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Neoclassical realism and small states: systemic constraints and domestic filters in Georgia's foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

Unlike structural realism, neoclassical realism focuses on how the interaction between systemic and unit-level variables influences foreign policy. This article assesses neoclassical realism against two alternative accounts – balance of threat and economic dependence – to explain change in Georgia's foreign policy. While structural realism highlights how the external security environment shapes general tendencies in foreign policy, specific strategies depend largely on unit-level factors, specifically elite cohesion and state capacity. The analysis of primary sources and exclusive interviews with high-level policy-makers suggests that neoclassical realism affords a more nuanced and precise account of foreign policy change over time than structural realism.

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Georgia took its first steps towards cooperation with Western states and institutions in the mid-1990s, during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze, but the country's pro-western ambitions have dramatically grown since the 2003 "Rose Revolution."¹ Mikheil Saakashvili "made it clear from the beginning he would aim to establish closer ties with the EU and the US, since he believed that the West was the only potential guarantor of Georgia's security". During his inaugural speech, the European flag was raised along with new Georgian flag, while the choir sang the European anthem. These symbolic gestures were clear indications of where he wished to position Georgia.²

In contrast to his predecessor who never pushed the pro-Western agenda too far, Saakashvili and his government started to implement an array of domestic reforms and foreign policy initiatives in support of the new foreign policy goals. New institutional bodies of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration and a new parliamentary committee on European integration were established, the primary function of which would be to support Georgia's cooperation with Western states and institutions. New departments and offices on NATO and EU cooperation issues were created in almost all major ministries, including the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, the Information Center on NATO was established with the primary responsibility of raising public awareness about NATO in Georgia.³ In 2005, for the first time in the history of independent Georgia, the new government adopted a National Security Concept, a major strategic

document, which explicitly stated that the ultimate aim of Georgia's foreign policy would be integration into the Euro-Atlantic Community.⁴

Alongside with its domestic Westernisation agenda, Georgia became the first country to sign the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with the North-Atlantic Alliance in 2004. Two years later, after successfully completing the IPAP, Georgia was granted the status of "Intensified Dialogue", the final step before receiving the Membership Action Plan (MAP) (Gvalia, Lebanidze, and Iashvili 2011, 48).⁵ To demonstrate the steadiness of his pro-Western agenda, Saakashvili significantly increased the presence of Georgian troops in Western-led military operations to the point that Georgia became the largest per capita contributor of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan after Britain and the United States.⁶ This shift in Georgia's pro-western agenda resulted in increased attention to Georgia, and led to an increasing number of Western officials visiting Georgia, including US president George W. Bush.⁷

How can we understand and explain this significant intensification of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy after the Rose Revolution? We believe that this shift in Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy cannot be adequately explained by focusing solely on external structural constraints and incentives; the administrations of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili responded differently to similar external constraints and incentives, we suggest, because unit level variables – in particular, elite cohesion and state capacity – were different under the two administrations.

The implications of this study extend beyond Georgia, a small state located between Black and Caspian Seas in the southern part of the strategically important Caucasus region, and can shed light on the causes of small state behaviour in the international sphere. The field of International Relations, especially its structural realist research programme, has long privileged factors external to states (such as balance of power/threat, economic dependence, etc.) when studying the foreign policy behaviour of small states. The logic is small states lack the proper military and economic capabilities to influence international or regional systems. For realists, small states usually react and conform to the pressures of the international system, which originate from the competition between the major players of the system, or they are punished for not doing so.⁸ "The strategic options of small states," one scholar writes, "are dependent upon how much action space they are allowed by other states, in particular the great powers, in their close vicinity ... By definition, they (small states) suffer from a 'capability deficit'" (Wivel 2016). In short, international politics shape and influence foreign policies of small states rather than the reverse.⁹ Some of the recent studies on small states international behaviour emphasise how small states are able to use the opportunities created as the result of competition between great powers or in some cases, even play off larger players against each other. As Long maintains,

All states, small or large, can either try to exploit their internal resources or turn to other states. However, because small states, by definition, lack more traditional forms of power, they must specialize in how they employ their resources and relationships. Small states depend more heavily on external options, whether a special relationship with a great power or other small states. (Long 2016, 3)

Other studies point to the importance that small states attach to international institutions and to non-material forms of power, including soft power. Despite this plurality of

perspectives on small states, these approaches explicitly or implicitly share the assumption that the focus on constraints and opportunities of global or regional environments is the most relevant to understanding the options that small states hold in terms of foreign policies.¹⁰

We do not challenge this established view regarding the primacy of external environment in small state foreign policy – Georgia is not the exception to this “rule of thumb” of international politics. The major influence on Georgia’s security environment, and thus of its foreign policy priorities, since regaining independence, is the presence and threat of Russian power. Indeed, Georgia’s desire to distance itself from the Russian “sphere of influence or interest” has resulted in not one but two quite serious clashes. These objective realities of Georgia’s external security environment explain why Shevardnadze and Saakashvili, despite tangible differences between the two administrations, both tried to balance the Russian threat by relying on cooperation with Western states and institutions. But there the similarities stop.

While the continued existence of the Russian threat explains continuity in general trends of Georgia’s foreign policy, it cannot comprehensively account for the difference in the pace and assertiveness of these policies during different administrations. To understand this variation between the two administrations’ foreign policies, we argue that two unit-level factors are crucial to include in the analysis, namely: the level of *elite cohesion* and the level of *state capacity*. This study suggests that a framework incorporating elite cohesion and state capacity, alongside the international environment, provides a superior explanation of Georgia’s foreign policy than any alternative explanations focusing either on the structure of external threats or on the nature of international economic interactions alone. This is consistent with neoclassical realism which, in contrast to structural realism’s “black box” approach to the state,¹¹ enables the integration of variables at the international and state “levels of analysis”. Neoclassical realism brings the state back into the analysis. It asserts that foreign policy is influenced by the internal characteristics of states, besides external influences.

As Kitchen states:

By using a plural definition of the state, neoclassical realism recognizes that processes within states are influenced not only by exogenous systemic factors and considerations of power and security, but also by cultural and ideological bias, domestic political considerations and prevailing ideas. (Kitchen 2010, 133)

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: First, we provide an overview of neoclassical realism and highlight how it enables analysts to integrate variables at different levels of analysis into the single theoretical model without losing parsimony and while gaining explanatory power. This leads to our discussion of how variation in elite cohesion and in state capacity shape foreign policy, in general and then applied to the case of Georgia’s foreign policy. Using original interviews, we conducted with 23 of the highest-level policy-makers in Georgia, we assess neoclassical realism against two alternative explanations of small state foreign policy behaviour: balance of threat and economic dependence. The analysis indicates that neoclassical realism affords a superior account. The article concludes with some general observations about the benefits and limits of neoclassical realism for understanding small state foreign policy behaviour.

Bringing the state back in: neoclassical realism and foreign policy

While structural realism (sometimes called “neorealism”) is often seen as a theory of international politics, neoclassical realism is regarded as a theory that strives to explain the foreign policies of particular states.¹² “Because neorealism tries to explain the outcomes of state interactions, it is a theory of international politics; it includes some general assumptions about the motivations of individual states but does not purport to explain their behavior in great detail or in all cases” (Rose 1998, 145).¹³ Both neorealism and neoclassical realism share a focus on the centrality of international system as the anchor of foreign policy motivation, but neoclassical realism asserts that unit level variables define how international level variables are transmitted into foreign policy outcomes (Rathbun 2008; Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman 2009).

Like neorealism, neoclassical realism holds that the external security environment in which the state finds itself has the foremost influence on the state’s foreign policy choices (Taliaferro 2006), but it does not determine it. Waltz himself stressed that “each state arrives at policies and decides on actions according to its own internal processes, but its decisions are shaped by the very presence of other states as well as by interactions with them” (Waltz [1979] 2010, 65). We agree that the international system rarely leaves states without choice, and for understanding how these choices are made unit-level variables are of paramount significance. As Saltzman notes, “systemic conditions define general trends but say nothing about the nitty-gritty details, the essence of political process or what neoclassical realists call the ‘warp and woof of domestic politics’” (Saltzman 2015, 506). It follows that, to have a fuller understanding of foreign policy, it is essential to explore the unique processes and local context in individual countries that lead to have different responses to similar external environments (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 31–32).

This analysis emphasises two major unit level variables that influence how the “warp and woof” of how small states respond to external security environment: level of elite cohesion¹⁴ and level of state capacity. While the external environment may push states towards a particular foreign policy strategy, elite understanding and agreement over foreign policy goals and challenges and the level of state capacity will determine the intensity, assertiveness and timing of foreign policy behaviour. If elites are internally divided about the nature and extent of the external threat, or about the policy remedy that will be most effective and appropriate to deal with it, the result will be an incoherent foreign policy. Even when elites agree, low state capacity to mobilise resources for the declared foreign policy goal can produce inefficient foreign policy. Randall L. Schweller uses the term of “underbalancing” to describe inefficient and incoherent attempts by states to balance external threats and dangerous accumulations of power. Underbalancing occurs when the level of elite consensus regarding the nature of external threat and the policy that should be pursued is low ... Elite consensus (or the lack thereof) is the most proximate cause of the state’s response (or nonresponse) to external threats (Schweller 2004, 2006).

Elite consensus on the nature of the external environment and the appropriate state strategy is in large measure ideational. Objective realities are viewed through the ideas and beliefs that leaders have about the identity of their state and its desired model of development. Those very ideas shape what will be regarded as the threat to the national

interests of the state and what foreign and security policies will be chosen against them (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018, 170). "Threats and interests do not automatically originate from the material international system, but are socially constructed by ideas and values" (He 2017, 138). Foreign policy choices that states make are therefore not only determined by their external security environment, but also by the ideas and identities of relevant foreign policy actors who interpret the external security environment and their material interests (Gvalia et al. 2013, 106).

Neoclassical Realists regard the structure of the international system as providing states with information about the costs and benefits of particular courses of action, but how that information is processed and weighed depends on the way states understand the world, their preferences, their ideas and their ethics. (Kitchen 2010, 143)

Elite ideas, defined as beliefs held by individuals that affect foreign policy outcomes, intervene between international system and foreign policy outcomes. Shared ideas act not only as the filters through which information is processed, they also affect whether elites will be able to reach a consensus regarding the threats to the national security of the country and the strategy against them. When there is a broad ideological similarity between political elites, the expectation is that the state will act as a unitary and coherent actor. Ideology can serve as an element of state power helping or inhibiting leaders to mobilise domestic resources for the sake of foreign policy: "Ideology can facilitate or inhibit leaders' ability to extract and mobilize resources from society depending on its content and the extent to which the population and elites share it" (Taliaferro 2006, 221). The same view is shared by Rathbun, who argues that "ideas and domestic political variables are significant factors in a state's ability to harness latent material power" (Rathbun 2008, 296).

The second unit level variable that influences foreign policy is the state capacity to extract resources from society for the support of foreign policy goals.¹⁵ If the state has limited capacity to mobilise domestic resources for the pursuit of desired foreign policy, then the result will be a fragmented and inefficient foreign policy. For states to be able to respond to external challenges, according to Schweller, they should possess at a minimum the ability to command and exercise extractive and regulatory power, two basic functions of the government:

These tasks in turn depend on the political regime's degree of effectiveness and political authority. *Effectiveness* is nothing more than the government's ability to get things done. To be effective, a government must mobilize and allocate resources to meet its policy commitments as well as organize the many institutions, each with their own functionally specific tasks and resources, that constitute the modern state. (Schweller 2006, 107)

Specifically, with regard to foreign policy, Zakaria argues that

foreign policy is made not by the nation as a whole, but by its government. Consequently, what matters is state power, not national power. State power is the portion of national power the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decision makers can achieve their ends. (Zakaria 1999, 9)¹⁶

In sum, we argue that while third image or system level theories are helpful in shedding light on the general trends in foreign policies of small states, for an in-depth understanding of those processes, multi-level theoretical models are required. Structural Realism

enables us to understand general tendencies in foreign policy, and how they are influenced by the external security environment, but the specific choices and strategies depend in large measure on unit level variables, particularly the level of elite cohesion and state capacity.

Next, we apply this model to study the foreign policy of Georgia over time, and illustrate how variation in elite cohesion and state capacity shaped the intensity, efficiency and coherence of Georgia's pro-western agenda.

Old vs new elites: Georgia before and after Rose Revolution

Ideas about the identity and desired model of development of the state can have a tangible impact on the definition of goals and the choice of alternatives in foreign policy. Since the Rose Revolution, Georgia is an exemplary case of how elite ideas about the preferred model of social and political development influenced the nature of its pro-Western foreign policy.

Shevardnadze's attempts at bringing Georgia close to the West lacked the assertiveness and the consistency that characterised foreign policy after the Rose Revolution. At first, because of limited choices, Shevardnadze pursued bandwagoning with Russia. Russia "encouraged" all former Soviet republics to join the new Russia-dominated regional organisation: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Shevardnadze was eventually compelled to join by Russia's threat to annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁷ In the first half of 1990s, the major broker in the region was Russia, while the West had yet to formulate coherent policies towards the region. This lack of Western involvement provided Russia with a window of opportunity to set the rules of the game in the region.¹⁸ As Kramer maintains, "Moscow has made it abundantly clear that the Commonwealth of Independent States is a Russian sphere of influence where the role of other great powers must be minimized" (Kramer 2008, 3). The Kremlin utilised a variety of instruments to keep post-Soviet countries under its security umbrella, including the support of separatist movements and pro-Kremlin groups, economic embargoes and financial incentives, information warfare, and of course the threat of actual military intervention. Some realists see Russian behaviour as not only rational but also legitimate in terms of Great Power prerogatives to maintain regional dominance in its own neighbourhood.¹⁹

In the mid of 1990s, the West started to pay attention to its economic interests in the South Caucasus, particularly the huge Hydrocarbon resources in the Caspian Sea Basin. According to Kevork Oskanian, the

West started circumventing Russia in the economic field, most importantly through the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline skirting Russia: the "contract of the century" signed with the Azerbaijan in 1994 gave Western corporations a foothold in the Caspian basin, apart from putting the region firmly on the Western capitals' geopolitical map. The second Clinton administration, in particular, aimed at safeguarding access to these reserves through BTC, described by its interlocutors in Baku and Tbilisi as a very "political" project, within which Georgia, as the only politically feasible transit country, would play a central role. (Oskanian 2016, 635)

The West's economic interests gradually acquired political clout, and suddenly Russia was no longer the only player in the region. Increased Western involvement meant that Shevardnadze's "menu of choice" had broadened, and he could now start to drift away

from Russian “sphere of influence”. At that time, Russia was seriously weakened by internal social-economic problems (Chechnya, financial crisis, weak state institutions, etc.), which precluded it from blocking Western expansion in the region (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018, 175) more vigorously.²⁰ As the availability of partners increased, Shevardnadze started to focus on the West to balance threats coming from Russia. Besides support for Western economic projects, Shevardnadze started to push towards deeper cooperation in the sphere of “high politics”. In 1999, Shevardnadze openly stated his desire to bring Georgia into NATO.²¹ However, despite these rhetorical desires and the window of opportunity, created as the result of increased Western involvement and Russian weakness, Shevardnadze could not exploit this situation fully both because of *internal elite divisions* and *lack of state capacity*.

As Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Frederik Coene have suggested,

Shevardnadze never pushed the pro-Europe policy beyond the declarative level. By the end of the 1990s, it was clear to many that Shevardnadze’s possibilities as an agent of democratic, modernizing change had been exhausted, and Shevardnadze himself increasingly fell back on his instincts and skills, honed during the Brezhnev years, of managing the myriad of conflicting personalities that surrounded him rather than solving policy problems and implementing necessary reforms. (Ó Beacháin and Coene 2014, 929; Coene 2016, 146).²²

Shevardnadze’s ability to pursue assertive pro-Western agenda was hindered by the composition of his ruling elite, which was a conglomerate of people with different ideological backgrounds and interests that could not reach consensus on vital issues of the country’s domestic and foreign affairs. One clear example was the regional head of Adjara, Aslan Abashidze, who despite Shevardnadze’s pro-Western steps, supported establishing closer relations with Kremlin. Abashidze benefited from closer political ties with Russia and supported the extended stay of Russian troops in the region. Abashidze created his own paramilitary groups and was outside the effective control of the central government. He was involved in high-level external trade relations with bordering Turkey, and consistently refused to transfer revenues from the region to the centre. Abashidze is just one egregious example that illustrates both deep divisions among political elites during Shevardnadze’s rule as well as the lack of state capacity to extract resources from its own regions.

Besides elite divisions between centre and periphery, Shevardnadze’s central administration was also a heterogeneous group that hosted pro-Westerners, like Mikhail Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania, who later became the major architects of the Rose Revolution, but also many pro-Russian politicians. As former Georgian ambassador to Germany, Kote Gabashvili, remarked in an interview with the authors, Shevardnadze’s elites were infiltrated by openly pro-Russian people who held high-level positions in his administration:

The Ministers of Defense and Security, to name a few, were directly appointed to their positions as a result of Russian demands. The Minister of Defense, Vardiko Nadibaidze and the Minister of Security, Igor Giorgadze, and later the Minister of Interior, Kakha Targamadze, were Russian residents inside the Georgian government. These people were in charge of the security sector, which had an outsized influence in Georgia at that time on both domestic politics as well as foreign affairs.²³

Elite division acted as a major internal impediment to a more assertive pro-Western agenda. As the former Secretary of National Security Council, Giga Bokeria, recalled in

an interview with the authors: “in light of such divisions that existed in Shevardnadze’s elites, it was impossible to have any effective approach towards a pro-Western foreign policy agenda”.²⁴ The Minister of Foreign Affairs during Shevardnadze administration also noted in an interview: “Georgia had no National Security Concept till 2005 ... not because drafting the text of the document was difficult, but because that it was difficult to achieve consensus on what to write in it”.²⁵

In contrast to Shevardnadze’s “zig-zag” foreign policy agenda, the government of Mikhail Saakashvili started to define the foreign policy of the country in new ideological terms. In contrast to its predecessor, his administration was more or less ideologically homogeneous as concerned the key objectives. The bulk of it consisted of young Western-educated individuals who enjoyed high-level consensus regarding the identity of the Georgian state and its desired model of development. High-level elite consensus resulted not only in having shared views about the identity of the state, but also about the appropriate instruments to be used in pursuit of the desired objectives. The first internal steps taken by the Saakashvili administration focused on removing pro-Russian elites from important power positions in the centre and in the regions. One of the major achievements of his internal agenda was the peaceful removal of Aslan Abashidze from power, and the restoration of the central government’s effective control over this important coastal region. This was followed by removing from power Emzar Kvitsiani, another regional baron in Western Georgia, with openly pro-Russian sentiments. In a very short amount of time, the new government managed to substitute old elites with new ones in mid or high-level positions in the centre and peripheries. The substitution of old elites with new ones removed they key veto players inside the country who could have blocked Saakashvili’s openly pro-Western domestic and foreign policy agenda.

The new elite consensus was based on two interrelated ideas. The first is Georgia as a European state. According to Saakashvili, “Georgia is not just a European country, but one of the most ancient European countries ... Our steady course is toward European integration. It is time that Europe finally saw and valued Georgia and took steps towards us.”²⁶ The second idea is modernisation (Gvalia et al. 2013). Both of these ideas were deeply intertwined and shaped Georgia’s foreign policy strategies. Although the European idea has long been present in Georgia, its prominence in political discourse grew after the Rose Revolution (Gvalia et al. 2013). The idea of modernisation played a similarly strong role in framing Georgia’s foreign policy discourse. For the Rose Revolutionary elite, a pro-Western foreign policy was an instrument that supported the country’s modernisation. Modernisation itself was defined along the lines of “the Western model” of social and political order and in opposition to “the Russian way” of organising political life. As Nodia notes, “The government also made it clear that striving to attain the membership of EU and NATO was not only about foreign policy. Rather, it meant a deep transformation of Georgia with the ultimate objective of turning it into a truly European country” (Nodia 2017, 77). One senior-level foreign policymaker explained that, although modernisation is a domestic objective, it sets limits on the choice of foreign policy partners. In effect, he said,

Bandwagoning with Russia, or more generally a pro-Russian foreign policy, is not an alternative for Georgia, not because we think that Georgia will cease to exist as a state ... but because bandwagoning with Russia means a return to the Georgia of the 1990s, when it was a failed,

corrupt and criminal state, with no hopes of ever becoming a normal, modern and European state.²⁷

Independently, the chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration made a similar argument:

Since the Rose Revolution, we started to think more seriously about why we need foreign policy. If our major aim is to build a modern state and society, we should be looking for strategic partners who will help us in achieving this end. This is the most important cause and objective of our foreign policy. As far as this is our choice, our objective is to distance ourselves from Russia, because the mental model practiced in Russia is modern feudalism. So, if we agree to have a pro-Russian foreign policy, there will be no modernization in Georgia, and we will have the same model as in Moscow: corruption and organized crime.²⁸

For the young and Western-educated political elites, the Rose Revolution represented a cultural and ideational revolution in the Caucasus. The key idea behind the revolution was to transform “a post-Soviet society into a European one and to turn as much as possible from the East to the West”.²⁹

When comparing Shevardnadze’s and Saakashvili’s political discourses towards the importance of European Integration, one can argue that Shevardnadze saw this path mostly in a pragmatic way: “the West has money, it can balance other claimants for influence in the Caucasus such as Russia and Turkey, it brings expertise and training and it offers better security” (Jones 2003, 102). In contrast, the Saakashvili government added an ideological component to the importance of having pro-Western foreign policy as an extension of its domestic efforts to modernise the Georgian state. Wilson makes a similar argument, stressing that

the two governments differed in the level of enthusiasm with which they embraced the West, particularly the United States. Shevardnadze’s pro-Western orientation was rooted in a pragmatic effort to balance Russia, while Saakashvili appeared to have been motivated by ideological enthusiasm born out of his experience as a student in the United States. (Wilson 2010, 28)

The former Ambassador of Georgia to Germany from 1993 to 2004, Kote Gabashvili, explained to the authors [that]:

While Shevardnadze was also trying to push for more cooperation with the West, still his policy is better described as a “balanced” approach ... that was the logical result of his communist background and that was how he and a significant part of his elite understood politics, whether domestic or international. The new revolutionary elite after him were steadfast in their political agenda and their ideology was based on a belief in the Western ideals of freedom and modern state-building. That difference between the administrations of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili had a direct impact on Georgia’s pro-Western agenda since the Revolution.³⁰

We argue that the shift in elites as a result of the Rose Revolution affected Georgia’s pro-Western foreign policy in two ways: first, the specific ideas of *Europeanization* and *modernization*, which the revolutionary elites believed, influenced their understanding of the national interest. The West was seen not only as the guarantor of Georgia’s security in a traditional military way, but also as the guarantor of transforming Georgia from a failed state to a modern, European nation. Second, elite ideological homogeneity, aided by the removal of old elites from power positions, resulted in an increase in elite cohesion regarding domestic and foreign policies. While variation in elite cohesion alone cannot

explain Georgia's pro-western aspirations, as far as both Shevardnadze and Saakashvili pursued same overall objective of distancing Georgia from Russia, it sheds considerable light on differences in the pace and intensity with which Shevardnadze and Saakashvili embraced pro-western policies.

Next, we show how changes in a second unit-level factor – state capacity – also contributed to this difference in foreign policy.

Weak state, strong state and the transformation of Georgia's foreign policy

In this section, we explore the links between state capacity,³¹ which we define following Krasner (1999, 4) as "the formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own polity", and Georgia's foreign policy direction and intensity. At the end of the 1990s, Georgia was on the brink of becoming a failed state. State institutions operated at a very low level of efficiency if they fulfilled their basic functions at all. Shevardnadze's government was unable to provide basic public goods. The public bureaucracy was characterised by pervasive corruption. The country was in a state of permanent economic and fiscal crisis with social unrest and commonplace extrajudicial killings (Lebanidze 2016). As Nodia observed, "by the late 1990s, fundamental weaknesses of his rule had become obvious ... The state was unable to collect taxes, provide adequate public services, take care of public infrastructure and provide adequate conditions to spur economic development" (Nodia 2017, 77).

Whereas Shevardnadze's Soviet mentality and his way of ruling the state certainly contributed to diminished state capacity, it is also important to mention that he had to cope with more complicated and immediate political legacies. Not only did he have to deal with weakened state institutions and a devastated economy, but his monopoly on power was constantly challenged by informal warlords and military commanders, and his social legitimacy was also contested in some areas of the country as a lasting legacy of the civil war. Hence, in the first few years, he spent his resources pulling the country out of political and social chaos. Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s, Shevardnadze had full political and legal control on the country, but still failed to transform political stability into development and to pull out the country out of its economic misery. Shevardnadze's regime collapsed with the 2003 Rose Revolution – a series of electoral public protests resulting from growing public dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime (Lane 2009; Ó Beacháin 2009; Lebanidze 2018). The Rose Revolution brought to power a group of young Western-educated elites under the leadership of the new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, who was determined to turn Georgia into a modern Western state. The new government started to quickly rebuild state institutions.³² In a short period, it managed to eradicate petty corruption, replace dishonest bureaucrats with well-trained young professionals, establish efficient law enforcement agencies, start reforming the military and create an efficient customs service (World Bank 2012). Most importantly, the government put fiscal and economic policies in order. The state budget was below 1 billion GEL (ca. 500 million USD) during the last year of Shevardnadze's rule (Table 1). Due to improved tax collection revenues had almost doubled already in the first year of Saakashvili's presidency, and increased six-fold within four years (Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Indicators of progress achieved between 2003 and 2008.

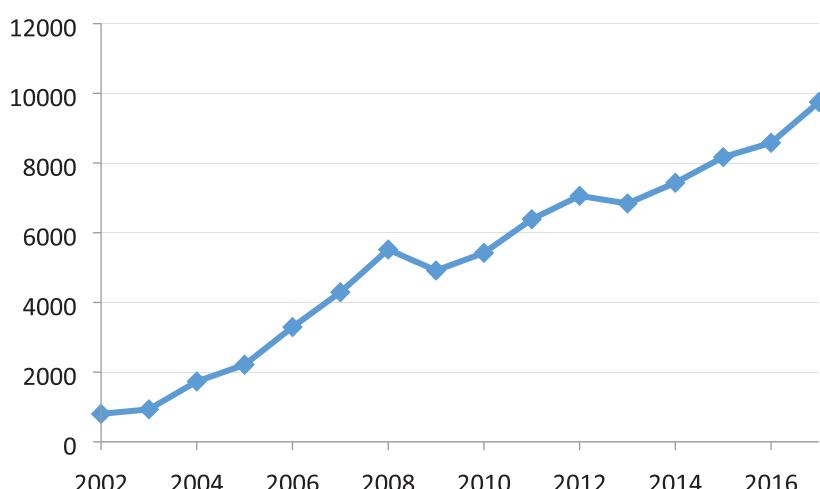
Indicators of progress	2003	2008	Growth (%)/Change
State revenues (in million GEL)	933.3	5517.7	591%
Exports (in million USD)	461.3	1495.3	324%
Imports (in million USD)	1,139,039.2	6,301,540.3	553%
GDP (in million USD)	3990.8	12,800.5	321%
FDI (in million USD)	334.6	1564.3	468%
Military Budget (in million USD)	75.6	895	1184%

Source: Gvalia and Lebanidze (2018, 165–196).

Legislation was liberalised and conditions for economic activities improved. As a result, Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) started to flow in the country. Between 2003 and 2008, FDI increased more than five times and reached 1.75 billion USD (Geostat 2017a). In the same period, the GDP of the country increased two-fold (Geostat 2017b). Georgia's state-building reforms were noticed by numerous international organisations. The World Bank's 2012 report designated Georgia as "top reformer" of the past 5 years among 174 countries and Transparency International called hailed it as the least corrupt country in the post-Soviet space (World Bank 2010, 6).

Table 1 summarises the progress achieved by Georgia in terms of state-building between 2003 and 2008. Although the country was still struggling with numerous socio-economic and political problems, Georgia became a promising developing economy with a centralised system of decision-making and an effective state administration and. In short, if we ignore issues of democratic accountability and transparency, and focus on the *efficacy* of state institutions, Georgia had turned from a weak state into a strong state within just a few years.

The dysfunctional institutions and limited state capacity under Shevardnadze's regime had a direct negative impact on the effectiveness of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. His domestic policy, rooted in the lack of elite cohesion, was one of the main internal impediments. Day to day diplomatic and foreign policy practices were also compromised because of government inefficiency. For instance, due to the permanent economic crisis

**Figure 1.** State revenues (in Million GEL). Source: Gvalia and Lebanidze (2018, 165–196).

and underfinancing, governmental agencies were under constant threat of being expelled from international organisations due to payment problems (RFE/RL 2002). For instance, in 2002, Georgia was almost expelled from the World Tourism Organization (RFE/RL 2002). Moreover, Shevardnadze's inability to modernise the country, which meant that Georgia might become a failed state, prompted the West to turn against Shevardnadze's government (Lebanidze 2016). The regime's inability to improve state capacity and provide basic public goods also generated negative externalities, and caused it to lose external support and become more isolated (Börzel and Levanidze 2017).

Georgia's quest to join NATO (and the EU) started in the second half of the 1990s during Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency. In 1999, Shevardnadze formally declared the intention of the Georgian authorities to join NATO (Jamestown Foundation 1999). In 2002, he again reiterated his intention to join NATO and the EU at the NATO Summit in Prague and at high-level meetings in Brussels (NATO 2002; Civil Georgia 2002). NATO generally welcomed Georgian aspirations, but made no secret that Georgia would need to conduct intensive reforms in order to be able to join the North-Atlantic Alliance. NATO's Secretary General George Robertson stated that Georgia's NATO membership was "a difficult challenge" and it required "long preparations" (Civil Georgia 2003). To join NATO, a candidate country needs to meet several military, economic and political criteria (NATO 2016). However, Shevardnadze's Georgia did not come close to meeting the majority of them. Next to disorganisation, corruption and fragile leadership, the Georgian military also suffered from underfinancing. Georgia's military budget was continuously below 100 million USD throughout 1990s and during the early 2000s (SIPRI 2017). In 2003, it amounted to only 75,6 million USD (SIPRI 2017).

However, the situation quickly changed under the new government. Mikhail Saakashvili's government managed to turn the Georgian military into a well-equipped modern military force within just a few years. It became the largest group of non-NATO personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan missions. During the first five years of Saakashvili's presidency, Georgia's military budget experienced an 8-fold increase to 895 million USD (SIPRI 2017). The modernisation of the military which was accompanied by the fast pace of reforms in other areas brought Georgia closer to NATO. Technical incompatibility with NATO standards became less of an issue. Saakashvili's government incentivised the US administration to intensify support for the reform process. The endogenous process of state-building again changed Georgia's external environment – this time in a positive direction. There was certainly also a lucky coincidence between Georgian process of modernisation and the democracy promotion agenda of the G. W. Bush Administration. As a result, the USA became a firm supporter of Georgia and the main advocate of Georgia's NATO membership.

In 2006, Georgia was offered intensified dialogue – a pre-stage to formal membership process. In 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest NATO promised Georgia that the country would join the alliance one day, but did not offer the Membership Action Plan (MAP) (Gvalia and Levanidze 2018). The Bucharest summit and the following 5-day war with Russia in August 2008 diminished Georgian hopes for fast-track integration into NATO. The accession process seems to now have been postponed indefinitely. But this failure the impediment was of political rather than technical nature. It was obvious that many European NATO members, most notably France and Germany, blocked Georgia's NATO membership perspective in 2008 because they considered it as an "unnecessary

offense to Russia" (New York Times 2008). The justification for denying the MAP to Georgia provided by the French Prime Minister is consistent with this interpretation: "We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine because we think that it is not a good answer to the balance of power within Europe and between Europe and Russia" (CNN 2008). Alexander Grushko, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, made a similar remark during the 2008 Bucharest summit: "Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have most serious consequences for pan-European security" (BBC 2008). As a result of intensive state – and capacity building efforts, joining NATO was no longer a technical challenge but a political issue.

The second foreign policy challenge that was tackled by the Georgian government – mostly thanks to increased state capacity – was the deterioration of relations with Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between Georgia and Russia have been marked by permanent crisis. During the last years of Shevardnadze's era, there were numerous sources of tension between the two countries, including unresolved territorial conflicts, Georgian government's interest in Euro-Atlantic integration and the future status of Russian military bases, and the. Russia did not need to spend many resources to keep Shevardnadze's weakened and corrupt regime in check. Russia did not perceive Georgia's attempt to join NATO and the EU as a serious danger either. The First Deputy Chief of Russian Armed Forces General Staff Colonel General Yurii Baluevskii was on the mark when he ruled out Georgia's NATO membership in 2002: the "Georgian military is unlikely to be able to meet NATO military and technological requirements for the next few decades" (RFE/RL Newsline 2002a). Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov, did not consider the Georgian attempt to join NATO and the EU seriously either, saying that Russia would not mind what organisation Georgia would join: "Let them join anything, even the League for Sexual Reform, if they wish" (RFE/RL Newsline 2002b).

After the 2003 Rose Revolution and the following change in power in Tbilisi, Georgia-Russia relations started to worsen further. Mikhail Saakashvili's swift state-building reforms gave a strong boost to Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. Whereas Georgia's foreign policy aim of Euro-Atlantic integration remained rather distant and illusory under Shevardnadze, it became dangerously real, especially once the US started to openly support Georgia's NATO membership bid, under Saakashvili (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018). Saakashvili also made the resolution of territorial conflicts his main policy priority by pushing for the internationalisation of CIS peacekeeping forces and demanding that Russia treat Georgia as an "equal" partner (RFE/RL 2006), abandoning much of the diplomatic restraint that characterised Shevardnadze's regime (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018).

Russian officials stopped joking about Georgia's NATO membership. Just before the 2008 decisive NATO summit in Bucharest, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that "Georgia's and Ukraine's potential NATO membership would be seen by Russia as a threat to its security" (RFE/RL 2008) and that Moscow would "do everything to prevent [them] from being accepted into NATO" (RFE/RL 2008). The Kremlin did not limit itself to political and diplomatic pressure but decided to punish Georgia for its more assertive foreign policy by using Georgia's economic and energy dependency on Russia. Just within two years, between 2005 and 2007, Russia quadrupled the gas price for Georgia from \$64 to \$235 (Lebanidze 2016, 163). In 2006, the Kremlin started waging an economic war against Georgia: it banned the import of Georgian wines, mineral waters and agricultural products and imposed a full-scale economic and transport embargo on its southern

neighbour and stopped issuing visas for Georgians (BBC 2006). Soon thousands of Georgian migrants working in Russia were deported to Georgia.

The Georgian government managed to mobilise resources to overcome Russia's punitive measures without negative economic and political shocks. Within two years, Georgia lost its main export market and had to pay four times higher prices for its main energy importer. Without improved state capacity and mobilisation of resources, Georgia would be unable to cope with this dual challenge. Not only did the Georgian government manage to withstand the economic pressure, but achieved a remarkable 12 percent economic growth the following year. Due to improved tax collection, which resulted in increased state revenues, the Georgian government was able to subsidize wine making and other agrarian industries – the most vulnerable groups that were hit hardest by Russian embargos (Vardiashvili 2010). According to one assessment study conducted in 2007, the aggregate effects of Russian embargos were not large. (Livny, Ott, and Torosyan 2009, 10). Even though Georgia lost 20 percent of its export market, the overall impact of this loss was negligible because Georgia managed to diversify its export markets. Overall exports increased more than three times between 2003 and 2008 (Table 1 and Figure 2). Georgia also managed to diversify its gas market by reaching an agreement with neighbouring Azerbaijan and became the only non-oil rich post-Soviet country that does not import substantial energy resources from Russia (Lebanidze 2016, 163).

We can observe a clear link between increased state capacity and a more assertive and coherent foreign policy. Without economic reforms that strengthened state institutions, Georgia would perhaps have been unable to withstand Russia's embargos and would have been forced to give in to Russian pressure by making certain concessions.³³

Some attribute the outbreak of the Russia-Georgia war,³⁴ and the following deterioration of Georgia's security environment to a failure of Saakashvili's leadership, but failure to avoid war against Russia does not indicate low state-capacity. On the contrary, the fact that Georgia survived the military conflict with Russia and rebuilt itself quickly was a sign of well-functioning institutions and the state's ability to use resources including

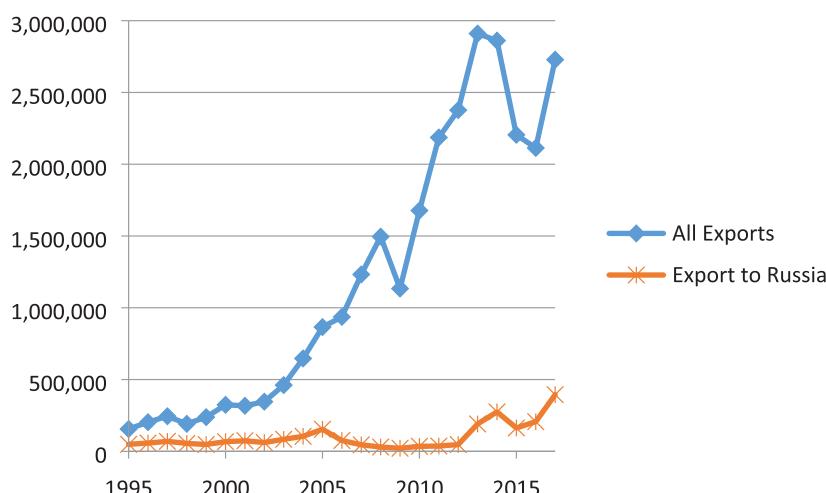


Figure 2. Georgia's Exports (in Thousand USD). Source: Gvalia and Lebanidze (2018, 165–196).

external assistance effectively (Gvalia and Lebanidze 2018). Today, observers of Russia-Georgia relations agree that coercive measures by the Kremlin against Georgia have consistently backfired and resulted in Russia losing any leverage over Georgia (Dzhaparidze 2013; Lebanidze 2014; Kakachia 2017). Despite losing in 2008 against Russia, Georgia managed to become politically and economically the *least* dependent post-Soviet state on Russia due to increased state capacity, which enabled the Georgian government to effectively use resources to counter Russia's coercive measures.

Interviews with Georgia's political elite

We conducted 23 interviews with representatives of the first echelon of Georgia's ruling political elites during both Shevardnadze's and Saakashvili's administrations to assess these conjectures.³⁵ The interviews provide a few important corrections to the conventional wisdom. They highlight the importance of domestic filters, and specifically the role of state capacity and elite cohesion, in explaining variation in intensity and coherence of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. All interview partners confirm the basic realist assumption that Georgia's foreign policy has been mostly moulded by the external security environment and has been driven by desire to balance the Russian threat. However, many interview partners identified state capacity and elite consensus/cohesion as important factors for explaining the qualitative *change* in the degree of foreign policy assertiveness after 2003.

Elite cohesion, state capacity and foreign policy

When comparing the foreign policy performance of the two administrations, respondents identified the limited state capacity and lack of cohesion among political elites as key reasons behind the unspectacular record of Eduard Shevardnadze's pro-Western foreign policy and behind the positive change in Georgia's pro-Western agenda after the Rose Revolution. According to one respondent "one cannot have an effective foreign policy if domestic policy is a total failure, since the two are closely interrelated".³⁶ For instance, the interviewees underlined the impact of the diminished state capacity in the 1993 controversial decision by Georgia's government under Eduard Shevardnadze to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), supposedly under Russia's pressure. The decision is broadly viewed as a reaction to pressure coming from the external environment. However, respondents also underlined the domestic dimension of that seminal decision.

Irakli Menaghishvili, former Foreign Minister during Shevardnadze's administration, argues that Georgia was forced to join the CIS due to "full economic collapse, collapse of all state institutions and rule by armed gangs".³⁷ He described Georgia prior to joining the CIS as a country "starving to death and being at the edge of full collapse of statehood". Similarly, Kote Gabashvili, who was Minister of Education in 1992–1993 and ambassador to Germany in 1993–2004, argues that the Georgian decision to enter the CIS was dictated by defeat in the Abkhazian conflict, which was the result of conspiracy, internal angst and treachery.³⁸ Russia played an important role in Georgia's defeat in Abkhazia and instrumentalised both parties in the civil war.³⁹ The West was not engaged in the region at this time, leaving Georgia no options for external balancing. Nevertheless, the decision to join the CIS was also precipitated by the inability of

Shevardnadze's administration to establish constitutional order in the country and to build effective state institutions. Chiaberashvili extends the limited state capacity-argument to whole period of Shevardnadze's rule.⁴⁰

Shevardnadze's [foreign policy] failure was conditioned by domestic policy and not foreign policy: for instance, in 2001, the [the suspected presence of terrorists of the North Caucasian terrorist groups in] the Pankisi Gorge included component of external danger of Russia's possible intervention, but the Pankisi problem as such was conditioned by domestic political dysfunction, absence of state institutions and lack of control of our territories. The same was in the Kodori Gorge and Adjara. So, the domestic political dysfunction conditioned foreign policy risks and opportunities.

Georgia often had difficulty paying membership fees in international organisations, resulting in the temporary suspension of Georgia's membership, and needless to say Georgian embassies were also underfinanced. This negatively influenced Georgia's image in the international arena and especially its relations with the West. According to Petre Mamradze, the Head of Shevardnadze's administration, the West stopped believing in the ability of Shevardnadze's government to tackle corruption and conduct reforms, and started to openly criticise his regime.⁴¹ Respondents were united in their assessment of changes in Georgia's foreign policy after the Rose Revolution, and contrasted the weak state under Shevardnadze to the strong and effective state machinery under Saakashvili's administration. The majority of respondents also linked the increased state capacity under Saakashvili to more assertive foreign policy. The new government spent more resources to achieve breakthroughs in relations with NATO and a number of Western countries.⁴² Strengthening institutions related to foreign policy under Saakashvili also made it more consistent, more predictable and more understandable for partners.

Georgia was ultimately able to overcome the ambiguity that characterised its foreign policy under Shevardnadze.⁴³ Moreover, the proper functioning of the state defined the mode of cooperation [with Western partners].⁴⁴ After the Rose Revolution, cooperation between [strengthened] Georgia and Western actors rested on equal footing, resulting in more respect and attention to Georgia.⁴⁵ As Nikoloz Vashakidze, former deputy foreign and defense minister, argues "the main difference [between Shevardnadze's and Saakashvili's foreign policy] lies not in its substance but in its more intensity",⁴⁶ which was partly due to the enhanced state capacity.

Respondents also highlight low state capacity in areas of limited statehood,⁴⁷ not only in the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also in the rest of Georgia formally governed by the central government. As one respondent recalls, when Russia first imposed visa regime against Georgia in 2000, it excluded the autonomous republic Adjara, which was then governed by local Russia-friendly governor Aslan Abashidze.⁴⁸ Throughout the 1990s, the central government itself was also split into several groups. Many ministers, especially in the so-called power ministries, nurtured exclusive ties with Russian intelligence services,⁴⁹ and were involved in terrorist attacks against Shevardnadze and other conspiracies against their own government, including the coup d'états.⁵⁰

Under Saakashvili's administration, the coherence of the ruling class significantly improved: pro-Russian political forces were delegitimised, and the ruling political class was fully westernised. The state bureaucracy became more united around the idea of joining the West.⁵¹ Whereas Shevardnadze had difficulty controlling a decentralised network of different clientelist and clan-based groups, the decision-making process was

more centralised and less fragmented under Saakashvili. All important decisions were made by a small and ideologically proximate group,⁵² which made decision-making more effective, although not necessarily more transparent.

Respondents also identified elite cohesion as a significant domestic factor that influenced the intensity of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. Eduard Shevardnadze's personal background as a Soviet politician and lack of experience of how to rule a modern democratic country resulted in a form of neo-feudal rule⁵³ in Georgia that lacked the main components of modern statehood. Its main function of which was to preserve stability and balance among different interest groups.⁵⁴ Shevardnadze also lacked basic knowledge to govern a modern capitalist market-economy,⁵⁵ and ruled the country primarily through corruption, clientelism and phony justice.⁵⁶ Shevardnadze's soviet background also influenced his personnel policy. Being himself a "Soviet product",⁵⁷ the most influential group in his government consisted of the representatives of old communist nomenklatura, their offspring and the Soviet intelligentsia.⁵⁸ Koba Kikabidze, a member of parliament from 1992–1995, admits that neither he nor Shevardnadze had any skills or experience needed to build a modern state.⁵⁹ According to David Darchishvili, a former Chairman of the Committee on European Integration in the parliament of Georgia, Shevardnadze was smart enough to attract clever reform-minded people but the position of former nomenklatura remained unchallenged.⁶⁰

Respondents also mentioned the lack of ideational cohesiveness as having a negative impact on the pro-Western foreign policy agenda.⁶¹ The former deputy National Security Secretary, Tornike Turmanidze, underlined the inherent conflict between the Soviet elite under Shevardnadze, which was socialised under Soviet Union and was spiritually closely tied to Russia, and the conduct of genuinely pro-Western elite and its preferred foreign policy.⁶² In contrast, Mikhail Saakashvili's government enjoyed much greater cohesion and pursued a more consistent foreign and domestic policy. The elite under Saakashvili was "de-Sovietized",⁶³ younger⁶⁴ and Western-educated.⁶⁵ It was also arguably more "idealistic",⁶⁶ driven by a desire "to establish a European state".⁶⁷ Although Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy started under Shevardnadze, it was only after 2003, when the pro-Western vector was cemented by strong ideational script that "Georgia was always part of Europe and it needs to return to its place in European and Euroatlantic space."⁶⁸ New elites had qualitatively new understandings of functions and nature of a state as a fully sovereign entity, capable of conducting an independent foreign policy.⁶⁹ This was in stark contrast to Shevardnadze's Soviet-era elite, which never fully realised that Georgia was a sovereign and independent state.⁷⁰ The "new, young and westernized" ruling elite that came to power after the Rose Revolution had a "common vision", and was surely recruited in part on this basis, and therefore exhibited much greater agreement on the most fundamental issues of Georgia's foreign policy.⁷¹ Respondents mentioned the significance of ideological coherence among the ruling elites as an important part of state capacity. The elite under Shevardnadze lacked a common ideological glue⁷² beyond personal financial gain, which outweighed the common interests.⁷³

Respondents were asked to provide quantitative assessments of Georgia's foreign policy. The majority of respondents, from both administrations, confirmed that the intensity of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy increased almost two-fold since 2003, from 47.5–90% (Figure 3). The respondents were also specifically asked about variation in

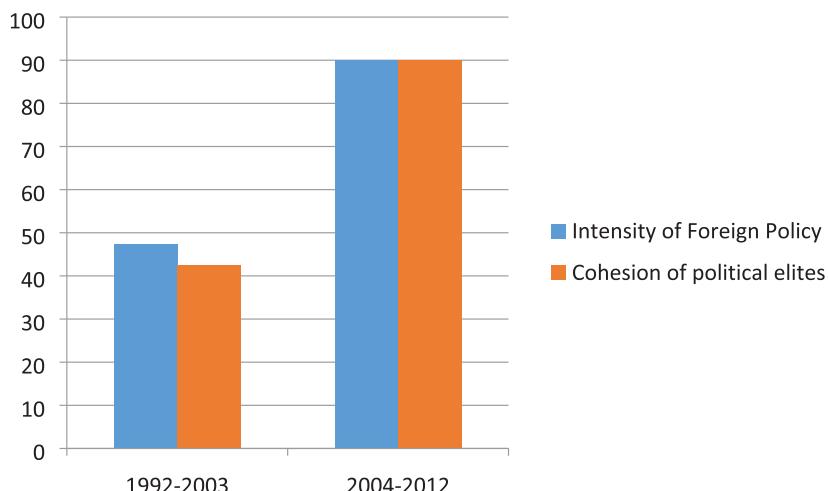


Figure 3. To what extent did the intensity of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy and the degree of elite consensus/cohesion changed between two administrations? (Average score standardised on a scale of 0–100).

cohesion of political elites under each administration. The average score estimating the amount of elite cohesion almost doubled after 2003 from 42.5–90% (Figure 3).

Finally, to triangulate the main argument, we asked respondents to weigh the significance of four key factors in explaining change in Georgia's foreign policy assertiveness (Figure 4): elite cohesion, state capacity, Russian threat and international support. The aggregated figures show that majority of respondents ascribe the change to the "new elites and its vision" (92.5) and "increased state capacity" (80). Both point to the importance of domestic filters. Increased international support (75) and the presence of Russian threat (55) were also mentioned but were deemed less important. The Russian

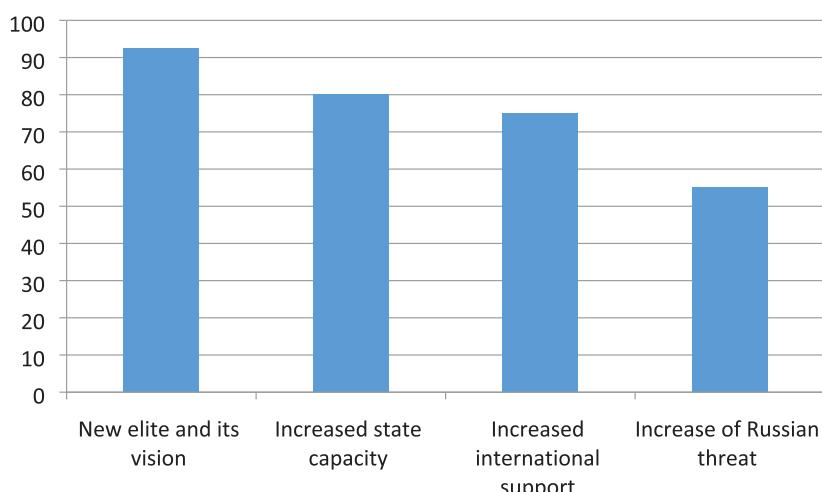


Figure 4. Which of the following factors can best explain intensification of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy Since the Rose Revolution? (Average score standardised on a scale of 0–100).

threat was ever-present rather than unimportant. Interviews underlined the impact of both systemic variables in explaining the overall trajectory of Georgia's foreign policy since independence, but emphasise these two domestic filters as explaining variation in Georgia's reaction to these external constraints and incentives.

Alternative explanations

Here we evaluate two alternative explanations of small state foreign policy behaviour – balance of threat theory and economic dependence theory – and show that the proposed theory provides a superior account of Georgia's foreign policy behaviour.

Balance of threat

Balance of threat theory (BT), mostly associated with Stephen Walt, arose as the alternative to the classic balance of power (BP) theory. In contrast to BP, which argues that states balance against extreme concentrations of power in international system, Walt argued that normally states balance against the most threatening states not necessarily against the most powerful states. According to this theory, power is just one element in threat perception, alongside offensive military capabilities, geographic proximity and aggressive intent. Powerful states with offensive military armaments, aggressive intentions and in close proximity are usually regarded as the most serious threats.

How well does BT explain Georgia's foreign policy posture since the Rose Revolution? While BT accounts for Georgia's desire to distance itself from Russian sphere of influence, it has difficulty accounting why the governments of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili responded differently to the Russian threat. BT argues that change in state's foreign policy follows shifts in the level of external threat. If one explores whether intensification of Georgia's pro-Western agenda since the Rose Revolution was a reaction to an increase in the Russian threat, one finds the opposite: the intensification of Georgia's pro-Western ambitions led to an increase in Russian threat. The growing Russian threat was more of an effect of Georgia's increased pro-Western policies than it was the cause of it.

Saakashvili's first visit as a president of Georgia was to Russia, and he spoke about the importance of having good neighbouring relations with the Kremlin.⁷⁴ At the same time, Russia played an important role in supporting Saakashvili's removal of the regional baron of Adjara, Aslan Abashidze, who consistently refused to obey the central government of the country, from power. The Kremlin's handling of the Adjara problem in favour of Saakashvili is consistent with Russia's overall perception of Georgia as part of its sphere of influence. By supporting Aslan Abashidze's removal, the Kremlin gave a political gift to Saakashvili and expected the new Georgian leadership to reciprocate by acknowledging Russia's special interest in the region. However, unlike Shevardnadze, Saakashvili would not accept Russia as the regional hegemon. While Russia-Georgia relations at that time were in the stage of "détente", Georgia was building its partnership with the West. As a result, Russia-Georgia relations started to deteriorate, and this process culminated at the end of 2006 after the imprisonment of four Russian spies, followed by the economic embargo and full-scale Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. Although post-2003 Georgia was trying to normalise relations with Kremlin and a symbolic sign of this attempt was Saakashvili's visit to Moscow in the beginning of 2004, former Secretary of

National Security Council, Giga Bokeria, remarked that Georgia's pro-Western agenda should not be compromised because of this.

During this meeting, one of the first demands from the Putin was to keep the old minister of security, because he was a resident of Russia. This demonstrated how different our views of Georgia's future were from the views of Putin. His understanding was that having good relations with Russia meant that Russia should control the security sector in Georgia. Of course, this demand was not and could not be met from our side.⁷⁵

Neoclassical realism assumes that the major predictor of a state's foreign policy is its external security environment. This explains why Shevardnadze and Saakashvili, despite clear ideological and other differences between their administrations, both tried to balance the Russian threat. At the same time, the Russian threat was understood differently by the two administrations. For Saakashvili, the Russian threat was understood not only in material terms, but in ideological terms as well. Accordingly, alignment with the West was seen not only as an instrument for balancing Russian hard power, but as the way to counter the Russian model of social and political development (Siroky and Dzutsev 2012). Additionally, homogenising the ruling elite and increasing state capacity placed the new government in a better position, compared to the administration of Shevardnadze, to implement an array of domestic reforms and foreign policy initiatives aimed at bringing the country closer to the Euro-Atlantic space. BT's "Black Box" approach towards the state cannot account for why different administrations of Georgia responded differently to the Russian factor.

Theory of economic dependence

Another alternative explanation is the theory of economic dependence. Observers have suggested that economic dependence is key to understanding the foreign policy behaviour of post-Soviet states vis-à-vis Russia. When economic dependence on the Russia is excessive, balancing against it becomes difficult and costly. Eric Miller observes that when there is high-level economic and especially energy dependence on Russia, usually post-Soviet states are pushed towards bandwagoning with Kremlin as far as anti-Russian foreign policies could hamper access to the hegemon's market and its energy resources (Miller 2006). Economic dependence affects state's foreign policy freedom as far as it increases domestic political risks for the regimes of dependent state. If a state that is heavily dependent on Russia economically, decides to pursue anti-Russian policies, Kremlin can resort to economic embargoes and other coercive instruments that might negatively affect not only dependent state's economic situation, but also create deep political turmoil inside the country because of worsened economic conditions.

If one looks at the dynamics of Georgia's economic relations with Russia, one observes that dependence on Russia was increasing from 2003 to 2006 before Russia imposed an embargo on Georgian imports in 2006. Russia was Georgia's number one trading partner before 2006, accounting for almost 20 percent of Georgia's total trade. In 2006, after completing the IPAP, Russia imposed several economic and energy sanctions on Georgia. It doubled gas prices, may have been involved in the suspicious explosion of gas pipelines and electricity lines, and banned Georgian wines and mineral waters from the Russian market. The Georgian government responded to Russian pressures by pursuing even more reforms in the economic and energy sectors. Georgia was subsequently

named the world's top reformer in 'doing business' by the World Bank and International Financial Corporation. Georgia's government called Russia's doubling of gas prices a "political decision" and interpreted it as the "price for freedom" that Georgia had to pay to reduce Russian influence. (Gvalia et al. 2013, 121–122).

Russia was also the single largest supplier of strategic energy resources, including electricity and natural gas. Until 2006, 100 percent of Georgia's natural gas imports came from Russia. Russia cut off natural gas supplies completely during the winter of 2005–2006. The loss of trade with Russia also had an especially adverse effect on Georgia's export-import balance. Rather than reversing course, or curbing its enthusiasm, Georgia responded to Russia's pressure by (1) pursuing new trade partners, mostly among its neighbours, though these did not fully compensate for the loss of the Russian market; and (2) distancing itself even further from Russia. The loss of the Russian market was not compensated for by an increase in trade with Western countries. Georgia's trade was supplemented by deeper economic relations with states other than Russia; other CIS countries, especially neighbouring countries, accounted for most of the new trade since 2006. Thus, it seems fair to infer that intensified political relations with the West post-Rose Revolution are neither the result nor a side effect of economic benefits from trade with the West, but rather the reason for Georgia's greater economic engagement with the West. (Gvalia et al. 2013, 123).

The theory of economic dependence cannot pass even a simple congruence test in light of Georgia's relations with Russia since the Rose Revolution. While the theory of economic dependence would predict Georgia pursuing closer ties with Russia because of its high-level economic dependence, the opposite has occurred. Increased state capacity and a more consolidated ruling elite, who shared a deep consensus regarding the importance of pro-Western foreign policy, shaped the direction and assertiveness of Georgia's ability and determination not to change course and to withstand Russian pressure.

Conclusion

This study explains change in Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy before and after the 2003 Rose Revolution. Drawing on neoclassical realism, it emphasises two intervening variables – elite cohesion and state capacity – as crucial in shaping the response of Georgia's governments to international constraints, especially the threat from Russia.

The lack of elite cohesion and limited state capacity prevented Shevardnadze from achieving a coherent foreign policy or from pursuing integration with the EU and NATO, even though he stated repeatedly that was his intent. The presence of pro-Russian veto-actors in the government such as Aslan Abashidze made Georgia's pro-Western policy look weak and inconsistent. However, two changes that took place after the Rose Revolution contributed to the U-turn in Georgia's foreign policy. First, the new government successfully implemented state-building reforms, strengthened state institutions and drastically increased resources at its disposal. Second, unlike Eduard Shevardnadze's government, Mikhail Saakashvili's ruling regime was a coherent and monolithic bloc. It spoke with one voice and one message. Ideological coherence was partly guaranteed by the ability of Mikhail Saakashvili's government not to allow voices of dissent among their ranks. Moreover, the government even stigmatised alternative (non-pro-Western) ideas among opposition and civil society. Georgia's pro-Western orientation

almost became a government promoted religion in the post-Rose Revolution Georgia. Ideological consistency and increased state capacity had a direct and positive impact on the assertiveness of Georgia's foreign policy. Georgia became a candidate for NATO membership and made enormous steps towards European integration.

In terms of theoretical implications, neoclassical realism offers the most promising account considered here in terms of explaining change in Georgia's foreign policy. Neoclassical realism asserts that domestic politics define how international threats and constraints are transmitted into foreign policy outcomes. Hence, for neoclassical realists domestic-level parameters are important determinants of foreign policy. Both Shevardnadze's and Saakashvili's administrations pursued the same overall objective of distancing Georgia from Russia and allying with the West. Nevertheless, the intensity and coherence of their foreign policies was very different. Hence, one must consider the subtle differences at the domestic level between the two administrations before and after the Rose Revolution to fully account for variation in terms of intensity and quality of foreign policy. State capacity and elite cohesion were two major unit level variables that witnessed the greatest change after the Rose Revolution.

This finding is consistent with mainstream research on small states, which holds that the international environment exerts the primary influence on foreign policy, but as the analysis here suggests that to understand how small states will respond to systemic stimuli, neoclassical realism offers a more powerful framework.

Notes

- As Frederik Coene (2016, 19–61) argues, two distinct phases can be distinguished in Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. The first phase, the "New Western Orientation" (1995–2003), coincides with the Presidency of former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and lasts until the peaceful Rose Revolution, which brought Columbia University Law School graduate Mikheil Saakashvili and his political party, the National Movement, to power for the next decade. The second phase of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy, which Coene calls the period of "Enforced Western Orientation", involved a more assertive implementation of the country's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy agenda.
- Coene (2016, 35).
- "The Georgian Government, collectively, was steadfast in its commitment to streamline all aspects of work with European and NATO standards of practice. This was performed with the intention of integrating with the Euro-Atlantic community, whether it involved the foreign ministry, the judicial system, the railways, the border guards, or even the airport landing systems and immigration desks, to name a few". Coene (2016, 36).
- National Security Concept of Georgia (available at: http://www.parliament.ge/files/292_880_927746_concept_en.pdf). For an analysis of this document, and the role of cultural paradigms in it, see Jones (2003).
- On individual foreign policy preferences, see Abbasov and Siroky (2018).
- "Georgian Battalion Departs for Afghanistan," Civil.ge, 7 April 2010. <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22159>.
- As Coene (2016, 139) states, "there was a large number of Western leaders and high-ranked officials who, following the success of Rose Revolution, flooded to the country which aspired to become a European democracy. In just a couple of months, Tbilisi played host to NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fisher, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, French Senate Chairman Christian Poncelet and many others".
- Miriam Fendius Elman (1995, 175–179) uses the term "scholarly consensus" to describe the dominance of system level theories in studies of small states' international behaviour.

9. For the conventional realist wisdom on the foreign policy behaviour of small states, see Waltz ([1979] 2010, 184–185, 195), Walt (1987, 21–31), Rosenau (1966, 47–48), Jervis (1978, 172–173), Schweller (1992, 253, 264–268), Handel (1990, 261–262), Keohane (1969, 291–310), Ingebritsen et al. (2006), Rothstein (1968), Katzenstein (1985), Vital (1968).
10. For recent studies that emphasise other forms of power that small states use in their foreign policies, see: Long (2016), Chong (2010), Chong and Maass (2010), Wivel, Ji, and Oest (2010), Braveboy-Wagner (2010).
11. Structural realism is based on the assumption that states act as unitary actors and their internal composition, does not influence much of the international politics. For the alternative conceptualisation of state, see: Moravscik (1997, 518) and Finel (2001).
12. On the issue of whether Neorealism can be valuable in explaining particular foreign policies, Waltz (1996, 54–57) argued that: “Indeed any theory of international politics can at best limp along, able to explain some matters of foreign policy, while having to leave much of the foreign policy aside.” Cf. Elman (1996a, 1996b); For the argument that Neoclassical Realism can serve as the theory of international politics, see Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016).
13. Rose (1998, 147): “systemic pressures and incentives may shape the broad contours and general directions of foreign policy without being strong or precise enough to determine specific details of state behavior. This means that the influence of systemic factors may often be more apparent from a distance than from up close – for example, in significantly limiting the menu of foreign policy choices considered by a state’s leaders at a particular time, rather than in forcing the selection of one particular item on that menu over another”. Schweller (2003, 316–317) makes a similar argument, as does Marsh (2012, 489), who argues that “Neoclassical realism seeks to explain the foreign policies of individual states over time and does not presume to explain broad systemic patterns or outcomes”.
14. In this paper, elites are understood as the policymakers with the access to executive decision-making in the field of foreign and security policy. On the issue which political elites matter most in foreign policy according to Neoclassical Realism, see Ripsman (2009, 170–193).
15. On the concept of state strength see, Taliaferro (2006). Taliaferro uses the concept of “state power,” while Thomas J. Christensen introduces the concept of “national political power”, or the government’s ability to extract and mobilise resources for the national security objectives. See also Christensen (1996).
16. Taliaferro (2006, 470–471) introduces the term “state building” to refer to an increase in the mobilisation and extractive capacity of central state institutions relative to other societal actors. In most modern states, “state building” refers to the efforts to increase the size and strength of the central executive instead of legislature, the judiciary, or provincial or local levels of government. On state making versus state breaking in Georgia, see Aprasidze and Siroky (2011).
17. <https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/7560-georgia-becomes-the-cis-member.html>. See Gerrits and Bader (2016).
18. On this point see, Baran (2002), Cornell (2005), Dawisha (1996), Macfarleine (2013), Mark (1996–1997), Starr (1997), Siroky, Simmons, and Gvalia (2017).
19. On that note, see Mearsheimer (2014a, 2014b, 2018), A similar argument, though from the perspective of Neoclassical realism, is offered in Gotz (2017). On aspects of Russia’s foreign policy in the Post-Soviet space, see Lynch (2001, 2002), Laurelle (2015), Charap and Welt (2015), Marten (2015), Dawisha (1996), Gerber (2015), Kramer (2008).
20. On how internal economic and political problems influenced Russia’s foreign policy, see Duggleby (2007), Baev (2007), Sussex (2012).
21. On the progress of Georgia-NATO relations during administration of Eduard Shevardnadze, see: Cecire (2013, 65–77).
22. Even those rhetorical desires of Shevardnadze were not consistent; in 1999, the same year he declared Georgia’s desire to join NATO, he also argued that it was not important if Georgia oriented towards the West or Russia, but rather who could offer what to Georgia.
23. Authors’ interview with Kote Gabashvili, Ambassador of Georgia to Germany (1993–2004) 26.03.2018. Tbilisi, Georgia.

24. Authors' interview with Giga Bokeria, 25 April 2018, Tbilisi.
25. Interview with Irakli Menaghishvili, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia (1993–2004), Interview with authors, 4 April 2018, Tbilisi.
26. Saakashvili, quoted in Müller (2011, 64–65).
27. Interview with high-level official, National Security Council of Georgia. Quoted in Gvalia et al. (2013).
28. Interview with high-level official, National Security Council of Georgia. Quoted in Gvalia et al. (2013). Also, see Di Puppo (2016).
29. BBC (2004). As Aprasidze (2016, 114) argues, "The 2003 Rose Revolution was an attempt to make a radical break from the Soviet past. The Soviet nomenclature had to make way for a new political leadership of young elites, most of whose members had been educated in the West. Extensive modernization and liberalization of Georgia were goals of the new government."
30. Authors' interview with Kote Gabashvili, Georgian Ambassador to Germany 1993–2004 (Tbilisi, Georgia, 26 March 2018).
31. We follow institutional understanding of state capacity: "the formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own polity" (Krasner 1999, 4). It would include "the control of the monopoly over the use of force", "tax and spending capacity" and effective "administration or professional bureaucracy". See Börzel and Risse (2018, 8). Further, to put this in the context of Georgia we link it to the term "modernization" which was a watershed moment between two Georgian administrations. We understand under the term reforms aimed at effective governance which do not necessarily include democratic governance. On dichotomy between effective and democratic governance or input and output legitimacy, see: Börzel, Pamuk, and Stahn (2008). Indeed, the observers of Georgia agree on the fact that post-Rose revolution government's reforms were the instance of autocratic modernisation, while democracy and human rights were often compromised. On that point see, Mitchell (2009); Cheterian (2008); Jones (2012); Siroky and Aprasidze (2011).
32. Party institutions were not a priority, however. See Mierzejewski-Voznyak (2014).
33. On the critical conceptualization of the effects that Russian sanctions had on Georgia, see: Newnham (2015).
34. On the Russia-Georgia War, see Welt (2010), Blank (2009), Karagiannis (2013), Cornell and Starr (2009).
35. The majority of respondents held positions of ministers or deputy ministers of Georgia's key ministries and other agencies. See [appendices](#) for detailed description of their affiliations.
36. Tornike Turmanidze, Interview with authors, 10 November 2018.
37. Irakli Menaghishvili, interview with authors, 4 April 2018, Tbilisi.
38. Kote Gabashvili, interview with authors, 26 March 2018, Tbilisi.
39. Siroky (2016).
40. Zurab Chiaberashvili, interview with authors, 25 April 2018, Tbilisi.
41. Petre Mamradze, interview with authors, 21 March 2018, Tbilisi.
42. Anonymous interview with the Member of Parliament (1999–2004), 21 March 2018, Tbilisi.
43. Anonymous interview with the Member of Parliament (1999–2004), 21 March 2018, Tbilisi.
44. Zurab Chiaberashvili, interview with authors, 25 April 2018, Tbilisi.
45. Zurab Chiaberashvili, interview with authors, 25 April 2018, Tbilisi.
46. Nikoloz Vashakidze, interview with authors, 5 May 2018, Tbilisi.
47. Börzel and Risse (2018).
48. Zurab Davitashvili, Interview with authors, 10 November 2018, Tbilisi.
49. David Sikharulidze, Interview with authors, 10 May 2018, Tbilisi.
50. Shota Utashvili, Interview with authors, 2 May 2018, Tbilisi.
51. Irakli Porchkhidze, 19 October 2018, Tbilisi.
52. Archil Gegeshidze, 20 May 2018, Tbilisi.
53. Ghia Nodia, interview with authors, 13 June 2018, Tbilisi.
54. Ghia Nodia, interview with authors, 13 June 2018, Tbilisi.

55. Kote Gabashvili, interview with authors, 26 March 2018, Tbilisi.
56. Anonymous interview with the representative of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1998–2002), 23 April 2018, Tbilisi.
57. Interview with Archil Gegeshidze, 20 May 2018.
58. David Darchishvili, interview with authors, 17 April 2018, Tbilisi.
59. Koba Kikabidze, interview with authors, 18 May 2018, Tbilisi.
60. David Darchishvili, interview with authors, 17 April 2018, Tbilisi.
61. Giga Bokeria, interview with authors, 25 April 2018, Tbilisi.
62. Tornike Turmanidze, Interview with authors, 10 November 2018.
63. Archil Gegeshidze, interview with authors, 20 May 2018, Tbilisi.
64. Archil Gegeshidze, interview with authors, 20 May 2018, Tbilisi.
65. Archil Gegeshidze, interview with authors, 20 May 2018, Tbilisi.
66. Zurab Davitashvili, interview with authors, 10 November 2018.
67. Zurab Davitashvili, interview with authors, 10 November 2018.
68. Tornike Turmanidze, Interview with authors, 10 November 2018.
69. Irakli Porchkhidze, Interview with authors, 19 October 2018.
70. Irakli Porchkhidze, Interview with authors, 19 October 2018.
71. Ghia Nodia, interview with authors, 13 June 2018, Tbilisi; Eka Akobia, Interview with authors, 20 September, 2018.
72. Zurab Davitashvili, interview with authors, 10 November 2018, Tbilisi.
73. Zurab Davitashvili, interview with authors, 10 November 2018, Tbilisi.
74. Walt (1985, 1987, 1988, 1992, 2009).
75. Authors' interview with former Secretary of National Security Council, Giga Bokeria (25.04.2018, Tbilisi, Georgia).

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Appendix. List of respondents and their affiliations

Respondent	Position held in Georgian government
Irakli Menagharishvili	Minister of Public Health, 1986–1991, 1992–1993; Deputy Prime Minister, 1993–1995; Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 1995–2003.
Kote Gabashvili	Minister of Education, 1992–1993; Mayor of Tbilisi, 1993; Ambassador to Germany, 1993–2004; Ambassador to Poland, 2001–2004.
Nikoloz Vashakidze	Member of the Parliament of Georgia, 1992, 2004–2008. Deputy Secretary of National Security Council, 2000–2004; Deputy Foreign Minister, 2007–2008, 2010–2012; Deputy Defense Minister, 2009–2010.
Zurab Chiaberashvili	Mayor of Tbilisi, 2003–2004; Georgia's permanent representative to the Council of Europe, 2005–2010; Ambassador to the Swiss Confederation and Principality of Liechtenstein; Permanent Representative to the United Nations office in Geneva; 2010–2012; Minister of Health, Labour and Social Affairs, 2012.
David Darchiashvili	Executive director of the Open Society Georgia Foundation, 2004–2008; Chairman of the Committee on European Integration in parliament of Georgia, 2008–2012; Deputy Chairman of the Defense And Security Committee in parliament of Georgia, 2012–2016.
Giga Bokeria	Vice-President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 2005–2008; Deputy Foreign Minister, 2008–2010; Secretary of the National Security Council, 2010–2013.
Ghia Nodia	Minister of Education and Science, 2008; Professor of political science and the director of the International School of Caucasus Studies at the Ilia State University.
Mikheil Machavariani	Minister for the tax revenues, 2000–2001, First Deputy Chairman of the parliament, 2004–2008
Anonymous	Member of the Parliament of Georgia, 1999–2004
David Sikharulidze	Deputy Minister of Defense 2004–2005;
Irakli Porchkhidze	Deputy Secretary of the National Security Council, 2008–2010 First Deputy Minister for Reintegration, 2010–2012
Anonymous	Member of the Parliament of Georgia, 1995–1999
Zurab Davitashvili	Member of the Parliament, 2004–2008
Archil Gegeshidze	State Advisor of the Staff of the President, 1994–1995 Assistant to the President on national security affairs, 1996–1997 Chief Foreign Policy Advisor to the President, 1997–2000 Georgia's ambassador to the United States, 2013–2016
Koba Kikabidze	Member of the parliament, 1992–1995
Petre Mamradze	State Chancellery of Georgia, First Deputy State Minister, Head of Office, 1995–2004 Member of the Parliament, 2008–2012
Shota Utashvili	Director of Department of Information and Analysis, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and held the position of 2004–2012 First Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Penitentiary, 2012
Giorgi Badridze	Ambassador of Georgia to the United Kingdom and Ireland, 2009–2013
Eka Akobia	Deputy director of the Department of the Americas, MFA, 2009–2010 Deputy director of the Political Department, MFA, 2010–2012 Director of the Asia, Africa, Australia and the Pacific Department, MFA, 2012–2016
Anonymous	Representative of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998–2002
Tornike Sharashenidze	Director of the Information Center on NATO; Professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs
Anonymous	Representative of Ministry of Defense, 1997–2003
Sergi Kapanadze	Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia, 2011–2012