



## Implications for Georgia of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Time to Act?

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### Executive Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine poses existential threats to the security of Georgia in military, political, and economic terms. The unjustified war against Ukraine and the brutality of Russia towards a peaceful nation galvanized unprecedented unity in the West and among its like-minded allies across the world, putting in place firm political and economic measures to isolate Russia and force it to stop its military assault against Ukraine. Within the changes in the geopolitical context, which evidences the tangible failure of norms-based international order, Georgia, with twenty per cent of its territory occupied by Russia, should adopt a proactive and pragmatic foreign policy strategy to preserve its national interests.

With a new geopolitical architecture shaping the region, the Georgian government needs to develop a clear, united vision to minimize the security risks and gain the fully-fledged support of its Western allies for security guarantees and its future in the European family. In response to all the risks that relate to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgia should act proactively, amend its foreign policy and communicate strongly its support for Ukraine and demand security guarantees for the country. At the same time, Georgia's Western partners must not forget about Georgia and should reiterate support at the highest possible level to minimize the risks that threaten Georgia's sovereign aspirations.

**Key Words:** Russia-Ukraine war, Georgia, Foreign Policy, European Union, NATO.

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## Introduction

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, the rest of the world has been busy shaping its strategic response and effort to halt the ongoing war. Geopolitics and security issues have become more important than ever as the collective West and individual countries rethink and upgrade their decades-long foreign and security policy strategies. Meanwhile, the Government of Georgia has come under severe criticism inside and outside of the country regarding the lack of clarity in its position over Russia's military assault against Ukraine. The war has accelerated the European Union (EU) integration process for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. In response to the official membership applications bids in March 2022, the Association Trio<sup>2</sup> states received questionnaires from the European Commission to prepare an opinion assessing the compliance of the three countries with the EU membership criteria. The Government of Georgia falls short of demonstrating strategic foreign policy vision in the context of anticipation of the European Commission's opinion on Georgia's EU membership application, the rising external and internal criticism about the ongoing democratic stagnation and political polarization, alongside security threats. This policy brief analyzes Georgia's foreign policy strategy in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It puts the Georgian Government's response to the war in Ukraine into question against the broader context of the changing geopolitical architecture in the region. The paper outlines the need for concrete and proactive actions to safeguard Georgia's sovereign aspirations and strengthen cooperation with the country's strategic allies.

### Georgia lacks a strategic response to Russia's war against Ukraine

As a member of the Associated Trio, Georgia has shared its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and challenges on this road with Ukraine, its strategic partner. This is why the ambiguous reaction of the Government of Georgia to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused disappointment on the Ukrainian side and a further split in an already polarized

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<sup>2</sup> In 2021 Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signed a joint memorandum establishing a format for deeper cooperation among themselves and the EU.

Georgian political landscape. The struggle by the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), to find an adequate response to the war was demonstrated by the adoption of a resolution on Ukraine that failed to mention the Russian Federation or the various controversial statements from the GD representatives since the start of the war. The most contentious statement came from the Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, himself, when declaring the decision not to join sanctions but also questioning their effectiveness (Civil.ge 2022a).

The controversy around Georgia's response to the ongoing war was further sparked by Ukraine's decision to recall its Ambassador to Georgia. On the other hand, official Tbilisi's position received praise from Russia's main negotiator for informal dialogue with Georgia, Grigory Karasin (Civil.ge 2022b). The actions of the Government of Georgia seem to be puzzling for both the local and international community given the fact that the country also experienced a war with Russia over a decade ago. Although Georgia's foreign policy actions might seem to be a continuation of the ruling Georgian Dream's 'non-irritation' policy towards Russia, or hesitation given the economic dependence of the country on Russia, for parts of the Georgian public the lack of support towards Ukraine raised doubts regarding Russian influences in the Government of Georgia and its strategic foreign policy direction. Unlike their Government, the Georgian people actively demonstrated their solidarity with Ukraine. Recent polls show that most Georgians (61 per cent) want to see more support for Ukraine (CRRC Georgia 2022). Numerous demonstrations of solidarity were organized in Tbilisi and elsewhere in Georgia. In some of these demonstrations the PM faced resignation calls over his remarks about Russia's war against Ukraine.

Alongside the wider public, twenty-two local civil society organizations (CSOs) have also criticized the Government's 'inconsistent rhetoric' and called for open and unambiguous support for Ukraine in a joint letter (Civil.ge 2022c). The lack of consistent and strategic response to the war in Ukraine puts the ruling Georgian Dream at odds with President Salome Zourabichvili. The President has demonstrated a more assertive stance in her support of Ukraine and condemnation of Russia's aggressive war. In contrast, the GD announced that they would appeal to the Constitutional Court, alleging that the President violated the Constitution over (among other issues) her visits to European capitals in the early days of the war. The Georgian Government fell short of demonstrating its strong support beyond a symbolic diplomatic alignment with resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, the rhetoric from high-level Georgian officials seems to reflect more the party's interests than solidarity with a strategic partner at war. While pursuing its 'pragmatic policy' of 'normalization' of relations with Russia, Georgia may be missing a rare window of

opportunity to closely align itself with the unprecedented level of Western unity and reaction against Russia. As Georgia enters a crucial stage of pursuing EU membership candidate status, a clear and consistent foreign policy in the context of the war is more important than ever.

## Russia: no longer a partner of the West

For more than a decade, the West's reaction to Russia's aggression to Georgia, Ukraine or elsewhere was overshadowed by the pragmatic politics of self-interest and naivety, tolerating Russia's illegal occupation of sovereign lands on the grounds that this would stop its imperialistic ambitions from further advancement. Yet, the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine seems to unveil the true nature of Putin's regime for many in the West. In the Versailles Declaration of 10-11 March, European leaders emphasized that 'Russia brought war back to Europe', which has caused 'a tectonic shift in European history' (European Council 2022, 1-3). The declaration stressed the need for the EU to 'live up to its responsibilities in this new reality'. Unlike the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the first war on the European continent following the Balkan Wars, the West stood firm in its response to Russia's latest military assault. The reaction from the West materialized in three main dimensions: isolation of Russia with sanctions, support for Ukraine and a start to (re)building of its own military and security capabilities.

*Isolating Russia:* The first wave of sanctions was unveiled rapidly, however, as the war continued Ukraine's pressure for harsher sanctions increased. Since February 2022 the EU has adopted five sanction packages directed at Russia and Belarus (European Commission 2022). The allies, including the EU, United States, United Kingdom and Canada, and others, have imposed measures to remove selected Russian banks from the SWIFT messaging system, limited the Russian Central Bank's access to international reserves, sanctioned politicians and oligarchs affiliated with Putin and denied Most-Favoured-Nation Status to Russian products as well as suspending the functioning of Russian state-owned media outlets, such as Russia Today and Sputnik (BBC 2022a). After the shocking revelation of atrocities committed by the Russian army in the Bucha Massacre, the West responded with new sanctions, (cautiously) targeting the heart of the Russian economy: its energy exports. The sanctions imposed have not yet stopped the war. However, they increase the already mounting cost and pressure on Russia.

*Support to Ukraine:* The West has shown unprecedented support to the Ukrainian people by assisting refugees, providing some defensive weapons and financial help. According to the latest UNHCR update, more than five million have fled Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The EU states have been the main destination for refugees. The EU has responded to the refugee influx by activating the Temporary Protection Directive, providing an 'immediate and temporary protection' for people fleeing Russia's war against Ukraine (European Commission 2022). Since the start of the war, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pleaded many times that the Western leaders should close the sky over Ukraine. While such an appeal was rejected by NATO, stating that the alliance would not establish a no-fly zone (NFZ) over Ukraine, the Western powers slowly and reluctantly moved forward in providing or assisting with military aid. For instance, the EU has mobilized one billion euros 'for military equipment and platforms designed to deliver lethal force' and supplies (European Parliamentary Research Service 2022). The US has provided security assistance equal to 1.35 billion dollars since February 24 (Ibid). Apart from these efforts, EU member states are also supplying some military equipment. As one of the recent developments, the European Council has agreed to establish a Ukraine Solidarity Trust Fund to rebuild the country after the war (European Council 2022).

*(Re)building Euro-Atlantic foreign and security policy:* The Russian full-scale military aggression against Ukraine has brought geopolitics back in the world security architecture. While it is still early to evaluate and analyze the effect of the war on the EU or NATO, it has caused a significant shift towards strengthening security and defense capabilities. The Versailles declaration outlined some of the critical dimensions for focus: strengthening the EU's defense capabilities and reducing energy dependence are the main priorities. Energy dependence has long been an Achilles heel for the European Union. Therefore, the decision to 'phase out' its reliance on Russian energy resources comes as a late but a necessary change. Calls to suspend Nord Stream 2 were largely ignored before the launch of the Russian military assault, only for the project to be halted after attacks on Ukraine's biggest cities. While many European countries continue to import Russian energy resources even as the war continues, Lithuania became the first country in the EU to announce its decision to cease the import of Russian gas as of April. In an attempt to lay out a long-term strategic vision, the EU also published the Strategic Compass in March, a document reflecting the Union's geopolitical ambitions. It outlines key priorities and sets out its main targets, such as having a 5000-strong EU rapid deployment force, increasing spending on defense and reinforcing CSDP missions,

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<sup>3</sup> Data from May 2, 2022 retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

and strengthening cooperation with NATO or the UN. The document comes at a most critical time for Europe. Therefore some targets, such as having a force of only 5000, may challenge the EU's ambitions in practical terms. It is still yet to be seen whether the Strategic Compass will share the same fate as its predecessors (for instance, the 2003 security strategy). In the meantime, as a response to the increased security threat from Russia, NATO is stepping up its presence in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Black Sea. In addition to the battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, NATO will deploy four more in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia (NATO 2022a). Planned to be released this summer, NATO has been working on its new Strategic Concept, which in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is expected to reflect on the new security agenda.

As Russia continues its aggressive attack on Ukraine, calls for more Western support and harsher measures against Russia are rising. However, unlike previous cases (Chechnya 1999, Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 or Syria 2015) the response from the West is indeed unparalleled. The Western allies seem to be moving slowly away from their Russia-centrist approach to the Eastern neighborhood. Regardless of the outcome of the war, the Euro-Atlantic foreign and security policy will undergo transformation. For instance, there is now a question mark over the future of the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative.

In contrast we may see more focus on bilateral or Trio formats in relation to the Associated countries. NATO also shows signs of more determination to avoid a Ukraine scenario in Georgia. This creates strategic momentum for Georgia to step up its diplomatic efforts and actively advocate for its national interests with the international community. The war in Ukraine has pushed the West to restructure and rebuild its security umbrella in which Georgia may be an active contributor and beneficiary. The Georgian Government's application for EU membership early in March is a welcome step in this regard. However, signs of deterioration in its relationship with Ukraine and the raising of questions among western allies undermine Georgia's past efforts in terms of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Appeasing Russia weakens Georgia's foreign policy aspirations and endangers it with the prospect of 'limited sovereignty' (Kakhishvili 2022). The following weeks and months will shape a new world security order. Georgia needs to make sure that it is part of it.

## Prospects for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic Integration

Since regaining independence in 1991, Georgia has aspired to attaining a place in the European family through the overarching Euro-Atlantic integration process. While these aspirations are tightly linked to Georgia's identity and its intrinsic 'Europeanness' they also have much to do with benefits the European security architecture has to offer (Lejava 2021). Georgia's relations with the EU are defined under the Association Agreement (AA) with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) component signed in 2014 between the EU and Georgia. Although the document acknowledges 'the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia' it does not incorporate EU membership prospects for the country. Over the years, in the spirit of progressing on the EU membership path, Georgia implemented a comprehensive package of reforms to harmonize its legislation with the EU and develop the country's institutional capacity. Georgia's speed and political will to implement a democratic reform package has helped the country to deepen its economic and political relations with the EU. However, due to a protracted internal political crisis and the democratic backsliding witnessed during the last couple of years, Georgia no longer ranks among the frontrunners of the initiative (European Parliament 2022). Internal tensions and the lack of political will to implement democratic reforms have led to the consideration of a 'less for less' approach for Georgia in line with decreasing political support expressed for the country. While Georgia could be seen as one of the most vulnerable countries amid the Russian war in Ukraine, the European Council Conclusions 24-25 March 2022 reaffirmed its commitment to stand by the Republic of Moldova and its people with no mention of Georgia (European Council 2022b). The country was also left out in the joint readout by the EU-US Summit which reiterated the importance of strengthening democratic resilience in Ukraine and Moldova while considering another Association Trio state, Georgia, within the wider Eastern partnership region (European Council 2022c).

Although the present foreign policy strategy of Georgia and its communication with its foreign partners may detract, the West should consider its interests beyond the current regime and should not forget that Georgia has been recognized as a success in terms of democratic resilience in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood (EEAS 2016) and it has already paid the price for its European choice with the 2008 War with Russia (Akhvlediani 2022). Therefore, the inclusion of Georgia in high-level security and political discussions is essential as it makes an integral part

of Association Trio, and one country-based security guarantees cannot be substituted for safeguarding broader regional security.

On 11 April 2022, Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi officially handed the questionnaire to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia for preparation of the opinion on Georgia's EU membership application (Civil.ge 2022e). In this process, it is important that the government of Georgia ensures transparency and allows civil society and interested stakeholders to contribute to the filling in (the second half of) the questionnaire. While the questionnaire sent to Georgia is similar to the one sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia could carefully consider the Commission's opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina, which identifies the areas for democratic reforms that should see daylight before the country can be granted candidate status (European Commission 2019). The areas such as the judiciary and rule of law, that were often the reason for the EU's distress in Georgia, will also play a crucial role in the Commission opinion. In this vein, the Government of Georgia should proactively show the will and dedication to the democratic reform agenda it has committed to within the association framework.

## The significance of the NATO security umbrella

The deadly war on Europe's continent has entirely reshaped the European Security architecture. The calls for strengthening of NATO's Black Sea Strategy have intensified following the 2014 Crimea annexation, however they fell short on anticipating the limits of Russia's military expansion. The war in Ukraine and changing of the West's image of Russia have demonstrated that military capacities and unified deterrence are of the utmost significance while NATO's Eastern flank borders the Russian Federation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been regarded as a 'massive strategic blunder' and has further incentivized NATO enlargement (BBC 2022b). Countries like Finland and Sweden, which neglected the option of NATO membership, are now queuing up to make sure that they can benefit from the NATO security umbrella amid the growing Russian security threats. While the war in Ukraine was seen as a tool to halt NATO enlargement, the alliance seems to support the Swedish and Finnish membership applications being planned for June 2022. The new members will allow the alliance to further strengthen its Eastern flank and increase the membership to 32 states.

The mainstream Russian debate focuses on NATO's role in provoking the war and its aggression towards Ukraine and Georgia, regarded as territories falling under Russia's 'sphere of influence'. Russia often refers to the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit declaration welcoming Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations for membership in NATO and promising to welcome the countries into the alliance (NATO 2008). While these countries regard the alliance as justifying expectations of more political support and security guarantees, the debate on 'neutrality' seems to have gained some prominence. Since there is no real 'neutrality' offer and the geographic closeness of Ukraine and Georgia to Russia does not give any real security guarantee of respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity, the debate regarding neutrality falls short on criteria for tangible consideration. The discussions concerning the 'Finlandization' of Ukraine, and possibly later Georgia, with an offer of false neutrality seemed to end with Finland planning on placing its application for NATO membership as soon as June 2022. NATO leaders are working to develop the Strategic Concept for the NATO Madrid Summit in June 2022, so the alliance should give due consideration to a regional approach and not see a country-based approach for security as an optimal solution (NATO 2022b). While NATO members seem to be willing to accept Nordic neighbours' bids for membership, enhanced security guarantees for vulnerable countries, like Georgia together with Ukraine, should be an important part of the strategic planning and vision for NATO's 2030 agenda.

The misleading debate over the choice of neutrality and the long and demanding process of Euro-Atlantic integration might seem tempting. However, the Government of Georgia should ensure that the country is included in new European security architecture building and that the security guarantees offered to Ukraine (within or outside the NATO) are extended to Georgia and the Georgian people. Strategic communication with the population explaining the security threats and the options the country has are increasingly important, while disinformation sources try to portray Russia as superior over the West and display the war in Ukraine as a failure of the European and trans-Atlantic security architecture. The communication should clarify the objectives and differences between the organizations (EU and NATO) and the benefits Georgia can get from the membership. Although democratic and economic development ensured within EU-Georgia relations are important, even if EU membership is achieved it cannot be considered as a substitute for the security guarantees that the trans-Atlantic security umbrella offers.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### *For the Government of Georgia*

- To consider the demonstrated will of the Georgian people and support Ukraine with concrete actions, including joining sanctions to ensure alignment with the EU's foreign policy, providing further humanitarian aid and increasing the assistance for refugees from Ukraine arriving in Georgia.
- Considering another visit to Ukraine together with Moldova in the Association Trio format before the European Council meeting scheduled for late June, which should shed light on Commission's initial opinion over the three countries' applications.
- To make sure that the official rhetoric of the Government and of the ruling party is fully committed to supporting and demonstrating solidarity with Ukraine as a strategic partner.
- To ensure that the reforms recommended by the EU on areas related to political, economic and EU legislation criteria are proactively and duly implemented before the preparation of the opinion by the European Commission.
- To step up its diplomatic efforts in Brussels and strengthen efforts to cooperate within the Association Trio format, including through the organization of the Association Trio ministerial for ensuring support to Ukraine and discussing further joint steps on the EU integration path.
- To avoid any further increase of polarization in society by taking steps for consolidation and creating platforms for dialogue regarding next-steps in European and Euro-Atlantic integration, with the involvement of the President of Georgia, opposition political parties and civil society. For instance, to make public the answers to the first part of the questionnaire and to organize consultations around the second part of the questionnaire from the European Commission.
- To strengthen its diplomatic efforts in European capitals, especially in Berlin, Paris, and elsewhere. An unprecedented shift in Germany's foreign policy and the current French presidency of the European Council provides a window of opportunity for getting tangible support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

### *For European Union*

- To set up a new cooperation format, based on the Association Trio platform, that would adequately reflect the Trio's membership aspirations, the changed security environment and Russian aggression/potential threats.
- To build up its human resources in DG NEAR and the European Delegation for structuring a dialogue with the Georgian Government in view of the membership application and the coordination of financing instruments necessary for the successful accession of Georgia to the European Union.
- To encourage the government of Georgia to make the process of filling in the questionnaire transparent and inclusive, particularly considering civil society's due engagement.

### *For NATO*

- To step up its political support for Georgia and ensure its inclusion in high-level political discussions concerning the altered security architecture of the Black Sea Region, including within the preparation of the Strategic Concept 2022 and June Madrid Summit.
- To strengthen bilateral discussions with the government of Georgia concerning the altered security environment and potential threats, including strengthening of Georgia's defense capabilities, in a fast and proactive manner.
- To step up its support for enhancing Georgia's cyber-security capacity and the resilience of state institutions amid the increased level cyber-attacks.
- To provide expertise and robust strategies for diplomacy, media relations and strategic communications to strengthen Georgia's capacity to counter Russian disinformation amid the increased attempts to spread disinformation regarding threats coming from Georgia.
- To map Georgia's defense capacity and military equipment with the government of Georgia and ensure readiness and robust planning of routes for equipment provision in case of necessity.

### *For civil society*

- To ensure societal support for Ukraine, including in terms of activities linked to humanitarian support, facilitation of relations between respective government agencies, and Ukrainian refugees arriving in Georgia.
- To enhance cooperation with Ukrainian and Moldovan civil society concerning the Association Trio's EU membership application and increase cooperation on a societal level, including in the run-up to the European Council meeting scheduled in June.
- To step up its monitoring efforts on Government action on policy towards Ukraine, including the compliance of Georgia's foreign policy actions with its Western partners, especially on the issue of sanctions.
- To ensure smooth and fast cooperation with respective government agencies on the filling in of the second part of the EU membership questionnaire upon request.
- To enhance its communication with the public regarding the developments in the region, Georgia's foreign policy options and ensure the maximum level of transparency towards the public and its inclusiveness in the process.

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