

**Russo-Georgian relations: Measures Georgian State can undertake to counter external threats
stemming from the Russian Federation.**

**Submitted on April 12, 2021, Spring Term,
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In complete fulfillment of the GMAP Capstone requirement.

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THE FLETCHER SCHOOL
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Abstract

The thesis will analyze Russo-Georgian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ethnic minority group's role in three conflicts between the two countries. Drawing upon neoclassical realist theory, the thesis provides a causal chain between the external threat the Georgian State faces, societal fragmentation on a domestic level, and the lack of social cohesion as an essential factor constituting Georgia's under-balancing behavior. The paper will discuss measures the Georgian Government can take to counter Russian hybrid interference regarding ethnic minorities of Georgia.

The paper starts by providing historical background on Russian-Georgian relations, focusing on Russia's and ethnic minority group's role in conflicts on Georgian territory since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a prelude to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and 2008 military invasion as a determinant of contemporary external threats in the face of Georgian State. Based on Randal Schweller's neoclassical realism theory of underbalancing, the paper attempts to explain why Georgia has not been able to balance internally against the external threat posed by Russian Federation due to societal fragmentation. The paper provides an overview of ethnic minority groups in Georgia. The thesis then focuses on the nature of external threats stemming from the Russian Federation that the Georgian State faces, including Russian occupation and hybrid interference, and how these two dimensions involve ethnic minority groups.

After providing information and analysis about Georgia's strategic environment, problems regarding ethnic minority groups' inclusion in Georgian society, and representation in political life, the thesis identifies two directions in which the Georgian State can manipulate: Greater integration of ethnic

minority groups via quotas for government jobs and diminished linguistic barrier to decrease latter group's susceptibility to Russian disinformation campaigns. The paper concludes that societal fragmentation has contributed to Georgian State's under-balancing behavior regarding external threats stemming from Russian occupation.

Historical Background.

Russo-Georgian relations are complex, and the two countries share a significant amount of history, especially in deteriorated relations. While most people see the 2008 Russo-Georgian War as a starting point of the conflict, the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union is an essential prelude to today's reality. Developments in Georgia during the 1990s must be analyzed, especially for the aims of the thesis, since the critical role of ethnic minority groups was evident during two Russian-backed secessionist conflicts in Georgia. With undeniable direct external involvement from Russian Federation, societal fragmentation with rising nationalism in Georgia contributed to Georgian State's underbalancing behavior during the first conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali before the Russian occupation changed the status quo. Georgia could not neutralize risks associated with two separatist movements from Abkhazians and Ossetians, and had to engage in military conflicts. As a result, Russian military support of separatists left Georgia defeated.

Svante E. Cornell observes: "Georgia has arguably been the Transcaucasian republic worst hit by internal strife. Since 1988, it has seen two wars with ethnic minorities and a short two-phase civil war. It has also suffered the largest amount of Russian interference in its domestic affairs, with varying

degrees of overt Russian support for the rebellious minorities in the country and allegations of Russian involvement in the assassination attempts on its president, Eduard Shevardnadze. " ¹

Cornell makes an interesting reference to Georgian scholars who discuss how Russia "adopted a divisive approach to weaken Georgia: the promotion of minorities in the territory "in the late nineteenth-century.² Cornell supports the viewpoint by referring to the opening of schools in Mingrelian, Svan, and Abkhazian languages as an attempt at the distinct identity promotion of minority groups. The author rightfully concludes that during the Soviet Union, Russian became a "lingua franca" in Soviet republics; this factor alienated minority groups, like Abkhazians, from the rest of Georgia even more since the language component changed and there was no common component, other than historical background, between ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians left. While nineteenth-century or Soviet-Era Russian-Georgian relations are beyond this paper's scope, it is worth underlining that using ethnic minorities as leverage against Georgia is not exactly new for Russian State.

Georgian analyst Alexander Rondeli writes: "For Moscow, Georgia is a strategically key country in the region. Russia believes that if it does not retain control over Georgia, it will be unable to restore its power in the South Caucasus and reclaim its role as the major power in the region. Control over Georgia allows Russia to feel more confident about its control over the unstable North Caucasus and to slow Turkey's increasing influence over former Soviet Turkic-speaking republics and peoples. As a satellite of Russia, Georgia could cut off energy-rich Azerbaijan and Central Asian land-locked states from the

¹ Svante E. Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus.*" Caucasus World. Richmond, Surrey, England: Curzon, 2001, p130.

² Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p 133.

West by closing access to the Black Sea." ³ Georgia, as a post-Soviet country and former part of the Russian Empire, is seen as a "natural sphere of influence" by the Kremlin.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, on April 9, 1991, Georgia adopted the Act of Reestablishment of Independence. Shortly, the civil war broke out and continued until 1992. During the Georgian civil war, Abkhazia and Ossetia launched active secessionist campaigns with the support and direct involvement of the Russian Federation. Representing one of the ethnic minority groups in Georgia, Abkhazians' demanded increased autonomy from the State. Georgian political establishment at that time did not agree on these demands. "The Abkhaz leadership for some time attempted to negotiate a solution with Tbilisi. In June 1992, Abkhazia's President Vladislav Ardzinba sent a draft treaty to the Georgian State Council in which a federative or confederative solution to the problem was suggested would have safeguarded Georgia's territorial integrity. However, this conciliatory step was rejected by the new Georgian leadership."⁴ Georgian State was unwilling to make concessions since Georgia rightfully saw activities of ethnic minority groups as Russian meddling in domestic affairs aimed at bringing the State back to Kremlin orbit.

Moreover, Cornell states that after 1978, despite being in the minority, Abkhazians were in a position of "secure control of the republican administration and the local economy: 67% of government ministers and 71% of *Obkom* department heads were Abkhazian. "⁵ On an official level, Abkhazians shared a favorable position in terms of local political representation from 1978 to 1992, but the lack of identification with the State was still evident; it had to do more with cultural differences at an emotional

³ Alexander Rondeli, "*Georgia-Russia: From Negative to Positive Uncertainty*", Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 2013, p 4.

⁴ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p 158.

⁵ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p145.

level than the legislative framework of rights in terms of autonomy. However, not acknowledging the interests of minority groups from the Georgian State did not result in positive outcomes.

The election of 1990 in Georgia was an important event in this discourse. Zviad Gamsakhurdia's party, "Round Table of National Liberation Alliance," came to power with heavy nationalist agenda. As Cornell observes, Gamsakhurdia's campaign was mainly oriented at the support of Georgian's rights superiority over Abkhazians and Ossetians: "The Gamsakhurdia's Government's stance toward minorities was dichotomized into certain respect for the indigenous right of the Abkhaz and to a lesser degree the Adjars, but total disregard for the Ossetians, perceived as alien to Georgia."⁶ Since Gamsakhurdia's statements were not exactly a secret to minority groups when he came to power, alienation deepened. Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Georgia declared independence, autonomous units were abolished. In 1991 War broke out between Georgia and Tskhinvali region, backed by former Soviet military units under Russian control.

By 1992 the conflict between Ossetians and Georgians with Russia's involvement was somewhat deactivated. In parallel, Abkhazians, who did not identify with the Georgian State, called for greater autonomy. During new president Eduard Shevardnadze's administration, in 1992, armed clashes, which developed into military conflict, broke out. An essential factor that should be underlined in the context of Abkhazian and Ossetian separatism at that time is the lack of social cohesion not just in the prism of ethnic minorities but in general: at least two different actors, Zviadists (ex-president Zviad Gamsakhurdia supporters) and former defense minister Tengiz Kitovani's paramilitary group were

⁶ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p151.

acting without central governments consent or approval in different parts of Georgia and engaged in armed clashes in and near Abkhazia.

Also, while Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a nationalist, and his approach might have contributed to the alienation of minority groups, the Shevardnadze administration sent clear signals to the groups of changed policy by visiting the main cities of ethnic settlements when he came to power. But the external Russian factor was already evident, and it was clear that conflicts were doomed to escalate. Georgia faced separatist tensions in the Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia), resulting in armed clashes. Unlike Abkhazians' claims of independence, Ossetians were willing to join North Ossetia, Russia's federal subject. Ossetians, living on Georgian territory, precisely in the Tskhinvali region, called for seceding from Georgia and incorporating in Russia. At that time, the Russian parliament's Speaker, Ruslan Khasbulatov, defined Georgian ethnic minority groups as Russian citizens and openly supported their accession to Russia.⁷ "Khasbulatov reportedly threatened to bomb Tbilisi in a telephone conversation with Shevardnadze, and hence by June 1992, Russia was on the brink of war with Georgia," states Cornell.⁸

Abkhazians' declared independence from Georgia and engaged in secessionist military conflict with massive Russian military support, which confirmed Russian interests behind the demands voiced by separatist forces. While Russia was officially holding a peacekeeper/mediator role in the conflicts on Georgian territory, interestingly enough, several indications proved Moscow's direct involvement in the process. Cornell names a few: Abkhaz separatists were armed with T-72 tanks, Grad rocket launchers, and a heavy arsenal. Also, over 100'000 landmines were put in place. Abkhazia (which was

⁷ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p157.

⁸ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p157.

a Georgian region) did not possess this armament. Moreover, unmarked "Sukhoi "fighter planes were bombing Sokhumi, the capital city of Abkhazia, while according to Cornell, Abkhazians did not possess any air force at all. "Abkhaz and Russian sources claim these raids were answers to Georgian bombardment of the Russian military laboratory in Eshera, Abkhazia. "⁹

Alexandros Peterson, Southeast Europe Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, quotes Oksana Antotnenko and states that regional Russian officials trained and equipped Abkhaz North Caucasian allies during the secessionist conflict. ¹⁰ Interestingly, Russia was mastering "plausible deniability" in Georgia years before "Little Green Men" appeared in Ukraine. ¹¹ In September 1993, Abkhazian separatist forces and Russian military units defeated the Georgian Army.

Civil war (1991-1992) and armed clashes in two conflict regions left the Georgian State in chaos. Tskhinvali's escalation of 1991-92 was concluded with a ceasefire agreement, also called the Sochi Agreement, which was reached on June 24, 1992. Notably, the agreement was signed between Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. The text reads: "The Republic of Georgia and the Russian Federation ... Have agreed upon the following." ¹² While the document's name contained the phrase Georgian-Ossetian conflict, Russia signed the agreement with Georgia. This is an important detail, especially when Russia tried to deny direct involvement in the conflict and portrayed developments as a Georgian-Ossetian conflict in the Tskhinvali region over the years.

⁹ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p159.

¹⁰ Alexandros Peterson, "*The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War: A forgotten conflict*", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol.2(4), 2008, p198.

¹¹ BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26532154>, 2014.

¹² "*Agreement on Principles of Settlement of the Georgian – Ossetian Conflict*", Sochi, 24 June 1992.

After the Sochi agreement, the Joint Control Commission, comprised of "peacekeeping" forces, was deployed on the ground. Mostly Ossetian de-facto Government controlled the territory. At that time, Tskhinvali was not yet recognized by Russia, and Georgia still hoped that by normalizing relations with Moscow, it would regain control of the territory. In 1993 Georgia even joined the Commonwealth of Independent States. Russia used CIS as a bargaining tool with Georgia. Membership in return for a ceasefire agreement. On April 4, 1994, the "Declaration on measures for a political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict" was signed in Moscow. This agreement, too, resulted in the deployment of "peacekeeping" forces in Abkhazia, but unlike the Tskhinvali region, the troops in Abkhazia were all Russian.¹³

In light of the abovementioned development, Minority Group International states: "As post-Soviet Georgia underwent considerable political upheaval against a wider context of economic collapse and a breakdown of social order, increasing emigration from Georgia was disproportionately high among minority groups. Public surveys found that minorities cited ethnic discrimination as a background factor. They also cited unemployment, economic insecurity, and the inability to pursue meaningful careers as pressing concerns. New opportunities for some minorities to obtain citizenship of ethnic homelands were also significant. "

¹³ David Batiashvili, *“August 7: How Russia Prepared And Launched The 2008 Invasion of Georgia, Expert Opinion”*, Georgian Foundation of Strategic Studies, Tbilisi, 2018, p 4.

2008 Russo-Georgian war and its consequences.

One must analyze Russia's foreign policy regarding the immediate neighborhood to understand Russian foreign policy towards Georgia. Georgian expert Giorgi Jgharkava argues: "With regard to the foreign policy of Putin's Russia, it is heavily influenced by the Soviet and Russian imperial past. The Soviet legacy in today's Russia can be translated to the concept of the current near neighborhood policy where Putin tries to keep as much leverage as he can have over the post-Soviet countries."¹⁴ Georgia is not an exception.

Unlike in the '90s and early 2000s, when Russia first used ethnic minorities in Georgia to create "manageable chaos" for later emerging as a peacekeeping force for bargaining reasons over Georgia's foreign policy choices, after the Rose Revolution, circumstances changed. During the Saakashvili administration, the State, which represented a "natural sphere of influence" for Russia, declared its radically Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Russian Federation was not ready to give up on post-Soviet countries, especially after the Baltic States. In April 2008, the NATO Bucharest summit took place. Georgia and Ukraine were promised they would become members of the organization one day.

The 2008 August War indicates how Russia maintained the status quo since the '90s in two ethnic minority enclaves in Georgia and used them against the Georgian State as a punishment when needed. Since the 2008 War, Russia occupied both regions, started unofficial annexation, and recognized Abkhazia and Tskhinvali's so-called independence. Interestingly, Russia began the "borderization" policy shortly after the war. "Borderization" differs from occupation as it aims to expand already

¹⁴ Giorgi Jgharkava, *How Russian Imperial History Repeats Itself Under Putin*, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 2019, p 8.

occupied territory by moving the occupation line/ Administrative Boundary Line in the depth of the Georgian Central Government Controlled zone. Russian Federal Security Service "border guards" install concertina wires, fences, and trenches on Tbilisi-Administered Territory and claim Georgian villages belong to occupied regions. "Borderization "is a part of Russia's hybrid warfare and serves its goal to sow discord in Georgian society and decrease public trust in Georgian government/institutions and Euro-Atlantic institutions by illustrating that Georgia's chosen Western-directed foreign policy cannot protect Georgian citizens.

Apart from "Borderization "as a hybrid warfare tool, Russia heavily relies on propaganda and disinformation campaigns tailored differently for different segments of society, including ethnic minority groups. The primary goal of disinformation campaigns is the cultivation of pro-Russian sentiments among Georgian society and undermining Georgia's declared foreign policy.

Under balancing as dependent variable: Neoclassical Realist Theory.

Neoclassical realism believes that territorial states are the primary units in the international system and that they choose their foreign security policies acknowledging threats and opportunities presented in this system. However, unlike structural realists, neoclassical realists identify domestic political or economic factors that can affect states' resource extractive or mobilization capacities. Gideon Rose indicates that "neoclassical realism differs from structural realism due to its incorporation of domestic intervening variables that condition whether and how states respond to the international systemic pressures that all realists assume underlie foreign policy, grand strategy, and international politics."¹⁵

¹⁵ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, "*Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*", New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p 58.

Thus, despite the international system's centrality and the signals that this system sends to the actors, states differ in their responses to systemic imperatives. "Neoclassical realism posits an imperfect "transmission belt" between systemic incentives and constraints, on the one hand, and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies states select, on the other. Over the long term, international political outcomes generally mirror the actual distribution of power among states. In the shorter term, however, the policies states pursue are rarely objectively efficient or predictable based upon a purely systemic analysis. "¹⁶

Georgian State's "transmission belt" between systemic imperatives and actual policies looked different during specific periods in State's history after the collapse of the Soviet Union and reestablishing Georgian independence. Giorgi Gvalia, Bidzina Lebanidze, and David S. Siroky compare foreign policy vectors of two Georgian presidents' administrations: Eduard Shevardnadze (1992-2003) and Mikheil Saakashvili(2004-2013). Authors note that despite the first steps of cooperation with Western states in the 1990s, the Shevardnadze administration was more moderate in pro-Western ambitions than the Saakashvili administration.

Moreover, Georgia became a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1993, during Shevardnadze's presidency, indicating a willingness to be a part of Russian-based regional order. "In contrast to his predecessor, who never pushed the pro-Western agenda too far, Saakashvili and his Government started to implement an array of domestic reforms and foreign policy initiatives in support of the new foreign policy goals. New institutional bodies of the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration and a new parliamentary committee on European integration were established, the primary function of which would be to support Georgia's cooperation with Western states and

¹⁶ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p 4.

institutions. New departments and offices on NATO and EU cooperation issues were created in almost all major ministries, including the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "¹⁷

Gvalia, Lebanidze, and Siroky State that analyzing two unit-level factors - elite cohesion and state capacity explain why the Georgian State pursued different foreign policies during two administrations while the external systemic imperative was relatively similar. While the Shevardnadze v Saakashvili case is an interesting example of different reactions on relatively systemic imperatives, I would like to point to the Armenian and Georgian foreign policies regarding Russia as supporting argument for how actors do not always perceive threats neither react to them similarly. Armenia's Nagorno-Karabakh problem and Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions draw similarities between the two countries. In both cases, Russian military involvement is evident to a different degree and nature. While Armenia decided to rely on Russia to solve the Karabakh problem, Georgia chose a different, radically pro-Western path during the Saakashvili administration. Comparison is clear, but it must be noted that Georgia had an armed conflict on the ground during both administrations, although, in different degrees, Russia still playing a central role in the processes; still, foreign policy responses to external threats differed dramatically.

Neoclassical realists argue that a range of domestic-level intervening variables come into play between systemic stimuli and policy response. They identify four broad categories of intervening unit-level variables: the images and perceptions of state leaders, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutional arrangements.¹⁸ "They [Policy choices] pass through the prism of the State, which perceives them and responds to them within the institutional constraints of its unique domestic

¹⁷ Giorgi Gvalia, Bidzina Lebanidze, David S. Siroky, "*Neoclassical Realism and Small States: Systemic Constraints and Domestic Filters in Georgia's Foreign Policy*" *East European Politics* 35, no. 1, 2019, p 21.

¹⁸ Ripsman, Taliaferro, Lobell, "*Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*", p 59.

circumstances. Therefore, to understand foreign policy, it becomes essential to study the unique processes of perception, decision-making, and policy implementation in individual countries, which will lead them to enact different policy responses to similar challenges. "¹⁹

Neoclassical realism observes that while policymakers work on policy to fit systemic stimuli, domestic-level intervening variables, including state-society relations, affect their ability to choose or construct the policy. They usually have to consider domestic constraints, especially in the case of a complex decision-making environment, which would be the case in deteriorated state-society relations. The level of social cohesion in Georgia will eventually affect the country's foreign security policy/balancing path since societal fragmentation would mean a complex decision-making environment and divergent viewpoints of different societal groups, including their perceptions of the nature of the threat. Thus the needed measures against this threat will impact Foreign Policy Executive's ability to construct and, most importantly, implement specific foreign policy as an answer to systemic stimuli, an external threat in this case.

Ethnic minority groups, as part of Georgia's society, represent a significant "filter "through which systemic imperatives are transmitted and might affect FPE's ability to construct and implement foreign policy and general internal stability and strategic environment. As one of the clusters of intervening variables that Neoclassical realists identify is a state-society relation, defined as the character of interactions between the central institutions of the state and various economic and or societal groups, ethnic minorities' greater integration in central institutions matters as it will potentially result in ethnic minority group members becoming agents/mediators between the central government and local communities.

¹⁹ Ripsman, Taliaferro, Lobell "*Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*", p 31.

Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell argue that social cohesion within the State is one factor that affects whether state leaders can extract, mobilize, and harness the nation's power. Randall Schweller states that social cohesion does not mean that all actors have to think similarly or agree on everything. Still, they must trust state institutions and be willing to settle disputes via those institutions, not seeking external involvement. Without ethnic minorities' increased identification with the Georgian State, social cohesion is almost unachievable, and thus extractive and mobilizing power cannot be maximized.

Notably, the State's experience has illustrated that the inability to resolve the state-society dispute through Abkhazians and Ossetians' prism (calls for greater autonomy) resulted in flourished separatism. Also, the lack of social cohesion meant that ethnic minorities distrusted the State and sought external involvement, precisely assistance from Russia. The impact of lack of social cohesion affects policy formulation and implementation. "As far as policy implementation is concerned, if society is suspicious of the State and resists what it considers to be state incursions upon societal rights and resources, it will be difficult to carry out foreign policy decisions. Foreign policy and grand strategy require immense human, material, and monetary resources. Suppose key societal groups that possess these resources – or the public at large – withhold them from the State. In that case, the state apparatus will have to devote considerable revenue collection, policing, and internal security, and propaganda resources in order to extract them, which will undermine the efficiency of national policy."²⁰

Ethnic minority groups in Georgia do not represent key societal groups in a classic understanding of the notion. However, the State's experience illustrates how non-key societal groups of ethnically Ossetian minorities from Tskhinvali destabilized the country and affected its foreign policy by making

²⁰ Ripsman, Taliaferro, Lobell *“Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics”*, p 71.

it harder to minimize Russian influence. As a group representing one cluster in Georgian society, Ossetians engaged in Russian-backed separatism, de-facto seceded from Georgia, and asked for unification with the Russian Federation. Ethnic minority groups in Georgia represent a risk of being "influence agents" of the Russian Federation. The simplest likely scenario would be Russia financially and militarily backing new separatist movements in compact settlements such as Akhalkalaki (Armenians) or Marneuli (Azerbaijanis) like it supported Abkhazia and Ossetia, thus destabilizing Georgia when it is convenient for Moscow. Convenience for Moscow to once again master sowing discord in Georgian society relies on political developments. However, since Russia has always been open about its position regarding Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, the right time would seem any event bringing Georgia closer to the Western influence, which Kremlin finds a threat to Russia's interests in the region.

Ethnic minorities who lack identification with the Georgian State will be easier to manipulate by an external force such as Russia. Schweller argues that under responding to threats is equally dangerous as overreactions to threats. Georgian State has done both. Most importantly, as Schweller argues, states assess and adapt to changes in their external environment partly due to their specific domestic structures and political institutions. Georgia's domestic structure does not limit itself to ethnic minorities' lack of integration but also includes the lack of elite cohesion and political polarization. As Norrin M. Ripsman states, to influence policy, domestic actors need to be able to provide a sufficient payoff to policymakers if they do not like the policy. The payoff from ethnic minority groups in Georgia would be the repeating scenario of occupied regions. Starting with calls for wider autonomy and alignment with Russian forces.

According to Schweller, balancing means the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilization or the forging of alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or political and military domination of the State by a foreign power or coalition. "Balancing exists only when the stakes concern some form of political subjugation or, more directly, the seizure of territory, either one's homeland or vital interests abroad (e.g., sea-lanes, allies, colonies, etc.). Thus, balancing requires that states target their military hardware at each other in preparation for a potential war."²¹

It is undeniable that stakes in Georgia's case concern vital interests, such as territorial integrity/sovereignty. It is also evident that Georgia could not create military power or forge alliances to prevent territorial occupation or political domination from the Russian Federation. After the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, Georgia lost approximately 20% of its territory due to the Russian occupation. But Schweller continues by quoting Jack Levy and pointing out that "it would not be balancing if war is forced on the potential balancer by a direct military attack by the aggressor."

Schweller argues that balancing states' choices depends on several reasons, including domestic politics/social cohesion as an important factor. Schweller presents us with four distinct categories of balancing and under balancing: Appropriate balancing happens when the target is a dangerous aggressor, appeasement is not an option, and State's military capabilities are vital to counter the threat; Inappropriate balancing, also called overbalancing, occurs when the target is not the aggressor but is perceived as one when in reality target is oriented at defense and tries to maximize its security. In the case of overbalancing, the wrong perception causes costly armament; Nonbalancing is one more likely scenario that Schweller identifies, and it is usually either buck-passing, bandwagoning, distancing, or

²¹ Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing", *International Security* 29, no. 2, 2004, p 166.

hiding behavior from the State; The last category is under balancing when as in case of appropriate balancing appeasement is not an option and State needs to undertake measures to counter a threat but does not.

External threat as an independent variable: The nature and extent of threats that Georgia faces from the Russian Federation.

Neoclassical realist theory argues: "the more imminent the threat or opportunity and the more dangerous the threat, the more restrictive the state's strategic environment is."²² The restrictive environment does not leave Georgia with many policy choices since the country faces direct threats from Russian Federation. Georgian State's material capabilities or relative power are significantly less than Russia's. Ironically, Georgia's increased "Westernization" is the issue Russia sees as a threat to regional order. Euro-Atlantic integration is the Georgian State's declared foreign policy to balance threats stemming from the Kremlin.

Russian occupation.

State Security Service of Georgia, an internal intelligence agency in the State responsible for security environment and threat assessment, publishes annual reports. 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 reports which are available on the service's website, repeatedly underline threats stemming from the Russian occupation as the main challenge to Georgia's security. In the Security Review of 2018, Giorgi

²² Ripsman, Taliaferro, Lobell "*Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*", p 52.

Bilanishvili, a researcher from "Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, "used the phrase "existential threat "while discussing Russia's role in Georgian security: "Obviously, Russia's destructive activities here are the most important issue in relation to Georgia's security environment. At the moment, the situation is not very challenging, but it is very complicated with the risk of deterioration considering Russia's negative impact, first and foremost. This should be taken into consideration very scrupulously in the process of planning Georgia's national security. " ²³

Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Russia has occupied a fifth of Georgian territory; 20% of Georgian land is now under the Russian Federation's effective control. Russian occupying forces impose restrictions on freedom of movement, and ethnic Georgians, at most, are not allowed to enter occupied zones. Georgian military or law enforcement agencies cannot access the territory, nor does the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, which has the mandate to monitor the security environment on the ground but is not allowed to do so by the de facto authorities in occupied regions.

State Security Service of Georgia, in a 2018 report, states that occupation and illegal presence of the Russian military forces in the occupied regions represent a major threat to Georgia. In this regard, the increasing militarization of occupied territories, discrimination of Georgian population on ethnic grounds, restriction of freedom of movement of the population and the unofficial annexation process carried out by Russia remain the main challenges for the State."

With the Russian Southern Military District on the ground, and Federal Security Service semi-military bases with Russian FSB personnel alongside the occupation line in Georgia, the State does not enjoy a

²³ Giorgi Bilanishvili, "Assessment of the Major Threats to Georgia Based on the Annual Reports of the State Security Service", Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi, 2018, p 7.

wide range of policy options. Especially because Moscow has never committed to non-use of force against Georgia, the EU brokered Six-point ceasefire agreement in 2008 was the only document that indicated responsibility for just immediate non-use of force.

Russian Hybrid Interference in Georgia.

Mikael Wigell defines "hybrid interference" as "the synchronized use of multiple non-military means of interference tailored to heighten divisions within target societies."²⁴ As Wigell continues to explain, hybrid interference is used by one State to interfere in the domestic politics of another state to shape perceptions, paralyze the decision-making capacity of the State, and also make society, by shaped perceptions, act voluntarily following the agenda of the "hybrid agent." Hybrid interference includes a toolkit of non-kinetic capabilities which the State controls. Wigell identifies three instrumental approaches to hybrid interference: clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics, and disinformation.²⁵ Russian Federation successfully uses the abovementioned instruments in Georgia.

Clandestine diplomacy is "a form of covert action that involves cultivating a network of subversive organizations, movements, and individuals to exacerbate existing tensions within the target country. Supporting radical or secessionist political parties, cultivating fifth columns and other agents of influence, and encouraging protest movements are means used to undermine support for central Government and to promote political polarization. The idea is to exploit existing political pressure points—such as religious or ethnic divisions, anti-government and anti-establishment sentiments, or

²⁴ Mikael Wigell, "Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy", *International Affairs* (London) 95, no. 3, 2019, p 262.

²⁵ Wigell, "Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy" p 263.

topical political sensitivities—in order to promote divisions and challenge the credibility of the Government."²⁶ Russia's support for separatist movements in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, transforming them into proxy regimes and maintaining total control on the political establishment of de facto regions to this date, is a classic example of what Wigell calls clandestine diplomacy. However, Russia did not limit itself to occupied regions of Georgia – the Russian investigative project "Dossier Center" released a report in August 2020, claiming that the Georgian political party "Alliance of Patriots" was backed by Russia during the parliamentary election campaign. According to the "Dossier Center," the key coordinating role with the following party is played by the Presidential Directorate for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries, formed by Vladimir Putin in 2005. "Alliance of Patriots" is the party that frequently voices pro-Russian narratives in Georgia and wants to achieve setting an issue of Georgian neutrality on the political agenda. Neutrality would mean for Georgia that the State will not become a NATO member in the future; this is the Kremlin's objective. The party functions as a prototypical fifth column that probably maintains covert links to the Russian Federation. However, there has been no investigation or legal case against the "Alliance of Patriots," and the party continues to play a vital role in spreading Russian propaganda narratives.

Another instrument outlined by Wigell is Geoeconomics, which he defines as "the use of economic means to interfere strategically in target countries."²⁷ Georgian dependence on the Russian economy is one of the most problematic issues for the State. Moreover, economic leverage has been used by the Russian Federation against Georgia on numerous occasions. According to Transparency International Georgia, State's dependence on the Russian economy remains an important challenge to Georgia's

²⁶ Wigell, *“Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy”* p 263.

²⁷ Wigell, *“Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy”* p 264.

security. High dependence of Georgian wine export on the Russian market, tourists visiting Georgia, and the import of Russian wheat are among the issues outlined by the organization as the most problematic. Despite positive dynamics in reducing Georgia's energy dependence on Russian resources, foreign trade, tourism, and remittances sent by emigrants are the areas that still threaten Georgian security. Russia has successfully used economic leverage against the country in different cases: "For example, in 2006 Russia cut off natural gas and electricity supplies to Georgia, then it banned the export of products from Georgia to Russia. At the end of the year, it started deporting Georgian citizens. After the events of June 20, 2019, the Kremlin banned flights from Russia to Georgia, and this restriction is still in force."²⁸

The last category of instruments that Wigell presents is disinformation. The 2019 report "Anti-Western Propaganda" by Media Development Foundation (MDF) explains the structure of anti-Western narratives used by Russian propaganda in Georgia. MDF argues that there are three stages: sowing fears, instilling despairs, and then offering solutions. Fears are usually linked with the fear of war, irritating Russia, and, interestingly, the fear of losing "identity." At the despair level, Russian propaganda undermines Western institutions by pointing to the message that the West is incapable of protecting Georgia. Russia then provides society with solutions for the problems it has created: dialogue with Russia, reintegration in the Russian orbit, and notably, Russia as an orthodox country guarantying Georgian identity on the religious level. Russia relies on representatives of the Georgian orthodox church for developing and disseminating narratives aimed at making the Georgian public voluntarily take steps that fit with Russia's strategic objectives. Orthodoxy is the similarity between Georgian and Russian societies that the Kremlin uses as one of the main pressure points. MDF report

²⁸ Transparency International Georgia, <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-trends-and-threats>.

quotes several clerics from Georgia who publicly disseminate messages like: "In the eternal battle between evil and good that is underway in the world, Orthodox Christian Russia is on the one side of the divide while the entire West under the leadership of the USA is on the other side. Because of this, this battle is also called the confrontation between Orthodox Christianity and the Satanists... The integration into Russia 236 years ago saved Georgians from the physical annihilation and the mental degradation from Islamization: Within the USSR, the Georgian Soviet Republic experienced unprecedented prosperity and revival."²⁹ According to Orysia Lutsevych from "Russia and Eurasia Programme," the pro-Russia Eurasia institute in Tbilisi, headed by Gulbat Rtskhiladze, was organizing protests and voiced anti -EU anti-NATO narratives, which afterward was widely publicized through the Russian state-funded Caucasus Research Network. One more point that Orysia makes is the Orthodox parents' committee in Georgia, modeled on the Russian Parent Committee of Schoolchildren. The group is aimed at voicing anti-Western narratives. Group members occasionally attack LGBTQ and feminist groups and point to the "moral decay" of societies because of Western-imposed "values."

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SSSG report states that RF exploits Georgia's occupied regions for its economic, financial, and military goals. Service mentions that de facto leaders of both Georgian regions frequently visit occupied regions of Ukraine and launch cooperation with "mutual assistance" intentions, including military assistance. SSSG report also refers to the scheduled rotations, armament modernization, and military-technical equipment conducted by the 7th and 4th military bases of the Russian Southern Military District on Georgian territory. In terms of the security environment in Georgia, SSSG also outlines that the

²⁹ Tamar Kintsurashvili, Sopho Gelava, "*Anti-Western Propaganda*", Media Development Foundation (MDF), 2020, p 38.

³⁰ Orysia Lutsevych, "*Agents of the Russian World Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*", Russia and Eurasia Programme, 2016, pp 21-26.

"Occupation forces and de facto regimes have been deliberately creating different types of artificial barriers in terms of restriction of freedom of movement of the local population. The illegal process of so-called Borderization, manifested in the installation of barbwire, fences, and so-called anti-fire dividing lines, as well as so-called border signs, etc., has continued. In the reporting period, the occupation forces have continued illegal detentions. The State Security Service has registered 100 facts of illegal detention in the direction of the occupied Tskhinvali region and 28 facts of illegal detention toward occupied Abkhazia."³¹

State Security Service also mentions that in terms of "hybrid warfare," foreign special services aim to confront various ethnic and religious groups residing in Georgia against each other. SSSG enlists several dimensions of Russia's "hybrid warfare" against Georgia. The list includes encouraging anti-Western sentiments among the population; deteriorating bilateral relations of Georgia with the countries of the region and strategic partners; damaging the image of Georgia as being a democratic and stable country; obtaining leverage for economic influence; supporting constant internal political tensions; stimulating uncertainty and nihilism in the society. "In the course of the "hybrid warfare," destructive political forces and social groups, as well as the media and social networks, have been actively exploited by the interested parties. During the reporting period, the disinformation campaign has been an important tool of "hybrid warfare." Polarization of the population, disseminating false opinions and fear, as well as influencing important processes by manipulating social opinion have been deliberately conducted through fake news, distorting facts, and falsification of history."³²

So-called "Borderization" as a tool of hybrid interference.

³¹ State Security Service of Georgia, *Report*, 2018.

³² State Security Service of Georgia, *Report*, 2018, pp 10-11.

So-called "Borderization" is unique and does not have many analogies, including in Ukraine, which also has to deal with the Russian occupation. So-called "Borderization" is also referred to as Russia's "creeping occupation" of Georgia and differs from the occupation in that it expands already occupied territory. So-called "borderization" includes the illegal installment of concertina wires, so-called border signs which read as follows: "Attention, State Border – South Ossetia/Abkhazia," and fire-dividing lines on Georgian territory. People who do this are armed Russian Federal Security Service personnel living in Russian FSB semi-military bases in occupied regions and sometimes de-facto military personnel from the regions. So-called "borderization" does not follow any concrete map and usually happens unexpectedly. Georgian citizens near the occupation line wake up and discover they are either on occupied territory because Russian occupying forces installed concertina wires and demarcated their yards overnight, or their neighbors are "on the other side." They cannot visit them without so-called passports anymore.

So-called "Borderization" does not aim just to take more Georgian land. With its military presence on the ground, Russia could even take the whole of Georgia in a matter of a day. "Borderization" is a political statement that Russian Federation does not respect Georgia's sovereignty or territorial integrity. Second, it demonstrates the power and indicates that Russia will not let Georgia follow its foreign policy priorities without consequences from Moscow. Additionally, "borderization" is constant pressure on the Georgian political establishment and has a message for the Georgian population. Russian Federation wants Georgians to know that their political leadership cannot protect them and also demonstrate that Georgia's Western foreign policy vector has consequences for its citizens. The latter fits in the general framework of the objectives that Russian disinformation aims to achieve in the country; this would be seeing Russia as a "partner" for Georgia without an alternative. So-called "borderization" also affects ethnic minority groups of Ossetians and Abkhazians, and they cannot cross

occupation lines either; FSB "border guards" usually do not grant them access to Georgian Central Government Controlled territory.

"Borderization also strengthens two Kremlin narratives being disseminated in Georgia: first, that Georgia's Western allies (especially NATO) are unwilling or unable to help it restore its territorial integrity, making Euro-Atlantic integration pointless; and second, that Russia holds all the cards and therefore the Georgian Government has no choice but to make concessions in the hope of regaining sovereignty over the separatist regions. Moscow hopes that in the long run, this dilemma will prompt Georgia to cease its Euro-Atlantic integration and return to the Russian sphere of influence."³³

"Borderization" usually causes tensions on a local level. People are discontent with Government, distrust among the citizens grows, and they gradually lose trust in institutions responsible for citizen protection (Ministry of Interior of Georgia, State Security Service, Ministry of Defense). People near the occupation line are usually the most vulnerable to the threat stemming from "borderization," in the realm of distrust and undermined government authority; they also carry the risk of potentially aligning with Russia by applying for a Russian passport, for example. This way, Georgia loses its citizens and territory and also risks instability on the ground.

"Borderization" could be analyzed in the context of ethnic minority groups other than Abkhazians and Ossetians in Georgia. They also get the message that Russia is "invincible," can and does everything it wants on Georgian territory, so they might be motivated to ask for protectionism and assistance in their secessionist movement—especially acknowledging the level of these groups' integrity and identification with the Georgian State.

³³ Kornely Kakachia, Levan Kakhishvili, Joseph Larsen, Mariam Grigalashvili, GIP Policy Paper: "Mitigating Russia's Borderization of Georgia: A strategy to contain and engage", Tbilisi Strategic Discussions, Tbilisi, 2017.

Societal fragmentation as the intervening variable: Ethnic minority groups in Georgia.

"Georgia discerns itself from its Transcaucasian neighbors in one main aspect: its ethnically heterogeneous population. "³⁴ Multi-ethnic community in Georgia has become the source of two Russian-supported separatist conflicts and attempted secessionist movements in at least one Georgian region other than Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. Ethnic minority groups who lacked identification with the Georgian State because of the deficit of inclusiveness in the country became the source of conflict, resulting in a continuous status quo starting in the 1990s and ending in 2008 when Russia invaded Georgian territory and established occupation and effective control in two Georgian regions. Minority Rights Group (MRG), a non-governmental international organization, in 2009, one year after Russia's massive military operation in Georgia, stated: "A year and some months after its conflict with the neighboring Russian Federation, Georgia continues to risk instability. Waves of domestic unrest and deep-seated tensions with Russia over the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia may cause the situation in Georgia to deteriorate rapidly."

Ethnic minorities in Georgia do not differ from each other or Georgians in just ethnicity; usually, they are distinct in language and religion from Georgians too. To understand complex layers of minority groups in Georgia, Svante Cornell identifies minorities who ethnically differ from Georgians and sub-ethnic groups among Georgians, such as Mingrelians, Svans, and Adjars, whose "identity is fairly strongly Georgian but with a remaining separate and distinct identity."

³⁴ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p 129.

Georgian national identity is multi-faceted, partly because of the Transcaucasus's history and demographic patterns. Cornell states that Georgian identity's main component is linguistic, with religion coming second, and as a supporting argument for this, he rightfully points to Muslims from Adjara. They do not share a religious component, which would be Orthodox Christianity, but speak Georgian and are considered by most Georgians to be Georgians for this reason. Cornell's observations about language as a critical component of Georgian identity are important for this thesis's aims. It contributes to the view that educational programs focused on diminishing the language barrier among minority groups are one way of increasing identification with the State of latter groups.

The case of Muslims from Adjara is also interesting because they were also tempted to join or develop their separatist movements during the period when Abkhazians and Ossetians started the secessionist movement. However, the autonomous republic of Adjara remained in Georgian statehood.³⁵ An observation that the language component contributed to the greater identification with the Georgian State of Adjarian Muslims than Abkhazians and Ossetians who have their languages and do not speak Georgian would be superficial. However, since the language component is an essential distinction between minorities, it deserves to be acknowledged as one factor in the identification process.

Lasha Markozashvili and Tinatini Dvalishvili observe Samtskhe-Javakheti's ethnic Armenian population's ties with Russia. "Due to high rate of unemployment, the local labor seeks jobs in Russian Federation. For these people, the Russian law on granting citizenship to those Russian-speaking citizens living within the former USSR's borders is quite attractive. Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported cases regarding the mass distribution of Russian passports to the population of Samtskhe-Javakheti (Eka Janashia, 2014). Although the problem has not taken more complicated

³⁵ Cornell, "*Small Nations and Great Powers*", p 166.

forms, a soft Russian policy can find the means to attract people who live in poor social conditions and are less integrated into the Georgian community. "³⁶

Cornell also presents interesting observations about Russian policy regarding minorities in Georgia. Precisely he points to the 1897 census, which he calls an attempt by Russian authorities to deny the existence of a Georgian nation by isolating 11 different "ethnic groups" from the Kartvelian population. Cornell, relying on Georgian scholars, states that "late nineteenth-century Russia adopted a divisive approach to weaken Georgia: the promotion of minorities in the territory."³⁷ He also observes that "the teaching of Russian to the Abkhaz led to Georgian's gradual replacement with Russian as the second language for the Abkhaz."

According to the Minority Rights Group (MRG), a non-governmental international organization, the main languages spoken in Georgia are Georgian, Mingrelian, Svan, Armenian, Azeri, and Russian. Main religions: Georgian Orthodox Christianity (83.4%), Islam (10.7%), Armenian Apostolic Christianity (2.9%), and other faiths, including Judaism, Yezidism, and other Christian denominations. MRG states: "The level of integration of minorities is interlinked with the degree of their knowledge of the Georgian language. By law, knowledge of the official language is a necessary condition for any citizen for employment in the public service, both at the central and regional levels. However, even when minorities are fluent in Georgian, problems with regard to civil and political participation remain. Georgian legislation does not provide for any quotas for the representation of national minorities in government bodies and agencies."

³⁶ Lasha Markozashvili, Tinatini Dvalishvili, *"Russian Smart Power in Georgia"*, 2017, p 181.

³⁷ Cornell, *"Small Nations and Great Powers"*, p 131.

MRG refers to the most recent 2014 census and breaks down the list of the largest ethnic minorities in Georgia: Azerbaijanis 233,000 (6.3%) and Armenians 168,100 (4.5%). Other ethnic groups include Russians 26,500 (0.7%), Ossetians 14,400 (0.4%), Yezidis 12,200 (0.3%), Greeks 5,500 (0.1 %), Kists 5,700 (0.2 %), Assyrians 2,400 (0.1 %), Ukrainians 6,000 (0.2%) as well as small Jewish and Polish communities. Armenians and Azerbaijanis are settled in the regions of Samtkshe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli; notably, they represent the majority on the ground, making them enclaves.

MRG refers to one more group of Georgia's ethnic minorities, Meskhetians. Meskhetians' religion is Muslim, and they were deported to Central Asia in 1944 by Stalin. According to MRG, Meskhetians are seeking repatriation to Georgia. The organization separately provides information about Ossetians in Georgia who do not live in the occupied region of Tskhinvali. MRG claims that according to the 2014 census, the number of Ossetians living in the Georgian Central Government Controlled Territory is 14,400 (0.4 %).

"The absence of a tradition of indigenous statehood accounts for the high degree of multi-ethnicity in post-Soviet Georgia and the low degree of identification with the Georgian State among its various minorities. The Georgians remained one of the least Russified of the Soviet Union's major nationalities and enjoyed de facto domination of the republic's key political and economic posts. This was reflected in the progressive increase in the Georgian share of the republic's population at the expense of minorities. However, Soviet nationalities policy also created a number of autonomous regions in Georgia – autonomous republics for the Abkhaz minority in Abkhazia and the Georgian Muslim population in Ajaria, and an autonomous region in South Ossetia for the Ossetian minority." ³⁸

³⁸ Minority Rights Group, <https://minorityrights.org/country/georgia/>.

An important detail about ethnic minorities in Georgia is that they usually live in compact settlements and are not assimilated. Since they do not speak the Georgian language, they communicate with each other and receive information from either TV channels from their ethnic countries or Russian information sources since Russian was a "lingua franca" during Soviet-Era, and more minorities speak Russian than Georgian. Ethnic minority groups' settlements can be broken down into geographic categories: Armenians are primarily settled in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Azerbaijanis live in Kvemo Kartli, Kists are compactly settled in Pankisi Gorge, Ossetians (other than Tskhinvali) live in Lagodekhi municipality, while other ethnic minority groups enlisted by the MRG are more assimilated and live in the capital city or places which do not represent "enclave"-like settlements.

Settlements in Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli usually enjoy particular representation in local government agencies but do not participate in political processes on a central governmental level. "Influence of minorities on decision-making processes is very low, and in central institutions, levels of minority political representation remain limited. Following the 2016 parliamentary elections, ethnic minorities won 11 seats (7.3 percent) – roughly half of their share of the national population. Minority representation in local Government was also poor until reforms passed in 2006. Local governments now largely reflect the demographics of the regions they represent."³⁹

Compact settlements of ethnic minorities in Georgia living in isolation represent a threat to national security. Ethnic minorities who do not speak Georgian or have elementary language skills and live in compact settlements, keeping minimal contact with outside Georgia, enjoy local control. As David Siroky contends: "the fact that some regions have autonomous structures (in this case, Abkhazia and

³⁹ Minority Rights Group.

South Ossetia) helped them to shore up local control, but importantly the two are distinct because autonomy does not guarantee local control, and local control can exist independently of formal legal provisions."⁴⁰

David Siroky identifies two potentially risky regions regarding ethnic minorities in Georgia: Samtshe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. First is Javakheti, which borders Armenia, a kin state in a way that the region is comprised of ethnic Armenians, is a poorly integrated "country in a country." The author points out that some maps circulated in the region include Javakheti as Armenian territory. According to Siroky, between 1990-2000, Georgian state currency was not used in Javakheti; Russian rubles and Armenian drams were used as a currency. There was a period when for example, the movement United Javakh wanted border readjustment for Javakheti. Siroky rightfully states that at the time, geopolitical circumstances resulted in the lack of external support for Javakheti Armenians, "Armenia needs Georgia more than it needs Armenians in Javakheti," especially in the light of Karabakh developments, but the potential of external actors using ethnic Armenians in Javakheti for Georgia's destabilization in the realm of the extent of lack of integration with Georgian State is significant. ⁴¹

Siroky tells an interesting detail about the conversation that a young Armenian woman in Javakheti had with the research team; she said how she was born in Georgia, Batumi, and married in Armenia, and when she was asked in which district of Armenia was she married, she answered "Here, in Zhdanovakan (which is Georgia)" Perceptions are of paramount importance, Javakheti population has

⁴⁰ David Siroky, "The sources of secessionist war: the interaction of local control and foreign forces in post-Soviet Georgia" p 65.

⁴¹ Siroky, "The sources of secessionist war: the interaction of local control and foreign forces in post-Soviet Georgia", pp 69, 70, 71.

a minimal level of identification with Georgian State which makes them perfect leverage in the hands of external actors interested in destabilizing Georgia, even more than it is.

The second region that Siroky names is Kvemo Kartli. This region borders Azerbaijan and is "composed of over 90% Azeris who live compactly in Rustavi, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Gardabani, Tsalka and Dmanisi areas." Like Armenians in Javakheti, Siroky observes that Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli lack both integration and identification with the Georgian State. They mostly do not speak Georgian. "many local people don't even realize which state they live in ... As the local officials say, many Azerbaijanis looked for the name of Heydar Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan, in the ballot papers."⁴²

Putting aside political developments, the fact that the threat is evident does not leave Georgia in a favorable position. Siroky claims that both regions he refers to mainly depend on the positions of kin states, which would be Armenia and Azerbaijan. These ethnic settlements carry the potential to be transformed into secessionist conflicts in case of external involvement and present an opportunity for being used against the State.

Georgian State's attempts to respond to external threats and ethnic minorities' role in the process.

Euro-Atlantic integration is a strategic choice of the Georgian State aimed at balancing against Russia. Georgia seeks alliances to counter different components of Russia's hybrid interference. Georgia tries to minimize economic and energy dependence on Russia by seeking EU membership. The state

⁴² Siroky, "The sources of secessionist war: the interaction of local control and foreign forces in post-Soviet Georgia", p 72.

attempts to increase military capabilities with the assistance of NATO allies. Georgian State attempts to respond to external threats and ethnic minorities' role in the process.

Randal L. Schweller states that balancing behavior requires elite consensus that the State confronts a serious threat that must be checked by internal or external means.⁴³ He lists a set of questions that are important in identifying the level of elite cohesion. I decided to apply the questions to the ethnic minority groups in Georgia because I believe the questions help determine the level of elite and social cohesion. Two important questions I decided to address are: 1 Do social minorities agree that there is an external threat? Moreover, do they agree about the nature and extent of the threat 2 If they agree on the external threat, its nature, and extent, do they agree on which policy is effective to counter that external threat? I will first outline how the Georgian State answers these questions. Then I will argue that ethnic minority groups are either not following the Georgian State's official position or have the potential not to be.

"The Threat Assessment Document," developed by the Ministry of Defense of Georgia and approved by the Government of Georgia, is characterized by the ministry as a fundamental conceptual document that identifies existing threats to the State. A non-classified version of the document underlines the centrality of threats stemming from the Russian Federation against the national interests of Georgia. MOD and the Georgian Government state that Russia's primary goal is to hamper the "realization of the Euro-Atlantic choice of Georgia and to forcefully bring Georgia back into the Russian sphere of influence." ⁴⁴

⁴³ Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing*, P173.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Defense of Georgia, "Threat Assessment Document", <https://mod.gov.ge/en/page/71/the-threat-assessment-document>, Tbilisi.

Georgian Government frames countries' Euro-Atlantic integration as a national security issue and believes that the Russian occupation of two Georgian regions was not an act aimed at taking over the land or recognizing the so-called independence of proxy regimes but rather a step focused at influencing the Georgian State's Western foreign policy. Official Tbilisi's agreed position on the nature of the threat the country faces is the following: Russian Federation wants to forcefully return Georgia to its sphere of influence by hampering Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration using various tools, including occupation and hybrid interference in general.

Georgia is taking concrete steps regarding NATO membership. We can assume that the Georgian State sees EU and NATO membership as a strategic choice against an alternative of returning to Russian orbit. From the Georgian State's perspective, European Union would minimize Georgia's economic dependence on Russia, and NATO membership would provide the country with security guarantees and increased military capabilities. According to Atlantic's Neil Hauer: "Georgia remains the top non-NATO contributor of troops to the coalition mission in Afghanistan, with 885 soldiers in the country, and previously stationed the third-largest contingent of soldiers in Iraq during that country's occupation, after the United States and Britain."⁴⁵ Also, Georgia plans to submit an official application for membership in the EU in 2024.⁴⁶

National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Georgia summarized the poll results of 2019 in the press release. NDI's former Resident Director in Georgia, Laura Thornton, emphasized trends regarding ethnic minorities' support/disapproval of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path with civil. ge of Georgia. Thornton underlined that while Armenian settlements in Georgia mostly strongly opposed Georgia's

⁴⁵ Neil Hauer, "*The West Takes NATO for Granted. One Country Still Wants In*", The Atlantic, 2019.

⁴⁶ Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Foreign Policy of Georgia.

NATO membership, Azerbaijani settlements opposed to answering the question or stated that they did not have any answer.⁴⁷

Simultaneously, poll results indicated that overall support for EU and NATO membership in the Georgian public remained stable and high – 78 and 71 percent, respectively, in 2019.⁴⁸ Apart from the level of support for the State's declared foreign policy among the Georgian public, including minority groups, NDI calculated that in Armenian and Azerbaijani settlements, only 3 and 8 percent viewed Russian military aggression as a threat to Georgian security. At the same time, "the majority of Georgians believes Russia is a top security threat to the country, with 31 percent naming Russian military aggression, 11 percent occupation, and 10 percent Russian propaganda."

Open Society Georgia Foundation published a Study of the Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives in Political Life in 2019 and concluded: "Ethnic minority representatives do not have a sense of political identity with the State; their majority is, in fact, distanced from the Georgian public and leads somewhat autonomous or, in a worst-case scenario, excluded life. The above noted has various reasons, among which the language barrier is the leading one: the absolute majority of ethnically non-Georgian citizens in densely populated areas do not know the state language (National Democratic Institute – NDI, 2018). Russian language, which was the only communication language with other ethnic groups in the Soviet period, significantly lost its position during the last fifteen years.

⁴⁷ Otto Kobakhidze, Civil.ge, <https://civil.ge/archives/321361>, 2019.

⁴⁸ National Democratic Institute Georgia, Press release, *NDI Poll: EU and NATO Support Remains Strong but Threatened by Russia and Perception of Harm to Culture and Values; Armenian and Azeri Communities Respond Differently to NATO Membership*, Tbilisi, 2019.

Accordingly, representatives of ethnic minorities cannot receive full information on the processes going on in the country, and more often, they are formally present in the higher legislative body."⁴⁹

"Armenians from Samtskhe-Javakheti know very little about European integration and the Association Agreement signed between the EU and Georgia in 2015. Since many people use mostly Russian media, Armenians are not as keen on the idea of European integration as many Georgians are, and they believe good ties with Russia are a priority - an opinion not widely shared in the rest of the country. This leads to a sentiment of lack of engagement with Georgia, which creates stereotypes and a feeling of minorities siding with outsiders, thus hampering the integration of Armenians into society."⁵⁰

Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy is how the state chose to counter Russian attempts to return Georgia to the Kremlin influence. From the perspective of military capabilities, economic development, or role in the international system, Georgia has limited capabilities and depends on alliances to balance against Russia. Georgia can cooperate with the West or return to the Russian sphere of influence. One can argue that the latter does not mean cooperating with Russia; it means losing national sovereignty for Georgia.

Georgia's Pro-Western foreign policy has several dimensions. Georgia wants to become a NATO member for military purposes, as the state cannot increase military capabilities on its own. Official Tbilisi has been cooperating with NATO allies, as stated in the thesis. The cooperation resulted in

⁴⁹ Open Society Georgia Foundation, "*Study of the Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives in Political Life*", Tbilisi, 2019, p 3.

⁵⁰ Sandra Veloy Mateu, "*The Armenian Minority in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia, Civic Integration and its barriers*", Policy Paper, Tbilisi, 2016, p 25.

sharing military tactics, various training programs for Georgian military personnel, and financial assistance for different programs to modernize Georgian armed forces.

Georgia is trying to minimize Energy and Economy dependence on Russia through close cooperation with the EU. Georgia attempts to diversify economic markets, not depend on the Russian market for exports, and achieve financial stability without sacrificing the state's national interests. Increased Military capabilities and relative economic independence from Russia are two critical factors on Georgia's way to maintaining political independence from Moscow. Unsurprisingly, Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia primarily focus on discrediting Western institutions and organizations. Moscow knows that the more the Georgian state minimizes economic dependence on Russia, Kremlin loses essential leverage. Georgia's cooperation with the West is disturbing to Vladimir Putin since he does not appreciate external support for the country, which the president sees as Russia's "sunny Georgia" (solnechnaya gruzia), not an independent state, but the Kremlin belonging.

Ethnic minorities' ambivalence toward western orientation, affinity toward Russia, and alienation from Georgia can impact Georgia's ability to balance against Russia on several levels effectively.

Firstly, by the current degree of ethnic minorities' alienation from Georgia, the state risks additional separatist enclaves calling for secession from the Georgian state. As in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia, the external actor - Russia, gets the chance to use alienated ethnic minorities to destabilize Georgia again. The probability of one more Russian-backed armed conflict poses significant risks to the Georgian state's national security. Most importantly, it negatively affects Georgia's ability to balance against Russia since it creates favorable circumstances for Russian military operations. More "frozen conflicts" on Georgian soil will also hinder Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration process since the state

will be focused on internal conflicts, and international cooperation will likely be less active than under different circumstances.

Secondly, ethnic minorities' ambivalence toward Georgia's western orientation does not mean they simply do not want European integration. In Georgian reality, this means that the latter minority groups favor Georgia's return to the Russian sphere of influence, which is the primary objective of Russian foreign policy regarding Georgia that the official Tbilisi aims to counter. At the same time, it completely contradicts Georgia's foreign policy objectives. Russia will hold additional bargaining tools for affecting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course, as it had done in the late '90s when Georgia became a CIS member hoping to restore influence in Russian-controlled Abkhazia.

Thirdly, in practical terms, ethnic minorities' affinity toward Russia could result in "Russian passportization," a method that Kremlin has been using since the early 2000s to justify military interventions in countries like Ukraine and Georgia by claiming intervention was aimed at protecting Russian citizens. Suppose ethnic minorities feel further alienated from the Georgian state and vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaigns. In that case, they pose the risk of applying for Russian citizenship, as people from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali did. This way, Russia gets the leverage by having Russian citizens "to protect" in compact settlements on Georgian territory, other than already occupied territory. Russia can fuel separatism in ethnic minority enclaves and then conduct a military operation in the name of protecting them if Georgia applies for EU membership and prospects of integrating into the organization become real. We witnessed a similar scenario in 2014 during the Ukraine events when Moscow used ethnic Russians in Crimea to annex the peninsula.

Georgia will not be able to mobilize society against external threats in the realm of societal fragmentation. Also, if ethnic minorities continue to be disintegrated from the state, with the current degree of affinity with Russia, they will not allow the Georgian State to implement foreign policy choices to balance against Russia; simply, they will not even see Russia as a threat to Georgian security.

Greater integration of ethnic minority groups via quotas for government jobs and state language teaching programs.

Public Defenders office of Georgia, in its 2018 report, outlined two critical recommendations to the Georgian Government: The first recommendation referred to educational activities and campaigns to eradicate the influence of Russian TV-Channels and anti-western propaganda in compact settlements of minorities, and the second recommendation included the increased role of ethnic minorities in the decision-making process in state agencies.

Possible measures for minorities' greater integration involve increased political representation of ethnic minorities in central government institutions to ensure their participation in the decision-making process and increased curricular activities to teach Georgian to ethnic minority groups. I argue that the measures presented cannot be taken separately since they are intertwined. Notably, the Georgian language is a state language; government institutions operate and work in this language, thus placing ethnic minorities in decision-making positions in the Georgian Government without teaching them Georgian will be useless, if not even impossible.

However, while Abkhazians enjoyed a certain degree of representability, they still seceded from Georgia and engaged in separatist conflict. Still, two crucial distinctions exist: firstly, Abkhazians enjoyed participation at a local level, not in a central government. Secondly, a language component identical to the wider Georgian public was also missing in Abkhazia. The same applies to Tskhinvali. In both cases, conflicts were picked when Zviad Gamsakhurdia voiced an ethnocentric approach.

Quotas included in the legal framework can increase the number of ethnic minority representatives in government jobs. The legal framework must provide responsibility on the political party's behalf to include ethnic minority community members on their lists if they want to receive state funding. This will incentivize political parties to seek regional representatives who might even be local communities' leaders and wish to be included in the decision-making process. Ethnic minority groups lack identification with State because they live in almost complete isolation, watch Russian TV-Channels broadcasting news about "Great Russia," and are not informed nor included in Georgia's political life. If inclusiveness grows, community members will first have an opportunity to represent the interests of their communities on a central government level, not just local municipalities. Also, they can serve as agents between the wider Georgian political establishment and members of settlements, and they can be used for information dissemination. Local leaders with certain authority could become a channel between Government and excluded society. After being included in the process, ethnic minority representatives themselves will potentially feel an affiliation with the Government on a psychological level. Trust in state institutions might grow if they become part of this environment.

Teaching ethnic minorities the Georgian language has tremendous importance. Firstly, knowing the Georgian language is mandatory to be accepted at central government jobs. Also, language fluency

will open doors for community members to be involved in educational programs, universities, and Georgian schools. It will increase communication between the Georgian public and ethnic minority groups. Improved communication can bring society together and create a sense of unity and belonging on a psychological level. Suppose ethnic minority groups speak the proper Georgian language. In that case, they can benefit from various programs that the State offers to its citizens, including open spots of jobs in government agencies and education funding. While benefiting from State services and being part of the decision-making process, they will have less incentive to align with the adversary or seek external assistance to establish a separatist regime.

Conclusion

Neoclassical realism argues that systemic structure and structural modifiers set the parameters for the states' likely strategic choices. Geography as a structural modifier in the case of Georgia creates constraints for the State. Georgia differs from Russia in GDP, defense spending, the size of armed forces, population, and territory size. Georgia is dependent on the Russian economy and energy resources. Georgian States' power and position in the international system is minor, especially compared to Russia's and its relative share of material capabilities. According to neoclassical realism, decision-making and policy implementation are affected domestically by state-society relations. Since the Georgian State is incapable of becoming resilient to the threats stemming from Russian Federation, it should try to achieve more attainable goals. Georgia is not capable of all at once becoming resilient to Russian interference. However, greater integration of ethnic minority groups in political life via

quotas for government jobs and diminished language barrier might contribute to Russia having less leverage to affect Georgia's foreign policy.

Russian Federation attempted to affect Georgia's foreign policy choices by using ethnic minority groups, recognizing the so-called independence of two Georgian regions after the 2008 August War and using them to punish Georgian State for its choice to align with the West. Ethnic minorities' lack of identification with Georgia and their heightened susceptibility to Russian disinformation were among the factors that enabled Russia to ignite separatism in Georgian regions during the 1990s, further increasing societal fragmentation. Russia created fertile ground for military intervention by targeting ethnic minorities who did not identify themselves as members of the Georgian State, creating an illusion of helping them achieve independence, keeping conflicts mostly frozen before August 2008, and preserving the status quo before the right time for Kremlin objectives. Notably, 2008 was the same year the NATO Bucharest Summit took place, and the prospect of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration became more real since the promise was made that one day the country with Ukraine would become a member of the organization.

Georgia's relative material power capabilities do not put the State in a position to pursue ambitious foreign policy. Nor does the external strategic environment give the country a wide range of foreign policy choices to counter threats stemming from the Russian Federation. Georgia's case is an interesting one in several ways: Firstly, the country has Russian military and semi-military bases on the territory, Russian troops are engaged in military drills that can escalate any minute, it has a high level of economic and energy dependence on Russian Federation, faces "borderization" process as a manifestation of Russia's hybrid interference, represents the post-Soviet country and has had ties with several forms of Russia (Russian Empire, Soviet Russia, Putin's Russia) for decades and still, the

country is striving for Euro-Atlantic integration. While the Georgian State sees countries' membership in NATO or EU to balance risks stemming from Moscow, Kremlin sees Georgia as its "belonging" and pursues policies to hinder Georgia's Westernization. Georgia also differs from South Caucasian states and has a distinct national identity. Also, it is one of the most multi-ethnic communities in the region. What Georgia sees as a solution is the problem or source of additional pressure from Russia simultaneously. This thesis did not aim to analyze the effectiveness of Georgia's foreign policy, but rather what additional measures can Georgian State take to counter Russian hybrid interference where it can. This paper did not aim to provide sophisticated policy recommendations to the Georgian State; instead, the goal was to explore possibilities for the State and to identify potential spheres where specific measures can be taken. Georgia cannot become fully resilient to Russian threats; this is almost impossible. However, by leaving the ethnic minorities issue unwatched, Georgia risks more occupied regions. Trying to integrate ethnic minorities into Georgian political life cannot eliminate risks. Still, it can help the State minimize the grave results of Russia's involvement/impact in compact settlements.

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