

Squaring the Georgian circle

By Božo Kovačević

Georgia-Russian Federation

Three topics dominate the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia: Russian Federation, integration in the European Union (EU) and NATO integration. It is interesting that apart from the title Foreign Policy Strategy, there is not even a word about the content of this strategy in English. But Russia is the main topic in the National Security Concept of Georgia chapter. It is quite understandable that the Ministry and the Government of Georgia attach great importance to the issue of territorial integrity in the context of relations with the Russian Federation. Namely, in 2008, the Russian Federation occupied two Georgian provinces, Tshkinvali Region (South Ossetia) and Abkhazia, and these two provinces are still outside the

constitutional order of Georgia. Since then, Georgia has not had diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that within the framework of the National Security Concept of Georgia we also find this point of view: "The military occupation of part of Georgian territory by the Russian Federation breaches the sovereignty of Georgia and is a factor that impedes its statehood and subverts its political, economic, and social development. The intensive militarization of the occupied regions and the deployment of Russian ground, air, naval, and border forces breaches Georgia's sovereignty and endangers security in the region as a whole."

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The authors of that strategic document emphasize that the ambitions of the political elites of the Russian Federation do not stop at the occupation of two Georgian provinces. They indicate that "the Russian Federation aims to turn Georgia into a failed state, to hinder the realization of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic choice, and to forcibly return Georgia to the Russian political orbit" and that the Russian military presence on the territory of the two occupied provinces "creates a stagingground for provocations and a bridgehead for a possible renewed military aggression". The main security problem of Georgia is the Russian Federation, that is, the imperial ambitions of the current Russian leadership. However, in order to mobilize the international public for more active participation in solving the Georgian territorial problem, the Georgian government indicates that Russia, in fact, organizes and encourages international terrorism and transnational organized crime in the South Caucasus region. It is quite understandable that the main strategic goal of Georgia is the integration of the occupied territories into its constitutional and legal order. At the same time, it is expressly emphasized that only diplomatic means to achieve this goal are considered.

Despite the current catastrophic state of Georgian-Russian relations, the document expresses optimism regarding the possibility of establishing normal good-neighborly relations between the two states, based on the principles of equality and mutual respect. Georgia's future involvement in Euro-Atlantic integration will enhance stability in the Caucasus and thereby increase the level of security on the southern border of the Russian Federation, the authors of the document speculate overly optimistically. They cite a well-known sequence "that security is indivisible, both in the relationships among citizens in the country and within the international system, since one state's security cannot be strengthened at the expense of another state." This provision of the final document of the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in 1999 is also invoked by the Russian Federation when justifying its special military operation against Ukraine and generally criticizing the policy of NATO enlargement. Russia considers NATO's expansion to the east with the aim of increasing the level of security of the new members to be a threat to its own security. It is quite certain that Moscow treats Georgia's ambitions to become a member of the NATO alliance in the same way. No matter how good and honest Georgia's intentions are, it is unlikely that Russia will consider them as such. And the same level of distrust on the Russian side will be caused by an open reference to the United

IRMO BRIEF 09/2025

States as the state on which Georgia's internal and external security, economic development, and social and political stability largely depend.

Accession to NATO

Practical bilateral NATO-Georgia cooperation started when Georgia joined the Partnership for Peace (1994) and deepened after the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, when a new government pushed for more ambitious reforms. Allies did not agree at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008 that Georgia will become a NATO member. Due to opposition of two countries, Georgia didn't get Membership Action Plan (MAP) then, but was promised to get it in foreseeable future. Unfortunately, it never happened. The announcement of possible Georgian NATO membership triggered furious Russian reaction. Then prime minister Vladimir Putin threatened that Russia would recognize rebel regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

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On June the 20, 2008 then President Mikheil Saakashvili visited NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in Brussels Headquarters. There was no press release from that meeting. It is not known what the two leaders discussed. But it is known what happened shortly after the meeting: On the night of 7 to 8 August 2008,

after an extended period of ever-mounting tensions and incidents, heavy fighting erupted in and around the town of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia. In fact, President Saakashvili ordered attack against peace keeping forces in South Ossetia. An agreement concluded in June 1992 in Sochi between the two leaders Eduard Shevardnadze and Boris Yeltsin established the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) for South Ossetia, consisting of one battalion of up to 500 servicemen each of the Russian, Georgian and Ossetian sides, to be commanded by a Russian officer. Peacekeeping in Abkhazia was the subject of another ceasefire agreement concluded in Moscow in May 1994, later to be endorsed by the UN Security Council, which led to the establishment of the CIS Peacekeeping Force (CIS PKF) of up to 3,000 servicemen. Among CIS countries, however, only Russia provided troops.

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Obviously, Russian peacekeeping forces were not impartial. Georgian government perceived those forces as supporters of South Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists. That is why President Saakashvili ordered attack against Russian peacekeepers in Tshinkvali. However, the use of force by Georgia against Russian peacekeeping forces in Tskhinvali in the night of 7/8 August 2008 was contrary to international law", as it was stated in the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia Report. On the other side, retaliatory measures undertaken

by Russian and South Ossetian forces as well as Russian and Abkhazian offensive in Kodori Valley were against international law. But Western governments condemned only the moves of the Russian Federation and its allies, failing to point out the initial action of the Georgian army, which was also contrary to international law.

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The consequence of such a setup was a further deepening of the misunderstanding between the West and the Russian Federation. At the center of that misunderstanding were, and remain to this day, the dispute over NATO enlargement and over Kosovo. The Russian Federation constantly insists on the point of view that NATO eastward enlargement threatens its security. Regarding Kosovo, Russia claims that if Kosovo could be internationally recognized, then so could the two Georgian rebel provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The dispute over Kosovo can be considered as an ideological justification for the realization of Russian imperial ambitions against Georgia and Ukraine through the use of military force. But it is also possible to understand Russian imperialist moves as a response to the imperialist policies of the West demonstrated in the Western Balkans and the Middle East.

Integration into the EU

The chronology of major events of EU-Georgia cooperation is extensively presented in very detailed way. Intensive relations between the EU and Georgia started in 1991-1992, since Georgia's independence. Since 1995, Georgia benefits from the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP). In 2005 Georgia became a beneficiary of the new system of preferences - Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance (GSP+). Since January 2014, upgraded GSP+ entered into force which was extended to Georgia. On 14 November 2006, the EU-Georgia European Neighborhood Policy Action Plan was adopted. In response to the Russia-Georgia war, the emergency EU Summit on 1 September 2008 was convened.

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On 15 September 2008, the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) was established that started its operation on 1 October 2008. On 25 September 2008, the Council of the EU appointed the EU Special Representative for the crisis in Georgia (EUSR). On 25 August 2011, the Council of the EU appointed the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia. On 29 November 2013, the EU and Georgia initiated the Association Agreement (AA), including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit. On same day, the Framework

IRMO BRIEF 09/2025

Agreement on participation of Georgia in the EU-led crisis management operations was signed between the EU and Georgia. At that summit the Ukrainian president Viktor Janukovich decided to suspend temporarily the process of preparations for signature of the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area between the EU and Ukraine. That was the moment when Ukrainian crisis started.

On 1 July 2016 the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia entered into force.



The next step was the meeting between the European Commission and the Government of Georgia which was held in Brussels on 21 May 2014. On 27 June 2014, the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), was signed in Brussels. On 17 November 2014, the EU and Georgia held the first meeting of the Association Council in Brussels. The new upgraded AA institutional framework of the EU-Georgia political dialogue was established, which includes: EU-Georgia Association Council; EU-Georgia Association Committee and the sectoral sub-committees. On 1 July 2016, the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia entered into full force. The intensive cooperation, which has been developing in the context of ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, encompassed the first high level EU-Georgia Strategic Security Dialogue which took place in Tbilisi on 11 October 2017.

On 23 June 2022 Georgia was granted European perspective.



On 5 February 2018, the EU and Georgia held the 4th meeting of the Association Council in Brussels. In the joint statement the general progress made by Georgia was warmly welcomed. The Association Council welcomed the adoption of the constitutional reform and of the overall positive opinion of the Venice Commission that assessed the evolution of Georgia towards a parliamentary system from a semi-presidential one. An important accent was put on EU-Georgia strategic security cooperation. The sides discussed ways to enhance EU-Georgia cooperation in the field of foreign and security policy and reflected on the issues discussed during the first EU-Georgia Strategic Security Dialogue that took place October 2017. Both sides agreed that such a dialogue provides a good forum to address issues of common interest in the security area. Both sides stressed the need to continue the successful cooperation established between the EU and Georgia on Strategic Communication and countering disinformation.

On 3 March 2022, Georgia applied for EU membership. On 23 June, 2022, according to the decision made by the European Council, Georgia was granted European perspective. But on 6 September 2022, when the 6th EU-Georgia meeting of the Association Council was held in Brussels, certain internal political tensions in Georgia have been addressed. Due to Russian full-scale war against Ukraine the president of Georgia (Salome Zourabichvili), who was supported by numerous non-governmental organizations, advocated for Georgia to join

the European sanctions against Russia. The government of Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze decided not to introduce sanctions against Russia, fearing a further tightening of relations with Russia and a possible Russian military response. Since then, the EU began to actively interfere in the internal politics of Georgia, openly supporting the outgoing president of the country.

stressing "the strong expectation for Georgia to substantially increase its alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy positions and restrictive measures as well as called on Georgia to progress towards full alignment". From that join statement, a deep EU dissatisfaction with Georgian government attitude toward Russia was evident.

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In the joint statement of the 8th meeting of the EU-Georgia Association Council held on 20 February 2024 in Brussels a special accent was put on political tensions inside Georgia. The EU urged all political actors in Georgia to demonstrate constructive cross-party cooperation dialogue, overcome polarization and refrain from actions that could further deepen the political tensions and hamper the country's reform agenda. The Association Council commended Georgia's vibrant civil society and underlined the importance of inclusive, meaningful and systematic engagement with civil society in the policymaking processes. In fact, this was implicit support to President Zourabichvili. In the same line was the emphasizing of the importance of fighting disinformation, anti-EU rhetoric and foreign information manipulation and interference. The EU urged the Georgian government to ensure a free, fair and competitive electoral process expecting the pro-sanctions opposition to win parliamentary elections. In the Political tensions were, to a large extent, caused by controversies surrounding the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, which was adopted in May 2024. The EU and numerous non-governmental Georgian organizations, which receive money from foreign sources, considered that the obligation to publish information on the sources of financial income and highlight the label 'foreign agent' a certain organization is financed from abroad is a form of political pressure and an attempt to discriminate against pro-European NGOs. The EU always advocates for the introduction of financial transparency, but in the case of Georgia it took the opposite position. The problem was that all NGOs funded by the EU or individual member states, along with some opposition parties, insisted that Georgia should impose sanctions against Russia. When the ruling Georgian Dream party refused to do so, the EU - through opposition parties, President Salome Zourabichvili and NGOs - directly got involved in

IRMO BRIEF 09/2025

the election campaign against the ruling party. But Georgian Dream won the elections that took place on 26 October 2024.

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ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report concluded "that while the elections offered voters a wide choice with 18 candidate lists, they unfolded amid entrenched polarization in an environment marred by concerns over recently adopted legislation "but did not note that EU strongly contributed to that polarization by its direct involvement on the opposition side. Final Report stated: "Preparations for the elections were well-administered, including extensive voter education on the use of new voting technologies. Overall, the legal framework provides an adequate basis for conducting democratic elections. The election administration efficiently managed the technical aspects of the elections. The CEC held regular live-streamed sessions, promptly published all relevant materials online, and organized extensive training and voter information campaigns. Party and candidate registration was generally inclusive, with the CEC registering 1,184 candidates across 18 political party lists. Contestants were generally able to campaign freely, and 18 candidate lists competed in a subdued campaign. The law provides for election observation by citizen and international observers, contributing to a vibrant observation scene. However, the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, along with the threat of sanctions for non-compliance,

although the latter not used before the elections, had a stigmatizing effect on many organizations."

Generally, EOM didn't find that elections were irregular and didn't contest the election results. But there were many buts. The main problem was EU dissatisfaction with the fact that opposition didn't win. For this reason, the EU supported the decision of the opposition parties not to participate in the new Georgian parliament. The EU also encouraged violent protests by calling them peaceful and joined the demand of President Zourabichvili and the opposition for new elections to be organized. On 28 November 2024 European Parliament adopted a resolution on Georgia. The resolution rejects election results and EP openly aligns with President Zourabichvili: "Acknowledges Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili's strong condemnation of the elections as rigged and her decision not to recognize the results; appreciates the efforts made by Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili to steer the country back towards a democratic and European path of development."

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Parliamentarians stress the fact that "a large majority of the population strongly supports the country's pro-Western course and its accession to the EU" but ignores the fact that a large majority of voters supported the ruling Georgian Dream party. They also demanded immediate release of former President Mikheil Saakashvili from prison,

although he is not a political prisoner. Current state of affairs is precisely described in the joint statement by Kaja Kallas and Marta Kos on behalf of European Commission on 31 May 2025: "The accession process has been de facto halted. The EU reiterates its call on the Georgian authorities to heed their citizens' clear demands for democracy and a European future, and to release all unjustly detained journalists, activists, protesters, and political leaders." From the Georgian perspective, Georgia's future membership in NATO represents a security guarantee against possible Russian aggression. From the Russian perspective, Georgia's commitment to NATO excludes the possibility of a peaceful reintegration of the rebel Georgian provinces into the constitutional and legal order of Georgia. From the perspective of the EU, Georgia's unconditional accession to European sanctions against Russia is a necessary precondition for the continuation of pre-accession negotiations. From the Georgian

perspective, the imposition of sanctions against Russia provokes possible Russian aggression and excludes the possibility of peaceful reintegration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Due to the many unresolved problems between the main players in the system of international relations, resolving the issue of Georgia seems like solving the problem of squaring the circle.

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