

## The balance strikes back

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# The Balance Strikes Back: Power, Perceptions, and Ideology in Georgian Foreign Policy, 1992-2014

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## INTRODUCTION

Tbilisi's recent foreign and security policies should present analysts working from conventional balance-of-power perspectives with something of a puzzle. With direct neighbor Russia very much the regionally dominant power, against the predictions of most structural-systemic theories (Jervis 1978, 172-73; Waltz 1979, 113; Wolfers 1962, 13-16), small state Georgia has ended up *balancing against*, rather than *bandwagoning with* Moscow, apparently disregarding a major structural constraint to its foreign and security policies. In addition, this pro-Western orientation has shown remarkable continuity: it has persisted even after the country's defeat in the August 2008 war, and one-time 'fellow traveler' Ukraine's descent into conflict. Georgia's post-Saakashvili government has, for all its opposition to its predecessor's domestic policies, promised to continue Georgia's path toward NATO and EU integration, even as it has made a priority of improving relations with Moscow (Civil Georgia 2012; How to Treat Russia. 2014).

As a result, Georgia's pro-Western stance has usually been explained through reference to *domestic* factors, including ideology and identity. One early work looked at Tbilisi's policies in terms of Georgians' religious, European, and pan-Caucasian self-identifications (Jones 2003). Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist (2009) analyzed the troubled Georgian-Russian relationship from the symbolic perspective of 'honor' and 'prestige'. Domestic explanations – economic, ideological – have also predominated in a collected volume on the subject (Kakachia and Cecire 2013) and a more recent monograph by Mouritzen and Wivel (2013), while in their recent article, Gvalia, Siroky,

Lebanidze and Iashvili (2013) have described the post-2003 elite's ideological world-views as underlying their Westernizing domestic and foreign policies. This contemporary dominance of *Innenpolitik* explanations of the foreign policy behavior of not just Georgia, but other small states appears to contradict realism's insistence on their relative passivity: for realists, due to their severely limited capabilities, smaller polities are condemned to conform to external structural, power-political realities, at the risk of engaging in the ultimate realist vice - of *imprudence* (Fendius Elman 1995; Hey 2003; Waltz 1979, 194-5).

While Georgia's behavior may contradict many of the theories concerned with the balance-of-power, disregarding outside realities in response would therefore appear to offer a very partial - and implausible - view of Tbilisi's motivations. There is no doubt that the ideational propensities of subsequent Georgian leaders were instrumental in shaping Georgian foreign policy; but such specific domestic, ideological factors can only tell part of the story. For instance – and somewhat weakening Gvalia and others' stand-alone ideological explanations - Tbilisi's journey towards the West had started well before the ideologically charged Rose Revolution, under pragmatist Eduard Shevardnadze: while having improved relations with Russia during the first years of his presidency, post-Soviet Georgia's pragmatic second president already oversaw fast-growing ties with the West from 1996 onwards, often in direct contravention of Russian interests.<sup>1</sup> This element of continuity despite of Shevardnadze's and Saakashvili's dramatically different world-views – and the fact that the Western turn occurred during, not after, the former's tenure -

suggests something more than simple ideological preference as the sole explanatory factor.

This essay will aim to re-validate the relevance of structural, power-political factors in understanding Georgia's foreign-policy behavior by analyzing its interactions with Russia and the West from a neoclassical realist theoretical viewpoint (Lobell and Ripsman and Taliaferro 2009; Rose 1998). It represents a departure from the pure 'Innenpolitik' approaches so prevalent in analyses of Georgian, and, in fact, small-state foreign policies in general. But it only does so *to a limited extent*: contrary to its predecessor theory – neorealism – *neoclassical* realism does not constrain itself to the *international* level of power-political interaction, thereby providing explanations as to systemic outcomes based only on particular configurations of power (with the prediction that small states will bandwagon with dominant states as a prime example). Instead, it sees state behavior as the result of an anarchic international environment whose relative distributions of power are *mediated through domestic conditions* (Sterling-Folker 1997). As such, it thus takes neorealism beyond Waltz' (1979) and his direct successors' parsimony and rigid structuralism; rather than assuming the 'functional identity' of units, it distinguishes between a range of internally generated motives and limiting factors that may affect their foreign policies. Here, states remain constrained by the structure of anarchy, but exact policy outcomes are subject to varying priorities determined from within the state: in Rose's words, there is no "perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior" (Rose 1998, 146-47).

As I shall argue in the next, conceptual section, with certain caveats for Georgia's position as a *small state* within the international system, the neoclassical refinement to neorealism provides a much more comprehensive and coherent view of Tbilisi's behavior since 1992 than exclusively *domestic* approaches. It explains Tbilisi's behavior over the whole period under review, while also addressing an unavoidable element in international relations, left out by most preceding analyses - the role of power in shaping foreign policy decision-making. Following the conceptual argument will be several sections applying these insights to distinct periods in Georgian post-Soviet history. The paper will then turn to possible alternative, realist frameworks – Walt's balance-of-threat theory and omnibalancing – that could provide competing explanations in a section, before concluding with implications for the present and future foreign policies of Georgia and other post-Soviet states.

#### ENTER NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

As mentioned above, part of the reason behind the prevailing preference for domestic explanations has been the apparent inability of most systemic, balance-of-power approaches to provide a coherent explanation for Tbilisi's pro-Western foreign policies. As also pointed out by Gvalia e.a. (2013), neorealism would have expected Georgia's subsequent governments to *bandwagon with, rather than balance against* Russia. The dominant response to these inconsistencies has been to disregard the inter-state level altogether, in favor of intra-state conditions. But, apart from their failure to account for the emergence of pro-Western policies during the Shevardnadze era – before any regime change had taken place – these domestic explanations have

implausibly discounted the role of *power* in shaping policy. Even the most ideologically inclined states could not disregard Thucydides' (2015, 1) adage that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" . Under anarchic conditions, *power* shapes the permissive factors within which elites have to formulate foreign policy, and, over the longer term, states are either socialized into accepting this over-arching fact, or they pay a heavy price.

Neoclassical realism addresses the shortcomings laid out above by combining the *domestic* and *international*, and maintaining realism's sensitivity to power. For neoclassical realists, domestic conditions are not independent variables in and of themselves; foreign policies are, for instance, *not* explained based on the preferences of internal elites alone (Rose 1998). Instead, the international system is integrated into explanations by viewing these elites as responding *imperfectly* (from the point of view of *rationality*) to *given structural conditions*. Balances of power so central to structural neorealism and its derivatives still matter, but are defectively transmitted into rational behavior: an elite's ideological preferences and identities are one distorting factor in these imperfect transmission mechanisms (Sterling-Folker 2009). Scholars in the neoclassical realist tradition also cite intra-state competition (Dueck 2009), the state's varying ability to extract resources or mobilize societies towards policy (Taliaferro 2009; Zakaria 1998), and (mis)perceptions of the balance of power (Schweller 2004; Wohlforth 1993) as other possible intervening factors. Moreover, while the international system indeed tends towards rational outcomes over the longer term, specific situations require an understanding of

the intra-state processes that may produce 'aberrant' behavior over the shorter term, like, say, the unexpected balancing behavior of a small state against an overwhelmingly superior, adjacent great power.

As, for instance, clearly demonstrated in Wohlforth's (1987) discussion of perceptions of Russian power before World War I, it is not only perceptions of *current* balances that matter as intimations and calculations as to their future trajectories. In that sense, states often end up bandwagoning with or balancing other states not simply because of present conditions, but because of speculative projections into the future. Misperceptions and miscalculations consequently become quite regular occurrences, leading to behavior that, from a safe distance, may seem 'irrational' to a third-party observer wedded to structural explanations. Wohlforth's (1993) more expansive treatment of the role of perceptions during Cold War bipolarity moreover reveals how ideological shifts in both the United States and Soviet elites played a role in how they perceived the balances of power between them, resulting in several distinct periods of strategic behavior (and culminating in Gorbachev's retreat from Central and Eastern Europe). Ideology therefore does matter, mainly insofar as it helps (or hinders) an actor's understanding of prevailing distributions of power – the 'elusive balance' - in the international system (Wohlforth 1993, 293-307).

Adequately adapted, Wohlforth's combination of the realist concern with the balance-of-power with the intra-state aspect of ideologically shaped perceptions provides a useful meeting point between two paradigms; it is this



general perspective – focusing on the interplay between *ideology* and *power* – which I shall build on here. The main conceptual difference between his viewpoint and what follows will lie in Georgia's status as a small state rather than a great power, and its consequent awareness of an inability to actively shape the global balance: after all, as also stated by Walt (1990, 28-31), what matters to a small state is not that global balance, but the balance *as it relates to its immediate neighborhood*, with the availability (or absence) of allies against given threats to that small state – most of which emerge in their immediate vicinity – determining its balancing or bandwagoning behavior. In a world where interests are unevenly distributed and power is a finite resource (Wendt 1999, 103-38), the raw capabilities of potential allies become less important than their interest in a particular region, and an ensuing willingness to actually project such power into that region. From a Georgian, and, more generally, a small-state perspective, the balance of power thus very much becomes a *regional* one, shaped not just by the aggregate capabilities of possible allies, but also their intentions and commitment to projecting their power into the region.

Applying neoclassical realism to an analysis of Georgian foreign and security policies would thus require an assessment of the structural restraints under which the state operated, while at the same time looking into the internal processes and ideological preferences affecting perceptions of these structural restraints. In terms of these structural constraints, the disparity of power between Tbilisi and Moscow posits an initial, overpowering limitation on the former (leading to the expectation of bandwagoning behavior on the part

of 'purely systemic' neo-realists): based on raw capabilities and proximity, Russia can very much be seen as the regionally preponderant power in the period under review. But this disparity of power is to some extent alleviated through the varying presence of the West (first of all the United States) within the South Caucasus. The balance of power in the South Caucasus could be seen to have varied during the past two decades, with Western - and particularly US - involvement and commitment arguably reaching a peak under George W. Bush, something eagerly perceived in Tbilisi during what can be termed the high point of pro-Western foreign policy, the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili.<sup>2</sup>

With the regional balance between Russia and the West so dependent on Washington and Brussels' intentions, on their commitment to regional involvement, Wohlforth's (1993) points on the 'elusiveness' of the balance of power become acutely relevant: *perceptions* of capabilities and commitments became a highly important intervening variable linking structural conditions – the balance of power – to foreign and security policy outputs, underlying Georgia's decision to balance or bandwagon, enabling some options and foreclosing others. As I shall argue in the following sections, Georgian policies before and after the Rose Revolution were the result of perceptions of Russia's relative regional decline, and (mis)calculations as to the West's – especially the United States' and NATO's - readiness to project power into the South Caucasus – miscalculations that culminated dramatically in the August 2008 war, which very much acted as a 'perceptual shock' (Rose 1998, 160)

invalidating many of the assumptions that had previously guided Georgia's world-view.

It is the *structural* environment – the regional balance of power - *as perceived in Georgia* that explains the pre-2003 pro-Western slant in Shevardnadze's foreign and security policies, something left unaddressed by purely domestic ideological approaches. Contra Gvalia et al. (2013), I shall argue that Saakashvili and his associates' pro-Western ideologies were not significant in determining Georgia's post-Soviet foreign and security policies *on their own*: clearly, something else had enabled Shevardnadze's pre-revolutionary, much more conventionally post-Soviet administration drift towards the West: that crucial – and oft-forgotten - permissive cause was a *perceived* shift of power away from Russia.

What was novel in the Saakashvili era was the reinforcement of these perceptions by ideologies that overstated the significance of liberal democracy in determining the regional balance of power through assumptions on the inevitable spread of democracy through the former Soviet space, and on the level of commitment of fellow Western democracies to Georgia; the external environment might not have substantially changed, but its mediation through the 'transmission belt' of domestic politics reinforced Georgia's pro-Western orientation. While the 2008 war acted as a 'perceptual shock' reasserting continuing Russian regional predominance, Saakashvili's legitimacy had become so dependent on these ideologies (and so alienated from Russia) that any policy correction remained out of the question. The new Georgian

Dream administration faces less restrictions in that regard, and its openings to Russia could be seen as the beginnings of further possible policy adjustments in the face of growing Russian assertiveness and perceived power, with much depending on the outcome of what is, essentially, a Western-Russian test of power in Ukraine.

In the four empirical sections that follow, I shall argue my point with reference to primary and secondary sources, concentrating on the public discourses of Georgia's leaders as they related to their perceptions of the regional balance of power in the South Caucasus, paying particular attention on their views on Washington's intentions within the region, as well as Russia's declining or improving fortunes. In so doing, I will arrive at an explanation of Georgia's foreign and security policy behavior encompassing 4 distinct periods: Shevardnadze's early period (1992-96), marked by rapprochement with Russia after Zviad Gamsakhurdia's disastrous (and short-lived) presidency; Shevardnadze's late period (1996-2003), marked by an increasingly Westward-leaning policy; Saakashvili's early period (2003-2008), marked by stridently pro-Western policies and strong corresponding ideological inclinations; and a late Saakashvili period, with pro-Western policies being maintained despite of the heavy defeat of the 2008 war. Before concluding, a subsequent conceptual section will then expand on the advantages of this neoclassical realist view over any competing, more rigidly rationalist explanations.

## COLLAPSE, DISORIENTATION, REORIENTATION (1992-1996)

It would be difficult to overstate the unexpected nature of the Soviet Union's collapse, especially for those living within the erstwhile superpower. Having lost its Eastern European satellites in 1989, and in considerable turmoil by 1991, the failed August coup precipitated a chain of events that would – through the Belavezha Accord and Alma Ata protocol – lead to the dissolution of this one-time superpower (Marples 2004, 91-97). At the time, Georgia was led by an erratic (some would say 'messianic') and highly anti-Soviet president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (Jones 1994); while his ideology and policies were, clearly, fiercely anti-Soviet, the Georgian state was in such chaos that there could be little talk of a coherent foreign and security policy, beyond the requirements of bare state and regime survival. During and after the dying years of the USSR, Gamsakhurdia's fierce ethno-nationalism was – according to most observers – instrumental in alienating the Republic's various minorities – above all those in the autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – from the idea of Georgian independence, driving them into the arms of Soviet, and, later, Russian irredentists (Nodia 1996). Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian style eventually resulted in his estranging much of the country's emerging political elite as well, resulting in a first of several civil wars during late 1991 (Way and Levitsky 2006, 397-400).

As a result, Gamsakhurdia was forced to resign and flee shortly after the formal end of the Soviet state, on January 6, 1992; by that time, however, Georgia was already disintegrating, with large parts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia coming under the control of secessionists, and central government

writ over much of Georgia's remainder shaky at best. In 1992-3, this disintegration deepened: having in effect lost the conflict in South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia's successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was forced to sign a Russian-mediated cease-fire dividing the region into government- and separatist-controlled areas, and providing for a Russian-dominated joint police force (Caucasica.org 2008; MacFarlane 1997, 511-15). Georgia's humiliation culminated in its president's hasty retreat – under enemy bombardment - of from Sukhumi, and a brief civil war in the western region of Megrelia (Cheterian 2008, 155-216); only in 1994 did the military situation in Abkhazia finally stabilize through the *Moscow Agreement on a Cease-Fire and a Separation of Forces* (United Nations 1994). Thus, by mid-1994, almost exclusively Russian 'peacekeepers' or observers had been posted in both of Georgia's separatist entities - formally at least - under CIS, OSCE and/or UN auspices (MacFarlane 1997). As such, this 'freezing' of the conflicts in Georgia was nothing exceptional: the Karabakh war between neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan was similarly brought to an end through an inconclusive cease-fire (not, however, involving the stationing of CIS or Russian troops in or around the enclave).

To some degree, Moscow had also seemingly lost control over its own external and even internal policies during this chaotic early post-Soviet period. While the pro-Western foreign ministry, led by the liberal Andrei Kozyrev (1992, 10), wanted Russia to turn into a "normal great power" integrated with the West, elements within the security apparatus held onto traditional views of the country as a *territorial* power, with a clear sphere of interest that would

have to include the republics of the former Soviet Union, including Georgia. With much of the Soviet structures of authority in tatters, different sectional interests within the Russian state ended up applying contradictory policies, with the security forces in particular actively involved in conflicts on the former Soviet periphery, among others, through active assistance to secessionists in Abkhazia during the 1993 civil war (Chervonnaia 1994). It was only during that year that the Russian Federation (2005) was able to formulate its first Foreign Policy Concept, which clearly delimited the territories of the former Soviet Union as Russia's an area of special interest, and implied Moscow's right to intervene in those former Soviet Republics where its interests were deemed to be under threat. That same year also saw a partial resolution of the power struggle between Russia's president and parliament in favor of the former, following the storming of the 'White House' in October 1993 (Shevtsova 2000).

Shevardnadze's agreement to the cease-fire of 1994 (including nominally CIS, de-facto Russian 'peacekeepers'), his introduction of Georgia into the Commonwealth of Independent States (which his predecessor had refused to join) in 1993/4, and his general submission to Russian foreign policy priorities during that period were the product of his recognition of continued Russian regional predominance, the fall of the USSR and a considerable weakening of the Russian state notwithstanding (Fawn 2002, 135-36). Shevardnadze clearly saw any resolution in Abkhazia or South Ossetia outside of Russian tutelage as unworkable at that time, stating, during an interview in August that year, that "...in the Abkhaz issue today everything or almost everything will

depend on Russia" (BBC Monitoring 1994); his negotiator at the Geneva talks between Tbilisi and the Abkhaz separatists similarly cautioned that "...political forces which are demanding that the problem be solved militarily must realize...[that] the option they are proposing will only be possible if *Russia* takes a neutral position and refuses to be involved in the conflict" (BBC Monitoring 1994).

Moscow had made its determination to maintain its sphere of influence over the former Soviet space clear, and, what's more, the Georgian leadership could not expect any direct Western help in potential counter-balancing efforts: in Wilsonian fashion, the first Clinton administration had pinned its hopes on partnership and accommodation with a democratized (and, hence, pacified) Russia, rather than 'hard', power-political balancing in containing Moscow's neo-imperial ambitions (Brzezinski 1994, 67-71), with NATO enlargement into the former Soviet Union - as opposed to Eastern Europe - not on the agenda.<sup>3</sup> This would gradually change from 1996 onwards, but without the Western structural alternative, Shevardnadze could only rely on accommodation with Moscow, which he achieved to a limited extent and for a short time-period, in 1994-1995 (Nodia 1999, 23-24). The overall tone of Georgian policymakers would become much more critical of Russia in later years, as negotiations over the secessionist territories dragged on (especially in the matter of refugees) and Shevardnadze became the target of several assassination attempts; for now, however, Georgia's foreign policy behavior corresponded neatly to what would be expected under neo-realist analyses: small state Georgia was bandwagoning with the most important power in its



neighborhood, with domestic ideological preferences playing a minor role in its largely pragmatic policies towards Russia.

### DRIFTING TOWARDS THE WEST

Tbilisi's structural constraints would gradually change in subsequent years. If, during much of its first term, the Clinton administration very much relied on his doctrine of 'democratic expansion' in bringing Moscow in from the cold, several events – including the 1997 Russian economic crisis, the Kremlin's attitude towards NATO's Eastward expansion, and the alliance's 1999 intervention in Kosovo – added to earlier disagreements over Chechnya to make the administration much more skeptical to such an approach (Frye 2000). The EU's and NATO expansion into Russia's 'near abroad' was still not on the agenda, but the West did start circumventing Russia in the economic field, most importantly through the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Çeyhan (BTC) pipeline skirting Russia: the 'contract of the century', signed with Azerbaijan in 1994, had already given Western corporations a foothold in the hydrocarbon-rich Caspian basin, apart from putting the region firmly on Western capitals' geopolitical map. The second Clinton administration in particular aimed at safeguarding access to these reserves through BTC, described by its interlocutors in Baku and Tbilisi as a very 'political' project, within which Georgia, as the only politically feasible transit country, would play a central role (Alam 2002; Hill 2004).

These openings were eagerly taken up in Tbilisi – increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of negotiations with the secessionist entities, and what it saw as Russian prevarication during these negotiations, Georgian foreign policy

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

A second factor - the coming to power of George W. Bush and the neo-conservatives in Washington – then dramatically accelerated Tbilisi's westward drift by further changing its structural environment. Critical of Washington's Eurasian policies during the Clinton years (Kristol and Kagan 1996; Rice 2000), Republican policymakers were both willing and able to expand their involvement in the former Soviet space, especially in the months and years following the 9/11 attacks. Much more sensitive to issues connected to energy, terrorism, and Iran, the new administration explicitly included Central Asia and the Caspian basin in its National Security Strategy (USA 2002, 24); the United States became directly, militarily involved in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia (Cornell 2005, 113), and explicitly

opened NATO membership to former Soviet states (Kraleev 2002; Zaks 2003). The Bush administration was moreover open to addressing state weakness through an active involvement in state-building and democracy-promotion, of which Georgia would come to be a prime example (Monten 2005).

At the same time, there was a perceived weakening of Russian influence in the region. In the immediate aftermath of 9-11, Moscow became uncharacteristically accommodative of US involvement in 'its' near abroad (albeit for a short period, between 2001 and 2003), creating at least the impression, at the time, of a thaw between Washington and the Kremlin (Bukkvöl 2003; Treisman 2002, 67-68), and a weakening of Russia's commitment to controlling the South Caucasus (Fawn 2002). While Russian power and assertiveness has today achieved something of a resurgence due to years of economic growth and political re-centralization during the previous decade, Moscow's might was very much seen to be on the wane in the years following the 1997 economic crash. The country was at an economic nadir after a failed economic revival, its armed forces were in disarray, its finances in dire straits.<sup>4</sup> Putin's centralizing reforms (aimed at restoring the 'power vertical') had not yet been pushed through, and other former Soviet republics were also seemingly leaving Moscow's orbit: the now practically defunct GU(U)AM union - a grouping of strategically like-minded, Western-oriented former Soviet states (Allison 2004; Cornell 1999) - became particularly active during this period.

The new administration in Washington was more open to direct involvement in the former Soviet space, within which Georgia had acquired increased importance due to its status as a transit corridor for Caspian hydrocarbons, while Russia stood, apparently, weakened in both power and resolve. It is this observed change in the balance of power and its ramifications for Georgia's structural environment, rather than some kind of ideological shift, that enabled Shevardnadze's (and the other GUUAM states') cautious moves towards the West, which had become a clear alternative, especially in the aftermath of 9/11: the balance of power in the former Soviet space was shaped by Russia's apparent decline and the Bush administration's readiness to intervene where Clinton had initially feared to tread. These shifting structural conditions fed into *perceptions* of these developments and power shifts in Tbilisi (and elsewhere) to produce Shevardnadze's response.

Ideology played a minor role in this process: it was not an unlikely sudden ideological conversion by Shevardnadze that affected Georgia's westward shift in 1996-2003. The educational and professional background of Georgia's pragmatic second president – as a former General Secretary of the Georgian CP and the Soviet Union's last foreign minister (Ekedahl and Goodman 1997, 7-28; Jones and Kakhishvili 2013, 38) – drove him towards a reliance on inter-elite bargaining and a corresponding focus on processes of high politics rather than ideological exigencies or assumptions on Georgian identity (save for the over-arching, unavoidable imperative of Georgia's reunification). The emergence of the pro-Western GU(U)AM grouping of states was similarly not predicated on ideology, but on pragmatic

considerations of similarly perceived shifting *power politics* within Russia's near abroad. But the question of Georgia's orientation would come to be imbued with precisely such a forceful ideological component with the challenge to, and the final fall from power of Georgia's second president.

#### DREAMS OF DEMOCRACY AND REUNIFICATION (2003-2008)

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

westward lurch by confirming and escalating the country's Atlanticist efforts towards NATO and EU membership – a process already begun, in a more cautious manner, under Shevardnadze.

As pointed out above, rather than being novel, this pro-Western orientation constituted an element of continuity between the late Shevardnadze and early Saakashvili years; and this continuity affirms perceptions of the balance of power between Russia and the West, rather than ideology on its own, as an explanatory factor behind Tbilisi's Euro-Atlantic strategy. The period immediately preceding the Rose Revolution had been one where the West was very much seen as being in the ascendant, and Russia either in decline, or at least more accommodative to a greater American role in the former Soviet Union (see above). It was this, rather than the radically different ideological outlooks of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili, that underlay Georgia's constant Atlanticist course from the end of the 1990s. Washington's increased commitment to regional involvement – mostly through Georgia – upheld the West as a real alternative after the Revolution, and gave Tbilisi a sense of confidence it would never have had otherwise, leading them to challenge Russia through the expulsion of alleged Russian spy rings, the closure of Russian bases even in the face of Russian retaliation in the form of the ejection of Georgian nationals or the imposition of economic embargoes before the 2008 war.

During this post-revolutionary period, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation was written into its Security Concept, and underwritten by a stated ideological

espousal of 'Western' democratizing values through which the new regime came to define its very purpose, in difference to Shevardnadze's much more under-stated, less ideologically laden discourse. The United States expanded military co-operation with Tbilisi, increasing direct military aid, helping in the adoption of NATO standards, and actively pushing for Georgian membership within the Alliance (Lynch 2006, 51-54; Nichol 2007). The country – and, specifically, Saakashvili's government - was clearly defined by both policymakers and analysts alike as a major strategic priority (BBC 2005; Cooley and Mitchell 2009; Cornell 2007), prompting Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to refer to its as America's "pet project" (De Borchgrave 2008). Compared to NATO engagement, integration with the European Union – through programs like the ENP - remained a relatively lower priority at the time, in both Brussels and Tbilisi (Leonard and Grant 2005; MacFarlane 2008, 6). In the absence of a perceived regional commitment by the West, such acts would have been inconceivable, suicidal even: the balance, and perceptions thereof, provided a crucial permissive structural variable for such actions, and the more general orientation underlying them (BBC 2006; Republic of Georgia 2005; Ria Novosti 2006; Socor 2007).

Ideology acted, at most, as an intervening variable. It explained the increased intensity and explicitness of Georgia's pro-Western strategies rather than the basic strategy in itself. And it reinforced perceptions of Western ascendancy and Russian decline, even in the face of the changing structural realities that made the Western/Russian balance of power far less straightforward than during the late Yeltsin/early Putin years. The period between 2003 and 2008

was, after all, also one where Moscow regained much of its economic and political composure<sup>5</sup>, and one when - especially after the color revolutions - any talk of Russia being 'receptive' to Western involvement in the former Soviet Union ceased: on the contrary, the Putin regime expressed its strong disquiet at an apparent loss of control over what it termed its "sphere of special interest", and its strong disapproval of NATO membership for former Soviet states (Kishkovsky 2008; Russia & CIS Presidential Bulletin 2008; VOA News 2007). This Russian resurgence was counter-acted by the Bush administration's increased readiness to deploy power in the former Soviet Union, but it made evaluating the levels of commitment by Washington/Brussels and Moscow all the more difficult.

Rather than acting on its own, *ideology* ensured that perceptions of the relationships of power between the West and Russia in Tbilisi essentially remained in the former's favor in an evolving, increasingly murky regional strategic environment: it produced positive feedback loops, boosting these perceptions of the preponderance of Western-style democracies, through two assumptions: that democracy's spread throughout the former Soviet Union was inevitable, and that fellow democracies made particularly reliable allies against authoritarian states. These assumptions had an inevitable effect on Tbilisi's world-view, and its evaluation of its own, and the West's capabilities and commitments: the first implied a historically determined retreat of autocratic Russia's influence in the near abroad (or its transformation into a democracy), while the second encouraged Tbilisi to overstate the level of Western (and, particularly, American) commitment to its security. The



distortive effect of these assumptions on Tbilisi's perceptions of power would eventually contribute to the fateful miscalculations of August 2008.

Firstly, Georgia's policymakers – and, significantly considering the centralized, top-down nature of foreign policymaking in Georgia, its flamboyant president – came to regard the spread of democracy throughout the former Soviet Union as historically determined and inevitable. From the Borjomi declaration<sup>6</sup> to everyday discourse, Saakashvili implied that the Rose Revolution was just the earliest in a new wave of democratization that would now sweep through the former Soviet Union, and even enable Georgia itself to coax its secessionist provinces back into the fold. The result would be either the democratization of Russia (and thus its neutralization as an imperial threat) or the creation of a ring of democratic states, duly supported by their democratic Western counterparts. The similarity of such thinking with neo-conservative democratic domino theories regarding the Middle East cannot be denied; and it would not have been the first time that a deterministic belief shaped misperceptions on future events and their consequences for relationships for the balance of power. In Georgia's case, the notion that history was on democracy's side also contributed to a skewed view of Russian weakness and Western ascendancy. In Saakashvili's words:

We are now witnessing the second wave of liberation of Europe.  
(...) The first one was Second World War, I mean, defeat of fascists. (...) Second one were all those velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe. But now the third one. Georgia started

it. Ukraine followed. Then Kyrgyzstan. So you are seeing that the results of Yalta are still there, but they are rapidly destroyed...  
(CNN 2005)

The Saakashvili government's narrative also implied that a pro-Western orientation would combine a buoyant free market economy and liberal-democratic 'good governance' to lure both the Abkhaz and the Ossetians into Tbilisi's fold: this idea was voiced frequently in the period running up to 2008, and boosted by the successful re-incorporation of semi-secessionist Ajaria in 2004 (Republic of Georgia s.d.; Saakashvili 2008; Saakashvili 2004; Saakashvili 2004). In effect, this implied confidence in the soft power of democracy appeared to play a central role in Tbilisi's calculations; and it was, in fact, one of the reasons Saakashvili and his team saw challenging overwhelming Russian power in both territories as a realistic option. Often speaking over the heads of the respective regional leaderships, Saakashvili apparently (and mistakenly) assumed an ability to appeal to local populations at a grassroots level, depriving the leaderships of the de-facto entities of legitimacy. In the case of South Ossetia, this actually led to a high-profile defection from the secessionist elite, with the absconding of Dmitry Sanakoyev to Tbilisi's side before the 2008 war (BBC Monitoring 2007; Corso 2008; Corso and Owen 2006).

Secondly, Georgia's president expressed an ideologically informed adherence to the Democratic Peace on several occasions, observing its stark distinction between naturally dependable allies – peaceful fellow democracies – and

natural adversaries – inherently aggressive autocracies like Russia (Owen 1994; Risse-Kappen 1995). To quote Saakashvili:

...when I see President Putin, I will remind him again that democracies on his border will make it easier for Russia to grow in a peaceful way. Democracies are peaceful. Democracies don't like war. And democracies are the best form of government to deal with animosities and concerns (States News Service 2005).

With Georgia seen as, at the very least, an aspiring member of the 'democratic community of states', this tentatively raises the specter of Tbilisi relying disproportionately on shared ideology rather than cold power-political calculation in assessing the balance between the West – and particularly the United States – and Moscow. Especially when one takes such a balance of power to depend both on raw capabilities and *interests*, such a belief – if sincerely held - would have distorted Saakashvili perceptions by in effect overestimating the West's, and particularly the United States' often and forcefully stated commitment to Georgia's security. A perspective untainted by the assumption of democratic solidarity would, no doubt, have provided a much more sobering view of the Georgian state's own capabilities, and the West's willingness to wield power in the 'near abroad' in defiance of Russia's much greater commitment to do the same.

## THE LATE SAAKASHVILI YEARS: WAR AND DISINTEGRATION

By the beginning of 2008, the assumption that democracy would inexorably spread throughout the former Soviet Union had frayed beyond recognition: far from seeing the spread of democracy throughout the 'near abroad', those democratic experiments that followed the 'color revolutions' in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan faltered. Alongside economic dependence, regional divisions within the former presented 'weak spots' that were eagerly exploited by Russia in creating internal antagonisms and rolling back or stalling many of the reforms initially envisaged by Kyiv. Kyrgyzstan's revolution similarly remained precarious, failing to live up to its promises by degenerating into the corruption and repression of the Bakiyev regime. Once pro-Western authoritarian states also re-adjusted their foreign policies towards a more cautious stance vis-à-vis Moscow: Uzbekistan left GU(U)AM outright in 2005, and Azerbaijan moved its 'multi-vectoral' policies closer to Russia, in effect beginning the organization's decline into the empty shell it is today (Tudoroiu 2007).

By 2007, the 'democratization' experiment in Georgia itself also was in serious trouble (Mitchell 2009; Mitchell 2009). Despite of having instituted a raft of reforms, Saakashvili and his entourage were, increasingly, being accused of authoritarian methods and high-level corruption by an increasingly vocal opposition. The November 2007 riots in central Tbilisi showed the extent to which the road towards successful democratization would not be so smooth after all. This weakened the logic of Saakashvili's strategy considerably: far from being historically pre-determined, the spread of democracy revealed

itself to be quite reversible, at least within the specific historical and regional context of the former Soviet Union – the ‘ring of democratic states’ envisaged in the Borjomi declaration had not materialized. Democracy’s powers-of-attraction had, moreover, failed to coax Abkhazia and South Ossetia away from the Russian orbit, despite of Tbilisi’s very active public diplomacy in preceding years.

The one democratic assumption left standing was that regarding the commitment of fellow democracies to (at least aspiringly) democratic Georgia’s defense. Western financial and military aid, and American professions of a commitment to Georgia’s security had, in previous years, made direct challenges to Russian regional power possible. NATO’s refusal to grant Georgia a Membership Action Plan in April 2008 – despite of extensive lobbying by Washington – thus came as a source of great disappointment to Tbilisi, all the more so because the unresolved nature of Georgia’s secessionist conflicts was put forward as one of the reasons for the refusal (BBC Monitoring 2008; Gallis 2008, 3-6). This shock was largely counter-acted by Washington’s (and “New Europe’s”) continued expressions of support for Tbilisi and its NATO aspirations (DPA 2008; Poland Business Weekly 2008; Russia & CIS Military Weekly 2008): much has been made of the United States’ ‘mixed messages’ in the run-up to the war, designed to simultaneously reign in and reassure an increasingly beleaguered ally, but taken by many to have been erroneously interpreted by Tbilisi as a strong commitment of support in the face of Russia’s ongoing provocations in South

Ossetia (BBC Monitoring 2008; Bowker 2011, 204-05; Cheterian 2010, 73-74; Cooper and Shanker 2008).

The Georgian military operation in South Ossetia in August that year emerged, at least partly, from these democratically inspired miscalculations: most importantly, the misguided belief that Western democracies' – especially American – assurances of support for Tbilisi would outmatch Moscow's determination to maintain strategic control over the South Caucasus. This is not the place to analyze the immediate reasons for the 2008 war at length; it is, however, safe to argue that it was *not* ideologically motivated, beyond the over-arching requirement, held by all Georgian administrations since Gamsakhurdia of re-uniting the country: most of the ideological assumptions guiding Saakashvili since 2003 had been comprehensively contradicted by the time he gave the orders for Georgian troops to move against Tskhinvali. Instead, Tbilisi's perception of present and future structural conditions limited its margin of maneuver, and drove it towards taking drastic action.

Firstly, NATO membership – the ultimate guarantee of security for the Georgian state, and, thus, a major incentive for action - was blocked by the continued insistence by several European states on a resolution of the Abkhaz and Ossetian conflicts; with an assertive Russia piling on the pressure, Tbilisi did not have any reasonable prospect of resolving these issues peacefully or in good time. Secondly, Georgia's strategy thus hinged, increasingly precariously, on continued support from Washington, and imminent presidential elections made American support even less reliable

over the longer term, as it was far from clear whether a new administration would be as committed to projecting power into Russia's 'sphere of special interest' as its predecessor. These pressures were moreover exacerbated by Kosovo's secession from Serbia, a worrying precedent for Tbilisi (Antonenko 2008; Tuathail 2008). A structural window of opportunity was therefore rapidly closing: with the pressure on, and the clock ticking, Saakashvili thus chose to take his (fatal) August gamble, while US commitments were still perceived to be acute, and therefore relevant to Tbilisi's calculations of power in its immediate environment.

Considering the enormous disparities of power between Russia and Georgia, it is highly unlikely Tbilisi would have adopted such a high-risk strategy in response to Russian provocations without these above-mentioned misperceptions regarding the balance-of-power, and the narrowing structural constraints marking its environment. But in the end, when push came to shove, the United States (and Europe) limited themselves to symbolic gestures, diplomatic interventions, and longer-term aid (Nichol 2009, 17-37); contrary to what Saakashvili may have thought, higher-level interests won out over previously loudly proclaimed 'democratic solidarity' in Georgian-Western interaction during and following the war, making the Western response feeble, at best (Antonenko 2008, 29-34).

Europe, for its part, was split (Mouritzen and Wivel 2013, 113-38; Parmentier 2009). Hawks, including the UK and Eastern European states, argued for sanctions against Russia - with several heads of state demonstratively visiting

Tbilisi during the war - and called for an acceleration of Georgia's path towards NATO membership. Doves – including Germany and others in Rumsfeld's 'Old Europe' – took a more cautious line, stressing the necessity for continued engagement with Moscow, with Berlusconi's Italy even taking an openly pro-Russian stance. In the end, the European Union's role remained limited to that of a mediator (Cornell and Starr 2009, 111-15; Mouritzen and Wivel 2013, 139-56), with France's president, Sarkozy, eventually succeeding in negotiating a cease-fire between Moscow and Tbilisi after several weeks of intense shuttle diplomacy. Europe would continue its engagement in Georgia, and include it in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – an upgraded version of the European Neighborhood Policy – in subsequent years (EU External Action Service 2015), but in military-strategic terms, its behavior during the 2008 war could not be termed that of an 'ally'.

Georgia's main alliance was still with the United States, however, and here, again, Tbilisi would remain disappointed despite of both sides' considerable investments into a 'strong personalized' bilateral relationship in previous years (Cooley and Mitchell 2009; Mouritzen and Wivel 2013, 97-112). Washington was slow to react at first, and direct military action in Georgia's favor remained out of the question throughout the conflict despite calls by some hawks within the administration – notably vice president Dick Cheney – for "Russian aggression" not to go unanswered (Downing 2008; Nichol 2009, 23-27): while American policymakers did intensify their verbal criticisms of Russia as the conflict dragged on, apart from a largely symbolic dispatch of a war ship delivering humanitarian supplies to Georgian waters, and the flying home of



Georgian servicemen serving in Iraq very little was offered in terms of immediate military aid. Saakashvili's final assumption - on the level of commitment by the United States (and the broader West) to much-lauded 'fellow democracy' Georgia - now also lay in tatters. The 'guns of August' invalidated much of Saakashvili's approach, and left the Republic's foreign and security policies in a state of limbo, continuing as if by (ideological) inertia.

The August 2008 war should thus have acted as a 'perceptual shock' to Tbilisi, doing away with many of the ideological assumptions and demonstrating, beyond any doubt, both Russia's capabilities and commitment to a continued presence in the South Caucasus, and, conversely, the relative lack of commitment of the West to directly and forcefully challenging that presence. With the politically very different Obama administration also pursuing a more realist policy, aiming at an ever-elusive 'reset' with Russia rather than the expansion of NATO as a 'zone of democratic peace', Tbilisi was now confronted with a very different geopolitical environment, one which its extensive, final-hope lobbying efforts in Washington could not counteract (Kagan 2010; Rachwald 2011; Silverstein 2011). The world's only superpower had demoted its onetime 'pet project'; and although Georgia continued to receive Western aid (of a largely non-military nature, in contrast to what had happened in previous years), and became an active participant in the EU's Eastern Partnership, talk of actual NATO and EU *membership* became 'academic' at best (Bowker 2011).

The important question here is why, in light of the disastrous August 2008 war, the Saakashvili government continued with its pro-Western policies *in spite of* these fundamental structural changes. If, as argued above, its previous pro-Western strategic choice was premised on a perception of (present or future) Western superiority and commitment amplified by ideology, and both that perception and its supporting ideologies were now in serious question, Georgia would have to change course, and either bandwagon with, or at the very least sit on the fence while the power relationships between East and West were clarified.

But Georgia's pro-Western policies continued unabated (Arnoult 2014; Rondeli 2012): with neither NATO or EU membership a realistic prospect even over the medium term, this gave the impression of Georgian foreign and security policies being in denial, tilting Westwards even as the strategic commitment of the West to the country had diminished relative to the George W. Bush years, and even as a pro-Western orientation could not provide a road-map towards re-unifying the country. It is highly unlikely that the Saakashvili camp failed to understand the modified geopolitical context surrounding it. Then why did it not respond in the manner that structural realists, or even neoclassical realists considering *perceptions* of power would expect it to?

Above all, Georgia was restrained at the inter-state level by Russia's opposition to improved relations in the absence of regime change: any improvement in relations would require the departure of Saakashvili himself

(BBC Monitoring 2009; Ria Novosti 2011; Ukraine General Newswire 2010). In any case, with its position in the now-recognized secessionist territories secured, Russia did not have much incentive in throwing the Saakashvili regime a lifeline by softening its pressure (through a loosening of the economic blockade, for instance). Georgia in effect acknowledged the hopeless nature of its relations with Moscow through, among others, its 2010 National Security Concept (Republic of Georgia 2010), which, contrary to its more subdued and cautious 2006 predecessor, was frank and open about the perceived menace from Russia, identifying it as its main existential threat. Georgia's government was structurally trapped in its pro-Western policies, with no realistic prospect for rapprochement with Moscow in the absence of regime change.

But ideology also had a role to play in Tbilisi's inert policies towards its northern neighbor. While well aware that regional power balances had now moved in Russia's favor, Georgia's elite also did not have a choice because of their domestic identification with ideologies they had espoused for years beforehand: a recalibration of policies towards Russia would have required such a fundamental restatement of the regime's legitimizing parameters – both at home and abroad – as to be impracticable without a significant loss of social capital. In effect, it would have entailed an admission of strategic failure and of the very *raison d'être* of their regime: the Rose Revolution. Thus, just as ideology had amplified distortions in Tbilisi's perceptions of the balance of power in the past, it now served to limit its elite's margin for maneuver in response to a different regional-international environment.

To some extent, Saakashvili had become a victim of his own success in changing the Georgian political discourse: domestically, “Saakashvili and his lieutenants found that they had imprisoned themselves in a box of democratic rules” (Fairbanks and Gugushvili 2013, 121), while public support for NATO and EU membership - having only slightly declined in the years following 2008 - was still overwhelming (Navarro and Woodward 2012). Indeed, one often-heard accusation referred to his mishandling of Georgia’s Western course through corruption, authoritarianism, and an unnecessarily confrontational attitude towards Russia, mistakes that the new Georgian Dream coalition – centered on billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili – pledged to correct (Civil Georgia 2011; Gente 2013, 124-5). Tbilisi’s policies were in deadlock, both at the international and the domestic level: its assumptions on the balance of power – specifically the level of commitment by its Western allies - had been contradicted, while domestic ideological imperatives precluded any corrective action. It would take the election of Georgian dream, in 2012, for the country to move, ever so slightly, beyond this impasse.

### THE BALANCE STRIKES BACK

The discussion in the previous sections reveals the a priori dismissal of power-based explanations by those wedded to solely domestic explanations as premature. While ideology did undoubtedly play a role in the formation of Tbilisi’s foreign policies (and most decisively so during the Saakashvili period), ignoring the power-political context in decision-making over the whole period under review – as the purely Innenpolitik approaches like Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist’s (2009), or Gvalia, Siroky, Lebanidze and Iashvili’s

(2013) do - is simply implausible. Georgian elites did *not* just care about their ideological goals, they had to realize those goals in an international environment whose changing power-political relationships opened up certain possibilities and foreclosed others. Focusing in the interactions between these power-political realities and the ideologically shaped perceptions of these realities – as neoclassical realism does – leads to explanations that are superior to solely domestic approaches in coherently capturing a greater number of phenomena over a longer period in time, in a clear indication of superior validity. The combining of ideology and power also proves superior to competing structural-rationalist approaches: they too are only able to account for distinct periods of Georgian foreign policy, outside of which they would have to dismiss Tbilisi's behavior as 'irrational'.

Take, for instance, two such derivatives of Waltzian neorealism which could be seen as relevant to the Georgian case: Walt's (1990) balance-of-threat theory and David's (1991) 'omnibalancing' framework. Against other structural forms of balance-of-power realism, the first actually sees bandwagoning by states as the exception rather than the rule, especially in the presence of perceived *threats* (as Russia was to Georgia for most of the post-Cold War period); the second sees the elites of fragile states like Georgia engaged in a balance-of-power game at two levels – the domestic and the international – with *domestic* threats to their continued hold on power determining their *international* alignments: in this view, Shevardnadze's and Saakashvili's strategic alignments would thus be predicated on their overarching imperative of warding off domestic threats. On closer examination,

however, neither of these theories provides an explanation that is as comprehensive and coherent as their neoclassical realist counterpart – precisely because of the latter’s ability to account for what would be construed as prima-facie ‘irrational’ behavior under these two alternatives.

Walt’s balance-of-threat theory is, at best, ambiguous and partial in its application to the Georgian case. On the one hand, it refines Waltz’ framework to argue that a state’s choice between balancing against or bandwagoning with a threat is shaped by a number of interrelated factors, including that potential threat’s aggregate power, its geographic proximity, its offensive power, its aggressive intentions, and the availability of allies, all of which favor *balancing* rather than *bandwagoning* behavior (Walt 1990, 17-29). On the other hand, there is an important restriction for ‘weaker’ – that is, small, less powerful - states like Georgia, which, as Walt (1990, 29-30) states, “...will be tempted to bandwagon when threatened by a great power [emphasis added]”, and are especially sensitive to “geographically proximate” threats. Such ‘weak’ states will accommodate a threatening power because “they will be the first victims of expansion, because they lack the capabilities to stand alone, and a defensive alliance may operate too slowly to do them much good” (Walt 1991, 31).

As argued above, quite against what Walt would expect from a small state confronting an adjacent great power, Georgia’s behavior since independence has mostly consisted of *balancing* Russia, except for a short period during the first years of the Shevardnadze presidency; and Tbilisi’s balancing behavior

was at its most intense during the Saakashvili years, when Russia's aggregate and offensive power was increasing under Vladimir Putin's oil-fuelled drive to 'restore the power vertical'. Georgia's initial balancing behavior could have been explained by the availability of new allies: with NATO eastward expansion and increased US involvement in the former Soviet Union, a Euro-Atlantic orientation became a viable option for Georgia from the later years of the Shevardnadze presidency. But in the end, this pro-NATO orientation led to the very consequences posited by Walt for 'aberrant' behavior by smaller states (Walt 1990, 31): Georgia became the first victim of Russian expansionism, it obviously lacked the capabilities to stand alone, and the NATO alliance did operate too slowly (and half-heartedly) to do it much good, failing the 'balancing' test when it should have been at its most relevant – during war. Walt's rationalist framework thus succeeds in explaining Shevardnadze's initial bandwagoning and subsequent balancing behavior vis-à-vis Russia. Saakashvili's behavior would, however, have to be characterized as a major miscalculation; and such miscalculations sit more comfortably within neoclassical realism's – particularly, Wohlforth's – focus on perceptions and misperceptions of the elusive balance of power<sup>7</sup>.

Neither can Tbilisi's foreign policy be coherently and continuously explained through *omnibalancing's* combination of the internal and external power-calculus of rational statesmen in 'fragile' – i.e. weakly institutionalized - states. For David, the leaders of fragile states – as Georgia arguably was in the 1990s – have to play the balance-of-power at two-levels, the domestic and the systemic (David 1991, 233-34). System-level behavior is often dependent on

calculations at the domestic level, as governments use alliances to counteract threats to regime stability. Applied to Georgia, this would mean that subsequent governments' alliances with Russia or the West depended on incumbent regimes' commitment to maintaining domestic power. Shevardnadze's alignment with Russia in his earlier years could thus be quite plausibly explicated through the "still-born" nature of the Georgian state (Demetriou 1999, 866-73), and the ensuing necessity to defuse armed separatist conflicts and acute threats to his hold on power in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Megrelia. But other aspects of Tbilisi's behavior since 1992 don't readily fit into this framework, most importantly because of the conditionalities associated with Euro-Atlantic integration.

Indeed, Omnibalancing assumes that a fragile state's foreign policy is dependent on the governing elite's over-arching interest in retaining power (David 1991, 235-38); but prospective NATO and EU membership – which stood at the core of Georgian foreign policy, certainly after the Rose Revolution – would definitely *not* have offered any such guarantees to an incumbent regime. Unlike alliances between the West and developing states (where democratic norms are often inconsistently applied), the kind of full Euro-Atlantic integration sought by Tbilisi implied membership of a democratic 'security community', and would thus have removed any guarantees on the continued hold on power by a specific elite (Pop-Eleches 2007; Schimmelfennig 2007). While Shevardnadze and Saakashvili's democratic credentials were certainly flawed, whether they had the ruthlessness of the presidents-for-life usually associated with the omnibalancing framework can



certainly be questioned. More importantly, unlike the various fully authoritarian regimes onto which omnibalancing has been applied (e.g. David 1991, 245-51; O'Reilly 1998; Strakes 2011), they would have been aware that their foreign policy course would imply them giving up power and some point; in fact, when they did lose power, both did so in no small measure because of pressure from the very allies they had become so dependent on (Sindelar 2012; Welt 2010, 178-87).

While domestic explanations leave out considerations of power altogether, both balance-of-threat theory and omnibalancing at least acknowledge its importance in the calculations of small-state elites. For Walt, assessments as to the relative power between rivaling alliances determine small states' choice between bandwagoning with and balancing against external threats. Omnibalancing similarly implies an assessment by elites of the power-political implications of any possible alliances, this time against threats to regime survival. But all explanatory frameworks hitherto expounded fail to continuously account for Georgia's post-Cold War behavior: like their domestic counterparts, rigidly structural alternatives have to dismiss certain periods of behavior that fall outside their frameworks as 'irrational'. Neoclassical realism's advantage is that it can continuously account for a broader range of phenomena – especially the noncircumventable issue of *power* - and transitions between distinct periods of Georgian policy, without having to dismiss certain periods of behavior as falling outside its scope. Its power lies in acknowledging the oft-discussed 'elusiveness' of the balance of power through the uncertainties of ideologically conditioned perception: and

this perspective is poised to offer new insights on the foreign policy behavior of not just Georgia, but other small states, both inside and outside the former Soviet Union, in the present and in the future.

## CONCLUSION

With the October 2012 parliamentary elections, and, subsequently, the October 2013 presidential polls, regime change did occur in Georgia; and this allowed the new 'Georgian Dream' (GD) government to 'correct' the country's foreign policies to reflect the far less straightforward power relationships in the former Soviet Union. Two important shifts in policy thinking could already be detected in the early months of the new administration: on the one hand, Ivanishvili and his party vowed to adjust the anti-Russian course of his president, supplementing (but not abandoning) Georgia's policy of EU and NATO membership – a long-standing policy priority – with improved relations with Moscow through the decoupling of security, economic, and social issues (Civil Georgia 2012; Coalson 2012; MacFarlane 2015, 12). At the same time, Ivanishvili's administration also adopted more open policies towards the secessionist units, which were isolated as agents of Moscow in the latter, post-2008 years of a Saakashvili administration clearly having given up on public diplomacy and engagement (Menabde 2013). This was not a return to Saakashvili's earlier belief in democracy as strategy – rather than just rely on assumed effects of democracy and democratization, it appeared GD was also maintaining the possibility of some kind of pragmatic accommodation between Tbilisi and Moscow, while adhering to the aim of Georgia's re-unification over the very long term (a strategic goal *no* Georgian politician could conceivably abandon in view of domestic public opinion).

This re-adjustment of policies should not be overstated: the Georgian government has on several occasions repeated its commitment to a pro-Western course, including NATO integration and active participation in the EaP. But regular dialogue with the Kremlin has nevertheless resulted in several tangible results: among others, a tentative lifting of the trade embargo and the resumption of regular flights between the countries in 2014 (ITAR-TASS 2014; Menabde 2014). The careful overtures to Russia could be seen as a reaction to shifting perceptions of the balance of power, perfectly explicable through the insights of neoclassical realism: compared to 2003, that balance was far less clear-cut, with the West's commitment to the Newly Independent States in question (certainly compared to the days of the George W. Bush administration) (Birnbaum 2015). Maintaining an opening, however small, towards Russia – in a 'just in case' hedging strategy (Tessman 2012) – reflected Georgia's now far more uncertain structural environment.

How this 'opening' develops in the future depends on several factors – above all, the perceived balance of power between the West and Russia in the near abroad. Two factors are significant in that sense. Firstly, unlike during the years following the Rose Revolution, a pro-Western course, while clearly and forcefully stated, is *not* at the ideological heart of the current Georgian regime to the same extent as during the Saakashvili/UNM years; the current government is more pragmatic than its predecessor in that sense, something also recognized by Moscow (RIA Novosti 2013). Secondly, and more importantly, as in previous years, the level of commitment by the West to

power-projection into Russia's 'near abroad' will remain decisive in shaping perceptions of the relative power relationships between Brussels/Washington and Moscow. This perceived commitment by the West to Georgia has been marked by mixed signals in recent months and years: despite new military aid packages, formal NATO membership remains elusive as ever for Tbilisi, and the Association Agreements related to the EaP carry no promise of the ultimate prize for any 'Europeanizing' country: actual entry into the EU (BBC Monitoring 2014; GHN New Agency 2014). Opinion polls taken at the height of the Ukraine crisis show decreasing support within the Georgian public on NATO and the EU (Civil Georgia 2014; Navarro 2014), and a further, more significant shift in that direction would provide any Georgian pragmatist playing a two-level foreign-policy game with added possibilities to move towards Moscow.

In this context, the ongoing Ukraine crisis could prove crucial in clarifying the relationships of power between East and West in the former Soviet Union, with inevitable consequences for the foreign policies of all smaller states in the region. A 'loss' of Ukraine by the West through a perceived lack of commitment would shift the perceived balance in Russia's favor, making pro-Western policies far less tenable in Georgia than they have been up to this date; current openings to Russia would then come into their own as bases for further accommodation, or even bandwagoning. While Ukraine and Georgia have been able to sign their respective Association Agreements with the EU (BBC 2014), the cost the former will pay in maintaining its Westward course, and the West's determination to consistently push through its Eastern

program will be crucial in shaping perceptions of the future balance of power between East and West; and that balance, and perceptions thereof will be as important in shaping the attitude of the Newly Independent States towards the powers competing within their region as an isolated ideological commitment to democratic values.

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## NOTES

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

<sup>2</sup> Especially after the re-election of Bill Clinton in 1996, Washington increased its activities in that region, at first in the economic, and, under George W. Bush, in the military spheres as well. The decision to build the strategically important Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was taken during Clinton's second term (Hill 2004); George W. Bush had already intensified American involvement in Georgia under Shevardnadze, through the stationing of advisers in the Pankisi gorge and the GTEP 'Train and Equip' program before Tbilisi's decisive Westward turn following the Rose Revolution. The European Union also included Georgia within its European Neighborhood Policy, and, after 2009, the Eastern Partnership, leading to the signing of an Association Agreement in June 2014. (Arashidze 2002; Blagov 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The Clinton administration at first concentrated on expanding NATO into Central and Eastern Europe; while the possibility of Russia and other former Soviet Republics joining was always kept open, the Partnership for Peace and Atlantic Council frameworks were, in part, designed to supplement repeated Clinton's reassurances that any such expansion would take into account Moscow's strategic interests (Clinton 2000; Goldgeier 1998).

<sup>4</sup> For contemporaneous pessimistic views of Russia see Lieven (1999), Trenin (2002) and Lynch (2001).

<sup>5</sup> The Russian economy had grown by between 4.7 and 10% per annum between 1999 and 2008, Vladimir Putin largely succeeded in restoring Russia's power vertical, and, despite defective reform, the budgets for the country's armed forces and power ministries increased substantially (Cooper 2007; De Angelis 2008; Mitin 2008; World Bank 2014).

<sup>6</sup> A short-lived attempt by Georgia and Ukraine to create a 'Community of Democratic Choice' in the former Soviet space (CEPS 2005; Socor 2005).

<sup>7</sup> In switching his strategic orientation towards the West, Shevardnadze could also have been seen as 'bandwagoning for profit' by, in Schweller's terms (1994, 96-98) 'joining a wave of the future' – the relative rise of the West - in order to realize the supreme objective of re-unifying the country. One could even argue that Saakashvili's belief in the inevitable spread of democracy intensified this logic. But the 2008 war – and its associated costs - would stand as a major counterargument and discontinuity in this logic: the fact that bandwagoning continued could no longer be explained through a profit motive.