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The Perception of National Security in Georgia***

This article examines how the on-going confrontation between Russia and the West affects perceptions of security in Georgia. Our angle is twofold: in addition to comparing previous National Security Concepts of Georgia we examine both governmental and public perceptions of security in the light of Georgia's foreign policy priorities, its relationship with neighbouring countries and conflict resolution policy. Since Georgia declares 20 per cent of its territory to be occupied, the article focuses particularly on the crisis in Ukraine and its effect on security debates in Georgia. As the upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia in autumn 2016 are highly important to maintain the current foreign policy course and secure achievements, the paper also tries to answer how these global and regional developments may be interpreted and reflected in the next National Security Concept of Georgia (whenever it might be published).

Introduction: Security Landscape of Georgia

Shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the re-establishment of independent Georgia, the new state has found itself in an extremely unpredictable and volatile internal political situation. Wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the civil war in Tbilisi in the early 1990's, consumed the high hopes of ordinary citizens for a peaceful and better life. Besides psychological relevance, the problem of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) also

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burdened the state budget. Parallel to armed conflicts and consolidation of the central power, Georgia underwent another painful process – transformation from a planned to a market economy – which resulted in widespread poverty and a steep fall of all macroeconomic indicators. Throughout the 1990s the Georgian government’s main task was to reach economic stability, create a favourable investment climate and functioning institutions of the economy, and firmly integrate into the world market. Even if the 2000s brought relative economic stability, most of the key problems stayed in the new century: rampant corruption, high crime rate, state’s inability to deliver basic social services, and the failure to bring democracy. Disenchantment of the population with the governing regime and the fragmentation of the political elite resulted in the euphoric Rose Revolution in 2003 and the ouster of President Shevardnadze.¹

Securing positive developments in the economy, boosting investments, eliminating corruption and strengthening the state’s capacity were domestic priorities of the new government led by Mikheil Saakashvili. Despite achieving many of these goals, the government did not manage to transform economic growth into welfare, leaving mass poverty and unemployment intact; elimination of petty bribery at the expense of granting unchecked power to security and law enforcement agencies resulted in the culture of fear and public resentment towards the government; and on top of these, the country engaged in a war with Russia in 2008 and lost, which led to the Russian recognition of the statehoods proclaimed by Abkhazia and South Ossetia earlier. These are some of the key factors leading to the convincing victory of the Georgian Dream party in the 2012 parliamentary election, which effectively ended the rule of Saakashvili’s United National Movement (UNM).

When the Georgian Dream came to power in autumn 2012, its critics from UNM raised concerns that the new government would pursue normalization of relations with Russia at the expense of pro-Western foreign policy. Contrary to this criticism, the Georgian Dream coalition proved its strong commitment to pro-Western orientation by adopting in March 2013 the bipartisan parliamentary Resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia’s Foreign Policy.² The document underlined the importance of having strong, stable and developing relations with the “US-NATO-EU triangle”. Cooperation with

¹ Cory Welt, “Georgia’s Rose Revolution: From Regime Weakness to Regime Collapse”, in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Post-Communist World*, eds. Valerie Bunce, Michael A. McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, (Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 155-180.

² “Resolution on Basic Direction of Georgia’s Foreign Policy” 2013, Parliament of Georgia, unofficial translation, Parliament of Georgia, Available from: <http://www.parliament.ge/en/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komitetebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komiteti-147/komitetis-gancxadebebi1130/saqartvelos-parlamentis-rezolucia-saqartvelos-sagareo-politikis-dziritadi-mimartulebis-shehexeb.page>

the US is based on the Charter on Strategic Partnership from 2009.³ It traces back to 1992, substantially deepened after 2003, and since 2008 the sides work within the framework of the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC), the forum where both political and practical tasks are discussed and supervised.⁴

The pro-Western foreign policy orientation of Georgia has a two-decades-long history; it was not Saakashvili but Eduard Shevardnadze (from 1992 the head of the country's governing council, and president from 1995 until 2003) who first turned his country towards the West. His successor, Saakashvili, secured this course in part due to his exceptionally good personal relations with many officials in the U.S. government and the Congress. Disregarding the Russian insecurity about having a new NATO member on its southern border, Saakashvili's Georgia prioritized membership in the military alliance, seeing it as the best way to achieve security and solve the territorial problems. Georgia went above and beyond, for example, contributing the highest number of soldiers (among non-member states of NATO) to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.⁵ In addition, it also participates in the EU missions in Central African Republic and Mali. Nonetheless, to date Georgian efforts were met with mostly with statements acknowledging the progress Tbilisi has made toward becoming a member of NATO, and not membership itself (which in fact was promised already in 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit).⁶

Georgia also pursues membership in the European Union. The EU is important to Georgia both for economic and strategic reasons. According to the latest figures, the EU accounts for 31% of Georgia's total trade.⁷ The EU single market plays a huge role in diversifying Georgia's foreign trade and allows Tbilisi to diminish economic dependence on Moscow and mitigate security risks emanating from such dependency. Amid strong Russian opposition Georgia signed an Association Agreement (including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement - DCFTA) with the EU in June 2014, and the Georgians expect to start traveling visa-free in Europe's Schengen zone in the coming months. Many Georgian decision-makers believe the visa-free travel

³ <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/121029.htm>

⁴ "United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership", U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, January 9, 2009.

⁵ Georgia has been assisting ISAF since 2004 and committed to support the post-2014 mission as well. In the peak of its contribution in October 2013 Georgia had 1560 troops deployed (in Helmand Province and Kabul), what made the country not only the biggest non-NATO member but also the fifth largest contributor overall.

⁶ "Georgia Calls on NATO to Deliver Membership Promises". Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, media release, August 21 2015, Available from: <http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-nato-membership/27201794.html>

⁷ According to National Statistics Office of Georgia.

and the future membership of Georgia in the EU (which implies fast improvement of economic conditions) would work as a magnet for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, encouraging them to reconcile and reintegrate with Georgia.

The Georgian Dream's normalization policy towards Russia was the key novelty in the country's foreign and security affairs, without questioning the prioritization and prolongation of the Euro-Atlantic choice. It served to minimize the hostile bilateral attitudes between the countries, an effect of the 2008 war. The new Georgian government persuaded the northern counterpart to lift the ban on Georgian agricultural products (which led to the rise of Russia's share in Georgian trade) and re-establish regular flights between the two capitals. However, the 'red lines' between Tbilisi and Moscow – hampering full-fledged normalization instead limiting it – are still in place. The first red line is Georgia's European choice, which undermines Russia's Eurasian project aimed at consolidating Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space and competing with key global actors, first and foremost with NATO and EU.⁸ The second red line is the Russian recognition and support of Abkhazian and South Ossetian statehood, which runs contrary to Georgia's understanding of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Georgian approach towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia is an *engagement without recognition* while the Russian is an *engagement with recognition but without incorporation*. The latter means that Russia has become the ultimate guarantor of the security of the two entities after the 2008 war, while prior to the war was also distributing Russian passports to Abkhazians and South Ossetians (this policy which is known as "passportizatsiya"). Moreover, Russia provides the bulk of both *de facto* states' national budgets. It has been rising over the years and currently it amounts to 70% in Abkhazia's budget and 90% in case of South Ossetia.⁹

The current National Security Concept of Georgia (2011) reflects the point that sovereignty and restoration of territorial integrity are number one priorities, while the Law on Occupied Territories (2008) leaves no question that these territories are Georgian and that Russia is the aggressor. The 2010 State Strategy on Occupied Territories offers a corrected and less restrictive approach. Yet, the overarching goal stays the same: "The Strategy is part of Ge-

⁸ Ivlian Haindrava, "Asimmetriya (k voprosu o gruzino-rossiyskikh vzaimootnoseniyah)", in, *Rossiysko-gruzinskiye otnoseniya: v poiskah novih putey razvitiya*, Haindrava, I, Sushentsov, A & Silayev N (eds.), Rossiyskiy Sovet po Mezhdunarodnim Delam and Mezhdunarodniy tsentr po konfliktam i peregovoram, Moskva, pp. 6-29.

⁹ "Abkhazia: Uglubleniye zavisimosti", *International Crisis Group*, February 2010, Report No. 202, Available from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/georgia/202%20Abkhazia%20-%20Deepening%20Dependence%20RUSSIAN.pdf>

orgia's overarching determination to achieve the full de-occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, reverse the process of annexation of these territories by the Russian Federation, and peacefully reintegrate these territories and their populations."¹⁰

De-occupation, restoration of territorial integrity and pro-Western orientation still represent the pillars of Georgia's foreign and security agenda. However, since 2011, when Georgia published its latest National Security Concept, significant changes have happened both within the country and in the immediate neighbourhood. First, the Georgian Dream's normalization attempt with Russia is a significant departure from an openly hostile rhetoric that the UNM government employed vis-a-vis Moscow. The current approach aims at decreasing the possibility of armed conflict by accommodating some of the Russian interests, or at least, not provoking additional tensions with the neighbor. Second, political polarization has increased in the country and relations with Russia in particular, but also wider foreign and security policy, have become key points of disagreement and debate among the two biggest political parties: Georgian Dream and United National Movement. Such polarization affects the public attitudes, which have evolved since 2011 and have made the NSC somewhat outdated. Third, the Russian intervention in Ukraine, ongoing since early 2014, has re-energized the national security debates in Georgia and affected public opinion which should perhaps lead to reassessment of both NSC 2011 and the current government's security policies. Fourth, all of the above mentioned changes have led to another question: how to keep the speed of development of the chosen foreign policy orientation given the fact that Georgia is performing well however getting everything but membership perspective in NATO and the EU; and, how to legitimize its drive if the country is doing more but not getting more in return? These are the key reasons behind this article's goal to explore the evolution of national security perceptions in Georgia and the factors shaping them.

Following the introductory overview of Georgia's internal and external security environment, we address how the government's perception of national security evolved in the past decade. The analysis is based on the comparison of two key official documents: National Security Concepts (NSC) of 2005 and 2011. Afterwards we review public opinion polls to learn about public perception of security issues as opposed to those of governing elite. In the final part we discuss the effects of Ukrainian crisis on the security perceptions in Georgia, as an example of external dynamics shaping domestic views on security.

¹⁰Ibid. p. 1.

1. The National Security Concepts of Georgia, in Comparative Perspective

The first National Security Concept of Georgia was adopted in July 2005 while the second one was adopted in December 2011. In spite of having an almost identical structure, the two documents differ significantly in their tone and focus. The major changes revolve around Russia; this is not surprising, because the August 2008 war had an immeasurable impact on Georgian security environment and led to re-evaluation of threats and priorities.

NSC 2005 ranked the presence of Russian military bases on the territory of Georgia as a lower security risk than international terrorism, which seems like a huge underestimation in retrospect. Based on the Russian promise to remove the military bases from Georgian territory, the 2005 Concept assumes that the Russian military bases are “no longer a direct threat to Georgia’s national security.”¹¹ Other security risks, such as organized crime groups, paramilitary formations, possibility of conflict spill-over from North Caucasus through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, get more attention in the NSC 2005 than potential Russian military attack. In fact, the document states that “the likelihood of an open military aggression against Georgia is low.”¹²

Instead, the 2005 document aspires to friendly relations with all neighbours, which also includes Russia, even if not explicitly mentioned. One can easily notice in the tone and content of NSC 2005 “the overall optimism of the new, pro-Western leadership that came to power with the Rose Revolution in 2003. Hence, according to the 2005 document the Tbilisi government perceived neither the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, nor Russia as serious military threats anymore.”¹³ In general, NSC 2005 emphasizes soft security risks, while hard security is given little attention. For example, state-building and strengthening of democratic institutions and economy take more central role in the document than the territorial conflicts, although the Concept emphasized the need for a peaceful settlement vis-à-vis the separatist territories.

NSC 2005’s benign view of Russia is nowhere to be found in NSC 2011. Instead, it identifies Russian military aggression and occupation as the top

¹¹ National Security Concept of Georgia, 2005

¹² National Security Concept of Georgia, 2005

¹³ Gela Merabishvili, András Rácz and Annamária Kiss, “Development of Georgian Security Policy in the Light of Strategic Documents: Analysis of the National Security Concepts of 2005 and 2011”, in *Panorama of global security environment 2014*, Peter Bátor – Róbert Ondrejcsák (eds.), Center for European and North Atlantic Affairs (CENAA), Bratislava, 2015, pp. 183-193.

threat and risk to national security. The ending of the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is listed as the number one priority. The document also provides a broader picture for evaluating the threat emanating from Russia:

In the light of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the NSC 2011 turned out to be rather prophetic when stated: 'Russia's disrespect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states – and its attempts to change the European and Euro-Atlantic security architectures and restore the principle of "spheres of interests" – endanger not only Georgia, but also all states that are neighbors of the Russian Federation as well as European security in general.' Though at the time when the NSC was adopted in December 2011, such an assessment was probably intended to serve mostly domestic political objectives, particularly in the light of the approaching 2012 parliamentary elections, finally it turned out to be more than accurate.¹⁴

Other changes that are not directly about Russia still provide additional layers for understanding how Tbilisi started to view Moscow after the 2008. For instance, the chapter on national values "sovereignty and territorial integrity" replaced the term "independence" to underscore the vital importance of indivisibility of the country within the constitutionally recognized borders. 2011 NSC further specified the definition of this national value - sovereignty - by including "forcible change of country's foreign policy," as a breach of Georgia's sovereignty:

Such a modification does not only reflect the impact of the war with Russia. By including foreign policy orientation as a decisive element of state sovereignty, the authors of the document hinted at what they believed the Russian motive behind the aggression was. Ever since August 2008, the government had been reiterating that Russian aggression meant to derail the process of Georgia's integration with the West.¹⁵

The National Security Concept of 2011 paid much stronger attention to questions of hard security. This difference is quite visible in the assessment of Western actors' role in Georgia's security. If the first National Security Concept views NATO membership in terms of facilitator of Georgia's internal reform processes, the second, updated, Concept focuses on upgrading the country's defense capabilities through cooperation with NATO and acquiring certain security guarantees through membership in the Alliance. In case of the European Union, NSC 2011, in contrast to the original Concept of 2005, expects from the EU, "as the mediator of the Russian-Georgian Ceasefire Agreement of August 12, 2008 [to] exercise effective influence on the Russian Federation to fulfill the norms of international law and the international obligations it has undertaken."¹⁶

¹⁴ Merabishvili, Rác and Kiss, "Development of Georgian Security Policy", p.189

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 185

¹⁶ National Security Concept of Georgia, 2011

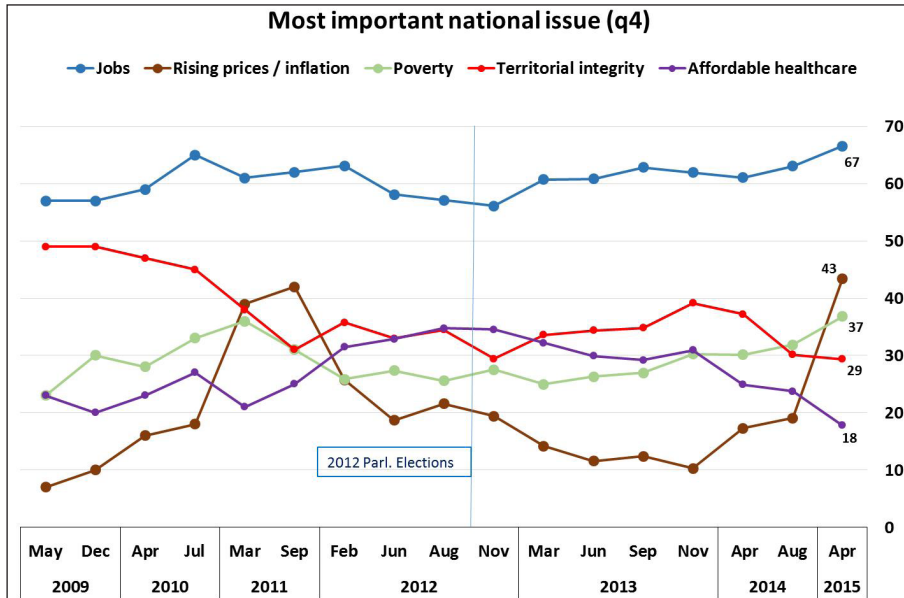
2. The National Security Concept and Public Opinion

Even though a country's foreign policy orientation and goals may be congruent with those of the public, a strategic document of a given country, such as a National Security Concept, should not necessarily mirror them. It is considered to be a long term vision of the country's security – and as such, constructed by the elites. Georgian foreign policy is considered to be elite driven, so it is the elite that predominantly defines the needs and priorities.¹⁷ Yet, the identity and perceptions of the population do shape foreign policy, thus, one may find it a legitimate component as well. Security is featured as a number one issue for Georgians in the public opinion polls conducted after 2008 August war between Georgia and Russia. In the 2008 Caucasus Barometer survey conducted three months after the war, territorial integrity and relations with Russia were perceived to be two top issues facing the country, jobs following them on the third place. Over time, the issue of unemployment became number one issue while the national security concerns have faded. Already in 2011, at the time of NSC publishing, 55% considered unemployment as the single most important issue, while only 12% answered territorial integrity.¹⁸ In 2015, not only unemployment (45%), but also economic development (17%) as an issue surpassed territorial concerns (14%) as the main problem facing Georgia.¹⁹ Devaluation of Georgian Lari, which was occurring for the most of 2014 and 2015, could be the reason for the rising importance of economic concerns for the public.

¹⁷ Kakachia, Kornely – Minesashvili, Salome: “Identity politics: Exploring Georgian Foreign Policy Behavior” in: *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Eom – White (eds.), Hanyang University, South Korea, 6 2015, pp.171-180.

¹⁸ “Caucasus Barometer 2011 Georgia”, public opinion poll, *The Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC)*, Tbilisi, Georgia

¹⁹ “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia”, public opinion poll, *International Republican Institute*, 2015.



All waves are nationally representative of Georgian speakers

Figure 1. **Most Important National Issues, 2009-2015**

Source: National Democratic Institute

Figure 1 illustrates this decline of concern over territorial integrity.²⁰ If in 2009 jobs and territorial integrity are virtually in the same 50-60 percent region, in 2015 the latter falls well behind the former as well as other economic concerns: rising prices and poverty. Slight uptick at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 could be explained by the Russian activities of erecting border fences to separate South Ossetian territory from the rest of Georgia. The so-called “borderization” gained much media attention around the fall of 2013, which coincides with the brief upwards trajectory of territorial integrity in the graph above.

NSC 2011 viewed NATO primarily as a guarantor of national security and regional stability and expected the EU to pressure Russia into fulfilling its obligations of 2008 ceasefire agreement and in a more general terms, play more active role on the conflict settlement process. The public, just like NSC 2011, views NATO predominantly as a military organization. The most common expectation respondents have from the membership in the Alliance is

²⁰ “Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of April 2015”, public opinion poll, *National Democratic Institute*, The survey was carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

greater security for Georgia, mentioned by 57%, according to the latest polls from 2015. But not as many are sure that the membership will improve Georgia's chances to restore territorial integrity (16%) or that it will protect Georgia from Russia (9%).²¹ This discrepancy could suggest two assumptions. First, many people may be aware of the fact that deepening relations with NATO means a better trained and armed Georgian army. The trainings with NATO armies are a massive added value and investment into the future of the national army and yet, it obviously would not be enough to counter Russia if it comes to that. Second, while Georgians do not generally believe that NATO forces will fight the Russia's to defend Georgia, the country's membership in the North-Atlantic Alliance will provide enough reason to the Kremlin not to attack the neighbor. Membership in NATO prevents potential Russian military intervention and makes Georgia more secure than it is now.

Attitudes towards the EU are somewhat different. In 2009, 33% of respondents believed that the EU membership would significantly increase possibility of restoring territorial integrity. However, over the years, the figure declined to 6% in 2015. A similar downward trend can be noticed in the questions where CRRC replaced "possibility of restoring territorial integrity" with "level of national security" from 34% in 2009 to 8% in 2015.²² This declining trend could perhaps be attributed to lack of actual progress in reconciliation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia despite deepening the level of integration with the EU. Besides, absence of any visible EU efforts in supporting the process of reconciliation could have influenced the trend. These figures run contrary to the government's belief that closer EU integration would help the country to reintegrate these regions.

Yet, the EU as a potential contributor to Georgia's security still retains some credibility in the Georgian public: in 2015, as a reason for supporting the country's accession in the EU, second and third most common answers were "Georgia would be better protected from foreign threats" (23%) and "Georgia would have a better chance at achieving territorial integrity" (18%). But the reasons related to security trailed well behind the most common response that the membership in the EU would improve respondents' economic con-

²¹ "Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of a November 2015", public opinion poll, *National Democratic Institute*, The survey was carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

²² "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia", The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2009, Tbilisi, Georgia and *Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia*, The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2015, Tbilisi, Georgia

dition (44%).²³ Another survey from 2015 showed that Georgian public two top expectations from the EU are economic development (26%) and visa-free movement (16%).²⁴ Based on these numbers, we can assume that the next NSC will tone down the inflated expectations the NSC 2011 has regarding the EU's security role in the country.

The polls show that the EU can be viewed as a threat, not just as contributor of Georgian security. It is impossible to find this view in the NSCs but it happens to on the rise steadily among the public. If in 2009 only 23% agreed that the EU threatens Georgian traditions, in 2011 the figure grew to 29% and already in 2015 a staggering 45% shared this idea.²⁵ This trend could be viewed as confirming the intensification of Russia's soft power and propaganda reach in Georgia aimed at, among others, supporting the spread of anti-western myths and stereotypes.²⁶ NSC 2011 has spectacularly failed to notice this aspect of Russian threat to Georgia's national security. These public surveys are good indicators that the threat of Russia is not limited to hard power and needs a more detailed focus in the new NSC.

Rising suspicions about the EU are coupled with the steep decline in popularity of the bloc as a partner. Among the respondents of the question, with whom should Georgia have the closest political cooperation, the EU had ratings in mid-sixties from 2009 to 2013, followed by sharp decline down to 49% in 2015.²⁷ This is in contrast to the progress Georgia has made in its European integration process in the past few years.

Similarly to the EU, the US rating as desired closest political partner has declined significantly since 2011 from 71% to 46% in 2015.²⁸ Yet, the US still maintains its position as Georgia's most important friend with 39%.²⁹ Decline of US popularity did not happen only in Georgia. According to the Levada Centre, positive attitudes towards the United States among Russians fell from

²³ "Knowledge of and Attitudes towards the EU in Georgia: Trends and Variations 2009 – 2015", *Eurasia Partnership Foundation*, Tbilisi, Georgia., 2015

Available: http://www.crrc.ge/uploads/files/reports/EU_attitudes_survey_eng_nov_24_2015.pdf

²⁴ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia", 2015

²⁵ "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia", and *Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia*, The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2011 and "Georgia and Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia"

²⁶ "Threats of Russia's Soft and Hard Power Policy in Georgia", Policy Document, *European Initiatives - Liberal Academy*, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2016. Available from:

<http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/threats%20of%20russian%20soft%20and%20hard%20power.pdf>

²⁷ "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia" of 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015, *CRRC*, Tbilisi, Georgia

²⁸ "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia" of 2011 and 2015

²⁹ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia", 2015

55-60% in 2010-2011 to under 20% in 2015.³⁰ Anti-American propaganda spread by Russian media with its reach in neighboring countries, especially activated after the Ukrainian Maidan and Crimea's annexation, could be cited to explain decreasing American appeal both in Russia as well as in Georgia.

As for Russia itself, in 2011 only 4% of Georgians considered Russia to be Georgia's biggest friend, while 51% perceived the northern neighbor as the biggest enemy.³¹ In the same year, 71% believed that Russia threatened Georgia's security, while only 9% believed otherwise.³² Four years later, Russia still maintains the huge lead as the nation's biggest enemy (76%), even though its image as the most important partner has been somewhat restored (18%).³³

These figures very much reflect the way the NSC 2011 portrays Russia as a key threat and enemy. However, unlike the NSC 2011, perception of Russia among the Georgians is multifaceted and even self-contradictory. For instance, according to the 2015 survey, more people would like Georgia to have the closest political cooperation with Russia (54%) than with the EU (49%) or the US (46%).³⁴ Even more surprising, the figure for Russia (54%) was identical in 2009, a year after the 2008 war and at the height of very anti-Russian government in Tbilisi.³⁵ It shows the disjuncture between the public's and the government's opinion of Russia at the time of writing the NSC 2011. The document views Russia solely as a threat to Georgian security, while public opinion polls show that fear and love can be complementary emotions when it comes to attitudes towards Moscow.

One way to interpret the discrepancy between the UNM elite's strictly hostile attitude towards Russia and the rest of the populations ambivalent stance is to argue that after the loss of 2008 war the government struggled to maintain domestic and to an extent, international legitimacy. Its post-2008 discourse of unconditional pro-Western foreign policy and fierce anti-Russianism was devised to create a nationalist narrative, to monopolize modern Georgian identity and shape it in a way that favored the UNM's policies and actions. In essence, it was a classic "rally 'round the flag" strategy. As George Khelashvili, Georgian scholar of the country's foreign and security policies, argued in 2011, "[p]aradoxically, the war of August 2008, despite Georgia's spectacular military

³⁰ Левада-Центр, Международные отношения: друзья и "враги" России, 08.06.2015, available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2015/06/08/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya-druzya-i-vragi-rossii/>

³¹ "Caucasus Barometer Georgia", 2011

³² "Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of a March 2011", public opinion poll, *National Democratic Institute*, The survey was carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

³³ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia", 2015

³⁴ "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia", 2015

³⁵ "Knowledge and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia", 2009

defeat, increased the popular basis of his pro-Western and anti-Russian political rhetoric. [P]opular mobilization in the face of the Russian threat [became] [o]ne of the major political tools in the hands of Saakashvili, which helped him to remain in power.”³⁶ Through this narrative, the UNM then sought to marginalize political opponents. Frederik Coene and Donnacha Ó Beacháin call it “a legitimacy management strategy”³⁷, while British political scientist and observer of Georgian politics, Neil MacFarlane, explains this political intent in the following way:

Although the empirical/analytical merits of the Concept’s characterization of the threat from Russia and the risks attending that threat may be questioned, the political value of this image for the Georgian government is clear. In the domestic arena, a strong enemy image can be used to justify the concentration of power at the expense of democratic process. It also helps in the debate with the opposition. To the extent that this image is accepted by the public, it is likely to support the government in the face of a foreign threat to Georgia’s survival, as happened after Georgia’s defeat in the 2008 war. Those opponents who suggest exploring the possibility of accommodation with Russia can be caricatured as naive or, worse, as creatures of Russia. Such accusations are frequent in Georgian political discourse.³⁸

This tactic became especially apparent in the run-up to 2012 elections, when the key point of attack against Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream was his and his party’s association with Russia.³⁹ It is interesting to note that the 2011 NSC, which contained all the major tenets of the aforementioned national narrative, was adopted in late December 2011, just a few weeks after Ivanishvili declared about his intention to challenge Saakashvili in the 2012 elections and established his Georgian Dream political movement, which later turned into political party.

Apart from containing diverse and conflicting viewpoints, Georgians’ perception of Russia and its role in the country’s security has been dynamic and changing over the past years. Figure 2 shows that prior to the 2012 elections, when the Georgian Dream coalition came to power, almost half of the respondents believed Russia to be a real and existing threat. The United National Movement applied this narrative quite liberally, trying to cast out the

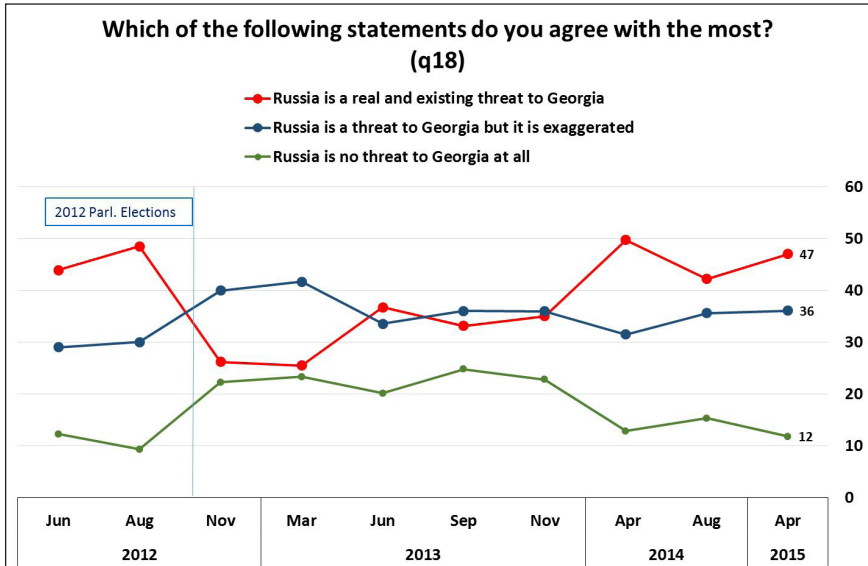
³⁶ George Khelashili, “Georgia’s Foreign Policy Impasse: Is consensus crumbling?” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 187, September 2011

³⁷ Donnacha O Beachain & Frederik Coene, Go West: Georgia’s European identity and its role in domestic politics and foreign policy objectives, *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 42:6, 923-941

³⁸ Neil MacFarlane, “Georgia: National Security Concept versus National Security”, Chatham House, 2012, p. 18

³⁹ “Saakashvili: ‘We Live in the Epoch of Revival’”, *Civil Georgia*, 11 January 2012. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24345>

opposition. “Georgian Dream was depicted as a willing pawn of the Kremlin’s larger geopolitical design to dominate Georgia and re-orientate the country away from the West and toward Russia,” write Coene and Ó Beacháin, “[but] the charge that Ivanishvili was a fifth columnist, however, never achieved the traction necessary to be a game-changer, not least because no hard evidence was produced to sustain the allegation.”⁴⁰



All waves are nationally representative of Georgian speakers

Figure 2. Whether Russia is a threat to Georgia, 2015

Source: National Democratic Institute

The narrative quickly changed after the elections when the new government tried to take a more moderate and pragmatic stance towards Russia. The elite’s approach apparently affected the public mood as well: share of people perceiving Russia as an existing threat significantly diminished, until the beginning of 2014, which can only be explained by the Ukrainian events. In March 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and soon after that manufactured a whole new separatist war in Donbas, yet another one in the region. Many in Georgia see direct parallels between the situation in Ukraine and in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; hence the feeling of continuous Russian aggression and threat.

⁴⁰ O Beachain & Coene, *Go West*, p. 935

3. The Ukrainian Crisis in the Georgian Debates on National Security

Ukraine has always been one of Georgia's closest partners. This tie became even stronger during the presidencies of Mikheil Saakashvili and Viktor Yushchenko in the second half of the 2000s. Many Georgians live and work in Ukraine and many Ukrainians tourists visit Georgia every year. Therefore, it is not surprising that, first, the Maidan demonstrations, and then Russian military intervention in Ukraine, in the beginning of 2014 found significant reverberation in Georgia both among public and the political elite.

When it became apparent in the beginning of March 2014 that Russia was undertaking a military operation in Crimea, the key officials in the Georgian government, among them Prime Minister Garibashvili, criticized the Russian moves:

The decision of the Russian government to send additional troops to Ukraine is a clear violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and international law. The international community, especially the European Union and the United States of America, must use all efforts to ensure against the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The international community must respond immediately to these processes and compel Russia to give up its forceful actions. Otherwise, we may end up facing yet another wave of aggression and occupation, which Georgia has experienced firsthand.⁴¹

The opposition UNM party was not, however, satisfied with the government's reaction to the developments in Ukraine and demanded more active words and steps, among them a parliamentary resolution, calling for sanctions on Russia. While both parties, GD and UNM, agreed on the content and the message of the resolution – declaring moral support for Ukraine and condemning the Russian intervention – the wording became a bone of contention. Specifically, the lawmakers could not agree on the inclusion of word “sanctions” demanded by the opposition. In the end, the Parliamentary majority adopted a resolution which “calls on the international community, primarily the European Union and the United States, to take efficient political, economic and diplomatic measures to assist Ukrainian people, to protect Ukraine from Russian Federation's aggression, to avoid armed conflict and to achieve Georgia's de-occupation.”⁴² The UNM lawmakers did not vote for this version of

⁴¹“West Must Compel Russia to Stop Forceful Actions Against Ukraine“, citing Irakli Garibashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia, *Civil Georgia*, 2 March 2014. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26996>

⁴²“Parliament Adopts Resolution on Ukraine, Fails to Show Unanimity“, *Civil Georgia*, 6 March 2014. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27015>

resolution and accused the GD members of being “more loyal towards Russia rather than towards Georgia’s interests”.⁴³ The common response from the GD coalition suggested that the UNM tried to “create its “political platform” out of developments in Ukraine”.⁴⁴

Since assuming the role of opposition, foreign policy and relations with Russia have been key attacking points for UNM against the governing coalition. Therefore, the party probably hoped to win some domestic political points by accusing GD of accommodating Russia. On the one hand, this accusation seems at least partially true. The GD’s opposition to including the following wording – “calls on the Georgian government to carry out active diplomatic campaign for the purpose of diplomatic isolation of and imposing sanctions against the Russian Federation” – in the resolution indicates that the government tried to stick with its pragmatic and moderate approach with Russia in its response to the Ukrainian issue.⁴⁵ The GD’s more restrained and rather diplomatic rhetoric, compared with the much more hostile tone of the UNM proposal, also echoes the initial GD-proposed draft of resolution on foreign policy that the Parliament had adopted a year before with several changes. In the initial draft, the GD proposed that “Georgia’s policy should not be directed towards performing a role of a strategic player in the process of ongoing confrontation on a global and regional scale. It is in the interests of Georgia that its factor to no longer be in the list of differences between the West and Russia.”⁴⁶

However, the moderate position that the GD government tried to maintain seems to be very much in tune with the public opinion of the time. According to the April 2014 polls, 63% approved and only 15% disapproved the government’s action condemning Russia. Although 46% believed that more effort had to be taken to support Ukraine (against 30%), only 14% of those considered economic sanctions on Russia as an appropriate additional action. An overwhelming majority (69%) thought that humanitarian assistance was the best way to show support to Ukraine.⁴⁷ The government’s approach, reflected in the adopted resolution on Ukraine on 6 March 2014, takes a middle ground between the positions of UNM, on the one side, and the wider public, on the other. The resolution “appeals the Government of Georgia to render

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Parliament Plans Resolution on Ukraine”, *Civil Georgia*, 5 March 2014. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27009>

⁴⁶ “GD Unveils Draft of Agreement on Foreign Policy Priorities”, *Civil Georgia*, 11 February 2013. Available from: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25744>

⁴⁷ “Public attitudes in Georgia”, 2014

meaningful humanitarian aid to brotherly Ukrainian people” and urges the international community “to take efficient political, economic and diplomatic measures to protect Ukraine from Russian aggression”, which obviously implies the sanctions without explicitly mentioning the S-word.⁴⁸In the end, Georgia did not join the international sanctions on Russia and limited its support to Ukraine to humanitarian aid in the form of medical supplies. According to April 2014 polls by NDI, 67% approved the government’s response to the Crimean crisis, while only 13% disapproved.

If GD’s policy decisions were closer to *vox populi*, UNM’s alarmist views appeared more in tune with the changing public attitudes. As mentioned already in the previous section, starting from the early 2014 more Georgians began to worry about the Russian threat. Between November 2013 and April 2014, when Crimea was already annexed and fighting was about to start in Donbass, the percentage of those who viewed Russia as real and existing threat rose from 36 to 50. In general, the Georgian public overwhelmingly took the Ukrainian side in the events: 62% perceived Russia as the responsible side in the Ukrainian crisis and 66% disapproved Crimea uniting with Russia.⁴⁹

A similar change in the public’s threat perception can be observed in the IRI survey. In November 2012, right after the GD victory in the October parliamentary elections, 23% believed that Russian aggression against Georgia is over and unlikely to resume, which was significantly higher than just 4% who thought so only a few months earlier in March 2012. But then, between May 2013 and February 2014, at the height of Maidan revolution, the number significantly decreased to its UNM-era lows (7% in 2014 and 6% a year later). Meanwhile the share of those who thought that Russian aggression against Georgia is ongoing rose from mid-40 percentages in late 2012 and throughout 2013 to 71% in February 2014.⁵⁰

In a 2015 poll, a NDI survey somewhat vindicated the UNM’s allegation that GD policies favors Russian interests in Georgia. 44% of the surveyed believed that Russian influence increased in Georgia since 2012; more than some of those who thought that it stayed the same or decreased. However, another NDI poll at the end of 2015 brought vindication this time to GD and its approach towards Russia. Almost 9 out of 10 Georgians, according to the poll, support a cautious policy towards Russia, promoted by GD, and only about 1 in 5 would like to see assertive policies vis-a-vis Russia, which more associated

⁴⁸“Parliament Adopts Resolution on Ukraine”, 2014

⁴⁹“Public attitudes in Georgia”, 2014

⁵⁰“Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia”, 2015

with UNM's approach. Additionally, a solid 65% fully support dialogue with Russia as of February 2015; however, it should be noted that the number has significantly decreased since the start of the Ukraine war; in 2013 the figure stood at 82%.⁵¹

Conclusions

In the past decade, perceptions of national security have been constantly fluctuating. If in the wake of Rose Revolution the UNM government expected close partnership with Russia, while excluding serious security risks coming from the Kremlin, the mood drastically changed in just a few years, and even faster after the 2008 war. The change in perception became particularly apparent in the second edition of National Security Concept, published in 2011. The document significantly differed from its 2005 predecessor in identifying the threats in focusing mostly on Russia and its ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following the 2012 parliamentary elections which brought the Georgian Dream coalition in power, the country's policies towards Russia became more moderate; so too have the public attitudes changed. In 2012 and 2013, fewer people tended to believe that Russia was a national threat to Georgia. But this did not last long. With the Maidan and the Crimean annexation, Russia as a national security threat started to grow again not just in Georgia, but in other post-Soviet and eastern European countries as well.

Georgian national security debates are very much guided by larger ongoing geopolitical dynamics. The question of the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are directly linked to Russia. It is a mainstream understanding in Tbilisi that Moscow, not Sukhumi or Tskhinvali, is the principal opponent of Georgia's territorial integrity. When it comes to finding ways to solve these conflicts, the Georgian government views NATO and EU as the best option(s). In these two major issues of security – de-occupation and Euro-Atlantic orientation – a consensus within the elite exists; however, within that consensus there are differing opinions about which different tools deserve favour and what the proper time frames are for reaching these goals. A polarized view of the outside world is the key feature of the 2011 National Security Concept, which replaced the more balanced 2005 version.

The overview of public attitudes shows that the population does not share the polarized view of security in which the Western actors are the only

⁵¹ "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia", 2015

force for good, while Russia poses the only threat. Public surveys reflect more nuanced positions that people of Georgia have towards the outside actors: they view Russia as hostile; however, a significant part of the population would like to have close cooperation with Moscow. Meanwhile, more and more citizens perceive the EU as a threat to Georgia, albeit in a non-traditional way: a threat to change the country's conservative values and way of life, rather than directly harming its national security.

The case study on the effects of the Ukrainian crisis on the debates on national security in Georgia explains the divergence between public and elite perceptions. The case showed that foreign and security policy is quite often a tool in the hands of politicians to undermine political opponents. Therefore, the narratives pronounced by the elite groups quite often might derive from political calculations and might aim at shaping the electorates' opinion(s), instead of reflecting the popular attitudes and following a rational understanding of national security needs.

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