

**Georgia at a Crossroads:
Balancing Western Aspirations, Russian Influences & Internal Divisions**

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Abstract

This research examines Georgia's interest in European Union and NATO membership and evaluates potential routes for ensuring progress and security while reducing Russia's residual post-Soviet influence. While much available scholarship focuses on the prospects of Georgia's formal integration into the Western sphere, there is far less scholarship explicitly discussing Georgia's potential future without accession to the EU or NATO or emphasizing the significance of the EU and NATO programs with which it already cooperates. Scholarly sources, original scholar interviews and primary-source materials are synthesized in this research to reveal the complexity of Russo-Georgian relations. Russia influences not only the national security and political spheres, but also popular discourse about national identity and the Georgian Orthodox Church. In this research I argue that official membership in either the EU or NATO will not be beneficial for Georgia because of the escalated risk of conflict with Russia. Nevertheless, Georgia is committed to cooperating with the EU and NATO, and these organizations are committed to supporting Georgia's security, democracy and economy. I conclude that Georgia can leverage its own geostrategic value to engage diverse partners for economic cooperation, democratic development and security alliances, promoting a future that does not rely on EU and NATO membership and reflects the will of the Georgian people.



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Introduction

The nearly three decades since Georgia's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union have been a formidable challenge to stability and security and an unparalleled opportunity for change. Since 1991 this South Caucasus state has worked to redefine itself in the post-Soviet world. In the 1990s, rapid economic decline, ineffective governance and civil strife put the country on the verge of collapse (Kalichava 2018, 197-198). Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, political rhetoric in independent Georgia has formally focused on accession to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). European integration is considered a path to stronger democratic institutions, social liberalization and economic prosperity (Hudson 2019, 187). Georgian leadership promotes a narrative of Europeanness as the basis of its "European Project," which aims for integration in the EU and NATO. However, sustained challenges to integration, particularly Russia's lingering influence in Georgia, have stalled Georgia's "European Project." Russia's formal recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war indicates that European integration would have significant consequences for Georgia. Russia's recognition of these separatist territories led Georgia and Russia to sever diplomatic ties (Hudson 2019, 191). Amid the political tensions that define Russo-Georgian relations, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) has remained remarkably close to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), revealing sociocultural tensions within Georgian society. Geopolitical flashpoints such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the condition of Russo-Georgian relations and the integrity of domestic Georgian politics remain key determinants of Georgia's future trajectory. In this paper, I will argue that Georgia's extensive cooperation with the EU to strengthen its democracy and economy and contributions to NATO security operations indicate that Georgia is already well-integrated into the Western sphere, albeit not through formal membership. Despite steadfast public support for European integration, Russian interests and interference signal that Georgia's accession to the EU or NATO will not occur in the near future. Even without membership in the EU and NATO, Georgia's geostrategic value facilitates trade with a variety of regions, meaning it has no lack of opportunities for diverse investment in its economy, security and democracy.

The paper will begin with a literature review and explanation of research methods, written in Russian. I will then explain the history of Russo-Georgian relations, analyzing the importance of Georgia's cultural and historical claims of Europeanness and resistance to Russian occupation to the development of its contemporary national identity and "European Project." The paper will also examine the tensions between Georgian Orthodox traditions and Westernized cultural values, which are visible in the Georgian Orthodox Church's (GOC) simultaneous condemnation of liberalized Western society and lack of vocal opposition to EU integration. The following section examines post-independence political developments in Georgia, emphasizing the weakness of Georgian democratic institutions and juxtaposing their weakness with the strength of Georgian civil engagement, which manifests in political protests. The next section surveys Georgia's foreign policy priorities and the limitations imposed on Georgia's security aspirations by Russian influences. Finally, the paper assesses the influence of Georgia's "European Project" and European identity on its international economic cooperation.

Literature Review & Research Methods / Обзор литературы и методы исследования

Введение целей исследования

Целью исследования является выявление того, как независимая Грузия умеет гарантировать свой суверенитет и обезопасить своё будущее кроме интеграции в

Европейский союз (ЕС) и НАТО. Существуют некоторые задачи, которые необходимо выполнить для достижения данной цели. Во-первых, нужно учитывать значение грузинской истории и культуры в современном мире и влияние на страну включения в Советский союз до настоящего момента. Во-вторых, важно понять, зачем Грузия хочет стать участником этих организаций. Страна преследует цель интеграции через некоторые меры, включая «Европейский проект». В-третьих, необходимо отметить важность геополитических интересов во внешней политике Грузии, например, она находится к югу от России и имеет порты на берегу Черного моря. Главнее всего обязательно уделить особое внимание грузинско-российским отношениям и внешнеполитическим интересам Российской Федерации в Абхазии и Южной Осетии. В исследовании анализируется явление грузинского «Европейского проекта» в контексте культуры, истории, внутренней и внешней политики, экономики и международной безопасности.

Обзор литературы

Этот обзор рассматривает пригодные для выполнения цели исследования академические ресурсы. В нем подчеркивается отсутствие ресурсов, учитывающих другие пути вперед для Грузии, кроме европейской интеграции. Роль исследования — восполнить недостаток статей и книг, противопоставить речи о «Европейском проекте» в академии и новостях. Дополнительные ресурсы, исключённые из обзора литературы, можно найти в списке используемой литературы.

Существуют некоторые ресурсы, в которых обращается особое внимание на культурный и исторический аспект желания Грузии вступить в ЕС и НАТО. В таких статьях показывается роль «европейской» идентичности в подготовке Грузии к интеграции. Челидзе (2014) отмечает важность грузинской идентичности в «Европейском проекте», уделяя особое внимание постсоветской перестройке. Харрис-Брантс (2018) связывает архитектурные изменения с грузинской посткоммунистической идентичностью. В статье анализируется влияние «Европейского проекта» на город Батуми и рассматриваются связи между целью европейской интеграции и международным туризмом в Грузию. Сторм (2019), добавляя в эту дискуссию об идентичности и архитектуре, подчеркивает изменение архитектурного образа в грузинских городах при Президенте Саакашвили. Точка зрения двух статей уделяет особое внимание роли архитектуры и политики в перестройке грузинской идентичности для «Европейского проекта». Китаевич (2014) объясняет роль идентичности и политики в грузинском государственном образовании, подчеркивая множество точек зрения о советском наследии, влияющем на грузинское общество и политику до сих пор. Точка зрения государственных преподавателей вообще зависит от их возраста и опыта воспитания в разные периоды СССР. Включенные в этой литературе точки зрения о роли идентичности в грузинском обществе являются основой исследования, потому что формируют базу для понимания грузинской мотивации для интеграции в европейские организации.

В связи с тем, что идентичность играет роль в «Европейском проекте», в других ресурсах речь идет о роли грузинской европейской идентичности в безопасности и политике. Самой важной темой является интеграция в ЕС и НАТО во многих академических работах о безопасности и политике. Фишер (2009) обсуждает контекст грузинско-российской войны 2008 года в более широком черноморском регионе, учитывая роль политики, безопасности и национализма в отношениях между странами региона. В статье объясняется, что Грузия отличается от других стран региона, потому что в ее

политике сотрудничество с Европейским партнерством и НАТО является приоритетом. Герман (2015) детально описывает и анализирует историческую и культурную базу грузинской цели европейской интеграции. В главе книги подчеркивается, что Россия до сих пор считает Грузию частью своей зоны национального интереса¹, препятствуя возможностям европейской интеграции для Грузии. Доббинс (2014) принимает во внимание выводы Революции роз 2003 года, отмечая важность реформ революции для результатов выборов 2012 года. В статье объясняется, что Президент Саакашвили неправильно интерпретировал западную демократию, поэтому реформы не были такими успешными, как многие считают. Айвазян (2018) рассматривает политические сдвиги в грузинской политике в последнее десятилетие, уделяя особое внимание президентским выборам 2018 года. В статье анализируются потенциальные риски начинающейся в 2020 году избирательной реформы, которая поменяет систему на парламентскую форму выборов. Кайль (2019) фокусируется на влиянии России на Грузию. В статье учитываются риски интеграции в НАТО для Грузии и для всего альянса и подчеркиваются экономическая и политическая сила российской нефтяной промышленности на европейском рынке и постоянство вопроса Абхазии и Южной Осетии в грузинско-российских отношениях. В этих ресурсах видно, что грузинско-российские отношения играют большую роль в вопросе европейской интеграции.

Другие материалы останавливаются на экономическом развитии Грузии. Авторы таких статей подчеркивают роль «Европейского проекта» в экономическом развитии и возможность экономического сотрудничества между Грузией и другими странами, например, Ираном и Китаем. Как указано выше, Харрис-Брантс (2018) и Сторм (2019) рассматривают роль целей «Европейского проекта» в архитектуре грузинских городов, которая поддерживает развитие международного туризма. Туризм является одной из самых важных индустрий в современной грузинской экономике. Лаврелашвили (2016) анализирует экономические выгоды и геополитические риски транзита нефти из Ирана в страны ЕС через Грузию. В отчете аргументируется, что интеграция Грузии в ЕС и НАТО могла бы усложнить региональную безопасность, поэтому Грузия должна балансировать между своим интересом² в интеграции и экономическими возможностями, существующими за пределами Европы. Забахидзе (2017) объясняет грузинскую политику по отношению к китайской инициативе, называемой «Один пояс, один путь», и дает некоторые политические рекомендации по ожидаемому расширению сотрудничества между Грузией и Китаем. В отчете представляется точка зрения на жизнеспособную возможность грузинского экономического развития без официального членства в ЕС. Литература, в которой рассматривается экономика, учитывает не только преимущества и риски европейской интеграции, но и другие варианты для международного сотрудничества и развития Грузии.

Важно отметить, что точка зрения автора обычно зависит от его происхождения. Например, авторы из Европы и США обычно считают Россию агрессивной и хотят защищать Грузию от российской агрессии или отмечают важность грузинской европейской идентичности (Кайл 2019; FPRI 2019; Кон 2016, Фишер 2009; Герман 2015). Русскоговорящие авторы более критически относятся к американским и европейским инициативам в Грузии и западному участию в грузинско-российских отношениях

¹ Зона национального интереса называется «zone of privileged interest» на английском.

² Интерес в этом контексте означает национальную безопасность, называемую по-английски «security interests».

(Каличава 2018; Сучков 2011). Грузинские авторы более целостно обсуждают вопросы грузинского будущего, рассматривая не только политику и военную способность, но и ценность грузинской истории и геополитического положения для развития страны (Забахидзе 2017; Лаврелашвили 2016; Челидзе 2014). Несмотря на разницу между точками зрения российских, грузинских и западных авторов, в большинстве этих ресурсов обсуждаются следующие темы: необходимость НАТО и ЕС для будущего Грузии и важность европейской идентичности в грузинской истории и культуры для выполнения интеграции. Это исследование противоречит чрезвычайной важности интеграции для безопасности грузинского будущего, и, наоборот, отмечает риски и сложность интеграции. Оно рассматривает силу существующих в настоящее время отношений между ЕС и Грузией для поддержки грузинской демократии и множество недоиспользуемых возможностей экономического сотрудничества со странами от Азии до Европы. Несмотря на то, что Европейский союз и НАТО продолжают играть важную роль в демократическом и цивилизованном общественном развитии, уровень рисков интеграции указывает, что тотальная официальная интеграция в экономику ЕС и военный альянс НАТО невозможна.

Методы исследования

Процесс исследования для этой курсовой работы состоит из трех частей. Во-первых, в исследовании включается обзор академической литературы по темам безопасности, постсоветских исследований, политической науки и международных отношений. Большинство использованных в работе материалов написаны на английском языке, но список литературы также включает некоторые ресурсы на русском. Роли всех ресурсов уже описались в обзоре литературы.

Во-вторых, исследование в Тбилиси в январе 2020 года способствовало этому проекту. При финансовой поддержке Фонда Уиллиама и Элке Дурдена для международного исследования в Дикинсон Колледже, мы с коллегой получили грант на неделю исследования в Грузии. Благодаря гранту фонда стало возможным поехать в Грузию, чтобы посетить важные места, например, Парламент Грузии и Государственный музей Грузии. Эта часть исследования помогла развить работу с точки зрения того, что в Тбилиси можно было самым наблюдать отношение народа к России и Европе.

В-третьих, некоторые эксперты дали интервью этому проекту, поддерживая и усложняя выводы, сформированные из обзора печатных ресурсов и проведенного в Грузии исследования. В январе 2020 года в Тбилиси Д-р. Георгий Хиштовани, директор исследования в Центре исследования РМСГ, дал интервью. В интервью рассматриваются экономические перспективы европейской интеграции и сотрудничества с Ираном и Китаем. Более того, он объяснил народное мнение и остановился на различии между мечтой и реальностью интеграции. Позже, в феврале 2020 года, Д-р. Роберт Хамилтон, профессор национальной безопасности и военной стратегии в Военном колледже армии США в Карлайле (Пенсильвания) и сотрудник Исследовательского института внешней политики (FPRI) в Филадельфии, дал интервью в Дикинсон Колледже. Так как его специальностью являются безопасность и внешняя политика Грузии, на интервью шла речь об отношениях между Россией и странами НАТО, Россией и Грузией и о возможности интеграции в ЕС и НАТО для Грузии. По рекомендации Д-р. Хамилтона Майя Отарашвили, заместитель директора Евразийской программы и исследователь FPRI в Филадельфии, дала интервью по Скайпу в апреле. В интервью отмечается важность тенденции к авторитаризму в

современной грузинской политике.³ В мае Д-р Васили Рухадзе, профессор факультета Политической науки в Университете Питтсбурга, дал интервью по телефону и комментировал работу на конференции Университета Питтсбурга. Моей курсовой работе значительно помогли проведенное в Грузии исследование и четыре интервью. Данные в интервью комментарии очень поддержали развитие темы и выводов исследования.

В дополнение к помощи вышеуказанных экспертов, некоторые профессора и сверстники в Дикинсон Колледже поддерживали процесс исследования, написания и редактирования. Профессор Алиса ДеБласио, профессор и глава факультета Русского языка и литературы, курировала весь процесс, включая поддержку написания гранта для исследования в Грузии. Профессор Давид Комминс, профессор факультета Исследований Ближнего Востока, и Профессор Елена Дуж, профессор факультета Русского языка и литературы, редактировали и комментировали полный черновой вариант текста. Елизавета Прайс и Диана Золкина, студенты-сверстники, внимательно поддерживали редактирование части на английском и на русском соответственно.

Between Soviet Legacy & Russian Influence

When examining political rhetoric in conversation among Georgians, in museums and on city tours, narratives about the Soviet Union “occupying” Georgia are explicit. Russian influence has a significant legacy in Georgia that transcends the national security field and formal political discourse into daily life, and resistance against Russia has become a source of pride in the Georgian national identity. Whereas the general nomenclature explains that countries were “part” of the Soviet Union, Georgia is adamant that it was “occupied.” Likewise, Georgian state institutions are adamant that it “regained” independence from Russia in 1991, emphasizing its period of independence from 1918 to 1921 (See Figure 1). According to the Georgian National Museum’s Soviet occupation exhibition the total number of Georgian victims of the Soviet occupation was 880,000 people, including approximately 80,000 people shot dead, 400,000 deported and another approximately 400,000 who perished in World War II (See Figure 2). Georgians’ resistance to and protest against the Soviet Union are commemorated in Tbilisi. Monuments and plaques memorialize demonstrators killed while protesting Soviet power, honoring Georgian resistance against the Soviet Union and Russia. A monument in front of the Parliament of Georgia commemorates the victims killed by a Soviet crackdown on an anti-Soviet protest on April 9, 1989 (See Figure 3). One block down the street from the Parliament, a plaque commemorates a similar event on March 9, 1956 (See Figure 4). In addition to these formal references to Soviet aggression, posters, bumper stickers, graffiti and other informal graphics protest Russia’s current “occupation” of “20%” of Georgia, referring to the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (See Figure 5). Georgians not supportive of these separatist movements fled these territories, and some were able to secure housing in refugee camps, while others live in abandoned apartment buildings in Tbilisi (See Figure 6). Tensions surrounding the role of Russia in this domestic issue contribute to Georgia’s narrative of Russian Imperial and Soviet domination, of which it considers Russian involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be a continuation.

Pivoting to Europe

Georgia’s pro-European aspirations emerged in a context of social, economic and political tumult after the collapse of the Soviet system. These aspirations gained traction following key events, including the 2003 Rose Revolution, the 2008 war with Russia and the 2012 elections.

³ На английском языке такая идея называется «authoritarian backsliding».

These turning points are associated with political changes that formalized pro-European integration rhetoric, which the majority of Georgians support. Despite this clear vision, Georgia, as a post-Soviet country, still faces significant opposition from Russia in realizing its goals for European integration. Nevertheless, Georgia differentiates itself from its South Caucasus neighbors through a staunch commitment to a European future for its citizens (German 2015, 603). Post-Soviet leadership in Georgia continually pushes a narrative of Europeanness and reunion between Georgia and its European heritage. Georgian heritage is also an important part of this narrative, emphasizing closeness among Georgians based on the Georgian language, the GOC and shared territory (Storm 2019, 131).⁴ The country envisions a future defined by a pivot toward Europe and away from the Russian sphere, membership in the EU and NATO being foundational to this goal. Georgia's National Security Concept published in 2011 emphasizes that a "return to Europe" is a "natural" part of the country's post-Soviet development (German 2015, 608). The Western European democracies to which Georgia aspires, however, are predominantly Protestant or Catholic and are often secularized. In Georgia, the vast majority of the population is Orthodox Christian, and the GOC is closely connected to the state (Hudson 2019, 181). Moreover, the GOC is a core part of Georgian national identity, and more devout Georgians consider Western European culture to be a threat to Georgian traditional values (Hudson 2019, 186). Despite these differences, Georgia's cultural ties to Europe are generally accepted in the international community and support its "European Project."

Positioning Georgia on the path to membership in European organizations is, therefore, a calculated step in the country's post-independence transition and reconfiguration. Georgian Europeanness is neither frivolous nor artificial because the concept of Georgian Europeanness is just as much sociocultural as it is geopolitical. The extent of this commitment to Europe is readily visible in Georgia. The European Union flag flies alongside the Georgian flag in front of police stations, both rural and urban, as well as outside the Georgian Parliament building (See Figure 7). In this context, the EU flags symbolize Georgians' decision to commit to European organizations and Western civilization.⁵ They are, therefore, manifestations of political rhetoric, signaling disconnection from Georgia's Soviet past and affirming its goals for a European future. According to political leadership, forming Georgia's contemporary national identity and international role requires alignment with European Union and NATO member states in a clear rejection of lingering Russian military, political and cultural influence in the South Caucasus region and broader post-Soviet space.

Cultivating European Heritage

Georgian claims of European heritage and identity predate the modern period, tying the country to its Christian heritage. Christianity was adopted in Georgia in the fourth century CE and quickly became a driver for the formation of Georgian alliances (Coene 2016, 4; Kyle 2019, 237). In the seventh through ninth centuries, the Byzantine Empire was an essential ally of the Georgians, helping them to regain independence from Arab invaders. With continued Byzantine support, the Georgians repelled an invasion by the Seljuk Empire around the year 1000 and expanded their territory until the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century (Coene 2016, 4). From this point forward, Georgians built connections with Latin Christian states in Europe, especially for trading purposes, while simultaneously and precariously maintaining relations with both the Ottoman and Persian Empires (Coene 2016, 4-5). Though Georgia has been distinctly Christian

⁴ Maia Otashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

⁵ Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020.

for over 1500 years, it was not only focused on cultivating connections with Latin Christian European entities. Rather, Georgia cooperated with a variety of foreign entities, both Eastern and Western, based on the relevance of threats imposed by external forces, until it was incorporated into the Russian Empire.

Prior to the nineteenth century, Georgians' interest in the Latin Christian West was largely peripheral, as their foreign policy was preoccupied with immediate neighbors: Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Georgia became a Russian protectorate in the mid-eighteenth century and was then unilaterally annexed into the Russian Empire in 1801 (Kyle 2019, 237). It was the Europeanization of the Russian Empire, based on Western European intellectual thought, that drove Georgia's interest in European-style statehood and Enlightenment ideals. Europeanization affected more than just ethnic Russians living in the Russian Empire; thus, Georgians living within the Empire, alongside Russians, were freed from serfdom and exposed to European education, ideas of the nation state and Enlightenment ideals. Georgians living within the Russian Empire joined the intellectual elite both within Russia and back home in Georgia (Coene 2016, 6). Despite their interest in and integration of European intellectual works, Georgians generally considered Western Europeans unreliable and saw the Russian Empire as the most important European power of the time. Likewise, the Russian Empire was considered the main protector of Georgia against Ottoman and Persian threats (Coene 2016, 6). At this juncture, Russia was Georgia's main connection to Euro-Christian civilization, but continued Russian and Soviet domination encouraged Georgia's interest in closer relations with Western European states.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Georgia and the other South Caucasian principalities took advantage of Russian weakness to claim their independence as the Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia. Within a few weeks, the independent republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were formed. During World War I, Georgia cultivated greater connections with Western European countries in an attempt to fortify its independence. However, Georgia was only independent from 1918 until 1921, when a successful Bolshevik uprising ended Georgian independence and led to its incorporation into the Soviet Union (Coene 2016, 7; Kyle 2019, 237). Relations between the Russian Empire and Georgia would shape the tone of Russo-Georgian relations throughout the Soviet period. When Georgia regained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it experienced a challenge similar to that of the World War I era: it needed support from outside of the Russian sphere to guarantee its continued independence (Coene 2016, 9). Pride in the period of independence from 1918 to 1921 is an integral part of contemporary Georgia's national narrative, and, for that reason, Georgia considers itself to have regained independence from Russia in 1991 (Kyle 2019, 237; See Figure 8). Following independence in both 1918 and 1991, Georgia leveraged its Christian heritage, though Eastern Orthodox and not Western, when looking to the West for this assistance.

Georgia's Contemporary National Identity

Contemporary Georgia's political rhetoric holds that Georgia is naturally European, belongs to Western civilization and shares common values with Western democracies. It asserts that Georgia was cut off from its natural course of development by historical events, namely the conquests of Russian Imperial and Soviet occupation from the early nineteenth century to 1991 (German 2015, 613). Political leadership expresses pride in Georgia's past, citing the integrity of their language, territory and religion despite enduring threats from the Persians, Ottomans, Byzantines, Russians and Soviets (Storm 2019, 138).

While Georgia clearly exerts its European heritage in modern politics, the country also embraces its role as a crossroads between the civilizational concepts of “East” and “West.” The Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi features a quote from Noe Zhordania, head of the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, in 1921 saying,

“what do we offer to the cultural treasure of European nations? — [our] two-thousand-year-old national culture, democratic system and natural wealth. Soviet Russia offered us military alliance, which we rejected... They are heading for the East and we, for the West... we would like to yell at Russian Bolsheviks: turn to the West to make a contemporary European nation...” (See Figure 9)

Similar narratives of Georgia’s enduring cultural heritage and resistance to occupation exist in contemporary social and political rhetoric. For example, the European Union supported an exhibit at the Georgian National Museum as part of the European Year of Cultural Heritage in 2018. Plaques at the entrance described Georgia and the Caucasus as “a bridge between Near East and Europe” responsible for the spread of technology and culture between these regions (See Figure 10). Likewise, another plaque in the museum describes Georgia as being located “at the crossroad of cultures” (See Figure 11). Location, therefore, is an important consideration for Georgia not only culturally, but also economically and politically.

Georgian political rhetoric since 2003 reflects a formal commitment to gaining membership in the EU and NATO, and its affinity for the West over the Russian sphere of influence is founded not just upon cultural likeness but also upon a need for greater national security and a stable future. Despite strong cultural links to Europe, Georgia, like many other former Soviet countries, is considered by Russians to be behind Russia on a civilizational level, which is a key determinant of contemporary Georgian-Russian relations. The Baltic States’ perceived status as more European than even Russia decreases Russia’s interest in keeping Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in its sphere of influence, meaning they experience less interference in their relations with the EU and NATO. Sociocultural superiority, in this way, is used to justify Russia’s foreign policy toward Georgia and peer states, such as Ukraine or Moldova.⁶ Accordingly, immigrants from the South Caucasus living in the Russian Federation frequently face xenophobia or other discriminatory attitudes (BBC 2018).^{7:8} Russia has even manipulated visa regulations and delayed money transfers to hinder Georgian migrant workers (Kyle 2019, 240). Russia’s residual influence and threat to Georgian security are key obstacles to Georgia’s pursuit of EU and NATO membership. Accordingly, Russia is treated as a “threat to the very existence of the Georgian nation” in Georgia’s contemporary historical narrative (Kyle 2019, 237). Though Russian influence is the main factor preventing European integration, Georgia also struggles to develop effective civil society organizations and political institutions, which are essential to the Western democratic values championed by the EU and NATO.

Georgian Orthodoxy & Georgian Politics

Russian influence creates tensions in Georgian society not only in the political sphere, but also in the sociocultural sphere due to the ROC’s close ties to the GOC. Georgia’s Christian

⁶ Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020.

⁷ To read more about the experiences of Georgian immigrants in Russia, refer to report summary about second-generation immigrants from the South Caucasus in St. Petersburg from internet publication «Бумара» (“The Paper”) [Full report available in Russian only]. <https://paperpaper.ru/photos/v-90-e-gody-v-peterburg-massovo-priezzhal/>

⁸ Additional information about Russian reactions to Caucasian immigrations, also associated with the report, is available here: <https://paperpaper.ru/photos/kak-v-1990-e-gody-v-rossiyu-priehalo-pervoe-p/>

identity is a core element of its proclaimed Europeaness. Christianity was adopted in Georgia in the fourth century (Coene 2016, 4; Kyle 2019, 237). In the fifth century AD the Patriarchate of Antioch granted the GOC autocephaly, but this autonomy ended when Georgia was taken over by the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century. Tsar Alexander I abolished the GOC and made it an exarchate of the ROC in 1811 (Hudson 2019, 179). The GOC managed to reclaim its patriarchate in 1917, but it was controlled by the Soviet Union until 1991. As a result, the GOC underwent nearly two centuries of “Russification” (Hudson 2019, 180). Georgian Orthodoxy is a core pillar of contemporary Georgian national identity and has filled a sociopolitical and ideological vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Hudson 2018, 180).⁹ Reasserting the role of the GOC in Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union served as part of the country’s national narrative construction in support of its “European Project.”

Unlike in the Western European democracies to which Georgia aspires, the church and state are not separated in Georgia. The GOC has been involved in both Georgia’s domestic politics and foreign relations since the 1990s. In the post-Soviet period, politicians were baptized in the GOC and used religious rhetoric in their public statements. President Shevardnadze legally recognized the GOC, and Article 9 of the Constitution was amended in 1995 to recognize the GOC’s “special role” in Georgian national history (Hudson 2019, 180-181). In 2002, a Concordat was signed between the GOC and the state, recognizing the GOC’s autonomy and “exclusive status in Georgian history, culture and national ideology and among the traditional religions of Europe” (Hudson 2019, 181). The Concordat elevated the position of the GOC above other religious identities and connected its history to Georgian statehood.¹⁰ Patriarch Ilia began to participate in political processes and became a driver of social cohesion (Hudson 2019, 180). When Mikheil Saakashvili became president, he attempted to reduce the GOC’s power but quickly failed. Instead, he resorted to promoting an image of close relations with the GOC. He began to give the GOC approximately \$24 million annually, but his superficial support of the GOC was clear and likely contributed to his electoral loss in 2012.¹¹ In 2015, 91% of the Georgian population reported trust in the GOC, and the GOC continues to exert strong influence over societal opinions in Georgia, including cultural development and the population’s worldview. As a result, the GOC has become a key symbol of Georgia’s national identity, despite variance in actual religiosity among Georgians (Hudson 2019, 181). With its important role in Georgian national identity, the GOC serves Georgian society in roles that civil society organizations and government institutions have failed to fill.

The primacy of Georgian Orthodoxy in contemporary Georgian identity would suggest that the GOC would want independence from the Moscow Patriarchate of the ROC. Instead, the country’s most prominent religious figure, Patriarch Ilia, remains closely aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate (Hudson 2019, 183). Despite the GOC’s institutional independence from the Moscow Patriarchate, the ROC is known to sponsor religious programs in Georgia, and Patriarch Ilia often uses themes that some Georgians view as pro-Russian and anti-Western (Hudson 2019, 185). The Patriarch generally condemns “soulless” Western culture, criticizing it as materially rich but spiritually poor. He perceives EU and NATO membership as threats to Georgian religious and national ideology that would damage Georgian society (Hudson 2019, 186). Despite this opposition to Western European society, the Patriarch is unable to go against the public will, which

⁹ Maia Otashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

¹⁰ Dr. Vasili Rukhadze, phone interview by the author, 6 May 2020.

¹¹ Dr. Vasili Rukhadze, phone interview by the author, 6 May 2020.

generally supports EU and NATO membership as a path to social, political and cultural freedom and economic prosperity (Hudson 2019, 187).

In this sense, the GOC is both a conduit for Russian influence and an important channel for communication between Georgia and Russia in the absence of diplomatic relations since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 (Hudson 2019, 192). Despite the complicated and controversial role of the GOC in Georgian society and politics, Patriarch Ilia is frequently cited as the most-trusted figure in Georgia.¹² Low trust in Georgian democratic institutions has upheld the popularity of the GOC and Patriarch (Chelidze 2014, 125). Church-state relations in Georgia reveal a paradox between pro- and anti-Russian as well as pro- and anti-liberal democracy sentiments, which are only further complicated by politicians' connections to Russian power and wealth.

Democratic Values & Civil Society

Tensions between Georgian traditions and liberal Western democratic society carry over into democratic development, creating a lack of consensus about certain social issues, such as religious, ethnic and other minorities. The West considers its civil society concepts of democracy, individualism, and liberalism to be antithetical to Soviet society (Chelidze 2014, 116). Developing a Western-style civil society has been one of independent Georgia's key objectives and is an essential feature of cooperative initiatives between Georgia, the EU and the United States. Georgian civil society experienced a rebirth in the late 1980s when the Soviet policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* relaxed media control and new opportunities for public discourse emerged (Nodia 2005, 13). When Georgia gained independence from the USSR, European states and the U.S. were interested in promoting civil society in Georgia and other post-Soviet states. Funding from the West helped found thousands of civil society organizations by 1995 (Nodia 2005, 13-14). Leading up to the Rose Revolution, the increasingly-authoritarian Shevardnadze government made NGOs more politicized, with many operating in direct opposition to the government (Nodia 2005, 15). Though NGOs were initially politically independent, they have become increasingly politicized, out of touch and self-serving. As a result, public trust in these organizations, like in government institutions, is low.¹³ Developing and upholding this facet of democracy will be important for Georgia's democratic development, with or without EU membership (Fischer 2009, 338).

Despite the clear influence of the GOC in Georgian politics and its promotion of the hegemony of the Georgian ethnicity, the Tbilisi City Hall promotes a narrative of tolerance and religious and ethnic diversity as the result of various empires' influences on Georgia (Storm 2019, 138-139). In reality, Georgia has achieved limited improvement in societal relations with ethnic and religious minority groups living within the country, which impedes its civil society development. Inequality and discriminatory rhetoric are still prevalent issues in Georgian society in the last decade, yet these issues generally do not attract much of the public's interest (Chelidze 2014, 114). Likewise, the Georgian government promotes a concept of religious tolerance when addressing both domestic and foreign audiences, but the GOC promotes the primacy of Georgian ethnic and religious identity. Since the GOC has a very close relationship with the state, its involvement in government decision-making also prevents proper representation for minorities in politics and national identity (Storm 2019, 148). Nevertheless, Georgia has cooperated with the EU on a variety of democracy development initiatives, though mostly in support of national security or political issues, some in direct relation to Russian influence.

¹² Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

¹³ Dr. Vasili Rukhadze, phone interview by the author, 6 May 2020.

Since Georgia has initiated dialogue about accession to the EU and NATO, it has participated in various European initiatives. It is a member of the Eastern Partnership alongside Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. Through this program, Georgia has access to programs such as the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which seeks to promote discourse about the development of civil society and political plurality within these countries (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2016). Following the 2016 elections, the European Commission's Venice Commission led a review of the Constitution of the Republic of Georgia. The revised version of the Constitution, drafted in cooperation with the Venice Commission in 2017, clearly defines the Republic of Georgia as a democratic state. Article 3.1 states that "Georgia is a democratic republic" and Article 3.2 states that "people are the source of state authority" (Venice Commission 2017, 3). President Margvelashvili vetoed this revised version of the constitution, largely because it included a presidential election reform, which is a contentious topic in contemporary Georgian politics. His veto was overridden by a parliamentary vote (Ayvazyan 2018, 77). Georgia's successful cooperation with the Eastern Partnership and European Commission is testament to its commitment to advancing its civil society and democracy, though much of its cooperation aligns with EU and NATO membership preparedness, leaving other societal concerns unaddressed.

Despite cooperation with EU initiatives, the condition of democratic political institutions in Georgia limits the realization of a fully-developed Western-style civil society. In the last decade, the Georgian government has been increasingly intolerant of dissenting voices in the media, which in itself limits the strength of civil society. Political plurality is weak in Georgian democracy, and key issues such as electoral reform and Russian influences tend to occupy political protests. Highly-concentrated power and the overall weakening of democracy leave little room for dialogue about social issues such as minorities or societal liberalization. While Georgia does in fact have a rich history of religious and ethnic diversity, its political and social bandwidth is occupied by more existential concerns, especially relating to Russian encroachment. Moreover, the GOC's narrative promotes the idea that "to be Orthodox means to be Georgian," crowding out other identities (Hudson 2019, 181). The European narrative serves to maintain support from EU initiatives, but Georgia is not yet ready to commit to the level of equality and openness that characterizes many Western societies. In spite of these reservations and the institutional weakness of Georgian democracy, the public has shown steadfast commitment to citizen-driven political change, albeit with more interest in some issues than others.

Democratization & Authoritarian Tendencies

Transitioning from the Soviet system to an independent democracy proved a formidable challenge in Georgia, and the country has achieved a limited degree of success in advancing its democratic institutions. The unpredictability of Georgian government institutions' effectiveness raises concerns among Western countries because functional democratic governance is a central pillar of European values. In the post-Soviet period, Georgian leadership was not chosen by democratic elections, and the political space was destabilized by civil and ethnic conflicts in the 1990s. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia, was deposed in 1992 and replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, a former Soviet minister of foreign affairs who had been invited back from Russia, in 1995. Gamsakhurdia had not been recognized within the international community, and the arrival of Shevardnadze marked an early turning point in Georgian-European relations. Soon after his appointment, hopes for Western protections and a new era of foreign policy rose domestically (Coene 2016, 11). The duality of Shevardnadze's political career, built in

both Russia and Georgia, made him a complicated figure in Georgian politics. Likewise, his relationship with Russia complicated the advancement of Georgian political development and foreign policy goals. Georgia's political rhetoric was increasingly focused on EU and NATO integration by the early 2000s, but the ineffectiveness of Georgian politics at this time rendered these efforts largely fruitless. Shevardnadze had ample international recognition and was committed to supplanting Soviet influences with a narrative of European heritage and Georgian Orthodox tradition. However, his corrupt government failed to address declining domestic conditions and drove Georgian politics to a breaking point in the early 2000s (Coene 2016, 3). The government's inability to establish an effective political system or provide a sense of societal security led to protests in late 2003 that would set Georgia on a path to more intensive democratization (Hudson 2019, 180). At the same time, this institutional weakness facilitated the growth of the GOC's power as the Georgian population looked for an institution on which it could rely for social stability.

A rigged parliamentary election in November 2003 incited protests in Georgia that culminated in what is known as the Rose Revolution. President Shevardnadze was ousted, and various politicians from his administration assumed power. Mikheil Saakashvili, founder of the opposition party United National Movement (UNM), won 97% of votes in a redo of the election in January 2004, and enacted a variety of reforms to address domestic issues that had been neglected by Shevardnadze (Kalichava 2018, 198). During Saakashvili's presidency, domestic policies and significant foreign assistance facilitated the near-elimination of petty corruption and the creation of an entirely new police force. Between 2003 and 2012 Georgia's ranking on the Transparency International corruption index moved from 127 to 51 out of 133 countries (Kalichava 2018, 197-199). Since the 2003 Rose Revolution catalyzed intensive development and reforms, Georgia has actively pursued privatization and market liberalization and attracted foreign investment, causing Russo-Georgian relations to further decline (Kalichava 2018, 199). Though Saakashvili is known as a modernizer in Georgian politics, his practices had authoritarian tendencies. During his presidency, the power of the GOC grew immensely, and grand corruption flourished.¹⁴ President Saakashvili did not correctly interpret Western democracy, meaning that his reforms were not as successful as many consider them to be. Moreover, the Rose Revolution disrupted the checks and balances of the Georgian government, vastly increasing presidential power (Dobbins 2014, 761). As a result, dissatisfaction with the administration grew and Georgian political parties splintered.

As political tensions mounted toward the 2010s, protests against the Saakashvili administration intensified. The government's harsh response to these demonstrations amplified public discontent with the UNM and fortified the oppositional Georgian Dream party (Coene 2016, 3). The 2012 parliamentary elections were Georgia's first peaceful transition of power since independence and a key turning point for both domestic and international relations. Emerging opposition parties were consolidated into the Georgian Dream party, the winner of the 2012 elections (Coene 2016, 3). Tensions between the Georgian Dream parliament and UNM-affiliated President Saakashvili continued until Georgian Dream-affiliated candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili won the presidential election in 2013. Since the 2012 parliamentary election, the Georgian Dream party has further consolidated political power. Georgian Dream was founded by the multi-billionaire former Georgian Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is also the largest individual shareholder of the Russian energy company Gazprom. Appointments of party members, often made by Ivanishvili, frequently raise questions of corruption, and the party's influence makes

¹⁴ Dr. Vasili Rukhadze, phone interview by the author, 6 May 2020.

electoral success extremely difficult for opposition candidates.¹⁵ Since 2013, power has been consolidated by the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, and press freedom, which has been declining since the Rose Revolution, has been curtailed (Kyle 2019, 243). These trends have continued to the present.¹⁶ Despite a strong public commitment to democratic development, the realities of Georgian politics suggest that political freedom and democratic processes are constrained by highly-concentrated power, restrictions on opposition media, and corruption.

The 2018 presidential election became another important moment in Georgia's political history. President Salomé Zourabichvili's campaign billboards were visible throughout Tbilisi, showing both the Georgian and EU flags, making a strong statement about her stance on the European project. The significance of these elections, however, was not the question of European integration, but rather the future of Georgian presidential election procedures (Ayvazyan 2018, 79). Constitutional reforms, originally introduced in 2017, proposed to change Georgian presidential elections to a proportional electoral system beginning in 2020 to reduce the power of the presiding Georgian Dream party's parliamentary super majority (Ayvazyan 2018, 77; Lomsadze 2019). Given the increasing polarity of Georgian politics, the result of popular frustration with the Georgian Dream's political monopoly, key issues such as European integration and separatist territories will increase tensions as trust in democratic institutions declines, potentially guaranteeing that an election reform of some form will pass (NDI 2020). Recent waves of protests in Tbilisi show the effects of decreased satisfaction with Georgian democracy, warning of increased political instability (Ayvazyan 2018, 78; Buziashvili 2019b).

Despite the relative success of democratization in Georgia, recent divisiveness in domestic politics, proposed electoral reforms and waves of protests signal a popular response to persistent authoritarian tendencies in Georgia's democratic government. The Georgian Dream government fears losing its grip on political power through election reform, but voters are committed to changing the electoral system. A reform that was promised in July 2019 failed, and a deal announced March 2020 would require a constitutional reform, furthering popular distrust and leaving the status of the 2020 election uncertain.¹⁷ The absence of pluralism in a democracy increases the risk of a country's regression to more authoritarian governance, confirming that a strong Georgian civil society is essential to supporting democratic reforms and improving government transparency (Kyle 2019, 243). Georgians are frustrated with their government's failure to serve national interests, and they are invested in inciting change.

Protests for Georgian Democracy

Though there is little trust in the integrity of Georgian democratic institutions, strong civil engagement and popular commitment to democracy will prevent a transition to authoritarian governance. The success of the Rose Revolution in 2003 not only initiated pro-Western reforms but also created citizen-led change. The Rose Revolution protests were an early indicator of strong civil engagement in Georgia, and this positive trend continues today. "Robust" civil engagement in Georgia has manifested again since the 2018 elections in various waves of protests against corrupt election practices and the closeness of the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches. Popular participation in democratic change indicates that Georgians are prepared to defend democracy.¹⁸

¹⁵ Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

¹⁶ Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

¹⁷ Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

¹⁸ Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

In March 2018, the Interior Ministry raided two nightclubs in Tbilisi, reviving dialogue about liberalizing national drug policies and sparking protests that carried into the early summer. The origins of these protests dated back to June 2017, when a youth movement called White Noise began in Tbilisi and Batumi after the arrest of two Georgian rappers for drug possession. Interestingly, Bidzina Ivanishvili's rapper son, Bera, gave public support for the rappers while Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Interior Minister Gakharia were under fire for their response to the protests (Oravec and Holland 2019, 249-250). The May 2018 protests made many conservative Georgians uneasy and prompted a strong reaction from ultranationalist groups. These groups condemned nightclubs, popular among international tourists, as places of immoral deviance and drug abuse while physically and verbally assaulting pro-reform protesters. (Lomsadze 2018). Thousands of protestors participated in demonstrations that, combined with a lawsuit, prompted successful narcotics reform in summer 2018, overturning regulations left over from Soviet times (Oravec and Holland 2019, 250-251). The events in mid-2018, focused on policy reforms, revealed a significant rift between the liberal youth and conservative groups of Georgian society, one that has carried into more recent protests.

On June 20, 2019, Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian Parliament member with close ties to the Kremlin and the ROC, visited the Georgian Parliament. When he addressed the Georgian Parliament, he sat in the speaker's chair, which many Georgians perceived as an insult to Georgian sovereignty and a betrayal by their government for inviting him to speak. The intensity of the response to this event, now popularly known as "Gavrilov's Night," reflects the controversial connections between the GOC, ROC and Kremlin. Given that the event occurred inside the Georgian Parliament, it sparked days of protests in Tbilisi. Gavrilov has publicly shown support for the Kremlin's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence, meaning that he supports what Georgians refer to as an illegal occupation of twenty percent of their territory by the Russian military. Georgians' response to this event demonstrates popular discontent with the power dynamic between church and state and between Russia and Georgia. A variety of pages on social media platforms attempted to discredit the protests by framing demonstrators as "drug dealers, drug addicts, LGBT activists, members of the opposition, or criminals" (Buziashvili 2019a). In *Russia Today*, the protests were criticized for being overtly anti-Russian and aggressive, also attempting to discredit their cause (Martynov 2019). While these reactions might suggest disinformation on behalf of Russia or Georgian political groups, they also reveal a splintering of Georgian society. While protesters condemned Russian influence in Georgian politics and the GOC, malicious social media posts framed demonstrators as members of the groups believed by the ROC and GOC to be enemies of traditional Orthodox Christian values (Hudson 2019, 186).

Additional protests broke out in November 2019, this time in response to the government's failure to pass its promised election reform. Protestors took to the streets in Tbilisi to express their discontent with the ruling Georgian Dream party. Some decorated their tents with photos mocking Bidzina Ivanishvili, while others went so far as to march to his mansion that overlooks the city (Lomsadze 2019). Failure to pass the election reform was perceived as a threat to Georgian democracy. Reform negotiations, mediated by American and European diplomats, continued until Gigi Ugalava, head of the opposition party European Georgia, was sentenced on February 10, 2020 to at least three years in prison on embezzlement charges (Kucera 2020; Lomsadze 2020). Opposition leaders accused the court of taking orders from the government when deciding its verdict on the case, and more protests broke out (Kucera 2020). Until an election reform is passed, it is likely these cycles of protest will continue.

Strong civil participation in Georgia's democracy, manifested in protests against government corruption and unfair practices, helps to secure support from the EU and international development organizations. If geopolitical limitations imposed by Russia ultimately prevent Georgian integration into the EU and NATO, these organizations will still be able to support Georgian democracy through programs that promote democratic institutions and democratic values. Despite friction between conservative groups and resolutely pro-EU Georgians, Georgian civil society as a whole generally agrees, whether realistic or not, that membership would increase prosperity and security in the country in a variety of spheres (Hudson 2019, 187).¹⁹ The aforementioned EU initiatives have contributed to democratic reforms and facilitated diplomatic relations with the separatist territories, making the EU an active ally of Georgian civil society development. The public, however, is often weary of international development initiatives because it generally does not trust NGOs.²⁰ Nevertheless, these organizations advocate for the integrity of Georgian sovereignty and national identity against Russian interests. As a result, Georgia's keen awareness of the Russian threat to Georgian national interests fortifies support for EU and NATO integration at the civilian level because this consciousness is a key part of the contemporary Georgian psyche.

Foreign Policy Goals & International Participation

Tensions in the Russo-Georgian relationship are nowhere stronger than in foreign relations and national security. Despite Georgia's clear intentions to join and contribute to the Western sphere of influence, its close proximity to Russia complicates the realization of these goals (Coene 2016, 9). Due to the country's history in the Russian sphere and contiguity with southern Russia, Georgia is still a significant interest of the Russian Federation. Geopolitical tensions and Russia's interests in Georgia and the greater South Caucasus region have prolonged membership processes for Georgia, especially regarding accession to NATO. Contemporary Georgian political rhetoric stresses that the Georgian government and people have made the autonomous choice to orient the country toward Europe and the Euro-Atlantic sphere (German 2015, 606). In the Georgian foreign policy perspective, membership in the EU and NATO are potential solutions to Georgia's precarious security situation on the Russian border, but these measures also come with significant risks (Fischer 2009, 345).

Despite the clarity of Georgia's aspirations, issues of territorial integrity have marred Russo-Georgian relations, and these tensions contribute to skepticism among NATO and EU members surrounding their security interests. Russia's influence in Georgia, which impacts not only security but also politics and society, is the main factor inhibiting accession to NATO. As stated in the National Security Concept of Georgia, Russian aggression in the early twentieth century led to Georgia's 70-year occupation by the Soviet Union, and Russia's activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are a modern form of Russian occupation that controls twenty percent of Georgian territory (Ministry of Defense 2018, 7). The dispute over these territories led to armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008, which Georgia viewed as a fundamental threat to its territorial integrity and political independence (Ministry of Defense 2018, 8). Former President Saakashvili had prioritized Georgia's territorial integrity during his presidency, which brought tensions between the two countries to a head (German 2015, 604). Russia showed its "will to perform" in international arena in 2008, proving that it was not afraid to intervene militarily on behalf of its interests in Georgia (Hudson 2019, 191). Likewise, the Russian perspective considers

¹⁹ Dr. Giorgi Khishtovani, interview by the author, 14 January 2020.

²⁰ Dr. Vasili Rukhadze, phone interview by the author, 6 May 2020.

Western involvement in this conflict to be overblown and criticizes the exclusion of Russia from international forums and organizations handling the Georgia issue (Suchkov 2011, 115). President Zourabichvili blames Saakashvili for the outbreak of war in 2008, and she officially promotes a stance in favor of the normalization of Russo-Georgian relations (Ayvazyan 2018, 78). For the time being, it seems that conflicting Georgian and Russian interests in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile (Kyle 2019, 246). The issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia not only creates tensions between Georgia and Russia, but also exacerbates tensions between Russia and the West about their conflicting interests in Georgia.

Peaceful resolution of ethnic disputes and external territorial disputes, though not a precondition of consideration for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), can be a determining factor in the membership process (Kyle 2019, 239). Political and military antagonism between Georgia and Russia regarding these territorial disputes, therefore, is still a key driver of Georgian foreign policy, and the nature of these countries' bilateral relations suggests that conflict with Russia would likely break out if Georgia were to obtain membership in NATO.²¹ Russia still considers Georgia to be located in its "zone of privileged interest" (German, 2015, p. 612). Beyond Russia's interests in the disputed territories, Georgia is located between Russia and Armenia, Russia's key ally in the South Caucasus. Georgia is the main transit route to Armenia from Russia, further increasing Moscow's strategic interest in Georgia (German, 2015, p. 612). Abkhazia and South Ossetia are key points of contention in the Russo-Georgian relationship, and Russia's formal recognition of these territories' sovereignty and subsequent annexation of Crimea have propelled Georgia further toward NATO members for security (German, 2015, p. 612). The official inclusion of Georgia in NATO, therefore, would put member countries directly at odds with Russian interests in the South Caucasus and likely provoke a military reaction.²²

In support of its goal of accession to NATO, Georgia has contributed to a variety of international peacekeeping missions to show its support for NATO allies. Supporting NATO missions has facilitated Georgia's military modernization and proven its loyalty to the alliance. Whereas democratization in Georgia has achieved only limited success, Georgia's military has grown significantly in size and strength. Democratic reforms, however, are to some extent more important than a modernized military, even in NATO membership considerations (Kyle 2019, 242). Georgia's military firepower ranks higher than that of some NATO members, including the Baltic states, on the Global Firepower Ranking, but trust in its democratic institutions is declining (Kyle 2019, 244; NDI 2020). Even if Georgia's commitment to military modernization and international security operations does not lead to NATO membership, it will receive continued support from the alliance as a partner.

Recently, internal reflection within the EU and NATO about the future of their organizations' purpose and the prospects of continued enlargement has raised concerns about Georgia and other potential candidates' path to membership.²³ The relationship between Georgia and NATO, therefore, reflects the geopolitical status of and interest in the South Caucasus and post-Soviet space. NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow has called Georgia a "model for its region" and "exporter of security" in terms of the reforms it has undergone since independence and its contributions to international security, but Georgia's application for membership has been declined multiple times (German, 2015, 610). Nevertheless, Georgia's

²¹ Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020; Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

²² Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020.

²³ Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020.

participation in Iraq and Afghanistan alongside NATO has earned the allies' respect, and Georgia in turn enjoys significant military aid from the United States and high rates of approval when requesting NATO coalition support funds.²⁴ As its lukewarm response to the conflict in eastern Ukraine confirmed, NATO has yet to develop a clear vision for the Black Sea region. While, at this point, it could be most pragmatic for NATO to conclude that some states, such as Georgia, will remain in the Russian sphere of influence, this approach would under-credit the autonomous efforts that Georgia and other post-Soviet states are making to move away from Russia and towards the West (German, 2015, 614).

Despite the fact that Georgia's European aspirations are directly hindered by Russia, it is important to note that post-Soviet status does not automatically complicate the NATO membership process. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, all of which border Russia, joined the alliance in 2004. Likewise, internal discussions about NATO expansion have not completely halted the membership process, for North Macedonia became the thirtieth member of the alliance on March 30, 2020 (NATO 2020). Unlike when the Baltic States joined NATO, Russia's military is now much stronger following internal review after the 2008 war in Georgia (Kyle, 2019, 244). The looming threat of Russia and its clear interest in Georgia, highlighted by its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence, makes Georgia and other states of Russian interest complicated candidates for membership. NATO's lack of consensus about Georgia and the Black Sea region is prolonging the membership process for Georgia. In the meantime, Georgia has the support of NATO allies through its participation in other non-membership activities, which ensures that the alliance would come to Georgia's aid in the event of a conflict.²⁵ Though Russian interests in and the unlikely reunification of the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia warn of conflict if Georgia formally joins NATO, it is highly likely Georgia will continue contributing to the alliance, even without membership (Kyle, 2019, 247). Though Russian influence impedes its goals to join NATO and the EU, Georgia has engaged extensively with non-member programs to promote its national security.

Identity & Agency in Economic Development

Despite the significant limitations imposed upon Georgia's security by its location, the country's position between East and West provides a multitude of opportunities for economic cooperation. As a result, Georgia's economic policy is an open policy, as if it were a "policy of no policy," welcoming foreign investments from a variety of countries.²⁶ Its economy, however, is still weak and susceptible to shocks, meaning that openness to economic opportunities is not something the country can sacrifice. A sizeable portion of Georgia's GDP is supported by remittances and tourism, meaning that sudden changes caused by sanctions or other shocks can significantly impact economic stability.²⁷ Georgia's location between Europe and Asia puts it on transit routes between various key economies from the EU and China, making an open economic policy particularly advantageous.

Promoting tourism is a key part of Georgia's economic development and European Project, and, as a result, policies were instated to attract more European tourists. The formalized pro-Western narrative of the Saakashvili presidency not only initiated a variety of democratic reforms but also started state-led alterations of Georgia's urban built environments, especially in Tbilisi

²⁴ Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020.

²⁵ Maia Otashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

²⁶ Dr. Giorgi Khishtovani, interview by the author, 14 January 2020.

²⁷ Dr. Giorgi Khishtovani, interview by the author, 14 January 2020.

and Batumi, to support a “Georgian” identity in juxtaposition with Soviet architectural influences (Storm 2019, 132). Though these changes coincide with Georgian’s resentment of Soviet occupation, not everyone supported the shift to ultra-modern architecture, and many Georgians felt that such architecture was out of place in Georgia (Storm 2019, 155). These alterations coincided with Georgia’s European aspirations, invoking a sense “pre-existing European character” while supporting foreign policy goals and new identity narratives (Harris-Brandts 2018, 1118-1119). The product of these efforts was a mix of Western European, Georgian, and “Eastern exotic” elements, reflecting the nuances of Georgia’s national identity and physical location that produce tensions between tradition and modernity as well as East and West (Harris-Brandts 2018, 1121). Reconfiguring Georgian cities to promote connection to Western markets as part of its post-socialist economic transition was motivated by immense economic incentive, security interests aside (Harris-Brants 2018, 1123). The architectural basis of Georgia’s tourism market, therefore, is just as much caught between tradition and modernity as Georgian society and its values.

Tourism has been essential to Georgia’s economic development. Georgia has capitalized on a recognizably European aesthetic combined with clear intrigue and novelty to attract tourists (Harris-Brandts 2018, 1123-1124). Although attempts to modify the built environment of these cities were intended to invoke connections with European markets, most of the tourists visiting Georgia do not come from the EU, but rather from neighboring countries. Tourists from Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan are drawn to the European-like style of Georgian tourist destinations, making this Europeanization an economically viable model. Visitors from former Soviet countries support a large part of the Georgian tourism market. President Putin enacted a ban on direct flights from Russia to Georgia in summer 2019, significantly limiting tourism from Russia. Not only did the flight ban significantly impact the tourism industry, it showed the lengths to which Russia would go to affect Georgia’s economy and made a statement about the condition of Russo-Georgian relations.²⁸ The main markets interested in Georgia tourism are not Western, indicating that Georgia’s economic strength does not necessarily rest on EU integration. Tourists from other countries, for whom Georgia is closer and more affordable than most EU tourist destinations, reflect Georgia’s diverse, and often untapped, economic opportunities outside of Europe. Effectively engaging these opportunities would allow Georgia to exert its agency and attract more international investment.

Though the EU and NATO are unable to commit to membership for Georgia, they are concerned about cooperation between Georgia and countries such as Iran and China. Despite the fact that Georgia displays clear interest in and commitment to the West, its free trade agreement with China has raised concerns among Western countries about further decline of its democracy. Georgia is notably the only country to have a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with both the EU and China, an opportunity undoubtedly afforded by its geography (FPRI 2019, 2).²⁹ Its location between East and West makes it a prime candidate for investment by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since the Georgia-China DCFTA was signed in 2017, Georgia has increasingly cooperated with the BRI (Zabakhidze and Beradze 2017, 3; FPRI 2019, 2). China has become Georgia’s sixth-largest export market and is now its second-largest source of imports after Turkey (FPRI 2019, 2). Despite this increased economic cooperation, China notably did not secure the bid to oversee the construction of Georgia’s first deep water port on the Black Sea in Anaklia. The project has stalled since early 2019 due to a money laundering scandal surrounding a member of the development committee. In the meantime, the United States and EU have offered to support

²⁸ Dr. Giorgi Khishtovani, interview by the author, 14 January 2020.

²⁹ Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

the project, trying to keep Chinese investors out (FPRI 2019, 8). China has made significant investments worldwide, but it has a mixed track record of fulfilling promised loans. As a result, U.S. officials warn against BRI cooperation because they fear that cooperation with China threatens civil society, rule of law and government accountability and prefer that Georgia cooperate with Western countries (FPRI 2019, 10). Despite these warnings, Georgia is aware of these risks and has proceeded with caution while welcoming investments from Western powers. Its partial integration into the Euro-Atlantic sphere signals that its democratic development will not be hindered by Chinese influences. Georgia's potential as a transit hub for the BRI, afforded by its location, also lends to the expansion of energy transit through Georgia.

Russia's dominance in the European energy market gives it political influence over EU and NATO decisions, sometimes affecting Georgia, especially because some Central and Eastern European economies rely almost entirely on Russian energy imports (Kyle, 2019, 241). Reducing Russia's energy monopoly in Europe could reduce its political influence and curb its interference with EU and NATO initiatives and interests. Georgia's economic connections with the EU were established in 1996, when the international energy cooperation program INOGATE was created to facilitate the transportation of oil and gas to Europe through the Caucasus region (Harris-Brandts 2018, 1120). As a bridge between Europe and Asia, Georgia cooperates closely with the countries of Central Asia, especially in the energy and transport sectors (Ministry of Defense 2018, 21). Already a key part of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, Georgia also has the potential to transport energy exports from Iran to the EU (FPRI 2019, 6). The Iran-Turkey-Europe (ITE) gas pipeline concept was originally introduced in 2008, but until recently European sanctions on Iran had stalled the project (Zabakhidze and Beradze 2017, 8). Increasing Iranian energy imports to Europe would decrease Europe's reliance on Russian oil, thereby reducing Russia's political influence in the region (Lavrelashvili 2016, 8). Georgia is relatively reliant on Azerbaijani and Russian energy, and Russia has considered building a pipeline from Iran to Russia via Georgia and Armenia (Lavrelashvili 2016, 9). The energy sector in the South Caucasus, therefore, is a tense environment. If Georgia could strike a deal with Iran and the EU to be an energy transit hub, it could benefit not only from increased economic investment but also from reduced Russian influence in the regional energy market.

Proper realization of increased cooperation with both China and Iran will require proactive, integrated national strategy to mitigate risk and promote Georgia's economic development goals (Zabakhidze and Beradze 2017, 3). By expanding and diversifying its economic partners, Georgia will not only improve the stability and strength of its economy but also further reduce its dependence on Russia as an export market and energy source (FPRI 2019, 2; Lavrelashvili 2016, 5). Georgia's location naturally invites economic cooperation, giving it the potential to bargain among prospective investors and partners and reduce Russian influence. While Russia wields influence over Georgia's national security, politics, and culture, it has pushed Georgia away economically with sanctions and flight bans. Georgia, therefore, has more opportunities to explore its interests economically than in other spheres. Moreover, Georgia's rich history of cooperation with various entities, afforded by its location between East and West, contributes to Georgia's rich cultural tradition and is a source of pride in its national identity. By continuing this role as a trade hub, Georgia can improve its economic, political and cultural autonomy.

Conclusions

Despite Georgia's extensive efforts to redefine itself since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, this South Caucasus state has yet to fully detach itself from Russian influences.

Even after the civil, economic and governmental crises of the mid-1990s subsided, remnants of the bygone Soviet “bureaucratic machine” made Georgia one of the most corrupt countries in the world by 2003 (Kalichava 2018, 197-198). Changes made to move Georgia closer to its European goals have stabilized the country, but they are not comprehensive solutions to the challenges the country faces. While Georgia ranks high for ease of doing business and has drastically lowered petty corruption, its economy is still struggling and its democratic institutions are weak (World Bank 2019). As Georgia has tried to build a Western-style democracy, Russian influence has tested the integrity of Georgia’s national security and the cohesion of its politics and societal values. Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s sovereignty, meddling in Georgian politics and evocation of traditional Orthodox values, in combination with Georgia’s increasingly dysfunctional democratic government, have complicated Georgia’s goals for European integration. Despite ongoing challenges to European integration, the Georgian people remain committed to democracy and resistant to Russian influences, suggesting that the country will continue pursuing its own democratic society while keeping its relations with the EU, NATO and Russia in mind.

Recent protests in Georgia are a microcosm of key tensions in contemporary Georgian society and politics. Tensions between the more liberal younger generation and more conservative groups of the Georgian population manifest in church and state relations and reactions to Russian influences. The Georgian people are generally frustrated by stalled democratization exacerbated by the consolidation of power by the Georgian Dream party. Despite the sociocultural and political tensions among the GOC, Georgian Dream, ROC, Russia and the Georgian people, Georgians have repeatedly protested against these influences, demonstrating the persistence of Georgian civil engagement. While more liberal groups in Georgia protest police raids of clubs and Soviet-era drug policies, conservative Georgians fear a moral decline. Nowhere is this tension greater in Georgian society than in its interests in joining the EU. Despite the fact that 77% of the population supports joining the EU, many Georgians, not just Patriarch Ilia, consider the EU a threat to their culture and values (NDI 2019). Though Patriarch Ilia has expressed his distaste for the perceived immorality of Western European culture, Georgians’ widespread support of EU accession means that condemning Georgia’s European Project would risk a loss of popular support for the GOC (Hudson 2019, 187). Patriarch Ilia’s moral stances are often perceived as pro-Russian because they express a narrative of conservative culture and values similar to that of Russia and the ROC (Hudson 2019, 197). Russia prides itself on a more “traditional [and morally superior] understanding of European heritage” and uses this narrative to discredit social liberalization in EU member states (Hudson 2019, 178). Despite ideological similarity, the GOC promotes the reunification of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, contradicting the ROC and Kremlin’s interests. Russian influence on the GOC, therefore, is confined mostly to social issues, rebuilding influence lost when diplomatic relations were cut in 2008. While some Georgians may truly believe that European initiatives are “imposing” ultra-liberal values on them, most recognize that the social, cultural and political freedoms associated with the “European dream” mean that Georgian heritage would not be lost if EU and NATO membership were achieved (Hudson 2019, 187).³⁰

For the time being, Russia intends to keep Georgian politics polarized and unstable enough that NATO and the EU remain apprehensive about Georgian accession (Buziashvili 2019b). Whether or not Georgia joins these organizations, it is apparent that Russian political and cultural influence will persist to some degree. Nevertheless, the majority of Georgians support integration

³⁰ Maia Otarashvili, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2020.

into the EU and NATO, signaling a commitment to democracy and full independence from Russia's sphere of influence (NDI 2019). Likewise, Georgia shows sincere commitment to development and has contributed to international military operations, earning the country the admiration of Western militaries, high approval rates for international grants and the West's sustained commitment to upholding Georgian national security.³¹ Commitment to the West, cultural ties to Europe and security participation make a strong argument for Georgia's inclusion in the EU and NATO. Georgia's close proximity to Russia and the conflict surrounding South Ossetia and Abkhazia, however, continue to outweigh these commitments and will prevent Georgia's accession to the EU and NATO for the foreseeable future. By continuing to fight for its own definition of European heritage and advancing its national economic, democratic and security interests, Georgia can balance between Russia's traditional interpretation of Europeanness, the liberalized society of the EU, and these entities' competing interests in Georgia's future.

³¹ Dr. Robert Hamilton, interview by the author, 26 February 2020.

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Appendix A: Images

Figure 1: A plaque outside the former Georgian Parliament, now the National Youth Palace, commemorates the declaration of Georgian independence in 1918 (left). An exhibit inside the Parliament of Georgia commemorates Georgian independence from 1918 to 1921 (right). Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photos.



Figure 2: Plaques in the Georgian National Museum detail the number of Georgian victims of Soviet occupation. Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photos.

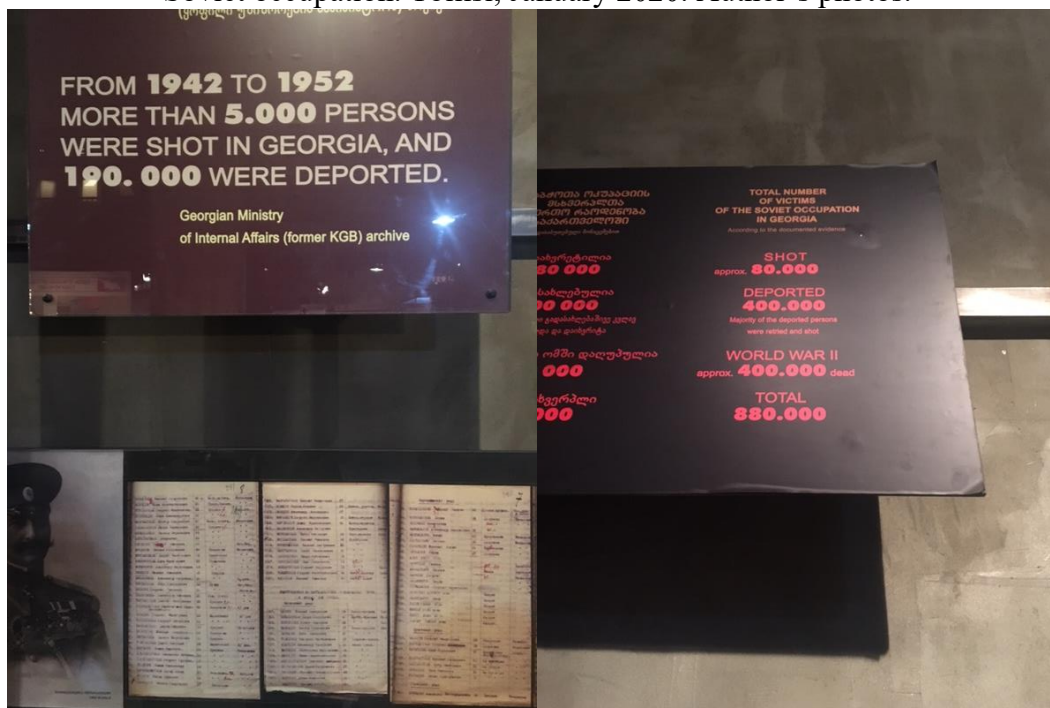


Figure 3: A monument on the square in front of the Parliament of Georgia commemorates the victims of a Soviet crackdown of a protest on April 9, 1989. Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photo.



Figure 4: A plaque on Rustaveli Avenue commemorates victims of a Soviet crackdown on a protest on March 9, 1956. Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photo.



Figure 5: A postcard in the Tbilisi Christmas market protests Russian occupation (left). A menu in an American-themed restaurant reminds diners that the Kremlin occupies 20% of Georgia (right). Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photos.



Figure 6: A settlement of housing for refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia who did not support the separatist cause. Gori, November 2018. Author's photo.

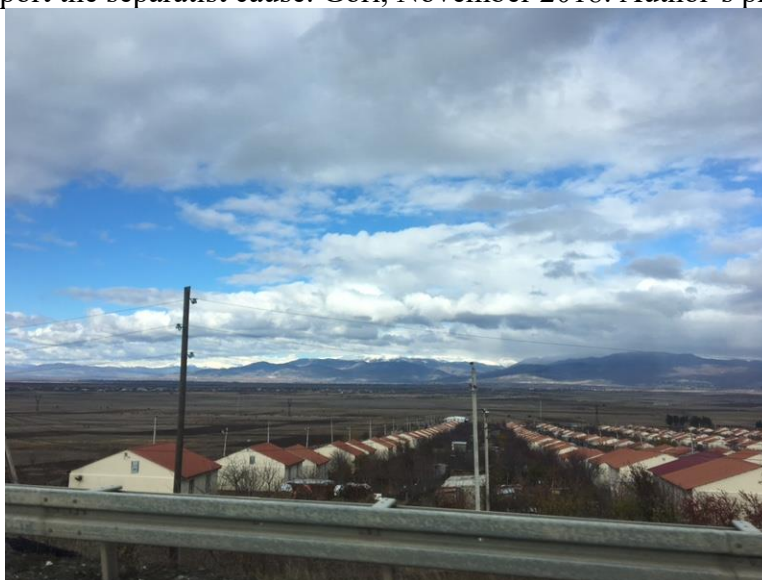


Figure 7: The European Union flies alongside the Georgian flag in front of a police station in the town of Khashuri (left) and in front of the Georgian Parliament building (right). Khashuri and Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photos.



Figure 8: A copy of The Act of the Restoration of State Independence of Georgia, signed April 9, 1991 in the Georgian National Museum (left). According to the guide, the declaration was signed on this table, now located in the Parliament of Georgia adjacent to the original document to commemorate the restoration of independence (right). Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photos.

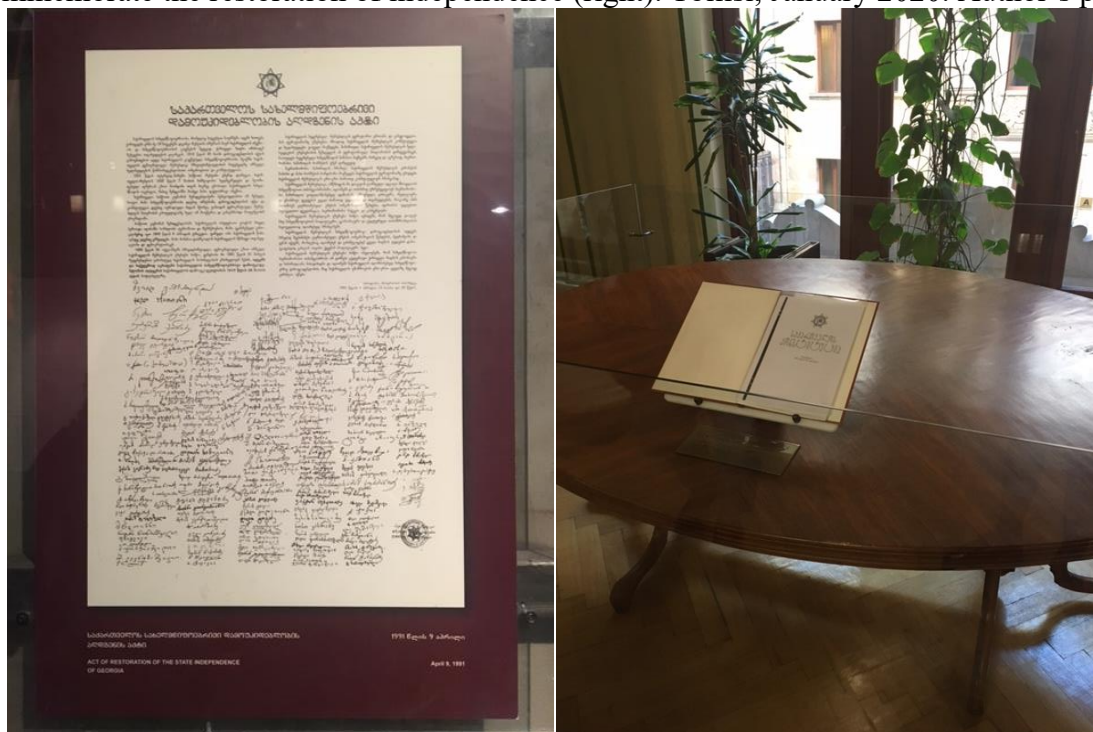


Figure 9: Quote from Noe Zhordania in the Georgian National Museum. Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photo.

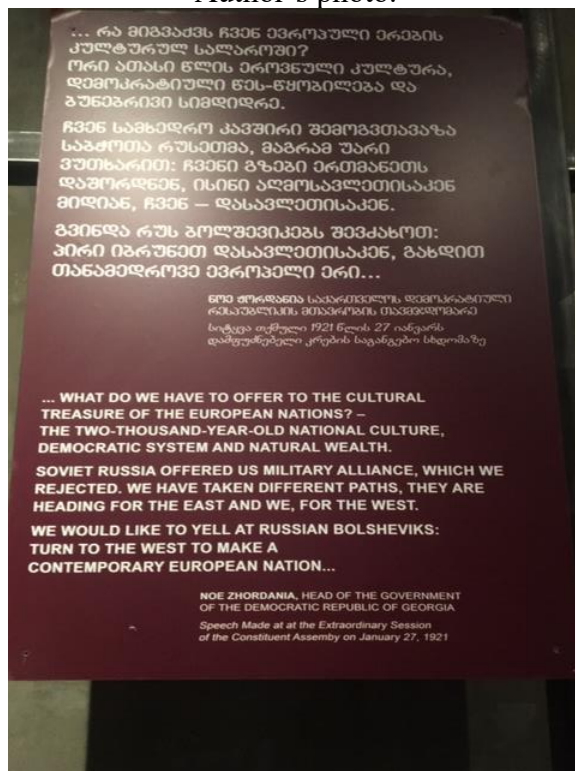


Figure 10: Exhibition at the Georgian National Museum hosted through the EU's European Year of Cultural Heritage (2018) referring to Georgia as “a bridge between Near East and Europe.” Tbilisi, January 2020. Author's photo.



Figure 11: Plaque at Georgian National Museum refers to Georgia as “a crossroad of culture.”
Tbilisi, January 2020. Author’s photo.

