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Foreign Policy Analysis of Georgia (2016-2023) -
What explains the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy directions?
A two-level analysis

MA Thesis

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I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere have been cited.

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Abstract

Georgia, the eastern European country situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has often been praised for its ambitious democratic reforms, fighting corruption and developing economy during the last two decades. The Western community has broadly recognised Georgia's democratic achievement. Against the background of Russia's aggressive policy, Georgia's foreign course has sharply been directed to alignment policy toward the West, particularly aspiring to NATO and EU integration, to secure itself from the hostile neighbour, which occupies nearly 20% of Georgian territories. Georgia has reached significant practical achievements in the Euro-Atlantic integration process under the incumbent government since 2012. Georgia was the leader in its democratic achievements among the Eastern-Partnership countries. However, the Georgian government's latest practical action, statements, and anti-Western rhetoric, has questioned its existing Western-oriented foreign policy direction. Furthermore, Georgia deepened its ties with Russia, and the ruling party's authorities avoided its criticism publicly. The fact that the alleged shift in Georgia's foreign policy direction is relatively new refers to the lack of academic literature that seeks to study this shift comprehensively. Therefore, this thesis addresses the research puzzle and asks two questions: How has Georgia's foreign policy changed from 2016 to 2023, and which factors are behind it? For this aim, primary and secondary sources will be analysed through the explanatory outcome process tracing method, allowing us to answer the research questions. Hermann's theory of redirection and Holsti's theory of restructuring will enrich the analysis to detect the level of the change and identify the critical triggers behind it on a domestic and international level.

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Introduction

In contemporary international relations, where globalisation has broad implications for our daily lives, it is essential to analyse the states' behaviour and coexistence well. Modelski (1962, p3) believes that the behaviour of one state always has a favourable or adverse effect on another state, and every state strives to minimise negative impact. Therefore, the state may change its foreign policy accordingly, which leads us to the crucial need to study foreign policy change. Shifts in foreign policy direction may include slight redirection or complete changes, which might result from the regime change, or it may happen under the incumbent government.

Georgia, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, regained its independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. The struggle for domestic power invoked civil unrest in the 90s, which was followed by a high level of corruption and criminality, weak state institutions and national poverty. The domestic hardship finally resulted in the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, and the pro-Western government came into power. Already emerging relations with the West further deepened under new political power, led by Saakashvili, Georgia's foreign course was strongly directed to the West, aspiring to the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) integration. The Western alignment foreign policy was mainly derived from Russia's factor. Russia became an existential threat to Georgia due to its aggressive politics. Russia backed separatists in two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and since the Russo-Georgia war in 2008, Russia occupies nearly 20% of Georgian territories. Therefore, Georgia applied Western alignment foreign policy to secure itself from Russian threats.

Georgia became a NATO aspirant country, deepened its relations with the EU, and the US became Georgia's strategic partner. The country's progress in the democratisation process on its Euro-Atlantic integration path was acknowledged by the Western partners. As a result, significant achievements were reached in Georgia-EU relations. In 2014, Georgia signed the association agreement with the EU, and later, in 2016, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) was enacted. Georgia actively engaged and contributed to NATO and US-led peace missions and military exercises. At the Bucharest summit in 2008, NATO allies welcomed Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspiration for membership and agreed that the door to the NATO alliance remained open for Georgia. Additionally, in 2015, the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) was established, which is designed to assist Georgia in reforming,

modernizing, and strengthening its security and defence sector and working alongside forces from NATO members and partners (JFTC.nato.int 2020). Generally speaking, Georgia was the leader country in its democratic and economic achievements among the Eastern partnership countries.

However, during the last several years, the ruling party launched a negative campaign against the United States (US) and EU member states' representatives in Georgia; anti-campaigns targeted pro-Western political oppositions and civil society organisations (CSOs). Moreover, the Western partners often criticised the Georgian government for its decisions in domestic politics. Against the background of the war in Ukraine, the ruling party and its associated media outlets intensified anti-Western campaigns, accusing them of interfering in internal politics and attempting to drag Georgia into the war with Russia. Moreover, Georgia deepened its ties with Russia and avoided its criticism, and often, the rhetoric and narratives of Georgian authorities coincided with Russian narratives. Also, Russian officials praised the Georgian government for its decisions and moves. Also, Georgia's alignment rate with EU foreign policy has significantly decreased after 2020.

As a result, these processes questioned Georgia's foreign policy direction, which was strongly directed to the West. More interestingly, the alleged shift in foreign policy direction emerged under the incumbent Georgian Dream's government, which has brought significant achievements in the Euro-Atlantic integration process. On the other hand, Georgia's political role is internationally important as it connects Europe to Asia, and the strategic energy and transport corridor passes through it. Finally, the factors above lead us to the research puzzle, and as the process is relatively new, there is a lack of literature that thoroughly explains how Georgia's foreign policy changed and what the reasons behind it are. This research puzzle led us to the goals of this thesis. Studying Georgia's current foreign policy helps in understanding its role in regional and global politics, its economic and geopolitical aspirations, and its efforts toward peace and stability.

In order to solve the puzzle and study the shift in Georgia's foreign policy directions, the thesis asks two main questions: first, how has the foreign policy of Georgia changed from 2016 to 2023, and second, which factors are behind these shifts, in other words, which factors are behind the shift in foreign policy direction of Georgia. The research will include two layers of analysis, domestic and international. The thesis will proceed with the process tracing method to analyse the empirical data and answer the research questions. Specifically, the explanatory outcome process tracing method will allow us to efficiently analyse the observed data in a single-case study of Georgia

from 2016 to 2023 and identify the potential systemic factors to create a basic and adequate explanation of how the foreign policy of Georgia has changed and which factors are behind it.

Following the introduction, the thesis will include the three main chapters. The first chapter will serve to review the existing theoretical framework of foreign policy change studies and identify the most appropriate ones that will contribute to a better understanding of the goals. The second chapter will provide the methodological framework, which will be applied in the empirical part of the analysis. The third chapter will provide the empirical data, analyse the primary and secondary sources from 2016 to 2023, and assess the findings based on them. Finally, the conclusive part will summarise the thesis and present the conclusion.

Part I - Theoretical framework

Starting with the theoretical framework chapter of my research, I will first conceptualise foreign policy terms as an essential part of international relations, attempt to identify the foreign policymakers, and then explain the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) by different authors as a method of studying foreign policy. Following that, I will move on to presenting the theoretical perspectives of foreign policy change presented by different scholars in social science and how the various political theories perceive the shifts in foreign policy. Mainly, I will focus on Hermann's theory of redirection and Holsti's theory of restructuring.

1.1. Foreign Policy

In the contemporary international system, when globalisation has profound implications in all aspects of life, it is essential to study the coexistence of independent countries' behaviour to analyse foreign policy. In general, foreign policy can be described as the decisions and actions that governments take when dealing with other countries. It involves the goals and strategies that a country's leaders adopt when it comes to their relationships with other states.

George Modelski (1962) defines foreign policy as a system of action where the action implies the "inputs" and "outputs," which are defined as possessing ends and means as well as the other properties of the unit act (p9). Hermann (1990) defines foreign policy as a goal-oriented or problem-oriented program created by authoritative policymakers or their representatives to deal with issues or achieve objectives involving interactions with other countries. This plan typically outlines the methods and tools a government will use in its dealings with foreign nations (p5). Similarly, Rosati (1994) defines it as 'the scope and collection of goals, strategies, and instruments that are selected by governmental policymakers to respond abroad to the present and future environment' (p225).

Holsti (1982) presents a more comprehensive perspective on foreign policy, allowing us to consider unintentional actions as part of a nation's foreign policy. He distinguishes between 'intended' and 'actual' foreign policy (p12-13). Goldman's (1982) definition of foreign policy isn't entirely explicit about the extent to which he is willing to take this idea, but he distinguishes between what is openly stated as policy (verbalised policy) and what is actually implemented as policy (non-verbalized policy). Verbalised policy is the stated course of action that an agent

declares they are pursuing, while non-verbalized policy refers to the actions that are actually taken in practice. (p7-10)

1.2. Policymakers

Modelski (1962) claims that it does not matter how independent the states may be; the behaviour of states has favourable or adverse effects on other states. The Behavior of striving to minimise the adverse effects and maximise the favourable actions in conducting foreign policy poses a problem (p3). Thus, this foreign policy problem is a question of adjusting the efforts of states to each other. The states deal with this problem by entrusting some men with the extraordinary task of influencing other states, who henceforth be called the “policy-makers”; however, some groups of individuals’ work and role might have foreign-policy functions and may affect other states, including tax-payers, soldiers on home or overseas duty, and some other of individuals, but what distinguish the policy-makers is full-time occupational characteristic of representative status and function, their ability to act and their responsibility for acting “on behalf” of their community (p3-4). In the democratic community, we should perceive that the foreign policymakers are representatives of democratically elected political parties in power.

In his research article about the actor-specific theory, Hudson (2005) argues that International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline is fundamentally rooted in the actions of individual or collective human decision-makers. Everything that takes place within and between countries is based on the choices made by people. In essence, the foundation of IR is identical to the foundation of all other social sciences. Therefore, the key focus for social scientists, including those in IR, is to comprehend how humans interpret and respond to their surroundings, as well as how they influence and are influenced by the world they inhabit. (p1) Later, while he tries to explain the psychological and societal environment of foreign policy decision-making, he compares the mind of foreign policymakers to a “microcosm,” which contains “complex and intricately related information and patterns, such as beliefs, attitudes, values, experiences, emotions, traits, style, memory, national, and self-conceptions” (p10), those factors shape the societal context in which the decision-makers operate.

Hudson’s (2005) work on defining the factors and environment that may affect decision-makers includes inquiries from different scholars of international relations, which enriches the knowledge

and findings in his article, making it more valuable. Another interesting concept in studying the leader's personality effect is the "operational code," which refers to identifying a leader's fundamental political convictions regarding the likelihood of global conflicts, their self-assessment of their ability to influence events, and similar factors. It also involves examining their preferred methods and approaches for achieving their objectives. (p11)

1.3. Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)

Foreign policy analysis is a subfield of International Relations that seeks to study and understand the formulation, implementation, and impact of a country's foreign policy. Mainly, it refers to an approach to the study of states' foreign policy, answering the question of why or how countries make certain foreign policy choices, what circumstances might influence this process, and what the results of those choices are.

The study of foreign policy has changed over time. Therefore, various scholars in social science have developed relatively diverse approaches. Philip B.K. Potter defines Foreign Policy Analysis as "the study of how states, or the individuals that lead them, make foreign policy, execute foreign policy, and react to the foreign policies of other states" (2010, p1).

Explaining the foreign FPA, Hudson claims that it is the study of explaining "those factors that influence foreign policy decision-making and foreign policy decision-makers" (2005, p2). The central part of inquiry in foreign policy analysis is decision-making which includes complex characteristics from various fields. He highlights the important role of the decision-making process and claims that human decision-makers, labelled as "true agents", are the source of all international politics and all changes within it, as far as states are abstractions and thus have no agency (2005, p2). He distinguishes several hallmarks of the foreign policy analysis approach. In order to analyse foreign policy, we should study the decision-making process "from the most micro to the most macro" level. FPA stands as one of the most integrative theoretical enterprises, as it combines diverse information from various levels of examination and encompasses multiple fields within human knowledge. (Hudson, 2005, p2)

Foreign policy analysis is a valuable approach for researching foreign policy changes of states for several reasons, indicating that it provides a systemic understanding of analysing the factors that influence foreign policy decisions and changes. As mentioned, its characteristics of studying

multidisciplinary perspectives, including political science, IR, economics, sociology, and history, allow us to consider a wide range of factors explaining foreign policy changes; therefore, FPA is the most appropriate level of analysis for my research purposes.

1.4. Foreign policy change

Following a review of the various approaches to foreign policy change by different scholars, we can conclude that it is not something that is static and fixed in time; it adapts and evolves in order to accomplish its objectives. Foreign policy is a goal-oriented action taken by authoritative governments toward entities outside the state's boundaries, be it state or non-state actors (Dugis, 2008, p102). Therefore, we may face shifts in foreign policy directions, including slight redirections or complete changes. The degree of change in foreign policy is categorised by various scholars, which I will apply in my research in order to determine which type of change we face in Georgian foreign policy and answer the research question of what caused these shifts.

In general, foreign policy change can be classified into two categories: first, when change is followed after the regime change or state transformation, and second, when change occurs during the existing government. Second, happens when existing actors change or redirect foreign policy, which Hermann perceives as "self-correcting" (Dugis 2008, p103). As my single-case study is focused on the shifts in foreign policy direction during the existing government, I will focus on theoretical studies that are related to the second category of change mentioned before.

First, I will analyse Jakob Gustavsson's article (1999) titled "How should we study foreign policy change?". In this article, Gustavsson critically evaluates six different models that seek to explain why governments opt to alter their foreign policies, after which he offers his own theoretical findings and assumptions regarding foreign policy change. He highlights that the study of foreign policy change has evolved and shaped over time in parallel with changing international politics. As a result, multiple approaches have been developed by different scholars; therefore, it is hard to label it with a certain definition that might be generalised.

His analysis is grounded in various models, including Holsti's (1982) foreign policy restructuring model, Goldmann's (1988) model focusing on stabilisers within the policy-making system, Hermann's (1990) model emphasising the role of the decision-making system, which serves as an intervening variable, Carlsnaes's (1992) model that highlights the ongoing interplay between

agency and structure, Skidmore's model that links change to a state's internal and external strengths, and Rossati's (1994) model, which suggests that periods of stability are regularly succeeded by periods of transition. (Gustavsson 1999, p74)

There are some differences in how these six authors conceptualise “change” in foreign policy. For Hermann and Rosati, this is a gradual process, and therefore, they developed the typology describing the graduated levels of foreign policy change. Holsti differs from them as he is mainly focused on ‘restructuring’ and referring to the dramatic shifts in foreign policy, which Hermann and Rosati identify as the most extreme form of change. In the term “restructuring” Holsti implies four foreign policy postures: ‘isolation, self-reliance, dependence, and diversification’ (Gustavsson 1999, p76). Goldman (1988, p10) defines it by referring to ‘either a new act in a given type of situation or a given act in a type of situation previously associated with a different act’ (Goldman 1988, p10)

Concluding the realist theory and institutionalist theory, Skidmore offers different assumptions about how changes take place and labels them into two categories. First, ‘evolutionary’ foreign policy change, which is predicted by realist theory, would refer to the ‘states that combine a weak international position with a strong domestic position. Such a state would be sensitive to international pressure while being capable of neglecting the preferences of domestic interests’ (Gustavsson 1999, p79). Second, ‘sporadic’ change refers to states with strong international positions with weak domestic positions. ‘Such a state would have the capacity to disregard international pressure while being unable to resist domestic interests in favour of the status quo’ (Gustavsson 1999, p79). Gustavsson argues that Carlsnaes does not address a more specific meaning of change in foreign policy.

Furthermore, it should be noted that two of the authors out of six, Hermann and Holsti, limit their focus on the study of foreign policy change when the shifts occur during the same government in power and exclude the changes that occur due to government change, while the other four do not adhere to this restriction (Gustavsson 1999, p77). Additionally, as mentioned above, Hermann and Rosati developed a typology consisting of gradual levels of foreign policy change, but Holsti studies the extreme forms of change in foreign policy. Hence, as my case study is focused on the shifts in the foreign policy directions of Georgia from 2016 until now, within the framework of the current government, I perceive that Hermann’s theoretical perception is more relevant to my

case study because it consists of both important factors relevant to my case, gradual level of change of the foreign policy within the incumbent government. Therefore, I will primarily rely on his theoretical study.

1.5. Theory of redirection (by Charles F. Hermann)

A theoretical model proposed by Hermann does seem to give us the most appropriate starting basis from which to try to analyse shifts in Georgia's foreign policy direction, which will enable us to answer the research question and explain the triggers that caused those shifts. Hermann developed a theoretical framework, a structured system designed to make sense of scenarios in which governments opt to alter the course of their foreign policies.

Hermann identifies four progressive levels of change and divides them into adjustment changes, program changes, problem/goal changes, and international orientation changes. First, Adjustment Changes are the most basic changes and involve altering the level of effort (greater or lesser) to achieve foreign policy goals, which can be either increased or decreased. Adjustments can also affect the scope of recipients or targets. Notably, the fundamental "what is done, how it is done, and the purposes for which it is done" remain unchanged. (Hermann 1990, p5)

Next, Program Changes is the level of change that pertains to modifications in the methods or means used to address foreign policy goals or problems. Unlike adjustment changes, which we can perceive as quantitative changes, program changes represent a qualitative shift involving the adoption of new approaches in statecraft, mainly the pursuit of a goal through diplomatic negotiation. While there are alterations in "what is done and how it is done," the fundamental purposes or objectives behind the policy remain consistent. Hermann claims that it is not easy to differentiate those terms in practice; however, in a program change, 'one would expect to find changes in the configuration of instruments, in the level of commitment, and probably in the degree of expressed effect. All these developments, plus policy statements and policy actions incompatible with the prior goal or problem stipulations - if not open rejection of prior goals - accompany goal/problem changes' (Hermann, 1990, p5-6).

Third, on the level of Problem or Goal Changes the initial problem or goal that the foreign policy is designed to address is either replaced or completely abandoned. The purposes themselves are also replaced or transformed. This represents a more significant departure from the previous

policy. Fourth, the International Orientation Changes level is the most drastic form of foreign policy change, involving changes in both words and deeds. It refers to the complete redirection of the entire state's orientation toward external entities. This includes a shift in the state's international role and activities. It represents a fundamental transformation in a nation's approach to the global stage. 'Typically, reorientation involves shifts in alignment with other nations or major changes of role within an alignment' (Hermann, 1990, p5-6).

Furthermore, in order to explain foreign policy change, Hermann tries to explain it by making inquiries in the areas of domestic political systems, bureaucratic decision-making, cybernetics, and learning, which he analyses after reviewing some applicable areas of existing scholarship in the field.

When discussing domestic political systems and foreign policy change, Hermann states that rulers and their regime create governmental foreign policy and this preceding depends on their continuance on the support of certain constituencies, which he defines as "those entities whose endorsement and compliance are necessary to legitimate and sustain the regime. They may be members of a ruling political party (or a faction within it), the political clients of a client-patron system, a dominant religious or ethnic group, military officers, major landowners, interest groups and associations, or the leaders of key sectors of society" (Hermann 1990, p7). Hence, the changes in the policy preferences of the constituencies presumably trigger changes in foreign policy.

Referring to the bureaucratic decision-making process, after concluding theoretical knowledge by three scholars (Holsti 1982, Etheredge 1985, Goldmann 1988), Hermann confirms that decision-making structures and processes have an essential role in foreign policy change study. He argues that altering long-standing foreign policy is usually met with opposition from different parts of the government's structure, and the more significant the change, the more resistance it encounters. As a result, implementing program changes is less challenging than achieving goal or problem changes, and reorienting policy faces the most significant resistance. Overcoming this organisational resistance necessitates the involvement of individuals with the expertise and capability to bypass the usual channels. (1990, p8)

Concluding those inquiries, Hermann identifies four different sources of major foreign policy change, which he labels as leader-driven, bureaucratic advocacy, domestic restructuring, and external shock. According to Hermann, leader-driven change is focused on an authoritative

policy maker who has the power, conviction, and energy to impose his own vision of the basic redirection necessary in foreign policy and compel his government to change the course (Hermann 1990, p11). During that time, leaders underwent significant reconceptualization of problems, which triggered a shift in foreign policy. The learning approaches should provide insight into change triggered in this manner.

Bureaucratic advocacy is another agent of change. This occurs when a specific group within the government identifies a necessity to alter the direction of foreign policy and wields enough influence to effect that change through persuasive efforts. This may happen when this group of people within the government identifies that the current policy is not working.

Referring to the bureaucratic decision-making process, Hermann concludes that altering long-standing foreign policy is usually met with opposition from different parts of the government's structure, and the more significant the change, the more resistance it encounters. As a result, implementing program changes is less challenging than achieving goal or problem changes, and reorienting policy faces the greatest resistance. Overcoming this organisational resistance necessitates the involvement of individuals with the expertise and capability to bypass the usual channels. (1990, p8)

In terms of Domestic restructuring, governments require the backing and approval of the most politically relevant segments of society to govern effectively. That segment of society may become an agent of change. If these influential groups either change their composition or shift their perspectives on foreign policy, they can trigger a change in government policy. In other words, "Foreign policy redirection occurs when elites with power to legitimize the government either change their views or themselves alter in composition- perhaps with the regime itself" (Hermann 1990, p12). Considering the domestic political factors that may affect foreign policy, Hermann reviews Goldman's work and concludes that the incumbent regime may change foreign policy when an issue becomes the centrepiece in the struggle for political power when competing political powers use foreign policy issues to distinguish themselves from opponents. Furthermore, change may occur when 'the attitudes or beliefs of the dominant domestic constituents undergo a profound change' or a realignment happens when the fundamental elements that make up a government change or when a revolution or some other significant transformation of the political system occurs. (Hermann 1990, p7)

In contemporary international relations, when the countries' dependence on each other is at a high level, external shocks are one of the most significant sources that might trigger foreign policy change. This implies dramatic international events that cannot be ignored, have large visibility and impact on the state's government, and push them to change foreign policy. Additionally, Hermann claims that there is a high likelihood that there may be a dynamic relationship among these sources of foreign policy change. They might work in tandem, with one source, like an external shock, triggering another source, such as a leader's proactive move, and subsequently leading to a shift in foreign policy direction. (Hermann 1990, p12)

Following the review of the primary change agents, Hermann argues that the decision-making process has an essential role in this process, as 'governments change their foreign policy through a decision process', and it is intervening between agents and changes (1990, p13). Decision-making is not a linear process, but it often includes cycles and pauses.

As Gustavsson argues, it is hard to generalize a specific model presented by different scholars of IR regarding foreign policy change, as an individual state will respond differently to the same structural incentives (1999, p. 92). Therefore, I will not insist that a certain theoretical approach will perfectly fit my research, however, I perceive that Hermann's aforementioned model of foreign policy redirection will provide useful tools and significantly contribute to my research, which will allow me to answer the research question, explain the triggers that entailed the shifts in the foreign policy direction of Georgia, and conduct the two-level analysis focused on domestic and international levels.

1.6. Theory of restructuring (by K. J. Holsti)

Holsti, in his book "Why Nations Realign" (1982), focuses on a specific category of foreign policy change, and in the introductory part, it is defined as the profound and comprehensive transformation of a country's interactions with other states. The authors label this behaviour as foreign policy "restructuring or reorientation." The chapters investigate how various states, each with their unique characteristics and variety of attributes, engaged in foreign policy restructuring. When we inquire about the reasons behind this - why these countries aimed to transform their foreign policies on various matters - common threads and similarities emerge. Holsti argues that

foreign policy restructuring is mostly a response to threats but not always a military one. In the contemporary world, threats may imply “cultural, informational, and economic components”, which are related to the ‘growing interdependence’ factor.

First, Holsti identifies four types of reorientations and restructuring that trigger significant changes: “(a) the levels of external involvement, (b) the policies regarding types and sources of external penetration, (c) direction or pattern of external involvement, and (d) military or diplomatic commitments” (Holsti 1982, p4). As a result of those changes, he proposes four typologies of foreign policy restructuring: isolation, self-reliance, dependence, and non-alignment diversification (Holsti, 1982: 4-5).

Isolation refers to a state of affairs marked by minimal engagement with the outside world and a set of policies that seek to exclude interactions. Such an approach avoids any military or diplomatic commitments. Since interactions with the external world are rare, the direction is relatively unimportant, and there are limited identifiable trends in the actions and changes. Meanwhile, Self-reliance involves diversified trade and diplomatic and cultural contacts, but the level of transactions remains low. The focus is on maintaining independence and avoiding any indications of reliance or vulnerability. Some selective exclusion policies, often in the form of import substitution programs, are implemented. Military commitments that might make the country dependent or involve supporting the interests of other nations that don't align with one's own are avoided. (Holsti, 1982: 4)

Dependence implies that a nation engages in a significant number of actions and exchanges with other countries, with a strong focus on one specific state or a group of similar states. The country relies heavily on external sources for crucial needs like the economy, technology, communication, and defence, often coming from just one foreign nation. The state is deeply influenced by external actors, including foreign advisors, investments, visitors, educators, communication, and possibly military personnel. Security is ensured by a mentor power, often in exchange for granting them rights to establish military bases. Non-alignment-diversification involves engaging extensively with various states and groups of states, rather than focusing on just one. While external influence is often noticeable, the government strives to maintain a diverse mix of foreign actors in terms of both their numbers and types. The key principle is to avoid any military obligations to a particular powerful nation, either existing or potential. (Holsti 1982, p4)

Holsti organised the data, which might indicate possible changes in foreign policy patterns. In order to identify the intention of change, we should carefully observe and study speeches, press conferences, party statements, and radio broadcasts (currently, it might be media, including social media), which serve as the basic sources of information. If official pronouncements are either misleading or rarely available, the studies rely on complex data and reported government activities (Holsti 1982, p15). He defines nine main characteristics of actions, transactions, and commitments, which we should study to identify the possible restructuring. Those are numbers of treaties; numbers and/or states as treaty partners (diversification of diplomatic and trade partnerships); new commitments of military capabilities abroad or terminating prior commitments; significant changes in numbers and destination of students sent abroad to study; voting patterns in UN General Assembly; direction of foreign trade; degree of trade concentration; absolute size of trade; number and direction of visits abroad by head of state or government; and numbers and location of diplomatic missions abroad (Holsti 1982, p15)

In conclusion, the interplay between Hermann's Theory of Redirection and Holsti's Theory of Restructuring offers a comprehensive framework for analysing foreign policy change. Their commonalities and at the same time unique contributions will enrich our understanding of the interplay between external and domestic factors, decision-making processes, learning, and the interconnected sources that drive foreign policy shifts. As we move forward, outlining these integrated perspectives is a solid foundation for identifying the causes and manifestations of foreign policy change in the case of Georgia.

Both theories recognize different levels or types of change in foreign policy and acknowledge the role of external factors as triggers for foreign policy change. Hermann emphasizes external shocks, while Holsti considers threats, including cultural, informational, and economic components. Both external shocks and threats imply a need for nations to adapt their foreign policy in response to changing circumstances.

Hermann's theory highlights the influence of domestic factors, particularly changes in the policy preferences of constituencies, as triggers for foreign policy change. Holsti also considers domestic factors, such as government activities, speeches, and commitments, as indicators of intentions for foreign policy restructuring. Together, they both emphasise the importance of understanding the domestic context as a catalyst for foreign policy change. Both theories recognise the critical role

of decision-making processes in foreign policy shifts. Hermann notes the challenges of overcoming resistance within the government structure, while Holsti emphasises studying official pronouncements and government activities as indicators of restructuring intentions.

Combining both perspectives provides a deeper understanding of how different sources of change interact and influence one another. Hermann's levels inform us about the scale of change, while Holsti's categories demonstrate the specific patterns of interaction and manifestation in foreign policy directions. Hermann's dynamic relationships inform Holsti's study of characteristics, which creates more comprehensive framework. This integration not only provides a more comprehensive understanding but also allows for a more detailed and sophisticated examination of the triggers, processes, and manifestations of foreign policy shifts in the context of Georgia.

Part II – Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a foreign policy analysis of Georgia, how it has changed during the specific time framework, and unveil the factors that triggered the shifts in foreign policy directions. Understanding these shifts is essential not only for comprehending the dynamic landscape of international relations but also for Georgia's strategic positioning in a rapidly evolving global environment. This chapter serves as a vital bridge between the research question and the empirical exploration of this phenomenon.

In this chapter, I delve into the methodological framework employed in this research, with a primary focuses on the qualitative method of process tracing within a single case study of the Republic of Georgia. The choice of methodological tools in this study is not arbitrary but emerges from careful consideration of the unique characteristics of the research question, as the paper's primary objective is to identify the possible factors triggering the shifts in the foreign policy directions of Georgia during the specified period. I will carefully review the needs of my research and will try to justify case selection.

2.1. Research design and case selection

The thesis aims to conduct a foreign policy analysis of Georgia and solve the research puzzle to explain the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy directions. For this, I decided to pursue the qualitative research method, precisely, a single case study, which will be focused on the case of the Republic of Georgia within the timeframe of 2016-2023 under the “Georgian Dream” government in power, where the level of analysis is foreign policy.

In order to solve the research puzzle, the thesis asks two research questions: first, how has the foreign policy of Georgia evolved within the two terms of the “Georgian Dream” government from 2016 till now? In other words, how has Georgia's foreign policy changed during the period 2016-2023? Hermann’s four-level scheme will help us identify the level of change. The second question is, which factors explain the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy directions on a domestic and international level? In other words, I will seek to explain the reasons that caused the shifts in foreign policy and whether domestic factors or exogenous factors are the primary drivers of the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy directions. I will analyse how foreign policy reflects on the level of domestic and international layers. On the one hand, I will seek to explain the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy directions derived from domestic and international factors; therefore, I will label it as a two-level analysis.

The research will focus on the period from 2016 to 2023, coinciding with the last two terms of the Georgian Dream (GD) party in sole governance. However, it should be highlighted that the Georgian Dream-led government was formed after the 2012 parliamentary election, but the first term included a coalition with six distinct political parties. In 2016, the Georgian Dream Party participated independently in the parliamentary election, and based on the results, it took a constitutional majority in parliament and established a one-party government. The 2016-2023 timeframe was intentionally selected after careful consideration and refers to the pivotal period when the GD political party assumed exclusive control of the government.

The qualitative method allows us to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of complex social or political phenomena in the real world. Creswell (2013) suggests that contemporary qualitative research puts a stronger emphasis on understanding the interpretive nature of research. It involves the factor that the researchers become a part of the study within the broader political,

social, and cultural context. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of the researchers' own perspectives and presence in the accounts they provide (2013, p43)

Using a single case study is the best choice because my research question is highly specific and centered on understanding the factors behind certain processes in Georgia. Yin's book (2018) significantly contributes to identifying when the case study should be employed while examining the "extensive and in-depth description" of some social phenomenon; he emphasizes that conducting a case study is relevant when seeking to explain some contemporary circumstances and asking the questions "how" and "Why." "This is because such questions deal with the tracing of operational processes over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence" (p. 40). Therefore, this method is the most appropriate for me to study the case and answer the research questions, which, on the one hand, seeks to examine the level of shifts/changes in foreign policy direction (how) and, on the other hand, explain the causes that triggered that change ("why").

Neuman reviews various types of methods in social science, including case studies, in his book published in 2014. He refers to case-study research as the method that allows us to conduct an in-depth examination that involves a thorough and detailed analysis of a limited number of subjects or cases, either within a single timeframe or across multiple timeframes. He claims that "case studies provide evidence that more effectively depicts complex, multiple-factor events/situations and processes that occur over time and space" (Neuman, 42, 2014).

Bennet and George (2005) argue that case studies give more space and flexibility to researchers and can be fitted to various theoretical approaches. Case studies are particularly useful because they can spark new insights by helping us discover and formulate additional factors and research questions through inductive reasoning. They claim that "case studies can analyse qualitatively complex events and take into account numerous variables precisely because they do not require numerous cases or a restricted number of variables" (p46)

Analysing the foreign policy of Georgia during the last seven years is a particularly good case due to several factors. First, in general, there is a lack of academic literature analysing small states' foreign policy change, especially in the case of Georgia. The balance of power in the region has changed amidst Russia's imperialistic foreign policy, the war in Ukraine, and the growing influence of China. However, the academic field lacks research conducted on Georgia's foreign policy recent development, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February

2022. Meanwhile, we may notice the shifts in the foreign policy directions of Georgia; it requires the research to identify which exogenous or domestic factors might be behind; therefore, I perceive that it is essential to conduct research on this topic, which will enrich the academic data. The fact that shifts occur within the incumbent government makes the research even more interesting to inquire about. This study can contribute to academic knowledge and inform policy decisions. It can also help current or future policymakers in Georgia make informed decisions about their country's future direction.

On the other hand, Georgia has a strategic geopolitical location connecting Europe and Asia. Russia's aggression in Ukraine increased the need for alternative energy corridors to Europe, one of which goes through Georgia. Therefore, we should assume that Georgia's international role has increased. Understanding its foreign policy shifts can provide insights into its efforts to promote regional stability and security, which can have implications for neighbouring countries and international partners. Also, studying shifts in foreign policy can reveal how Georgia's foreign policy aligns with its democratic and governance aspirations, reflecting its commitment to human rights and the rule of law. It can provide insights into the progress made toward EU and NATO aspirations goals and the challenges it faces in the process.

Georgia's foreign policy choices affect its relationships with major powers like the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, and neighbouring countries. These relationships have global implications, and studying Georgia's foreign policy contributes to understanding the dynamics of international relations, which is important for both Georgia and its international partners. Furthermore, the study of Georgia's foreign policy can provide valuable findings and insights for other countries, particularly those in similar geopolitical positions, historical backgrounds or relatively similar challenges. The thesis focuses on Russia, as it presents the key actor in Georgia's foreign policy as the regional player with a post-Soviet dependency factor, and it still occupies Georgian territories. The West is Georgia's officially declared foreign policy strategy. Georgia was the leading country out of the six Eastern-Partnership countries. China is a global power with increasing interest in the South Caucasus region, and Turkey is a considerably influential regional actor.

In summary, studying the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy direction during the last seven years is essential for understanding its role in regional and global politics, its efforts toward peace and

stability, and its economic and geopolitical aspirations. The findings gained from the thesis can be valuable for academia, policymakers, and international relations experts for further inquiries and empirical usage.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

As the main aim of my research is to unpack and spell out how Georgia's foreign policy has changed, I decided to proceed with the process tracing method. Process tracing allows us to systematically trace the sequence of events and the decision-making processes and identify the causes and effects of foreign policy shifts. This is crucial for understanding why specific policy changes occurred and what their consequences are. It will help me to uncover specific actions, decisions, and events that lead to policy change.

Throughout the book, George and Bennet (2005) paid particular attention to the method of process tracing, which attempts to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes. As Bennet and George argue, many case study researchers decide to use the process tracing method either to uncover evidence of causal mechanisms at work or to explain outcomes (p. 20). In my case, I seek to explain the shifts in foreign policy direction as outcomes. In process tracing, the researcher examines histories, archival documents, interview transcripts, and other primary or secondary sources. They claim that “Process tracing can perform a heuristic function as well, generating new variables or hypotheses based on sequences of events observed inductively in case studies” (George and Bennet 2005, p 18). When process tracing is used in case studies, it cannot test theories that lack detailed explanations; it can play a vital role in developing the theory. (p142)

David Collier perceives that process tracing is a fundamental tool of analysis and describes process tracing as a methodical investigation of diagnostic evidence carefully chosen and analysed in the context of the research questions and hypotheses put forth by the researcher. The process tracing approach plays a crucial role in not only describing political and social phenomena in detail but also in critically assessing claims about causation (2011, p823). Collier claims that process tracing is centred on observing how events or situations develop chronologically over time. It's important for researchers to understand that, in process tracing, detailed descriptions often involve the use of quantitative data to enhance precision (2011, p824-825). In my paper, I will also utilise a few quantitative data from different research institutes in Georgia that conduct social surveys to

determine the public attitudes towards foreign policy issues, which is important to analyse which factors are behind the shifts in foreign policy directions on a domestic level.

Beach and Pedersen (2013) address understanding of how to use process tracing in practice; for this, they differentiate three distinct variants of the process tracing method: theory-testing, theory-building, and explaining outcomes. The theory-testing variant refers to an approach for theory testing that begins by extracting a theory from the available literature, followed by an examination to determine whether there is empirical evidence supporting the existence of a proposed causal mechanism within a specific case. The theory-building mechanism indicates building a theoretical explanation from the empirical evidence of a particular case. This method is utilised in two different research situations: first, when we acknowledge a connection between X and Y but lack an understanding of the mechanisms that connect them (focusing on the relationship between X and Y), and second, when we recognise a particular outcome (Y) but are uncertain about the factors causing it (concentrating on the causes of Y) (2013, p16). However, as I am not focused on the theory testing mechanism or theory-building in my research, I will mainly focus on the third type, explaining the outcome process tracing mechanism.

Third, explaining outcome process tracing does seem to be the most appropriate method for my research purposes, as it aims to create a basic but adequate explanation of what happened in a particular case to produce a specific historical outcome. Here, the aim is not to build or test more general theories but to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of the case (2013, p18). A successful explanatory outcome PT study should identify potential systematic factors. These factors can serve as subjects for further investigation in subsequent studies or form the foundational elements for future inquiries aimed at constructing universally applicable causal mechanisms. (2013, p19). However, I do not apply the causality claim in my research.

Following that, in order to test shifts in the foreign policy directions and find out the possible reasons, I will use existing primary and secondary sources of information, which is available publicly. It will enable me to apply the process tracing method to analyse the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy direction from 2016 until 2023 in sequence over time. First, analysing bilateral agreements, formal positions, official statements, national security and foreign policy strategy documents, and constitutional amendments will provide a general understanding of Georgia's officially declared foreign policy course and the formal stance of the government. They offer

insights into the intended direction of Georgia's foreign policy. However, in order to check the coherence of the declared course and its implication, we must analyse the practical instruments, what the Georgian government does on the practical level, what the decision-makers in government and the ruling party state when it comes to foreign policy issues, in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia and other global players. as well as we should look at it from a Russian and Western perspective and analyse official statements of these actors to see the coherence of Georgia's foreign policy aspiration and external perspectives. Governmental decisions, efforts, official statements, and reports from these external actors will help us evaluate their perspectives on the formation of Georgia's foreign policy.

Reviewing papers, articles, and analyses from independent scholars and institutions can offer diverse perspectives and insights into the factors influencing Georgia's foreign policy. Additionally, while the insider data is not often officially available from the decision-makers, I will consider reliable and independent media outlets for a broader understanding of socio-political events. Independent sources provide a more nuanced view and help triangulate information, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. Analysing significant events, polls, and factual information related to Georgia's foreign policy can help contextualise shifts. This could include public opinion polls, major political events, and geopolitical developments. Events and facts will provide a temporal context for understanding changes in foreign policy and can highlight key turning points.

Moreover, economic statistics will be important in studying foreign policy change, as far as economic factors often play a significant role in shaping a nation's international relations. Therefore, statistical information, such as foreign trade, the number of incoming tourists from a certain country, foreign investments in strategic meaning projects, debts, and economic sanction issues, will be analysed as well.

Analysing publicly available interviews with key figures in the government, the ruling party, and other influential domestic or external actors may provide direct tangible knowledge of the decision-making process and the logic behind foreign policy choices. Interviews will add a qualitative dimension to my analysis, will provide perspectives that might not be clearly demonstrated and noticeable in official documents alone.

By combining these diverse sources, I will be able to conduct a thorough and valuable analysis through the process tracing method, which will contribute to solve the research puzzle thought analysing it from multiple angles. Triangulation strategy will ensure to validate the information through checking different sources. This methodology will enhance the reliability and validity of the thesis' findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy. By employing process tracing research method, it will allow the thesis to identify the mechanism and contextual factors that contribute to changes in Georgia's foreign policy, which ensures to provide a robust and detailed explanation for the observed shifts. I will try to build the timeline of the developments and locate the used material in space and time.

2.3. Limitations of the study

Addressing the limitations of the study, I acknowledge that some of the sources used for analysing events or documents will be gathered in the Georgian language, and as I am not a native English speaker, I recognise possible limitations and potential issues related to translating specialised terms, however, I will provide explanations when needed to ensure clarity and accuracy. On the other hand, having access to and analysing the sources in my native language will benefit me in profoundly understanding and making comprehensive analyses.

As mentioned before, my research analysis will be based on publicly available sources. However, I am aware that foreign policy decisions are often influenced by various factors. My analysis may not capture the full complexity of these decisions, as some motivations and influences might be hidden or not well-documented and therefore, it is beyond my ability to gain such data. Furthermore, I acknowledge that diplomatic negotiations often involve confidential and informal agreements that are not publicly disclosed, and my reliance on public sources may limit my ability to gain insights from insider decision-making process. Moreover, alongside conducting a two-level foreign policy analysis of Georgia, I recognise the important role of the human decision-making process in conducting foreign and domestic policy; however, various local and international actors indicated informal governance in Georgia, which questions the actual decision-making process. As far as this allegation stays beyond the scientific justification, I will not include the individual-level analysis in my research. Therefore, I recognise the possible limitations regarding it.

Also, I am aware that publicly available information, including official statements, media analytical articles, or other sources, can be subject to political bias or strategic communication. However, after carefully analysing multiple sources, I will critically evaluate the credibility and bias of the sources that I utilise in my research.

Part III – Analysis and findings – explaining the shift in the foreign policy directions of Georgia during the time period 2016-2023

This chapter aims to analyse the shifts in the foreign policy directions of Georgia, identify the level of change, and explore the factors that are behind the shifts; for this, I will conduct a foreign policy analysis of Georgia from the 2016 parliamentary election until the end of the 2023 year, which refers the two terms of Georgian Dream political party's sole government in power. As foreign policy is a complex issue that integrates various factors to conduct it, I will delve into exploring the factors that are behind the shifts on a domestic and international level. For this purpose, I will research various sources mentioned in the methodology chapter through process tracing methods, to triangulate the sources through timeline of the developments and locate the used material in space and time.

I will proceed to the main part of the study, which includes an analysis of foreign policy since the 2016 parliamentary election. For this, I will introduce two main sub-chapters seeking to research the shifts in Georgia's foreign policy directions. First, I will analyse the 2016-2020 mandate years as the first solely GD party-led government with a constitutional majority in parliament, and second, the 2020-2023 years as a currently ongoing tenure in government led by the same political party. Both sub-chapters will be arranged as follows. First, it will research all appropriate primary and secondary sources within the time frame, which will help us identify the domestic factors that might be influencing foreign policy, and second, it will delve into the analysis to identify the exogenous factors that have an implication on the foreign policy of Georgia. Therefore, both sub-chapters will have two layers of analysis, domestic and international. This arrangement of sub-chapters will give us the opportunity to better understand the gradual shifts in foreign policy

directions. At the end of the chapter, I will summarise the analysis, unpack and spell out the findings, and answer the research questions.

3.1. Foreign policy development in 2016-2020 years

3.1.1. Domestic Level Analysis

Parliamentary Elections

The parliamentary elections of Georgia took place in October 2016. Based on the results, three political parties took mandates in parliament, out of which the ruling political party, Georgian Dream, solely garnered 115 mandates out of 150 parliamentary seats, which allowed them to have a constitutional majority. According to the Central Election Commission of Georgia, the elections were held "in a generally calm and free atmosphere, without any flagrant violations" (RFE/RL's Georgian Service, 2016). Similarly, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) published a report summarising the October election and evaluating it as free and competitive – "parties were able to deliver their messages, and voters were able to make informed decisions." The voting process has proceeded in a lawful manner. However, minor incidents emerged during the election, which did not affect the overall legitimacy (NDI election final report, 2016 p3). Additionally, the OSCE/ODIHR (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) Election Observation Mission (EOM) Final Report confirmed the legitimacy and validity of election results, claiming that the elections "were competitive, well-administered and fundamental freedoms were generally respected." Some unlawful accidents were reported; however, overall legitimacy was not questioned (OSCE/ODIHR EOM final report 2016, p1).

Ana Gomes, the head of the European Parliament delegation, stated at the election sum-up conference that the ruling party will have more substantial responsibility as they take constitutional majority based on the election results. This opportunity should be used for the good of the country and not for political revenge. Balance of power between state institutions is crucial for democratic development. She stated that the EU stands by Georgia on the road to democracy, and it seems

that Georgia is on this road. She reaffirmed that Georgia and its European path take an important place on the agenda of the European Union and the European Parliament. (Interpressnews, 2016).

Constitutional reforms

Once the ruling party secured its constitutional majority in the legislative body of government, the constitutional changes came into the domestic political agenda. Significant changes were introduced in the new constitution, further shifting the country to the parliamentary system. Under a new constitution, formally, the president still retains the status of head of the state, commander-in-chief, and representative in foreign relations; however, his/her tangible mechanisms applying these rights are more limited and, in most cases, require consent from the Prime minister. The President loses the right “to request particular matters to be discussed at the Government session and participate in the discussion;”. Furthermore, the National Security Council was abolished. However, instead, the National Défense Council was established under the prime minister. According to the new constitution, the President will no longer be elected directly by the people from 2024, as the College of Electors will only have the mandate to appoint the president, which will comprise 300 members, including MPs and local and regional government representatives. (Civil.ge, 2017)

The new constitution included electoral changes that implied the full proportional representation in parliament from 2024, that electoral blocs would no longer be allowed, and that the 5% threshold would remain intact, which could diminish opposition parties already fragmented and weakened. Overall, the changes aimed to replace the existing seemingly problematic majoritarian system with a fully proportional election system were positively assessed domestically and internationally; however, postponing it until the 2024 elections, while the 2020 parliamentary election was ahead, led to the suspicion that GD would utilise the system in favour of the ruling party. This issue was strongly criticised by the Venice Commission, the EU, opposition, and civil society organisations. (Freedom House Report 2018)

The constitutional changes ensured and strengthened Georgia’s aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration. According to article 78 in the transitional provision, “the constitutional bodies shall

take all available measures within their competence to ensure Georgia's full integration into the European Union and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization;" (Civil.ge, 2017).

Overall, constitutional changes were positively assessed by the Venice Commission and the Council of Europe's advisory body on legal affairs. According to the Commission's report (2018), the proposed reform had a positive assessment, claiming that the reform "constitutes a positive step forward to consolidate and improve the country's constitutional order, based on the principles of democracy, the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights" (p4). However, underlines the importance of the "widest possible consensus" for this major constitutional reform. Additionally, several negative remarks were also noted, indicating the postponement of electoral reforms until 2024, which was referred to as "highly regrettable" and "a major obstacle to reaching consensus" (Human Rights Watch 2018). It should be highlighted that the President rejected to take part in the constitutional commission, and later, opposition parties also left the commission, claiming that the proposed constitutional change was unfair and prioritising the ruling party over any other political subjects.

Media Environment and Human Rights

Freedom House's (FH) report 2018 allows us to widely analyse the key points in democratic development in Georgia domestically. In a large context, the media landscape in Georgia can be characterised as "largely pluralistic, critical, and vibrant," which is also guaranteed by the legal framework. However, some negative events emerged in 2017, which concerned media independence among civil society, western partners, and international human rights organisations. First, the case of major critical television outlet Rustavi 2 questioned media independence. Following the long-term dispute over ownership, the Supreme Court transferred ownership of the outlet to the former owner. Interestingly, the Supreme Court made a unanimous decision the same day it examined the case without allowing the parties to make oral arguments. Later, after high criticism and active engagement of civil society organisations, The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) suspended the decision until further notice and called the Georgian authorities to refrain from interfering in the case (Human Rights Watch 2018). In 2018, ECHR upheld a verdict by Georgia's Supreme Court, and ownership of Rustavi 2 was transferred to its previous owner.

As a result, the new General Director dismissed government-critical journalists and other high-ranking staff (FH Report 2020).

Later, former staff of Rustavi 2 launched a new TV channel, “Mtavari Arkhi”, which was characterised by its criticism of the GD government. In November 2019, Giorgi Rurua, one of the owners and shareholders of Mtavari Arkhi, was detained for illegal possession and carrying of a firearm. In July 2020, he was sentenced to four years in prison. In the same year, the State Security Service accused Mtavari Arkhi of an act of sabotage regarding the Covid pandemic issues, claiming that the opposition-minded TV were organisers of a disinformation campaign aimed to “fuel the feeling of insecurity as well as distrust towards the state, [and to] create panic and chaos” and Tbilisi City Court issued ruling to obtain the entire footage of the TV stories aired by pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV on June 20 and June 25. (Civil.ge, 2020e)

In 2019, the events around Adjara TV, the public broadcaster of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, once again questioned media freedom and intensified the doubts about gaining influence on media outlets by the ruling party. The Advisory Council of Adjara TV supported the impeachment of Natia Kapanadze, the director of the TV channel. Under her leadership, various local and international watchdogs, including OSCE and Human Rights Watch, praised Adjara TV for its politically neutral editorial policy. Instead, Giorgi Kokhreidze was elected to the director position on its 4th attempt, who had ties with the ruling party. After his appointment, significant changes were imposed in management staff and editorial policy. Interestingly, the ruling party's chairman, its MPs and other top officials often criticised Adjara TV's editorial policy, referring to “calm down”, threatening TV journalists with suspending accreditation and accusing them of pursuing opposition parties' interests. (TI Georgia 2020b)

Alongside the media independence issues, various reports indicate the case of Imedi TV, which acquired two other media outlets. Controlling shares of Maestro and GDS were transferred to Imedi, which is perceived as the ruling party's mouthpiece. Furthermore, the new leadership came in Georgian Public Broadcasting (ITV). The decision was criticised by NGOs as the new management allegedly had a close relationship with the ruling party. Under new leadership, political talk shows were shut down, and according to media monitoring organisations' reports,

Georgian Public Broadcasting had an editorial bias in favour of the ruling party (US State Department Human Rights Report Georgia 2018).

In addition, the case of Afgan Mukhtarli was another controversial issue that undermined the freedom of media and human rights in Georgia. Afgan Mukhtarli is an Azerbaijani journalist and activist who fled from Azerbaijan over the threats related to his independent investigation of corruption in Azerbaijan. He has resided in Georgia since 2015, continuing his work in investigative journalism. In May 2017, Mukhtarli was abducted and a day later found arrested in Azerbaijan. Mukhtarli claimed that “he was kidnapped by men in Georgian police uniforms, who beat him in the car, put a hood on his head, stuffed his pockets with money and handed him over to Azeri state security officers”. However, the Georgian side categorically denied its involvement in the process (BBC, 2017). Mukhtarli believed that state agencies of Georgia, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and State Security Service, cooperated with Azerbaijan’s border and security services during his abduction. Later, the case was widely condemned and reported by US, EU and human rights watchdogs.

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based press freedom watchdog, in the Press Freedom Index ranking, Georgia took 64th place in 2016 among 180 countries and 60th place in 2020, while it had 100th place in 2013. RSF assessed Georgia’s media as pluralistic but still very polarised in 2021, stating that reforms during the recent years improved “media ownership transparency and satellite TV pluralism, but owners and bosses still often call the shots on editorial content” (Civil.ge, 2021a). Freedom House reports also addressed the same challenges in the media environment in Georgia. The Independent Media score from 2016 to 2020 decreased from 4.00 to 3.50 out of 7 points. (FreedomHouse 2021)

Judicial reforms

Transparency International’s (TI) Georgian office, a local watchdog, in its report published in October 2020, provides us with comprehensive findings and key points of the state of the justice system of Georgia during the 2016-2020 years. Since 2012, the ruling party has implemented “four waves” of judicial reforms, two of which were in 2016-2020. According to Transparency International, the reform was protracted in time and often unclear to the public, or changes in the

text of draft laws were unexpectedly made without a public hearing. Furthermore, when parliament approved the “third wave” package in December 2016, the final wording did not include the amendments that had been assessed positively by the Venice Commission, and the President’s motivated remarks were not considered either. The Georgian parliament started considering and developing the package under 4th wave of judicial reform in December 2018. However, Transparency International stated that the work on the reform “proceeded in an isolated manner, without the participation of professional groups and civil society organisations”. The work on “fourth wave” judicial reform continued and was finalised in 2019, which included part of the recommendations of the Venice Commission. However, a considerable number of recommendations were not included. The Ambassador of the European Union to Georgia, Carl Hartzell, assessed it as a “missed opportunity” not to consider several critical points from the Venice Commission recommendations. (TI Georgia 2020a)

In 2020, the report “Georgia’s Implementation of 20 Eastern Partnership Deliverables for 2020” was published, which was prepared by major Georgian independent research centres and civil society organisations. The report stresses that despite the significant positive changes under the 4th wave of reform, the system of judicial appointments still faces major challenges such as impartiality, justification, transparency and the principle of merit-based assessment. Concluding the judicial reform issues, the report expresses major concern regarding the Judiciary and claims that it is “controlled by an influential group of judges who occupy the most important administrative positions and are connected with each other by close friendship and kinship”. This influential group of judges has a huge influence and leverage over the judges. Furthermore, it has close ties with the top officials of the ruling party, resulting in the politically biased appointment of judges, which hinders the independence and impartiality of the system. (ASSESSMENT BY CIVIL SOCIETY 2020, p61)

Appointing the judges in the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court has been marked to be a politically tumultuous and provocative action, strongly condemned by civil society organisations and foreign partners. By the end of December 2018, the parliament received the 10-person list of candidates to be appointed to the Supreme Court, which the High Council of Justice sent. It turned out to be compiled without any procedures and based on an informal agreement. TI Georgia stated that the list of people was compiled through “procedural violations and in a non-transparent and

accelerated manner”. The list included the candidates clearly referenced to a group of influential individuals in the judiciary, including Mikheil Chinchaladze, one of the four sanctioned judges by the US State Department in April 2023. This process was responded to by harsh criticism by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Public Defender, and critically minded non-judge members of the High Council of Justice. Later, to accelerate the judges' approval, the chairperson of the Legal Issues Committee of the Parliament, Eka Beselia, resigned. As a result of high political pressure from the public and NGOs, the committee refused to consider the issue and nominated individuals withdrew their candidacies by themselves. (TI Georgia, 2020a)

However, against the background of this process, the Council scheduled an interview with Levan Murusidze and, at the same session, appointed him to the judicial office for life. It is noteworthy that Levan Murusidze has been associated with many high-profile and politically motivated cases in the past, and together with Mikheil Chinchaladze, he was sanctioned by the US State Department in 2023. Amidst the ongoing developments of the Supreme Court, some other members of the parliament, together with Eka Beselia, gradually left the ruling party, which resulted in losing the constitutional majority in parliament by the GD. (TI Georgia 2020a)

Alongside the judicial reform, in 2019, the Georgian Dream started to work on regulations of the procedure of the selection of the Supreme Court judges in the format of the task force. However, TI Georgia claimed that the majority of this task force includes the members of the so-called ‘judicial clan’ and MPs who are perceived to have close ties with them. The parliament introduced new regulations regarding the selection and appointment of judges; however, it failed to address real challenges to setting certain barriers and restrictions for the group of influential judges. Later, the High Council of Justice approved a 20-person list and submitted it to parliament. Some violations of procedures accompanied the voting process at parliament. On the same day, parliament appointed 14 judges for life at the Supreme Court in an accelerated manner. Similarly, judges’ appointments in the Constitutional Court during the 2017-2020 years were marked to be controversial. (TI Georgia 2020a)

In September 2022, the final report, the Evaluation of the EU’s cooperation with Georgia, was published under the European Commission, which provides a “comprehensive and independent assessment” of the EU’s cooperation with Georgia during the period 2014-2020. The document

allows us to clearly understand the EU's perspectives on Georgia, which mainly focuses on Georgia's coherence in implementing the reforms under the Association Agreement.

Referring to the Rule of law evaluation section, the report expresses dissatisfaction with progress on the independence of the judiciary in Georgia, together with national CSOs and international organisations. Two waves of justice reform introduced during 2016-2020 were assessed as "fragmentary and inconsistent". Despite positive legislative changes, the EU perceives that the overall state of the system is incompatible with democracy, as the individual independence of judges and the closed nature of the judicial system remain the main challenges. The process of selecting the judges was not aimed at staffing the Supreme Court with conscientious and qualified judges, but it served to strengthen the influential group of judges, resulting in entirely controlling the judiciary by the so-called "clan". The EU report perceives that the overall process of nominating and electing the Supreme Court judges and disregarding a big part of Venice Commission recommendations causes "considerable reputational damage" to the country. (European Commission 2022, p 170-171)

According to the public surveys conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centre in 2019 spring, the judiciary of Georgia has one of the lowest trusts among the state institutions. Only 5% of respondents fully trust the system. Furthermore, 53% of the population believe that the judiciary system is under the ruling party's influence, and 50% believe that the court system is not fair (civil.ge 2019b). The vast public mistrust toward the judicial system once again demonstrates its vicious characteristics, lack of conscientiousness, and lack of independence.

The presidential and local elections

Local municipal elections took place in October 2017 and were finalised with the overwhelming victory of the ruling party. Local and international observers were presented on election days. International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) published a report summarising the two rounds of the local municipal elections. IEOM included OSCE/ODIHR observers and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. According to IEOM's final report, overall, the elections were assessed as free and fair, it was well administered, "fundamental freedoms were generally respected, and candidates were able to campaign freely". Election days

have mainly proceeded in an orderly manner with minor procedural errors. However, the ruling party's dominance was presented, and a few isolated cases indicated possible intimidation and pressure on voters, which raised concern. IEOM also indicated the absence of specific legal regulations which would regulate the donation and election process in general. Overall, the legal framework was assessed as comprehensive, which provided the basis for conducting the election in compliance with democratic principles. It should also be highlighted that the ruling party accounted for 91.1% of all election campaign donations, which clearly demonstrated GD's dominance, significantly shaping the overall context of the elections. The ODIHR EOM also verifies some cases of misusing administrative resources by the ruling party (OSCE/ODIHR report, 2018)

In late 2018, two rounds of presidential elections were held in Georgia. The independent candidate, Salome Zurbashvili, supported by the ruling party, won the election and became the first female president of Georgia and the last elected directly by the people due to constitutional changes. Based on the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), overall, the election was competitive and professionally administered; candidates could campaign freely, and voters had a genuine choice. Election day was mainly free, orderly, and well-administered. Despite this, several critical issues raised concern among local and international observers. According to the IEOM report, misuse of administrative resources in favour of the ruling party-supported candidate was one of the issues which blurred the line between the party and the state. The election campaign was marked by negative campaigns and harsh rhetoric; private media was polarised and biased; furthermore, lack of analytical reporting limited voter's fully informed choices. Even though the election day was assessed positively, "tracking of voters reinforced concerns about potential intimidation". (OSCE/ODIHR report 2019)

The IEOM report refers to the legal framework which provides an adequate basis for conducting democratic elections. Recent amendments in the election code provided several technical improvements and partially addressed prior ODIHR and Council of Europe recommendations. However, it does not provide sufficient regulations for the second round. Additionally, unregulated donations and pre-election campaigns remained a challenge. Before the second round, a few social and financial initiatives were announced, including debt relief for 600,000 individuals by the charitable foundation related to the ruling party's chairperson, which was announced the day before

the runoff. According to Freedom House Report 2019, several instances of vote buying, and ballot-box stuffing were reported during the presidential election.

Despite many irregularities, international observers recognised the legitimacy of the election result, calling it “competitive”. However, it was met with high dissatisfaction among the opposition, accusing the government of “stealing the election. Vashadze, the opponent of Zurabishvili in the presidential runoff, and his supporters alleged the ruling party and Ivanishvili in securing Zurabishvili’s victory through mass bribery and intimidation during the second round. However, many analysts believed that former President Saakashvili's involvement in backing the Vashadze may have backfired his position as Saakashvili was a controversial political figure in Georgian domestic politics due to his legacy, which strongly influenced the runoff result. Many voters supported Zurabishvili to prevent the Saakashvili-backed candidate's victory, which would potentially mean his return. (Lomsadze 2018)

The opposition coalition holds a rally protesting the election result. However, the size of the demonstration was not impressive. President Zurabishvili dismissed the opposition’s claim, stating - “For democracy’s sake, the results of the election should be accepted” (Eurasianet.org, 2018). Senior leaders of the EU and US congratulated Salome Zurabishvili on her election soon after the result announcement and urged her to combat “political polarisation” (RFE/RL, 2018).

‘Gavrilov night’ protest

Mass protests erupted in the capital of Georgia on the night of June 20, 2019. Sergei Gavrilov, a Russian Member of Parliament (MP) from the communist party, arrived in Georgia to participate in the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO); he decided to give his speech in Russian from the speaker’s seat of the Georgian parliament, which caused opposition MPs to call for protest to the public. Soon, thousands of angry Georgians went into the streets to protest Gavrilov’s presence in the speaker’s seat, which later turned into a clash between the police and protestors after they tried to storm the parliament. As a result, 240 people were hurt, 80 were police, and two people lost an eye. The protest next to the parliament was mainly spontaneously organised by ordinary people, which turned into a “shame movement” with the slogan ‘Shame to the government’, ‘Go and Take Away Russian Troops’ (Sanaia, ON.ge, 2019).

The mass protest and unrest lasted for some days, resulting in the resignation of the speaker of Parliament, Irakli Kobakhidze, on 21 June, which was one of the protestors' claims. Later, on 24 June, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the chairperson of the ruling party, announced that the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2020 would take place in a fully proportional representation, which was one of the demands from protestors. Also, it was one of the recommendations from the West partners and demands from the opposition and the civil sector during the constitutional changes, which had been neglected by the ruling party before. Therefore, this large-scale protest was the main trigger for the ruling party's chairperson to promise a fully proportional election in 2020 instead of starting in 2024 to calm unrest. Moreover, Ivanishvili announced that he would not apply an electoral threshold (ips-journal.eu 2019).

Over the 20th of June rally case, Irakli Okruashvili, one of the opposition leaders, was detained and found guilty of participating in group violence; he was sentenced to five years. Another opposition leader, Nika Melia, was also charged with group violence during the rally, and the parliament suspended Melia's MP immunity. The opposition claimed that Okruashvili was a political prisoner of the government. In 2020, the EU Ambassador to Georgia said, "Circumstances around ex-defence minister Okruashvili's case raises questions" (Agenda.ge, 2020).

President Zurabishvili called the public to stay calm, and she assessed Gavrilov's action as a "major crime" that "damages the country's dignity". Later, Gavrilov stated that the events in Tbilisi over his action were a "provocation aimed at hindering efforts to strengthen relations between the Russian and Georgian peoples." On June 21, President Putin ordered a temporary ban for Russian airlines flying to Georgia and the decision would be revised once the situation in Georgia is normalised, later Russia tightening restrictions on Georgian wine import too. Russian high officials criticised and blamed the opposition for the developed events in Tbilisi, calling them "radical political forces of Georgia" that "spew their anti-Russian sentiments" (RFE/RL's Georgian Service, 2019).

The ongoing political events over the 'Gavrilov night' protest became just the beginning of a major domestic political crisis in Georgia, which further deepened the mistrust between the ruling party and the opposition. As mentioned before, a few days after a mass protest emerged in Tbilisi, the chairperson of GD promised the public to hold the upcoming parliamentary election with a fully

proportional system, which significantly contributed to appeasing the protest. However, a few months later, the promise proved to be abandoned as far as the ruling party backtracked on its key promise.

In November 2019, the Georgian Parliament voted down the constitutional amendments, which were supposed to envisage promised changes in the electoral system, fully transferring to a proportional system in 2020. In 150 seats of parliament, 101 voted in favour, three against and 37 abstained, while the amendment needed $\frac{3}{4}$ of votes (113 of 150). Of the 101 votes in favour, only 57 of them were from the ruling party, 37 abstained, and three went against. (Civil.ge, 2019a)

This decision of the Parliament was followed by a civil society protest in November. In the background of the protest, the representatives of the government and opposition parties started negotiations on changes in the electoral system. Several meetings held for this purpose ended in vain. "Georgian Dream" did not seem to agree on a proportional electoral system, and the opposition was against holding the October 2020 elections with an existing mixed electoral system. After four unsuccessful rounds of negotiations, with the active engagement of the Western partners' diplomatic corps in the process, the ruling party and the opposition reached a consensus over the electoral system reform which would be enacted for the 2020 parliamentary elections. The agreement was reached on negotiations that took place at the U.S. Embassy on March 8. All parties involved in the negotiations made a joint statement expressing their readiness and pledge to "be engaged in dialogue in the interest of ensuring free and fair Parliamentary elections in 2020 that reflect the will of the Georgian people." As of the 8 March agreement, the new parliament would consist of 120 members elected through the proportional party lists and 30 members elected through a majoritarian system through the 2020 year's elections, where the electoral threshold would be 1% for proportional election. (Civil.ge, 2020c)

The agreement between parties was strongly supported and praised by the US and EU, hoping that this would have a positive impact on ending the internal political crisis and preparing for the 2020 parliamentary election. Furthermore, parties welcomed President Zurabishvili's contribution to the facilitation process. Later in May, the President pardoned Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili, alleged political prisoners, claiming that her decision derived from the "interest of political de-polarization and creating a political environment more conducive to a free, fair and transparent

electoral process”. 8 March agreement facilitators, US, German, and EU Ambassadors praised this political act as a pivotal contribution” toward the implementation of the agreement and once more underlined that the foreign diplomats are closely following the further progress regarding “all aspects related to the 8 March agreement” (Civil. ge, 2020d).

Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia for 2019-2022

In 2019, Georgia's foreign policy strategy was adopted by the government, aiming to determine the strategic goals, tasks, and priority directions of the country's foreign policy and the ways and mechanisms of their implementation. This is the first strategy document of Georgia's foreign policy, which is a national-level document approved by the Georgia government and is based on the constitution and law, as well as the international obligations, international agreements and treaties assumed by Georgia. The document is fully consistent with the resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on foreign policy priorities adopted in 2016.

After the introductory part, the document reviews the international environment first and then defines Georgia's foreign policy strategies and priorities. It recognises the dynamic and rapidly changing characteristics of international relations alongside the increasing number of militarisation, terrorism, political and economic instability, wars and raised cyber threats. The document describes the regional instability caused by Russia’s aggression, including the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, alongside other unsolved regional conflicts.

The documents claim Georgia will have to protect its own interests in a difficult, unpredictable, and turbulent environment against the background of existing international and regional tendencies. However, it also underlines that Georgia, as a European-type democratic state, will further continue to contribute its positive role in terms of peace, the rule of law, protection and implementation of human rights.

Despite the existing international environment and the challenges, it poses to Georgia, the document claims that it also creates new political and economic opportunities for the country, indicating Georgia’s strategic location, connecting Europe and Asia, which provides the possibility of sustainable economic development in Georgia. Therefore, conducting a ‘pragmatic and result-

oriented' foreign policy for Georgia will ensure the strengthening of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, further consolidation of institutional democracy, the well-being of the population and the establishment of a 'dignified' place in the European family and globally.

Regarding Georgia's foreign policy priorities, the foreign policy strategy prioritises the strengthening of the strategic partnership with the United States of America and aspiring to NATO and EU integration, as well as deepening the bilateral relations with EU member states and Canada. On the other hand, the document pays particular attention to Carrying out "an effective and balanced" regional policy. It aims to pursue existing strategic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan and further deepen its ties in the fields of energy, electronic communications, economics, transport/transit, defence, and security. Georgia keeps prioritising good neighbourly relations with Armenia and seeks to strengthen sectoral cooperation, especially while Armenia faces positive changes in the country. Georgia will continue peace negotiations with the Russian Federation within the framework of the international discussions in Geneva and all other peaceful instruments to contribute to de-occupation and non-recognition policy toward the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia.

Moreover, the strategy document widely reviews its priorities to deepen relations with Asia and Oceania, the Middle East and African countries. Multilateral diplomacy remains the priority as well, indicating Georgia's role and aims to actively engage in the work of the UN, the Council of Europe and OSCE, as well as cooperate with other regional organisations. Referring to relations with China, the document perceives it as "extremally important" to deepen friendly relations and cooperation, particularly in the directions of trade-economic and transport-transit cooperation. (Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia for 2019-2022)

Furthermore, the document prioritises Georgia's engagement in international peace missions and underlines the importance of enhancing economic and cultural diplomacy. Also, the strategy document highlights the government's aims to popularise Georgia's foreign policy priorities in order to keep and strengthen the support for it among the population. It pays attention to civil engagement in the process of implementing foreign policy priorities. Additionally, the document aims to combat disinformation and prevent the influence of anti-Western propaganda on the Georgian population.

Georgia-US relations

The relations between the two countries in 2016-2020 coincide with Trump's presidency in the United States of America (USA). Despite Trump's main slogan, "America first, make America great again", which indicated its main priority to be the domestic process in the country, the strategic partnership between Georgia and the USA continued. Domestically, the USA pursued its policy to support the democratic development of Georgia, providing financial aid all year. Around 50 large-scale programs are supported and allocated around 40 million dollars annually by the US government. However, several anti-democratic events that occurred during this period in Georgia, were negatively assessed by the US senators. In 2020, two US Senators released a letter addressing to Prime Minister Gakharia, while they expressed "concern over recent events that indicate a backsliding from Georgia's commitment to building the institutions of their democracy." (Changiani M. (2022), p56)

Military cooperation increased during these years as well. In 2018, the program was launched which aimed to train nine battalions of the Georgian defence Forces by the Americans. In the same year, Georgia purchased Javelin portable anti-tank missile systems, M-240 machine guns, and Stinger anti-aircraft missile systems from the US. Moreover, in 2019, a three-year security cooperation agreement was signed to increase the Georgian military's combat capability. (ibid,p54)

Alongside the political and military support, strengthening the economic cooperation was indicated during the meeting between Trump and the PM of Georgia in 2017, while they emphasised the importance of a "new level of partnership". In 2017, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visited Georgia to convey Trump's message of support. He attended the NATO military exercises, Noble Partner 2017, that took place in Georgia. In 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Georgia, where he reaffirmed America's support for Georgia, and later, the US allocated \$ 64 million to Georgia as assistance "to develop the economy and support the Euro-Atlantic integration". (Ibid, p58). In 2019, the US approved the Georgia Support Act (H.R.598), which emphasises its support for Georgia's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, Euro-Atlantic integration, peaceful conflict resolution, and democratic development. In 2016 and 2019,

the House representatives passed resolutions condemning Russia's intervention and occupation of Georgian territories (Welt 2019, p14).

Georgia-Russia relations

The relations between Russia and Georgia during the 2016-2020 years have not changed much, as the ruling party continued pursuing its „pragmatic policy” toward Russia, not to irritate it. Politically, diplomatic relations remained cut, as Russia occupied and supported two breakaway regions in Georgia. However, the Geneva International Discussion format for negotiations between the parties continued operating. In response to US Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Georgia in 2017, Putin visited occupied Abkhazia, coinciding with the 9th anniversary of the 2008 Russo-Georgia war (Tabula.ge, 2017).

In 2018, Georgian Prime Minister (PM) Giorgi Kvirikashvili released an appeal to the Russian Government. Kvirikashvili claims that despite positive developments in economic relations, Russia keeps illegally detaining Georgian citizens in so-called borders in occupied territories, and some cases of murder, which undermines the prospect of normalising Georgian-Russian relations. Kvirikashvili expresses readiness for direct dialogue with the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians. Kvirikashvili concluded – “I urge the leadership of the Russian Federation to take joint steps and resolve this difficult situation while fully embracing our responsibility to the present and future generations. ” In response, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement stating that Russia is, like previously, interested in improving relations with Georgia and “is ready to go as far as Tbilisi is ready to go” (Civil.ge 2018b). Furthermore, in 2018, Syria became the 5th UN member state to recognise the breakaway regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Official Tbilisi accused Russia of exerting pressure on Bashar Al-Assad (Gigitashvili, 2018). In 2019, following the UN General Assembly, the foreign ministers of Georgia and Russia met in New York, the highest-level meeting since 2008.

Against the background of Georgia's “normalization” policy, Russia continued to implement its “borderization” policy in Georgia, which implies a series of actions of encroaching and seizing Georgian territories across the already occupied regions. This process divides families, violates human rights, and undermines Georgian sovereignty. This process is followed by detaining the

local citizens by occupying forces. According to the Georgian State Security Service 2021 statement, in 2019 and 2020 years 150 people were illegally detained. In many cases, “detained” citizens are facing ill-treatment and violence, and in the worst cases, death (Seskuria, 2021, p3). In 2018, Russian PM Medvedev claimed that NATO’s commitment to accept Georgia in the alliance was an “irresponsible position” that could provoke “terrible conflict” (Ibid, p4)

Interestingly, the tension and incidents often coincide with Georgia’s pro-western moves or NATO military exercises in Georgia. Except for the “borderization” policy, Russia actively pursued spreading misinformation and Anti-Western narratives in the Georgian population, through its local players. These narratives mainly include patriotic, religious, nationalistic, and anti-LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer+) sentiments portraying the West as “Evil” trying to undermine traditional Georgian values while presenting Russia as a “traditional spiritual-moral value” defender. (Ibid, p4)

Economically, the relations between the countries increased during the 2016-2020 year. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, exports to Russia gradually increased from 2016 to 2020 and took 13.2% of total exports in 2020. In numbers, in 2016, Georgia exported \$207 million in products, while in 2019, it stood at \$497 million, and in 2020, it was slightly less, \$441 million. The share of Russian Tourists increased from 12.6% in 2016 to 16.2% in 2018 and slightly decreased to 15.7% in 2019 due to the anti-Russian so-called Gavrilov Night protests. Russian gas imports in Georgia remained between 9.2 % and 12.2 % in total share of imports for 2016-2020. Foreign Direct Investments from Russia to Georgia increased from 1.7% in 2016 to 7.1% in 2020 (TI Georgia 2022a). Should be highlighted that after the anti-Russian protest in Tbilisi in 2019, Russia imposed economic restrictions on Georgia, including banning direct flights. F

Euro-Atlantic integration

The Georgian government’s declared foreign goal to join the EU and NATO remained unchanged and the development of the process was mainly characterised by positive dynamics. The most significant steps in Georgia-EU relations during the 2016-2020 years were enacting the Association Agreement, DCFTA in 2016 and the visa-free regime for Georgian citizens to

Schengen area in 2017, which gave hundreds of thousands of Georgians closely acquired the EU standards, cultures and way of life.

These foreign priorities and goals of the country are strongly backed by the Georgian population. National Democratic Institute (NDI) national surveys, an authoritative and reliable organisation, provide us with national attitudes toward foreign policy issues. NDI 2016 November survey reports depict that 72% of the population approve of Georgia's aspiration toward the EU and 61% toward NATO. Furthermore, 66% of the population believed that Georgia's foreign policy should be pro-Western, out of which 54% perceived that Georgia should maintain good relations with Russia. By June 2020, support for EU integration stood at 76%, and 69% for NATO integration. (NDI Georgia 2020)

Additionally, one more important indicator for Georgia's integration process toward the EU during the 2016-2020 years is its alignment rate (%) with the EU's common foreign and security policy. Mainly, it indicates the country's alignment with EU-issued declarations in the area of common foreign and security policy. The percentage of Georgia's alignment with it had a gradually increasing dynamic from 2017 to 2020 years. In 2017, it stood at 56%, and the highest indicator was in 2020, at 61%. (Civil.ge 2023b)

In 2018, Members of European Parliament (MEPs) assessed the implementation of the Georgia-EU Association Agreement process. The assessment was mainly positive, highlighting Georgia's tangible achievements in the process. MEP Mamikins stated that Georgia has undertaken "substantial reforms for the successful implementation of the Association Agreement. " The Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, also evaluated Georgia's effort positively, indicating "the positive trends in terms of closer links with the European Union." however, there are some areas that require further improvements. Finish MEP Heidi Hautala praises Georgia for its progress and encourages it "to do even more", adding that "in certain international rankings, Georgia does better than many EU member states.". MEP Clare Moody from the UK commented that "Georgia is a frontrunner in the region; it is a star in the region for its commitment to European values, underlining that Georgia's future is European." Another MEP from the UK, Charles Tannock, claimed that "overall the picture is one

of progress” but it requires more work indicating the judiciary reforms and high-level corruption. (Civil.ge, 2018a)

In 2020, the European Parliament adopted a report on Georgia’s AA implementation. Overall, the assessment is positive, but it also includes more critical recommendations regarding certain cases that undermine the democratic process in Georgia. It evaluates the reforms and legislations positively alongside the March 8 agreement between the political parties; however, the judiciary situation triggers concerns related to appointing the judges and, furthermore, a series of cases against the opposition. The European Parliament also welcomes President Zurabishvili’s decision to pardon opposition leaders and call Georgian authorities to “refrain from pursuing any politically motivated cases.” It gives particular attention to the upcoming parliamentary election in October 2020 as “pivotal in confirming Georgia’s democratic credentials” and calls authorities to “fully address the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations” related to misuse of public resources, improper campaign financing methods, free from pressure voting, vote-buying, hate speech and xenophobia. (Civil.ge, 2020b)

The export from Georgia to the EU was gradually increasing from 2016 with \$550 million and to \$806 million in 2019 and took around 21% of all exports. Money transfers from the EU to Georgia doubled from \$370 million in 2016 to \$782 million in 2020, which is mainly related to the fact that EU countries became the main destinations for Georgian job workers abroad. The number of foreign visitors from the EU to Georgia was increasing gradually from 2012 to 2019 by 20% annually. For 2014-2021 years, the EU allocated 819 million Euro grant to Georgia for implementing the reforms and supporting democratic development. Additionally, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank provided a total of 4 billion euros in loans to Georgia in 2014-2021. (Namchavadze, 2022)

Georgia proceeded with its aspiration toward NATO, which was accompanied by several military exercises held in Georgia, including Agile Spirit and Noble Partner drills. In 2016, Georgia hosted three NATO multinational exercises consisting of soldiers from various NATO member and aspirant countries. Furthermore, in 2020, Georgia took part in the third-largest military exercises in Europe after the cold war led by the U.S. (Agenda.ge,2019). In December 2020, NATO Foreign

Ministers approved an updated substantive package (SNGP) for Georgia, which contains important elements to further strengthen Georgia's defence capabilities (Civil.ge, 2020f)

3.1.2. International Level Analysis

This sub-chapter aims to review the external geopolitical context and ongoing international events during the years 2016-2020 that could have influenced Georgia's foreign policy and shaped its priorities. Considering the problematic geopolitical context of the country, major international events that may have influenced Georgia are related to regional politics focused on Turkey's relations with the West and Russia, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, and Russia's politics with the EU and NATO, which present Georgia's main foreign policy priorities.

Turkey is the NATO member state that directly borders Georgia, and it presents a political and economic strategic partner for the country, which is also formalised in Georgia's foreign policy strategy document and other bilateral agreements. Furthermore, Turkey fully supports Georgia's aspiration toward the EU and NATO. In the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, the foreign minister of Turkey reaffirmed its support for Georgia's NATO aspiration, stating – "We are criticised for having relatively better relations with Russia as a neighbour, but our Western friends do not agree to invite Georgia because they don't want to provoke Russia. But Georgia needs us, and we need an ally like Georgia. So, we need enlargement, and Georgia should be made a member." (Reuters, 2020)

Several important elements have led US-Turkey relations to a stalemate. First, contradictory interests in the Middle East proved to be one of the key factors that made the relationship between the two parties turbulent. In Syria, the US and mostly Western European countries support the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is a military unit and one of the archenemies of Turkey. (GÜRSOY 2021, p137)

On the other hand, the coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 was one more important issue that significantly undermined the relationship between the US and Turkey. Turkey's government accused Fethullah Gulen as the mastermind of the coup and asked the US to extradite him. However, it has not happened. This issue deepened the sense of distrust between the parties. This resulted in the increased anti-Western sentiments in Turkish domestic politics. Turkey agreed with

Russia to purchase the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, which triggered Turkey's withdrawal from the F-35 program. President Trump harshly criticised Turkey and imposed economic sanctions, which triggered the depreciation of the Turkish lira on its historical record and the economic weakening of the country. Overall, these major events between the parties pushed Turkey to start forming strategic partnerships with Russia and Iran, adversaries of the USA, to diversify its logistical and military dependence beyond NATO. Furthermore, as Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria created a vacuum in power, Turkey enjoyed the moment to grow its regional influence (Ibid, pp 138-139). Turkey's increased influence in the region was noticeable in Georgia, too. The government closed Gulen-associated schools and restricted the universities, and also detained one of the school's Turkish managers, allegedly due to high pressure from Turkey (Civil.ge, 2023g).

Alongside the regional tensions and international political events, Nagorno-Karabakh's second war in 2020 has been marked to be one of the factors that might have influenced the South Caucasus regional stability and supposedly on foreign policy priorities of Georgia as well. Azerbaijan launched a military operation that turned into the second Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which lasted 44 days. Azerbaijan significantly advanced and recaptured its internationally recognised territories. As of the cease-fire agreement, Azerbaijan was handed all of the territories surrounding Karabakh, and Russia deployed peacekeepers in the conflict zone. The victory of Azerbaijan was derived from two main reasons. First, it was backed by Turkey, a regional power perceived as a strong patron state for Azerbaijan. Second, the use of drones bought from Turkey and Israel strongly contributed to victory (Aljazeera 2023b). On the other hand, the conflict proved to be dramatic for Armenia, as it was left alone. Russia, which is a treaty ally and security guarantor for Armenia, only stepped into the negotiation process of the ceasefire and deployed its peacekeepers in the conflict zone. Georgia kept neutrality during the war between the neighbouring states. Moreover, Georgia expressed its readiness to host negotiations in Tbilisi if needed. (Samkharadze, 2022)

In 2020, after the end of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, President Erdogan announced the initiative to form the "Six-Country Regional Cooperation Platform", while at the same time, Iran also proposed a similar cooperation platform, the "3 + 3" model, which would include three South Caucasus countries, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, plus three regional powers: Turkey,

Russia, and Iran. Later, Russia and Azerbaijan expressed their support and interest in engaging in regional cooperation; however, Georgia and Armenia expressed serious concerns, restraining their engagement in the platform. (Kaleji 2021)

As Georgia aspires to Euro-Atlantic integration, the main adversary for Russia, and at the same time, Russia presents an accountable regional power that claims its influence in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region and occupies parts of Georgian territories, it is important to briefly review the relations between Russia and the West during 2016-2020. Interestingly, during this period, political relations between the West and Russia worsened while the economic dependence between the EU and Russia increased.

Despite the Western sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of East Ukraine, the statistics proved that the economic relations between the parties have not worsened but somehow increased, so the EU and Russia remained important trade partners. For instance, the Foreign Direct Investment stock of the EU in Russia constituted 75% of Russia's total FDI in 2018, which stood at EUR 276.8 billion (Kapoor 2021, p12). Eurostat data depicts that EU exports to and EU imports from Russia gradually increased during the 2016-2019 years, slightly decreased in 2020, and grew in 2021 (Eurostat 2022). In 2020, 38% of the goods Russia exported arrived in the EU, mainly energy resources taking the leading position in the list (Lavdari, F., & Lavdari, X. 2022, p71). By 2019, Russia was the largest importer of gas in the EU, accounting for 43 % of the EU's total gas import, ahead of Norway (23 %) and Algeria (6 %). (Russel, 2021, p2). Moreover, despite the strong opposition of Poland, the USA, Ukraine, and the Baltics, the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline progressively continued during the 2016-2020 years, which would further increase Russian gas imports into the EU (Ibid).

Against the background of economic cooperation, the relations between the West and Russia were characterised by tension. As far as Russia classifies NATO as an adversary, the two latest enlargements of the alliance further deteriorated the relations between the West and Russia. Two new members joined NATO, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020, which triggered Russia's critics and threats. In 2017, the Russian foreign minister called Montenegro's NATO accession a "hostile policy" and claimed that the Russian side would reserve the right to take "retaliatory measures on a reciprocal basis" (Tomovic, 2017). Russia was dissatisfied with

NATO's 2020 years enlargement, too, with North Macedonia becoming the 30th member of the alliance. On the other hand, NATO's Eastern enlargement in 2017 and 2020 was perceived as a positive signal for Georgia that the alliance remains open-door policy. During her official visit to North Macedonia, President Zurabishvili stated that – “North Macedonia is a concrete and inspiring example for Georgia in terms of successful NATO integration, which shows that NATO's open-door policy is real” (Interpressnews.ge, 2021)

The cases of the poisoning of former spy Sergei Skripal in 2018 in the UK and opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 triggered Western criticism of Russia and imposed various sanctions by the US and EU. Furthermore, Russia's authoritarian moves in domestic politics fueled the worsening of relations with the EU. Suppressing opposition activities, lack of free and fair elections, human rights violations, and restriction of the press and civil sector were the main issues that caused political tension between the parties. Moreover, the West accused Russia of allegedly attempting to interfere in elections, such as the US presidential elections in 2016 and later important elections in EU states, including France, as well as fueling the disinformation and supporting rising right-wing populism in Europe, which was undermining European security. In response to its critics, Russia evaluated the EU's concerns and its support of free media and local NGOs in Russia as interference in internal affairs, so the regime created all the bases in the country to suppress these attributes of democracy, attempted to promote its brand of conservatism and create an “ideological alternative to the EU”. (Kapoor 2021, p10-11)

3.2. Foreign policy development in 2020-2023 years

3.2.1. Domestic level analysis

2020 parliamentary elections and domestic political crisis

In October 2020, the parliamentary election was conducted in Georgia with a new mixed electoral system that the parliament introduced as a result of the agreement after an internal political crisis.

The mixed electoral system implied 120 seats with proportional representation with a 1% threshold and the rest, 30 seats with majoritarian representation, elected in single-member districts. The Limited Election Observation Mission (LEOM), which included OSCE, NATO and the Council of Europe representatives, carried out observation. However, due to Covid pandemic restrictions, the observation mission could not carry out comprehensive and systematic work, unlike previous elections. Later, on 5 March 2021, LEOM released its final report, concluding the parliamentary elections. According to the report, the 31 October elections “were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected” (p2). However, it is noticeable that the overall quality of the election worsened compared to previous elections, and many remarks remained the same. The ruling party retained its dominance in election commissions, pre-election campaigns, financing and ads. The media environment was highly polarised and partially biased. There was a lack of analytical reporting, debates and policy-based discussions, which could have an influence on voters’ ability to make fully informed choices. (OSCE/ODIHR 2021)

The reports argue that despite the revised electoral legal framework, which overall provides the basis for conducting democratic elections, number of recommendations were not addressed and there remained the gap in legal framework which is related to “campaigning, election administration, campaign finance, media, the complaints and appeals process, and a regulatory gap on recounts and annulments of the election results at all levels” (Ibid, p3). Overall, effective implementation of the legal framework remained challenging.

International Republican Institute (IRI) also released a report evaluating the elections, mainly based on local CSOs. It also outlines similar key points and remarks as the OSCE LEOM report, further emphasising that election day was mainly well administered. However, irregularities have emerged mainly in the region populated with ethnic minorities. Some cases of violence against journalists, intimidation and reports of abuse of state administrative resources were also detected. The media was characterised by a free and pluralistic environment; however, it was partially biased and mainly dominated by two major parties. Social media was dominated by disinformation and propaganda. (IRI report, 2021)

Freedom House Nation in Transit 2021 report evaluates Georgia as a transitional or hybrid regime with a democracy score of 3.18 out of 7 and outlines its backsliding in the electoral process,

dropping from 3.25 to 3.00, and names the cases of vote-buying and boycott of the second round by opposition as key reasons. As a result of 2020, parliamentary elections, nine political parties passed the 1% threshold. The Ruling GD party took 48.15% and secured its third term in government by 90 parliamentary mandates. However, the opposition refused to recognise the results and organised several mass protests and boycotted the second round of the election, finally leading to another political impasse. (Freedom House Report 2021)

Despite international recognition of the election result, the opposition boycotted to take mandates, leaving the Georgia Dream party solely in parliament. However, the EU and US called the opposition to take the mandates and engaged in a mediation process between the ruling party and the opposition. The president of the European Council, Charles Michel, was personally involved in the process and introduced an accord. Before reaching the agreement, an unresolved political crisis lasted six months. This period was strongly characterised by polarisation and mutual accusations between the political parties. Moreover, the ruling party threatened the boycotted opposition parties by suspending state funding, restricting free political ad airtime and cancelling registration for the United National Movement, the largest opposition party. This action was strongly condemned by thirteen Georgian CSOs, who expressed their extreme concern and indicated that rhetoric was hindering the process of solving the political crisis. (Civil.ge 2020a)

Later, in February 2021, over the allegation of organising mass violence related to anti-government protests in June 2019, the Tbilisi court ordered the detention of the largest opposition leader Nika Melia. Soon, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned as he was against the plan to arrest the media, stating that this action from the state would cause further political polarisation and the crisis posed “a risk to the health and lives of our citizens” (ADKINS 2021). Soon after his resignation, ex-Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili was nominated for the position by the ruling party. In the following days, Nika Melia was arrested at the party's headquarters through a violent raid, which caused concern among the Western partners of Georgia. Commenting on the political event, the US Embassy in Tbilisi stated - “We regret that the call of the United States and other international partners for restraint and dialogue was ignored. We are dismayed by the polarising rhetoric from Georgia’s leadership at a time of crisis.” The US Congressman Adam Kinzinger assessed it as a “very concerning” move by the government. The chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee of the

Lithuanian Parliament, Žygmantas Pavilionis, compared storm on UNM headquarters by using gas “acting like Putin or Lukashenk”, “as Putin once did”. (Giorgadze 2021)

In April, Charles Michel brokered the agreement with the political parties, which was joined by the ruling and most opposition parties that passed the electoral threshold. The EU proposal envisages the amnesty of opposition leaders Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia and snap parliamentary elections if GD takes less than 43% of votes in upcoming local elections in 2021. The so-called Michel’s document also addressed the key issues that the Western partners were expressing their concerns in earlier years, including ambitious electoral reforms and judicial reforms, as well as power sharing in the parliament and addressing the perceptions of politicised justice (‘A way ahead for Georgia’ 2021). President Zurabishvili welcomed the GD and part of the opposition party’s decision to join the compromise document and thanked President Michel’s effort in the process. The signing ceremony was hosted by President Zurabishvili at the Orbeliani Palace. Following the compromise agreement, Giorgi Rurua was pardoned by the President and Nika Melia was released from pre-trial detention (Kinchka 2021).

Three months after signing the EU-led agreement, Georgian Dream annulled its signature and left the agreement. Head of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze, indicated that UNM, who won the most opposition seats, did not join the agreement and other opposition parties “were consistently violating the agreement”. Furthermore, he stated that the parliamentary commission proved that the parliamentary election was not fabricated (Agenda.ge 2021c).

Responding to the GD decision to leave the agreement, the US embassy in Tbilisi released a statement calling all parties to work together to implement the key envisaged commitments by the EU-led document, which has “vital” meaning for Georgia’s European integration. The embassy stated that the US “is deeply disturbed and exasperated” and “Washington is growing increasingly alarmed about repeated setbacks to Georgia’s democratic future,” over the ruling party’s decision. (Civil.ge 2021b).

In August 2021, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili announced that its government decided not to take an EU loan amounting to 75 million EUR. The reason that the government tried to justify its decision was economical, claiming that Georgia had no need of the loan, due to increased dynamics

in the economy and the aim to decrease the foreign debts. However, earlier, in the meeting with Premier Gharibashvili, the European Council President Charles Michel stated - “deadline for the disbursement of macro-financial assistance is looming, and it is time for the Georgian government to demonstrate its commitment to the agreements and notably the reform agenda”. Therefore, the government's refusal of the EU loan was evaluated as a “deviation from the country’s Euro-Atlantic course” by the Georgian NGOs. In response to this decision, the EU also reacted and stated that they “respect” Georgia’s decision; however, the country was unable to fulfil the preconditions needed to take the loan (Agenda.ge 2021a). A few weeks later, the Georgian government announced that it would take a \$100 million loan from the Asian Development Bank.

In October 2021, local municipality elections were held in Georgia., ending up with the victory of the ruling party. As of the OSCE report, the election proceeded in a “technically well-administered” manner. However, the general remarks and irregularities remained the same as during the previous elections. Alongside the political tension over the polls, ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili’s return to Georgia caused a deepening internal political crisis and further polarisation in the country. Saakashvili was in exile residing in Ukraine as he was accused of several unlawful cases during his presidency, and in 2018, the court convicted him in absentia. Moreover, as he crossed the border illegally, the Interior Ministry launched another charge additionally to two others. However, Saakashvili denied all accusations and claimed it was politically motivated. (HRW 2021)

Focusing on human rights and media environment issues, anti-LGBTQ+ protests and violence on journalists in July were some of the key issues in 2021. The Tbilisi pride parade was cancelled as far-right groups encouraged by the Georgian Orthodox church took to the streets and attacked activists’ headquarters and journalists. Freedom House report in 2021 states that 53 media workers were injured during the incident. Furthermore, after the attack, the Tbilisi mayor and one of GD leaders, Kakhi Kaladze, labelled Georgian news programs “psychological violence”, and critical journalists were denied access to the press events (Freedom House 2022). This accident was critically assessed by international watchdogs and had a significant influence on Georgia's freedom index. According to the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders Report 2022, Georgia backslid in the ranking and took 89th place among 180 countries. It should be noted that during previous years, this indicator varied between 60-64th place in ranking.

Interestingly, Prime Minister Gharibashvili stated that the intention to hold the Tbilisi pride in a public place was “unreasonable” and provocative, which could lead to “civil confrontation”, and MPs from the ruling party accused the “radical opposition” for supporting and sponsoring the pride event (Roth 2021).

Another attempt to hold the Tbilisi Pride event in July 2023 failed as it was disrupted by violent groups, like in 2021. A few thousand anti-LGBTQ+ protesters, led by Russian-affiliated far-right groups, clashed with police and managed to invade the private venue where the closed event of the Tbilisi Pride festival was scheduled to take place. They destroyed property and burnt the pride flags. The festival was cancelled by the organisers. President Zurabishvili condemned the violence and claimed that the freedom of expression guaranteed by the constitution was violated. The fact was also condemned internationally, including the UN, USA, UK and EU. Tbilisi pride organisers claimed that the Georgian government was coordinating with Russian-affiliated, far-right groups to disrupt the event. (Kennedy 2023)

The contradictory process in the judiciary remained effective in 2021 too. Two judge-members were appointed to the High Council of Justice. According to media reports, both judges were involved in politically motivated cases before. The appointment was followed by CSO critics, indicating doubts that an “influential group” of judges seeking to “consolidate power” had emerged, especially while the public attention was diverted to the political crisis (Agenda.ge 2021d). The EU Ambassador stated that this process was “a fifth setback in the area of the judiciary and rule of law in Georgia.”, and the process was “hasty, non-transparent and non-competitive” and once again called to authorities to uphold their reform commitment envisaged under the Association Agreement and lately, Charles Michel’s brokered agreement, adding that “the EU’s assistance to Georgia remains conditional on progress on key reforms” (Agenda.ge 2021b)

Abolishing the State Inspector Office and the case of Nika Gvaramia

At the beginning of 2022, the Georgian parliament supported the decision to abolish the State Inspector office, which was enjoying one of the highest qualities of efficiency, independence and truthfulness among the state institutions. CSOs released a joint statement expressing that they were “extremely concerned about the planned attack by the Georgian Dream authorities on yet another

independent body, the State Inspector's Office, breach of the independence of and trust in the institution.”. (Civil Society Foundation 2021)

The UN also criticised the decision, indicating they were “particularly concerned about the expedited manner and lack of inclusive and transparent discussions about the abolition of one of the most credible, independent and authoritative institutions in Georgia”. Western partners indicated that such steps weaken the democratic process and therefore jeopardise the country's aspiration toward the EU and NATO. Georgian opposition representative Mezvrishvili assessed the decision as a “huge step back for Georgia's democracy and towards authoritarianism” (Georgia Today, 2022).

Addressing the media freedom and democracy issues, the case of Nika Gvaramia caused mass outrage among the West partners, local and international organisations and opposition. Nika Gvaramia, director of government-critical and pro-opposition media outlet Mtavari Arkhi, was detained in May 2022, one month before the EU had to make a decision on whether to grant the candidacy status to Georgia or not. He was accused of abuse of power, money laundering, bribery and document forgery during his directorship of Rustavi 2 tv before. Transparency International-Georgia condemned the fact and evaluated it as a “politically motivated” case to punish Gvaramia and disrupt critical media activities. (TI Georgia 2022b)

Later, on 9 June 2022, the EU parliament adopted a resolution condemning the sentencing of Gvaramia and recalling Georgian authorities to “refrain from interfering in media freedom or pursuing politically motivated judicial cases against media owners or representatives”. Except for media freedom, the resolution includes all the other key issues that have caused Western partners' concern regarding the democratic development of Georgia on its path to the EU (EU Parliament resolution 2022). One day after the EU parliament adopted the resolution, the US Embassy in Georgia released US representative Kara McDonald's remarks to the media, expressing “deep concerns about Georgia's democratic trajectory.” (Freedom House 2023)

Georgia-Ukraine relations amidst the war

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had a profound impact on Georgia's internal and foreign policy. Since the very first days of invasion in February 2022, Georgian society expressed its

utmost support and solidarity to Ukraine. In the first evening of the invasion, Georgian people took the main streets in Tbilisi and in other major cities, too, in solidarity with Ukraine. The mass solidarity protest lasted long; people were gathering on the main avenue. Ukrainian flags were profoundly noticeable all over the cities. Georgian and Ukrainian presidents addressed the citizens at the March 4 demonstration. Media outlets, Universities, businesses and the civil sector, organised various charity funds to help Ukrainian people, alongside other solidarity actions. (Forbes.ge 2023). According to an August 2022 NDI survey, Georgians are confident that the war in Ukraine is Russia's fault; 58% named Russia as a whole, and 18% said Vladimir Putin personally. Also, the majority of Georgians believed that the Government was doing enough to support Ukraine. (NDI August 2022)

The Georgian government implemented various social services for Ukrainian refugees, made an exception, extending the visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens and allocated various humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including high-power generators. The Georgian diplomatic mission in Ukraine has continued to function despite the ongoing full-scale war (Forbes.ge 2023). As of April 2022, Georgia ranked first among 191 countries in providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Agenda.ge 2022a). Furthermore, based on MFA data, Georgia supported the various resolutions and statements initiated by international intergovernmental organisations, such as the UN and its specialised agencies, OSCE, Council of Europe, EU and other formats (Forbes.ge 2023).

Despite Georgia's officially declared position to strongly support and stand by Ukraine, political relations between the states cooled down. On the first day of Russia's mass attack on Ukraine, the Georgian opposition initiated an extraordinary parliamentary session on the ongoing event in Ukraine. However, the ruling party rejected it, claiming that there was "no need to hold the session" (Civil.ge 2022b). Later, Prime Minister Gharibashvili made a statement expressing Georgia's support for Ukraine; however, they refused the actions to join the sanctions imposed on Russia. He stated - "I want to state clearly and unambiguously, considering our national interests and interests of the people, Georgia does not plan to participate in the financial and economic sanctions, as this would only damage our country and populace more.". He added that the Government would pursue its foreign policy based on national interests, including GD's "pragmatic policy" toward Russia. At the same time, reminded Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, blamed UNM administration in betraying Georgia for "stupidly and foolishly or in an anti-

state manner giving in to provocation”, and in a current situation accused the opposition of creating provocations. The opposition claimed the Georgian government was appeasing Moscow. (Civil.ge 2022a)

Alongside the growing tension, the Georgian government did not allow a group of volunteers to fly to fight in the war in Ukraine, which was followed by President Zelenskiy’s decision to recall its Ambassador from Georgia, accusing Georgia’s government of “immoral behaviour” (Lomsadze 2022). Political polarisation between the states increased over time. Ukraine’s government accused Georgia of collaborating with Russia to evade international sanctions; however, it could not present any tangible evidence. In response, the Georgian ruling party accused Ukraine of its attempt to drag Georgia into conflict. Remarks from Kyiv calling Georgia to seize the moment and retake its breakaway regions backed by Russian troops, alongside the Ukrainian authorities’ statements that an additional war front for Russia would be helpful for Ukraine, contributed to Georgia’s allegation to Ukraine of an opening second front. The ruling party labelled Saakashvili’s UNM party as “the party of war” supported by Ukraine. (Gabritchidze 2022a)

The political tension between Ukraine and Georgia is mainly based on a governmental level, which is caused by Saakashvili’s factor for both parties. On the one hand, Saakashvili and his political party, UNM, present the main “enemy” of the Georgian Dream and Ivanishvili in Georgian politics, while, on the other hand, Saakashvili enjoyed a high authority in Ukrainian politics. Georgian ex-President Saakashvili and former Georgian authorities under his government moved to Ukraine once they lost power in Georgia. Furthermore, many of them, including Saakashvili, were granted Ukrainian citizenship and appointed to high state positions by the Ukrainian government. Additionally, Zelensky accused Georgian authorities of mistreating the prisoned Saakashvili and claimed his transfer to Ukraine, which was rejected and criticised by the Georgian side. Zelensky summoned the Georgian Ambassador, giving 48 hours for consultation over the Saakashvili case. (Ibid)

In the Autumn of 2023, Georgia’s State Security Service released a statement claiming that a group of individuals were planning Ukraine’s Euromaidan revolutionary scenario, including destabilisation and civil unrest from October to December. Security service indicated that foreign countries were behind the plan, indicating Deputy Head of Military Intelligence of Ukraine, Giorgi

Lortkipanidze, who was deputy minister of internal affairs of Saakashvili government, and former bodyguard of Saakashvili, Mamuka Mamulashvili, who is the commander of the “Georgian Legion” in Ukraine. As to the Security Service claim, Serbian organisation CANVAS and USAID were giving training to the group of young Georgians, who would later stage the “Euromaidan” scenario in Georgia. Several individuals, including representatives from Georgian NGOs, were questioned over the issue; however, they denied the accusations. It should be noted that such accusations from the government were often heard since 2014, mainly during the political tension in the country, which was directed to marginalise the opposition or civil movements. (Shanava 2023)

Interestingly, soon after these allegations, the parliament approved amendments in the domestic Law on Assembly and Manifestation banning the installation of “temporary constructions”, which was proposed by the GD. The bill was later vetoed by President Zurabishvili, who perceived its undemocratic and anti-European nature. OSCE criticised the GD proposed bill, calling it “disproportionate”, which potentially would negatively affect “the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly”. (Civil.ge 2023c)

Slandering and smear campaigns against the opposition, CSOs and the West

Anti-Western campaigns have long been accommodated in Georgia by Russian-affiliated far-right groups. However, Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine has proved to be decisive in intensifying anti-Western propaganda in Georgia. Since 24 February 2022, alongside the far-right groups, the ruling party has engaged in harsh criticism of Western partners, opposition and civil society organisations. Natalie Sisvadze, former Georgian ambassador to the EU, who served for eight years, indicated an unprecedented Eurosceptic and confrontational attitude toward the partners by the government.

In March 2022, the Georgian government submitted its EU membership application, a year ahead of initially planning to do so. The decision was taken based on a new regional geopolitical context, amidst the war in Ukraine. After applying, the Georgian government promised to fulfil the EU conditions to gain candidacy status. However, the ruling party’s further practical steps proved to be in contrast. In May, Nika Gvaramia, the director of a critical media outlet, was detained. In

June, the EU declared its decision to grant a “European perspective” to Georgia, while Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status. Furthermore, the Ruling party and its affiliated groups and individuals intensified criticism and anti-Western propaganda.

The ruling party started an attack campaign against the US and EU ambassadors. The U.S. Ambassador Degnan was accused of attempting to drag Georgia into the war in Ukraine, as well as interfering in Georgia’s judiciary. Additionally, the former US ambassador, Degnan, was often portrayed as a figure in control who was coordinating and orchestrating the CSOs and opposition against the government, as well as enhancing “gay propaganda” in Georgia. The ruling party blamed EU ambassador Hartzell for not doing enough to help Georgia’s EU integration. Kobakhidze, the chairman of the GD, stated that Hartzell “played only a negative role in the EU-Georgia relations.” (Gabritchidze 2022b)

Moreover, Georgian Prime Minister Gharibashvili blamed Ukraine’s NATO aspiration for the ongoing Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine. During the GLOBSEC security forum in Bratislava, the PM stated that “one of the main reasons” for ongoing war “was NATO expansion... the desire of Ukraine to become a member of NATO”, which coincides with Russia's narratives of its full-scale attack on Ukraine (Gavin 2023). It should be highlighted that Georgia is a NATO aspirant country itself, and according to NDI surveys, Georgia’s aspiration to NATO has robust support from people, varying between 67-77 % during the last years. In 2023, Georgia refused to participate in NATO “Defender 23” military exercises for the reason of high expenses, however, hosted “Agile Spirit 2023” drills (JAMnews 2023a).

Publica.ge, an independent media agency in Georgia, conducted the research to identify the key findings behind the anti-Western campaigns led by the ruling party. The main source for the research was news headlines of “Imedinews”, which is perceived to be the mouthpiece of the ruling party, from 24 February 2022 to 24 July 2023. Analysing the thousands of news, Publica released the key findings as follows: Irakli Kobakhidze, the chairman of the GD, seems to be the main speaker during this anti-Western campaign, whose main critics subjects are everyone who criticises the government, including the Western partners, NGOs and oppositions. Regarding Russia, he rarely mentioned it in a negative context, only once calling it “occupier” and two times mentioning “aggression” with it. The analysis depicts that the main message from the ruling party

is the “second front”, emphasising the GD’s contribution to secure peace in the country. The main subjects for the accusation in the attempt to open a “second front” in Georgia were MEPs, Ukrainian authorities, US ambassadors, opposition leaders, “Credit Suisse” bank, and critical journalists. Furthermore, various Russian media outlets also pursued the same campaign, accusing the West of attempting to open the second front of the war; in many cases, they were using Kobakhidze’s statements as a source. (Publika.ge 2023)

Over the time, Georgian Dream’s attack campaign included everyone who criticised or went against the government. President Zurabishvili was no exception. From the very first day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Feb 2022, President Zurabishvili expressed its utmost support and solidarity with Ukraine, as well as harshly criticised Russia’s illegal actions and pursued strongly pro-Western rhetoric in her political agenda. In a 40-minute speech addressing the Georgian parliament in March 2023, she criticised the ruling party and openly accused it of changing the foreign policy of the country. She blamed the Georgian dream for the democratic backsliding of the country, empowering the one-party system and its influence in state institutions, which aims not to contribute to democratic development and people’s well-being but to consolidate and prolong power. She insisted that the Georgian Dream’s late ambiguous decisions contradicted Georgia’s foreign aims and people’s mandate. She criticised the Government over its anti-European campaigns and judiciary, leaving Charles Michel’s brokered political agreement, unclear policy toward Ukraine, “not irritating policy” toward Russia and finally blaming the GD that Georgia did not receive the EU candidate state status. Furthermore, it should be noted that the President also criticised the opposition for their boycotts and sending harmful messages to Brussels and Washington. She also addressed the ruling party to stop spreading the conspiracy theories on the “second front.” “The Georgian people know very well that the idea of creating the European Union serves peace, not war”, - she stated. (Civil.ge 2023d)

President Zurabishvili’s popularity increased for her pro-Western, pro-Ukrainian and government-critical views, which later faced a revenge response from the ruling party. The government rejected Zurabishvili’s request on her official foreign visits to several European countries, which aimed to lobby Georgia to be granted EU candidate status. However, Zurabishvili still conducted her visits to a number of European capitals without the government’s consent, which later turned into the reason for the ruling party to start Zurabishvili’s impeachment process. The ruling party launched

the impeachment process in the Constitutional Court, which the opposition and CSOs believe to be under the government's influence. The court ruled that the President violated the constitution, which allowed parliament to hold the vote. Despite EU official's call, including Joseph Borel, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that the impeachment process of the pro-European President presents a risk for Georgia's EU path, especially while shortly after the process, Georgia was expecting the decision from the EU regarding the candidate status. Finally, the ruling party failed to impeach the president, as they could not garner enough votes in parliament.

EU candidacy status and Foreign Agents' bill

As mentioned before, Georgia submitted its application for EU membership on March 3, 2022. However, it should be noted that the government's decision was preceded by the calls from civil society during the large-scale rally to use the opportunity and submit the EU candidacy application, as Ukraine did on 28 February. Before, the ruling party was planning to submit an EU membership application in 2024. As of the EU's decision in June, Georgia could not secure its membership candidacy status. Which mainly is based on political context as well as necessary conditions that the country needs to fulfil. Democratic backsliding and Georgia's foreign policy amid Russia's war in Ukraine might be perceived as the main trigger for this decision. Georgia was not granted candidacy status; however, the EU granted a "European perspective" and was given 12 priorities that the country needed to address in order to gain candidacy status. After the decision, the ruling party met a large-scale protest; thousands of Georgians went out to the streets to express their European support and protest the Government's inefficiency and inability to secure the candidacy status. In response, the ruling party intensifies its anti-Western rhetoric. The main message was that the EU treated Georgia unfairly, and anyway, the candidacy status was just symbolic but would not bring any substantial benefit to the country. (Kunchulia RFE/RL 2023)

Twelve priorities that Georgia had to address to fulfil the EU's conditions were the key challenges that Georgia faces on its European and Democratic path. Those included addressing the political polarisation between the political parties in the spirit of the April 19 agreement, brokered by Charles Michel. Addressing the electoral framework and its shortcomings, which were identified by OSCE/ODIHR and the Council of Europe/Venice Commission. Ensuring transparent and

effective judicial reform fully in line with European standards and the recommendations of the Venice Commission, addressing corruption issues. As of the document, Georgia should “implement the commitment to “de-oligarchization” by eliminating the excessive influence of vested interests in economic, political, and public life’, strengthen the fight against organised crime, undertake stronger effort to guarantee, free, professional, pluralistic and independent media environment, ensure strengthening of human rights of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, the EU called Georgia to ensure civil society engagement in decision-making processes at all levels. Ensuring appointing new Public Defender in a transparent manner and adopting legislation so that Georgian courts proactively take into account European Court of Human Rights judgments in their deliberations (EU Commission 2022).

In March 2023, the ruling party supported the controversial “transparency of foreign influence”, a so-called “foreign agents” law that was directed to CSOs that receive more than 20% of their funding to be registered as foreign agents. Even though the ruling party shaped it as a copy of American law (FARA), the Western partners indicated its high risks for the country's democracy and EU integration. Additionally, CSOs, opposition and protest movements labelled it as “Russian law” due to its nature and parallels with similar law imposed in Russia in 2012, which resulted in its authoritative and non-democratic impacts, suppressing independent civil society organisations, media and critical individuals in Russia. Moreover, the word “agent” is equivalent to the term “spy” in Georgian. This law would also affect media outlets, NGOs and ordinary citizens who are involved in foreign-funded projects (Kintsurashvili, 2023).

Interestingly, a few days before Parliament voted for “foreign agents’ law, anti-NGO and anti-opposition propaganda posters appeared in the streets, and their source was not precisely identifiable. However, the ruling party was blamed for being behind the campaign as far as it coincided with the ruling party’s narratives. The posters targeted the key civil activists and opposition leaders, showing their photos and labelling them as “stateless traitors” and “Spies are detractors of the church” (JAMnews 2023b)

The EU claimed that the law was incompatible with EU values and standards. The high representative stated that the law “goes against Georgia’s stated objective of joining the European Union, as supported by a large majority of Georgian citizens. Its final adoption may have serious

repercussions on our relations” (EU external action 2023). Despite concerns from the Western partners and civil sector, the parliament approved the law on its first hearing on March 8, which was followed by utmost protest later in the evening. Thousands marched in main streets chanting "No to the Russian law" with EU flags. The protest of angry people turned into clashes between the protesters and security forces. The protest was dominated by the young generation, and its robust resistance finally triggered the withdrawal of the bill. (Aljazeera 2023a)

8 November 2023, the European Commission released its decision recommending the grant of EU candidate status to Georgia, indicating nine steps that Georgia undertook. The European Commission underlined the need from the Georgian side to counter disinformation foreign information manipulation and interference against EU’s values, as well as Georgia having to improve its alignment rate with the EU common foreign and security policy (EU delegation to Georgia 2023). The European Council endorsed the commission's recommendation and supported granting candidacy status to Georgia in December 2023.

It should be highlighted that Georgia’s alignment rate to EU foreign policy significantly decreased from 2020. In 2022, Georgia aligned only 51 declarations out of 107 that the EU issued. During the 2017-2023 years, the maximum alignment rate of 61% was in 2020, while, as of May 2023, it dropped to 31%. In 2022, Georgia abstained from most of the declarations on Russia, also declarations related to the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (16 May 2022) and Human Rights Day. Georgia also abstained from the EU declaration of the 10th anniversary of introducing the Law on Foreign Agents in Russia in July 2022. (Civil.ge 2023b)

The EU granted candidacy status to Georgia despite the fact that only three recommendations out of twelve were fully fulfilled, and the ruling party pursued its anti-Western campaigns and made decisions that harmed the country's reputation. Also, Georgia further misaligned itself with EU foreign policy. This demonstrates that the decision was mainly based on geopolitical context and the Georgian people’s robust support of European integration.

Georgia-Russia relations

Against the background of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Georgian government pursued its cautious and balanced politics toward Russia, as part of its “pragmatic”

policy. As mentioned, Georgia did not join the international sanctions imposed on Russia, as it was not in the “national interest” of Georgia, as the Prime minister stated. Furthermore, official Tbilisi was avoiding openly criticising Moscow for its actions. Even though Georgia did not join the international sanctions, it stayed in compliance with it. Newly appointed US Ambassador Dunnigan in October 2023 stated her gratitude for Georgia’s “very effective efforts to prevent sanctions circumvention and prevent goods from entering Russia that could help Russia in its war against Ukraine. We highly appreciate Georgia's compliance with international sanctions” (Newshub 2023).

The authorities repeatedly stated that Georgia’s joining the sanctions on Russia would not have any tangible impact on the Russian economy, but in adverse, it would affect the Georgian economy significantly, therefore the economic dependence on Russia has profoundly increased during the last two years. Transparency International-Georgia concluded the dynamics of the economic relations between the countries, which provides important data to analyse the economic dependence. According to the report, Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia has increased in 2022 and continued during half of 2023. The statistics show that during the half of 2023, Georgia received 2 billion USD in income from Russia through remittances, tourism, and the export of goods. This number is 1.6 times more than the 2020 same period and accounted for 14.2% of Georgia’s Gross domestic product (GDP), while it stood at 11.7% in 2022 same period. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, a total of 21,326 Russian companies have registered in Georgia, which is three times more than the whole period from 1995 to 2021. In the first half of 2023, two times more Russian visitors came to Georgia than in the same period of 2022. Georgian wine exports to Russia increased by 41%, which is 65% of Georgia's total wine exports. Since the full-scale war in Ukraine, the import of all oil products from Russia to Georgia has increased five times. In the first half of 2023, Russian natural gas imports in Georgia increased by 119%, accounting for 24% of Georgia’s domestic consumption. The foreign direct investments from Russia to Georgia have increased as well. (TI Georgia 2023)

Soon after the attack on Ukraine in 2022, Russia announced the “unfriendly” list of countries, which did not include Georgia anymore. However, Georgia was named in the unfriendly countries list in 2021, along with Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine, and Czechia. (News.err.ee 2021). Since the outbreak of full-scale war, Georgia became one of the top destinations for Russians in exile.

According to the official statistics, nearly 112,000 Russians emigrated to Georgia in 2022. The Georgian population met with critics of Georgian authorities' inability to impose any restrictions on Russian immigration to Georgia. As of the early 2023 NDI survey, 79% of Georgians were against Russian nationalities entering the country without a visa, purchasing property, and opening a business. The ruling party called these concerns “hysterical” and a campaign of ethnic discrimination against Russians (Chumburidze & Gavrilova 2023).

In the spring of 2023, Putin declared to abolish visa requirements for Georgian citizens and ordered the restoration of direct flights between Russia and Georgia. Premier Gharibashvili welcomed the decision, claiming the decision was made in the “interest of the Georgian people ” and Georgia would only give permits to airlines which are not subject to sanctions. The Ministry of Economy also welcomed the decision indicating its financial benefits for Georgia. The opposition assessed Putin’s decision as a “gift” to the Georgian government. (Nechepurenko 2023).

Russian state authorities have praised the Georgian government for its “courage” and international policy during the last two years. For instance, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Lavrov praised the Georgian government for its “courage” to resist the Western pressure to join sanctions against Russia (Civil.ge 2023a). Furthermore, in November 2023, the International Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma praised official Tbilisi, for its courage “not to succumb to anti-Russian hysteria and to be guided primarily by a position focused on national interests and the well-being of their own citizens” and adds that “with these priorities, Georgia’s economy is growing rapidly, showing double-digit growth for two years in a row,”, indicating to Russian tourist bringing good income in Georgia (Civil.ge 2023f). Against the background of a drastic increase in the number of Russian war-time exiles entering Georgia, Tbilisi did not allow some Kremlin critic individuals and journalists to enter the country.

China as an emerging strategic partner for Georgia

During the last few years, several important steps have been taken between China and Georgia, which profoundly contributed to deepening bilateral relations. In 2016, Georgia joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative to further Georgia’s role in the Middle Corridor network. For this aim, Georgia hosts the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum which takes place every two years. The event hosts

thousands of participants, including senior policymakers, businesses and community leaders from tens of countries. During the last forum in 2023, Premier Garibashvili highlighted the aim of the forum was to make the future resilient. China has always been widely presented on the forum. In 2017, a Free Trade Agreement was signed between Georgia and China, after which economic ties gradually increased between the states. China was the third-largest trade partner for Georgia in 2022. (Popkhadze 2023)

Gharibashvili gave an extensive interview with Chinese television, while he called this event “historic” and praised President Xi calling him “truly an exemplary leader, a visionary, a wise man”, further expressing his interest in Xi’s initiatives because “all his initiatives are pro-peace, pro-progress, modernisation, prosperity, pro-development and I think this is great. This is what the world needs today”. He stated that Georgia was “privileged” to have a free trade agreement with China, which increased the trade volume between the countries by 400% in recent years, adding that “China can become the number one trade partner for Georgia” and Georgia provides maximum support and maximum comfort to Chinese companies (civil.ge, 12 Aug 2023). On the other hand, Xi Jinping claimed that “Political trust between our two countries is solid.... Georgia is a friend and good partner of China” (Kartozia 2023)

During his visit to Beijing in July 2023, PM Gharibasvili and President Xi Jinping announced the establishment of a strategic partnership between Georgia and China. Joining statement was expressing the willingness to deepen the relations in transportation, telecommunications, infrastructure modernisation, and digital technologies and exchange experiences in governance. During his visit, Garibashvili visited Huawei headquarters and expressed interest in deploying Huawei’s 5G infrastructure in Georgia. Interestingly, Georgia signed a memorandum of understanding with the USA in 2021, expressing its commitment to develop 5G in line with Western standards. However, Garibashvili’s move regarding the Chinese 5G infrastructure proves to be controversial. (Popkhadze 2023)

Against the background of Russia’s war in Ukraine, Georgia’s strategic location increased its significant component in the East-West corridor, which attracted great interest from regional and global players and international corporations. Only in the first three months of 2022 did cargo shipments increase by 28% through the Middle Corridor (ibid). To increase its influence, China is

actively using a wide range of financial structures to invest and fund strategic economic projects, including transport infrastructures, the hydropower sector, railways, ports and industrial zones in Georgia.

Furthermore, China expressed its great interest in taking part in building the Anaklia port, which has been controversial in Georgia and its foreign policy approach. Based on its economic need and interests, the Georgian government planned to build a deep-sea port which would play a significant role in the Middle Corridor initiative. The Georgian government cancelled its 2.5 billion USD contract with the Anaklia Development Consortium in 2020, which was perceived to be mainly a Western investment, as the co-member of the consortium was a US-based company. Later, as the need for deep-sea ports intensified after Russia's war in Ukraine, the government decided to revive the Anaklia port project, with its co-participation holding controlling shares. As of December 2023 information, two companies have been shortlisted by the government who are interested in building the port, one of which is a China-Singapore company and the second, Swiss-Luxembourgish, whose final decision has not been made yet. (Chichua 2023)

Alongside the economic relations, China allocated considerable resources to promote the Chinese language and culture. Several Confucius Institutes were established in Georgia. Moreover, China has offered scholarships to Georgian students. During Garibashvili's visit to the Chinese university, the Chinese Vice Education Minister welcomed the Georgian delegation as “the most distinguished guests to the University” and highlighted the “great importance” of deepening educational cooperation and exchange programmes between the countries. (Agenda.ge 2023)

3.2.2. International level analysis

The major international event that emerged during the 2020-2023 years was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which marked to be the largest-scale war in Europe since World War Two. Russia's attack on its neighbour sovereign state significantly undermined the international order and Europe's security. Russia's aggression was largely condemned by the West and its partners all over the world and demonstrated its unprecedented solidarity and support to Ukraine by providing military, financial and humanitarian aid. Furthermore, the West imposed various international sanctions aiming

to weaken and isolate Russia. However, it pushed Russia to seek stronger strategic partnerships with other states, mainly with countries in opposition to the West, such as China, Iran, and others. (Center for Preventive Action 2023). At the same time, Europe significantly decreased its energy dependence on Russia and started seeking alternative sources.

The war has an immense negative outcome not only for Ukraine but also for the world. This event undermined global energy, the food market, the economy, armament, and other important issues. As a result, in a year and a half time period, military casualties for both counts are nearly half a million, 5.1 million people are internally displaced, and 6.2 million have fled Ukraine. Through significant financial and military support, Ukraine stands resilient in the war. In a year and half, nearly 54% of occupied territories were recaptured by Ukraine, while Russia still occupied 18% of the country. (Ibid)

Even Though the West provided huge support to Ukraine and stepped forward to cut the economic ties with Russia, after nearly two years of ongoing war, further support seems to be delayed and slowed down due to resistance inside the United States authorities and the European Parliament. Upcoming presidential elections in the USA and Hungary-Slovakia's resistance may prolong this process further. Which negatively affects the continuation of the war in Ukraine.

On the other hand, this war has proved to be a confrontation between the West and Russia. These profound changes taking place in the world seem to be beneficial for China. China further deepened its strategic partnership with Russia in the current war period. In 2022, two states issued a joint declaration stating “no limits” to their friendship. Amidst the West's isolation of Russia, Xi Jinping, the president of China, visited Moscow in March 2023, and he stated, “Change is coming that hasn't happened in 100 years, and we are driving this change together” (Bachulska and Leonard 2023). Moreover, during recent months, China has actively promoted its “global initiative” ideas through its active engagement in international relations to build a “shared future for mankind” and “to

achieve modernisations for all countries” (McCarthy 2023). Chinese efforts seem to be aiming to reshape the US-led international system.

3.3. Summary of findings: assessing the shift in Georgia’s foreign policy direction

This final sub-chapter serves to unpack and spell out the key findings based on the empirical data provided in the previous sub-chapters, which contributes to answering the research questions. The empirical data provides us with the significant political, domestic, and international events and issues that are related to Georgia's foreign policy from the 2016 parliamentary elections to the end of 2023. This time framework is carefully selected as it coincides with the Georgian Dream’s one-party government. Therefore, as a publicly elected political party, it puts responsibility and accountability for conducting domestic and foreign policies on behalf of the people.

The empirical data shows that once GD secured its constitutional majority based on the 2016 election results, it soon started adopting constitutional changes, which shifted the political system to parliamentary and strengthened the one-party-led governmental system. The state’s governing power was concentrated in one political party. The President and the Western partners outlined the high responsibilities that a constitutional majority is accompanied by in democracy and addressed the ruling party to direct its power to strengthen democracy; however, the practice proved to be contrary, and Georgia became less democratic. Even though the overall constitutional changes were positively assessed, they did not address some of the Venice Commission and EU recommendations, mainly about the electoral code and judiciary.

On the one hand, proceeding with the domestic layer analysis of my thesis, the provided data indicates that on the official declaration layer, the ruling party (GD) pursued a foreign policy of aspiring to European Union and NATO integration, which is robustly backed by voters and Georgian people. During the selected timeframe, these foreign policy choices strengthened on an officially declared level. The following steps have been taken to strengthen Georgia’s EU-NATO aspiration on the official declaration level: two parliamentary resolutions on the foreign policy adopted in 2016 and 2020 and foreign policy strategy for 2019-2022. first time in the Georgian constitution, article 78 of the transitional provision guaranteed Euro-Atlantic aspiration and notes,

“The constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competencies to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” and in December 2023, EU officially recognised Georgia’s aspiration and granted it membership candidacy status, which the government applied in 2022.

Even though Georgia's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy choices were further strengthened at the declaration level, the domestic empirical political analysis shows a different coherence to it. During the research period, analysing the practical steps, decisions and public statements by the government demonstrates Georgia’s democratic backsliding and its incompatibility with the EU.

The shortcomings in the electoral code and the election process demonstrate the highly polarised political and media environment. Even though the held elections were internationally recognised, various local and international observers outlined the highly polarised and partially biased media, lack of analytical reporting, debates and policy-based discussion, usage of state administrative resources by the ruling party, cases of intimidation and vote buying. GD’s dominance in election commissions, pre-election campaigns, financing and advertisements. All these remarks could have significantly influenced the manipulation of people and further limited the ability of informed choices. More importantly, the ruling party did not show the political will to address these challenges, which was repeatedly indicated by Western partners.

Furthermore, despite several waves of judicial reform, which envisaged a number of positive issues, the empirical data conveys that the ruling party did not show its political will to eradicate the vice of the judiciary inherited under the previous government, which refers to so-called “clan”, the influential group of judges, but instead, the GD pursued using this practice in favour of it. The judicial reforms did not address key recommendations from the Venice Commission which was assessed as “missed opportunity” and regrettable from the West. Despite the harsh criticism from the Western partners and civil sector, the contradictory process of appointing the judges continued, often accompanied by procedural violations and in a non-transparent and accelerated manner. Major challenges, such as impartiality, justification, transparency, and the principle of merit-based assessment, remain unsolved, resulting in further empowerment of influential judges who have close ties with the ruling party.

In April 2023, the US State Department released a statement announcing the sanction of five Georgian judges, indicating that these individuals abused their positions as court Chairmen and members of Georgia's High Council of Justice, involved in significant corruption, and undermined the rule of law and the public's faith in Georgia's judicial system (RFE/RL 2023). Several aforementioned cases of detaining the opposition individuals further deepened the political crisis in Georgia and resulted in politically motivated allegations, which also contributed to decreasing the democracy index of Georgia.

Alongside the judiciary and electoral issues, human rights and media-related cases contributed to democratic backsliding as well. As discussed in the empirical part, various international watchdogs and reports assess the Georgian media landscape as largely pluralistic, critical, and vibrant. However, several cases during the selected period undermined its independence. New management in state-funded broadcaster 1TV and Adjara TV had a close tie with the ruling party; later, some political shows were closed, and critical journalists were dismissed, which questioned editorial policy. Similarly, new management in Rustavi 2 dismissed government-critical journalists and high-ranking individuals, followed by editorial policy change also. Government-critical media outlet "Mtavari Arkhi" also faced some difficulties from the government, and high-ranking individuals, Rurua and Gvaramia, were prisoned. Ruling party officials often discriminated against and marginalised government-critical media and journalists and refused to engage in their political talk shows or debates. Several cases of violent attacks on journalists were also identified. Overall, the media freedom index gradually decreased during the last few years.

Referring to human rights and civil activism issues, number of cases were reported during the selected period which triggered an overall fall in the democracy index, such as the case of Afghan Mukhtarli, violent attack on vulnerable groups of society and civil activists, and alleged usage of excessive force against protestors. The government did not show its political will to pursue effective and objective investigations. Furthermore, the ruling party often launched a smear and slandering campaign against protest groups, NGOs and civil activists. The proposed "Foreign Agents law" was mainly targeting the civil sector. Therefore, we can assume that by adopting this law, the ruling party was aiming to control and suppress the civil sector, which could have a similar outcome to that in Russia, totally abolishing civil organisations and protest movements.

Additionally, the recently adopted law banning the installation of “temporary constructions” can be perceived as a restrictive measure of the freedom of peaceful assembly.

The disinformation and discrimination campaign launched by the ruling party also targeted the former public defender and former state inspector, who were enjoying high efficiency, trustworthiness, and independence among state institutions. Additionally, the GD’s anti-campaign against President Zurabishvili, and later its attempt to impeach her, proves that the Georgian Dream attempts to empower the one-party system and is ready to discredit everyone in state institutions who is independent and critical.

Furthermore, against the background of Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine, the Georgian government intensified its attack campaigns on everyone who criticised the government, including the Western partners, Ukraine and the opposition. In general, the ruling party well captured the sensitivity of civil unrest and war for Georgian society. Therefore, it launched negative campaigns against the opposition and Western partners using these national traumas and collective memory issues. The campaign targeted the opposition as traitors who wanted to drag Georgia into the war or to make mass civil unrest and also to support the spreading of “LGBTQ+” propaganda through the contribution of the Western partners. and at the same time, underlines the importance of the Georgian Dream government as the guarantor of peace and stability and defender of national values and interests. This issue well demonstrated the theoretical approach of Hermann, who claims that the incumbent regime might change foreign policy when an issue becomes the centrepiece in the struggle for political power when competing political powers use foreign policy issues to distinguish themselves from opponents.

Similarly, as demonstrated in the empirical part, the ruling party launched an anti-Western campaign, which was particularly intensified after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the EU’s rejection of candidacy status in June 2022. Furthermore, the Georgian government evaluated the Western partners’ claims and criticism on democratic issues, such as elections, judiciary, human rights and other issues as interference in Georgia’s domestic politics. This anti-Western rhetoric and claims that Western countries intervene in domestic policy coincide with Russian rhetoric. Alongside the EU issues, it should be noted that Georgia’s alignment rate with the EU’s common foreign and security policy has significantly decreased from 61% in 2020 to 31% in 2023.

Moreover, the Georgian Prime Minister blamed Ukraine's will to join NATO for Russia's full-scale war, which also matches with Russian claims. At the same time, the Prime minister puts particular attention on the fact that there is peace and stability in Georgia thanks to the ruling party. This may mean that Georgia, the NATO aspirant country under the current ruling party, did not declaratively give up its NATO aspiration in exchange for peace and stability. However, Georgia has not taken any opposing steps regarding the NATO aspiration officially, and it again hosted NATO military exercises in 2023.

At the Qatar Economic Forum in May 2023, Prime Minister Garibashvili discussed the foreign policy issues and outlined that before the war in Ukraine, there was war in Georgia; however, no one in the world had an "adequate reaction" and moreover, the EU deepened the economic relations with Russia - "where is the logic? Our war is not a war, and the Ukrainian war is a war?". He also indicated that Russia already occupied 20% of Ukraine, there is no sign of ending the war, and the international community does not take proper measures to encourage peace talks (Civil.ge 2023e). Two main narratives can be identified from it. First, the international community did not stand with Georgia when Russia invaded in 2008, and furthermore, the EU deepened economic relations with Russia. In the current situation, no one can stop the war in Ukraine, while it already has a huge loss.

Furthermore, Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine proved that the World order is changing. This refers to the Western community and its support for Ukraine, even though it has shown considerable unity, support, and solidarity with Ukraine since the very first days of the war. Currently, the financial and military support to Ukraine from the US and EU is delayed and reduced because the unity of the West is undermined due to certain states or political groups. As a result, the future of the war outcome in Ukraine is vague. The imposed Western sanctions on Russia do not seem to have a tangible outcome also, as it diverted its economy to China, India, Iran and other non-Western countries. Against this background, China, as the main political and economic adversary of the US, has significantly developed its economy and attempts to undermine the "Western-oriented" world order. President Xi's various initiatives and statements prove that. Furthermore, China is a strategic political and economic partner for Russia. At the same time, major geopolitical events in the region show that the American influence in the Middle East and

Caucasus regions has decreased, and the vacuum of power was seized by Turkey and Russia in the South Caucasus region.

These points allow us to conclude that Georgia does not see the international community, including its Western partners, as security guarantors and has a little trust to it, therefore, while situating in extremely difficult geopolitical location, Georgian current government seeks to have balanced and pragmatic policy, to avoid the possible confrontation with Russia. At the same time, deepening the political and economic relations with China, Georgia seeks to diversify its political and economic interests. This diversification policy includes keeping the strategic partnership with the West, which is the order from the Georgian people; therefore, as the Georgian Dream is seeking to stay in power for the upcoming election, it is essential to maintain the Euro-Atlantic integration in the political agenda, as it is supported by around 70-80% of the population.

On the other hand, keeping a balanced and pragmatic policy toward Russia and further deepening the economic relations allows the ruling party to gain the immense economic benefits which are needed to satisfy the people's social and economic demand and well-being. Lastly, China is becoming the emerging political and economic partner for Georgia, which will allow the government to balance the West and Russia. Furthermore, as the war in Ukraine emerged, the need for alternative economic, energy, and transport corridors, as well as the strategic location of Georgia, significantly increased its international role in connecting Europe to Central Asia and China and Russia to Turkey. This policy of diversification allows the ruling party to make bolder, democratic decisions in domestic politics that often contradict its EU values.

Finally, answering the two research questions based on empirical data analysis and given theoretical knowledge, which seeks to solve the research puzzle. First, referring to the first question of how Georgia's foreign policy has evolved within the two terms of the "Georgian Dream" government from 2016 till now, we can conclude that it gradually became less Western-oriented, which mainly implies the decreasing democratic development of the country alongside the political misalignment with the Western policy. On the other hand, Georgia became more engaged with Russia, mainly in economic direction, and politically pursued strategic forbearance policy, which is expressed in Georgia's anti-Western moves and avoiding criticism of Russia. Moreover, Georgia deepened its economic and political relations with China and signed the strategic partnership

agreement, which also implies more engagement between the parties in governance and technology directions, which also contradicts Georgia's alignment with the West. Combining the empirical analysis and theoretical framework, out of four progressive levels of changes provided by Hermann in the theory of redirection, the second "program changes" level best fits the case of Georgia. In other words, the empirical data proves that even though Georgia pursued its declared Euro-Atlantic integration foreign policy on an official level, "what is done and how is done" has gradually altered, the degree of expressed effect and level of commitment has significantly decreased, policy statement and policy actions became more incompatible with prior goals, particularly during the ongoing term of the ruling party.

When it comes to the second research question, explaining the reasons behind the identified shifts in the foreign policy direction of Georgia in the selected time period, based on empirical data, we can conclude that domestically, those are economic benefits and democratic backsliding, which is strongly related to the struggle for domestic political power. While referring to exogenous factors, we can assume that the main feature of Georgia's shifts in foreign policy directions can be conditioned by the national security component against the background of external shocks. Both Hermann and Holsti outlined the role of domestic politics as a possible trigger for foreign policy change. Hermann claims that when foreign policy issues become the centrepiece in the struggle for political power between the domestic political powers, foreign policy might be changed. This point has largely been employed in Georgia, as the foreign policy issues are deeply connected to domestic politics, and therefore, it becomes the centrepiece in the struggle for political power between the ruling party and the opposition.

Alongside the exogenous factors, both scholars highlighted the immense role of external shocks as a source of change. Hermann calls it "dramatic international events", which cannot be ignored. In this case, such events are Russia's aggression in Ukraine, as well as changing political influences in the region seized by Turkey, which is in contradiction to the West now and Russia, which has hostile relations with the West and overall. Both regional actors deepened their relations during the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war, and its outcome also well demonstrated the influential regional powers. Therefore, these factors also affected Georgia's Western aspiration process and alignment politics in order to avoid any military confrontation and threats, and furthermore, Georgia received more economic benefits from those regional powers. The fact that Georgia

started seeking strategic political and economic partnership with China as a global power refers to Holsti's theoretical framework on restructuring, particularly the non-alignment-diversification policy. This implies extensive engagement with various states and groups of states rather than being rallied on just one.

Conclusion

In this thesis, the case of analysing the shift in the foreign policy direction of Georgia in the time period of 2016-2023 was examined from the perspective of different theories regarding foreign policy change in order to answer the research questions: first, how has Georgia's foreign policy changed during the period 2016-2023? Second, which factors are behind the shift in foreign policy directions of Georgia on a domestic and international level? The objective of this thesis has been to find out what is behind the shifts in the foreign policy direction of Georgia. The importance of the research derived from its puzzle that Georgia, as an Eastern European country situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, strongly aspired to Euro-Atlantic integration and was distinguished by its democratic reforms and development, leader among the Eastern-Partnership countries; however, this image of the country has largely reversed during the last years. More interestingly, the shifts in foreign policy direction occurred under the incumbent government.

In order to analyse the shift and solve the puzzle, this study employed theories and concepts related to foreign policy change, such as Hermann's theory of redirection and Holsti's theory of restructuring. These theories provided the tools and the knowledge to examine the level of foreign policy change and possible factors behind the change. Hermann's four progressive levels of change (adjustment changes, program changes, problem/goal changes, and international orientation changes) contributed to identifying the scope of foreign policy change in the case of Georgia, while Holsti's provided four typologies of foreign policy restructuring (isolation, self-reliance, dependence, and non-alignment diversification) contributed to determining the foreign policy restructuring characteristics of Georgia. Overall, the interplay and combination of those two theories create a more comprehensive framework to study and identify the triggers of foreign policy change on domestic and international levels.

In order to identify the level of change in foreign policy direction and explain the reasons behind it in the case of Georgia from the 2016 parliamentary elections to the end of the 2023 year under the Georgian Dream's government, various primary and secondary sources were utilised through process tracing method, which allowed us to explain the shift in foreign policy direction of Georgia. The explanatory outcome process tracing method contributed to gradually analysing the sources since 2016, detecting the logical interplay between the events and concluding the findings that give us an explanation of the outcome.

Responding to the first research question, how has Georgia's foreign policy changed during the period 2016-2023? Based on the empirical data, we can conclude that Georgia, during the selected period, gradually slowed its Western alignment policy, which implies EU and NATO membership, and by its practical efforts, it further distanced itself from democratic standards. However, on a declared official level, Georgia advanced in the EU integration process. In this regard, "what is done and how it is done" changed, and the prior goal remained consistent. On the other hand, Georgians further engaged with Russia increased its economic and energy dependence on it and politically pursued a strategic forbearance policy, which sometimes blurs the line between forbearance and appeasement policy in practice. Additionally, China emerges as a new strategic partner in Georgia's foreign policy. As a result, these points create a basis for a non-alignment diversification policy.

When it comes to the second research question, which factors are behind the shift in Georgia's foreign policy directions on a domestic and international level? The thesis concludes the struggle for domestic political power, of which the centrepiece is foreign policy issues between the ruling party and its opponents, triggered the empowering of the one-party governance in the state institutions. The already mentioned practical steps, decisions, events and statements negatively affected Georgia's democratic development, and from 2016 to 2023, the democracy index of Georgia gradually deteriorated. Overall, the Georgian Dream's efforts to stay in power caused democratic backsliding, which jeopardised Georgia's Western aspiration and triggered shifts in foreign policy directions. Russia's isolation from the West brought even more economic benefits for Georgia through deepening economic ties with Russia. This contributes to the ruling party to satisfy the people's social and economic needs, which will help to stay in power longer. Therefore, we can conclude that on the domestic layer, the struggle for power, democratic backsliding and

economic benefits are the main triggers behind the shift in Georgia's foreign policy direction. These factors should be considered in combination as they are interconnected variables. Referring to the external layer, based on theoretical and empirical data, the thesis concludes that security threats, which derive from external shocks, are the main trigger behind the shift in Georgia's foreign policy direction. The external shocks imply Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and highly polarised international politics. Alongside the security issues, these major international events emerged new economic and political opportunities, which Georgia started to utilise.

The goal of the study, to explain the shift in Georgia's foreign policy and identify the reasons behind it, has been achieved. While the methodological approach and empirical data provided sufficient tools and knowledge to conduct the analysis, it is important to consider the results in light of the limitations. Had it been possible to have access to more insider data or insight the decision-making process, it would enrich the analysis and could make the reasons behind the shift more precise. However, as already mentioned, with the various publicly available data used for this study, the aim of the thesis has been achieved.

Even though the utilised theoretical framework provides a sufficient basis to identify the level of change in the foreign policy direction of Georgia and explore the reasons behind it, the thesis findings cannot be generalised across the countries, as far as it does not provide a look at other countries. The findings are specific and derive from the uniqueness of the case of Georgia due to its size, historical background, geopolitical location and so on. However, considering the uniqueness of the case of exploring the shift in the foreign policy direction of Georgia under the incumbent government, the analysis provides sufficient knowledge and findings that might contribute to further research in the direction of foreign policy change under incumbent governments, particularly in relatively small states with hybrid regimes. While the research addressed the domestic and international layers of analysis of Georgia's foreign policy, it can be a stepping stone for further research on an individual level.

Regarding the practical usage of this study, the findings of the thesis can be useful for the current and future policy makers. Through utilising a wide range of sources and theoretical literature, the study accumulated sufficient data from Georgia's contemporary political history from 2016 to 2023. The analysed statements, articles, policy documents and other relevant sources from internal

and international politics provides tangible knowledge which might be useful for further research and policy-making processes. Particularly, while the research addressed the domestic and international layers of analysis of Georgia's foreign policy, it can be a stepping stone for further research on an individual decision-making level analysis.

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