

UACES 44th Annual Conference

Cork, 1-3 September 2014

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Balancing a Tightrope: Constraints, Possibilities and Ideology in Georgian Foreign Policy, 1991-2014.

August 2014

Paper Presented at the 2014 UACES Conference, Cork, Ireland

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Introduction

Tbilisi's recent foreign and security policies have presented analysts working from a neorealist balance-of-power perspective with something of a puzzle. With Russia very much the regionally dominant power, against the predictions of structural-systemic theories (Jervis, 1978, pp. 172-173; Walt, 1990, pp. 29-31, 263; Waltz, 1979, p. 113; Wolfers, 1962, pp. 13-16), small state Georgia has ended up balancing against, rather than bandwagoning with great power Moscow, apparently disregarding a major structural constraint to its foreign and security policies. What is even more puzzling is the continuity of these pro-Western policies: they have persisted even after the country's defeat in the August 2008 war, and one-time 'fellow traveller' Ukraine's descent into what has escalated into civil conflict. Georgia's post-Saakashvili government has, for all its opposition to its predecessor's domestic policies, promised to continue Georgia's path toward NATO and EU integration, even as it has made a priority of improving relations with Moscow (Civil Georgia, 2012; The Messenger, 2014).

Some have explained this pro-Western stance through reference to *domestic* factors, including ideology and identity. In their recent article in *Security Studies*, for instance, Gvalia, Siroky, Lebanidze and Iashvili (2013) describe the post-2003 elite's ideological world-views as underlying their Westernising domestic and foreign policies. Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist (2009) have previously analysed the troubled Georgian-Russian relationship from the symbolic perspective of 'honour' and 'prestige'. There is no doubt that the ideational propensities of Saakashvili and his co-revolutionaries were instrumental in propelling Georgia westwards during the past decade; but domestic, ideological factors can only tell part of the story. In fact – and somewhat weakening a stand-alone 'ideological' explanation – Tbilisi's journey towards the West had started well before the Rose Revolution, under Eduard Shevardnadze. While having improved relations with Russia during the first years of his presidency, post-Soviet Georgia's pragmatic second president oversaw fast-growing ties with the West from 1996 onwards, often in direct contravention of Russian interests¹. This suggests something more than simple ideological preference as the driver of Tbilisi's westward turn.

This essay will analyse the complex Georgian-Russian-Western triangle from a neo-classical realist (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009; Rose, 1998) (rather than a neo-realist or pure 'innenpolitik') theoretical viewpoint. Contrary to its

¹ Although Shevardnadze was more cautious than Saakashvili in expressing his views on NATO membership, seeing it as a longer-term aspiration rather than an immediate goal, he was already pushing for the expansion of military links to the United States under a 'Train and Equip' programme, and threatening not to renew the mandate of Russian peacekeeping troops in the breakaway territories, in addition to demanding the closure of Russian military bases, over which agreement in principle was actually reached as early as in 2000. Writing in 2002, one prominent analyst described Georgia as "decidedly and sometimes desperately pro-Western" (Baev, 2002). By mid-2003 Shevardnadze was already unambiguously referring to NATO integration as guaranteeing Georgia's independence (BBC Monitoring, 2003; Interfax, 2003).

predecessor theory – neo-realism – neo-classical realism does not limit itself to the ‘third image’ of international relations, that is, the *international* level of political interaction, providing explanations as to systemic outcomes based on particular configurations of power – with the claim that small states will tend to bandwagon with dominant states as a prime example. Instead, it sees state behaviour as the result of an anarchic international environment structured by relative distributions of, mediated through domestic state structures, elites, ideas and interest groups (Sterling-Folker, 1997). As such, it thus takes neo-realism beyond Waltz’ (1979) and his direct successors’ parsimony; rather than assuming the ‘functional identity’ of units, it distinguishes between a range of internally generated motives and limiting factors that may affect their behaviour. Here, states remain constrained by the structure of anarchy, but exact policy outcomes are subject to varying priorities determined from within the state; in Rose’s (1998, pp. 146-147) words, there is no “perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior”.

Importantly, however, these domestic conditions are not independent variables in and of themselves; foreign policies are *not* explained based on the preferences of internal elites alone. Instead, the international system is integrated into explanations by viewing these elites as responding *imperfectly* (from the point of view of *rationality*) to *given structural conditions*. Balances of power so central to structural neo-realism still matter, but are defectively transmitted into the rational behaviour predicted by neo-realism: an elite’s ideological preferences and identities are one distorting factor in these imperfect transmission mechanisms (Sterling-Folker, 2009). Scholars in the neo-classical realist tradition also cite intra-state competition (Dueck, 2009), the state’s varying ability to extract resources (Taliaferro, 2009; Zakaria, 1998) or mobilise societies (Christensen, 1996; Schweller, 2009) towards policy, (mis)perceptions of the balance of power (Schweller, 2004; William Curti Wohlforth, 1993) as other possible intervening factors. Moreover, while the international system indeed tends towards rational outcomes over the longer term, specific situations require an understanding of the intra-state processes that may produce ‘aberrant’ behaviour over the shorter term.

Applying neo-classical realism to an analysis of Georgian foreign and security policies would thus require an assessment of the structural restraints under which the state operated, while at the same time looking into Georgia’s internal processes. In terms of structural constraints, the disparity of power between Tbilisi and Moscow posits an initial, overpowering constraint on the former (leading to the expectation of bandwagoning behaviour on the part of ‘purely systemic’ neo-realists): based on raw capabilities and proximity, Russia can very much be seen as the regionally preponderant power in the period under review. But this disparity of power is to some extent alleviated through the varying presence of the West (first of all the United States) within the South Caucasus. Especially after the re-election of Bill Clinton in 1996, Washington increased its activities in that region, at first in the economic, and, under George W. Bush, in

the military spheres as well². The European Union also included Georgia within its European Neighbourhood Policy, and, after 2009, the Eastern Partnership, leading to the signing of an Association Agreement in June this year. This is important because, as Wendt (1999, pp. 103-138) points out, a balance of power is dependent as much on raw capability as it is on the particular 'distribution of interests' throughout a system, and an ensuing willingness to actually project such power. Viewed in such terms – as the result of a combination of *capability* and *intent* – the balance of power in the South Caucasus could be seen to have varied during the past two decades, with Western - and particularly US - involvement and commitment arguably reaching a peak under George W. Bush.

Also, with the regional balance between Russia and the West so dependent on Washington and Brussels' intentions, on their commitment to regional involvement, *perceptions* of these commitments became a first, highly important intervening variable linking structural conditions – the balance of power – to foreign and security policy outputs. As already pointed out by many classical authors of IR – including Morgenthau (1985, pp. 213-231) – balances of power are notoriously difficult to assess, even more so at the regional level. As mentioned previously, misperceptions of such balances feature heavily in the growing neo-classical realist literature (William Curti Wohlforth, 1993). Moreover, as, for instance, clearly demonstrated in Wohlforth's (1987) discussion of perceptions of Russian power before World War I, it is not only perceptions of *current* balances that matter as intimations and calculations as to their future trajectories. In that sense, states often end up bandwagoning with or balancing other states not simply because of present conditions, but because of speculative projections into the future. Misperceptions and miscalculations consequently become quite regular occurrences, leading to behaviour that, from a safe distance, may seem 'irrational' to a third-party observer wedded to structural explanations. As I shall argue in the following sections, Georgian policies before and after the Rose Revolution were the result of such misperceptions of Russia's relative regional decline, and miscalculations as to the West's – especially the United States' and NATO's - readiness to project power into the South Caucasus – miscalculations that culminated dramatically in the August 2008 war, which very much acted as a 'perceptual shock' (Rose, 1998, p. 160) invalidating many of the assumptions that had previously guided Georgia's world-view.

These perceptions of the regional balance of power interacted with elite ideologies behind Georgia's foreign and security policies. Thus, the national-ideological imperative of re-unification – shared by all of Georgia's independence-era administrations – limited Tbilisi's margin for manoeuvre considerably throughout the period in question. But, contra Gvalia et al., (2013)

² The decision to build the strategically important Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was taken during Clinton's second term (Hill, 2004); George W. Bush had already intensified American involvement in Georgia under Shevardnadze, through the stationing of advisers in the Pankisi gorge and the GTEP 'Train and Equip' programme before Tbilisi's decisive Westward turn following the Rose Revolution (Blagov, 2003).

I argue that Saakashvili and his associates' pro-Western ideologies were not significant in determining Georgia's foreign and security policies on their own; rather, through their inclusion of Western notions of 'democracy-promotion' and 'soft power', they fed into the elite's misperceptions and miscalculations of present and future regional power balances. These imperatives and (partially ideologically driven) misperceptions underlay the August 2008 war; they account for the Georgian elite's contemporary (and highly unlikely) disavowal of the balance of power as a part of their strategic calculations; and they also explain the Saakashvili administration's continued pro-Western stance following the 2008 war, not only in terms of ideological consistency, but also in terms of an unwillingness to lose considerable political capital in admitting these earlier misperceptions and miscalculations, especially in light of a growing domestic political challenge and the loss of both secessionist entities. Significantly, maintaining the relevance of the *structural* environment as an independent variable also explains the pre-2003 pro-Western slant in Shevardnadze's foreign and security policies, something left unaddressed by purely domestic ideational approaches.

In the sections that follow, I shall argue my point with reference to primary and secondary sources, concentrating on the public discourses of Georgia's leaders as they related to their perceptions of the regional balance of power in the South Caucasus, paying particular attention on their views on Washington's intentions within the region, as well as Russia's declining or improving fortunes. As stated above, I shall also take ideologies into consideration: more specifically, the ways they affect these perceptions of the balance of power and the manner in which they limit the range of possible policy responses. In so doing, I will arrive at an explanation of Georgia's foreign and security policy behaviour encompassing 4 distinct periods: Shevardnadze's early period (1992-96), marked by rapprochement with Russia after Zviad Gamsakhurdia's disastrous (and short-lived) presidency; Shevardnadze's late period (1996-2003), marked by an increasingly Westward-leaning policy; Saakashvili's early period (2003-2008), marked by stridently pro-Western policies and strong corresponding ideological inclinations; and a late Saakashvili period, with pro-Western policies being maintained despite of the heavy defeat of the 2008 war. In each of these periods, a neo-classical realist focus on structural conditions and Georgian domestic (mis)perceptions thereof will be shown to provide a more coherent and long-term explanation of Georgian foreign policy choices than an emphasis on structural conditions or domestic ideologies alone. In a final section, I will deal with the constraints, possibilities, and domestic conditions facing Georgia today.

Collapse, Disorientation, Reorientation (1992-1996)

It would be difficult to overstate the unexpected nature of the Soviet Union's collapse, especially for those living within the erstwhile superpower. Having lost its Eastern European satellites in 1989, and in considerable turmoil by 1991, the failed August coup precipitated a chain of events that would – through the Belavezha Accord and Alma Ata protocol – lead to the dissolution of this one-time superpower (Marples, 2004, pp. 91-97). At the time, Georgia was led by an erratic (some would say 'messianic') and highly anti-Soviet president, Zviad

Gamsakhurdia (Jones, 1994); while his ideology and policies were clearly, fiercely anti-Russian, the Georgian state was in such chaos that there could be little talk of a 'coherent' foreign and security policy, beyond the requirements of bare state and regime survival. During the dying years of the USSR, Gamsakhurdia's fierce ethno-nationalism was – according to most observers – instrumental in alienating the Republic's various minorities – above all those in the autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – from the idea of Georgian independence, driving them into the arms of Soviet, and, later, Russian irredentists (Nodia, 1996). Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian style eventually resulted in his estranging much of the country's emerging political elite as well, resulting in a first of several civil wars during late 1991 (Way & Levitsky, 2006, pp. 397-400).

As a result, Gamsakhurdia was forced to resign and flee shortly after the formal end of the Soviet state, on January 6, 1992; by that time, however, Georgia had already disintegrated, with large parts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia already under the control of secessionists, and central government writ over much of Georgia's remainder shaky, at best. In 1992-3, this disintegration deepened: having in effect lost the conflict in South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia's successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was forced to sign a Russian-mediated cease-fire dividing the region into government- and separatist-controlled areas, and providing for a Russian-dominated joint police force (Caucasica.org, 2008; MacFarlane, 1997b, pp. 511-515). Georgia's humiliation culminated in its president's hasty retreat – under enemy bombardment – of from Sukhumi, and a brief civil war in the Western region of Megrelia (Cheterian, 2008, pp. 155-216); only in 1994 did the military situation in Abkhazia finally stabilise through the *Moscow Agreement on a Cease-Fire and a Separation of Forces* (United Nations, 1994). Thus, by mid-1994, almost exclusively Russian 'peacekeepers' or observers had been posted in both of Georgia's separatist entities - formally at least - under CIS, OSCE and/or UN auspices (MacFarlane, 1997a). As such, this 'freezing' of the conflicts in Georgia was nothing exceptional: the Karabakh war between neighbouring Armenia and Azerbaijan was similarly brought to an end through an inconclusive cease-fire (not, however, involving the stationing of CIS or Russian troops in or around the enclave).

To some degree, Moscow had also seemingly lost control over its own external and even internal policies during this chaotic early post-Soviet period. While the pro-Western foreign ministry, led by the liberal Andrei Kozyrev, wanted Russia to turn into a "normal great power" (1992, p. 10) integrated with the West, elements within the security apparatus held onto traditional views of the country as a *territorial* power, with a clear sphere of interest that would have to include the republics of the former Soviet Union, including Georgia. With much of the Soviet structures of authority in tatters, different sectional interests within the Russian state ended up applying contradictory policies, with the security forces in particular actively involved in conflicts on the former Soviet periphery, among others, through active assistance to secessionists in Abkhazia during the 1993 civil war (Chervonnaia, 1994). It was only during that year that the Russian Federation was able to formulate its first Foreign Policy Concept (Russian Federation, 2005), which clearly delimited the territories of the former

Soviet Union as Russia's 'sphere of special interest', and implied Moscow's right to intervene in those former Soviet Republics where its interests were deemed to be under threat.

Shevardnadze's agreement to the cease-fires of 1992 and 1994 (including nominally CIS/OSCE, de-facto Russian 'peacekeepers'), his introduction of Georgia into the Commonwealth of Independent States (which his predecessor had refused to join), and his general submission to Russian foreign policy priorities were the product of his recognition of continued Russian regional predominance, the fall of the USSR and a considerable weakening of the Russian state notwithstanding. Shevardnadze clearly saw any resolution in Abkhazia or South Ossetia outside of Russian tutelage as unworkable at that time³. Moscow had made its determination to maintain its sphere of influence over the former Soviet space clear, and, what's more, the Georgian leadership could not expect any direct Western help in potential counter-balancing efforts: in Wilsonian fashion, the first Clinton administration had pinned its hopes on partnership and accommodation with a democratised (and, hence, pacified) Russia, rather than 'hard', power-political balancing in containing Moscow's neo-imperial ambitions (Brzezinski, 1994, pp. 67-71), with NATO enlargement into the former Soviet Union - as opposed to Eastern Europe - not on the agenda.⁴ This would gradually change from 1996 onwards, but without the Western structural alternative, Shevardnadze could only rely on accommodation with Moscow, which he achieved to a limited extent and for a short time-period, in 1994-1995 (Nodia, 1999, pp. 23-24).

Drifting Towards the West

Tbilisi's structural constraints would gradually change in subsequent years. If, during much of his first term, Clinton very much relied on his doctrine of 'democratic expansion' in bringing Moscow in from the cold, several events – including the 1997 Russian economic crisis, and the Kremlin's attitude towards NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo – added to earlier disagreements over

³ Thus, during an interview in August that year, he clearly stated that "...in the Abkhaz issue today everything or almost everything will depend on Russia" (BBC Monitoring, 1994b). His negotiator at the Geneva talks between Tbilisi and the Abkhaz separatists similarly cautioned that "...political forces which are demanding that the problem be solved militarily must realize...[that] the option they are proposing will only be possible if *Russia* takes a neutral position and refuses to be involved in the conflict" (BBC Monitoring, 1994a). The overall tone of Georgian policymakers would become much more critical of Russia during 1995, as negotiations dragged on (especially in the matter of refugees) and Shevardnadze became the target of several assassination attempts.

⁴ The Clinton administration at first concentrated on expanding NATO into Central and Eastern Europe; while the possibility of Russia and other former Soviet Republics joining was always kept open, the Partnership for Peace and Atlantic Council frameworks were, in part, designed to supplement repeated Clinton's reassurances that any such expansion would take into account Moscow's strategic interests {Goldgeier, 1998 #389; Clinton, 2000 #551}.

Chechnya to make the administration much more sceptical to such an approach. The EU's and NATO expansion into Russia's 'near abroad' was not on the agenda, but the West did start circumventing Russia in the economic field, most importantly through the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Çeyhan (BTC) pipeline skirting Russia: the 'contract of the century', signed with Azerbaijan in 1994, had already given Western corporations a foothold in the hydrocarbon-rich Caspian basin, apart from putting the region firmly on Western capitals' geopolitical map. The second Clinton administration in particular aimed at safeguarding access to these reserves through BTC, described by its interlocutors in Baku and Tbilisi as a very 'political' project, within which Georgia, as the only politically feasible transit country, would play a central role (Alam, 2002; Hill, 2004).

These openings were eagerly taken up in Tbilisi – increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of negotiations with the secessionist entities, and what he saw as Russian prevarication during these negotiations, Georgian foreign policy drifted further westward⁵. A second factor - the coming to power of George W. Bush and the neo-conservatives in Washington – dramatically accelerated Tbilisi's westward drift by changing its structural environment. Critical of Washington's Eurasian policies during the Clinton years (Kristol & Kagan, 1996; Rice, 2000), Republican policymakers were both willing and able to expand their involvement in the former Soviet space, especially in the months and years following the 9/11 attacks. Much more sensitive to issues connected to energy, terrorism, and Iran, the new administration explicitly included Central Asia and the Caspian basin in its National Security Strategy (USA, 2002, p. 24); the United States became directly, militarily involved in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia (Cornell, 2005, p. 113), and explicitly opened NATO membership to former Soviet states (Kralev, 2002; Zaks, 2003).

At the same time, there was a perceived weakening of Russian influence in the region. While Russian power and assertiveness has today achieved something of a resurgence due to years of economic growth and political re-centralisation during the previous decade, Moscow's might was very much seen to be on the wane in the years following the 1997 economic crash. The country was at an economic nadir after the failed economic revival, its armed forces were in disarray, its finances in dire straits (for contemporaneous pessimistic views of

⁵ Shevardnadze willingly agreed to the BTC pipeline; at the same time, he also gradually abandoned the hitherto cautious approach towards his large northern neighbour, all but accusing it of being involved in an assassination attempt in 1998 (see AFP, 1998; Reeves, 1998), demanding the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Abkhazia (before retracting his demand) (see BBC Monitoring, 2001; Lagnado, 2002), strongly deploring the granting of Russian citizenship to the Abkhazian and South Ossetian populations (Prime News, 2002; Rosnews, 2002), rejecting ominous Russian accusations of Russian support for Chechen rebels (see Antidze, 2000; Dzhindzhikhashvili, 2002), publicly advocating Georgian NATO membership (see AFP, 1999; NATO, 2002; Silharulidze & Sysoyev, 2000), and pressing for the closure of Russian bases in Georgia {see BBC Monitoring, 2000 #394; Dow Jones, 2000 #395; BBC Monitoring, 2000 #396}.

Russia see Lieven, 1999; Lynch, 2001; Trenin, 2002). Putin's centralising reforms (aimed at restoring the 'power vertical') had not yet been pushed through, and other former Soviet republics were also seemingly leaving Moscow's orbit: the now practically defunct GU(U)AM union - a grouping of strategically like-minded, Western-oriented former Soviet states (Allison, 2004; Cornell, 1999) - became particularly active during this period. In the immediate aftermath of 9-11, Moscow also became strangely accommodative of US involvement in its near abroad (albeit for a short period, between 2001 and 2003), creating the impression of a thaw between Washington and the Kremlin (see Bukkvol, 2003; Treisman, 2002, pp. 67-68).

Shevardnadze was certainly not alone in trying to counter-balance Russia by aligning with the West, in reaction to what was widely seen as a change in the balance in NATO's favour, and a (at least temporarily) less antagonistic US/EU-Russia relationship. Georgia's NATO and EU aspirations, and military co-operation with the United States and the alliance, became even more explicit within a broader, over-arching structural context. The new administration in Washington was more open to direct involvement in the former Soviet space, within which Georgia had acquired increased importance due to its status as a transit corridor for Caspian hydrocarbons, while Russia stood, apparently, weakened in both power and resolve. It is this change in the balance of power, rather than some kind of ideological shift, that explained Shevardnadze's cautious move towards the West, which had become a clear alternative, especially in the aftermath of 9/11: the balance of power in the former Soviet space was shaped by Russia's apparent decline and the Bush administration's readiness to intervene where Clinton had feared to tread. These shifting structural conditions fed into *perceptions* of these developments and power shifts in Tbilisi to produce Shevardnadze's response.

Ideology played a minor role in this process: it was not an unlikely sudden ideological conversion by Shevardnadze that affected Georgia's westward shift in 1996-2003. The educational and professional background of Georgia's pragmatic second president - as the Soviet Union's last foreign minister, and a former General Secretary of the Georgian CP - drove him towards a reliance on inter-elite bargaining and a corresponding focus on processes of high politics rather than ideological exigencies or assumptions (save for the over-arching, unavoidable imperative of Georgia's reunification). The question of Georgia's orientation would come to be imbued with precisely such an ideological component with the challenge to, and the final fall from power of Georgia's second president, but with ideology only having a secondary role: the balance of power, and perceptions thereof, remained the crucial factor, an argument reinforced by the continuities between the policies of the non-ideological Shevardnadze regime, and the ideologically charged Saakashvili administration.

Following the Rose revolution, the growth of American (although perhaps not EU) commitment to the former Soviet Union would endure; with it, the regional balance would continue to shift in the United States' favour, as eagerly perceived in Tbilisi. But these perceptions of the balance would now be complemented by the ideological makeup of the Georgian post-revolutionary regime: in contrast to

Shevardnadze, Saakashvili did – at least rhetorically - present an ideologically charged world-view, one heavily influenced by the neo-conservative views of democratic expansion *en vogue* at that time in Washington; but rather than directly affect its policies, this ideological world-view interacted with the perceptions and misperceptions of the balance of power in complex ways. It is to this post-Revolutionary regime that I turn in the next section.

Dreams of Democracy and Reunification (2003-2008)

Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' was a seminal moment in the history of the former Soviet Union. The first of several 'colour revolutions', it brought to power a group of young reformers – led by a triumvirate consisting of Mikheil Saakashvili, Nino Burzhanadze and Zurab Zhvania – with radically liberal, pro-Western policies. Faulting Shevardnadze for increased corruption and authoritarianism, and his failure to achieve the country's reunification, they broke their links with the governing elite (of which they had previously been part) and finally succeeded in removing Shevardnadze from power through a non-violent revolution, in 2003 (Wheatley, 2005, pp. 171-209). While, in the beginning of the Rose Revolution, observers noted the absence of a clear agenda beyond criticism of the old regime's perceived ineptitude and corruption (Broers, 2005, p. 343), once in power, the "results-oriented" (Nodia, 2005, p. 50) Saakashvili-Burzhanadze-Zhvania triumvirate came to coalesce around a number of clearly expressed goals, centred around the notion of liberal democracy and capitalism as superior, and inherently attractive modes of political and economic governance. Domestically, the reformers' narratives implied a Georgia's radical transformation from a weak, fractured, semi-authoritarian post-Soviet republic into a strong, united, multi-cultural, liberal-democratic, free-market state. In terms of foreign and security policy, they led to an intensification of Georgia's westward lurch by confirming and escalating the country's Atlanticist efforts towards NATO and EU membership – a process already begun, in a more cautious manner, under Shevardnadze.

It is important to note here that the reformers' foreign and security policies represented an *intensification* of what had come before, rather than a radically new choice, containing elements of both continuity and novelty: a pro-Western orientation could already be detected in Georgia during the Shevardnadze years, and, from that perspective, post-Revolutionary policies were a continuation of what had come before. What was new was the intensity of the rhetoric involved in the presentation and justification of policy, and the explicit and forceful ways in which Georgia's development as a 'free-market democracy' was stressed as a way of re-uniting the country.

From the point of *continuity*, both late-era Shevardnadze's and Saakashvili's early pro-Western strategies occurred in an international context - especially in the years immediately preceding and following the Rose Revolution - where the West was very much seen as being in the ascendant, and Russia either in decline, or more accommodative to a greater American role in the former Soviet Union. At the very least, this created a *permissive condition* for the new Georgian elite to adopt liberal ideas domestically and pro-Western orientations internationally. This was partly the result of the Bush administration's increased readiness to

deploy power in the former Soviet Union. Washington had already supported Shevardnadze in the years before the 2003 elections; but it eagerly embraced Saakashvili and his entourage, and greatly expanded political and military ties with Tbilisi, eventually leading Sergei Lavrov to denigratingly describe Georgia as an American 'pet project'. For the young Georgian reformers, American regional power was clearly in the ascendant; Washington's increased commitment to regional involvement – mostly through Georgia – gave Tbilisi a real alternative, and a sense of confidence it would never have had otherwise, leading them to challenge Russia through the expulsion of alleged Russian spy rings, the closure of Russian bases even in the face of Russian retaliation in the form of the expulsion of Georgian nationals or the imposition of economic embargoes before the 2008 war. In this, they merely differed from Shevardnadze in *degree*, rather than in fundamental geopolitical orientation.

The main novelty in post-revolutionary Georgia was the quite explicitly pro-Western, liberalising, 'democratic-peace' rhetoric of its leadership, particularly president Saakashvili. During the period, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation was written into two subsequent Security Concepts (Republic of Georgia, 2005, 2010), and underwritten by a stated ideological espousal of 'Western' democratising values through which the new regime came to define its very purpose, in difference to Shevardnadze's much more under-stated, less ideologically laden discourse. Domestically, Saakashvili's narrative implied that a pro-Western orientation would combine with civic nationalism, a buoyant free market economy and liberal-democratic 'good governance' to lure both the Abkhaz and the Ossetians into Tbilisi's fold; in this, the *rhetoric* of Georgia's new elite was, clearly, different from its predecessors'.

But this stated belief in the soft-power attractions of democracy and the free market was not confined to domestic politics: it extended onto the international level as well. Western political systems were inherently attractive and successful, and, in that vein, the 'Rose Revolution' was presented as part of a natural, universal move towards democracy in former Soviet lands, eventually leading to either the democratisation or a weakening of authoritarian Russia's influence and power. The idea that democracy was on an unstoppable march through the CIS could be heard throughout the discourses of the Georgian elite at the time *when taken at face value*, the underlying rationale behind Saakashvili's strategy thus carried important implications for how Georgia's elite viewed present and future regional balances of power.

But, as so ever in the case of discourse, *face value* presents any analyst with a familiar problem: the mismatch between rhetoric and reality. For, while radical free-market reforms were undertaken, and there were early successes in the fight against corruption, observers note how democratic practice did not quite live up to the rhetoric of Georgia's new elite (Hale, 2006; Mitchell, 2009). In fact, the years immediately following the revolution were marked by a centralisation of power in the office of the president, the hollowing out of parliamentary politics through de-facto one-party rule, a lack of participation on the part of wider civil society, and growing allegations of high-handedness and high-level corruption. Cracks began to appear in the post-revolutionary elite only a few

years into the new era, culminating in the relatively brutal suppression of opposition demonstrations in November 2007. It was thus possible to view Saakashvili's pronouncements in two ways: rhetorical ploys designed for foreign audiences, or expressions of sincerely held ideological beliefs. Both cases, however, do not affect the fundamental primacy of *power* and *perceptions of power* superseding ideology in the formation of foreign and security policy.

There are indeed two ways of viewing this mismatch between Saakashvili's discourses and the reality of domestic Georgian politics, and its link to perceptions of the external balance of power. On the one hand, if one takes an entirely cynical view of the Georgian elite's rhetoric during 2003-2008, one could view these expressions of commitment to democratic and free-market ideals as a tactic within a broader bandwagoning strategy with the West, a way to enhance and legitimate the United States (and, for other reasons, NATO/EU) commitment to Tbilisi through the ostensible adoption of the neo-conservative rhetoric prevalent in Washington at the time. On the other hand, if one gives Saakashvili and his entourage the benefit of the doubt, and takes their rhetoric - regarding a belief in the inevitable attractiveness and historical progression of democracy - at face value, ideology comes to amplify Georgia's commitment to, and confidence in, its Western orientation, and the longer-term power-political advantages of the West. In other words, ideology was either a bandwagoning tool for the regime, or an amplifier of the ideologically distorted perceptions of the balance of power between the West and Russia within the Georgian regime; either way, it was the regional balance of power, and perceptions thereof, that opened the possibility of a pro-Western course, rather than ideological conviction in itself.

The late Saakashvili Years: War and Disintegration

Cracks began appearing in the Saakashvili regime's democratisation-based pro-Western strategy soon after the revolution, widening into stark relief from 2007 onwards. The structural possibilities of plausibly aligning with the West while maintaining the Georgian state's strategic imperatives narrowed dramatically during early 2008 during the disastrous Bucharest summit - when Georgia was denied a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) despite of extensive lobbying by the Bush administration, which had already long abandoned the earlier neo-Conservative rhetoric of democratic domino effects. Meanwhile, the wave of revolutions in the former Soviet space failed to maintain its momentum, with both the Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan failing to live up to their initial democratic aspirations, other Soviet republics maintaining their authoritarian (and pro-Russian) regimes, and Russia resurgent on the back of Putin's centralising moves and, especially, soaring global commodity prices. The violent suppression of opposition protests in November 2007 had already shown the limits of the Georgian democratic experiment before the final collapse of the Rose Revolution's triumvirate with the dramatic falling out between Saakashvili and Burzhanadze, in the following year (Zhvania had died in a tragic accident a few years before that): although Georgia was undoubtedly a regional leader in terms of civil liberties and its fight against corruption, these deficiencies certainly did not make convincing the sceptical Abkhazians and Ossetians about the inevitable attractiveness of Georgian capitalist liberal-democracy easier.

Remarkably, despite of all these momentous changes, the Saakashvili administration continued to rely on its 'special relationship' with Washington in its strategic calculations, leading to fundamentally distorted perceptions of available policy options. August 2008 became the point when these misperceptions regarding the relative balances of power between the West and Russia, and the soft power value of democracy came to a head in clear relief. As is by now glaringly apparent, the Georgian military operation in South Ossetia was based on a triple miscalculation: firstly, on Russia's determination in maintaining its presence in the territory and sustaining its secessionist government in the face of primarily American strategic support for Tbilisi, secondly, in the West's readiness to come to democratic Tbilisi's aid, and thirdly – if one views Saakashvili's post-2003 discourses in a less cynical light - as to the value and practicality of public diplomacy, democratisation and 'soft power' in easily attracting the secessionist entities back into the fold. The August 2008 war invalidated much of Saakashvili's approach, and left the Republic's foreign and security policies in a state of limbo, continuing as if by (ideological) inertia.

The misperceptions of the balance of power identified in the previous section were absolutely essential in understanding the outbreak of war in 2008. Western financial and military aid, and American professions of a commitment to Georgia's security counter-acted had counter-acted Russia's previous reactions to what it had seen as unfriendly moves, perhaps imbuing the Georgian leadership with a false sense of immunity, and the impression that Russia would ultimately not test Washington's express alliance with the country despite of its growing influence on increasingly pro-Russian policies of neighbouring states⁶. Elsewhere in the FSU, it was clear that the balance had started shifting back in Russia's favour during previous years. But, as is apparent from statements by individuals close to the Saakashvili administration in the months following the August 2008 war, Tbilisi also clearly did not expect the kind of co-ordinated, determined response from Moscow to its attempt to subdue South Ossetia by force, instead aiming to place the Russians before a 'fait accompli', safeguarded through reluctant-but-still forthcoming American support.

NATO's refusal to grant Georgia a MAP in the months leading towards the August war was, similarly, counter-acted by Washington's perceived readiness to intervene in Georgia's favour. Much has, rightly, been made of Condoleezza

⁶ A reassertion of Russian power could also be clearly seen in Georgia's direct environs during the latter half of the 2000s. Armenia, always under great Russian influence, in effect became Moscow's regional extension, its strategic industries all Russian-owned, its energy grid entirely dependent on Russian fuel supplies, its army eagerly using preferential conditions for arms supplies from Russian manufacturers. Where its foreign policy was termed 'complementary' in the early 2000s, by the late years of that decade, it was almost entirely in sync with Moscow. And while Azerbaijan has been able to maintain a 'multi-vectoral' foreign policy thanks to its hydrocarbon reserves, it also took care to improve relations with Russia during that decade, downgrading its involvement in clearly anti-Russian initiatives like GUUAM.

Rice's statements during a visit to Tbilisi a few weeks before the war. At the time, Rice's public pronouncement could only be described as 'ambiguous', possibly creating the impression of concrete aid in the event of an attack on 'ally' Georgia. The George W. Bush administration was, moreover, coming to an end, and it was far from clear whether a new administration would be as committed to the American-Georgian relationship. In short, the clock was ticking, structurally speaking – from the point of view of the advantages offered by an American-Georgian alliance, and a structural window of opportunity was rapidly closing in that sense, putting more pressure on the Georgian leadership to solve the South Ossetian and Abkhaz issues then and now. Considering the enormous disparities of power between Russia and Georgia, it is highly unlikely Tbilisi would have adopted such a high-risk strategy in response to Russian provocations without these above-mentioned misperceptions regarding the balance-of-power, the structural constraints marking its environment, and the perceived benefits of a pro-Western orientation.

These misperceptions were amplified by the inability of democratisation alone to realise the single-most important strategic aim within Georgia's national ideology - reunifying the Georgian state. To be fair, Georgia's 'soft power' strategy had appeared to result in some early successes in the years following the Rose Revolution (notably in Ajaria); but these early successes were deceptive. By 2007, the 'democratisation' experiment itself had started fraying. Despite of having instituted a raft of reforms, Saakashvili and his entourage were, increasingly, being accused of authoritarian methods and high-level corruption by an increasingly vocal opposition. The November 2007 riots in central Tbilisi showed the extent to which the road towards successful 'democratisation' would not be so smooth after all. This weakened the logic of Saakashvili's strategy considerably: faced with increasing challenges (which he blamed on Russian interference), Georgia's leadership could no longer unproblematically maintain it would be able to coax the secessionist republics into submission or cooperation through soft power alone. Faced with this domestic environment, a resurgent Russia, and a still (apparently) committed America, it chose to take a (fatal) gamble.

In the end, when push came to shove, the United States limited itself to humanitarian aid and symbolic gestures, including the ostentatious stationing of one Navy ship near the Black Sea port of Poti, and diplomatic interventions (including private rebukes to Georgia's leaders at what was seen as a 'rash' intervention); contrary to what Saakashvili may have thought, higher-level interests won out over 'democratic solidarity' in the Russian-American interaction. With the ideologically very different Obama administration also pursuing a more realist policy, aiming at an ever-elusive 'reset' with Russia rather than the expansion of NATO as a 'zone of democratic peace', Tbilisi was confronted with a very different geopolitical environment. The world's only superpower had lost interest in its onetime 'pet project'. Although Georgia continued to receive Western aid (of a non-military nature, in contrast to what had happened in previous years), and became an active participant in the EU EaP, talk of actual NATO and EU membership became 'academic' at best.

Nevertheless, the Saakashvili administration continued its pro-Western course in the following years, even as the West grew lukewarm, at best, of its aspirations. This might seem like something of a paradox: if, as argued above, its previous pro-Western strategic choice was premised on a perception of (present or future) Western superiority and commitment, and that superiority and regional commitment was now in question in the face of an assertive Russia, Georgia would have to change course, and either bandwagon with, or at the very least sit on the fence while the power relationships between East and West were clarified. But the pro-Western, NATO/EU-integration rhetoric continued unabated; and even if there was now no hope of the secessionist entities ever being reintegrated through soft power/public diplomacy alone, Saakashvili did take care to continue within the 'multi-ethnic' ideology he had advocated since the 2003 Revolution. By 2013, Georgia's foreign and security policies appeared to be in limbo, tilting Westward when the balance of power had moved Eastward, unable to provide a clear road towards Georgia's single-most important security concern: its reunification. It is highly unlikely that the Saakashvili camp failed to understand the modified geopolitical context surrounding it. Then why did it not respond in the manner that structural realists, or even neo-classical realists considering *perceptions* of power would expect it to?

The answer may lie in the role of ideology within the 'transmission belt' from structure to (mis)perception to foreign policy. While well aware that power balances had become far less clear-cut than in 2003 – in effect moving in Russia's favour – Georgia's elite simply did not have a choice because of their domestic identification with ideologies they had espoused for years beforehand: a recalibration of policies towards Russia would have required such a fundamental restatement of the regime's legitimising parameters – both at home and abroad – as to be impracticable without a significant loss of social capital. In effect, it would have entailed an admission of strategic failure (of the misperceptions enumerated above – see the highly implausible avoidance of any discussion of balances of power by Georgian elites in 2012) and of the very *raison d'être* of their regime: the Rose Revolution. Thus, just as ideology had amplified distortions in Tbilisi's perceptions of the balance of power in the past, it now served to limit its elite's margin for manoeuvre in response to a different regional-international environment. In any case, with its position in the now-recognised secessionist territories secured, Russia did not have much incentive in throwing the Saakashvili regime a lifeline by softening its pressure (through a loosening of the economic blockade, for instance)⁷. In short, Saakashvili was

⁷ The idea of a 'soft power' approach luring the territories back after Russian recognition and Georgia's own discrediting of its 'peaceful reunification' thesis in August 2008 became even less plausible, and was clearly, explicitly abandoned in the 2011 National Security Concept. As opposed to the 2006 NSC, which concentrated mainly on 'separatists' and, at best, mentioned Moscow implicitly, the 2011 NSC was frank and open about the perceived menace from Russia, identifying it as the main source of conflict and secessionism by factoring out the separatist entities as its puppets. Although negotiations between Georgia and Russia continued in Geneva, there was little progress to report. Tbilisi clearly

stuck in the pro-Western policies, with no realistic prospect for rapprochement with Moscow in the absence of regime change.

Conclusion: Sitting on a Fence?

The emergence of Bidzhina Ivanishvili and his 'Golden Dream' appeared to offer an alternative to the approaches adopted during the Saakashvili years (from which the latter was largely unable to veer away because of Russia's intransigence and his own resulting loss of domestic credibility). And, two important shifts in policy thinking could already be detected in the early months of the new government: on the one hand, Ivanishvili and his party vowed to 'correct' the anti-Russian course of his president, supplementing (but not abandoning) Georgia's policy of EU and NATO membership – a long-standing policy priority – with improved relations with Moscow. The new government even referred to the policy of 'complementarity' adopted by Armenia between 2000 and 2008 – rhetorically, but definitely *not* in practice – to describe Tbilisi's future strategic direction. At the same time, Ivanishvili's administration also adopted more open policies towards the secessionist units, which were isolated as agents of Moscow in the latter, post-2008 years of a Saakashvili administration clearly having given up on public diplomacy and engagement. This was not a return to early Saakashvili's belief in democratisation and soft power as a strategy towards reintegration – rather than just rely on the supposed attractions of a democratised and Westernised Georgia, it appeared GD was also maintaining the possibility of some kind of accommodation between Tbilisi and Moscow allowing for Georgia's re-unification over the very long term (a strategic goal *no* Georgian politician could conceivably abandon in the near future).

This re-adjustment of policies should not be overstated: the Georgian government has on several occasions repeated its commitment to a pro-Western course. Nevertheless, its overtures to Russia could be seen as a reaction to shifting perceptions of the balance of power, perfectly explicable through the insights of neo-classical realism: compared to 2003, that balance was far less clear-cut, with the West's commitment to the Newly Independent States in question (certainly compared to the days of the George W. Bush administration): a NATO MAP remains a distant prospect, and a 'glass-half-empty' view of the Association Agreement with the EU would interpret it as a rather poor consolation prize in lieu of the prospect of full membership. To some extent, the current Georgian government could therefore be seen to be sitting on a fence: lacking clear commitments from the West, it is awaiting clarity on the future

veered away from its strategy of 'soft power' by imposing a strict ban on all interactions with the separatist entities and identifying Moscow, not Sukhumi or Tskhinvali, as the relevant interlocutor towards any resolution. By the end of 2012, Russia was intensely securitised, the 'soft power' aspect of Georgia's strategy towards reunification lay in tatters (with little to offer in its place, except for a purely declarative and contradictory policy of 'engagement' that, in the absence of co-operation from Sukhumi, would remain on paper); only part of the democratisation agenda remained intact.

regional balances of power, dependent on both the relative capabilities and intentions of Washington/Brussels and Moscow.

This makes the outcome of the Ukrainian crisis especially important to the West's relations with Georgia: the tug-of-war between Brussels and Moscow will be one major indicator of future power relations between the West and Russia. While Ukraine and Georgia have been able to sign their respective Association Agreements and DCFTA with the EU, the cost the former will pay in maintaining its Westward course, and the West's determination to consistently push through its Eastern programme, will be crucial in shaping perceptions of the future balance of power between East and West – and it is that balance, and perceptions thereof, rather than an ideological commitment to democratic values, that will ultimately shape the attitude of the Newly Independent States towards the powers competing within their region. This is the crucial insight that neo-classical realism - with its combination of systemic, structural factors and domestic variables – provides in understanding the foreign policy choices of smaller states like Georgia.

DRAFT

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