



The Impact of Georgia's Geopolitics on its Regional Position

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:
Received 06 November 2023
Revised 01 March 2024
Accepted 13 March 2024
Published Online 26 September 2024

Keywords:
Georgia,
Geopolitics,
Russia,
Small-state,
South Caucasus,
SWOT analysis.

ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan emerged as independent countries, leading to a shift in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus region. This research aims to analyze Georgia's geopolitical realities through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) framework to better comprehend its regional role in the South Caucasus. The central question posed in the article is: "What is the impact of Georgia's geopolitical characteristics on its regional position?" The hypothesis put forward by the authors suggests that if Georgia adopts a balanced diplomacy approach, it can draw substantial investment into its infrastructure and establish itself as a key transit hub in the region. The findings indicate that Georgia holds a strategic position with significant potential to enhance its geopolitical standing through the development of transit routes (such as ports, railways, and pipelines), hydropower plants, and mineral resources. However, the country faces challenges stemming from its relatively small population, limited resources, and its proximity to major powers like Russia. Being a buffer state situated between NATO and Russia, Georgia is particularly susceptible to external pressures. Therefore, it is imperative for Georgia, as a small state, to pursue a diplomatic strategy that is neutral and balanced. By adopting an unbiased diplomatic stance in its foreign relations, Georgia can mitigate threats, build resilience, and attract increased foreign direct investment (FDI).

Cite this article: Moghani, A. M. & Tisheyar, M. (2024). The Impact of Georgia's Geopolitics on its Regional Position. *Journal of Iran and Regional Studies*, 7 (1), 59-80. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2024.367760.1058>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2024.367760.1058>

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

Introduction

Geopolitics involves the intersection of political geography, where geography and politics mutually shape each other (Flint, 2021: 3). The geopolitical landscape encompasses the influence of factors such as space, topography, position, climate, land, seas, natural resource distribution, as well as aspects related to human settlements, social institutions, and behavioral patterns (Starr, 2013: 435). Therefore, geopolitics examines how space and location impact human and political behaviors.

In his book "America's Strategy in World Politics," Nicholas J. Spykman emphasized the significance of geography in shaping foreign policy, stating that geography is the most enduring factor influencing the policies of states (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, 2016). Spykman's geopolitical framework was influenced by Mackinder's theories. Mackinder's view of the heartland as the pivotal region in geopolitics was seen as overstated by Spykman. Spykman argued that the geopolitical dynamics of the Rimland, the coastal areas, were driven more by internal development factors rather than external pressures from nomadic groups, as Mackinder had suggested. While Mackinder's pivot area may not have had a significant historical role, Spykman believed that the Rimland held the key to global dominance (Ismailov & Papava, 2010: 89). According to Spykman's theory, Georgia is situated within the Rimland.

The main aim of this research is to examine Georgia's geopolitics through a SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is a framework for identifying and analyzing an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. To understand the factors affecting policymaking, SWOT method helps the policymakers to make their decision based on the realities of their countries. Therefore, the main question of the article is: What is the effect of the geopolitical characteristics of Georgia on the regional role of this country? To answer the question, the authors hypothesize Georgia will be able to attract massive investment in its infrastructure and become an important transit country in the region if the country follows a "balanced diplomacy" strategy.

The results indicate that Georgia holds significant potential to serve as a bridge between the East-West and North-South regions. Moreover, Georgia boasts low taxes, transparent bureaucratic processes, and a lenient legal framework that has attracted foreign investors to the country. The investment prospects in Georgia, particularly in developing renewable energy and transportation routes, are highly appealing. Therefore, adopting a neutral policy could enhance Georgia's ability to attract more investments. Additionally, a neutral diplomatic stance can help Georgia mitigate potential threats from Russia. Notably, Georgia has experienced a loss of 20% of its territory due to its pro-Western policy.

One of Georgia's notable weaknesses lies in the diversity of its ethnic minorities, as they are predominantly situated along Georgia's borders with neighboring countries. Consequently, external powers intervening in these minority areas pose a significant threat to Georgia. The authors first elucidate the geopolitical features of Georgia, followed by an analysis of these features using SWOT analysis. Finally, the authors present their conclusions and suggestions.

1. Overview of Georgia's Geopolitical features

South Caucasus is located between the two seas (between the Black Sea in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east) (See Figure 1) and the size of Georgia's territory is equal to 69,700 km. The neighbors of the South Caucasus are Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Georgia is located in the North of the Caucasus and has a common border with Turkey, Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Georgia has access to free water through the Black Sea.



Figure 1. Location of Georgia
(Source: Suny, 2022)

Georgia's population is about 3,728,282 and the literacy rate of Georgia was equal to 99.57 per cent in 2022 (The Global Economy, 2022). The religion of Georgian people is Georgian orthodoxy (83.4 per cent) and other branches of Christianity (5.7 per cent), Islam (10.7 per cent), etc. Furthermore, the ethnic groups of Georgia include Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Iranian (Ossetian), Abkhaz, and Greece. Also, the Georgian language is the Kartvelian language, which includes Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz. Georgia has little resources, but the country has many natural resources such as manganese, copper, arsenic, iron, and lead-zinc. Furthermore, Georgia has a lot of water resources and rivers. The main river of Georgia is the Kura. The Agricultural products of Georgia include grapes, potatoes, maize, wheat, apple, tangerines, barely, watermelon, tomato, cucumber, and peach. In the following, the authors will examine the geopolitical features of Georgia based on the SWOT analysis.

2. Strength

2-1. Transport role

Since independence in 1990s, the Georgian government has developed the transportation system (Imani et al., 2021: 116). Georgia acts as the bridge between North-South and East-West energy corridors in the south Caucasus (Charles, 2012: 3). In the following sections, we will explain the sea and land transport routes of Georgia.

2-1-1. Sea (ports)

Georgia has four ports alongside the Black Sea coastline including Anaklia, Batumi, Poti and Kulevi. Azerbaijan and Russia both have direct rail connections with Georgian ports and terminals. Developing Georgia's port infrastructure is one of the country's top priorities (Kadagishvili, 2016: 216).

The amount of transportation in Georgia's ports is significant. Georgia had an average of 0.24 million containers between 2007 and 2020, with a minimum of 0.18 million containers in 2007 and a maximum of 0.29 million containers in 2017 (See Figure 2).

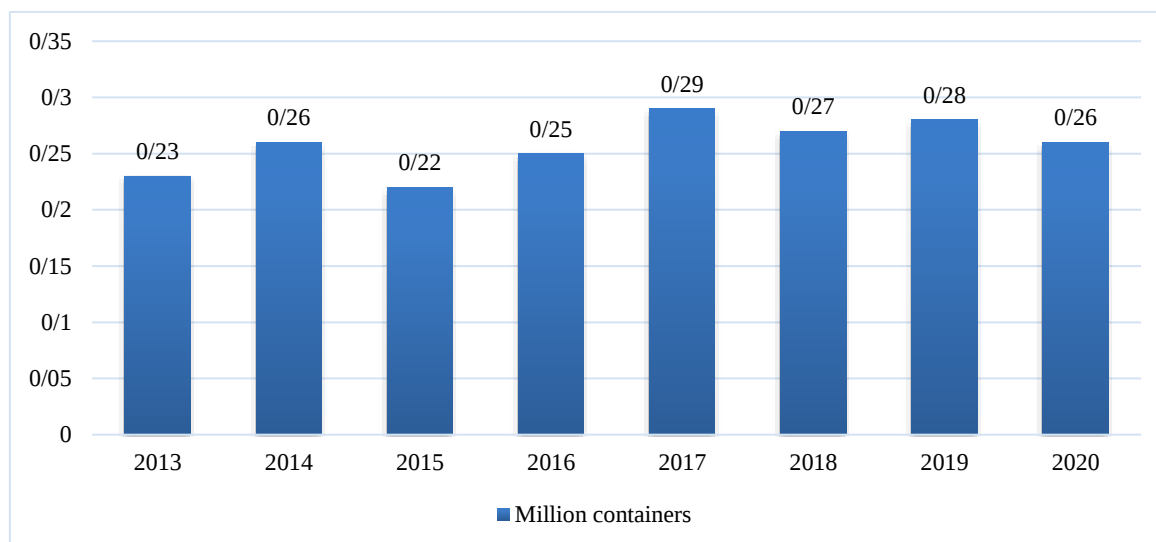


Figure 2. Georgian ports traffic
(Source: The Global Economy, Retrieved in 2022)

Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Italy import some parts of their goods from Georgian ports. Also, Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Malta, and Romania use the Georgian ports to export some of their commodities (Dolbaia, 2016: 160). Therefore, these ports are crucial for Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Georgia has attracted investment to expand Poti free industrial zone. 75 per cent of the shares of attracted investments belong to CEFC (Euro-Asian) LLC (China), 15 per cent belong to Ras Al Khaimah (United Arab Emirates), and 10 per cent belong to Georgian companies (Transparency International Georgia, 2021).

Since the independence of Georgia in 1991, the development plan for the ports of Poti and Batumi focused on a comprehensive modernization strategy aimed at enhancing the maritime infrastructure and operational capabilities of these key ports. This strategy included significant investments in infrastructure upgrades, equipment modernization, and dredging projects to accommodate larger vessels and increase cargo handling capacity. By integrating environmental sustainability measures into the plan, such as reducing emissions and complying with international environmental standards, the ports aimed to minimize their ecological footprint while maintaining operational efficiency (Kvinikadze et al., 2023; Tabidze & Beridze, 2019).

The connectivity improvements implemented as part of the development plan were designed to enhance the ports' accessibility to road and rail networks, thereby facilitating the seamless movement of goods and promoting regional trade. By positioning Poti and Batumi as strategic hubs for international trade and transit, the development plan aimed to attract investment, stimulate economic growth, and elevate Georgia's maritime sector to a competitive position in the global market. Through these strategic initiatives, the ports of Poti and Batumi aim to solidify their positions as key nodes in the regional logistics network, driving sustainable development and fostering prosperity in Georgia's maritime industry (Sarkhanidze & Bejanidze, 2023).

2-1-2. Railways

Azerbaijan faces a strategic challenge due to its geographical constraint of not having direct coastal access. Nonetheless, this limitation has been addressed by establishing connectivity with Georgia and Turkey through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway system. The BTK railway runs 826 kilometers starting in Baku, stopping in Tbilisi, passing through the gauge-changing

facilities in Akhalkalaki, and terminating in northeast Turkey (Kars) (See figure 3) (Ibrahimli & Bittner, 2018: 9). In terms of geography, the BTK rail line connects Eurasia's central portion.



Figure 3. Map of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway
(Source: Van Leijen, 2022)

The BTK railway is integrated into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Among the seven economic corridors of the BRI, Georgia collaborates with the China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor, utilizing its new port in Anaklia city along with the BTK railways (Mosashvili, 2019: 5). To clarify, the BTK railway facilitates the connection of Central Asia with the Black Sea through the Caspian Sea.

Moreover, as illustrated in figure (4), the Middle Corridor, also recognized as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), serves as a transportation pathway linking Europe to Central Asia and China through the South Caucasus region, including Georgia.



Figure 4. map of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
(Source: News Central Asia (nCa), 2022)

By participating in the Middle Corridor development plan, Georgia strengthens its role as a crucial link between Europe and Asia, positioning itself as a hub for trade and transit. This increased connectivity not only attracts investment and economic opportunities but also

enhances Georgia's influence in regional affairs (Avdaliani, 2022). Furthermore, the Middle Corridor allows Georgia to diversify its transportation routes and reduce its dependence on traditional routes through Russia. This diversification contributes to Georgia's efforts to balance its relationships with different regional powers and promotes its geopolitical autonomy. By expanding its network of transportation routes, Georgia can mitigate the risks associated with relying on a single transit corridor, thereby increasing its resilience and flexibility in the face of geopolitical challenges.

Moreover, the Middle Corridor promotes regional integration and cooperation among countries in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe. By facilitating trade and transit along the route, Georgia can foster closer ties with neighboring countries and promote economic development and stability in the region. The Middle Corridor serves as a platform for enhancing regional cooperation, building trust among countries, and advancing common interests, ultimately contributing to Georgia's geopolitical position as a key player in the South Caucasus region (Kemoklidze, 2021; Palu & Hilmola, 2023).

The Middle Corridor, as a new transportation route connecting China and Europe through Central Asia and the Caucasus, can potentially challenge Iran's position as a key transit hub in the region. With the Middle Corridor offering an alternative route for goods and energy transportation, Iran may face increased economic competition and a potential shift in trade flows (Mousavi et al., 2021). Therefore, the development of the Middle Corridor can lead to the formation of new geopolitical alliances in the region, potentially shifting the balance of power and influence.

2-1-3. Pipelines

Georgia connects Baku-Supsa, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines from Caspian Basin to Turkey and the Black Sea (See Figure 5).



Figure 5. Map of the pipeline passes through Georgia
(Source: Zhalko-Tytarenko, 2014)

The Baku–Supsa is an oil pipeline, which has a length of 833 kilometers, from Sangachal Terminal near Baku to the Supsa terminal in Georgia. Then tankers carry the oil to the Mediterranean region through Bosphorus and Dardanelles (Souleimanov & Černý, 2012: 81). In 2021, the Baku-Supsa carried only 4.2 million tons of oil, compared to its capacity of 7.2 million tons (Obyrne, 2022). Nowadays, the export via Baku-Supsa is 100,000 barrels per day (BP, 2021).

BTE is a gas export pipeline with a 692 km length that transports natural gas from the Shah Deniz field in Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey (Badalyan & Kusznir, 2011: 4). In 2021, the daily average export throughout of the BTE was 48.5 million cubic meters of gas per day (BP, 2022a).

BTC pipeline carries oil from the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli (ACG) field and condensates from Shah Deniz to Erzurum in Turkey. The length of BTC is equal to 1.760 km. The current BTC capacity is equal to 1.2 million barrels of oil per day (BP, retrieved in 2022b).

2-2. Water resources

Georgia has abundant freshwater resources (See figure 6). Georgia's water resources are divided into two main basins: the Black Sea Basin and the Caspian Sea Basin (Howell, retrieved in 2022.). The important Georgian rivers include the Alazani, Aragvi, Enguri, Kura (Mtkvari), and Rioni rivers. Georgia has about 26,060 rivers (Lomsadze et al., 2016). Drought is not a problem in Georgia because of its enormous amount of water resources.



Figure 6. Map of Georgia Rivers
(Source: FAO, Retrieved in 2022)

There are more than 730 different types of mineral water sources suitable for export in Georgia. In 2019, Georgia exported about one million bottles of water (White, 2020). Georgia exports its mineral water to more than 30 countries, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Europe, the United States, Canada, China, and Japan (Business Media, 2022).

By supporting private investments, Georgia's agriculture, water, and land can be contributed to increase economic productivity with a transition from low agriculture returns to high-value crop production (World Bank Group, 2022). Due to its fertile soil and favorable climate, Georgia produces grapes and wine, berries, nuts, citrus fruits, apples, peaches, and apricots. Furthermore, agriculture's contribution to GDP amounted to 7–8 per cent in 2021. "Borjomi" is the most famous Georgian mineral water (International Trade Administration, 2021).

2-3. Natural resources (Except Oil and Gas)

The natural resources of Georgia can premise for its potential economic development and include manganese deposits, iron ore, copper, and minor coal. Mining experts state that Georgia was once known to possess one of the world's richest manganese deposits in the Sachkhere and Tchiatura regions (Chikhradze, 2022).

2-4. Reform in laws

In the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, Georgia amended its laws throughout the country to put it on a path to progress. The public sector has been modernized, resulting in low bureaucracy burdens for citizens and companies, and low levels of corruption (Saha & Giucci, 2017: 2). The country has also undertaken some progressive reforms, such as reforming the labor and tax codes and improving its essential infrastructure. Georgia has been relatively successful in attracting FDI (Akhvlediani & Havlik, 2019: 14). However, as the global economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, FDI flows to Georgia decreased to USD 617 million in 2020, more than halving from 2019. In parallel, the total amount of FDI is estimated at USD 18.6 billion. More than 30 per cent of the total FDI inflows are in the industry sector, while 20 per cent and 11 per cent are in the trade and finance sectors. (Lloyds Bank, 2022). In 2018, half of Georgia's inward FDI stock came from European countries, including the UK, Netherlands, Cyprus, Luxembourg, and the Czech Republic. The other countries investing in Georgia include Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Armenia, United Arab Emirates, China, and United States (OECD, 2020).

2-5. Political system

Georgia's political system has changed to a presidential-democratic form of government since 1991, which was reinforced by a new constitutional amendment approved in August 1995. Among its provisions, the constitution establishes a strong executive branch and unicameral parliament of 150 members. As a result of the constitutional amendments enacted in 2013, the prime minister has more power than ever before (The Economist Intelligence, 2021).

Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was deposed by coup d'état in January 1992. In March 1992 Shevardnadze was elected as the Georgia's parliament speaker. In November 1995, he won 70 per cent of the votes when the presidency was restored. In 2003 Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement (UNM) came to power as a result of the Rose Revolution (Foresti et al., 2010: 1). Furthermore, following the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, Georgia underwent significant political reforms aimed at strengthening its democratic institutions and improving relations with the international community. The war, which resulted in the loss of territories of South Ossetia, prompted Georgia to prioritize reforms to enhance its democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights protections. These reforms included constitutional amendments, electoral reforms, and efforts to combat corruption, all of which were aimed at fostering a more transparent and accountable political system (Bochorishvili, 2023).

However, Saakashvili has been criticized for his increasingly authoritarian rule, which relies on government-friendly media and courts to suppress opposition. In this regard, in 2009, opposition to President Mikheil Saakashvili's reforms in Georgia was multifaceted and stemmed from various political, social, and economic factors. One of the key opposition groups was the UNM, which criticized Saakashvili's government for alleged authoritarian tendencies, lack of transparency, and failure to address issues such as poverty and unemployment. The opposition accused Saakashvili of centralizing power, limiting media freedom, and suppressing dissent, leading to widespread discontent among segments of the population. Additionally, the 2009 opposition to Saakashvili's policies was fueled by concerns over the handling of the 2008 war with Russia. Critics argued that Saakashvili's approach to foreign policy and security issues had exacerbated tensions with Russia and failed to effectively address the country's territorial integrity challenges. This opposition movement culminated in mass protests and demonstrations, highlighting deep divisions within Georgian society over the direction of the country's political and governance reforms (Khodunov, 2022; Aydın, 2012).

Therefore, both the UNM's parliamentary majority and Saakashvili's presidency were lost in the 2012 and 2013 election. Instead, UNM joined with the Georgian Dream Party in coalition.

Critics, however, claim that it has been drifting toward authoritarianism similar to its predecessors. Following Saakashvili's resignation and the ascension of the Dream Party to power in 2012, Georgia endeavored to navigate a delicate equilibrium between Russia and Western nations. In alignment with this approach, a new legislative provision was sanctioned. Subsequently, in March 2013, the Georgian parliament adopted a foreign policy resolution emphasizing the paramount importance of integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. However, the resolution included contentious clauses that tacitly recognized Russia's security concerns within the region (Kapanadze, 2014).

The latest political crisis began with anti-government protests in June 2019, followed by a boycott of the parliament by the opposition in November 2020 (Russell, 2021: 2). Georgian civil society did not develop roots in the public sector. Georgia's civil society groups did not consider themselves to represent Georgian citizens but rather as its avant-garde. In Georgia, though, some of the political elites embraced these values while the civil society did not. Georgia was the first former Soviet Republic started the transition to democracy (Stefes & Paturyan, 2021: 10).

3. Georgia's geopolitical weakness

In the definition of small states, social scientists study the size, population, geography, and quantity of resources available on a particular territory, and also the behavior of that territory in particular situations of the contemporary security environment and its role-plays in world politics (Utashvili, 2014: 4). Georgia has a total area of 69,700 km². In comparison with the great powers¹, Georgian territory is too small. Small countries are occupied quickly and have fewer natural resources as a result. The other parameters to examine Georgia's geopolitical position as a small state are as follows:

3-1. Population

In November 2022, Georgia's population was 3,971,156. Furthermore, its growth was -0/2, and Georgia's population represents 0.05 percent of the world population (Worldometer, 2022). The population growth rate in this country shows the population is aging. In comparison with great powers, Georgia has a small population, which affects its skilled labor forces. More than one million Georgians live in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Other cities, however, have low population densities (See Figure 7). The result of a small population is a smaller workforce and an even smaller army.

The future of Georgia may also be challenged by immigration. The Georgian migrants seek better socioeconomic conditions and education, without conflict, political unrest, and corruption. According to Georgia's official statistics, most of the migrants who leave the country are young, highly skilled individuals between the ages of 20-34 (Bogishvili, 2021).

Remittances have long been a significant factor in Georgia's economy, a small country with limited resources. Over the years, the amount and composition of remittances have evolved. In 2012, Russia accounted for 56% of remittances, but by 2021 this figure had dropped to 18%. However, it rose to 47% in 2022 and further to 54% in the first quarter of 2023. In 2022, \$4.372 billion was sent to Georgia through money transfers, a \$2 billion increase from the previous year. Furthermore, some Russian citizens physically brought cash into the country, contributing to the strengthening of the Lari currency (Nikoladze, 2023).

The top three countries contributing to inflows were the Russian Federation with \$100.59 million (32.87% share), Italy with \$35.96 million (11.75% share), and the USA with \$28.56

1. Great powers refer to sovereign states that wield significant influence and power on the global stage due to their economic, military, political, and cultural capabilities. These countries have the ability to shape international affairs and exert influence over other nations.

to simmer in the two breakaway provinces. Russo-Georgian war in 2008 has two narratives. The first is that Saakashvili invaded South Ossetia to unite Georgia and seized Tskhinvali. Second, the main reason is that Georgia has been on the verge of joining NATO. On August 10, 2008, Georgia's government announced withdrawing its troops from South Ossetia. Therefore, Abkhazia and South Ossetia recognized as independent states by Russian government on August 26, 2008 (Fabry, 2012: 662).

Russian citizenship was granted to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia demonstrating the country's interest in seceded regions. Georgia lost 20 per cent of its territory and the coastal line of the Abkhazia province (See figure 8). Indeed, Russia continued its military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are economically dependent on Russia (Gürçan, 2020: 538).



Figure 8. Map of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia
(Source: Coalition for the International Criminal Court, 2015)

After the 2008 war, Georgia lost its navy. The government implemented reforms to optimize state resource expenditures in this area. International experts recommended that Georgia merge the coastal military fleet and border police guard. Consequently, Georgia's Coast Guard was established as a multifunctional marine service. The Coast Guard is responsible for defense, maritime, border police, organizational-legal, environmental, and search and rescue operations. Additionally, in the event of war, the Coast Guard undertakes the functions of the navy (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, retrieved from 2022).

4. Opportunities

4-1. Belt and Road Initiative

Due to Georgia's strategic location in South Caucasus, the country has good opportunities to cooperate with Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Georgian government desires to become a major transit hub in the region. Therefore, the huge volumes of Chinese transit cargo of China-Central Asia economic corridor (passes through the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and arrived in Black Sea ports of Georgia) can be attractive for Georgia. The BRI would bring technology, management, and marketing knowledge to Georgia, as well as better access to outbound FDI from China (World Bank, 2020).

The inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK) in 2017 was attended by Chinese officials, underscoring the railway's strategic significance within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by substantially reducing travel duration from 45 days to two weeks. Simultaneously, Anaklia port signed memorandums with the Kuryk port of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan's Baku port to promote use of the trans-Caspian corridor along the maritime route

of the BRI (Topuria, 2019).

A network of free trade agreements and expansion of the country's infrastructure will help Tbilisi become an attractive regional and international transit hub (Smolnik, 2018: 7). The Chinese and Georgian governments agreed in October 2016 to finalize negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement. Georgia also has a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union (EU) since 2014. Therefore, the country has plenty of potential to become a transit hub between China and the EU (Larsen, 2017).

Georgia's third largest trading partner is China. Since January 2018, when the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Georgia and China entered into force, more than USD 1 billion has been traded between the two countries. In particular, trade turnover with China reached USD 1.086 billion in 2019 and increased by over 5 per cent from 2018. Georgia-China trade volume reached USD 1.2 billion in 2020, over 10 per cent higher than in 2019 despite the covid19 pandemic (Kalandia, 2022: 17).

4-2. A bridge between the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf

Georgia's location in the Black Sea market is advantageous due to its enormous potential. Therefore, Georgia enjoys a tremendous opportunity to access the Persian Gulf. The Black Sea-Persian Gulf corridor (Via Iran, Azerbaijan, and Georgia or Iran, Armenia, and Georgia) helps the economic and political diplomacy between Iran, Georgia, and Azerbaijan or Iran, Georgia, and Armenia (Mehr News Agency, 2021). In this regard, Georgia could attract FDI for expanding its infrastructures. Georgia connects the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf to the European countries Furthermore, Iran and other countries in the Persian Gulf can export their commodities to Eastern Europe via the Black Sea-Persian Gulf corridor (See Figure 9).



Figure 9. Black Sea and Persian Gulf corridor map
(Source: Mehr News Agency, 2022)

4-3. Hub of Electricity production

Forests and hydroelectricity are derived from the Caucasus mountains in Georgia. The country relied heavily on imported electricity in the early years of independence, but since 2000, significant investments have been made in power generation, transmission, and distribution. Therefore, Georgia is now a net electricity exporter rather than a net importer.

Georgia is blessed with Caucasus mountains and has a largely untapped hydropower potential that is attracting the attention of the private investors and international lenders (Bankwatch, 2021). The significant companies have invested in hydropower plant of Georgia such as the Anadolu (Turkey) Peri (Georgia) Ağaoğlu (Turkey) Trans Electrica Ltd. (India) Energo Pro (Czech) Clean Energy Group (Norway) KGM (Turkey) Rusmetal (Georgia); etc (Ministry of Energy of Georgia, 2015). Therefore, the construction of more dams and plants in the Caucasus mountains will help Georgia in advancement of the hydropower energy.

The electricity cooperation in South Caucasus is however limited. Georgia's role as a producer of clean electricity is essential in facilitating regional electricity trade. Indeed, the Georgian geographical location and its electricity interconnections with all its neighbors can serve as a power trade "hub" for the entire region (Tsurtssumia, 2015: 31).

5. Georgia's geopolitical threats

5-1. Georgia as a buffer state

As a strategic transit point, Georgia has been subjected to great power rivalry. Georgia is the buffer state between the EU and Russia. Therefore, Georgia should choose a balanced diplomacy. Before the Rose Revolution, Georgia was involved in corruption and had close relations with Russia, but the influence of the West in Georgia made the country tend to the West. The Rose revolution in 2003 had both external and internal factors. The internal factors include corruption, heterogeneous composition of social structure, economic crisis, and the role of people. The External factors include US support, international organizations, and Shevardnadze's misconception of possible Russian support (Koolae, 2012: 35). As a result of Rose Revolution, Russia's influences decreased especially because the Saakashvili government is the pro-western and tend to the West.

In response to the Western presence in Georgia, Russia waged the Russo-Georgian war (Kakachia & Minesashvili, 2015: 178). Furthermore, as a strategic partnership with the U.S., the U.S. supports Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (Ministry of Defense of Georgia, 2018). In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia despite Georgia has strategic partnership with the United States.

In a poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 82 per cent of Georgians approve of Georgia entering the EU, and 74 per cent of Georgia's stated the goal of joining NATO (See figure 10 & 11).

On the other hand, Orthodox Christianity traces its origins to the early Christian Church, particularly the Eastern Orthodox Church, which emerged as one of the major branches of Christianity following the Great Schism of 1054. The Eastern Orthodox Church developed in the Byzantine Empire, with its center in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), and became the predominant form of Christianity in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (McGuckin, 2010). Georgia is part of the Orthodox civilization. At the same time, an important element of Georgian foreign policy has emerged from its national identity, Georgia's European identity, which has become dominant in the Georgian political discourse. Due to the country's history, democratic aspirations, and values, the Georgian political elites believe the country belongs to Europe. Georgians emphasize they are connected with Europe through the Black Sea, and they are European. Furthermore, Georgia has a historical connection with the eastern powers such as the Persian empire, Russian empire, and ottoman empire. Consequently, these interactions also have influenced on Georgia's political landscape, culture and identity (Minesashvili, 2016). Therefore, Georgia has an eastern tendency in its roots. Furthermore, the concept of an "eastern tendency" in Georgia refers to the country's historical, cultural, and geopolitical connections with Eastern, particularly Asian, countries and influences (Gitelman, 2024). This notion can be examined from various perspectives, including historical, cultural, economic, and political

dimensions. From a historical perspective, Georgia has a long history of interaction with Eastern civilizations, including Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and Central Asian states. These interactions have left a lasting impact on Georgia's cultural heritage, architecture, cuisine, and language. The Silk Road, for example, passed through Georgia, facilitating trade and cultural exchange with Eastern societies. Culturally, Georgia exhibits influences from both Eastern and Western traditions. The country's unique blend of Orthodox Christian heritage and Persian, Turkish, and Central Asian influences reflect its position at the crossroads of different civilizations. Georgian cuisine, music, dance, and art also showcase a fusion of Eastern and Western elements (Jahn, 2020).

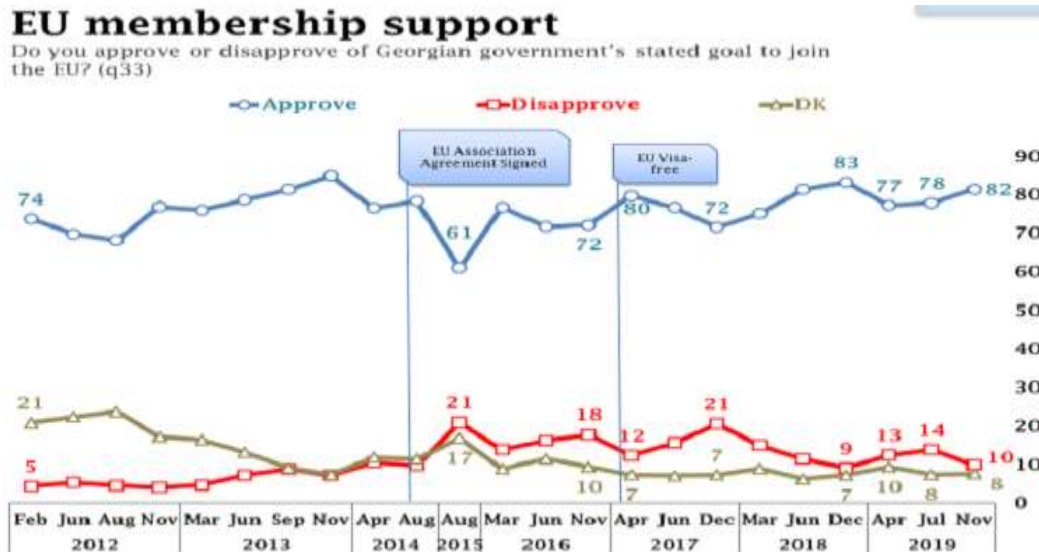


Figure 10. EU membership support chart
(Source: Agenda.ge, 2020)

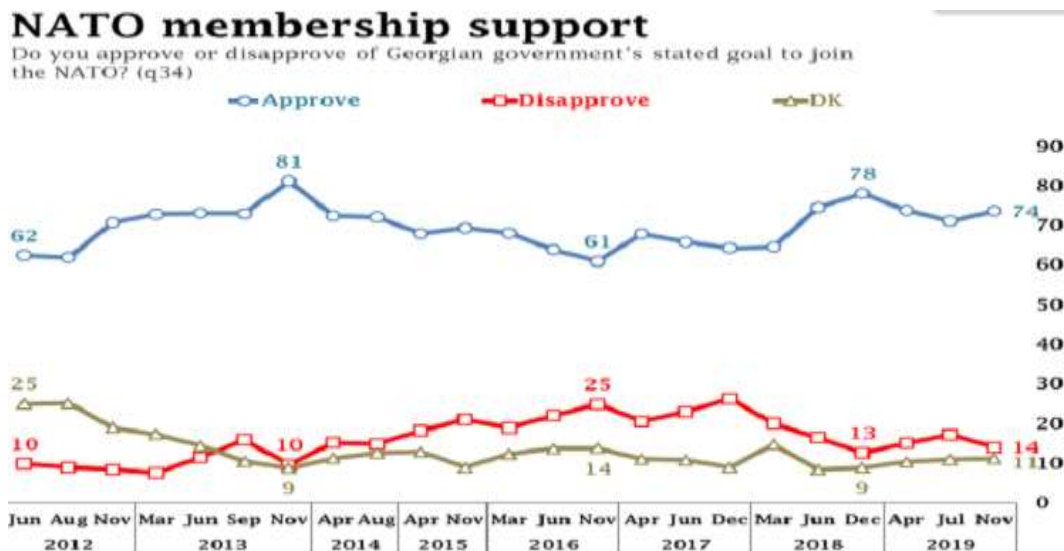


Figure 11. NATO membership support
(Source: Agenda.ge, 2020)

Economically, Georgia's strategic location at the intersection of Europe and Asia has made it a key player in regional trade and transportation networks. The country's efforts to strengthen economic ties with Eastern partners, such as China and the Persian Gulf states, demonstrate its orientation towards the East. Politically, Georgia's foreign policy reflects a balancing act

between its Western aspirations, particularly its pursuit of EU and NATO membership, and its pragmatic engagement with Eastern powers like Russia and China (Popkhadze, 2023).

The country's participation in initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Eastern Partnership program underscores its efforts to diversify its international partnerships. In this regard, in July 2023, Georgia entered into a strategic partnership with China, underscoring a further divergence from Western alliance amidst indications of Beijing's implicit backing of the Russian intervention in Ukraine. The Georgian government has not only embraced China's "Belt and Road" initiative but has also expressed support for other Chinese foreign policy endeavors aimed at countering Western influence, particularly that of the United States (Dickinson, 2023a).

Furthermore, the dissemination of Russian propaganda in the Georgian information sphere poses a significant challenge, notably evident in the rehabilitation of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. Over the years, the Putin government has advanced a revisionist narrative on Stalin, portraying him as a formidable leader whose contributions to defeating Nazi Germany outweigh his atrocities. Within Georgian society, Russia has effectively leveraged Stalin's Georgian heritage, presenting him as a symbol of anti-Western Georgian nationalism aligned with Kremlin narratives. Furthermore, recent developments in Georgia include the erection of 11 new statues commemorating Stalin, alongside a survey indicating that nearly 46 per cent of respondents believe "patriotic Georgians should take pride in Stalin" (Dickinson, 2023b).

5-2. Ethnic groups

Census of Georgia in 2014, shows the ethnic minorities are Azerbaijanis 233,000, and Armenians 168,100, Russians 26,500, Ossetians 14,400, Yezidis 12,200, Greeks 5,500, Kists 5,700, Assyrians 2,400, Ukrainians 6,000 as well as small Jewish and Polish communities (Minority Rights Group, 2020) (See figure 12).

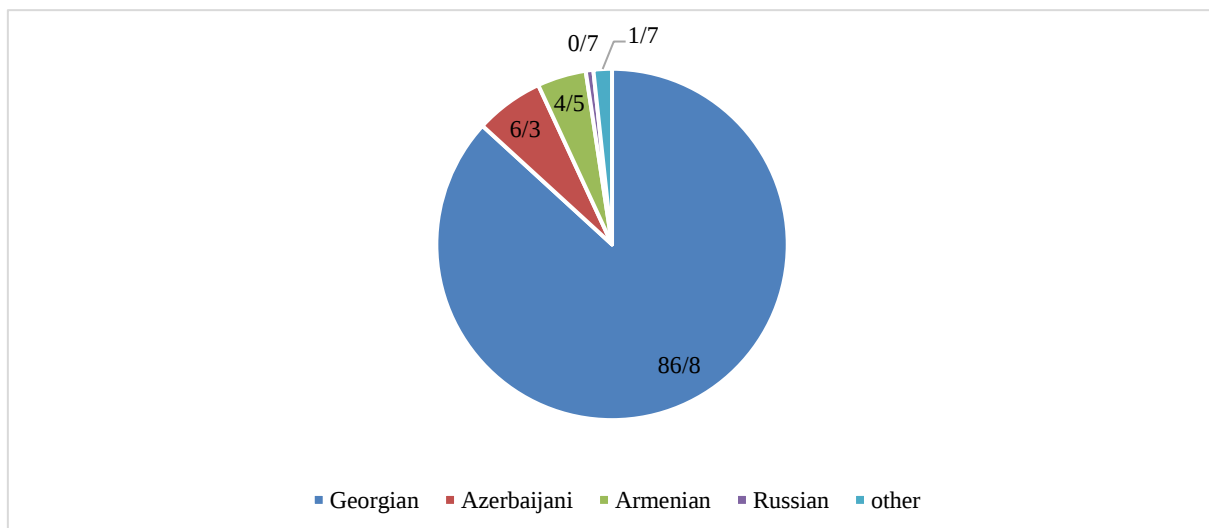


Figure 12. Georgia ethnic groups
(Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014)

Azerbaijan and Armenia have common borders with Kvemo Kartli Samtskhe-Javakheti, respectively. Therefore, politically their status has become an important charge. In spite of holding a Georgian passport, many Azerbaijanis and Armenians from these two regions consider themselves Azerbaijani and Armenian. The majority of men in Samtskhe-Javakheti migrate to Russia to work during the summer (Amirejibi, 2021).

It should be emphasized that these regions provide a direct connection between ethnic minorities and neighboring countries. The settlement by Georgian ethnic groups can be

considered a geopolitical vulnerability, because great powers can exploit unrest and separatism to exert pressure. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which separated from Georgia are good examples.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence of the South Caucasus republics, the region suffered a political vacuum. Therefore, each regional and trans-regional actor attempted to consolidate its influence in the South Caucasus.

Economically and geographically, Georgia is a bridge linking Western and Eastern Civilization, as it sits at the crossroad of Europe and Asia. Georgia with its strategic location has the good potentiality to transfer goods from East to West and vice-versa, because of its existing infrastructures (Railways, Pipelines, and ports). In this regard, the lack of complicated bureaucracy and less strict law in Georgia helps it attract FDI. The staggering mountains and many rivers in Georgia present an opportunity to invest in hydropower energy. Georgia with invest and expand its hydropower plant can be connected to the regional electricity network.

The countries involved in BRI tend to trade with each other. A balanced diplomacy helps Georgia to cooperate with all countries interested in Georgia's transit role. In fact, Georgia has a significant opportunity to expand its transport role and connect the East-West.

Small states follow multilateral diplomacy in international relations. In These states, security resources are more limited in terms of both human and material resources. Small states are frequently unable to use force, either defensively or preemptively. Therefore, for smaller states, diplomacy is more crucial to their approach to security than for larger ones. In order to serve its interests, Georgia should maintain a balanced relationship with Russia and the West.

One of the significant weaknesses of Georgia is its diversity of ethnic groups. These ethnic groups are located on common borders of Georgia with its neighbors. Therefore, if external powers intervene, this situation may pose a threat to Georgia; like the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia is a superpower in energy resources and technology. For the geopolitical factors, Russia wants to monopolize the energy export to the EU. It is also trying to develop pipelines through Russia to export energy to Europe. With these policies, Russia wants to stop the expansion of NATO to the East. Georgia's role in the transit of energy can make a conflict with Russia.

Looking at the demographic, territorial and political features of Georgia, this country has many opportunities and threats. It is better for Georgia makes the role of transportation hub in the region between north-south and east-west of the region. Also, the neutral diplomacy is profitable for Georgia and helps the country attracts FDI from the foreign countries. In other words, it is better for Georgia work with all its neighbors and the EU in the field of economic cooperation.

It is not possible for Georgia to join NATO and it will not be desirable. During recent years Georgia wanted to join NATO but the process of membership of Georgia in NATO has not been not successful. Revising in the basis of its foreign policy, can provide new opportunities for Georgia to develop its relations with other countries and benefit its geopolitical position.

Therefore, it is better for Georgia's foreign policy to focus on a multifaceted approach that encompasses historical, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. The country's unique position at the crossroads of different civilizations has shaped its identity as a bridge between East and West, influencing its interactions with its neighbors and contributing to its rich cultural heritage and geopolitical significance.

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