



The Influence of the Russian Invasion in Ukraine on the Georgian Politics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russian war against Ukraine is still underway but whatever its outcome, it will have a lasting effect on regional and global politics. In the case of Georgia, the impact may be especially big. There is an expectation in the Georgian society that the war will greatly affect Georgia's international positioning as well as its domestic political situation.

It is too early to discuss the long-term results of the war. This paper tries to assess the influence that it has already exerted on Georgia.

The war has had a significant influence on Georgia's foreign-political positioning. It dramatically changed European attitudes towards Ukraine, which led to the three countries of the so-called *Association Trio*: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, being granted a European perspective. However, Georgia, unlike the other two countries, failed to get the EU candidate status. This implied missing a historical opportunity, at least at this stage. Moreover, instead of stimulating closer relations with the West and new democratic reforms, the new international environment led to Georgia's further estrangement from the West, exacerbating a trend that had already been observable during the last years.

If earlier, representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party strongly rejected specific critical remarks coming from the West and attacked individual politicians for making them, in the context of the war their attitude to the West came close to hostile. GD created and spread a conspiracy theory alleging collusion between the collective West, the Ukrainian government, and the Georgian opposition aimed at dragging Georgia into war and/or staging an anti-government coup. Any criticism of Georgia's policies or government performance coming from the West or domestic critics was seen against this background. GD also explained the EU decision not to grant Georgia the membership candidate status by its refusal to join the war.

In domestic politics, the war did not bring about qualitatively new developments but added alarming new dimensions to already existing trends of toxic polarization and democratic backsliding. The GD referred to all its domestic critics as the "war party". On the other hand, if earlier only part of the opposition described the GD government as tacitly being in the Russian camp, now this allegation became mainstream and was often shared by influential international observers as well.

Despite its persistent anti-western rhetoric, the GD government has not given up on its declared course of European integration. It expresses readiness to meet recommendations set by the EU

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as a precondition for reconsidering its decision regarding Georgia's candidate status. However, the general stance of the GD government makes the prospects of implementing these recommendations extremely unlikely. The country faces the prospect of irreversibly losing a truly historic opportunity. The Georgian opposition and civil society will need systemic, brave, and focused efforts to reverse this extremely disturbing trend. So far, however, they have not been up to the task.

This policy paper aims at analyzing mentioned policy trends and discussing steps that are most appropriate under the circumstances. The report of two expert surveys carried out in May and August 2022 is attached.

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This policy paper was produced with the financial assistance of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). It is written by Ghia Nodia with participation of Veronika Chkadua. It does not express opinion of NED.

In preparation of the paper CIPDD carried out a survey of the Georgian experts. Its report is attached to the paper.

1. THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND BEFORE THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

By the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgia was undergoing a protracted crisis of democratic institutions. It is difficult to clearly name the moment when the trend of decline became evident; but most experts contend that during the last 2-3 years at least, Georgia's governance and political system have been incrementally moving away from democratic norms. In parallel, we witnessed a gradual deterioration of Georgia's relations with the international democratic community.¹

1.1 The trend of democratic decline

Georgia's political regime had never satisfied the minimal requirements of democracy. Under different governments, its most salient defects have included an unfair electoral environment, the dominant position of the ruling party in all branches of governance, the absence of judiciary independence, toxic political polarization, general structural weakness of the political party system, etc. Since the advent of the GD party to power in 2012, the mentioned features were supplemented by selective use of the justice system for persecuting political opponents, and informal governance by the founder of the new dominant ruling party, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili (often referred to as "the oligarch"). Since his resignation from the prime minister's position in October 2013, he stayed away from government positions but was widely believed to effectively define the policies of the ruling party.

During the last several years, new negative trends have become conspicuous, such as:

- (1) *The decline of the role and legitimacy of parliament as the chief institution of the representative democracy.* This started with the opposition refusing to accept the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections and enter Parliament. Later, most of the opposition decided to end the boycott, but their parliamentary activities remain half-hearted and ineffective. Apparently, having declared this parliament illegitimate, the opposition finds it difficult to return to the "normal" parliamentary life. Some active supporters repeatedly appeal to the opposition to return to the boycott regime.
- (2) *The government's increased intolerance towards its critics.* While the GD government questioned the legitimacy of the political opposition from the very beginning, in the last years it

extended this attitude to all its critics, including independent media, civil society,² and even some public organizations not controlled by the ruling party such as the Public Defender³ and State Inspector's Office.⁴ Contacts between the government and civil society are close to being severed: government representatives only very rarely take part in events organized by the civil society.

Under different governments, most salient defects of Georgia's democracy included an unfair electoral environment, the dominant position of the ruling party in all branches of governance, the absence of judiciary independence, toxic political polarization, general structural weakness of the political party system.

The events of 5-6 July 2021 became an especially salient expression of these attitudes. The government rhetoric indirectly encouraged mass violence of extreme right extremists against journalists and civil society activists that led to fifty people wounded; one journalist later died, most likely from the wounds. After the fact, only a fraction of the offenders were punished; in their public statements, GD representatives largely blamed the provocative behavior of the media and civil society for what happened.⁵

- (3) *Unwillingness to carry out democratic reforms.* In the first period of its rule, the GD government carried out some legislative changes that many observers assessed as an advancement on the road to democracy. This included such spheres as the electoral system, the judiciary, and others. Their overall effect might be debated, but at least, the government displayed some willingness to achieve progress in democracy and human rights. In the last years, however, the reforms stalled. The area where the lack of reforms causes especially strong criticism is that of the judiciary.⁶
- (4) *Weakening of the opposition.* Since November 2020, the defeat of the radicalized strategy of the opposition undercut its morale. This radicalization expressed itself in the mentioned decision to boycott Parliament and public protests following the return to Georgia, imprisonment, and the hunger strike of former president Mikheil Saakashvili. The opposition finds it hard to formulate a credible strategy and convince its supporters of its viability. The largest opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM), undergoes a crisis of leadership, with its supporters often expressing discontent with the current leaders of the party. On the other hand, the support for the so-called "third parties" considerably declined as compared to the 2020 parliamentary elections.⁷

These recent negative trends express themselves in lower scores for the level of democracy in Georgia produced by authoritative international research organizations.⁸ The Georgian public is of the same opinion: in a poll conducted in August 2022, 62 percent said that Georgia is not a democracy with only 30 percent believing it is. This is the most pessimistic assessment during the last twelve years.⁹ Moreover, many people who are critical of the government express pessimism concerning the prospect of the progress of democracy in Georgia.

1.2 The trend of estrangement from the international democratic community

The GD came to power with a promise to deepen Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, even though it planned to combine this with improving Georgian-Russian relations. In the first years of its rule, many observers believed that it was truly committed to this strategy. Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU, achieved a visa-free regime for Georgian citizens in Schengen countries, and was quite successful in carrying out reforms within the framework of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU.¹⁰ At the same time, Georgia's relations with Russia became less tenuous, which expressed itself in toned-down rhetoric and greater economic contacts. The West generally welcomed this new policy formula.

However, the trend of democratic backtracking described in the previous section gradually led to stronger criticism of the Georgian government from its western partners. Earlier, the government met such criticism with understanding, even though it didn't always agree. In the last years, this changed: the GD government was much less likely to accept criticism and responded to it in increasingly harsh terms.¹¹

In the last years, it became clear that the Georgian government and the international democratic community differ in relation to fundamental democratic values.

The ruling party's decision to annul the agreement with the opposition that had been mediated by a personal representative of Charles Michel, the chairman of the European Council,¹² as well as the government's refusal to take the EU subsidized loan (that, as later became clear, the EU was going to withhold for the Georgian government's failure to carry out reforms)¹³ were other important signs of cooled-down relations between the GD government and its western democratic partners.

To be sure, no government is obliged to accept advice coming from its partners. We cannot presume that any suggestion coming from the EU or Georgia's other western partners is always right and fits the country's interests. But in the last years, it became clear that the Georgian government and the international democratic community differ in relation to fundamental democratic values. We increasingly hear from the latter's representatives that they no longer know, where Georgia is heading.¹⁴ This implies that Georgia's ultimate choice in favor of European democratic norms is under question.

In Georgia's case, these two dimensions – backtracking in democracy and cooling down of relations with western partners – are the two sides of the same coin. While the country's underdeveloped democratic institutions fail to contain the dominant position of the ruling party, western influences may, at least in part, compensate for this deficit. The reduced influence of the western democratic community implies that checking the autocratic inclinations of the GD government is becoming even more difficult.

2. GEORGIA'S REACTION TO THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE AND ITS RELATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY

The war influenced relations between Georgia and the international democratic community in two contradictory ways. It was in the context of the war that the Georgian government decided to apply for membership in the European Union – something implying even closer relations with the EU and the West in general. However, it was the same background that stimulated unprecedented deterioration of relations between the government of Georgia and the international democratic community.

Until the war, the EU refused to consider the perspective of the EU membership for the countries of the European Partnership (EaP), even though the EU associate members, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia (in relation to the EU, these countries were often referred to as a *Trio*), persistently requested recognition of their European identity and at least general perspective of eventual EU membership. The Russian aggression, the Ukrainians' heroic resistance, and

the solidarity of the European public towards Ukraine fundamentally changed this: the EU decided to consider Ukraine's application for EU membership.¹⁵

This also changed the plans of two other members of the *Trio*, Moldova, and Georgia. Before the war, the Georgian government had planned to submit an EU membership application in 2024. As late as 1 March, the GD chairman, Irakli Kobakhidze rejected the opposition proposal to immediately apply for EU membership: he reiterated that this would only happen in 2024 as planned.¹⁶ Two days later, however, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili signed the application.¹⁷ We don't exactly know what was the specific reason for this change of mind, but we can imply some coordination with Moldova and/or the EU, as these two countries submitted their applications on the same day.¹⁸

Against the backdrop of the war, the EU considered the applications of the three countries in an accelerated way. At the end of June, the European Council, following the recommendation of the European Commission, pronounced its verdict that was the worst possible one for Georgia: Ukraine and Moldova were granted the candidate status, but Georgia's issue was postponed, because "it still had some homework to do". Georgia was granted a general European perspective – before the war, this would have been considered a huge achievement; but in the new context, the EU decision meant Georgia's exclusion from the *Trio*, hence downgrading.¹⁹ The war made Ukraine a special case, but it was especially painful that Georgia was put behind Moldova as well.

This was not the end: EU said it would come back to Georgia's application after it completed its "homework" by addressing twelve recommendations developed by the European Commission.²⁰ Georgia was given time until sometime in 2023.²¹

Why was Georgia denied the EU candidate status? For many years, Georgia was considered ahead of other members of the *Trio*, especially concerning the level of corruption. The GD's initial explanation was that geography was the decisive factor, while based on the countries' performance, the EU had no valid reasons to give preference to Moldova and Ukraine over Georgia.²² This was based on a statement of the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who called for granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova but not Georgia, explaining this by geographical considerations.²³

It would be naïve to deny the importance of geography in politics in general and in matters of

EU expansion in particular. However, neither the EC nor the European Council used geography to explain their decision to disqualify Georgia from the candidate status. Having granted Georgia the European perspective and conditionally postponing rather than flatly denying it the candidate status, the EU expressly excluded the decisive influence of geography in this case.

It was in the context of the war that the Georgian government decided to apply for membership in the European Union. However, it was the same background that stimulated unprecedented deterioration of relations between the government of Georgia and the international democratic community.

Whatever hidden motives one may hypothetically ascribe to the EU leaders' decision, the fact of the matter is that it could indeed be solidly based on the countries' performance, namely, in the area of democracy and human rights. To see this, we can go back to the country's scores in different democracy ratings.²⁴ In the 2017 *Democracy Index of the Economist*, Moldova and Georgia were both categorized as *hybrid regimes* with almost identical scores (5.94 and 5.93 respectively, ranking 78th and 79th). In 2021, Moldova moved up to the category of *flawed democracy* (score 6.10, ranking 69), while Georgia's score and ranking notably declined (5.12 and 91, respectively). Given the current trends, the gap is likely to further broaden. The latest EU Association report for Georgia, while noting some successful reforms, also mentioned "setbacks in the key areas of rule of law, governance and human rights".²⁵ It would have been incongruous for the EU to grant a membership candidate status to a country that has been displaying a stable trend of democratic decline for several years and did not make any effort to break it.

It is broadly recognized that European integration is a strong stimulus to democratic reforms: that's how it had been during the EU "big-bang expansion" into the formerly communist central Europe in the early 2000s. It would be natural to expect that having applied for EU membership, the Georgian government would make an extra effort to improve its image and convince the European partners that the country was genuinely committed to democratic norms. No such efforts ensued, however.

The arrest of Nika Gvaramia, the founder and CEO of *Mtavari Arxi*, the most popular independent TV channel in Georgia, in mid-May²⁶ became the most salient expression not only of the continuing government pressure against its opponents but also of its disregard for domestic and international public opinion. Independent analysts

considered the legal charges against Gvaramia to be flimsy and saw this as a fragrant case of persecution of a political opponent.²⁷

It was not only the fact of politically motivated persecution, which is a huge problem in itself, but its timing, that was notable in this case. The GD government took this, to say the least, extremely controversial step at a time when it was expected to have the strongest motive to demonstrate its commitment to the norms of democracy and human rights. Its decision (keeping in mind the judiciary's general dependence on the ruling party) created an impression that not only the GD government was not doing its best to obtain its aim of securing the EU membership candidate status for the country, but it didn't take this objective seriously, or even might have deliberately sabotaged its own application.²⁸

Different attitudes towards the Russian war in Ukraine also exposed a value gap between the GD government and the West, as well as between the government and a large part of the Georgian society.

This suggests a deep discrepancy between the vision and attitudes of the GD government and the fundamental norms and values underpinning western democracies. Among other things, this is expressed in the GD's refusal to recognize the very existence of problems in the Georgian political system: according to its chairman, Irakli Kobakhidze, the level of democracy in Georgia is very high, the chief problem is that its economic development cannot catch up with the democratic progress.²⁹ Such an assumption makes it logical that the government does not come up with any substantive initiatives aimed at progress in the area of democracy.

Different attitudes towards the Russian war in Ukraine also exposed a value gap between the GD government and the West, as well as between the government and a large part of the Georgian society (the latter will be discussed in the next section). From the very beginning, the GD took an ambivalent attitude towards war. On the one hand, it has made general statements in support of Ukraine, voted for a resolution condemning Russian actions in the UN,³⁰ sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, welcomed Ukrainian refugees to Georgia, etc. At the same time, it bluntly rejected the possibility of joining international sanctions against Russia³¹ and blocked a flight taking Georgian volunteers willing to fight on the Ukrainian side;³² despite the opposition demands, the ruling party refused to invite President Zelensky of Ukraine to address the Georgian parliament during a period when he addressed many parliaments of the world.³³

No less importantly, the government rhetoric was often extremely unfriendly towards Ukraine and greatly diverged from that of the international democratic community. Prime minister Irakli Garibashvili implicitly extended the responsibility for the war to Ukraine by saying that it "failed to avoid the war"; he also predicted that international sanctions against Russia would be fruitless.³⁴

In the very first days of the war, skepticism towards Ukraine's ability to effectively resist the Russian aggression might have been explicable. Under the circumstances, one might also understand the cautious reaction of the government that put the security of its own nation first. Georgia, as well as Moldova, might have become the next target for the Russian aggression, and the West did not have the resources to prevent that, as it had failed to prevent the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Georgia and Moldova were less protected than NATO member countries and could use extra caution. Moreover, severing all economic contacts with Russia would deliver a greater blow to the Georgian economy than to European ones, even though the latter also accepted inevitable economic pain. Moldova also dragged its feet against joining economic sanctions against Russia, but this did not prevent it from getting a candidate status. Most western politicians and diplomats recognized that these countries had indeed extra reasons to be cautious.

These arguments that GD and its supporters may use to justify its position are valid in themselves but insufficient. The core problem was that the sum of the rhetoric and steps taken by the GD government concerning the war in Ukraine was greatly at odds with the consensus existing within the international democratic community. Among other things, this was expressed in the government's extremely hostile attitudes towards its Ukrainian counterpart, which gradually developed into open attacks against the West.

These attacks were mainly focused on a conspiracy theory according to which the West, led by the United States, in collusion with the Ukrainian government and the Georgian opposition, was trying to drag Georgia into the war. It was initially triggered by isolated statements of some Ukrainian officials saying that it would be beneficial for Ukraine if Georgia opened "a second front" against Russia (implying that Georgia could take advantage of the Russian troops being relocated from Georgia's occupied regions and try to take control of them).³⁵ No political group in Georgia supported this idea. Nevertheless, it was enough for the Georgian

government to accuse the Georgian opposition of colluding with the Ukrainians to drag Georgia into a war with Russia.³⁶ Eventually, GD made this a central story in its relations with the Ukrainian government, domestic opposition, and eventually also the West.

Eventually, different surrogates of the GD in the media publicized a broader and more detailed conspiracy theory³⁷ that was at least indirectly supported by its official representatives.³⁸ According to it, the US was at the helm of an international conspiracy aimed at dragging Georgia into a war. EU, as well as the Swiss banking system represented by *Credit Suisse*, a bank Bidzina Ivanishvili was in the process of litigation with, were part of this conspiracy. Allegedly, the US used the Swiss bank to exert pressure on Ivanishvili so that he formally returned to the helm of Georgian politics and opened the “second front” against Russia. EU refusal to grant Georgia membership candidate status was also explained by the government’s refusal to succumb to the pressure.³⁹

A wave of even more vicious anti-western attacks, this time focused personally on the US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, started with three GD MPs formally quitting the ruling party so that they could talk without inhibition in public.⁴⁰ Supposedly, the GD would be reluctant to publicly expose “shady deals” of western governments, so the “defectors” took this task upon themselves (later, a fourth MP joined them).⁴¹ The group issued several public addresses to Amb. Degnan demanding her to disclose the fact of her confidential meeting with Bidzina Ivanishvili in March, in which she allegedly pressured him to make Georgia enter the war. Ivanishvili, who had not made any public political comments for a considerable time, issued a written statement in which he confirmed the fact of the meeting without describing its substance. However, he indirectly confirmed the mentioned conspiracy theory saying that the threat of Georgia being dragged into war had indeed been real, although thanks to the firm position of the Georgian government it had been overcome so far.⁴² Following this, Amb. Degnan confirmed the fact of a meeting with Ivanishvili, denying that Georgia’s participation in the war was discussed; she strongly refuted speculations that the US government had any wish to drag Georgia into the war.⁴³ However, the splinter group did not stop and continued to harass the US Ambassador with different accusatory statements such as trying to destabilize Georgia by supporting the “radical opposition” that wishes to come to power through unconstitutional means.⁴⁴

The “defectors” statements were rather bizarre and reminiscent of the Russian propaganda in their wording. However, no GD representative ever distanced the party from their statements or censure them for their “defection” and subsequent activities.⁴⁵ This stands in stark contrast with the way they treated genuine defectors in the past. Moreover, party leaders continued to issue their own statements that were accusatory of the West, including lashing out at outgoing EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell.⁴⁶ This suggested that the “defection” was itself a ruse and constituted part of the GD political game, however peculiar this specific method might have been.

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One can only speculate what the ultimate objective of such a game might be. Whatever it is, however, it is most alarming that the position of the Georgian government has never been so hostile to the international democratic community.

This makes it legitimate to ask how far Georgia may go in its estrangement from the West. The obvious point of comparison is the November 2013 decision of President Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine when he dropped the idea of the Association Membership of the EU in favor of closer relations with Russia. While in Georgia, the idea that Ivanishvili has a hidden pro-Russian agenda had always been popular among some of his critics, now it is also becoming mainstream among international observers to claim that the current Georgian government is essentially pro-Russian.⁴⁷ Western officials are naturally more reserved in expressing an opinion on this issue; however, as mentioned above, they also openly question whether Georgia’s pro-western orientation is still valid.⁴⁸

So far, most analysts consider it unlikely that the GD government will make any dramatic moves like openly declaring itself in the Russian camp. It is more likely it will continue playing a double game by maintaining the declarative pro-western orientation with keeping the trends described above. It unveiled a plan to implement recommendations of the European Commission so that Georgia eventually gets the status of EU candidate country.⁴⁹ A September statement by Prime Minister Garibashvili that further “spreading and deepening” criticism of Ambassador Degnan is not in the country’s interest (even though he did not disavow the substance of accusations that had been made against her) confirmed once more that the GD continues to play its balancing game.⁵⁰ Garibashvili’s visit to

Germany in mid-September served as another demonstration of Georgia keeping its commitment to European integration.⁵¹

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However, if only superficial moves are made and the government does not display any will of changing its policies in a substantive way, it is highly unlikely that the next EU decision on its candidate status will be more beneficial for Georgia than the one taken in June. The country faces the prospect of losing a truly historical opportunity.

3. DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON GEORGIA'S INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE

From the very first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the large majority of the Georgian people expressed strong support for Ukraine. They believed that the Ukrainians were fighting for Georgia too, that their defeat would have deplorable consequences for their country, while Ukraine's victory would be greatly beneficial for Georgia as well. This was revealed in the results of the public opinion polls,⁵² mass rallies in support of Ukraine,⁵³ Georgian volunteers going to fight for Ukraine,⁵⁴ numerous humanitarian initiatives, etc.

The issue of Georgia's response to the war is a genuinely polarizing one not only on the level of the political elite but with regard to the general public.

Nevertheless, Georgian society is deeply divided over how the Georgian state should respond to the war. Many of those strongly supportive of Ukraine considered the Georgian government's response in support of Ukraine insufficient and inconsistent. Mentioned rallies in support of Ukraine swiftly developed into protests against the government's allegedly inadequate response.⁵⁵ Others, however, approved of the government's cautious approach.

Results of the public opinion polls confirmed this division. Even though a large majority put the blame for the war on Russia and supported Ukraine, people were much more divided when evaluating the Georgian government's response to the war. In a poll of the Caucasus Regional

Research Center (CRRC), with fieldwork conducted on 7-10 March, 61 percent of those polled agreed that the Georgian government should do more to support Ukraine and only 32 percent considered the existing level of support sufficient.⁵⁶ In another poll conducted by the same CRRC but commissioned by the US National Democratic Institute (fieldwork conducted at the end of February and March), 49 percent supported the government's decision not to join sanctions against Russia, while 37 were of the opposite opinion. The same poll also showed that GD supporters were mostly against joining the sanctions, while most of the opposition supporters would like their country to join them.⁵⁷ According to a poll commissioned by the US International Republican Institute (fieldwork on 4-24 March), 53 percent considered the Georgian government's response in support of Ukraine completely or somewhat sufficient, while 44 percent thought it was completely or somewhat insufficient.⁵⁸

These data demonstrate that the issue of Georgia's response to the war is a genuinely polarizing one not only on the level of the political elite but with regard to the general public. General support for Ukraine in the war does not always preclude accepting the GD's claim to be the guardian of security and stability against the opposition demands that some see as risky and irresponsible. This also contradicts earlier research contending that there is no genuine political polarization in Georgia because supporters of the government and the opposition do not express differences on major political issues.⁵⁹ In this case, a division on an important policy issue correlates with party loyalties.

GD explains its cautious policy by the necessity to protect Georgia's security and economic interests. Moreover, it aggressively attacks its critics, accusing them of betraying national interests and deliberately undermining public order. The conspiracy theory described in the previous section is the main ground of this criticism: allegedly, there was collusion between the Ukrainian government and the Georgian opposition to drag Georgia into the war. Since the GD government would not allow this, the opposition would have to first come to power by engineering a coup. (As said, later the GD government presented the US government as the true mastermind of this alleged conspiracy). In justifying this theory, GD representatives repeatedly referred to the ties between the government of Ukraine and the Georgian opposition, implying that several individuals formerly linked to the UNM had positions in the Ukrainian government.⁶⁰ Alluding to the opposition as the "party of war" has become part of the standard message box of the ruling

party. This was a way to refer not only to the UNM but to any government critics, including civil society organizations and even the Public Defender.⁶¹

On the other hand, the government's only lukewarm support for Ukraine and its increasing hostility towards the West made it even more common to accuse the government of playing the Russian card and effectively undermining policies of western integration. Among other things, this was often explained by Bidzina Ivanishvili's linkages to the Russian oligarchic business. The latter view was strengthened by the audio recording of a supposed conversation between Ivanishvili and a sanctioned Russian oligarch Vladimir Evtushenkov who is close to Vladimir Putin. In the recording, Evtushenkov urged Ivanishvili to meet his emissary personally (rather than refer him to Prime Minister Garibashvili) as he had important business issues to discuss.⁶² Evtushenkov later confirmed the authenticity of the call,⁶³ while some GD surrogates in the media included this episode into their conspiracy theory by saying that it was Americans who made Evtushenkov call Ivanishvili to discredit him.⁶⁴

However, it is one thing to declare the government's actions unacceptable if not treasonous; it is another to determine what should be the response of the opposition and the wider public. The most natural one was to protest in the streets. There were two sets of public rallies since the beginning of the war: at the end of February, people expressed solidarity with Ukraine, but also disappointment with the Georgian government's insufficient support for it. At the end of June and early July, a coalition of civil society organizations led by the *Shame* movement organized three large rallies under the slogan "Home to Europe". The first of them, on June 20th, was intended to demonstrate the Georgians' support for the country's European future in anticipation of the pending European Council decision.⁶⁵ When it became clear, however, that Georgia, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, was not getting the candidate status, both civil society and the opposition were quick to blame the failure on the GD government contending that GD might have deliberately sabotaged its own EU bid wishing to appease Russia.⁶⁶ This was followed by two more rallies demanding the resignation of the government and replacing it with a technical government before snap parliamentary elections.⁶⁷ All these rallies were rather large by Georgian standards, attracting over fifty thousand (maybe, over a hundred thousand) people each by most conservative estimates. However, the government ignored the protesters' demands, while the rally organizers decided to discontinue them, apparently

because they didn't hope that they could keep up the momentum of protests long enough to force the government to make meaningful concessions.⁶⁸

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These events showed both the weakness and strength of the Georgian civil society (using this term in the broad sense that includes opposition parties as well). Presumably, mentioned huge rallies had a genuine effect in that they did not allow the government to abandon even its declarative and superficial commitment to Georgia's European path. Despite its unadulterated hostility to the Ukrainian government and accusing the West of the anti-Georgian conspiracy, the government still felt obliged to occasionally express its support of Ukraine and declare commitment to the cause of European integration. Many people believed that it was the Georgian public who forced the government's hand when it applied for EU membership against its true wishes.⁶⁹ To be sure, it is difficult to decisively prove such contention, but striking contradictions between its harsh anti-western rhetoric and continuing steps aimed at European integration make it look believable.

The presumption that the government submitted an application under duress was effectively confirmed by the "splinter group" of GD that is believed by some to express true opinions of Ivanishvili: they claimed that the international democratic community and the Georgian opposition set up a "mousetrap" for the GD government by putting it into a position when not submitting an EU membership application became politically unaffordable. The alleged calculation was that public discontent caused by the denial of the candidate status for Georgia would lead to deposing the government through public protests (followed, of course, by Georgia joining the war).⁷⁰ However absurd this theory may be, it suggests that the GD government considered applying to the EU membership being against its interest, but did it under public pressure.

However, civil society has not been strong enough to induce the government to make meaningful changes in its policies and break the trend of democratic decline. One of the chief reasons for that may be that, while uniformly opposed to the GD, critical civil society is divided in many other ways. There exists discord between the grassroots protest movements and the opposition parties. For instance, organizers of mentioned protest rallies shunned the opposition leaders believing that their prominent role would make fewer people willing to join.

Moreover, both the opposition and civil society organizations are split on the issue of whether they should cooperate with the GD government on the implementation of the EU recommendations. Supporters of the cooperation believe that even the smallest chances of a positive development shall be taken advantage of, all the more so that it is the EU's advice for the opposition and civil society to behave in such a manner.⁷¹

The opposition and civil society organizations are split on the issue of whether they should cooperate with the GD government on the implementation of the EU recommendations.

Others believe that the GD government is not going to implement the recommendations and will only take ostensible steps in that direction. Therefore, it is wrong to help it by creating an illusion of a normal inclusive process without any reasonable hope of influencing the outcome. The GD helped supporters of the latter view when it refused to cooperate on issues of electoral reform with the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a leading elections watchdog, as it allegedly was not "politically neutral". In response, several other leading NGOs refused to take part in the process as well.⁷²

The recommendation of "deoligarchization" coming from the EU somewhat strengthened the radical position as well. In Georgia, the term "oligarch" has been exclusively used concerning Bidzina Ivanishvili; therefore, part of the civil society took this recommendation as a signal from the West that Georgia would not get a candidate status without a regime change. The EU did not elucidate, what it meant under deoligarchization but, arguably, its mentioned appeal to the opposition to cooperate with the ruling party contradicts the deoligarchization imperative as understood by many Georgians. In its turn, the GD leadership strongly rejected the possibility of considering Ivanishvili an "oligarch" and indicated that it applied to leaders and financial supporters of the opposition.⁷³

There are expectations in parts of the Georgian society that the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine – provided Russia is defeated – may become a game-changer in Georgia's domestic politics.

Against the backdrop of major divisions, an impression has been created that the opposition, in its current condition, is weaker than at any time under the GD rule. This cannot be only explained by the increased government pressure.

As the size of the mentioned rallies shows, the level of discontent with government policies is quite high. This is confirmed by public opinion polls: In August 2022, more than half of those polled assessed the government performance as "bad".⁷⁴ However, the opposition and civil society fail to offer any distinct vision of further actions that can bring about meaningful change. As a result, 56 percent of Georgian citizens do not see any political party that represents their interests.⁷⁵

2024 parliamentary elections are the most natural point of reference for change; however, influential parts of the opposition still insist on demanding snap elections,⁷⁶ even though it has several times been demonstrated that the opposition parties and civic movements fail to mobilize sufficient support to achieve this goal. This contributes to a greater confusion among the part of society that wants change.

UNM, the largest and most popular opposition party, appears to be going through a leadership crisis that may be caused by an uncertain position of its founder and historically unifying figure, Mikheil Saakashvili. During the summer of 2022, being in a Georgian prison, he became much less active in his appeals to the Georgian public and even signaled, through his lawyers, that he was fully focused on the Ukrainian fight against Russia and no longer interested in Georgian politics.⁷⁷ However, many considered this a temporary tactical move. Part of the party faithful appeared to mistrust other leaders of the party and attacked them in social networks. All this had an almost paralyzing effect on the UNM leadership. This creates a leadership vacuum on the opposition side; no other political party or public movement has tried to take the lead and propose any viable strategy.

All this contributes to the perception that Georgia is at an impasse, at least as much as interrelated issues of democratic development and European integration are concerned. Even though the GD government continues its demonstrative commitment to the European path, it is highly unlikely that under its leadership, Georgia will achieve any progress and will qualify for the status of the EU candidate country. This means that the country risks missing a historical chance, as the window of opportunity will not be open indefinitely.

There are expectations in parts of the Georgian society that the outcome of Russia's war against Ukraine – provided Russia is defeated – may become a game-changer in Georgia's domestic politics by weakening the GD's hand. Such

an opinion is not fully unwarranted. The GD response to the war was most probably dictated by the expectation of Russia decisively defeating Ukraine in the war. If the outcome of the war is opposite to that, the GD narrative will be proven essentially wrong; even its supporters will see its campaign of attacks against the West as unwise. This may change the balance of political support in favor of the opposition. However, even if these calculations are correct, this might not be sufficient for the decisive political breakthrough in favor of the opposition. The latter still should do a lot to organize itself and propose a workable strategy for its supporters and the country.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russian aggression against Ukraine did not lead to dramatic shifts in Georgia's domestic political scene. However, it added a new dimension to a protracted crisis of democratic institutions which has been going on in Georgia for approximately the last two years.

One of the most important dimensions of the crisis is that both the ruling party and the opposition question each other's legitimacy. This leads to undermining the legitimacy of key democratic institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, the Public Defender's Office, etc. The war equipped both sides with new arguments to reject each other's legitimacy and made it even more difficult to find common ground between the parties.

Even though the government expresses general support for Ukraine, its rhetoric and actions are inconsistent. This makes it a target of legitimate criticism from not only the opposition, but also civil activists, the expert community, and international observers. Many are even more convinced that GD has only declarative commitment to the cause of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, while in effect it leads the country away from the western path.

The Georgian government created a conspiracy theory referring to alleged collusion between the Ukrainian government, the Georgian opposition, and the West (including the US government, the EU, and the Swiss banking system) aimed at dragging Georgia into the war and/or staging a coup in Georgia. Without presenting any proof, this theory became the cornerstone of the GD propaganda. Following this theory, the GD calls all its critics (not necessarily

from the political opposition) members of a "war party".

All of this makes Georgia's declarative commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration extremely shallow. Isolated steps such as applying for EU membership and, later, demonstrating readiness to implement EU recommendations stand in a striking contradiction with the overall direction of the ongoing political process. A realistic chance of a breakthrough in the direction of European integration did not stimulate any new steps for creating a more democratic environment – to the contrary, the government's attitudes to the opposition, civil society, and independent media, hostile to start with, became even more inimical. So far, nothing gives hope that the process of work on implementing EU recommendations will be genuinely inclusive and reduce the intensity of toxic political polarization.

What can be done in these rather discouraging circumstances when no positive trends are visible?

Given the general mindset and policies of the acting government, it is difficult to formulate realistic recommendations concerning democratization and European integration. However, we can formulate what should be the first steps of the current government if it, hypothetically, develops a political will to achieve progress in the mentioned areas. These are:

- Recognizing the existence of deep structural challenges in the area of democracy
- Refusing to demonize the opposition and recognize it as the legitimate political player
- Starting an active dialogue with civil society and the media (however critical they might be)
- Releasing political prisoners as a confidence-building step

Only after this one can meaningfully speak of further meaningful efforts to cooperate for the implementation of the EU recommendations or generally improve the political environment in the country.

The political opposition has its own crisis to overcome, which had been primarily caused by having created unrealistic hopes of a speedy change of government through street protests and the following inevitable disillusionments. The necessary first steps to take are:

- Refraining from impulsive steps and cultivating new unrealistic expectations

- Instead of an exclusive focus on negative rhetoric, concentrating on the development of long-term strategy and a vision of overcoming the crisis in preparation for the 2024 parliamentary elections
- Engaging in a systemic and comprehensive dialogue with different parts of the Georgian society
- Cooperating with western partners without creating an illusion that external players can have a crucial influence on solving Georgia's internal problems.
- Combining concentration on the long-term strategy with tactical flexibility and the use of different methods of political struggle based on changing political situation.

NOTES

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Appendix

GEORGIAN EXPERTS DON'T TRUST PRO-WESTERN ORIENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT, ARE PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE PROSPECT OF CHANGE

The Results of Two Surveys

May and July 2022

In May and July 2022, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) carried out two surveys of Georgian policy experts. The first dealt with the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Georgia's foreign and domestic politics, while the second focused on the importance and reasons for the EU decision regarding Georgia's membership application and the next steps that follow from this. This report summarizes the results of both surveys and is linked to the policy paper which is published at the same time.

The surveys were taken on the online platform Survey Monkey from 3 to 16 of May and from 2nd to 20th of July respectively. In the former case, we got 52 responses, and in the latter – 130 ones.

To be sure, the results cannot be generalized. However, they depict views that are popular among Georgian researchers and analysts who have an influence on the Georgian public through the media or by influencing other opinion-makers. In the second survey, 41.7 percent of respondents represented the academic sphere, and 35.4 percent – public policy think tanks. Others included influential journalists and independent analysts. The distribution of respondents' affiliations was similar in the first survey as well. We did our best to involve respondents who have different political preferences, but the large majority of responses were rather critical of the incumbent government. Presumably, that generally corresponds to overall attitudes widespread in the public policy experts' community.

Only a single respondent in each of the surveys opposed European integration, all others considered this policy direction crucial for the country. While in the Georgian society the share of opponents of the European course is larger, the near unanimity among the respondents may be correlated with the fact that there is effectively no expert debate in Georgia concerning the desirability of European integration: it is only ways toward that goal are under discussion.

With regards to each question, we proposed to the respondents several possible answers and asked them to choose the one they considered the closest to their views. In their turn, different versions of answers were based on media statements and policy discussions that are underway in Georgia. Apart from that, we gave respondents a chance to explain and specify their answers, but only very few of them took advantage of this option. We decided not to use these comments in this report.

The research was carried out under the general supervision of Ghia Nodia.

MAIN FINDINGS

Both surveys revealed that a large majority of experts shared extremely critical attitudes towards both foreign and domestic policies of the incumbent Georgian Dream (GD) government.

The large majority considers Georgia's failure to obtain the EU membership candidate status to be a grave disappointment and holds the government singularly responsible for that. Moreover, as many as 70 percent ascribed this failure not to the government's mistakes, but to its deliberate strategy: they believed that the GD government submitted the application for EU membership under pressure from society, without being genuinely interested in getting the candidate status. An even larger majority, 85 percent, believed that the probability of the GD government implementing EU recommendations was either very low or did not exist at all.

Effectively, this implied accusing the government of having an anti-western and tacitly pro-Russian course. Earlier, accusing GD of tacit pro-Russian sympathies was something typical for more radical supporters of the opposition; the expert community tended to consider such accusations as exaggerated, unfounded, and politically motivated. Now, branding the GD government as effectively pro-Russian has become mainstream.

Against this backdrop, it has become reasonable to ask, whether the government may take the next step of openly rejecting policies of European integration. The majority, 70 percent, assessed the probability of such a move as low or did not expect such development at all. 21 percent deemed this option feasible.

However, when it comes to recommending a proper strategy for the opposition and civil society, the opinions of the experts differ. In August, 42 percent thought that under the circumstances, the strategy of changing government through mass rallies was the most adequate course of action for the Georgian opposition and civil society. A somewhat smaller share, 34 percent, supported a more "constructive" approach – cooperation with the GD aimed at the implementation of EU recommendations. On the other hand, a large majority also did not believe in the prospect of achieving snap elections and disagreed with demands to renew the boycott of Parliament. To summarize, support for more radical methods may have somewhat increased within the expert community, though there is also a high level of skepticism concerning their effectiveness. Respectively, the large majority of experts expressed pessimism about prospects for a positive change within the foreseeable future.

How did Georgian experts assess the Georgian government's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

In May, the large majority of experts, 84.6 percent, believed that the Georgian government should have expressed much stronger support for Ukraine; another 11.5 percent deemed the government support mostly adequate, but still expected it to be more consistent. Only one expert considered government support to be fully adequate, and one more thought that Ukraine did not deserve even the level of support it got. Answering another question, 78.8 percent agreed that this response "significantly" or "somewhat" undermined the trust of western governments towards the Georgian government (15.4 percent thought it remained the same).

When asked about the reasons for the government's reactions, each respondent could choose

three options. According to the three most popular answers, the government response was mainly influenced by Bidzina Ivanishvili's (the GD founder believed to be effective power behind the government) business interests, domestic political reasons (a wish to discredit the opposition as an irresponsible force), and a wish to appease Russia. Only relatively small numbers (20.4 and 18.4 percent respectively) picked motives that GD itself used to justify its reserved response, such as pragmatic interests of security and economics.

Did Georgia's application for the EU membership impact the domestic political scene?

In the May survey, the large majority of respondents, 86.5 percent, believed that during the last two years, Georgia has made steps in a more autocratic direction. This conforms to the findings

of international research organizations that assess the level of democracy in different countries.

Following its application to the EU membership, it became logical to expect the Georgian government that it would try to make some steps in a more democratic direction to impress its western partners. But in May, only 15.4 percent of Georgian experts shared this expectation; 76.9% believed that this application would not have any impact on the government's actions. A similar majority agreed that the new international environment would not affect the activities of the opposition either. These predictions proved correct.

Reactions to the EU refusal to grant Georgia membership candidate status

In late June, responding to Georgia's application, the EU decided to grant Georgia, as well as Ukraine and Moldova, the European perspective; however, unlike two other countries, Georgia did not get the EU membership candidate status. We explored the experts' attitudes to both components of this decision.

The majority, almost 60 percent of the respondents agreed with the answer that "under the circumstances, this [the overall decision of the EU] was fair," though a little bit less than one-third thought that all the existing problems notwithstanding, Georgia still deserved a candidate status. Usually, people who say this imply that Georgia should have received a status in recognition of the general pro-European attitudes of its society and different governments during the last couple of decades. No experts thought that "Georgia did not deserve the European perspective either".

Apart from assessing the fairness of the decision, we also asked what component of the decision the experts deemed more important: the positive (opening the European perspective) or negative (refusal to grant a candidate status). On this, experts were close to unanimous: over 82 percent were primarily concerned with the failure to get the candidate status. Only 8.5 percent attributed greater weight to the opening of the European perspective, while less than four percent had ambivalent attitudes.

Who is to blame for Georgia failing to get a candidate status?

The large majority of experts, more than 80 percent, held the Georgian government exclu-

sively responsible for Georgia's failure to get the membership candidate status. Eighteen percent divided responsibility between the government and the opposition. Only six experts endorsed a version voiced by the GD representatives that the EU decision was really motivated by the geographical factor. No one laid exclusive blame at the opposition's door.

The respondents were almost equally unanimous concerning the positive element of the EU decision – opening up of the European perspective. A little bit over three-thirds shared an assessment that this way the EU "took into account repeatedly expressed the commitment of the Georgian society towards policies of the European integration." About twenty percent believed that the EU decision was based on geostrategic considerations, and only three experts thought that the EU showed its appreciation of the reforms that the government carried out during the last three years.

GD speakers had repeatedly claimed that the opposition worked hard with the European partners to prevent Georgia from getting the candidate status. In our survey, only 11.8 percent of the respondents agreed with that claim. 48 percent believed that "the opposition tried to convince the European partners that Georgia deserved the candidate status, but it could have done much more for this," while in the opinion of 16.5 percent it did all it could. A relatively large share of the respondents, 23.6 percent, abstained from answering this question.

What is the government's real geopolitical strategy?

In recent years, a contradiction between the government's declarative pro-western strategy and its undemocratic political steps and increasingly anti-western public rhetoric has become more and more salient. In Georgia's circumstances, the latter policy direction is presumed to imply some kind of rapprochement with Russia. Against this backdrop, some opinion-makers have speculated that the government only applied to the EU membership under pressure from below, while in fact, it was not interested in getting the candidate status.

The August survey showed that seventy percent of respondents shared this opinion: moreover, they agreed with the statement that the government's actions during the previous several months amounted to a deliberate subversion of its own application. Only 28.4 percent agreed to an assessment that the ruling party "wanted

to get the candidate status, though its activities were not adequate for achieving this goal.” Not a single respondent believed that the government did all it could to get the candidate status for the country.

Based on this, it becomes appropriate to ask whether the government is going to maintain at least its declarative pro-western direction. Should we expect a next step whereby it will openly reject this political course and explicitly move to the Russian camp? There was no unanimity on this point. A plurality, 40.2 percent deemed this possible, though considered the probability of such development to be low, while 30 percent was confident that the government will continue to be pro-western on a declarative level. Only 21 percent considered the probability of giving up on the pro-western course as high.

How does the expert community evaluate the opposition attitudes towards European integration as more acceptable than that of the GD? 81.4 percent, the vast majority, presumed that if the existing opposition comes to power, the country will have a much greater chance to get the EU membership candidate status. Only 7.8 percent believed that nothing would change in this case as well, and nobody thought that the change of government would diminish the chances to get the candidate status. A relatively large share, 10.9 percent, abstained from answering this question.

How big is the chance of the EU recommendations being implemented?

The EU plans to reconsider the issue of Georgia’s candidate status based on its success to implement twelve recommendations set by the European Commission. The initial timeframe for this task included approximately six months; later it was extended to sometime in 2023. At the time of launching the August survey, the six-month deadline was presumed to be in force, which was reflected in the formulation of the question.

We asked the experts to assess the probability of the GD government achieving significant progress in implementing recommendations within the given timeframe. The response was mostly pessimistic: 55 percent deemed the chance of success as low, while 30.2 percent considered it non-existent. Only 4.5 percent believed that there was a realistic chance of the incumbent government implementing the recommendations, while 6.2 percent were confident that the government would implement them.

What should democrats do?

As this research also confirmed, the large majority of experts believe that with the GD in power, trends of estrangement from the West and the decline of democracy are irreversible. If this is the case, what should the pro-western and pro-democracy people do? The latter is often equated with opposition and civil society.

During the last two years, the opposition and civil society have been effectively divided concerning the strategy of action. One part believes that they should be oriented towards the traditional democratic institutions, most importantly, Parliament. The prospect of change should be primarily linked to the opposition winning elections. This is also the strategy that the international democratic community consistently encourages.

Others are skeptical about the effectiveness of such conventional methods. They believe that the government has immense resources for manipulating electoral processes and will not allow the opposition to win. In their view, the most productive strategy for change is the mobilization of street protests.

This research demonstrated that there is no shared opinion on these matters within the expert community as well. Moreover, as time passes, support for more radical methods tends to somewhat strengthen.

We explored the expert opinion on these issues in both May and August surveys but also compared their data to the results of similar research carried out by the CIPDD in August 2021. At that time, only 28 percent were confident that "if the opposition becomes more popular than the incumbent, nothing can stop it from winning elections"; on the other hand, only 9 percent fully ruled out the possibility of an electoral change of power. 59 percent believed that it was possible to defeat GD in elections, but only in case the opposition had an especially strong margin of popularity (in the vicinity of 7-8 percent at least) to outweigh the effects of manipulation and fraud.

In May, we checked how expert attitudes on this issue had changed since then. 58.2 percent stated that their opinion on this issue had not changed. Others did change their opinions, but in opposite directions: a somewhat larger amount, 19.1 percent, said that now they had even less hope of the feasibility of the government change through elections; on the other hand, 15.7 percent was even more confident that such a scenario was realistic.

In the August survey, we asked, what strategy should active supporters of the European integration choose given the government had no political will to implement the EU recommendations? The plurality, 42.4 percent, supported ousting the GD government through street protest rallies. A relatively big part, 34.4 percent believed that the opposition and civil society should cooperate with the GD regarding the implementation of the recommendations. 12.8 percent deemed both these ways unproductive and thought that priority should be given to preparing for the 2024 elections.

Even though questions in the mentioned three surveys were formulated differently and the data are not directly comparable, they still reveal a general trend of the growing skepticism towards the effectiveness of conventional democratic methods such as elections and parliamentary work. The problem is, however, that the same respondents were not confident about the effectiveness of relatively more radical methods such as peaceful protest rallies either. In the May survey, 35.5 percent of respondents believed that the demands of snap elections (supposedly achievable through mass rallies) were totally unrealistic, and 48 percent thought their success was less probable. Only 3.9 percent deemed snap elections to be highly probable.

Time and again, radical critics of the government appeal to the opposition to return to the regime of the parliamentary boycott. Only 18 percent of the experts approved of such a strategy. The vast majority believed that the opposition should concentrate on using the parliamentary methods

or combine them with street protests (44 and 30 percent respectively).

It is fully consistent with these views that most experts were pessimistic about the prospect of any advance in democracy within the next two years. In May, 51 percent believed that within this period, the country will continue to move in a more autocratic direction, while 25 percent did not expect significant changes in this respect. Only 13.7 percent were hopeful that the country would become more democratic within this time frame.

With the general outlook being rather gloomy for Georgian democrats, people tend to pin greater hopes on the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war. This does not only imply an expectation of Ukraine's victory (we did not check this in our survey), but a presumption that such a victory would weaken the GD grip on power and, respectively, increase the probability of a positive change. This research showed that such expectations did exist in the expert community as well. 78.4 percent of those polled in May believed that Ukraine's hypothetical victory would "significantly" or "somewhat" weaken the GD government position. Only 9.8 percent agreed that the result of the war would not affect Georgia's domestic politics; nobody expected it to strengthen the ruling party.

However widespread such hopes might be, almost nobody discusses specific mechanisms of Ukraine's military success being translated into Georgia's domestic political situation: we did not try to check this in this survey as well.