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RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE: A HOBSON’S CHOICE FOR GEORGIA

Abstract: *This paper examined the implications of the war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Georgia. Georgia, due to its comparative disadvantage to Russia and as a close neighbour, has been faced with a dilemma since the beginning of the war. The Georgian authorities are confronted with the options of either supporting Russia or supporting the West in support of Ukraine to achieve their aim of joining the European Union/NATO. Neither of the two options is better than the other for the Georgian President, that have no negative consequences for the regime. The Georgian President decided to side with the Russian government to live in peace with their neighbour rather than fulfilling the requirements set by the West for the prospective members of the EU. Therefore, supporting Russia in the war with Ukraine has damaged the relationship between Georgia and the West one hand, and huge discontent among the majority of Georgians on the other. This is because the overwhelming majority of the citizens of Georgia are not comfortable with a cordial relationship with Russia because of its domineering tendency in the Black Sea Region and other parts of Eastern Europe. The continuous uprising among the citizens and the frozen relationship with the West are helping the opposition party in Georgia to regain popularity and possibly defeat the ruling party in the next election.*

Keywords: *Hobson’s Choice, Russia-Ukraine War, Security, Economic, Social, Implications*

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Introduction

The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Georgia has multiple implications; there are both positive and negative consequences on social, domestic politics, economic and foreign relationships with the Black Sea region and the European Union (EU). The strategic location of Georgia in the Black Sea for trade, military and politics has made its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war very significant for its internal security and politics of Georgia Dream. Georgia is at a political and security crossroads in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with either supporting Russia or an EU-led decision.

First, Georgia has long had strong economic relations with both Russia and Ukraine as a former Soviet country. Although they have fallen significantly since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the connections with Russia are still important. Georgia mostly imported staple items, including wheat flour, maize, buckwheat, edible oils, etc., from Russia. Georgia had significant export markets in both Russia and Ukraine. About 60% of Georgia's wine exports and 47% of its mineral water exports were being absorbed by Russia, while Ukraine was one of Georgia's primary importers of alcohol and spirits (46 per cent of exports). Other areas where Georgia is considerably weaker than Ukraine and more closely related to Russia are tourism and remittances. Before the outbreak, Russia received 24% of all tourism-related income in 2019, compared to 6% from Ukraine. In 2021, remittances from Russia made up about 16.5% of all inbound transfers². Impliedly, remittances have increased by the middle of 2025 by more than 40 per cent going based on a crude estimate. Against this background, it has been revealed that the symbiotic relationship between the Russian Federation and Georgia, the latter stands to benefit more than the former in the relationship.

However, in discussing the internal security and other social institutions of Georgia after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Georgia has found itself in a difficult political and security situation. It has been observed that since the declaration of partial mobilisation in Russia, the country has seen an increase in the number of Russian people seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, which it is among the destinations for migrants. Tensions in Georgia developed as a result of this rapid influx of the Russians. However, some experts on the Black Sea studies have provided a divergent analysis on the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Georgia. They stated that pro-Russian misinformation, which was one of the main issues facing Georgia's national security challenges, has gotten even worse, focusing on the weakest facets of society and stated that Georgia should cut ties with its Western allies. Georgia has been granted a special window of opportunity to go on its path towards European integration by being granted EU candidate status, although facing an unparalleled collection of obstacles³.

² Y. Babych, *Georgian economy and one year of Russia's war in Ukraine: trends and risks*. "Policy Paper, ISET Policy Brief Series" 2023, pp. 1-13.

³ T. Chikhladze, S. Shiukashvili, T. Tavkhelidze, *Impact of the Russian War against Ukraine on Georgia*. "Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD)" 2023, No. 135, pp. 2-18.

In the same vein, explaining how the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has spill-over effects on the security of Georgia, it was found that Russia has adopted hybrid warfare against Georgia for many years. However, Russian propaganda operations have stepped up much more after Russia's action against Ukraine was redoubled. The general goal of Moscow's disinformation campaigns is to strengthen anti-Western sentiments and promote pro-Russian sentiments. Convincing the populace that the West will not support them in times of need and that Georgia should fundamentally alter its approach to Russia, that is, set aside any Euro-Atlantic ambitions and instead form an alliance and cooperation with Russia, is another important goal⁴.

Furthermore, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has drastically altered the regional security landscape in the Black Sea region. It has also caused unheard-of tensions in Georgia, where the administration has been re-establishing certain connections with Moscow while the mass of the populace supports European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The extraordinary influx of Russian nationals into Georgia has increased discontent among Georgians, sparked worries about security, and increased the nation's reliance on Moscow for economic growth⁵. This clearly showed that the leaders of Georgia and their citizens are not on the same page regarding the war between Russia and Ukraine, which leads to the government losing support and legitimacy from the citizens and ultimately has negative consequences on the internal security of the country due to popular uprising and unrest.

From a foreign policy perspective, which has a direct relationship with internal security, the conflict has had a major impact on Georgia's foreign policy stance. The three nations that make up the so-called Association Trio, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, were given a European viewpoint as a result of the significant shift in European perceptions of Ukraine. Georgia, however, was not granted EU candidate status, in contrast to the other two nations. This meant that, at least at this point, a historical opportunity was lost. Furthermore, the new international environment exacerbated a trend that had already been evident in recent years by further separating Georgia from the West rather than fostering greater ties with the West and new democratic reforms⁶.

Connected to the preceding perspective on international or foreign relations, there were two opposing effects of the war on Georgia's connections with the global democratic community. The decision by the Georgian government to apply for EU membership, which would have implied even deeper ties with the EU and the West generally, was made during the war. But the same backdrop also

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ N. Sescuria, *An Impact of the Influx of Russians in Georgia*, "Caucasus Analytical Digest" 2023, No. 135, pp. 8-12.

⁶ G. Nodia, *The Influence of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Georgian Politics*, "Caucasus Institute for Peace and Democracy Development, Policy Paper" 2022, pp. 1-20.

fuelled an unparalleled decline in ties between the Georgian administration and the global democratic community. For what reason was Georgia not granted EU candidate status? Georgia was seen as superior to the other Trio members for a long time, particularly in terms of corruption. According to the GD's original justification, location was the deciding factor, and the EU had no good reason to favour Moldova and Ukraine over Georgia based on the nations' respective performances. This was based on a declaration made by French President Emmanuel Macron, who advocated for giving candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine but not to Georgia, citing geographic reasons for his decision⁷.

Review of Relevant Literature

Significance of the Russia-Ukraine War on Georgia: Multiple Implications

There have been two significant changes in the South Caucasus' geopolitical landscape after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. First, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia has lacked a strategic response that emphasises its national interests and security priorities. The Georgian government has been focusing on short-term benefits instead. Georgia would be at greater risk from a weakened Russia, and the prospects of joining NATO as its sole security guarantee remain hazy and far off. Domestic political polarisation in Georgia is increasing, and since the government is the primary gainer of polarisation, many Georgians feel that, rather than addressing this issue, it is fostering it. None of Georgia's political parties is trusted by the majority of Georgians. The results of the August 2022 NDI survey indicate that the two most polarising elements in Georgian society are politics and Russia. With 20% of Georgia's land under occupation and ongoing borderization, Russia has played a significant role in internal politics since the August 2008 war, making it much more than a foreign policy issue⁸. Increasing insecurity in the Black Sea region, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, has drastically altered the regional security landscape. It has also caused previously unheard-of problems in Georgia, where the administration has been re-establishing certain connections with Moscow while the mass of the populace supports European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In addition to increasing Georgia's economic reliance on Moscow, the enormous influx of Russian citizens into the country has increased Georgian discontent and sparked security worries⁹.

Similarly, a severe crisis of trust in the government's activities is Georgia's main problem, which has been exacerbated by Russia's full-scale invasion of

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ I. Machitidze, *The Impact of the Russian War Against Ukraine on the EaP Region: Georgia*, "Input paper", New Vision University 2023.

⁹ N. Seskuria, *op. cit.*

Ukraine. Sixty-five per cent of Georgians do not think their country is a democracy, up from 59% in 2019. The majority of Georgians, according to public opinion polls, anticipate economic collapse, the emergence of pro-Russian political groups, a higher likelihood of direct Russian military assault, and deteriorating connections with the EU. The second significant obstacle is the Georgian government's commitment to securing EU Candidate Status and ensuring EU allies that the government is making investments in a long-term plan to carry out the aforementioned changes. Establishing Georgia as a trustworthy Western ally in the advancement of democracy and human rights is the third significant obstacle. One of the concerning indications that Georgia is giving up its position as a "democracy champion" in favour of a more practical approach to regional authoritarian powers like Iran is its absence from the 77th session of the UN Third Committee, where the resolution denouncing human rights abuses in Iran was drafted. This is an example of a fundamental change where opportunistic short-term gains are valued more highly than long-term planning¹⁰.

A complicated connection is reflected in the opinions of Georgians towards Russia, where the majority of them viewed it as a security risk. In its election campaign, the ruling party effectively capitalised on the 74% of people who think Georgia could not defend itself if Russia launched a war, blaming the opposition for supposedly driving Georgia into conflict. However, 43% of Georgians surveyed want to work with Russia more; 50% disagree. However, there is also a desire to lessen dependency on Russia, even if doing so lowers Georgia's level of living (58%)¹¹. However, despite Georgia's neutral, potentially defensive posture, the majority (74%) of respondents support ongoing assistance for Ukraine, which is the second-highest percentage in the survey. The respondents who support humanitarian aid the most are from Georgia. As a result, they oppose sending soldiers, which is the third-highest level of opposition in the survey. Although women are marginally more supportive than men (23% vs. 18%), people are nonetheless apprehensive about increased weapons delivery. Significant majorities of Georgians are in favour of Ukraine joining the EU (72%) and NATO (64%). This clearly portrayed the position of the Georgians regarding the war between Ukraine and Russia. It has pitted the Government and its citizens on two different political divides. The results have established that the significant majority of the population of Georgia wants their country to be pro-EU or the West, while the incumbent political power holders are pro-Russia. This polarisation has deep implications for security, the economy and the stability of Georgia. Examined the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the foreign policy of Georgia. It has been observed that before the invasion of Ukraine by

¹⁰ I. Machitidze, *op. cit.*

¹¹ A. Dienes, E. Josten, *Georgia's look to the future. One eye on Russia, the other on the West*, "Security Radar" 2025, pp. 1-7.

Russia, the Georgian foreign policy was pro-West because of its desire to join the European Union. Corroborating further, Russia's invasion of Ukraine changes Georgia's geopolitical situation and has an immediate impact on its potential for future growth. The war has affected all sectors in Georgia, ranging from domestic politics, energy, electricity and natural gas¹².

Georgia, as a non-NATO member littoral state, with an ongoing Russian occupation of part of its territory and facing continual pressure from Moscow through myriad unconventional methods, is in a highly vulnerable position. Russia's Black Sea policies have profoundly altered Georgia's security, both internally and externally. The 2008 Russia–Georgia War marked a key shift by Moscow in its policy towards the Black Sea as it sought to counter Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Since the war, Tbilisi has paid a high price for seeking to break away from Russia's regional sphere of influence, with 20% of its territory occupied. Moscow's actions have led to Georgia being a hostage to its proximity to Russia, lacking a border with the EU, and being viewed by some of the EU states, such as France, as being in a different geopolitical category from Ukraine and Moldova¹³.

Discourse on Georgia's Internal Security

Political groups in Georgia that have aimed to maintain a balance with Moscow have been strengthened by the lack of clarity surrounding the Euro-Atlantic community's security commitment to Georgia. This trend has been strengthened by the invasion of Ukraine, which runs the risk of further isolating the nation and solidifying the area as part of Russia's sphere of influence. Thus, the conflict in Ukraine presents Georgia with a turning point and an opportunity to reassess its geopolitical positioning and ties with the transatlantic community. While Russian naval actions have severed ties across the Black Sea and Georgia's isolation has been further exacerbated by a tense internal political environment and increased political polarisation brought on by the war, the conflict has also created new opportunities to reshape Black Sea security with Georgia as a member of a larger regional community. Georgia might be more crucial as a transit route for trade, energy, and transportation over the Black Sea to the EU, avoiding Russia. Georgia's geostrategic location offers considerable advantages, but its limited maritime capabilities restrict its access to the broader Black Sea region.

In this regard, as Moscow has sought since the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, the February 2022 attack further contributed to Georgia's isolation and alienation

¹² T. Kvaratskhelia, M. Margvelashvili, G. Mukhigulishvili et al., *Effects Of The Russia-Ukraine War For Georgia's Energy Security In The Short-Term Perspective*, Report World Experience for Georgia (WEG), Tbilisi 2022, pp. 5-16.

¹³ N. Seskuria, *op. cit.*

from the Transatlantic community. NATO has been hesitant to present Tbilisi with a Membership Action Plan, despite the Alliance's progressive development of a security alliance with Georgia¹⁴. Without a real NATO security guarantee and without strong regional friends, Georgia has been at risk from Russian pressure, particularly over the potential annexation of Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia¹⁵. The incumbent Georgian Government (2025) did not impose Western sanctions and kept a distance from Kyiv while the war went on. As Tbilisi's commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration was questioned, these moves at home exacerbated political polarisation and increased tensions between Georgia and its transatlantic allies¹⁶.

Furthermore, as the most effective means of preventing more Russian aggression and creating a strong national deterrent, Georgia is still dedicated to joining NATO. NATO membership would effectively prevent Russian borderization efforts, ongoing attempts to intimidate Georgia, and escalation threats, even if it would not resolve Georgia's territorial problems. However, over ten years have passed since the 2008 Bucharest Summit, and Georgia's chances of joining are still on hold¹⁷. Even though the conflict in Ukraine has compelled the West to reconsider its policy, France and Germany's mistrust make Georgia's NATO membership a remote possibility. Georgia's security thinking must look beyond NATO to find methods to forge security partnerships inside a Black Sea security framework, given how rapidly the regional security landscape is evolving.

In this sense, it has been observed that Georgia must develop new avenues for enhancing connectivity during a period when Russia is seeking to control the Black Sea. Georgia's strategic importance has been greatly increased and regional security has benefited from critical projects including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway. Alternative routes to Western markets for trade, transportation, and energy across the Black Sea and the South Caucasus are becoming more and more crucial as the West is severing ties with Russia.

¹⁴ N. Gabritchidze, *More NATO Aid for Georgia, but no Progress on Membership*, Eurasianet 1 July 2022, <<https://eurasianet.org/more-nato-aid-for-georgia-but-no-progress-on-membership>> (24.03.2025).

¹⁵ Moscow's recognition in February 2022 of the independence of the two occupied regions of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk paved the way for the former de facto leader of South Ossetia, Anatoly Bibilov, to announce a referendum on unification with Russia, once again threatening Georgia. See: J. Kucera, *Questions Surround South Ossetian Referendum on Joining Russia*, Eurasianet 16 May 2022, <<https://eurasianet.org/questions-surround-south-ossetian-referendum-on-joining-russia>> (24.03.2025).

¹⁶ Kakachia K., Lebanidze B., *Georgia's Crossroad After Crossroad: Paths of Risk and Resilience*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 792, September 2022.

¹⁷ NATO, *Bucharest Summit Declaration*, 3 April 2008, accessed 20 September 2022, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm> (25.03.2025).

Georgia has the opportunity to establish itself as a major transit route and centre for connectivity. One example of how Georgia might establish itself as a dependable transit route, reaping economic benefits and simultaneously increasing its Black Sea geostrategic significance for NATO, is the eagerly awaited and postponed Anaklia deep-sea port¹⁸. Strategic initiatives like the Anaklia port have the potential to transform Georgia into a logistical hub in the Caucasus, drawing foreign direct investment to the nation despite its weaknesses in the marine domain.

For Georgia to address some of its domestic security challenges, finding methods to involve Ankara more in regional security as part of a bolstered transatlantic regional presence and to move Ankara away from Moscow are important problems, given Turkey's leadership role in the Black Sea and its balancing stance with Russia. Along with the US and the UK, Turkey has been one of the biggest advocates for Georgia's accession to NATO. Georgia and Turkey have a strategic alliance that includes collaboration in the fields of energy, economics, and military affairs. This gives Georgia the chance to strengthen its relationship with Turkey on important initiatives both bilaterally and multilaterally, as well as to boost Ankara's interest in Georgia's security. Additionally, Georgia ought to seek to collaborate closely with regional state groups, particularly those that are directly associated with NATO¹⁹.

Georgia prioritises developing marine security cooperation because of its geostrategic location and vulnerability. Russia destroyed the majority of Georgia's navy in 2008 through air and sea attacks. Given the extent of the devastation, it was decided to combine the navy's remaining elements with the Border Police Coast Guard after the war rather than rebuilding it²⁰. National security priorities should now include developing civilian and naval maritime capabilities and forming the alliances necessary to function as a part of a Black Sea maritime security community. However, establishing such a priority calls for the right financial resources. Georgia is lacking in this area. Working with the West, mainly the US and the UK, is currently the only practical option, but the incumbent political leaders in Georgia are not considering such practical options. Given the difficulties in the Black Sea as of 2025, Georgia is well-positioned to persuade

¹⁸ M. Hess, M. Otarashvili, *Georgia's Doomed Deep-Sea Port Ambitions: Geopolitics of the Cancelled Anaklia Project*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2020.

¹⁹ Russia's war against Ukraine has promoted the revival of the sub-regional grouping, bringing together Georgia–Ukraine–Azerbaijan–Moldova (GUAM). This sort of cooperation is vital in the region and should form part of the developing network of ties making up a broader Black Sea security community. See: P. Goble, *Putin's War in Ukraine Leading to Revival of GUAM*, "Eurasian Daily Monitor" 2022, Vol. 19, No 148.

²⁰ L. Coffey, *The U.S. Must Ensure NATO's Door Remains Open to Georgia and Ukraine*, Middle East Institute 27 May 2021, <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-must-ensure-natos-door-remains-open-georgia-and-ukraine>> (25.03.2025).

allies to invest in enhancing its marine capabilities so that Tbilisi can work with Romania, Ukraine, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom to reduce Russia's naval presence in the Black Sea²¹.

Conclusion

The war between Russia and Ukraine has presented Georgia with two contrasting options to choose from. Either supporting Russia or Ukraine is without major consequences for the country. This is where the Hobson's choice is applied. Therefore, the authorities in Georgia decided to avoid Russian aggression and support the Kremlin in the war because it is regarded as the best option to live in peace with Russia and other EU members that are less aggressive compared to Russia. It was evident in the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia that the devastating effects and its scars are still in the minds of the Georgians, and this is why the ruling party want to avoid confrontation with Russia at all costs.

It could be deduced from the above discourse, from the economic sector, domestic politics, foreign relations, energy and electricity, that Georgia is confronted with a Hobson's choice. That is, taking sides with either Russia or Ukraine in the war has devastating effects on the country. The rationale behind the decision of the Georgian ruling party to take sides with Russia is not far from the fear of its military strength and political, as well as geographical influence, which was demonstrated in the 2008 war.

Deteriorating Georgia-West ties have also been observed in Georgia in 2024. A "foreign agents bill", approved by the Georgian government in May 2024, mandates that media and non-governmental organisations that obtain more than 20% of their income from sources outside of Georgia register as entities "pursuing the interests of a foreign power". This was directed at Georgia's numerous international NGOs, which the government (rightly) claims are conduits for Western influence and power. Under this legislation, Kobakhidze and Ivanishvili both threatened to outlaw the major opposition parties. Using backwards attitudes to buttress their position, Georgian Dream also approved a bill in October 2024 that drastically restricts LGBT people's democratic rights²².

Similarly, to address internal security, the Georgian government has tightened down on the rallies, accusing them of having "foreign trainers", arresting over 100 people in 2024, and raiding opposition offices, even though there has not been much actual violence during the arrests. As a result, Western institutions have blasted all of this. Georgian Dream politicians have already been subject to

²¹ N. Melvin, N. Seskuria, *A New Security Order in the Black Sea. The Role of Georgia*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies 2022, pp. 1-21.

²² J. Attard, *Pro-EU protests in Georgia as western imperialists plot a new Maidan*, 11 December 2024, <<https://marxist.com/pro-eu-protests-in-georgia-as-western-imperialists-plot-a-new-maidan.htm>> (25.03.2025).

a number of travel restrictions from Washington. Like so many other Eastern European nations, Georgia's predicament is a terrible result of the fall of the USSR, which paved the way for gangster capitalism. With imperialism's support, gangs of oligarchs carved up the remains of the planned economy for themselves. The "democratic West" wants Georgia to push back against their primary geopolitical foe in the region and to allow the country's labour and resources for exploitation, not to grant its citizens "freedom".

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