



Lost in Pragmatism(s) in the South Caucasus?

Why Georgia Should Invest in Value- based Foreign Policy

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POLICY PAPER

ISSUE #32 | NOVEMBER 2022

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Ivanna Machitidze, *“Lost in Pragmatism(s) in the South Caucasus? Why Georgia Should Invest in Value-based Foreign Policy,”* Policy Paper No. 32, Georgian Institute of Politics, November 2022.

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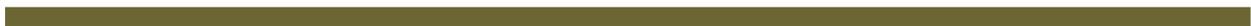
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Executive Summary

Russia's full-scale unprovoked and unjustified aggression against Ukraine on February 24th 2022 has focused global attention on the region. What was considered for almost a decade to be just another regional conflict in "Russia's backyard" without major impact on Europe's security architecture has now been recognized as being of global importance. Ukraine's impressive handling of the war has rallied significant global support and focused minds on defending democracy and freedom against the threat posed by Putin's Russia. It has divided the world into the governments that unequivocally support Ukraine, those that align with Russia and still others that avoid taking sides in order to prioritize economic stability and a secure supply of natural resources. None of the countries of the South Caucasus has openly supported Russia's aggression against Ukraine, though neither has any of them adopted a policy of fully isolating it. Such a stance has provoked discussions on whether this sort of "pragmatism" is winning over the region, especially in traditionally stalwartly pro-Western Georgia.

This policy paper explores this "pragmatic turn" in the South Caucasus. It argues that such a "pragmatic" foreign policy is not the optimal strategy for Georgia in the current conditions of high uncertainty. With this aim, we first assess the implications of the shifting geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus and shed light on the essence of pragmatic and value-based foreign policy approaches. Secondly, the rationale of pragmatism for Azerbaijan's and Armenia's regional policy is discussed. Finally, the high costs and lack of rewards likely entailed by Tbilisi's effort to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy stance are explained. As the findings demonstrate, such an approach would put Georgia into deadlock. Hence, a value-based foreign policy stance stands out as the option to follow, as it is the only country in the South Caucasus that has declared Euro-Atlantic aspirations as the core goal of its foreign policy. Putting this course under doubt, entails penalties for downgrading cooperation between Brussels and Tbilisi and leaves Georgia vulnerable to regional shifts. In this light, recommendations are offered for Georgia's government and international partners on the measures required to ensure Tbilisi's regional policy adheres to a value-based course in contrast to the increasingly pragmatic stance of both Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Key words: South Caucasus, Georgia, War in Ukraine, pragmatic foreign policy

Introduction

Throughout over three decades that have passed since the demise of the Soviet Union, the geopolitical labels attached to each of the state actors in the South Caucasus have stayed largely the same. Russia has always been characterized as the regional hegemon, Turkey as a mercantilist power, Azerbaijan as a country with a balanced, multi-vector foreign policy aligned closely to Turkey, Georgia as pro-Western, and Armenia as Russia's main client in the region. The West (specifically the US and the EU) are mostly described as concerned but keeping the region at arm's length. In case of the US, the trend towards partial disengagement became pronounced after the departure of President G.W. Bush's administration and the region's strategic significance decreased after the Middle East ceased to be the US top foreign policy priority. No US President has visited to the region since G.W. Bush's visit to Tbilisi in 2005 which served as bold statement in support of Georgia's democratization. In case of Azerbaijan and Armenia no such presidential visit ever took place. Moreover, the EU and NATO have been reluctant to contribute to security arrangements in the region reaffirmed by Barack Obama's "reset policy" of 2009-2011 towards Russia after the August 2008 war (Lebanidze 2020). The signing of 2018 Caspian Sea Convention banning foreign military forces from entering the area has also been considered a Russian victory (Eurasianet 2019).

Since February 24th 2022, the West has finally realized that Russia poses an existential security threat. But the war in Ukraine has also caused a shift in the balance of power in the South Caucasus in several ways. After Russia's strategic miscalculation and failure to quickly takeover Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow's capacity to maintain hegemony in the neighborhood has been shrinking, while Turkey has been strengthening its posture as a "swing state" since February 24th, standing out as the guarantor of connectivity of transportation and trade routes in the region. The OSCE Minsk Group has also been sidelined from in the conflict resolution process over Nagorno Karabakh. In the meantime, the EU has made efforts to step into the breach and broker a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan throughout 2022. In addition, September 13-14th violence and Azerbaijani troops' incursion into the territory of Armenia have endangered diplomatic avenues for achieving a lasting peace. Here too, the EU has managed to broker agreement between the two sides to dispatch a civilian mission to Armenia's border with Azerbaijan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2022). Finally, Georgia has found itself in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape since February 24th, struggling to adhere both to its Euro-Atlantic integration goals and a normalization policy towards Russia, simultaneously facing increasing criticism from the EU for insufficient domestic reforms. Thousands of Russian citizens have fled the country since February 24th, potentially contributing to societal and political polarization. The current high degree of uncertainty makes the pragmatic foreign policy strategy increasingly attractive for Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi. Struggling to preserve its image as a posterchild for democratic transition in the South Caucasus, Georgia had been expected by the West to stick to a value-based foreign policy

course. Under current regional dynamics, adhering to a “pragmatic” stance implies high costs for Georgia as it lacks security guarantees from the West in case of full-scale aggression from Russia. Prior to analysing the implications of a pragmatic foreign policy approach for each of the states in South Caucasus, the essence of both value-based and pragmatic policy stance will be discussed.

Can Pragmatic and Value-based Foreign Policy Be Reconciled?

A lack of precise definition of pragmatism in foreign policy allows for multiple interpretations to be made. Frequently, a pragmatic foreign policy stance is perceived as a toolbox for achieving certain specific goals and promoting a generic conception of the national interest shorn of any ideological considerations. Here we can talk of small-P and big-P pragmatism. Small-P pragmatism focuses on the survival of a state leader or leading elite, compromising on ideology while prioritizing remaining in power. Big-P pragmatism is a similar strategy, albeit one serving the wider national interest rather than the personal interests of the leadership. This approach tends to favor a focus on longer-term goals (Rong Phua 2022). Both small-P and big-P approaches can either conflict or be combined as components of one strategy. The following chapter on pragmatic strategies pursued by Azerbaijan and Armenia discusses both options.

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In contrast to pragmatic foreign policy, value-based foreign policy prioritizes allegiance to the promotion of democratic values, the rule of law, media freedom, and resilient institutions as the cornerstone of foreign policy planning. Such a stance departs from a narrow pursuit of national security interests and focuses in addition on defending a broader democratic agenda. For instance, among small states in Eastern Europe, Estonia has embarked on a value-based foreign policy since the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Lithuania has also been emphasizing its commitment to the value-based approach as well, “investing into the spirit of solidarity between democratic states” (The Programme of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania 2016).

The EU has tried to forge a middle path between a pragmatic stance and strengthening its value-based foreign policy approach. This deserves separate attention, as since Russia's first wave of unprovoked aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the EU has been struggling to accommodate the diverse interests of its member-states and has been cognizant of the need to maintain dialogue with Russia for the sake of continuous economic cooperation. Thus, principled pragmatism was announced as part of EU's Global Strategy in 2016 in an attempt to prioritize matters of common interest over those of conflict. Such an approach would accommodate the diverging national interests of EU member-states and find a middle-ground between the EU's transformative agenda towards its neighborhood based on respect for values and normative commitments (European Union Global Strategy 2019).

Nevertheless, the EU's Strategy did not pay off, as Russia's second assault against Ukraine created an urgent need to review the strategy to bolster the security and defense of the bloc. The strategy envisages making these changes by 2030 and is known as Strategic Compass for Security and Defense. Indeed, each of the five priorities, namely security and defense, resilience, integrated crisis management, regional order and global governance, require reassessment in the wake of February 24th 2022. The new Compass does not contain any mention of Armenia or Azerbaijan, while reiterating support for Georgia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in countering hybrid threats, disinformation and cybersecurity (EU Strategic Compass 2022). The case of the EU illustrates the challenges linked to a transformation of foreign policy logic from a value-based one to a pragmatic one. This is especially relevant for Georgia facing an uneasy choice between acting pragmatically to diversify its trade ties and economic partnerships with countries like Turkey, China and eventually Russia, while at the same time not compromising on democratic values. At the same time, Tbilisi's neighbors, namely Azerbaijan and Armenia, have been both increasingly investing in a pragmatic approach towards regional policy, further undermining confidence in trustworthiness of a value-based approach.

Varieties of Pragmatism in the South Caucasus: Azerbaijan's and Armenia's Path?

While exploring the "pragmatist turn" in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Armenia stand out as cases in point, while Georgia has been making efforts to maneuver between pragmatic and value-based foreign policy options. The analysis below demonstrates that both small-P and big-P pragmatisms have worked in tandem in Azerbaijan's pragmatic foreign policy. The key goal of Azerbaijan's strategy is to restore its territorial integrity and bolster President Aliyev's credibility as a strong and resilient leader. For Armenia, which has embarked on pragmatic decision-making to cope with its loss in the November 2020 Karabakh War, the interplay between the two pragmatisms has not yet taken shape.

Baku's careful "balancing act" has paid off as it has consolidated its regaining control of territory in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, turned into an attractive energy provider for the EU, all while maintaining dialogue with Russia and its close alliance with Turkey. For Armenia, being left with limited options after being isolated by Russia's security umbrella, a pragmatic policy shift became a matter of urgent necessity. In terms of unlocking transportation corridors in the region, Yerevan has to ensure that dialogue with Turkey will persist which is not a given owing to the bitter historical legacy between the two countries.

- ***AZERBAIJAN: THE „EXPERIENCED BALANCER “***

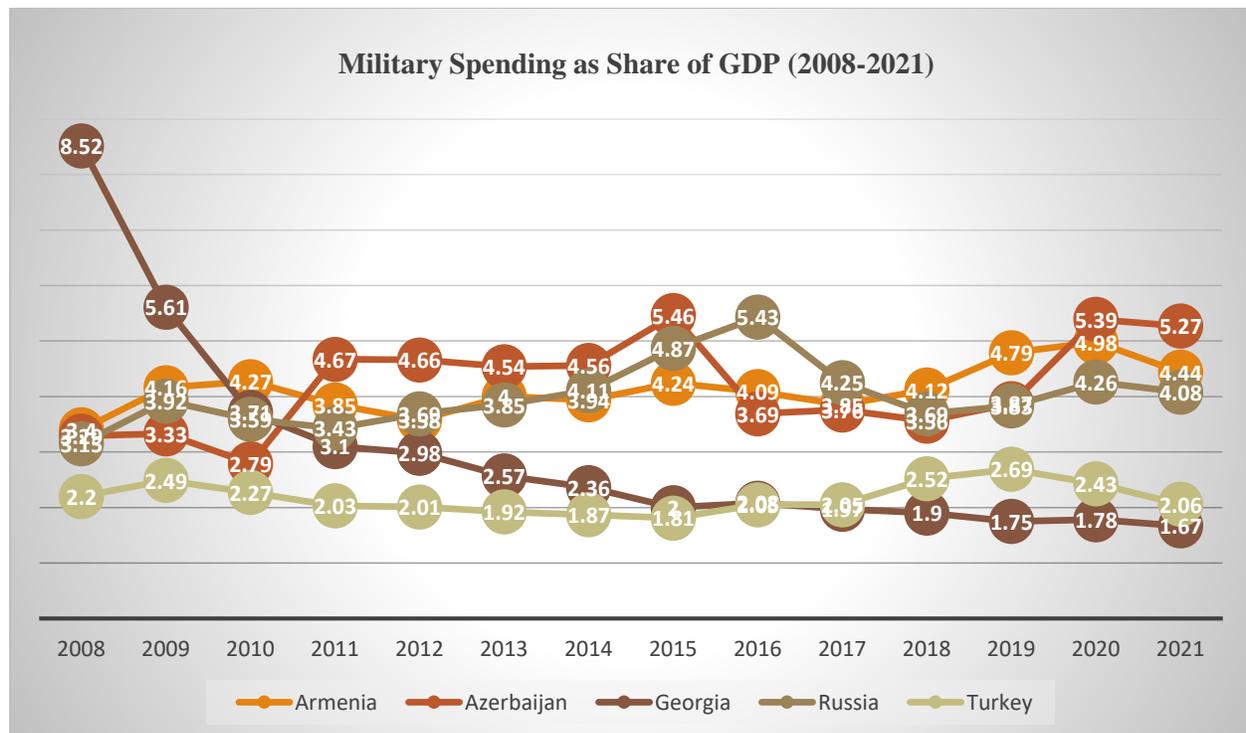
In the foreign policy realm, Baku has been following a strategy similar to that of its main partner, Turkey, positioning itself as a reliable partner of both Russia and the West. Unlike Armenia, sidelined by Russia as its security provider due to meddling in the war in Ukraine, Turkey's support for Azerbaijan since the first Karabakh war has been consistent and reliable (Machitidze 2020). Extensive cooperation in the fields of economic, cultural, military and defense has developed. And the relationship between two countries became even closer after the signing of the Shusha Declaration of 2021 (Anadolu Agency 2021). In addition, a joint E-service platform to facilitate the access of citizens of each country to each other's public service systems have further elevated both countries' partnership (Caspian News 2022). Support for Azerbaijan paid off for Turkey after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war, when it managed to secure participation in the cease-fire monitoring center in Azerbaijan's Agdam district which is staffed by a Turkish and Russian team.

Baku has significantly strengthened its geopolitical standing after its victory in the Autumn 2020 war, as well as the outbreak of violence in August and September 2022. Since February 24th, Azerbaijan has acted boldly in line with its key national interest in restoring territorial integrity, building on its newly regained control over areas in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. The outbreak of violence on September 13-14th, the worst since the Autumn 2020 war, underlined Azerbaijan's intention to coerce Armenia into accepting Baku's conditions of peace by raising the stakes and attacking Armenia-proper, rather than just Nagorno Karabakh. As in previous escalations after November 2020, Russia has been reluctant to interfere in the conflict as Armenia's security provider (VoA News 2022). Having turned into one of the largest military spenders in the region (Graph 1) with military spending reaching more than 5% (SIPRI 2021), Azerbaijan has been acting in an increasingly assertive manner, stepping up its criticism of the OSCE Minsk Group after the Autumn escalation in 2020, repeatedly calling it "virtually inactive" (BBC 2022).

Simultaneously, Azerbaijan has been bolstering its status as a regional energy security provider, contributing to EU and Ukrainian energy security. Azerbaijan and Turkey stand out as the alternative to Russia for gas transportation (Washington Post 2022). The EU and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum on doubling gas supplies by 2027 which in turn limits Brussels' capacity to demand improvement of the human rights and democracy situation in Azerbaijan. Potential

agreement between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary on electricity supplies demonstrates Baku’s increasing significance (Agenda.ge 2022). Azerbaijan’s goal is not to be the West’s exclusive partner in the South Caucasus and Caspian. A treaty on “Allied Interaction” with Russia was concluded in March 2022, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, stands out as evidence of Azerbaijan’s multi-vector strategy. The document deepens cooperation between the two countries, having already been important partners in the areas of defense and trade (OC Media 2022).

Graph 1: Source: own compilation based on data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute SIPRI (2021).



Unlike Georgia and Armenia, although not joining international sanctions against Russia, Azerbaijan’s government avoided criticism from Kyiv, and gained praise as provider of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine worth 15 mln euros, while the Azerbaijan state oil firm, SOCAR, supplied 100 tons of fuel vitally important for Ukraine’s ambulances and vehicles (EU reporter 2022).

Baku has attempted to transform its identity from a post-Soviet state to a Turkic state. Through its membership in the Organization of Turkic States Azerbaijan has embarked upon intensive cooperation with Central Asian states, in particular serving as the alternative transportation route for the region’s vast energy resources. Developing a new fleet of tanker ships in the Caspian is one of the outcomes, including the landmark agreement on the Dostlug offshore oilfield in the Caspian which was disputed with Turkmenistan for 30 years (Caspian news 2021). Due to temporary closures at the Novorossiysk oil terminal in July 2022, Kazakhstan also

looks to Azerbaijan and the Southern Gas Corridor with a potential expansion of TAP and TANAP to accommodate the energy needs of Turkey, Georgia and European partners. Another partnership in the realm of energy sector cooperation was forged with Uzbekistan. Although beyond experience sharing and attracting investments, this partnership serves another goal, namely, Tashkent's interest in the "Zangezur Corridor", potentially offering the shortest land route from Asia to Europe, if restored (Eurasianet 2022).

Hence, for Azerbaijan, a pragmatic stance has been genuinely based on cost-benefit calculations, pursuing alliances and partnerships based on Azerbaijan's key national interests of restoring its territorial integrity and achieving the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh issue on its own terms. While continuing partnership relations with Russia, Baku aims to carry out an independent regional policy in alliance with Turkey without Moscow's approval. Azerbaijan has also managed to increase its leverage as an alternative transportation route for energy resources from Central Asia to the EU.

- **ARMENIA: "DESPERATE PRAGMATISM"**

While a pragmatic foreign policy approach has contributed to Azerbaijan's independent regional profile and departure from stronger Russian influence, Armenia has had to adopt pragmatism out of despair. In its foreign policy priorities, the country stands out as the only regional player to stress both the strategic importance of a "friendly partnership" with the USA and a "special partnership" with Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2022). After the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, Armenia was compelled to re-open dialogue with Turkey as Russia's discredited itself as the key security provider for Yerevan and its failure to adhere to its obligations as a CSTO member-state.

The impetus for this decision was triggered by a deep popular dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's lack of assistance for Armenia during the 44-days war in Autumn 2020 and afterwards (IRI 2022). Russia has been facing increasing isolation due to its unprovoked and unjustified aggression against Ukraine, making its paper security guarantees for Armenia even less realistic. Therefore, the Kremlin's calls for a "diplomatic solution" to the September offensive by Azerbaijan on Armenia, and has attempted to back away from security guarantees provision for Yerevan, allowing Baku to push for more concessions in any future peace agreement, if one is ever concluded (Reuters 2022).

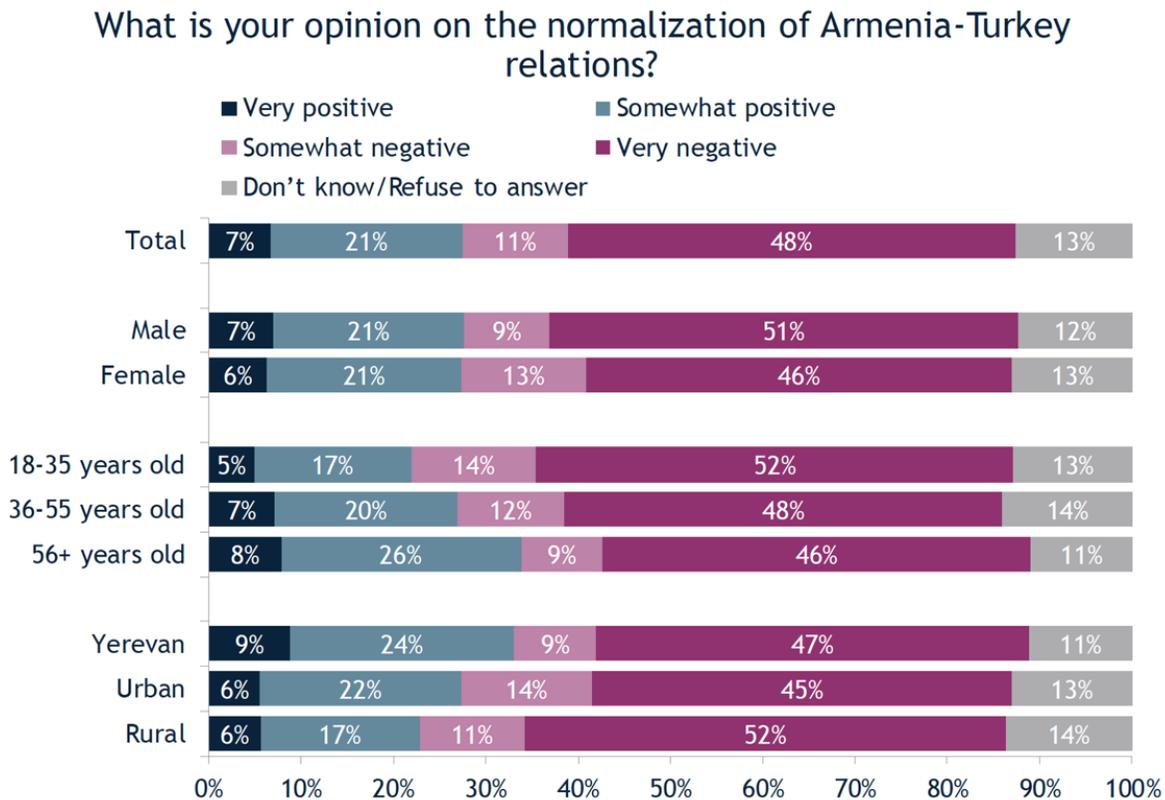
For Armenia, the key reward for adopting a pragmatic regional foreign policy is the alleviation of its deepening political and economic crisis. More importantly, overcoming the perceived humiliation of its 2020 military defeat is possible only through resolving the issue of its economic isolation (VoA News 2022). With this aim, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has reopened negotiations with Turkey, stressing readiness to discuss normalization of relations and invest in launching transport corridors between the two countries. Unlike previous attempts to normalize relations with Turkey in 2009, the current negotiations take place under

the “no preconditions” approach, without linking the Armenian Genocide or Nagorno Karabakh issues to their success. Although Azerbaijan remains against such

Turkey-Armenia “normalization”, unlike a decade ago, Baku does not object to the talks taking place. If previously, the EU and US contribution had been largely absent (Eurasianet 2022), according to the October agreement, the EU will dispatch a temporary civilian mission to the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This decision in turn marks the West’s return to an increased role in post-conflict settlement.

Public opinion on the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations is largely very negative ranging from 47% in Yerevan to 52% in rural areas. This could be a potential source of popular unrest if such an agreement is concluded. In spite of Armenian public opinion demonstrating unprecedented levels of distrust towards decision-making institutions, with 64% trusting no one, Nikol Pashinyan still enjoys the highest level of support amongst major political figures (IRI 2022).

Graph 2: Source: International Republican Institute (IRI). Public Opinion Survey – Residents of Armenia (June 2022)



Overall, for Armenia, its turn towards a pragmatic foreign policy stance has been prompted by its November 2020 “humiliation”, the loss of territories in and around Nagorno Karabakh and disenchantment with Russia’s security provision commitments. Although normalization of relations with Turkey is largely opposed by Armenian public opinion, for Yerevan, lacking security guarantees from Russia and facing shrinking influence in the region, dialogue with Turkey is the key to reopening long-blocked trade routes and potentially turning into a transit hub through the North-South International Transport Corridor. As part of its pragmatic turn, Armenia has been investing in restoring cooperation with the European Union.

Georgia: In Search of Foreign Policy?

Unlike Azerbaijan or Armenia, Georgia has been increasingly ambiguous in relation to the foreign policy course it should adhere to. Being the only country in the South Caucasus labelled as the West’s loyal and trusted partner and belonging to the Associated Trio of Ukraine-Georgia-Moldova, Tbilisi was not expected to depart from a value-based foreign policy. Instead, since the outbreak of the Ukraine war, Georgia has found itself backtracking on obligations to carry out reforms, especially regarding anti-corruption and the judiciary. It has also been unable to overcome political polarization and rejected the EU brokered 19 April agreement in June 2021 blaming opposition parties for unwillingness to cooperate (Euroactiv 2021).

“Georgia has decided to embark on the European Union path and also to take on these responsibilities. And now, [what] is relevant is to deliver” (European Council 2022). This statement by EU’s High Representative, Josep Borrell, contains clearly formulated expectations of Georgia. This year marks by far the lowest point of relations between Tbilisi and Brussels since the Georgia-EU Association Agreement entered into force in 2016 (Kakachia, Kakabadze 2022). The chair of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, for his part slammed the EU envoy, Ambassador Hartzell, for damaging Georgia-EU relations while in office. Tbilisi’s failure to meet the expectations of its Western partners has been the key cost of its pragmatic foreign policy turn and its departure from a value-based foreign policy orientation.

Following its Euro-Atlantic aspirations has served as the backbone of Georgia’s regional policy, in particular towards the South Caucasus and Black Sea regions. At the same time, Tbilisi has not been given clear security guarantees by the West to address its vulnerability to the security threats emanating from Russia. Key partners, namely the EU and the US, still largely act as bystanders in regional security arrangements, lagging behind Russia and Turkey in their capacity and willingness to take the initiative in the South Caucasus. While the EU has been a key actor in strengthening democratic performance, reducing political polarization, empowering civil society, and addressing green energy concerns, in light of the growing militarization of the region these issues have not played a decisive role in the balance of power

in the region. Georgia's willingness to commit itself to value-based foreign policy would be strengthened by recent initiatives such as Georgia's Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Agreement with the US in 2021. This program aims to achieve improved defense capabilities and builds on Georgia's NATO Enhanced Security Partner status. As such, more such programs would add to Tbilisi's confidence in its foreign policy course without compromising on its pro-democratic course.

Another issue complicating Tbilisi's ability to act proactively in the South Caucasus and Black Sea regions and stand out as a promoter of democratic values in the region is the major discrepancy between its formal foreign policy orientation towards EU and NATO and its less official efforts to avoid irritating Russia. For Tbilisi, this pragmatic stance is based on cost-benefit calculations that seeks to balance cooperation with regional stakeholders, such as Turkey, Russia and China, while simultaneously adhering to the reform commitments to achieve Euro-Atlantic integration. The absence of a coherent vision for Georgia's long-term foreign policy goals and clearly defined, up-to-date national security priorities addressing current geopolitical regional shifts has cast doubt over the wisdom of Georgia's current course in the context of the Ukraine war. Georgia's national security strategy also requires an urgent update, especially in the light of the changed status quo around Nagorno Karabakh and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While both Ukraine and Moldova face complex challenges on their democratization path, namely the lack of judicial independence, fragility of independent media, oligarchic rule and political parties' clientelism, Georgia's democratic backsliding has been increasingly associated with state capture (German et al. 2021). While it was the Georgian Dream government that secured the visa-free regime and Association Agreement with the EU, only recently Irakli Garibashvili, Georgia's prime minister, openly criticized the EU Parliament's resolution on Georgia and the EU's reluctance to give candidate status, emphasizing that "Georgia is ten times ahead of Ukraine and Moldova in all areas, and in many respects even ahead of EU member states" (Eurasianet 2022).

Finally, in addition to its backtracking on reform obligations and, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, failure to obtain EU candidate status, in an effort to avoid irritating Russia, Tbilisi has taken a rather ambiguous position on compliance with international sanctions against Moscow. While the government stated that introducing sanctions against Moscow is contrary to Georgia's national interests, Georgia's President Salome Zourabichvili reaffirmed full support for the sanctions against Russia (Parliament of Georgia 2022).

The inward-looking and low-profile character of Georgia's policy towards the South Caucasus and Black Sea region disqualifies it from being a truly pragmatic course. It would be more accurate to say that Georgia is using pragmatism as excuse for pursuing an ambiguous foreign policy course. The absence of a common stance by key decision-making institutions, has left Georgia as the West's regional partner, pursuing EU and NATO integration goals, that has hesitated to join the West in full scale isolation of Russia, instead continuing a policy of normalization of relations with Moscow.

In this manner, Georgia has cast doubt on its loyalty to the West, its strategic partnership with Ukraine, and readiness to invest in democratic reforms that were unquestionable a decade ago. Its departure from an emphasis on value-based foreign policy would entail unprecedentedly high costs in the long run, namely, decreasing Western support for Georgia, which will come at a cost in terms of security and economic cooperation and participation in any new security arrangements after the war in Ukraine is over. In the short-run, compromising on its value-based foreign policy course may lead to diversified trade relations, increased investments by such countries as China, Turkey, Iran and Russia. However, in the long-term this stance will likely undermine Georgia's democratic progress, institutional resilience and decision-making transparency.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The developments since February 24th 2020 revealed a complex set of challenges for Georgia to revise its foreign policy strategy towards the region. While a pragmatic foreign policy course stands out as the most feasible option in a time of uncertainty over the outcomes of Russia's war in Ukraine, a pragmatic stance must be based on cost-benefit calculations at core. Until recently, Georgia has been the only country in the South Caucasus committed to a value-based foreign policy as a "beacon of democracy" and the West's loyal partner. Tbilisi's departure from a value-based foreign policy course and its attempts to pursue a normalization policy with Russia is the outcome of an absence of Western security guarantees to Georgia and NATO's disengagement from the South Caucasus, illustrated by the region's low profile in the EU's new Security Compass. Unlike Armenia or Azerbaijan, there is no regional player offering security guarantees to Tbilisi in case of attack.

Tbilisi seems to be off course, without a clear priority in pursuing its long-term foreign policy goals. Hence, the recommendations below aim at ensuring Tbilisi's regional foreign policy is based on a value-based approach. The context in the South Caucasus is that Azerbaijan and Armenia both pursue a pragmatic stance pushes Georgia to employ this strategy as well. In a post February 24th 2022 world, Azerbaijan's pragmatic stance has been bringing benefits to Baku, as its pragmatic and prudent approach to relations with regional actors has been its trademark for a long time. Meanwhile, Armenia has also followed a pragmatic foreign policy course as a matter of necessity for survival rather than a matter of choice. For Yerevan, its pragmatic stance resulted from its defeat in November 2020 when it lost territory in and around Nagorno Karabakh and its disenchantment with Russia's failure to honor its security commitments. Key to the success of Armenia's approach is restoring diplomatic and economic relations with Turkey which is still rather uncertain. Hence, unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia should invest in a value-based foreign policy strategy that would be best suited to its long-term status of the West's partner in the South Caucasus.

Recommendations

To the Georgian Government

- *In respect of the European Union:*

1. The Georgian government in partnership with all relevant stakeholders and civil society actors has to demonstrate unquestionable commitment to obtaining candidate status and pursue reforms under the auspices of the EU's 12 point recommendations in the areas of transparent judicial reform, fighting corruption, overcoming political polarization, and strengthening parliamentary oversight;
2. Involvement and continuous monitoring by key civil society actors of the government's work should be an inherent component of a transparent and accessible process. Reports on implemented, undergoing and planned activities as well as programs, plans and strategies should be published. TV awareness campaigns should also be taking place as part of the approach;
3. The Georgian government should initiate a platform together with Moldova and Ukraine for a continuous exchange of experience in carrying out reforms in as EU candidate countries. Experience sharing could also involve recent successful applicants for EU membership, such as Croatia. Other countries with candidate status such as Montenegro and North Macedonia should be invited as well to strengthen the profile of applicants for EU membership.

- *In respect to Georgia's neighbourhood:*

1. The Georgian Government has to declare unequivocal support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and its fight against Russia's unprovoked and unjustified aggression. Tbilisi should join all international sanctions which in turn decreases Russia's ability to interfere with Georgia's democratization process. Both the president and prime minister of Georgia as well as the speaker of Parliament should pay an official visit to Kyiv that will relaunch the damaged partnership. Kyiv, in turn, should express its readiness for a fresh start and leave aside political differences.
2. Georgia should act proactively to relaunch together with Ukraine, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania an effective Black Sea multilateral cooperation platform offering the region an up-to-date strategy for addressing new security architecture after the end of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This should be done in consultation with EU and NATO counterparts to promote the significance of the Black Sea area in both organizations' strategic documents;
3. Georgia should further embark on its Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative for the South Caucasus and reach out to both Armenia and Azerbaijan and along with the EU exercise a mediating role between the two countries. In light of Russia's focus on the war in

Ukraine and the ineffective OSCE Minsk Group conflict resolution effort, the meeting of foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Tbilisi in July 2022 and the successful agreement to release prisoners of war in 2021 are a solid starting point. Georgia has to elaborate a strategy for preventing disinformation campaigns discrediting its role as an impartial mediator.

To the EU and NATO:

1. With a view to enhance continuous peace and prevent confrontation in the South Caucasus, in particular on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the temporary EU border-monitoring civilian mission should widen its scope and timeframe, investing in the EU's increased profile and credibility in the South Caucasus;
2. In line with the evaluation report of EU Support to Georgia in 2014-2020, the European Union in Georgia should enhance its assistance in line with six priority sectors, with a particular emphasis on justice, rule of law and democratic governance;
3. Georgia and Ukraine should be offered a Membership Action Plan by NATO replacing the current vague policy of "open doors". Such an approach would emphasize NATO's commitment to oversee reforms in Georgia. At the same time, this perspective would enhance the pace of military modernization which is of critical importance. Like the EU, NATO should take advantage of Russia's shrinking capacity to maintain leadership in the region and integrate itself as part of the security architecture in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region.

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