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Bandwagoning by stealth? Explaining Georgia's Appeasement Policy on Russia

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ABSTRACT

Bandwagoning by stealth refers to a situation when a government of a small state tries to accommodate a great power turned to aggressor amid a strong public opposition. We explain it with the example of Georgia's foreign policy towards Russia in the period of 2012–2022. It is argued that Georgia's attempt for rapprochement to Russia since 2012 can be explained by two unit-level variables: (1) a belief of the country's leadership in the need to accommodate Russia and (2) a societal and public opposition to the Russia-accommodating policy. A conflictual dynamic between the Russia-accommodating government and Russia-sceptic public resulted in bandwagoning by stealth – a defacto and partial bandwagoning with Russia without formally changing Georgia's declared pro-Western foreign policy.

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Georgia; Russia; small state; foreign policy; bandwagoning; neoclassical realism

Introduction

This article seeks to explain Georgia's inconsistent attempts at rapprochement with Russia since the 2012 electoral power transition. On the one hand, the then-new Georgian government attempted to pursue a more pragmatic, less ideologically driven and more balanced line with Moscow: economic and people-to-people ties were re-established, diplomatic channels with Moscow were restored and attempts were made to accommodate Russia's interests and concerns in Georgia's foreign policy decisions but stopped short of formal diplomatic relations with Moscow.[1] The announcement of this "reset" by the newly elected Georgian Dream government delighted the Kremlin. At the same time, Tbilisi has drawn certain non-negotiable red lines: territorial integrity and the freedom to choose its own alliances. Consequently, the country formally continued its pro-Western foreign policy, signed the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union (EU) and deepened ties with the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the USA. Since Russia views Euro-Atlantic aspirations by the former Soviet states as incompatible with its own vision of neighbourhood, it can be argued that attempts by the Georgian government were limited in extent at least. We explain the incomplete nature of Georgia's rapprochement with Russia by two unit-level variables: (1) a belief of the country's leadership in the need to accommodate Russia and (2) a societal and public opposition to a Russia-

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accommodating policy. We call this phenomenon bandwagoning by stealth – a defacto and partial bandwagoning with Russia without formally changing the country's declared pro-Western foreign policy.

To explain the puzzling behaviour of Georgia towards Russia, we first look at perceptions, ideas and beliefs of key decision-makers in Georgia since 2012 when the United National Movement (UNM) a party that had ruled Georgia since the 2003 Rose Revolution and was famous for its Russia-sceptic foreign policy was defeated by Georgian Dream (GD), a political movement founded and shaped by Bidzina Ivanishvili – a Georgian multi-billionaire who made his fortune in Russia and later moved to Georgia. It is argued that a certain ideational U-turn took place in Georgia's ruling elite after the 2012 electoral change: from the Russia-critical UNM which attempted to balance Russia to the Russia-accommodating GD which decided to bandwagon with Moscow, selling it as prudent foreign policy.

The bandwagoning process was incomplete however Georgia, located in the "gray zone" between the EU and Russia, did not abandon its pro-Western foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic integration attempts. We explain the limited scope of bandwagoning by domestic constraints enforced by the Georgian public and societal actors upon the GD government. Since a "return to the European family" is somewhat of a mythologised national consensus in Georgia, the ruling party could not change the country's formal orientation without risking political crisis and possibly – a regime change.

To explain Georgia's incomplete bandwagoning with Russia, we use a theoretical prism of Neoclassical Realism. Neoclassical Realism provides a useful analytical framework to open the "black box" of a state and incorporate state-level factors into the analysis of how states react to external pressures. As Saltzman argues, "systemic conditions define general trends but say nothing about the nitty-gritty details, the essence of political process or what neoclassical realists call the 'warp and woof of domestic politics" (Saltzman 2015, p. 506). Therefore, Neoclassical Realism will allow us to incorporate unit-level factors as intervening variables into our analysis while maintaining the environment-based ontology of systemic theories (N. Ripsman 2011). Particularly, we focus on two unit-level variables: (1) elite ideas and perceptions about foreign policy and (2) a limiting impact of public opinion on the decision-making capacity of the ruling elite. First, constructivist models of Neoclassical Realism argue that elite ideas, perceptions and beliefs determine how states perceive and react to incentive structures of their external environment. Based on this assumption, we will explain how changes in elite ideas after the 2012 power transition in the Georgian government resulted in Georgia's foreign policy shift towards Russia – from balancing to bandwagoning. Second, we analyse public opinion and negative societal reactions as a potential veto actor limiting the extent of Georgia's bandwagoning of Russia. The interplay between two variables makes up what we call bandwagoning by stealth – or a partially successful attempt by the Georgian government to informally bandwagon with Russia without formally changing the foreign policy priorities of the country.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next part provides the theoretical framework and clarifies the variables of the study. In the second part, we explore Georgia's bandwagoning of Russia in three main areas: economy and people-to-people contacts, political and diplomatic relations, and military and security. In the third and fourth parts, we then look at two unit-level variables: elite ideas and public reactions to it. Finally, we conclude with a few thoughts about the theoretical and empirical implications of the study's findings and future avenues for research.

Theoretical framework: bandwagoning by stealth

Literature on alliance patterns of small states identifies two basic strategies: balancing and bandwagoning. Each of them can have different variations, types and dimensions. While many authors consider balancing as a preferred option,[2] for small states it is the other way round – due to structural constraints and lack of capabilities for most of the time they would end up bandwagoning with the source of the threat rather than balance against it.[3] However, parsimoniously constructed structural theories of International Relations, such as Neorealism, are often criticised for not being able to provide a whole picture of foreign policy trajectories even of small states who are supposed to be under the constant pressure of systemic factors.[4] Instead, inclusion of the *Innenpolitik* approaches together with the analysis of impacts of systemic constraints seems to provide a more sophisticated image of (small) states foreign policy behaviour. This is the reason why various theoretical models from Neoclassical Realism have managed to somewhat dominate the field of small states foreign policy analysis recently.[5] Neoclassical Realism is a flexible theoretical prism which manages to combine the best of both worlds – systemic and state/domestic levels of analysis. Neoclassical Realists do pay attention to the environment-based ontology but states' responses do not follow "fluidly [the] changing international circumstances" (N. Ripsman 2011, p. 3):

> states respond primarily to the constraints and opportunities of the international system when they conduct their foreign and security policies, but (…) their responses are conditioned by unit-level factors, such as state–society relations, the nature of their domestic political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions. (N. Ripsman 2011, p. 2)

Neoclassical Realist authors mention different unit-level variables that shape state responses to structural incentives of the international system. They include domestic interest groups (N. M. Ripsman 2009), resource extraction and domestic mobilisation capacity (Randall L. Schweller 2009), identity-related issues (Sterling-Folker 2009) to name but a few. At the same time, Neoclassical Realism does not view the unit-level factors as independent variables but rather as intervening variables which act as a transmission belt between structural incentives and foreign policy outcomes (Rose 1998).

Foreign policy analysis of post-Soviet states has recently seen the proliferation of various neoclassical realist models but also related theoretical approaches such as two-level games theory or strategies of hedging and wedging (Meister 2018). Two-level game liberalism is analytically very close to Neoclassical Realist approaches since they both include "international and domestic levels of analysis in their analytical framework" (Foulon 2015, p. 640). Morar and Dembińska (2021) use the two-level game model to explain Moldova's "dual alignment" strategy between the EU and Russia. They look at how key political actors in Moldova use their external networks to Russia and the EU strategically to boost their domestic power base. Similarly, Leukavets explores Belarus' and Ukraine's integration policies towards the EU and Russia through the prism of the two-level game model (Leukavets 20 20). Overall, however, while two-level game models offer a good analytical prism to study external-internal nexuses they suffer from their actor-centeredness and lack of focus on systemic factors (Foulon 2015).

Strategic Hedging, on the other hand, offers a more systemic approach to foreign policy analysis. As a non-ideological and a multi-vector approach, hedging combines

elements of both balancing and bandwagoning and allows the ruling elites in post-Soviet states to play with several regional powers without a need to integrate with either of them (Meister 2018). A concept of strategic hedging has often been used by scholars to explain the multi-vector foreign policies of Belarus (Preiherman 2017), Azerbaijan (Valiyev and Mamishova 2019) and Ukraine (Smith 2020). While strategic hedging is a useful concept, it mostly focuses on small state's manoeuvrings between competing regional or global powers but is not a useful prism to analyse dynamics between two unit-level variables (ruling elite ideas and public opinion).

Literature on Georgia's foreign policy behaviour confirms the recent trend of including unit-level variables into a systemic level of analysis. Over the past two decades, many authors analysed the major events in Georgia's foreign policy from regaining independence in 1991 to the 2003 Rose Revolution to the 2008 Russia–Georgia war. The majority of these studies focused on unit-level variables by employing the theoretical prisms of Neoclassical Realism, Constructivism and other unit-level theoretical models while also maintaining the importance of systemic factors. Gvalia *et al*. (2013) and Kakachia *et al*. (2018) explain Georgia's unpredictable foreign policy trajectory by the ideational underpinnings of Georgia's ruling elites.[6] Oskanian (2016) ascribed Georgia's defiance in the face of structural constraints to the distorted image of the international environment due to (mis)perceptions of Georgia's political elite about its nature. Gvalia *et al*. (2019) introduced two more unit-level variables – state capacity and elite cohesion to explain the variance in intensity of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy.[7] The edited volume on Georgia's Foreign Policy by German and colleagues too focuses on an impact of unit-level variables to explain Georgia's foreign policy dynamics (German *et al*. 2022). German and Kakachia reiterate in the introductory chapter that "domestic factors play a key role in Georgian foreign policy behaviour" (Kornely Kakachia and German 2022, p. 23).

Following these studies, we add another prism to explain Georgia's somewhat puzzling behaviour since the 2012 electoral power transition: a conflictual dynamic between foreign policy ideas of the ruling elite and public opinion. The resulting outcome of this dynamic is bandwagoning by stealth: a partial and informal accommodation of Russia's geopolitical interests without formal revision of pro-Western foreign policy priorities which has been a matter of broad public consensus in Georgia.

The first part of our argument is grounded in the significance of foreign policy ideas of the ruling elite. While states react to incentive structures of the external environment, their reaction is filtered by ideas, beliefs and perceptions of political leaders about the identity and function of their state in the international system and a proper way of conducting foreign policy. These ideas and beliefs significantly affect how states perceive opportunities and threats to their sovereignty and national interests (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018). "Threats and interests do not automatically originate from the material international system, but are socially constructed by ideas and values" (He 2017, p. 138). In other words, "elite ideas, defined as beliefs held by individuals that affect foreign policy outcomes, intervene between international system and foreign policy outcomes" (Gvalia *et al*. 2019, p. 5). As Wolforth argues, "if power influences the course of international politics, it must do so largely through the perceptions of the people who makes decisions on behalf of the states" (Wohlforth 1993).

The second part of our argument is grounded in the impact of public opinion and societal reactions towards foreign policy making. The role of public opinion as a driving

factor of foreign policy has so far been understudied in studies about Georgia's foreign policy behaviour.[8] Broader literature is split on the extent of the impact of public opinion on foreign policy making. A sceptical view suggests that typically low public attention to foreign policy often works in favour of governments and insulates them from public pressure (Baum and Potter 2008, p. 43). Yet, other authors view public opinion to be a consistent counterweight to be taken into account by decision makers (Baum and Potter 2008). The latter can be the case especially in times of longer conflicts when information becomes widely available to the public or in the case with small states having conflicting relations with bigger neighbours. In his seminal article, Gideon Rose underlines the linkage between elite preferences and public opinion and how it impacts policy outcomes:

> The elites tend to get what they want in the end but have to make concessions to their publics along the way - with the result that foreign policy is linked to systemic incentives but not wholly determined by them. (Rose 1998, p. 164)

The importance of public opinion is also underlined by classical realists and even by some neorealists. As Carr wrote, "[p]ower over opinion is (…) not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power, and has always been closely associated with them" (Carr 2016, p. 132). Accordingly, as Christensen argues, "state leaders design ideal strategies and then adjust them according to the domestic political constraints on implementation" (Christensen 1996, p. 24). In line with Christensen (1996), Zakaria (1999) and others, we assume the public opinion to be an important part of "national political power" (1996) or a "state power" that serves as a "key intervening variable between the international challenges facing the nation and the strategies adopted by the state to meet those challenges" (Zakaria 1999, pp. 11–13). Therefore, we expect Georgian governments to pay attention to public opinion and societal moods while designing foreign policy strategies.

Georgia's bandwagoning with Russia in 2012–2022

In this part, we give an overview on Georgia's attempts at rapprochement with Russia under the rule of the GD between 2012 and 2022. Georgia's rapprochement with Russia is mostly driven by the power of fear, consisting of two components: *normalisation* of relations – mostly in economic and societal areas, and *strategic patience* – or accommodation of Russia's positions in foreign and security policy decisions (ICG 2020).

Gradual restoration of economic and social relations took place under the pretext of "normalization" (ICG 2020). As a result, under the GD's rule, Georgia's economic dependency on Russia has significantly increased (TI Georgia 2022a). The share of Russian exports in overall exports has increased from 2 to 14.4%, and the share of Russian imports 5.91–10.12% between 2012 and 2021 (Figure 1). While Georgian exports and imports still remain somewhat diversified as none of the countries account for more than 15% of Georgia's external trade, Georgia's structural dependency on Russia has increased in a few critical economic areas making Georgia vulnerable to Russia's political pressure. For instance, Russia's share of the export market for Georgian wines has increased from 0 to 55% between 2012 and 2021 (Bakradze 2022). Considering that wine production is not just an economic but also an important societal issue ensuring

Figure 1. Georgian imports from and exports to Russia (as a percentage of all imports and exports). Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia. (2012). Online database. External trade: imports and exports. https://www.geostat.ge/en.

the social wellbeing of thousands of individual wine producers in Georgia, dependency on the Russian market can be viewed as a social and political vulnerability for the Georgian state. Georgia also depends on Russia in terms of imported critical goods. As of 2019, wheat imports from Russia constituted 70% of Georgia's wheat consumption (TI Georgia 2022a).

Russia also plays a central role in Georgia's tourism sector. The share of Russian visitors increased from 8.7% to 15.7% between 2012 and 2019 (TI Georgia 2022a, see also Figure 2). Dependencies in the tourism sector have also been used by Russia as a political leverage against Georgia. In 2019, angered by anti-Russian demonstrations in Tbilisi Russia suspended direct flights to Georgia (TI Georgia 2022a). Due to the flight ban and COVID-19, the share of Russian tourists decreased again down to 11.3% in 2021 costing Georgia several hundreds of millions of US dollars (TI Georgia 2022a). The relative share of Russian visitors increased again however in the first six months of 2022 up to 15.2% even though the absolute numbers remained rather low (TI Georgia 2022b). The share of income from Russian visitors in total tourism income was also on the rise in pre-pandemic era (TI Georgia 2022b). It reached 26.3% in 2018 and went down to 12.2% in 2021 but increased again up to 19.1% in the first six months of 2022 (TI Georgia 2022b). Overall, Georgian tourist sector remains highly dependent on Russian visitors and hence vulnerable to Kremlin's political pressure.

Similarly, under GD rule the number of Russian business has been on the rise in Georgia. Between 2012 and 2018, the number of Russian companies annually registered in Georgia almost quadrupled from 253 to 1180 (Figure 3) but the number went down in the pandemic period. Yet, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and following sanctions against Russia resulted in a massive influx of Russian businesses to Georgia (Kakachia and Kandelaki 2022). Over 6000 Russian companies registered in Georgia within the first six months

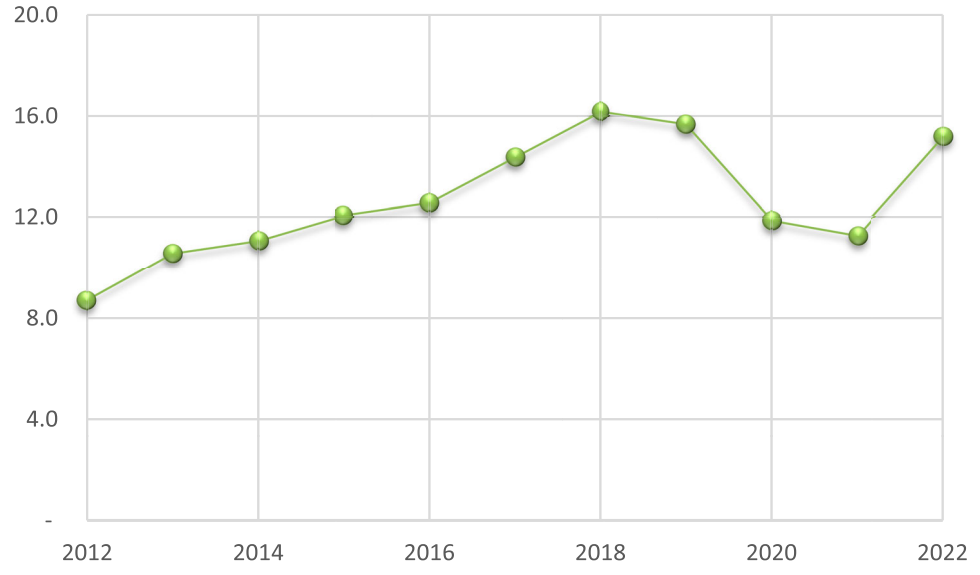

Figure 2. Share of Russian visitors in the total foreign visitors to Georgia 2012–2022.[20] Source: TI Georgia. (2022b). Online database. Georgia's economic dependence on Russia: impact of the Russia-Ukraine war. https://www.geostat.ge/en https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-impact-russia-ukraine-war.

of 2022 (Figure 2) which increased the number of Russian companies in Georgia up to 13,500 (TI Georgia 2022b).

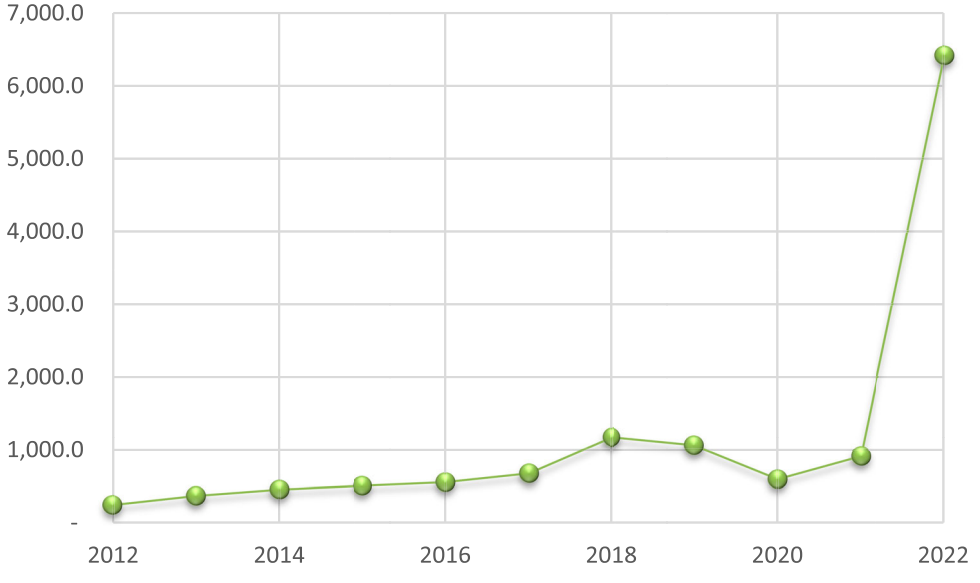

Figure 3. Number of new Russian companies registered in Georgia during one year 2012–2022.[21] Source: TI Georgia. (2022b). Online database. Georgia's economic dependence on Russia: impact of the Russia-Ukraine war. https://www.geostat.ge/en https://transparency.ge/en/post/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-impact-russia-ukraine-war.

Georgia remained relatively independent from the Russian energy resources due to the availability of Azerbaijani gas and oil. But the share of Russian imports in Georgia's gas imports has significantly increased between 2018 and 2021 from 2.8% to 23.1% (TI Georgia 2022a). Economic rapprochement with Russia also continued in other areas of economic relations. In sum, in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia received USD 1.6 billion – which equates to 9% of Georgia's GDP from remittances, exports to Russia and the Russian tourists (TI Georgia 2022a).

It is important to note that both the UNM and the GD governments are somewhat complicit in making Georgia economically dependent on Russia.[9] It was the UNM that soon after the 2008 Russia–Georgia war unilaterally abolished the visa regime for Russian citizens, and invited Russian business to invest and trade in Georgia (Georgian Journal 2012). In doing so, Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's former president, laid the ground for Georgia to become economically dependent on Russia again. However, while both the UNM and GD followed similar Russia-friendly economic policies they did so for different reasons. While the UNM followed the neoliberal economic policy (Gugushvili 2017) and did not consider economic security as a serious issue, for the GD, close economic ties with Russia were part of both the revitalisation of Georgia's economy and the normalisation of relations with Russia.

Next to the normalisation of economic and societal relations with Russia, another pillar of Georgia's rapprochement with Russia was the incorporation of the principle of *strategic patience*. Strategic patience prioritises "stable relations with Russia" and imposes "an informal requirement that Georgia's government take no action without considering how Russia might respond" (ICG 2020, p. 3).[10] Georgia's strategic patience has been in line with the Kremlin's concept of limited sovereignty in its perceived sphere of influence. Limited sovereignty as a reincarnation of the Brezhnev Doctrine implies that Russia's smaller neighbours do not possess enough state capacity to be fully sovereign and need to coordinate their foreign and security policies with Moscow.[11] Strategic patience in Georgia's foreign policy was visible in political and diplomatic areas. After GD's ascent to power, Tbilisi initiated a low-level semi-informal political dialogue between Russia and Georgia. Special envoys were appointed on both sides[12] who met regularly and discussed bilateral issues.

Strategic patience was also visible in security and military areas. Georgia's military reforms since 2012 were modest at best. Georgia's defence spending as a share of the country's GDP was reduced from 3.1 to 2.2% between 2012 and 2017 (SIPRI 2017). Military procurement policy, often a matter of concern for the Kremlin, too was underwhelming and much below common standards (SIPRI 2017). Furthermore, Georgian authorities took few controversial geopolitical decisions which advanced Russia's interests and undermined Georgia's strategic autonomy in the South Caucasus and the broader Eurasian region. For instance, in 2020, the GD government ensured that US-backed construction of the deep-sea port in Georgian Black Sea town of Anaklia was stopped (Hess and Otarashvili 2020). Construction of the port would create "the shortest overland corridor" between Asia and Europe via the South Caucasus and the Black Sea, and, would turn Georgia into a "significant hub for the Eurasian transit system" (Hess and Otarashvili 2020, p. 2). One of the Georgian partners of the US–Georgian consortium which was supposed to build the port recalled his conversation with GD's founder and a defacto leader Bidzina Ivanishvili who allegedly was against the presence of the US investments in the consortium:

> Let's leave Anaklia alone. You clearly don't understand geopolitics. What are the Americans doing in the Black Sea? I thought that a Chinese state company was supposed to be the investor, and now I don't see any prospects for that. (Hess and Otarashvili 2020, p. 9)

The halting of the project cooled down US-Georgian relations. US politicians criticised "perceived political targeting of the U.S.-backed Anaklia Development Consortium" by the GD and predicted further decline of the US investments in Georgia which would harm Georgia's Western aspirations and "strengthen Vladimir Putin's hand in the region" (RFE/RL 2020). The GD government itself claimed that the project "failed to attract sufficient investments" and placed "heavy and unrealistic demands on the state to underwrite huge loans from international financial institutions" (Eurasianet 2022). Recently, perhaps due to increased cargo traffic via Georgia due to the Russia–Ukraine war, the Georgian government declared its intention to revive the Anaklia project but intends to keep 51% of shares in its own hands (Eurasianet 2022).

Bandwagoning with Russia also touched the domestic political playing field in Georgia. Under the GD's rule, the pro-Russian discourse was not stigmatised anymore in Georgia – resulting in political re-legitimisation of pro-Russian political parties and media outlets. GD high-ranking officials stated many times that openly pro-Russian political parties and organisations are less of a danger to Georgia's national security compared to the pro-Western opposition parties, such as their main competitor the UNM.

Implications of pursuing of both pillars of rapprochement to Russia – normalisation and strategic patience – culminated during Russia's invasion of Ukraine and resulted in somewhat tarnishing Georgia's image internationally and triggering large anti-governmental and anti-Russian protests in the country. In the early days of the Russia–Ukraine war, the reaction from the Georgian government was extremely cautious and self-restrained. While Georgia complied with international financial sanctions it did not impose its own sanctions on Russia. Despite voting against Russia in the United Nations General Assembly and the Council of Europe, it exercised diplomatic self-constraint. The reaction amounted to mild appeasement of Russia and deepened Georgia's estrangement from the West. It also let tens of thousands of Russian citizens and their businesses relocate to Georgia. As government-critical voices claim many did so to escape the international sanctions. GD's reluctancy to support Ukraine more resolutely triggered a political and diplomatic crisis between Georgia and Ukraine and the recalling of the Ukrainian ambassador from Georgia. Overall, although, Georgia remained committed to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, even formally applied for EU membership, Tbilisi maintained a low profile in international politics and tried to stay off of Russia's radar.[13]

Bandwagoning with Russia in GD's foreign policy discourse

Rapprochement with Russia after the 2012 power transition did not occur sporadically but was part of the foreign policy ideology or vision of the new government. It has been visible in the statements and speeches of key decision makers in the new government. Already the 2012 election programme of the party blamed the UNM – the former ruling party for the deterioration of relations with Russia. According to the document, "the [previous] government did not consider the existing threats and built its foreign

policy based on permanent conflictual rhetoric with Russia" (Ivote.ge 2013, p. 20). The GD also indirectly blamed the UNM government for not avoiding the war with Russia in 2008. According to the GD's programme, "the illusory nature of this approach was confirmed by the 2008 war when Russia annexed part of Georgian territory and recognized its independence" (Ivote.ge 2013, p. 20). More importantly, in GD's view, for the USA and the international community, the UNM's foreign policy was an irritant and a problematic issue in relations between Russia and the West (Ivote.ge 2013, p. 20). It seems that for the GD, the UNM's foreign policy was an aberration from a logical path that a small state located next to a larger neighbour should have pursued.

To fix this, GD proposed a foreign policy based on principles of "pragmatism" and "realism" – or a "realistic assessment of the existing situation" [around Georgia] (Ivote.ge 2013, p. 21). In GD's view, Georgia should have become a predictable partner to the international community by not playing "the role of a strategic player in conflictual processes of regional and worldwide dimensions" (Ivote.ge 2013, p. 21). More importantly, according to GD's plan, the "Georgian factor should cease to exist in the list of contradictory issues between Russia and the West" (Ivote.ge, 2013, p. 22). Instead, GD supported the dialogue with Russia with the aim to gradually develop the crisis-solving plan (Ivote.ge 2013, p. 22). Soon after the GD came to power, GD's first prime minister multi-billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili further operationalised GD's plan of turning Georgia into a "normal" country. He argued that Georgia could pursue complementarism/multi-vectorism and simultaneously have good relations with Russia and NATO and mentioned neighbouring Armenia as "a good example" for Georgia and "a source of envy in positive sense" (Civil Georgia 2013b). According to him,

> Armenia is on excellent terms with Russia and has friendly relations with [Russia] while also being on excellent terms with the United States and with other NATO-member states. So I think it's possible and I think that we have to and I believe that we will combine it. (Civil Georgia 2013b)[14]

Ivanishvili also initially did not rule out multi-vectored foreign policy for Georgia to join the Russia-led Eurasian Union if "it [would be] interesting for the strategy of [Georgia]" (Civil Georgia 2013a). The controversial statement was later retracted however after it resulted in outcry in Georgia.

GD also tried to justify the so-called "borderization" process by Russia's security interests. The borderisation process – or the unilateral border demarcation process alongside administrative boundary lines between occupied territories of South Ossetia/Tskinvali region and Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia has been one of the most contentious issues which was accompanied by numerous accidents and exposed Georgia's vulnerability towards Russia (K. Kakachia *et al.* 2017). The GD however decided to downplay the importance of the issue. In 2014, the PM Ivanishvili linked the borderisation process to the peaceful conduct of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi and suggested the Georgian government was "doing all [it could] to create conditions (…) to maximally help them [Russia]" (Civil Georgia 2013c).

But Georgia's Russia-accommodating policy became more visible after the start of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2014. From the very beginning, the Georgian government driven by the power of fear tried to distance itself from Ukraine as much as possible and adopted a neutral tone.[15] Georgian PM claimed that [annexation of] the Crimea

was not comparable to the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since Russia was not interested in annexing these territories (Civil Georgia 2014). In light of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the Georgian PM explained Georgia's approach to Russia in the following way:

> I think we created a very interesting precedent and example in the region – on the one hand we want to become part of the European Union … and at the same time we are normalizing relationship with Russia. I think we found a perfect balance. (Civil Georgia 2014)[16]

The Georgian government kept its cautious positioning also after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, saw Ukraine's punishment by Russia as an inevitable process. Gharibashvili called the Western sanctions against Russia ineffective and stated that the bombing of Ukraine's capital could not be stopped by anybody (Civil Georgia 2022b). From this train of thought, we can also infer the GD's reasoning about the place and role of Georgia in the Russia–Ukraine war based on the idea of strategic patience. According to Gharibashvili, Georgia was facing "huge challenges" and "any emotions, miscalculated steps, words, actions, of course, contain[ed] great risk" (Civil Georgia 2022b). The GD government contrasted their positioning with the recklessness of the opposition parties who would want to involve Georgia in another war against Russia (Kincha and Khvedelidze 2022). In one of the interviews, the Georgian Prime Minister accused the former government in wanting to open a second front in Georgia:

> If we imagine just for a second that [former Prime Minister and ruling Georgian Dream party founder] Bidzina Ivanishvili had not gotten rid of this destructive force [the United National Movement party] under Saakashvili [in 2012 elections], today I guarantee you that Saakashvili would have been in power again and there would have been another Mariupol [in Georgia]. (Agenda.ge 2022)

GD's justification of its bandwagoning policy by demonising the UNM's allegedly hawkish policy towards Russia was partly dictated by domestic political context marked by high-level party-political radicalisation and societal polarisation.[17] It can be argued that GD has also been using it for electoral purposes. From this perspective, we can probably partly explain GD's aggressive discourse by a *diversionary theory of peace* as an opposite to the diversionary theory of war.[18] By pretending to have achieved a normalisation of relations with Russia the GD portrayed itself as a "party of peace", while the opposition was labelled as a "party of war". However, GD's Russia-accommodating policy goes beyond the domestic politics. Bandwagoning with Russia was the main foreign policy idea to deal with the structural incentives of the external environment. It was introduced by GD's founder, first prime minister after the 2012 power transition and most influential person within the party to this day – Bidzina Ivanishvili and widely shared by his close circle. GD's decision to bandwagon with Russia, even if only to a limited extent, cannot be explained only by a Neorealist expectation that bandwagoning with Russia would be a logical choice for any Georgian government. GD's predecessor, the UNM faced similar systemic incentives – being exposed to Russian danger and without credible security guarantees – but still decided to balance against and not to bandwagon its Northern neighbour. Before the UNM, there was a ten-year period of Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency who, at least in the second half of his rule, also decided to balance Russian power. Hence, systemic incentives only cannot account for the trajectory of Georgia's zigzaging

foreign policy. GD's U-turn was rather a by-product of GD's political thinking about how small states should be conducting their foreign policy. It was a difference in perceptions between Bidzina Ivanishvili and his circle from its predecessor government(s) that enabled a partial U-Turn of Georgia's foreign policy thinking towards Russia from balancing to bandwagoning.

Georgian public and limits of bandwagoning

As argued in the introduction, GD's bandwagoning of Russia was shallow, imperfect and at times inconsistent. One could even question if GD's Russia-accommodating policy amounts to bandwagoning at all. We argue below that to explain why the Georgian bandwagoning was limited in extent it is needed to further open the black box of the Georgian state and look into domestic preferences and ideas of key local stakeholders. From this perspective, the main limitation for the Georgian government to pursue fully embraced bandwagoning with Russia came from the public and societal opposition to appeasement towards Russia.

The Georgian public has for a long time been strictly pro-Western with a majority of the population supporting NATO and EU membership and being opposed to close political ties to Russia and Russia-led organisations. Figure 4 shows the Georgians' overwhelming support for NATO and the EU over time while support for membership of the Russia-led Eurasian Union has rarely been higher than 30%. Considering differences in perceptions, it is not surprising that 70% of surveyed Georgians in 2021 were unsatisfied with the "government's handling of Georgia's relationship with Russia" (IRI 2021, p. 92). Public opinion does matter to incumbent regimes in Georgia. Georgia is a hybrid regime with contested but competitive elections. While the political field is uneven and skewed in favour of the ruling parties, the opposition is generally still capable of winning elections. Therefore, the

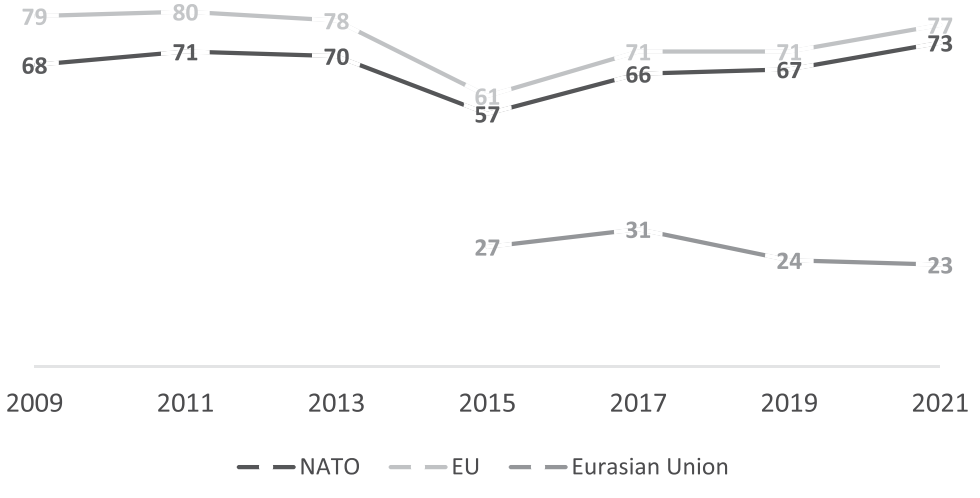

Figure 4. If there were a referendum tomorrow would you vote for or against membership of … Source: CRRC Database. 2022.

incumbent regime needs to ensure that its policies do not deviate too much from the popular sentiments and do not result in electoral exodus. Georgia's pro-Western, or more precisely – pro-European orientation seems to be one of the few topics of national accord in the country (Kornely Kakachia *et al*. 2019) otherwise marked by a high level of societal polarisation and political radicalisation.

It should be noted, however, that strong popular sentiments in favour of pro-Western foreign policy among Georgian citizens do not necessarily equate to support of the entire spectrum of the Western liberal script. Various surveys show that a big majority of Georgians hold deeply social-conservative views, support the Georgian Orthodox Church which has a questionable reputation and nurture deep sceptic views towards minority rights (cf. Ecorys 2017). However, illiberal, and pro-European attitudes have so far coexisted peacefully among the majority of Georgians, perhaps because the importance of European integration for Georgian citizens goes beyond the liberal script and includes also instrumental and cultural dimensions. Europe is viewed as a protective shield wall against Russia and other threats but also as a source of material wellbeing as well as a historical and cultural place for the Georgian state and society (Kornely Kakachia *et al*. 2019).

Therefore, any action that is perceived as a danger to the pro-European orientation of Georgia has a potential to galvanise anti-governmental protests in the country. Since 2012, the Russia-accommodating policies of the GD at least twice resulted in widespread protests and a political crisis. On 20–21 June 2019, within the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy, the leaders of the GD invited Sergey Gavrilov, a member of the Russian parliament, to address the Georgian parliament (OC Media 2020). Gavrilov's visit sparked large-scale anti-governmental protests and a political crisis in Tbilisi. The crisis was further escalated by disproportionate use of force by police to disperse the protesters in front of the Georgian parliament. Dubbed as a "Gavrilov night", the crisis attracted international and domestic criticism forcing the government to back down. The speaker of the parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, resigned and the ruling party promised to implement a broad package of democratic reforms, including the introduction of a fully proportional election system for the 2020 parliamentary elections (Freedom House 2020).

What is more the "Gavrilov night" set in motion continuous anti-governmental protests and further exacerbated the societal and political polarisation in Georgia. Even though democratic developments in Georgia were the main reason behind the continuous political crisis in Georgia since 2019, foreign policy issues and GD's Russia-accommodating policy popped up time and again adding another layer to societal discontent.[19] For instance, in July 2021, spontaneous protests erupted when a group of Russian journalists and celebrities paid a visit to Georgia to celebrate a birthday of Vladimir Pozner, a Russian pundit (Civil Georgia 2021). However, by far the largest protests took place after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022. The protests were staged to express support for Ukraine but they also were directed against the posturing of the Georgian government during the Russia–Ukraine war. Tens of thousands of the protesters and the opposition parties decried the GD's "inadequate" reaction to the crisis and demanded that the government resign and the country apply for EU membership immediately (OC Media 2022). The government stood firm first and insisted on filing the membership application by 2024 as initially planned. But as protests continued state authorities again felt pressure to back

down and handed in the application following the same steps by Ukraine and Moldova (Kucera 2022). The anti-governmental protests reflected the difference between public opinion and the government's posturing which could not be any larger. While the GD sees Georgia's national interest best guaranteed by staying out of the Russia–Ukraine war as much as possible (Civil Georgia 2022a) 96% of Georgians polled in March 2022 think that the war concerns Georgia as well and 87% think that it is Georgia's war too (Sakevarishvili 2022). Moreover, while the Georgian government keeps equidistance between Ukraine and Russia, even before the outbreak of war, 79% of Georgians saw Russia as "the greatest political threat to Georgia" and 71% – as "the greatest economic threat to Georgia" (IRI 2021, pp. 88-89). On the other hand, Ukraine is considered as the third "most important political partner" (32%), only after the USA (60%) and the EU (56%) (IRI 2021, p. 87).

In summary, it can be argued that the public pressure has acted as an effective deterrent against the government's turn towards Russia. While the Georgian public seems to tacitly endorse the government's attempts to re-establish economic and people-to-people contacts with Russia, it is against Georgia's political rapprochement towards Moscow (Kornely Kakachia and Lebanidze 2019). The 2019, 2021 and 2022 protests against the government's Russia-accommodating policies are good illustrations of this dynamic.

Interestingly, the Russian government and a broad foreign policy community in Moscow seem to understand the limitations of the GD government in their quest to normalise their relations with Russia and accommodate the Russian factor in Georgia's foreign policy. While Russia generally is against the Euro-Atlantic approximation of its former colonies, the Kremlin was conspicuously silent or at times even supportive of GD's foreign policy, even if it included Euro-Atlantic integration as a formal priority. It can perhaps be argued that this is because Russia does not have better political allies in Georgia to rely on. Alliance of Patriots, a right-wing pro-Russian party failed to establish a significant electoral presence in Georgia. There are few other pro-Russian groups but their popularity is even lower. It seems that a low-profile bandwagoning of the current government is the best Russia can get under current circumstances. The alternative would be a regime-change by direct military involvement with an uncertain political outcome. While Russia can certainly defeat Georgia in a direct military confrontation, keeping Tbilisi under political control will be a costly exercise. Hence, it could be argued counterfactually that while Russia may not be happy with Georgia's continued approximation to the EU under the GD, the Kremlin tolerates it since it does not see capable alternatives to the GD-led government in Tbilisi.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explain Georgia's half-hearted Russia-accommodating policy since the 2012 power change by unpacking the conflictual dynamic between elite ideas and public and societal preferences. On the one hand, the Georgian Dream government that has been in power since 2012 considered accommodation of Russia as the most adequate response to systemic incentives. At the same time, public opinion has remained sceptical of the Russia-accommodating foreign policy and GD's attempts at appeasing Russia resulted in some major societal backlashes. The result of

these conflictual dynamics was bandwagoning by stealth: a process of partial re-alignment with Russia by the ruling elite without formally altering the country's pro-Western foreign policy.

An exploration of Georgia's bandwagoning policy towards Russia can contribute to the ongoing discussion about the future of the European order in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the role of the Eastern Partnership countries in the shared neighbourhood between the EU/NATO and Russia. Particularly, the creation of a buffer zone consisting of neutral states was often discussed as a potential scenario for Ukraine's future status between Russia and the West (Van Evera 2022). Scholars and policy practitioners who consider themselves to be Realist, tend to blame the West for the Russia–Ukraine conflict and suggest that the West acknowledge Russia's special interests in Ukraine in order to solve the conflict (Allison 2022, Kissinger 2022; Mearsheimer 2022, Van Evera 2022, Walt 2022). Many Liberal and Constructivist scholars, on the other hand, shift focus away from systemic factors and utilise second- and first-image perspectives to explain how ideas, norms, culture and domestic power structures, instead of geopolitical considerations, shape the confrontational dynamics in the former Soviet space (Wilson 2014, Person and McFaul 2022).

While not dismissing the significance of systemic factors, Georgia's experience modifies the neutrality argument for former Soviet states in two ways. First, some International Relations scholars and the Western security practitioners alike disregard the impact of domestic constraints on leaders of non-authoritarian Eastern Partnership countries. This contradicts the reality on the ground since a majority of the states stuck between the EU and Russia, while being imperfect democracies, are characterised by strong civic activism and anti-governmental public mobilisation capacity (Georgia (2003, 2008, 2019), Ukraine (2004, 2013), Moldova (2009) and Armenia (2008, 2018) to name but a few).

Second, foreign policy issues seem to be politicised and a matter of public concern in a majority of these states since the deteriorated external environment directly affects the everyday social life of their citizens. Therefore, unlike the expectations by some foreign policy scholars that foreign policy would not generate a strong public resonance, in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, foreign policies do play an important role in party politics and could even affect an electoral outcome or facilitate a regime change. This makes public opinion and civil society an important veto player in foreign policy decision making for non-authoritarian former Soviet states. It is also important to note, that a certain degree of openness of the political system is perhaps a necessary condition for public opinion and civil society to have an impact on policymaking. Therefore, it can only work in democracies or hybrid regimes, but not in closed autocracies.

Notes

1. It is in this context that observers understood Tbilisi's decision to not boycott the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. The cessation of activity by Georgia's Russian-language PIK television channel, which was financed from the state budget, as well as more muted discussion on the topic of the nineteenth-century Circassian genocide. Moreover, the Georgian government has appointed a Special Representative for Relations with Russia, in so doing further displaying its readiness for dialogue.
2. Not everyone supports the argument that balancing is a predominant behaviour. For alternative views, see: Randall L. Schweller (1994).

3. For conventional views on foreign policy behaviour and alliance policies, see: Keohane (1969), Rothstein (1966), Walt (1990, 1997) and Waltz (2010).
4. In fact, K. Waltz himself acknowledges that Neorealism is not a theory of foreign policy but not all Neorealists agree with this assumption. See: Telbami (2002).
5. On Neoclassical Realism, see: Rose (1998), Lobell *et al*. (2009), Rathbun (2008), Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (2006), N. M. Ripsman *et al*. (2016) and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (2009).
6. Also, see: Kornely Kakachia and Minesashvili (2015).
7. Also, see: Gvalia and Lebanidze (2018).
8. Few exceptions include Buzogany (2019) and Siroky *et al*. (2017). Bugozany explores public opinion in Georgia towards conflicting/complementary regional integration projects.
9. It is important to note that Georgia used to be tightly bound to its former metropole Russia via economic, trade and energy links. However, Russia's full-scale energy and economic embargo on Georgia in 2006–2007 contributed to a hard divorce between two countries in key areas of trade, economy and energy relations but also in terms of societal and people-to-people contacts (cf. Lebanidze 2020). For instance, while Russia used to be a main export market for Georgian products after the embargo it went down to just 2% (Lebanidze 2020).
10. It should be noted that strategic patience initially was also inspired by the Western calls for Georgia to demonstrate patience with the resolution of territorial conflicts and other security-related issues after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. See: Reliefweb. (2009). Commissioner outlines EU Georgia priorities. Retrieved from: https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/commissioner-outlines-eu-georgia-priorities.
11. On limited sovereignty, see: Krastev (2007) and Lossovskyi (2020).
12. Zurab Abashidze, an experienced diplomat and former ambassador to Russia was appointed on the Georgian side. Russia was represented by Grigory Karasin, a deputy foreign minister.
13. When discussing Georgia's manoeuvring between Russia and the West perhaps we should also briefly mention Georgia's relations with China as another great power and its impact on Georgia's foreign policy. Georgia and China nurture a close economic partnership underpinned by free trade agreement and increasing trade and investments, however, the relations between the two countries lack strategic depth and are shaped by a mutual political indifference and low expectations towards each other. Beijing does not regard Georgia as a strategically important country and China has "little resonance in wider society" of Georgia (Brattberg *et al* 2021).
14. It is noteworthy that Armenia is considered by many scholars as heavily dependent on Russia and firmly anchored in Russia-led alliance structures. While Armenia has a certain degree of relations with NATO and the EU there cannot be a talk about equidistance between Russia and the West in Armenian foreign policy.
15. There have been some strong domestic political irritants in Georgian–Ukrainian relations since 2012 such as the exodus of representatives of the former Georgian government into Ukrainian authorities. However, these factors cannot fully explain the Russia-accommodating positioning of the Georgian government in the Russia–Ukraine conflict.
16. It is interesting that during the same interview, given few months before Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU, Gharibashvili also claimed that "Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin assured that Moscow would not interfere in the process of signature of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU" (Civil Georgia 2014). It seems that the Georgian government had some communication with Russia before signing the Association Agreement with the EU. This would be in line with the principle of strategic patience – or checking Russia's reaction before taking an important decision. See: Civil Georgia (2014).
17. On polarisation in Georgia, see: Gegeshidze and De Waal (2021) and Samkharadze (2021).
18. On diversionary theory of war, see: Levy (1989) and Tir (2010). On diversionary theory of war in the post-Soviet context, see: Filippov (2009), Gerstel (2017) and Shevtsova (2009).
19. It should be noted that the distribution of political parties in pro-Russian and pro-Western camps is the most visible party-political cleavage in Georgia.
20. For 2022, the statistics for the first six months are included.
21. For 2022, the statistics for the first six months are included.

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