained in the European Union's understanding of stability on its periphery. It was expressed in the European Neighbourhood Policy, in the Eastern Partnership and is still here in the current thinking on a potential revived Eastern Partnership. So, I do not think that the EU is isolationist. The EU is not the same as NATO, of course, and the security orientation of the Alliance should be considered separately.

Under the Biden administration there has been some strong statements of support for Georgia, as indeed for Ukraine. In part that reflects perhaps the fact that Biden is the American president who comes to the presidency with the most prior knowledge and experience of Georgia and Ukraine. In a way, Washington's security commitment to Ukraine can be seen as indirect support for Georgia, too. In many senses the vulnerabilities of these two states are viewed as similar; America's relationships with them require similar commitments to ensure stability in the Black Sea Region. The Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Black Sea demonstrate that continued commitment. This is to say that I do not believe Georgia should feel too anxious about the effects of the Afghanistan withdrawal. It is likely to result in a greater reluctance on the part of the US to commit itself to troops on the ground in foreign theatres for stabilisation or counter-terrorist operations. This will lead to a greater

reliance on 'over-the-horizon' capabilities and assets, some capacity for rapid reaction into theatres, when necessary, the use of drones and the deployment of other technologies of this kind. But this kind of strategic reassessment is less relevant for Georgia's region.

*GIP: In your widely acclaimed 2013 book, "Russia, the West, and Military Intervention" you demonstrate that Russia's instrumentalist justifications for its exceptional use of force in South Ossetia and Abkhazia confirmed the "contested nature of sovereignty and secession as principles in the CIS region". At the same time, you point out that since 2008 Moscow has refrained from seeking to entrench new rules and norms in post-Soviet interstate relations, for fear of alienating its international and regional partners. Do recent developments, such as Western isolationism, or recent military provocations on Ukraine's border, signal that Russia becoming more ready to run the risk of further alienating other post-Soviet states and other important partners?*

**RA:** Here, I think we need to focus above all on fundamental principles of international law, which relate to territorial sovereignty and the conditions under which the use of force is permissible. In fact, there is no likelihood that other post-Soviet states, even those politically close to Russia, any more than Western states, would wish to change these ground rules. Moscow has learnt that any efforts to try and shift normative understandings over the use of force meet great resistance in the wider international community. Russia attempted to do this through reliance on an interpretation of remedial secession tested in 2008 during the Russia-Georgia war, which was revived in 2014 over Crimea. This is found in the discourse of Russian state and Foreign Ministry officials. However, remedial

secession, as a justification for external military intervention, is not supported more widely in the international community of states, nor indeed in international judicial opinion. Russia has tested the water and been careful not to claim that in fact it is seeking to push forward unilaterally revised interpretations of international law on this contentious issue. An attempt of this kind was implied by Russian language in 2014, related to the support and protection of Russians abroad and to the supposed repression of ethnic Russians and Russian citizens within Ukraine. However, despite this, ultimately Russia did not attempt to pursue or encourage a subsequent change in international customary law in this area in any systematic way. Moscow recognised the opposition such an effort would meet (as indicated in both UN Security Council and General Assembly votes) and the inevitable failure of a bid to override or qualify core legal principles enshrined in the UN Charter.

In the current situation, what we could say, however, is that Russia continues to be interested in developing region-specific norms, in what it describes as the post-Soviet space. It does this through statements in Russia-led regional organisations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which attempt to bond states around Russian interpretations on norms. However, these statements do not concern fundamental precepts related to the justification for the use of force, as there was clearly no support for that after 2008 or 2014 in the CSTO or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Most countries, including other post-Soviet states, essentially recognise Russia's actions for what they were: a territorial aggrandisement, at least in the case of Crimea. The fact that some post-Soviet state leaders have been diplomatic in their responses and language over Crimea, or that some of them were critical of Ukraine's change of government in March 2014 and accepted Russian

characterisations of that as a coup, really reflects a common focus on regime security among authoritarian state leaders within the post-Soviet space. Indeed, often, other post-Soviet states are simply acting prudentially and diplomatically, rather than out of any core agreement that Russian actions, in Syria for example, are justifiable in themselves.

Returning to the question of secession and self-determination, I do not expect that the Russian attempt to justify the separate statehood of South Ossetia and Abkhazia will find any more support in the post-Soviet region in the future than it has in the past. This is because this attempt represents a challenge to all post-Soviet states concerned about the integrity of their own states and the possibility of regional or ethnic claims within them. This is also true for large neighbouring states, such as Turkey, with its concerns over the Kurdish issue, Iran, with its concerns over Azeri populated areas, or India with Kashmir, and so forth. Amongst the post-Soviet states, you have similar concerns, to a lesser or greater degree. Tajikistan has had concerns that the Gorno-Badakhshan region could represent a threat to central authority, Uzbekistan in the past had concerns about the Karakalpakstan region and Kazakhstan remains wary about Russia's interests in support of ethnic Russian communities in the north and east of the country. In conclusion, I believe that the issue of separatism and its representations in international law are acutely sensitive within the post-Soviet region. Russia's actions in Georgia and in Ukraine's Donbass region represent an on-going challenge to other post-Soviet states' understandings of this issue.

**GIP:** *Can Russia and Georgia in this way be seen to be stuck in a political deadlock? How would you describe the trends and processes unfolding?*

**RA:** I could comment on Russian efforts to instrumentalize international law and norms, which forms part of the wider context of this deadlock. After 2008 Russia failed to get other post-Soviet states to recognise Abkhazia's or South Ossetia's statehood. Since 2014 even Belarus has refused to recognise Crimea as part of the Russian state, despite all the leverage Russia can exert. Thus, an entrenched difference in understandings is discernible, even amongst Russia's closest allies. In fact, the legal claims Russia made in 2014 run counter to post-Cold War traditionalist interpretations of principles on the use of force, which Russia had previously argued for. Russia had previously used interpretations of international law as a shield against the actions of stronger powers in the international system, essentially the United States. For example, Russia developed a forceful narrative attacking Western states' interventions in Iraq and Libya. That position of principle was undermined by the claims it tried to make over Crimea in 2014. Next, there is the question of grey areas between what is clearly illegal and what is not, such as the so-called 'deniable operations' in the Donbass. Russia sought to operate within this grey zone, where there is sufficient uncertainty about the facts on the ground, to prevent countries - those favourably inclined towards it (such as the BRICS countries) or those which do not generally wish to take an opinion on major conflicts in international bodies - from directly criticising Russian actions. At the same time, Russia has tried to create a situation in which it can use its military presence, even at the lowest threshold, as a tripwire to justify a response on the grounds of the use of force against the Russian state. From this, two different kinds of legal issues unfold: one where Russia is trying to create uncertainty and confusion to prevent countries from acting, and another where Russia is using traditional use of force principles to deter other states from any response to Russian

actions on the ground. It tries to create such deterrence through the deployment, or threat of, low levels of force in these theatres.

Russia is also interested in advancing norms of state conduct that are not properly captured by international law in the traditional way. We can conceive of this as Russia trying to develop regional level norms, an effort which fits in with the Russian discourse on multipolarity, or distinct poles. Russia claims that there is one such pole centred on Moscow, encompassing various states, whose norms, and codes of behaviour it has the right to influence strongly, or in some cases, define completely. For example, on the relationship between state and society, the role of the state in relation to its citizens. Norms on these matters are shared among post-Soviet states where there are similar political systems of authoritarian governance. The leaders in such states also have similar views on the illegitimacy of what they view as extraterritorial efforts by Western states or international organisations to shape political processes within the region. This attempt to carve out a zone of Russian normative influence is, to some extent, supported by Russia's view that there exists a separate Russia-centred civilisation. The problem, however, is that at its core, this concept has a strong focus on the Russian Orthodox Church and the ethnic Russian community, which can potentially become quite polarising, rather than a force pulling countries together. This is especially the case given the extent of ethnic, religious, and social diversity within the post-Soviet region.

So, Russia has also tried to develop some overarching concepts, such as the Greater Eurasian Partnership, to create a wider sense of community, defined by a degree of common normative cohesion, despite all the real differences that exist between Eurasian states. There are tensions at work here. Russia argues that we are

living in an increasingly pluralist world with different civilisations. But at the same time, it is talking up the existence of a far-reaching community in Eurasia in which there exists a certain commonality.

*GIP: Following the latest round of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia has stepped up efforts to assert itself as a force of stability in the region, especially given its amicable relations with both sides of the conflict. To what extent is Georgia in a position to achieve this goal, especially considering Russia and Turkey's interests in dominating the peace process?*

**RA:** In principle, Georgia might seem to be quite well positioned to offer some mediation services in this conflict. Clearly, there are advantages for Azerbaijan in ensuring that the transport and communication corridor, the South Caucasus corridor running through Georgia, is developed, and expanded. This is a core connection with Georgia. Armenia, of course, has also maintained good relations with Georgia, despite occasional tensions over the Javakheti region. Nor is Georgia perceived as having a strong state interest, as such, in the conflict, expect that the way it is resolved may have implications for the occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In practice, however, the management of this conflict has taken the form of a great power condominium, as the question implies. It reflects a Russian-Turkish imposed settlement, with Russia being the dominant force in that arrangement and Turkey being the newcomer. In the past, Turkey has not played a direct role in the Karabakh conflict, and when it has implied it should, there have been quite strong Russian reactions in opposition. The additional difficulty for any Georgian role of course is that Russia-Georgia relations remain very strained. Moscow sees

Georgia as representing transatlantic perspectives and interests. Certainly, Georgia's security direction is subject to continuous Russian criticism. Due to this, there are clear limits on what Georgia can do. It is advantageous for Georgia to continue representing itself as a state seeking compromise and as a venue for talks, if necessary. Perhaps, it could also play a heightened role in encouraging discussions on transport infrastructure issues around the conflict, which tend to depend on the further development of the South Caucasus transport corridor. Beyond that, Georgia does not have much leverage in the conflict and, undoubtedly, maintains a strong state interest in trying to prevent any destabilising effects from the conflict spilling into Georgia itself. Of course, as Georgia is not yet a cohesive state, there remain many points of tension within it that restrict its ability to play a greater part in stabilising external conflicts.

*GIP: Despite widespread acknowledgement that Western-European partners are increasingly preoccupied with balancing the growing threat of Russia and China with domestic issues, Georgians largely remain hopeful about Biden's commitment to policies aimed at undermining malign Russian influence. How do you assess the current political appetite in Western-European countries for aiding Georgia in the fight against provocations and threats stemming from Russia? How far are they willing to go and how much do you expect they are willing to risk vis-à-vis relations Russia?*

**RA:** I will focus my response on the EU dimension of Western support for Georgia. The question really concerns the kind of pressures Russia subjects Georgia to. These are often coercive, but do not represent what one might call direct aggression. They include various more deniable operations and disinformation (efforts to influence

domestic politics within Georgia in one direction or another). This experience is repeated in many Central-East European states and even in West-European states. For this reason, there is a joint effort and shared interest in counteracting these forms of statecraft exercised by Russia. The European Union has a core commitment to member states' resistance to such actions. For example, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats centred in Helsinki has been developing EU-wide strategic thinking on countering disinformation. It aims to develop greater resilience within the EU more widely, to reduce the opportunities for these kinds of so-called hybrid actions, and to strengthen cohesion among member states around common norms and societal principles.

An emphasis on societal resilience could also be developed within a revived Eastern Partnership framework. I expect there are already some discussions of this kind underway. What is possible depends very much on the circumstances within each EaP state. For example, in the case of Ukraine, the domestic political environment is very much in flux, and there are limits on what the EU can do to strengthen media independence and to reduce society's susceptibility to those kinds of destabilising narratives that appear to be propagated by various Russian campaigns. The same constraints on the EU role apply to Georgia. It is necessary to look within the state and find ways of strengthening societal resilience to establish a sufficient consensus around core values. That is a task for states, governments, and other domestic actors. Georgia's Orthodox Church is a very important institution and actor within the state, which can act as a source of social cohesion. However, on the Russian side, Georgian

Orthodoxy is also seen as a means of access to promote conservative and anti-EU social agendas.

So, there are contradictions that exist within Georgia, like in other states. Programs may be developed over time, either bilaterally with EU states or through the wider platform of the Eastern Partnership, to strengthen media independence and sustain the diversity and role of civil society actors. Beyond that, however, the EU is unlikely to act very directly to build up these domestic fortifications. Of course, destabilising narratives may find more receptive audiences during times

of greater societal tension stemming from domestic economic difficulties. Therefore, economic progress and prosperity in Georgia are also essential for any longer-term strategy to resist unwelcome Russian influences. In conclusion, Georgia has to engage in a long-term and society-wide effort. Programmes to try and manage the challenges of living beside Russia must be deeply embedded in the state, rather than dependent on the short-term interests of governments, which may undermine such efforts. The effort must be conceived of as a sustained response and one shared among states with similar outlooks.



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#### HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

*“Georgia’s Security Options, as a Small State Navigating the Pressures of an Evolving International System”*, Expert Interview with Professor Roy Allison, issue #10, Georgian Institute of Politics, October, 2021.

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