



# Protecting National Interests or Abandoning Strategic Partners? The Georgian Government's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a 'special military operation' in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine which has served as a wake-up call for Western countries. In 'the darkest hours for Europe since World War II' (European Union External Action 2022), the West has taken a unanimous position that Russia's attack on Ukraine was 'unprovoked and unjustified' (The White House 2022). The West thus decided to 'cripple the Russian economy' (Euronews 2022) so that Putin is unable to finance his war machine and to throw financial resources and military equipment at Ukraine to support the latter's 'brave' resistance. Even Russia's traditional partners such as China have been extremely cautious in their evaluations and have come out in support of Ukraine's sovereignty (Martina 2022). Furthermore, Kazakhstan has reportedly refused to send its army to Ukraine (Alexander 2022), which Moscow could use to legitimize the 'special military operation' as an operation under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, now Russia has to face the majority of the world mostly alone, possibly supported by the likes of Belarus, Iran, North Korea and Syria.

The Government of Georgia (GoG), meanwhile, has publicly declared that to protect Georgian national interests (Civil Georgia 2022b) Georgia will not join sanctions against

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Russia (Civil Georgia 2022b). PM Irakli Garibashvili even stated that nobody can stop the war in Ukraine and that sanctions are ineffective (Civil Georgia 2022g). Just before the start of the war, the parliament adopted a resolution in support of Ukraine without mentioning Russian aggression (Civil Georgia 2022d). When faced with criticism, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party argued that the 'resolution is worded exactly in accordance with our national interests' (Civil Georgia 2022f). Additionally, the GD has used pragmatism and protection of Georgia's 'security, national interests and the economy' to reject the call for an extraordinary session of parliament on Ukraine (Civil Georgia 2022c).

This policy memo analyzes the GoG's positioning on the war in Ukraine and contextualizes it in the wider picture of the GD's foreign policy, which has been influenced by the GD's narrow party-political interests. This has led the GoG to abandoning Georgia's strategic partners in their most difficult moment and risking association with Russia, which is threatening the world with a nuclear war (Tsvetkova 2022).

## **How have the GD's Party Interests Affected the Georgian-Ukrainian Strategic Partnership?**

Ukraine and Georgia have had close ties since the dissolution of the Soviet Union based on shared 'economic, political and security interests regardless of whether the members of their cabinets are on friendly terms or not' (Kakachia 2016: 142). Georgia and Ukraine signed 107 bilateral agreements between 1991-2017 and conducted 85 high-level visits in between 2007-2017 (Kakhishvili and Kupatadze 2022). For comparison the same figures for Moldova are 17 and 44, while for Kazakhstan, they are 39 and 23 (Kakhishvili and Kupatadze 2022). However, since its rise to power, the GD has perceived of vocal support for Ukraine as contradictory to the party's attempt to decrease anti-Russian rhetoric and its policy of 'normalization' of Georgian-Russian relations. Consequently, the GD has been de-linking Russia's policy towards Georgia from what has been happening in Ukraine (InterPressNews 2022). Garibashvili claimed back in 2014 that comparing the Russian annexation of Crimea to Georgia's breakaway regions was 'a big mistake' (see Kakachia, Minesashvili and Kakhishvili 2018). Furthermore, for the first time in 2015, the GD's foreign policy strategy (FPS) removed Ukraine from the list of Georgia's strategic partners. This could be attributed to the GD's party-political interests.

The GoG's reluctance to reiterate its strategic partnership with Ukraine in 2015 could be because Georgian-Ukrainian relations deteriorated after the migration of Georgian politicians and bureaucrats, including the former president Mikheil Saakashvili, to Ukraine and their employment in Ukrainian government agencies. Georgia repeatedly requested the extradition of Mikheil Saakashvili from Ukraine for abuse of power (Civil Georgia 2017). The Ukrainian authorities rejected these requests (BBC 2017). However, Saakashvili was stripped of his Ukrainian citizenship on July 26, 2017 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017a) almost a week after Georgia and Ukraine signed a declaration on strategic partnership (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017b). Thus, it could be argued that the GD has allowed its narrow party-political interests to affect how the government interprets national interests and strategic partners. If this is the case, one cannot exclude that in the current turmoil, the GD is once again protecting its own party-political interests. Such party interests are primarily centered around diverging from its main competitor, the United National Movement (UNM).

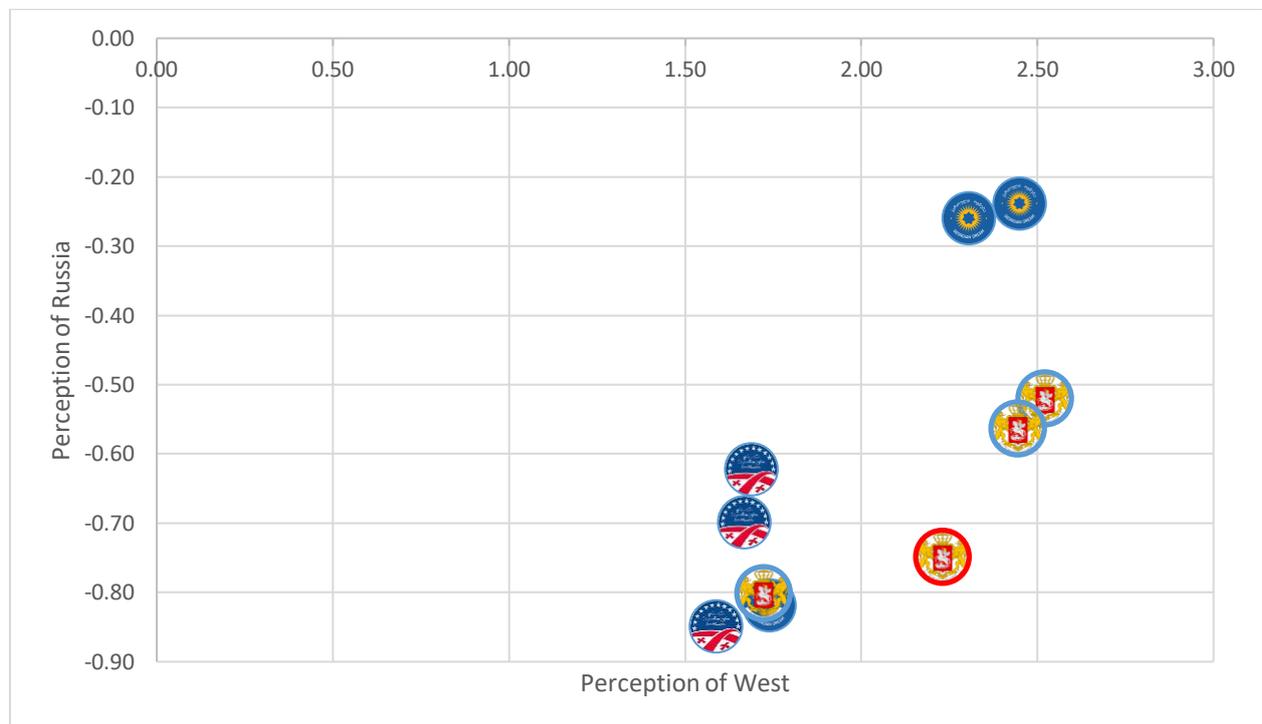
### **Is the GD consciously trying to diverge from UNM in foreign policy?**

Previous studies have shown that the positions of GD and UNM on specific issues in foreign and security policy mostly converge (Kakhishvili *et al* 2021) and overall, the two parties have similar foreign policy orientation with subtle differences (Kakhishvili 2021). At the same time, the GD's discourse on Russian-Georgian relations and the August War has differed from the UNM (Kakachia, Minesashvili and Kakhishvili 2018). This discourse is a result of two worldviews. First, the GD believes it can neutralize the threat of Russian military aggression by normalizing Georgian-Russian relations and toning down Georgia's aspirations to join the EU and NATO. Second, the GD suggests that had these principles been the basis of the UNM's policies before the August War, the war could have been avoided. Thus, the GD has adopted a discursive strategy to decrease anti-Russian rhetoric. This change is visible from the analysis of textual documents such as party manifestos from 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections as well as all post-August War strategic documents adopted by the GoG.

Figure 1 below shows a two-dimensional policy space with the horizontal dimension being perceptions of the West and the vertical dimension being perceptions of Russia. Positive values indicate positive perceptions and negative values indicate negative perceptions. The

figure maps the positions registered in UNM’s 2011 national security concept (NSC) (Government of Georgia 2011); GD’s 2014 national military strategy (NMS) (Government of Georgia 2014); and GD’s 2015 and 2019 FPSs (Government of Georgia 2015; Government of Georgia 2019). Additionally, the figure shows the positions of the UNM and GD in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1.** Positions of GD and UNM as well as the GoG in terms of views on West and Russia (2011-2020)



*Note: GD’s and UNM’s party manifestos are indicated with their respective party logos; Georgia’s coat of arms indicates strategic documents – UNM’s NSC is circled in red, while GD’s NMS and FPSs are circled in blue. (Source: author’s own calculations).*

What this data shows can be summed up in four main points. First, positions registered in all documents remain in the same quadrant of the two-dimensional plane, which indicates that there have been no radical policy changes between 2011 and 2020. However, incremental changes can be observed. Second, UNM’s positions have been largely consistent across the span of three parliamentary elections. Third, GD positioning as a party has experienced a significant shift. GD decreased the intensity of expressing negative views on

<sup>2</sup> Positions were calculated by the author based on quantitative text analysis using the coding framework used by Kakhishvili (2021) and a logarithmic proportions method developed by Lowe *et al* (2011), which estimates the difference between positive and negative mentions of countries and organizations associated with West or Russia.

Russia between 2012 and the following two elections and increased the intensity of expressing positive views of the West in the same period. Considering that in the 2016 and 2020 elections GD has been consistent in its positioning, it should be assumed that the party is consolidating its views by diverging from the positions of UNM. Finally, positions of the strategic documents adopted by GD have also shifted in the same direction as the party positioning, which means that the GD as a party and the GD as a government are in the process of calibrating positions.

Overall, the data supports the argument that GD consciously tries to diverge from UNM by decreasing its anti-Russian language, which also explains the shift in positioning as expressed in GoG strategic documents. Although this in and of itself is not surprising, there needs to be a line drawn between broad worldviews influencing tactical maneuvering and narrow party-political interests influencing strategic thinking. It seems that GoG's reaction to the current war in Ukraine is slowly turning into the latter.

### **Render unto Caesar: are GoG's actions a strategy or tactics?**

Appealing to pragmatism and Georgian national interests has been a recurring theme in the statements of GD representatives. Although GD's understanding of pragmatism has been criticized for its risks (Kakachia, Kakhishvili and Minesashvili 2015; კაკაჩია და კაკაბაძე 2022), it is necessary to understand whether GoG's actions are a strategy or tactics.

Although the analysis of strategic documents shows that the GoG has not become pro-Russian or anti-Western, it seems unlikely for GoG's actions in response to the war in Ukraine to be mere tactics. If the GoG's hesitant actions were indeed a result of tactical thinking to avoid deterioration of Georgian-Russian relations and attracting Moscow's attention, then the GoG must have been actively working through its diplomatic channels unobservable to the public eye to re-assure its strategic partners, including first and foremost Ukraine, that Georgia fully supports Ukraine. However, two factors demonstrate that this has not been the case. First, public statements made by the GoG, instead of being neutral, have been arguably 'anti-Ukrainian' (კუპრეიძე 2022), with which the GoG's statements have become a tool for propaganda at Russia's disposal. The joyful assessment of Georgia by pro-Putin actors as 'recovered' (RadioTavisupleba 2022c) is illustrative of how Russian tanks can supposedly correct foreign policies of neighbors.

The second factor, however, is more important, and is related to the clear disappointment of the Ukrainian government with GoG's actions. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has criticized the GoG's actions while thanking the Georgian people, hinting at the necessity of supporting friends (FormulaNews 2022). Furthermore, in his tweet, Prime Minister of Ukraine Denys Shmyhal almost mocked PM Irakli Garibashvili's refusal to travel to Kyiv due to the closed airspace (RadioTavisupleba 2022a). Commenting on this tweet MFA of Georgia, Davit Zalkaliani hinted at the possible influence of UNM stating he had his "ideas about where this [Shmyhal's tweet written in Georgian] may be coming from" (RadioTavisupleba 2022a). However, Zalkaliani's attempt to distance official Kyiv's position from social media posts of the Prime Minister was quickly refuted when Ukraine recalled the ambassador to Georgia because of "not letting volunteers through [to go to Ukraine] and an immoral position [of the GoG] regarding sanctions [against Russia]" (Netgazeti 2022). The Ukrainian government's statements and actions are a clear demonstration that the GoG has done little to reassure its Ukrainian counterparts that Tbilisi fully supports Ukraine. Instead, the GD's response was to blame the UNM for 'coordinating efforts to involve Georgia into a military conflict' (RadioTavisupleba 2022b). Consequently, there is little evidence that the GD's public statements are mere tactics to manage risks of possible Russian aggression.

### **Logical and perceptual problems of the GoG's response**

To look at the big picture, one of Georgia's four strategic partners has been attacked by Georgia's number one threat. The GoG faces two options: support a strategic partner or not. Both options are risky and each puts parts of Georgian national interests under question. The GoG's claim is that vocal support will attract too much attention from Russia, which may decide to invade Georgia too. According to the NSC, the risk of renewed military aggression from Russia is one of the top national security threats for Georgia. Therefore, the GoG's goal seems straightforward but it also suffers from logical and perceptual problems (see Buzan 1991).

The reason why Russian military aggression is a threat to national security, apart from the obvious destructive results, is that Georgia's national interest of utmost importance is to ensure sovereignty. GoGs since 2000, including the three GD governments since 2012, have agreed that the best strategy to this end is integration in EU and NATO. This means that Georgia has chosen an international strategy of ensuring national security, which aims at

reducing self-reliance and engaging with partner states to reduce common threats (Buzan 1991). The alternative would be a national strategy to decrease vulnerabilities and build up capabilities to increase self-reliance (Buzan 1991). The challenge with international strategy is that it largely depends on the quality of management of inter-state relations (Buzan 1991). Therefore, if Georgia fails in managing its strategic partnerships, it will fail in its ability to rely on partners to reduce common threats. This is a logical problem of security policymaking.

Against this background, the GoG's claim that they are only trying to protect national interests turns into a perceptual problem. This happens when decision-makers fail to assess what is seen as facts by their counterparts and what perceived significance these counterparts attach to those facts (see Buzan 1991). In this case, the GoG fails to see the significance of even symbolic support of strategic partners as perceived by those in Ukraine and Western countries. Consequently, 'with mild appeasement to Russia while not reaching out to its traditional Western allies Georgia could get the worst of both worlds' (De Waal 2022). The only consolation for Georgia and its largely pro-Ukrainian public is the statements and actions of the ceremonial president of the country who has been expressing strong verbal support for Ukraine.

### **Conclusion: National interests versus strategic partners?**

As stakes are rising, the GoG is forced to make choices. The GoG's argumentation is focused on the impact of its actions on Russia's behavior. The problem is that the goal of Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union has been to strengthen its grip over the former Soviet republics by economic and military measures while limiting Western penetration in the region. Therefore, with or without military aggression, Russia's offer is limited sovereignty without ability to make important decisions in foreign and security policy. Georgia either accepts this offer or not. Consequently, if Russia wins the war in Ukraine, the outcome for Georgia will be the same notwithstanding its actions during the war - Georgia is likely to be forced to accept limited sovereignty. The 'silver lining', however, is that there will always be time for giving up and capitulation. The risk is doing it too early.

If Russia loses the war and Ukraine remains sovereign, this will mean a crippled Russia without resources to wage new wars. It will be much easier for the West to deter Moscow.

Counterintuitively, this is the scenario in which Georgia's actions matter. Georgia will either be seen as a reliable partner who does not abandon its strategic partners, or it will be seen as unreliable. This will depend on the extent to which Georgia supports Ukraine and Western partners. Georgia needs to be on the good side of the West to not risk being abandoned *vis-à-vis* Russia because even a weak Russia is a threat to Georgia if Georgia is alone.

Consequently, the real question for the GoG is whether it believes that Ukraine can withstand Russian aggression and that Western assistance to Ukraine and pressure on Russia is going to be sufficient to stop Putin. If Russia prevails, the GoG's actions is unlikely to have significant effect on Georgia's future. Expecting Russia to achieve its geopolitical goals and appeasing it contradicts Georgia's pro-Western orientation codified in the constitution. Furthermore, aligning with Russia creates a viscous circle as pro-Russian orientation implies formal acceptance of a limited sovereignty conflicting the idea of independence - the primary national interest that the GD government claims to be protecting.

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This publication was produced in cooperation with the **Research Council of Norway-funded project Competency through Cooperation: Advancing knowledge on Georgia's strategic path (GEOPATH) (project number 287815)**, coordinated by the **Norwegian Institute of International Affairs**. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the organizations.

**How to quote this document:**

*Levan Kakhishvili, "Protecting national interests or abandoning strategic partners? The Georgian government's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine", Policy Memo No. 54, Georgian Institute of Politics, March 2022*

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