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# 11. The choice of independent Georgia

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*Alexander Rondeli\**

## I. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave birth to 14 independent republics with little or no experience of modern independent statehood and a post-imperial Russia as a struggling but still powerful neighbour. Georgia was one of those republics, and was confronted first with the issue of survival and security and later with the choice of strategic orientation. This chapter describes how a small and weak independent Georgia, almost a quasi-state torn apart by internal contradictions and economic problems, has struggled to define its strategic orientation and main national security and foreign policy priorities. The objective is to identify alternatives that Georgia may consider in the process of strategic decision making and to pinpoint the factors that determine its strategic and security choices. Has Georgia chosen its political orientation? If it has, is its choice realistic and sustainable or is it based on political idealism and lack of sufficient strategic experience? The question of political realism is particularly important for a country like Georgia, which has found itself part not of the globalized and pluralistic world, but instead of the post-Soviet space still dominated by principles of nationalism and even aggressive militarism.

After the short period of so-called strategic idealism that characterized the early days of independence, Georgia began to develop an increasingly realistic foreign policy, which has been less motivated by the fear of Russia and not solely driven by the short-term survival agenda.

The strategic idealism of the young Georgian state was characterized by the dominance of what Stephen Jones calls cultural paradigms.<sup>1</sup> These are traditional Georgian values, perceptions and attitudes towards foreign peoples and states and the outside world in general. These values often coloured the judgement of the Georgian authorities which, together with their lack of political experience and populism, led the country in the early 1990s into strategic wish-

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jones offers a new and stimulating argument about the possible connection of Georgia's political culture with its foreign policy. Jones' interpretation of political culture, as he admits, is rather narrow and focused on traditional values, which he calls Georgian cultural paradigms or global paradigms. They explain the role of national identity in foreign policy and will be the reference points for any foreign policy 'ideology' that may emerge in the future. These global paradigms, according to Jones, are the religious identity of a Christian nation; the Western identity of Europeaness; pan-Caucasianism as a vague regional identity; and rejection of Russia. Jones, S., 'The role of cultural paradigms in Georgian foreign policy' (manuscript), Mount Holyoke College, Mass., 1999. For the last paradigm the term 'fear of Russia' is perhaps more appropriate than 'rejection'.

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ful thinking or strategic idealism. Since the return of President Eduard Shevardnadze in 1992 and the relative stabilization of the country by the mid-1990s, the Georgian elite has shown a better understanding of the surrounding geopolitical environment and begun to promote a cautious but nevertheless consistently Western-oriented foreign policy.

By the late 1990s it became clear that Georgia's foreign policy was largely determined by two main circumstances. One is its regional context and its especially strong dependence on a volatile neighbouring Russia, and the second is its internal weakness and disunity, which limits its ability to make independent and confident foreign policy choices. Under these circumstances the achievement of Georgia's strategic goals, such as integration with Europe and increased regional cooperation, seems extremely complicated. The authorities, however, consider participation in large international economic projects, such as Caspian Sea energy projects and transport corridors, to be decisive in the achievement of these goals. The following main foreign policy orientations can therefore be outlined: (a) the re-establishment of the territorial integrity of the country; (b) friendly, balanced relations with all neighbouring countries; (c) the reduction of the Russian military presence on Georgian territory; (d) integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures; (e) the development of regional cooperation within the region; (f) the internationalization of local conflicts in the region; (g) attracting foreign economic interests to Georgia and the region; and (h) participation in regional economic projects.

Until 2000 the Georgian authorities refrained from officially publishing their concept of the country's security and political orientation. There was no official document arguing the government's vision of Georgia's future development, strategy and political orientation. The work of devising a concept of national security started in 1996 but has yet to be completed. One factor explaining the delay has been a lack of internal consensus on many important issues, both among the public and among the ruling elite. Another factor was the unwillingness of the authorities to annoy neighbouring Russia with loud pro-Western statements.

At last, in October 2000 a document prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia entitled 'Georgia and the world: a vision and strategy for the future' was presented by the government at the international conference on Georgia and its Partners: Directions for the New Millennium, held in Tbilisi.<sup>2</sup> It is an attempt to clearly define Georgia's strategic goals and objectives. It had been approved by the National Security Council.

The document states that an independent, prosperous, stable and unified Georgia is clearly in the best interests of its neighbours and that 'this applies especially to Georgia's relations with the Russian Federation, with which Georgia seeks the same stable and harmonious relationship that it enjoys with other countries. Georgia poses no threat to its neighbours and intends to play a positive role in the region's economic growth and political development'. It

<sup>2</sup> Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Georgia and the world: a vision and strategy for the future', Tbilisi, Oct. 2000, pp. 3–4 (in English).

also declares that ‘the highest priority of Georgian foreign policy is to achieve full integration in the European political, economic and security structures, thus fulfilling the historical aspiration of the Georgian nation to participate fully in the European Community’ and that ‘deepening cooperation with the [European Union] represents a paramount aim of Georgian foreign policy’. The following statement in the document stresses Georgia’s pro-Western orientation: ‘Georgia considers cooperation with the United States of America and European countries as a main segment of the strategy of integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures’.<sup>3</sup>

The following sections briefly describe the main political events that illustrate Georgia’s recent strategic choices and analyse Georgia’s behaviour as a small state, its relations with its powerful neighbour, Russia, and the impact of regional oil politics.

## II. Recent political developments

An account of Georgia’s most recent history and important political decisions illustrates the development of its strategic orientation better than any analysis of official documents or the limited scholarly work available. This section describes briefly the events that determined and shaped Georgia’s national security interests and the character of its foreign policy.

In April 1991 Georgia declared independence without being recognized by the international community. In December of the same year the dissolution of the Soviet Union was officially announced, while in Georgia the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was ousted as a result of a military revolt. For a short period Georgia was ruled by a Military Council, which in March 1992 decided to invite Eduard Shevardnadze, former Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, back to Georgia. After Shevardnadze’s return the process of Georgia’s achieving international recognition was begun. In 1992 Georgia joined the United Nations, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE, which in 1995 became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the OSCE) and several other international organizations.

At the same time, separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia began to gain momentum as a result of multiple factors, the main one being Russian military and political support to these movements, and another the clumsy nationalism developed under President Gamsakhurdia. The result was the defeat of the Georgian forces in Abkhazia in 1993. Russia demanded that Georgia join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Shevardnadze was forced to sign an agreement allowing Russian military bases to remain on Georgian territory for 25 years. In 1992–93 Georgia had been against joining the CIS, but by the end of 1993 Russian coercive diplomacy had resulted in its eventually joining.<sup>4</sup> In 1994 Georgia and Russia signed a bilateral agreement on friendship

<sup>3</sup> ‘Georgia and the world: a vision and strategy for the future’ (note 2), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Kortunov, A., ‘Russia, the near abroad and the West’, ed. G. Lapidus, *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation* (Westview Press: Boulder, Colo., 1995), pp. 172–73.

and cooperation, which was ratified only by the Georgian Parliament: the Russian Duma has yet to ratify this already outdated document.<sup>5</sup>

In 1994 Georgia also joined the NATO Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme, which marked the beginning of its relations with NATO. In the same year President Shevardnadze paid an official visit to the USA and established initial contacts with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the two biggest donors which now define the main orientation of Georgia's economic development.

In 1995 Georgia and Russia signed another treaty on Russia's military presence in Georgia, which was agreed for 25 years.<sup>6</sup> Ratification of this agreement by Georgia was conditional on Russia's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and the build-up of its military power. Since 1995 Russia has failed to meet any of these conditions, and the agreement has lost its legal as well as moral force.

In 1996, under the umbrella of the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (the CFE Treaty), it was possible to resume talks about the Russian military presence in Georgia. During the same year in Vienna a special interstate consultative body, GUAM, was created, which included Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. These countries had similar problems with Russia and decided to hold consultations on a regular basis in order to coordinate their policies under a common OSCE umbrella. (Officially, GUAM was founded at the Council of Europe meeting in October 1997 in Strasbourg.) Economically the GUAM countries are unified by the TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) project, which envisages the restoration of the historical Silk Road. Uzbekistan joined GUAM in April 1999 at the NATO 50th anniversary summit meeting in Washington, DC, and it now became GUUAM. It is still a consultative body, since its institutional structure has yet to be developed. In the future, however, it may play an important role in fostering political cooperation among its member states. Russia's attitude towards GUUAM has been extremely negative.

In 1999 Georgia joined the Program Analysis and Review Process (PARP), which envisages the upgrading of its military forces to NATO standards and the participation of Georgian forces in peacekeeping operations. For the first time a Georgian unit joined the NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo.

The year 1999 was marked by many important political developments and critical foreign policy decisions. Georgia joined the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization and withdrew from the 1992 Treaty on Collective Security (the Tashkent Treaty).<sup>7</sup> The Helsinki European Council meeting in December 1999 began talks about the possible inclusion of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in the European Union (EU), which seemed to signify that the

<sup>5</sup> *Izvestiya*, 2 Feb. 1994, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Shermatova, S. and Mikadze, A., 'Russia strikes deep roots in the Caucasus', *Moscow News*, 31 Mar.–6 Apr. 1995.

<sup>7</sup> The original members were Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia also joined later. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan left in 1999. On the Tashkent Treaty see chapter 5 in this volume. For the text see *Izvestiya*, 16 May 1992, p. 3.

Black Sea region was slowly coming to be considered EU territory. At the OSCE summit meeting in Istanbul in November 1999 an agreement on the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline route for the export of oil from the Caspian region was signed by Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> At the same meeting Russia agreed to start its withdrawal from its military bases in Georgia in 2000. By the end of 1999 all Russian border guards had left Georgia and were being replaced by Georgian forces.

For a small and newly independent state such as Georgia, it is particularly important to achieve economic and political stability, as well as internal social cohesion. These are necessary preconditions for any country's foreign policy to be effective and forward-looking. Internal weaknesses and contradictions also make other members of the international community cautious and tense. In this respect the relative success or failure of Georgia's foreign policy largely depends on its internal problems and difficulties. The international community watched with a certain fear and alarm the chaos of 1991–95. In 1996–98, however, the situation improved when Shevardnadze managed to stabilize the country and embark on the process of reform and economic development.<sup>9</sup> During this period, the foreign policy of Georgia was refined and included long-term strategy aimed at fostering regional cooperation and reducing Georgia's dependence on Russia, which itself was going through a painful transition period.

The oil and gas reserves in the region could become a catalyst for further development and an important tool in helping the region out of the current economic crisis. The development of the oil and gas sector, along with the increasing presence of foreign economic interests, could contribute not only to regional cooperation and economic development but also to regional security.

However, despite Georgia's improved internal and external position, 1999 was also characterized by a severe economic downturn resulting from the failure of reform, corruption and increasing social tensions. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, about 40 per cent of Georgia's population were living below the poverty line.<sup>10</sup> Salaries in the public sector and pensions were not paid for months and even years. Unemployment was officially as high as 16.8 per cent—according to unofficial estimates 25.6 per cent.<sup>11</sup> Public expenditure on health, already very low in 1993–98 (at 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product, GDP), dropped further to 0.6 per cent of GDP in 1999.<sup>12</sup> The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained unresolved, and Georgia's international positions had begun to weaken. Increasing internal problems raised doubts about the viability of the state and its elite, which had failed to maintain the success of 1996–98. Georgia's foreign

<sup>8</sup> 'Baku–Ceyhan oil agreements signed in Istanbul', Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report—Central Eurasia (FBIS-SOV)*, FBIS-SOV-1999-1118, 18 Nov. 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, S., 'Georgia's return from chaos', *Current History*, vol. 95, no. 603 (Oct. 1996), pp. 340–45.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report, Georgia 2000* (UNDP Country Office: Tbilisi, 2000), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Human Development Report, Georgia 2000* (note 10), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Human Development Report, Georgia 2000* (note 10), p. 76.

standing and reputation now greatly depend on the resolution of its internal socio-economic problems and on the government's determination to fight corruption. By the middle of 2000 it was clear that the pro-Western orientation would be severely tested domestically.

### III. Georgian foreign policy

According to Article 48 of the Georgian Constitution, the Georgian Parliament is responsible for developing and defining the country's foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Chancellery are responsible for carrying out the policy. At the same time, however, President Shevardnadze plays a special and decisive role in defining foreign policy. When Georgia became an independent state, few Georgian diplomats enjoyed international recognition and respect. Among them Shevardnadze stood out not only as an experienced diplomat but also as a well-known public figure. For a newly independent state like Georgia, which found itself in complete chaos and internationally isolated, the return of the experienced Shevardnadze with his extensive political connections and international recognition was a boon. It is therefore only natural that Shevardnadze still uses his extensive diplomatic experience and plays a critical role in defining his country's foreign policy.

One of the other agencies working on foreign policy issues is the National Security Council, set up in 1996 and headed by the president. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates inter-agency efforts. To foster better coordination the ministry holds regular consultations with other relevant agencies and involves them in the decision-making process, later presenting final draft documents to the president.<sup>14</sup> This has been very successful in reducing inter-agency conflicts and disagreements. However, there have also been clear cases of failure in coordination. One example is the resolution on 'Basic principles of the sustainability of social life, the strengthening of state sovereignty and security, and restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia', passed by the parliament in April 1997.<sup>15</sup> This document was an incomplete draft of Georgia's foreign policy strategy and was overloaded with anti-Russian rhetoric and emotional statements. Its tone was not consistent with the actual foreign policy conducted by Georgia's executive elite.

After the declaration of independence in April 1991 and the election of Gamsakhurdia as president, the Georgian authorities began to seek recognition and legitimacy for Georgia and tried to establish links with the outside world. There were numerous unofficial visits and consultations during the early period of independence.

Some observers divide the development of Georgia's independent foreign policy into two main periods—the presidency of Gamsakhurdia, from the

<sup>13</sup> 'The Constitution of Georgia', Tbilisi, 1998, p. 224 (in English).

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with the Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Irakli Menagarishvili, 28 June 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia, 3 Apr. 1997.

announcement of independence until December 1992, and the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze from December 1992 to the present.<sup>16</sup> This chapter focuses on the latter period, which marks the turning point in the development of Georgian strategic thinking and foreign policy analysis. There were attempts to think through foreign policy priorities during the Gamsakhurdia period, especially with regard to neighbouring countries, and many Georgians publicly debated the role of Georgia in the Caucasus and the choice of foreign policy orientation. However, Gamsakhurdia's presidency is not discussed here as a separate period in the development of Georgia's foreign policy because the country was not a completely sovereign state. Georgia at the time was trying to separate itself from Russia and establish contacts with other powers, but this was only an attempt to develop a foreign policy rather than an already established and well-thought-through strategy. Attempts to conduct foreign policy were mostly characterized by an idealistic understanding of the international environment and were full of slogans and what could be called strategic wishful thinking.

The return of Shevardnadze in 1992 marked the beginning of the development of a sovereign foreign policy. For almost 10 years Georgia has been trying to find its place in the international community, ensure its national security and carry out its foreign policy in accordance with the national security priorities. Over this period the political elite has tried to define the country's main strategic orientation and come up with ways of achieving its political goals.

It can be argued that 10 years is not long enough for a country with no experience of modern independent statehood to define its goals and long-term political perspective; that for the past decade Georgia has only been able to focus on its survival and immediate concerns rather than on concepts of 'strategic choice', foreign policy orientation, long-term perspective and so on. These are big concepts that a weak and small state like Georgia cannot yet grapple with. This chapter argues, however, that since 1995, after a period of strategic uncertainty caused by the conflict in Abkhazia and internal instability, Georgia has managed to embark on an active foreign policy. Despite the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the pending issue of the Russian military bases, Georgia's foreign policy has become consistently Western-oriented, with the goal of final integration into the European community. This tendency has become more and more obvious.

In this author's view there are two stages in the development of Georgia's foreign policy—1992–94 and 1995 to the present. In the first period, as a result

<sup>16</sup> Hunter, S. T., 'The evolution of the foreign policy of the Transcaucasian states', eds G. K. Bertsch *et al.*, *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (Routledge: New York, 2000), pp. 98–99. See also Darchiashvili, D., *Georgia: The Search for State Security*, Caucasus Working Papers (Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University: Stanford, Calif., 1997), pp. 2–3. Edmund Herzig writes about the Gamsakhurdia period as the 1st stage of Georgia's foreign policy development. Herzig, E., *The New Caucasus* (Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 1999), pp. 98–99. Helena Frazer discusses Georgia's foreign policy since 1992. Before then, according to Frazer, Georgia, not being a sovereign state, was not able to conduct an independent foreign policy. Frazer, H., 'Managing independence: Georgian foreign policy 1992–1996', thesis for the M.Phil. in International Relations, University of Oxford, Apr. 1997 (manuscript), p. 2.

of severe domestic problems and external pressures, Georgia's foreign policy was reactive and short-term oriented. In the second period, Georgia managed to achieve political stability and gain enough political experience to enable it to become more active in foreign affairs and more determined in carrying out a pro-Western foreign policy.

During 1992–94 Georgia's foreign policy was largely determined by the domestic political situation. It is not surprising that a small and newly independent state like Georgia, which found itself in total economic and political crisis, ethnic conflicts and paramilitary struggles, failed to conduct a fruitful and constructive foreign policy driven by long-term strategic thinking. This was particularly difficult under constant pressure from its former master, Russia. Some observers note that Georgia represented the clearest and perhaps the worst case of Russian involvement in the 'near abroad'.<sup>17</sup> There was also a politically inexperienced and to a certain extent destructive opposition which often obstructed rational and realistic foreign policy choices. Aves argues that, of the three South Caucasian states, Georgia adopted the most radical stance in asserting its independence from Moscow.<sup>18</sup>

Although Shevardnadze was trying to make Georgia's foreign policy more realistic, balanced and pragmatic, his ideas were often disapproved of by a large part of the Georgian public and by the political elite. People were still going through the post-independence euphoria characterized by high expectations largely generated by irresponsible nationalist and populist figures, the most prominent example being the former president, Gamsakhurdia. During this period Georgia lost the war in Abkhazia, joined the CIS and signed the agreement with Russia on the Russian military bases.

This period was also marked by the spread of anti-Russian feeling among the Georgian public. In March 1993 President Shevardnadze openly called the war in Abkhazia a Russian–Georgian conflict.<sup>19</sup> The decision on CIS membership was a direct result of Russian pressure in the form of an ultimatum from Russia's defence minister.<sup>20</sup> Frazer in her study of Georgia's foreign policy characterizes this decision as 'omnibalancing' as opposed to the traditional 'bandwagoning'. She argues that the Georgian authorities were trying to appease the secondary adversary—Russia—in order to allay the primary threat of internal disintegration and to ensure the regime's survival.<sup>21</sup> However, most Georgian observers believe that joining the CIS was a clear case of capitulation and not 'bandwagoning'.

The connection between domestic and foreign policies is widely known. However, the type and the character of this connection are often determined by

<sup>17</sup> Lepingwell, J. W. R., 'The Russian military and security policy in the near abroad', *Survival*, vol. 36, no. 3 (fall 1994), p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Aves, J., 'The Caucasus states: the regional security complex', eds R. Allison and C. Bluth, *Security Dilemmas in Russia and Eurasia* (Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 1998), p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> Litovkin, V., 'Rossiyskiye voyennye otritsayut svoyo uchastiye v boyakh' [Russian military deny taking part in hostilities], *Izvestiya*, 17 Mar. 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Odom, W. and Dujarric, R., *Commonwealth or Empire? Russia, Central Asia and the Transcaucasus* (Hudson Institute: Indianapolis, Ind., 1995), pp. 85–86.

<sup>21</sup> Frazer (note 16), p. 23.



the specifics of each country and its surrounding regional security environment. In the newly independent Georgia, internal factors significantly influenced not only foreign policy and strategic thinking, but also the country's positions on the international and regional levels. Frazer was right to argue that internal factors have been at least as important as external ones in influencing the foreign policy of Georgia since 1992.<sup>22</sup>

If initially internal factors such as ethnic tensions, rising ethnic nationalism and a severe energy crisis were the government's main concerns, by 1998 poor governance and rapidly spreading corruption had become the two main factors threatening the viability of Georgia's statehood.<sup>23</sup> The government, however, only admitted the existence and overwhelming importance of these problems in 1999–2000, when the IMF and the World Bank refused to provide further assistance and it became obvious that the country's international reputation had been severely damaged by domestic mismanagement.

Generally, the national interests and security concerns of small states have a relatively local character, and only in a few cases reach the regional level. The main, and often the only, priority of a small country is ensuring its independent and sovereign existence. Among the critical external factors one is the neighbouring presence of a great power which plays an important role in the international system. However, an increasingly important factor for small states in the modern world is the ongoing process of globalization and the role of international organizations and institutions. The foreign policy of a small country typically has to provide for quick adjustment to a changing environment, since it is unable to influence the international system.

From the very first days of its sovereign existence any country should try to ensure its security and economic development, and establish itself as a competitive partner and a responsible member of the international community. It should aim to achieve the trust and recognition of its neighbours and create the proper external conditions for a well-functioning economy. Georgia in early 1992 was in severe political and economic crisis. The state authorities began to look for options that would bring recognition of and support to Georgia by the international community. Tense relations with the new Russia, which was itself torn apart by internal problems, promised very little.

#### IV. Georgia, Russia and the West

Georgia's relations with Russia cannot be described as simple and straightforward. The two countries have a history of close bilateral relations reinforced by Georgia's existence first as part of the Russian Empire and later as part of the USSR. The Russian and Georgian peoples have shared their culture and history for almost two centuries. On the one hand, Georgia in the 19th and 20th centuries considered Russia as a door to Europe and a link to European culture,

<sup>22</sup> Frazer (note 16), pp. 14–24.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report, Georgia 1999* (UNDP Country Office: Tbilisi, 1999).

as well as a powerful neighbour sharing the same faith and ready to protect Georgia at critical moments. On the other hand, Russia appeared to Georgians as an imperial power, shamelessly violating all the agreements and promises it had made to Georgia as its regional supporter.

It would be an oversimplification to say that Georgia now considers Russia as the devil incarnate, an enemy. As Stephen Jones notes: 'Until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, liberal Russia was for Georgians, despite its autocratic tradition, a channel to the west and Georgia's incorporation into the Russian Empire in the first decade of the 19th century reinforced the Georgian sense of Europeaness'.<sup>24</sup> After 1917 Bolshevik Russia, no longer looking West, was not regarded by independent Georgia (1918–21) as a part of modern Europe. According to Jones, the Soviet attempt to 'isolate Georgia from Europe made the latter a pristine and symbolic antithesis to communism's Oriental backwardness'.<sup>25</sup> Georgians are extremely resentful of Russia's imperial policies in the Caucasus and towards Georgia in particular. However, according to a 1997 opinion poll 24 per cent of them still considered Russia important for Georgia's future.<sup>26</sup> In 1999 the figure was reduced to 13 per cent but, despite disillusionment with Russia and the failure of the CIS, 24 per cent of those polled then still believed that Georgia should define clearly its security relations with Russia and the CIS (40 per cent named the USA and other Western countries).<sup>27</sup>

Georgia's attitude towards Russia has never been simple, partly because 30 per cent of Georgia's population is non-Georgian. In addition, the persistent socio-economic crisis and resulting disillusionment with the Western orientation encourage a certain feeling of nostalgia about the former association with Russia. It is important to note that the Georgian view of Russia is characterized not only by fear but also by long-standing cultural connections and respect for Russian power. The argument that there are two Russias—the democratic and the imperial—is very popular among the Georgian officials and well explains the often contradictory and complex legacy of Georgian–Russian relations. However, Georgia takes the Russian military's support for the Abkhaz and South Ossetian secessionists and an ongoing anti-Georgian campaign in the Russian media as signs of clear hostility. In 1999 Georgia withdrew from the Tashkent Treaty, mainly because it had failed as a tool for restoring Georgia's territorial integrity. That was one of the main responsibilities of the treaty and it was not fulfilled either in Georgia or in Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan).

In December 2000 Russia imposed visa regulations on Georgians for the first time since Georgia regained independence. The Russian authorities explained that the visa policy would make Russia's borders more secure against alleged

<sup>24</sup> Jones (note 1), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Jones (note 1).

<sup>26</sup> US Information Agency, Office of Research and Media Reaction, 'Opinion analysis: Georgians trust US more than Russia to act responsibly in the Caucasus', 28 Jan. 1997, p. 20, table 14.

<sup>27</sup> US State Department, Office of Research, 'Opinion analysis: Georgians increasingly view the US as their country's main ally', Washington, DC, 29 Nov. 1999, p. 6, table 1.

infiltration by Chechen terrorists.<sup>28</sup> In reality Russia's visa policy toward Georgia will do little if anything to stop Chechen terrorists from trying to cross the Russian–Georgian border. At the same time new visa requirements do not include the inhabitants of secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which border Russia. This goes against international law and can be considered as an attempt by Russia to annex Georgian territory. In fact the new visa regulations were planned to apply economic pressure on Georgia. They created severe problems for hundreds of thousands of Georgians living and earning money in Russia. Their remittances to Georgia are estimated to be equivalent to almost one-quarter of Georgia's GDP.<sup>29</sup> Any serious reduction of these remittances will be a severe blow to a weak Georgian economy and will add to social discontent.

Russia's policy in the Caucasus continues, unfortunately, to be driven by fear of the Western powers, and of the USA in particular. This is expressed in Russia's treatment of Georgia and the rest of Caucasus as either satellites or adversaries. For some reason Russia has not considered the option of partnership with the South Caucasian states, in which it could guarantee its influence through economic participation and serve as a security guarantor. Currently Russia is undergoing serious difficulties, but in the future it may regain its economic power and its participation in the economic life of the region could become quite substantial. Such a turn of events could be mutually beneficial for Russia and the South Caucasian states. Ultimately it is not feasible to expect that Western interest in the region will be so strong that it will exclude Russia. Russia's geographical proximity, its resources, the size of the market and cultural ties are all important for the future of the South Caucasus. The Georgian elite therefore considers the constructive participation of Russia in the development of the regional economy as a positive and highly desirable step. So far, however, Russia has not sent positive signals to Georgia, thus giving the impression that it sees the political processes in the South Caucasus only as a 'zero-sum' game.

Georgia has clearly tried to reduce its uneven dependence on Russia and slowly move out of the Russian sphere of influence. For many Russian commentators this is a clear sign of an ungrateful and treacherous attitude towards Russia. This kind of emotional judgement is easy to understand, as Georgia has been trying to conduct an independent foreign policy and define its national security priorities. Its attempts to reduce its dependence on Russia and establish close relations with other neighbouring and Western countries are taken by the Russian authorities not only as anti-Russian moves but also as strategically incorrect ones for Georgia, given its proximity to Russian power. The Georgian authorities' efforts to integrate their country into European structures is often seen as strategic idealism which goes against all geopolitical arguments and even common sense.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sergey Yastrzhembsky, assistant to the Russian President, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 21 Dec. 2000.

<sup>29</sup> *Financial Times*, 4 Jan. 2001.

Certain political forces in Georgia, especially the communists and others on the left wing, consider the current pro-Western stand to be a fatal mistake. This view is shared by certain segments of the Georgian public, especially the Russian-speakers, who still believe that Georgia's future lies with Russia. In the view of this author, Russia, because of a skewed perception of its interests in the South Caucasus, has in fact been forcing Georgia to become even more politically detached from Russia.

Russia fears the increase of Western interests in the Caspian region, and Western involvement in the exploration and exploitation of Caspian oil has triggered a Russian confrontation with the West, and in particular the USA. Russian–US rivalry is affecting the security environment and economic situation in the South Caucasus in a major way and contributing to the further deterioration of relations between Georgia and Russia.

### **Foreign policy alternatives**

The Georgian political elite has traditionally considered several alternatives for the future development of Georgia.

The first alternative can be called pro-Russian. It calls for close connection with and dependence on Russia—becoming a Russian ‘satellite’. Given Russia's current difficulties and the continuing legacy of ‘imperial’ thinking, such unilateral dependence on Russia would not allow Georgia to develop as an independent state fully integrated into the world economic system.

The second choice is pro-Western. This can be interpreted in many different ways but in general is defined as full-scale integration in the European political, economic and security system. The main way of achieving this goal is through increased cooperation with the EU. As illustrated by the historical overview in this chapter, the Georgian authorities have so far opted for a European or Western orientation as the best way to ensure Georgia's security and economic development (although it is worth mentioning that the majority of the population have no illusions as to how easy it will be to reach this goal).

It must be stressed that the desire to be European and part of Europe is rooted in the Georgian national consciousness. Georgians associate Christianity with Europe and, perhaps naively, count themselves as Europeans. According to Jones, ‘Georgians’ Europeanness is bound up with the church, which since the 4th century has been an outpost of Western Christendom in a Muslim region’.<sup>30</sup> Later many Georgians associated their connection to the Russian Empire with the increased Westernization of their country. Jones also argues that:

Incorporation into the Russian Empire in the first decades of the 19th century reinforced the Georgian sense of Europeanness. The Georgian intelligentsia rapidly adapted to the ideas, imbibed through Russian universities, of progress, individualism and liberty. The liberation movements of Greece and Young Italy became the model

<sup>30</sup> Jones (note 1), p. 9.

for Georgian progressives. At the turn of the century, another Western ideology—socialism—usurped liberalism's place among the educated.<sup>31</sup>

However, after 1917, Georgia tried to establish relations with Europe independently, considering Bolshevik Russia as a non-European state. Even former President Gamsakhurdia elaborated this connection of Georgia with Europe.<sup>32</sup> In the early 1990s Russia was sometimes associated with Europe and sometimes not. This association was mostly political as opposed to cultural, but the public in the Caucasus and Central Asia has a rather vague understanding of the West and Western traditions.<sup>33</sup>

In the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union was already entering its death throes and national liberation movements were gaining strength, some thought that Georgia, along with its neighbours Armenia and Azerbaijan, would become a buffer state balancing the interests of the regional great powers—Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Wight defines a buffer zone as 'a region occupied by one or more weaker powers between two or more stronger powers; it is sometimes described as a power vacuum'. He also notes that 'a buffer state is a weak power between two or more stronger ones, maintained or even created with the purpose of reducing conflict between them'.<sup>34</sup> Given the current geopolitical situation in the region, as well as the increasing interdependence and economic integration of the world as a whole, the buffer zone alternative could be an ideal strategic choice, a third alternative for Georgia. The concept of a buffer implies the presence of strong and often hostile neighbours. In today's changing world, however, the geopolitical function of a buffer may be more connective than divisive.

In 1991–92 part of the Georgian elite seriously considered the 'bufferization' of Georgia as an ideal strategic move which would bring Western support. Later, however, Russia's involvement in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the imposition of economic sanctions and forcible integration into the CIS shook the inexperienced Georgian elite and dashed their hopes. It turned out that Russia sees its presence in Georgia as vital for its own national security and does not perceive the Caucasus as anything but a completely subordinated zone of influence. Russia is afraid that a power vacuum in the Caucasus would be filled by other, rival powers.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Russia's increasing political and economic weakness does not allow it to maintain such a dominant position in the region.

<sup>31</sup> Jones (note 1), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Gamsakhurdia, Z., *Sakartvelos Sulieri Missia* [Georgia's spiritual mission] (Ganatleba: Tbilisi, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> MacFarlane, N., *Western Engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 1999), pp. 2–5.

<sup>34</sup> Wight, M., 'The pattern of power', eds H. Bull and C. Holbraa, *Power Politics* (Leicester University Press and Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 1995), p. 160.

<sup>35</sup> Rotar, I., 'Stat' nashimi satellitami ili umeret' [Become our satellites or die], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 5 May 1994; and Nikitin, V., 'Vneshnyaya politika Gruzii: idealy i interesy' [Georgia's foreign policy: ideals and interests], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 4 Jan. 1996.

The buffer zone idea looks increasingly unrealistic for Georgia now, but it should not be dismissed completely given the volatile and changing political environment in the region. Under certain circumstances a move towards becoming a buffer state guided by the 'responsible supervision' of interested parties would be a positive step for Georgia and might lead to greater internal and regional stability.

## V. Georgia's choice

It is 10 years since Georgia became a sovereign state conducting its own independent foreign policy. The national security and foreign policy priorities have been widely debated over the past few years, but the official concept of that foreign policy has yet to be fully developed.<sup>36</sup>

In the early days of independence, the Georgian elite tended to rely on intuition and President Shevardnadze's personal insight in determining foreign policy and national security priorities. In the late 1990s, however, analytical work by different think tanks and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has become more important and valuable for the state elite. Enriched by some practical experience, that elite has also begun to take into consideration scholarly and analytical work. According to David Darchiashvili, however, Georgia's national security and foreign policies are more 'practical' than conceptual and lack a serious theoretical basis.<sup>37</sup>

President Shevardnadze declared in his state of the union address in 1997 that joining Europe 'was for centuries the dream of our ancestors'.<sup>38</sup> In a speech of January 1999, Foreign Minister Irakli Menagarishvili emphasized that the first priority of Georgia's foreign policy was European integration, and as a first step the harmonization of Georgian and European legislation.<sup>39</sup> In 1999 Shevardnadze seemed overly optimistic about the future prospects for Georgia, stating in one speech that 'if processes underway in today's world continue at the current pace, membership in all major Euro-Atlantic and European structures of Georgia and other newly independent states would be inevitable'.<sup>40</sup> The Chairman of the Georgian Parliament, Zurab Zhvania, declared in his speech of accession to the Council of Europe in February 1999, 'I am Georgian, therefore I am European'.<sup>41</sup>

It is becoming clear that the Georgian elite has chosen a pro-Western orientation. At the same time the Georgian authorities try to be cautious and refrain from frequent declarations of their Western aspirations in order not to irritate

<sup>36</sup> Darchiashvili, D., 'Trends in strategic thinking in Georgia', eds Bertsch *et al.* (note 16), pp. 66–74.

<sup>37</sup> Darchiashvili (note 16), p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Speech at the parliamentary session of 27 May 1997, *Parlamentis Utskebani* [Parliamentary gazette], 31 May 1997, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> *Recent Political Developments in Georgia*, no. 1 (31 Jan. 1999), document held by the US Embassy in Georgia.

<sup>40</sup> Address of H. E. Eduard Shevardnadze at the Inauguration of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement in Luxembourg, June 1999, Georgia's State Chancellery Archive (in English).

<sup>41</sup> *Parliament of Georgia Newsletter*, no. 2 (Feb. 1999), p. 1 (in English).

neighbouring Russia. Recently pro-Western rhetoric has become even weaker because of increasing public discontent with the much-vaunted Westernization, which has failed to benefit the average citizen. An ineffective socio-economic policy, pervasive corruption, increasing social polarization and poverty are associated among certain segments of the Georgian public with the pro-Western policies of the current government.

Paradoxically, Russia has contributed to the popularization of Western ideas in Georgia as a result of its open support of separatist forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>42</sup> The Georgian public in general hoped that Western help would improve their dire living conditions, while the so-called elite, largely made up of the old Soviet *nomenklatura*, hoped to benefit personally from foreign grants and assistance. This latter hope was realized.

The Georgian authorities soon realized that Western interest in the Caucasus was triggered by its substantial natural resources. The South Caucasus, luckily, is rich in oil and gas resources, which has brought serious Western economic interests into the region and is expected to contribute to the economic development of the region as a whole and Georgia in particular. Without the development of the region as a whole, Georgia's chances of economic revival look slim. However, together with the rest of the Caucasus and Central Asia, Georgia has good prospects for the future. It should also be noted that, since regional economic development largely depends on regional stability and security, the Georgian Government is trying to promote regional cooperation through the transport corridor and pipeline projects. Georgia's calculations are simple and obvious: large-scale international projects will attract significant Western investment, stimulate the economy and create a vested Western interest in preserving political stability and security in the region.

The Georgian authorities now clearly link the country's prospects to increased regional cooperation and use every opportunity to underline the importance of rational economic and security cooperation. In order to further promote the idea of mutually beneficial cooperation in the Caucasus, President Shevardnadze in February 1996 came up with six main principles to govern interstate relations among Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia.<sup>43</sup> Later these principles became known as the Peaceful Caucasus Initiative. They include: (a) renunciation of territorial claims and recognition of existing borders; (b) commitment to the protection of human rights; (c) protection of transport and communication assets; (d) joint efforts to preserve the natural environment and deal with natural disasters; (e) promotion of ethnic and religious tolerance and the renunciation of extreme forms of nationalism; and (f) support for and comprehensive protection of international projects and investments in the Caucasus region.

<sup>42</sup> On Russia's policy towards Georgia see Arbatov, A., *Bezopasnost': Rossiyskiy Vybor* [Security: Russia's choice] (EPI Tsentr: Moscow, 1999), pp. 163–70; and Trenin, D., 'Russia's security interests and policies in the Caucasus region', ed. B. Coppieters, *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (VUB University Press: Brussels, 1995), pp. 115–30.

<sup>43</sup> *Sakartvelos Respublika* [Republic of Georgia], 1 Mar. 1996, p. 1.

Unfortunately, the current political and economic situation in the Caucasus does not allow the countries of the region to engage in extensive and effective cooperation. However, it remains one of the top foreign policy priorities for Georgia.<sup>44</sup>

To a certain extent, Georgia's future plans and hopes were connected to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation scheme (BSEC) which was set up in 1992. Under Georgian chairmanship in 1999 the BSEC received the legal status of an international organization<sup>45</sup> and opened up a new way for the member states to get closer to the EU. BSEC membership not only provides advantages stemming from regional cooperation; it also protects Georgia from the side effects of ongoing globalization.

Georgia also has hopes for GUUAM. However, this organization is still very young and has been slow to develop, so that many commentators are sceptical about it. Currently the main binding interest of the GUUAM countries is economic, and the organization may develop into a free trade zone.<sup>46</sup> The chances of improving economic cooperation among the member countries look good, especially since GUUAM is open to other, non-CIS members as well. It is too early to discuss possible security and military functions for GUUAM. However, recent discussions regarding the creation of a GUUAM battalion indicate that such developments are possible.

Georgia also remains part of the CIS, although the organization has proved rather ineffective, both politically and economically, and increasingly seems to have been stillborn. The reason for its failure may lie in the inability of Russia to play the locomotive role in the organization, as well as its clumsy attempts to use the CIS to restore a quasi-Soviet Union under clear Russian hegemony. Georgia's disappointment with the CIS has been growing irreversibly.

Given these circumstances it is not surprising that Georgia considers Russia's attempts to dominate the region through destabilization and ethnic confrontation as extremely destructive. At the same time, Russia's more constructive policies aimed at strengthening regional security and promoting regional cooperation can only be welcomed by the Georgian authorities.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, as mentioned above, the Russian political elite considers political processes in the Caucasus only as a 'zero-sum game'.

Integration with Europe is clearly becoming the main objective of the current Georgian Government, which often considers Russia also as part of Europe. At the same time, neither the Georgian people nor the authorities believe that this goal will be easy to achieve in the near future. On the contrary, despite increasing cooperation with European structures and states, the Georgian elites are

<sup>44</sup> Rondeli, A., *Georgia: Foreign Policy and National Security Priorities*, Discussion Paper Series 3 (UNDP Country Office: Tbilisi, 1999), pp. 19–29.

<sup>45</sup> The BSEC became a regional economic organization on 1 May 1999 after its charter was ratified by 11 member states. On 8 Oct. 1999 it was granted observer status by UN General Assembly Resolution 54/5. For the charter see, e.g., the BSEC Internet site, URL <<http://www.bsec.gov>>.

<sup>46</sup> 'Na osnove obshchikh tseley i podkhodov' [On the basis of common goals and approaches], *Svobodnaya Gruzija*, 28 Sep. 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Shevardnadze has emphasized this on different occasions. See, e.g., Shevardnadze's speech in the Parliament of Azerbaijan on 19 Feb. 1997, Archives of the State Chancellery.



now more realistic in assessing their chances and the prospects for what they call the 'return to Europe'. Even though concrete steps have been taken towards integration into European structures and the harmonization of Georgian legislation with that of Europe, the population as a whole has a very vague understanding of these measures. Popular scepticism is understandable: the general public is tired of promises and deteriorating living conditions. The widely-hailed Western orientation has brought no tangible results, and this feeds into public disappointment and frustration.

## VI. Conclusions

In the current transitional stage, Georgia has clearly made its choice in favour of the West. The question remains, however, whether this choice is final and irreversible. To a great extent the answer depends on the ability of the local elite to deal with the complex issues of state-building and economic development, and to settle the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Successful resolution of these problems may not only improve Georgia's international image and make it more attractive to foreign investors, but also increase social and political cohesion.

The sustainability of Georgia's pro-Western policies will also depend on the succession to Shevardnadze. Personalities continue to play a decisive role in Georgian politics because its state institutions are not fully developed and are still unable to ensure an automatic and uninterrupted transfer of power through democratic mechanisms. The successor to Shevardnadze will therefore largely determine Georgia's future strategic choices.

External factors and conditions that may influence Georgia's foreign policy behaviour and strategic orientation (including Caspian energy policy, the situation in Russia, relations with the West, regional problems and so on) are uncertain and volatile, and thus difficult to predict.