



POLICY BRIEF

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Current Challenges of Georgia-Ukraine Relations: Strategic Allies in a Spiral of Antagonism

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Executive Summary

Relations between Georgia and Ukraine, two countries that have long considered each other close strategic partners, are at a historic low. The period since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has been ongoing for over a year, has been the most challenging period in the history of bilateral relations between the two Black Sea states. There have been numerous disagreements between the two governments, revealing differences in ideology, values, foreign and security policy orientation, as well as a lack of mutual solidarity. As a result, since the outset of the full-scale invasion, already strained relations have been steadily deteriorating. The Georgian government has seemingly acted to spoil traditionally amicable ties, engaging in confrontational rhetoric and accusations against Ukraine. For its part, Ukraine expected a much clearer display of solidarity from the Georgian government and has resorted to radical responses to its actions.

A solution to the crisis in Georgia-Ukraine relations has yet to be found. Firm actions should be taken by the governments of both states to revitalize the strategic partnership and overcome

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bitter divisions. The Georgian government needs to strongly demonstrate its solidarity with Ukraine and refrain from divisive rhetoric, as Ukraine expects relations with Georgia to be based on reciprocity. In the current geopolitical circumstances, the strategic partnership between Ukraine and Georgia and close relations between the Ukrainian and Georgian peoples remain crucially important for the security of the Black Sea region.

Key words: Georgia, Ukraine, Georgia-Ukraine relations, European Union, Associated Trio, full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

Georgia and Ukraine are strategic partners connected by shared values, European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, geopolitical ties, relatively similar processes of democratic transformation, and a common adversary in the form of Russia. In recent years, however, relations between the two states have noticeably soured. After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the discord became particularly visible, and traditionally friendly ties are steadily deteriorating in a spiral of antagonism and political rivalry. Despite voicing support for Ukraine on various international platforms, the current Georgian government has adopted an ambiguous stance towards Russia, thereby undermining trust between the two countries. This situation raises pertinent questions about the potential long-term consequences of the divide between the strategic partners.

This policy brief evaluates the current state of Georgia-Ukraine relations, analyzing their dynamics and the main points of contention therein. Special attention is paid to developments since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has been the most difficult period in the history of Georgia-Ukraine relations. The relevance of the issue of European integration in bilateral relations is analyzed separately. The policy brief lays out recommendations for the governments of both states on how to tackle the problem.

Georgia-Ukraine Relations: Determinants of Cooperation and Main Challenges

Traditionally, Ukraine and Georgia have boasted strong and amicable relations. Their common experience of post-communist transformation and democratic revolutions prompted Ukraine and Georgia to develop their political relations in tandem (Shelest 2013). Value-based factors such as a strong sense of national self-determination, shared democratic values, and European Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations have served as significant determinants of their cooperation.

The two countries' alignment also stems from common security challenges. Both Ukraine and Georgia have been direct victims of Russian aggression and territorial conquest. Russia's strategy towards both countries bears striking similarities, defining Russia's role as the main security threat to both countries and solidifying their common resolve in attaining Euro-Atlantic integration. Broader geopolitical factors also feature in Georgia-Ukraine relations, given the countries' access to the Black Sea. Black Sea cooperation strengthens security in the region and helps Georgia to develop economic and political ties with the Euro-Atlantic space.

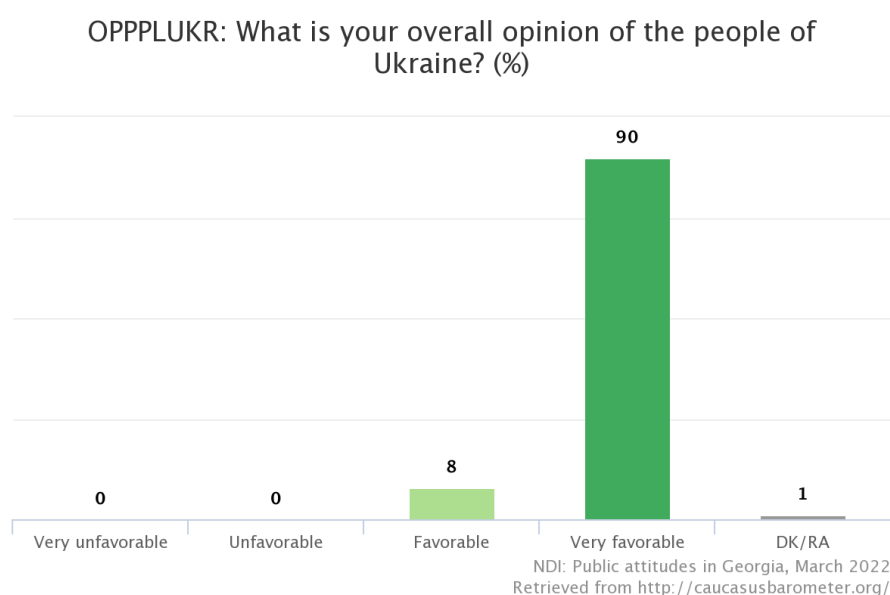
One of the main challenges for the Georgia-Ukraine partnership is an overreliance on personalities in power and high-level contacts between political elites. The period of closest affinity and dynamic relations between the states occurred in the 2000s, under the presidencies of Mikheil Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko. A strategic partnership between Georgia and Ukraine started to emerge, linking both countries with common goals of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Saakashvili's government was perceived positively in Ukraine as a government of modernizing reformers, and the perceived success of many of these reforms served to show that an effective fight against corruption in a post-Soviet country is possible. The Georgian example thereby became a catalyst for the Ukrainian democratic movement (Hayday 2016). As a result, strong bonds between the former president's United National Movement (UNM) party and the pro-Western camp of Ukrainian politicians were created (Kakachia 2014).

From the perspective of the Georgian Dream (GD) government, the involvement of their main political opponents from the UNM in the internal politics of Ukraine, among them Saakashvili himself, was the main bone of contention in the countries' bilateral ties. Granting Saakashvili citizenship and the position of governor of Odesa Oblast irritated the GD government, while the Ukrainian government maintained that the issue should be viewed outside the framework

of bilateral relations (Hayday 2016). This so-called “Saakashvili factor” became a major disrupting element in Georgia-Ukraine relations.

At the same time, the GD government adopted a “non-irritation” policy towards Russia, which translated to a more restrained and conciliatory approach towards Russia, refraining from confrontational rhetoric and concentrating on economic issues. Despite the Georgian government’s continuous support of Ukraine on international platforms, this policy led to distrust in Ukraine, which became suspicious of its long-term effects (Hayday 2016). Thus, Georgia-Ukraine relations became strained to a degree.

Regardless of the varying nature of the bilateral relationship between the two governments, the societies of both countries have highly positive perceptions of one another. This is evidenced by Georgians’ overwhelming support for Ukraine during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, with an impressive majority of 88% supporting Ukraine (Civil Georgia 2022a). Ukrainian volunteers fought for Georgia in the war in Abkhazia, while Georgian volunteers have been fighting for Ukraine since 2014, forming the largest group of foreign fighters (Kvakhadze 2022). For Georgians, Ukraine’s resistance resonates with their own struggle against Russian aggression (Kakachia 2017). A Ukrainian victory could mean an opportunity for Georgia to restore its territorial integrity and bring justice against the Russian aggressor. A positive opinion of Georgians about Ukrainians is evidenced in the March 2022 National Democratic Institute public attitudes survey.



Source: National Democratic Institute, 31 July 2023, <https://caucasusbarometer.org>

The Full-scale Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Bilateral Relations

Relations between Georgia and Ukraine have drastically deteriorated since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Instead of using the opportunity to restore strong ties through rhetorical and practical support to Ukraine, the GD government's ambiguous position on Russian aggression has exacerbated the discord between Ukraine and Georgia and spiraled tensions to levels previously unknown. From the Ukrainian perspective, the strategic partnership with Georgia has become severely damaged.

The Georgian government's stance is marked by a limited display of solidarity, confrontational rhetoric, and frequent accusations against Ukraine. Leading figures within the GD have made numerous ambiguous comments about Ukraine, on occasion going as far as to suggest that Ukraine may be party at fault for the war (Civil Georgia 2023a). The GD government's ambiguous position can be explained by its belief that, given Georgia's position outside NATO's security umbrella, appeasement of Russia is the best way to guarantee Georgia's security. For Ukraine, however, Georgia's behaviour undermines the strategic partnership between the states.

The friction between Ukraine and Georgia became apparent shortly after Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili stated that Georgia did not plan to impose sanctions against Russia, referring to Georgia's national interests and citing potential negative economic consequences for Georgia (Civil Georgia 2022b). Additionally, he dismissed the idea of visiting Ukraine. Such a stance differs markedly from the position taken by Ukraine in August 2008, when then-President Yushchenko visited Tbilisi amidst the Russian invasion. The only high-profile Georgian official visit to Ukraine during the full-scale invasion came in April 2022, when a parliamentary delegation visited the sites of Russian war crimes in Kyiv Oblast, albeit preceded by a heated exchange between the Georgian and Ukrainian Parliament speakers, Shalva Papuashvili and Ruslan Stefanчук (Civil Georgia 2022c).

Furthermore, the GD government blocked a Ukraine-bound charter flight designated for Georgian volunteers traveling to fight for Ukraine, arguing that allowing the flight to depart would imply the direct engagement of Georgia in the war (Agenda Georgia 2022). President Zelensky reciprocated by recalling Ukraine's ambassador from Georgia as a response to "obstructing volunteers" and Georgia's "immoral position on sanctions" (Yevropeyska Pravda

2022). This reaction indicates that Ukraine had higher expectations for support from its strategic partner (Samkharadze 2022).

The GD's rhetoric often raises the concern that Georgia might become involved in the military conflict. The close relationship between senior figures in the Ukrainian government and the Georgian opposition UNM party has often been highlighted by GD officials. This has culminated in the conspiracy theory, often repeated by senior GD figures, which claims that the UNM, the Ukrainian government and unnamed Western leaders – the alleged “global party of war” – are collectively attempting to drag Georgia into the war as a so-called “second front” against Russia. A statement of that kind has been made by a Ukrainian official only once, when in March 2022, Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, said that if “second fronts” were opened against Russia, it would help Ukraine, mentioning Georgia, Moldova, Poland, and Japan as potential locations (Ukrayinska Pravda 2022). The comment did not prompt any reaction from other Ukrainian officials, despite it being seen as insensitive towards Georgians who have endured devastating wars in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Nevertheless, no Western or Ukrainian leader has called on Georgia to open a “second front”. As such, the GD's narrative has been exaggerated for internal political purposes in order to present the GD government as a guarantor of Georgia's stability and peace.

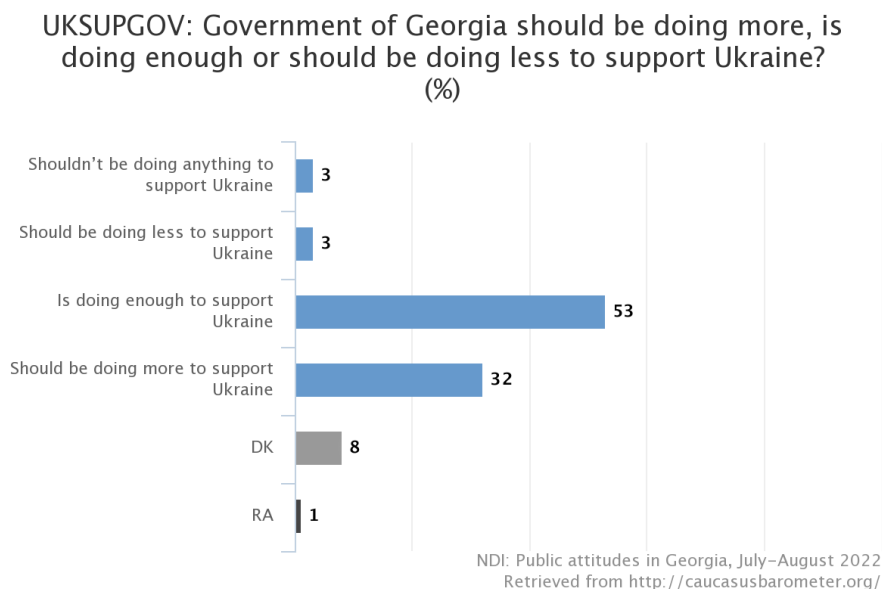
Georgia's growing economic ties with Russia are a major point of concern for Ukraine. Since the full-scale Russian invasion, Georgia has increased its trade flow with Russia, with imports from this country soaring by 79% in 2022 (Civil Georgia 2023b). Ukraine, troubled by Georgia's activities, has accused the Georgian government of assisting Russia in evading sanctions (Civil Georgia 2022d). From Ukraine's perspective, any state engaged in economic activity with Russia risks boosting Russia's ability to evade sanctions and sustain its military efforts. Thus, Georgian economic ties with Russia are not perceived to be merely an internal affair of Georgia. A particularly alarming example in this regard is Georgia's decision to renew direct flights with Russia, including by companies sanctioned by Ukraine for operating flights to temporarily occupied Crimea (Yevropeyska Pravda 2023). In response, Georgia's flagship carrier Georgian Airways was sanctioned by Ukraine for providing Russians with transit flights to Europe (Civil Georgia 2023c).

Another contentious issue is military aid. Georgia rejected Ukraine's plea to transfer Buk missile system and Javelin anti-tank systems in its arsenal, citing concerns about its defensive capabilities and potential threats to its security (Radio Svoboda 2023). In Ukraine, the Georgian government's decision was perceived as a lack of solidarity and contrary to the principle of

reciprocity, given that Ukraine provided Georgia with the Buk to defend itself during the Russian invasion of 2008 (Kakachia 2017).

A new round of escalation in Georgia-Ukraine relations occurred in July 2023 over Georgia's treatment of convicted ex-president and Ukrainian citizen Mikheil Saakashvili. Footage showing his deteriorating health condition triggered a sharp rise in tensions, with Ukrainian President Zelensky urging the Georgian government to transfer Saakashvili to Ukraine and requesting the Georgian ambassador's departure from Ukraine (Civil Georgia 2023d). The severity of the Ukrainian response indicates that the Ukrainian government has become entrenched in its position that normalization of Ukraine-Georgia relations is impossible while the GD is in power.

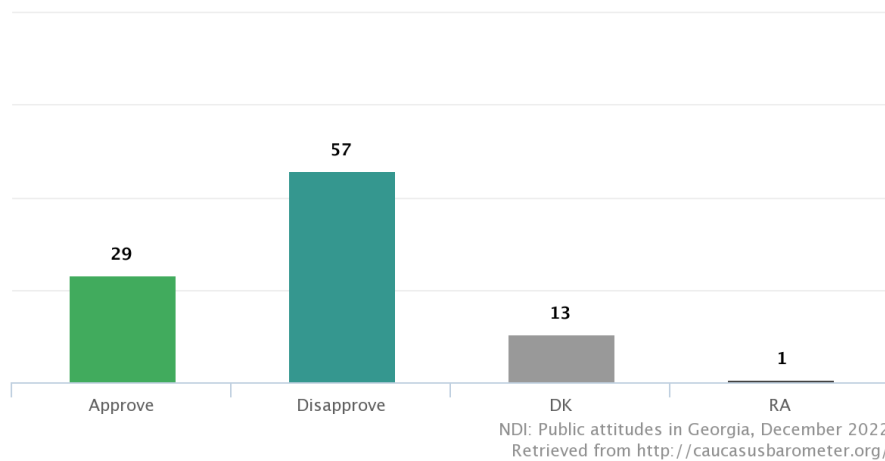
Despite bitter disagreements, the Georgian government has taken a pro-Ukrainian position on international platforms. For example, Georgia has supported UN resolutions condemning Russia's illegal attempts to annex Ukrainian territories and calling for it to withdraw its troops (Civil Georgia 2022e). Georgia also voted for the suspension of Russia's membership of the UN Human Rights Council (Civil Georgia 2022f). Moreover, Georgia actively provides humanitarian assistance and hosts Ukrainian refugees. As to the opinion of the Georgian society on their government's policy towards Ukraine is split, with over a third of the population believing it should be doing more to support Ukraine, according to the March 2022 National Democratic Institute public attitudes survey.



Source: National Democratic Institute, 31 July 2023, <https://caucasusbarometer.org>.

At the same time, the Georgian society is generally critical of their government's treatment of the incoming Russian citizens, with 57% of the population disapproving of the Georgian government's approach and 69% supporting the introduction of the visa regime for Russian citizens, according to the December 2022 National Democratic Institute public opinion survey.

APGOVARS: Do you approve or disapprove of the Georgian authorities' approach regarding Russians entering Georgia? (%)



Source: National Democratic Institute, 31 July 2023, <https://caucasusbarometer.org>.

In conclusion, the key clash points between Ukraine and Georgia are the Georgian government's confrontational rhetoric, refusal to assist militarily, growing economic ties with Russia, and Ukraine's insensitive comments about Georgia's policy towards its temporarily occupied territories. These disagreements have caused substantial damage to bilateral relations. The potential outcome of this dynamic for Georgia is losing a committed ally and falling into the Russian and wider anti-Western orbit. Nevertheless, Ukraine is still interested in developing strong ties with Georgia, considering the traditionally friendly relationship and its geopolitical importance. However, it seems that the Ukrainian government is unlikely to cooperate with the GD government, given the current lack of trust and curtailed diplomatic ties.

European Integration of the Associated Trio

Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova make up the Associated Trio (A3) – a formalized trilateral format of enhanced cooperation, directed at coordinating their shared goal of European integration. Despite relatively active cooperation, the format failed to institutionalize meaningful engagement between the parties. For example, it did not include provisions for a deep free trade regime among the A3 members (Gogolashvili 2021).

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine altered the dynamics of A3 cooperation, prompting Ukraine to formally apply for EU membership, followed by Georgia and Moldova soon afterwards. In June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while Georgia had its European perspective legally confirmed. The political decision to not grant Georgia candidate status was influenced by concerns about Georgia’s democratic backsliding, effectively splitting the A3 into different European integration tracks.

The decision was preceded by several comments by Prime Minister Gharibashvili, who stated that Georgia deserved to receive candidate status more than Ukraine and Moldova, adding further that not granting candidate status to Georgia was a punishment “for not being at war” (Civil Georgia 2022g). These remarks were perceived as insensitive and obstructive to the prospects of Ukraine-Georgia reconciliation, especially considering the fact that Ukraine’s resistance to Russian aggression prompted the EU to adopt a more positive stance on potential future EU membership for the A3 countries, including Georgia. The division of the A3 into candidate states Ukraine and Moldova and non-candidate Georgia, coupled with disagreements between the Georgian and Ukrainian governments, has weakened the unity between the A3 states in their European integration.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Relations between Ukraine and Georgia are at a historic low. While the countries have had disagreements in recent years, the full-scale Russian invasion has worsened the situation dramatically. Prior to the invasion, there had already been two main sources of contention between the two countries. Firstly, Ukraine’s leadership had strong ties to the Georgian opposition, which led to a lack of sensitivity towards Georgia’s internal political context. Secondly, the Georgian government had developed a more conciliatory stance towards Russia.

Currently, the GD government is perceived as the primary disruptor of Georgia-Ukraine relations. The Georgian government's position on Russian aggression has undermined the value-based character of Georgia-Ukraine relations and the strategic partnership between the states. During the full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine has been forced to adopt different styles of diplomacy to limit Russia's political and economic strength. Georgia, having chosen a confrontational attitude in response and accusing Ukraine of hostile actions, has only exacerbated growing tensions. Furthermore, Georgia's recent distancing from Ukraine has reduced the appeal of a shared European integration path. Trust between Ukraine and Georgia has also suffered as a result of the GD government's position. If the Georgian government continues to increase its ties with Russia and act in ways that further antagonize Ukraine, it may be difficult to reverse the negative trend.

Nevertheless, maintaining amicable relations between Ukrainian and Georgian societies should be strongly prioritised, as it is only Russia who benefits from discord between the strategic partners. Both states should strive to find a way to overcome current tensions, considering shared values and the invariable geopolitical relevance of the strategic partnership. To achieve normalization, several recommendations should be considered.

For the Georgian government:

- To unambiguously display **solidarity with Ukraine**. This implies that Georgia should refrain from unsubstantiated accusations and insensitive comments towards Ukraine, and demonstrate a willingness to engage constructively in direct high-level contacts. A high-level visit to Ukraine would be of great significance in this regard.
- To improve clarity in communication concerning the issues of **sanctions** and **military aid**. This requires clear and direct communication about the risks to Georgia's security and economy that may arise from the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions or the transfer of military equipment.
- To hold meaningful discussions about measures available for Georgia to assist Ukraine. Strengthening mechanisms to prevent Russia from evading sanctions and developing effective communication lines to address this issue are crucial.
- To examine options for **diversifying Georgia's trade** connections and **reducing economic reliance on Russia**. Demonstrating interest in expanding economic cooperation with Ukraine would serve as a serious display of Georgia's intent to strengthen the bilateral relationship.
- To demonstrate a willingness to **revitalize the Associated Trio format** and utilise it to enhance cooperation and achieve closer economic and political integration

- To boost participation in multilateral initiatives with Ukraine and other strategically important countries. Georgia should consider taking an interest in **the Three Seas Initiative** and creating new cooperation frameworks in the Black Sea region, as well as with the Ukraine-Poland-Baltic axis. Closer cooperation between the Black Sea states will increase interconnectivity and strengthen regional security.

For the Ukrainian government:

- To consider **reappointing an ambassador to Georgia**. The absence of a diplomatic mission head limits contacts between Georgian political actors and Ukrainian diplomats.
- To issue statements only through authorised channels, considering potential threats to Georgia's security and the sensitivity of Georgia's internal and regional political environment.
- To reconsider its approach towards military aid from Georgia, refraining from making such requests, given Georgia's lack of NATO's security umbrella.
- To **depersonalise bilateral relations**, concentrating on institutionalized international cooperation.
- To clearly state **unwavering support for Georgia's EU and NATO accession**.
- To promote and encourage cooperation between Ukrainian and Georgian civil societies.

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