



# Georgia-Ukraine Relations During the War: Strained Partnership

Nino Samkharadze <sup>1</sup>

The events following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the geopolitical changes in the Black Sea region and the wider West are directly related to Georgia's security environment and European integration. There have been various risks for Tbilisi at every stage of the Russia-Ukraine war, including for how peace is established (GIP 2022). Therefore, it is vital for Georgia not only to maintain good relations with Ukraine, but to further enhance them to minimize these risks. However, relations between the two countries have been strained. At first, the rhetoric of the Government of Georgia (GoG) did not give any indication that the tension would be defused. However, the visit of the parliamentary delegation on April 15 is a significant step forward.

At this stage, we can discuss several mistakes made by Georgia's political elite. These mistakes may be problematic for the country at various levels. This policy memo analyses the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's rhetoric and actions since the Russian invasion of Ukraine before the Georgian delegation's visit (from February 24 to April 15). The document offers the reader a discussion on why the relations between the two strategic partners became tense in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, why this dynamic is harmful for Georgia's security environment, and what GoG should rethink in its approach towards bilateral relations with Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> Nino Samkharadze is Junior Policy Analyst at GIP

## Context Analysis: Georgia in the Face of a New Ukrainian Diplomacy During the War

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine (CNN 2022), the political elite in Kyiv began establishing new standards of intensive diplomacy in parallel with military self-defense (Adams 2022). Ukrainian politicians actively pressure Western actors to ensure their active involvement in fighting off Russian military attacks. Therefore, Kyiv established a new formula for aggressive diplomacy: maximum pressure for maximum benefit.

Similar diplomatic efforts particularly apply to the country's strategic partners, in the forms of both Tbilisi and the West. Georgia's moves in support of Ukraine included a number of important decisions, including the fact that the Embassy of Georgia has been continuously operating from the first day of the war (MFA of Georgia 2022). In addition, Tbilisi has been regularly supporting Ukraine at the global level, voting in support of suspending Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council (UN News 2022). Georgia also continues the mobilization of humanitarian assistance and is one of the leaders in this effort, along with Belgium and Romania (Radiotavisufleba 2022b).

However, GD government's public support for Ukraine has not been consistent, justifying it with the fear of repercussions from Russia. Ukraine had higher expectations for Tbilisi's support (Jones 2022; Sheils 2022) and Kyiv took measures of its own, such as recalling Ukraine's ambassador, and taking on a critical tone of President Zelensky and other Ukrainian politicians towards Tbilisi. It all culminated in Ukraine's claim that Russia uses Georgia as a smuggling channel for dual-use products (Civil.ge 2022) - a serious accusation that Georgian government officially denied. Confrontational tone was maintained by GD members even when the Parliament of Georgia received the invitation from the Chairperson of Ukraine's Rada (კობახიძე 2022b; მდინარაძე 2022c). It became clear that this form of the messages to Kyiv chosen in Tbilisi would not help to soften the confrontation.

Therefore, responding to the pressure of Ukrainian diplomacy turned out to be a hard task for the ruling elite in Georgia. Such public falling out with a strategic partner left an impression that despite Georgia's strong support of Ukraine internationally, and in terms of humanitarian assistance, the efforts of GoG remain insufficient in the eyes of Kyiv, as well as of the Georgian public.

## Relations with a Strategic Partner in War: Mistakes and Impact

For Georgia, the Russia-Ukraine war created an environment in which the country's number one enemy invaded one of its most important strategic partners. In this context, Tbilisi tried to turn a neutral response into a foundation for a pragmatic policy with the goal of maintaining peace. However, there was a risk that this could have cost Georgia its strategic partner by abandoning and eventually losing it (Kakhishvili 2022). We may assume that the visit of the Georgian delegation in Ukraine will help to reset relations. In these regards, the decision of the Georgian political elite is an important positive step that may become a watershed moment to improve the damaged relations in the context of the war.

However, based on the narrative analysis of the Georgian government's activities and statements, we may identify four main mistakes that Tbilisi made in relation to Ukraine and, therefore, four factors that may have damaging impact for Georgia-Ukraine relations Tbilisi's official visit to Ukraine.

- ***Mistake 1: Georgia as a stand-aside partner***

The first and the most visible mistake made by the ruling Georgian Dream party was that from the start of the war, when high-ranking politicians did not have sufficiently intensive direct communication – telephone calls or visits – either with Ukraine or with Western political elites, as should have been the case with strategic partners. As a result, it seemed as though Georgia moved away from the context of Ukraine, as well as from general western mobilization in support for Kyiv.

The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, who regularly publishes reports of his communications with global leaders on social media, almost never discussed any high-level communications with Georgia (Zelenskyi 2022a). This kind of communication was held only by the President Salome Zurbishvili shortly after the war started, which is a valuable move, but considering the status of the President in Georgia's political system, politically insufficient. At the same time, President Zurbishvili has been criticized by the ruling party for organizing a Western tour focusing on Ukraine, on the grounds that organizing of those visits did not “conform with the constitution” (Samkharadze 2022)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The ruling party announced the constitutional lawsuit against the President Salome Zurbishvili because of the visits conducted in European countries without the permission from the Government, where Zurbishvili held high-level bilateral meetings and actively informed authoritative Western media outlets on Georgia's position in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Additionally, the Georgian authorities at first refused the Mayor of Kyiv's invitation with other European leaders to Bucha. Initially, the GD members stated that Georgia had not received such invitation (Tabula 2022); later, the visit was postponed due to alleged illness of the Chairman of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili (Kadagishvili 2022), and finally, the Georgian government posed several conditions for the visit (მდგონარაძე 2022c). This gesture created the impression that the ruling party tried to avoid demonstrating its support for Ukraine, and this resulted in the situation when Georgia was visibly missing in Ukraine which meanwhile has been receiving a number of high level visits from Western leaders since tensions with Russia flared in December 2021.

While Georgian delegation eventually visited Ukraine (GPB 2022), the fact remains that at a certain stage, the country lost the opportunity to take this important decision in parallel and in concurrence with European leaders (Zelenskyi 2022c). It would be a powerful message if Tbilisi took part in a strong European mobilization. Because of this mistake, Georgia appeared to be disconnected from united Western solidarity to Ukraine, damaging the country's prospect of becoming a fully-fledged member of the European political space. In Brussels, Tbilisi is starting to look like a stand-aside observer rather than a reliable ally (ვინ ვრამბო 2022), thus weakening relations with its strategic partners (კაკაბია 2022). This creates additional obstacles in the context when Georgia, along with Ukraine, applied for the EU membership candidate status under extraordinary circumstances and expects unprecedented progress towards European integration (RFE/RL 2022).

Hence, it is important that the Georgian government maintains direct contact with Ukraine's political elite and strengthens it at the highest political level. With these regards, the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA of Georgia 2022b), who had a brief personal communication with his colleague Dmytro Kuleba against the backdrop of heightened relations, has an important role to play (Darchiashvili 2022). It is also time for Tbilisi to intensify direct communication with its Western partners, specifically those that are providing unprecedented support to Kyiv. It is important that Georgia maintains a direct line of communication with Ukraine, as well as with the Western partners mobilized around Ukraine in the context of the Russian-Ukraine war.

- ***Mistake 2: Confrontational tone and damaging relations with Ukraine?***

Georgian government's confrontational tone may be counted as the second mistake made by the ruling party members. In response to the aggressive diplomacy used by Ukraine to

receive the maximum support, Tbilisi officials answered with a series of accusations to Ukraine and additional counter-requests. The Government of Georgia has used aggressive tone while stating its position, which was denounced by many as an inappropriate way to address a country that is a strategic partner of Georgia and is at war with Georgia's main enemy.

This blemish of the ruling political elite was demonstrated during the very first public statement of the Prime Minister about the sanctions. A comment made by Irakli Gharibashvili on the second day of the war summarized the PM's position, and the tone of communication: *"I would like to state clearly and unambiguously that Georgia, considering its national interests, does not plan to participate in financial and economic sanctions"* (ღარიბაშვილი 2022a). It was followed by a set of symbolic gestures from the Georgian political elite, namely denying the President and the opposition's initiative for calling an extraordinary session of Parliament on Ukraine (პაპუაშვილი 2022a), criticizing the President of Georgia for bringing the Ambassador of Ukraine to the Parliament, citing Parliament's rules and procedures (მდინარაძე 2022b), and refusing the idea of allowing President Zelensky to address the Parliament of Georgia (პაპუაშვილი 2022b)<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, these actions were accompanied by a series of sensitive statements such as *"Ukraine was punished"* with war (ღარიბაშვილი 2022b), [Ukraine's position] *"is the expression of one thing, that they want to drag Georgia in war"* (კობახიძე 2022a), and that *"sanctions are not effective anyway"* (ღარიბაშვილი 2022c).

Strained relations between the two countries reached its peak when Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister Irina Vereshchuk cited the Ukrainian intelligence report, according to which dual-use products have been allegedly smuggled to Russia via Georgia (Civil.ge 2022). This statement came across as a harsh accusation from Ukraine, since it may be perceived by the public (both external and internal) as Georgia's direct support of Russia in its war against Ukraine.

The Government of Georgia instantly denied these very serious accusations (MOD of Georgia 2022; SSG 2022), which was very important to save the country's international image. However, it is worth mentioning that the Georgian Dream responded to Kyiv with dubious statements such as *"If the United National Movement provides valuable support to the Government of Ukraine, they (UNM) may teach them [Ukrainians] how to lay around dead bodies"*

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<sup>3</sup> President Volodymyr Zelensky's address to the Parliaments of various countries has become an intensive practice. Since the start of the war, President Zelensky addressed the parliaments of more than 20 countries (President of Ukraine 2022).

(Okhanashvili 2022). This happened when Ukraine was trying to prove that the gruesome slaughter by the Russians in Bucha was not staged by Ukraine and that Russia had indeed committed war crimes (Browne, Botti & Willis 2022). Considering the fact that Georgia is itself trying to prove that Russian forces committed war crimes during the 2008 August War to the international judicial community, Tbilisi's only position had to be coordinated support to Ukraine.

Instead, such confrontational attitude of the ruling political elite in response to Kyiv's aggressive diplomacy creates the risk that Tbilisi may burn all bridges in relation to Ukraine. If Georgia remains on this track, it will only worsen the relations with one of its most important strategic partners. Close relations with Ukraine, which is turning into a European player to be taken into account in the Black Sea security architecture, will become even more important for Georgia's security environment. Following the Georgian delegation's visit to Ukraine, one of the ways Tbilisi can avoid this risk is to work with Ukraine's political elite on reinstating the Ukrainian Ambassador, since during this vital period for the two countries, the absence of the Ukrainian Ambassador to Georgia raises questions as to whether there are no "misunderstandings" between Kyiv and Tbilisi (Radotavisupleba 2022c).

- ***Mistake 3: Fear factor that turns Georgia into an easily manipulated player***

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia's ruling elite has repeatedly stated that the Georgian Dream government will not allow Georgia to risk war, and will ensure peace for the population through pragmatic policies (ღარიბაშვილი 2022d). At first glance, this approach sounds like reasonable rhetoric for the country; however, it frequently seems as though Tbilisi's "pragmatic policy" is mainly based on the fear of war instead of strengthening Georgia's security guarantees. In this case, the main mistake is that the ruling party approaches the important mission of ensuring the peace through caution at the verge of fear. Such approach has been demonstrated in an emotional interview of the then-Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, where he states that "*only several minutes will be needed [for Russians] to turn Georgia upside down*" (ზალკალიანი 2022).

However, Tbilisi's "normalization" policy does not impede Russia from recognizing the existence of three independent countries on the territory of Georgia. Neither did the 'cautious' approach to Ukraine stop the so-called South Ossetia to hold a referendum on joining Russia. Therefore, a similar approach is far from a pragmatic result-oriented policy. Especially when taking into account Russia's imperialist character, the existence of similar guarantees is impossible.

In the context of the appeasement policy and cautious rhetoric about the full-scale war in Ukraine, for Moscow, Georgia seems to be ready to compromise to avoid the war and ensure stability. Therefore, Tbilisi may become a more vulnerable and easily-manipulated target by Russia in the region. To a certain extent, a similar approach of the Government of Georgia may even go against the national interests of Georgia (Kakhishvili 2022). This prospect does not turn Georgia into a reliable partner either for Kyiv or the West.

- ***Mistake 4: Internal polarizing narrative as an international message***

Another important mistake made by the ruling political elite is the inability to ensure internal consolidation about Ukraine and turning it into a polarizing topic.

The Georgian Dream has found it irksome that there are Georgian politicians related to the ruling party's main political competitor – the United National Movement (UNM) – serving in Ukraine. Added to this is the fact that the leaders of the Georgian Dream faction refer to the UNM as a “war party” (თალაკვაძე 2022). Similar labeling points to the fact that the Government still has not been able to free itself from its own narrow party interests (Kakhishvili 2022). This issue is becoming an additional topic of contention with Ukraine, making it harder for the Government to establish constructive relations with Ukraine; according to the Georgian Dream rhetoric, “*we have an unfortunate situation, in which politicians in opposition in Georgia are in the government in Ukraine*” (კობახიძე 2022c). This issue almost became the reason for canceling the Georgian parliamentary visit in Ukraine: Tbilisi set forth conditions of the visit, among which was mentioned its unease that there are Georgian opposition actors serving the Government of Ukraine (კობახიძე 2022b).

The government's polarizing attitude during the war also extended to the presidential institute, which was criticized by the authorities because of its activities in support of Ukraine, which then led to a constitutional crisis (სამხარაძე 2022). The President was reprimanded for attempting to take important political steps, such a tour of the West, voicing Georgia's position on the war in Ukraine in the international media, and hosting the Ambassador of Ukraine in the Parliament of Georgia. The Georgian Dream authorities justified this measure with incompatibility with the constitution or the [Parliament's] rules and procedures. It even started a constitutional lawsuit in the Constitutional Court of Georgia, which constitutionalists consider to be an unjustified political move (ხმაღაძე 2022).

This strategy may send a negative message to Ukraine as well as to the West, demonstrating that there are distinctive domestic views on issues of global importance, such as Russian



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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia  
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12  
Email: [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)  
For more information, please visit  
[www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)