

Georgia: How Domestic Policy Shapes the Path Towards Western Integration



Briefing paper

Braga, may 2024

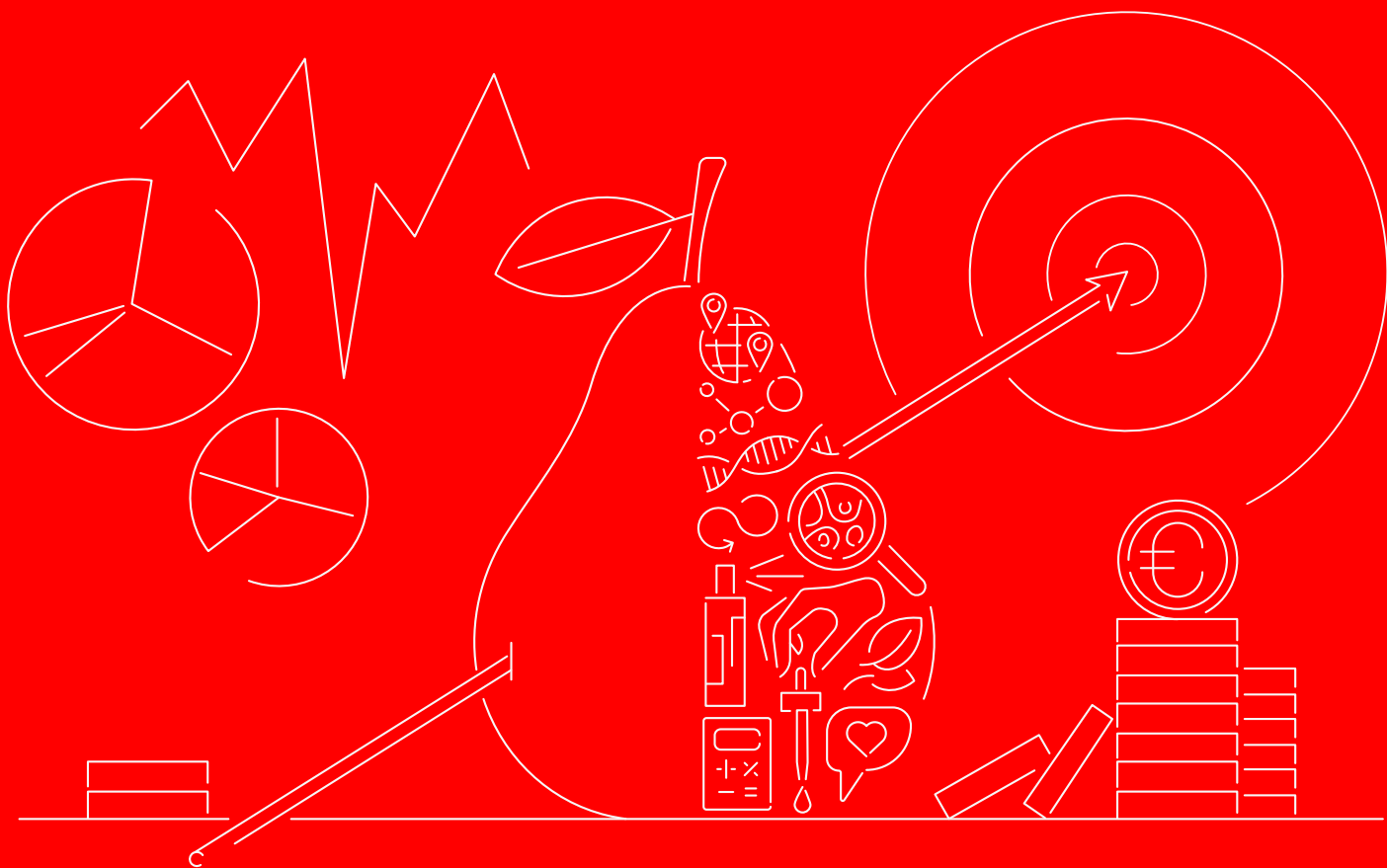
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At a glance

Our research explores the domestic and foreign policy of Georgia, focusing on the period from 1991 to 2024. This work is divided into three main parts: analysis of the domestic and individual levels, analysis of the systemic level, and theoretical and practical recommendations for Georgia until 2030.

The introduction contextualizes the historical background of Georgia's foreign policy, highlighting foreign influences and invasions over the centuries, from the Byzantines to the Soviet Union (Hey, J. 2003). After gaining independence in 1991, Georgia faced significant challenges due to rising nationalism and separatism in Europe, particularly in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Suny, R. 1994). Political instability and internal conflicts in the 1990s weakened Georgia's international standing, with Eduard Shevardnadze assuming leadership in 1992, bringing relative stability.

During Shevardnadze's leadership, Georgia sought closer ties with Western institutions, joining NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994 (NATO, 1994) and becoming a member of the Council of Europe in 1996. The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a significant project aimed at transporting Caspian oil to Western markets, bypassing Russia, was a notable effort to attract Western investment (Peuch, 2000; Council of Europe, 1996).

The early 2000s marked a significant shift in Georgia's policy with the Rose Revolution in 2003. Mass protests and election fraud led to Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation and Mikheil Saakashvili's election as president in 2004.

Tensions with Russia led to the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008. The conflict started in South Ossetia and escalated with Russian forces entering Georgian territory. It concluded with an EU-mediated ceasefire; however, Russia subsequently recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, further deteriorating its relations with Georgia (Allison, 2008). Following the 2008 war, while managing its relationship with Russia, Georgia persisted in its integration with Western institutions and both the EU and the US bolstered their support for Georgia's sovereignty. NATO membership remains a key goal, but unresolved conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia complicate this path (Allison, 2008); (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

Domestic politics are crucial, with ongoing debates about reforms and external influences. Georgia's strategic position as an energy transit corridor further complicates its foreign policy. Additionally, the government has prioritized improving relations with neighboring South Caucasus and Black Sea countries to enhance regional stability (Cornell, 2013)

After analyzing Georgia's domestic and foreign policy dynamics, our group has identified the "Small State Theory" as a foundational framework and analytical tool to understand Georgian behavior and provide future recommendations. According to this theory, smaller states within an anarchic international system can employ strategies that capitalize on their power asymmetry relative to larger states. This theoretical approach highlights the importance of small states in the global arena and suggests that embracing this identity can lead to growth over the medium to long term (Hey, 2003).

The primary criteria used to examine small states include quantitative, qualitative, and relational dimensions, with a strong emphasis on the latter. Relational criteria provide insights into Georgia's status by assessing its relative influence, "weight," and power compared to other states, thus going beyond mere quantitative measures. Applying relational criteria, we must examine Georgia's position and behavior within the international system, considering its interactions and interdependencies with other global actors. This approach highlights the importance of Georgia's regional context in determining its classification as a small state, which can diverge based on contextual and regional specifics (Kurecic, Kozina & Kokotović, 2017).

Acknowledging the various determinants of small state status, our group supports a holistic approach that combines quantitative, qualitative, and relational criteria to achieve a nuanced understanding of Georgia's classification. This method allows for a comprehensive examination of small state behavior within the broader international system, considering shifting power dynamics and contextual nuances. We emphasize the importance of not relying solely on any single criterion to define small states, as this often leads to numerous exceptions. For example, focusing only on quantitative criteria could result in misleading conclusions by ignoring crucial factors such as military strength, geographic location, or economic interdependencies (Kurecic, Kozina & Kokotović, 2017).

Following this theoretical exposition, our analysis explores Georgia's strategic maneuvers within the international arena. Despite being a small state, Georgia has shown astuteness in navigating power asymmetries through strategic bandwagoning, hedging, and balancing (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023). By aligning with Western powers, Georgia has pursued a bandwagoning strategy to enhance its security and counter Russian influence (MacFarlane & Jones, 2023). Simultaneously, adopting hedging strategies, like diversifying energy and trade relationships, reflects Georgia's aim to reduce dependence on Russia (Ciorciari, 2019). Additionally, it has engaged in balancing strategies, strengthening its military capabilities and participating in NATO exercises to counteract Russian assertiveness (MacFarlane & Jones, 2023). These strategic imperatives highlight Georgia's efforts to transcend its "weak state" status and establish itself as a "small power" (Kozina & Kokotović, 2017).

Our analysis not only underscores Georgia's strategy in navigating the international system but also accentuates the interplay between theoretical frameworks and real-world policy imperatives. Moving forward, our research endeavors will delve into Georgia's policies from the systemic, state, and individual levels, elucidating the dimensions that shape its foreign policy conduct (Kozina & Kokotović, 2017; Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2023). At the domestic and individual levels, Georgia's path to independence promised democracy and prosperity (Smith, 2001) but was fraught with obstacles.

The collapse of the Soviet Union left a power vacuum, leading to political instability (Brown, 2005) and public protests. Frequent leadership changes hindered the establishment of effective governance structures (Miller, 2007). Ethnic and territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia posed significant threats to Georgia's territorial integrity, resulting in violence and strained international relations, as these autonomous movements advocating for separations were ethnically based (Clark, 1995).

Meanwhile, Georgia had to deal with a transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one (Robinson, 2010) required structural reforms, privatization, and efforts to attract foreign investment (Adams, 1999) once it was left with obsolete infrastructure facilities, ineffective production methods and lacked experience in market mechanisms (White, 2006). Efforts to bolster democratic institutions, enhance sustainable economic development (Brown, 2005), and at the same time reconcile societal rifts marked the early years of independence (Jones, 1998).

Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency in 1992 aimed at aligning Georgia with the West (Taylor, 2002), but his tenure was marred by corruption and instability due to sustained strikes (Garcia, 2008). With the new leadership, came the realization of the necessity to consolidate democracy and institutions to make it hold up against internal and external pressures (Baker, 2004). Despite these challenges, his era demonstrated Georgia's determination to overcome obstacles in pursuit of its full potential (Brown, 2005). Shevardnadze's tumultuous tenure served as a crucible for lasting reforms (Jones, 1998). The shortcomings of Georgia's early independence ultimately led to his downfall (Miller, 2007), but did not have lasting negative effects. In hindsight, Shevardnadze's presidency played a significant and profound role in Georgia's journey towards democratic consolidation and economic recovery, underscoring the inherent challenges of nation-building post-independence.

The Rose Revolution in 2003, led by Mikheil Saakashvili (Robinson, 2010), marked a turning point. Saakashvili implemented sweeping reforms (Baker, 2004), fought corruption, and pursued closer ties with the EU and NATO placing Georgia on an integration path towards the West (Smith, 2001). However, his tenure faced criticism for human rights issues and regional conflicts, particularly the 2008 war with Russia.

Despite the challenges and criticisms, the legacies of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili significantly shape Georgia's political landscape and global position (Miller, 2007). Their distinct leadership styles and governance approaches highlight the complex issues Georgia faces in its quest for stability and progress (Johnson, 2003). Saakashvili, following a dynamic election campaign advocating pro-Western policies (Taylor, 2002), pledged to implement extensive reforms targeting corruption, strengthening democratic institutions, and boosting economic development (Clark, 1995). His presidency achieved notable improvements in governance, rule of law, infrastructure, and public services, marking significant milestones for Georgia (Garcia, 2008). Saakashvili's autocratic and centralized leadership style drew significant criticism for limiting press freedom, infringing on civil and political rights, and eroding the separation of powers (Robinson, 2010). Despite these issues, his impact on Georgia's political landscape is undeniable. His unwavering commitment to revolutionary reforms and a pro-Western stance modernized Georgia and strengthened its ties with Western states (Green, 2012). However, his aggressive policies also led to ongoing tensions, highlighting the complex relationship between democratization and political stability in Georgia (Baker, 2004).

This presidency ended in 2012, leading to the Georgian Dream coalition headed by Bidzina Ivanishvili (Campbell, 2015). Despite hopes for political stabilization and a more pluralistic governance system, these expectations were not fully met (Smith, 2001) and the situation was worsened by allegations of corruption, weak institutions, and deep political polarization (Brown, 2005). Ivanishvili's rise was seen as a historic chance for reform and inclusivity (Jones, 1998; Miller, 2007), but his efforts fell short due to pervasive corruption and public mistrust (Johnson, 2003). International concerns persisted about judicial independence, media freedom, and human rights (Clark, 1995). The political confrontation between the ruling party and the opposition, reflecting societal divisions, hindered effective policy-making (Garcia, 2008). These ongoing struggles highlight the challenges of achieving the unity needed for successful democratic consolidation (Robinson, 2010), making development difficult even in favorable conditions (Adams, 1999). In democracies, consolidating power is essential for a well-functioning political system (Green, 2012).

The principle of power separation is crucial to prevent power concentration and ensure mutual checks among the legislature, executive, and judiciary (Baker, 2004). In Georgia, however, the government's near-unlimited authority challenges this balance (Campbell, 2015). Despite constitutional provisions for separation of powers, powerful political and economic interests often undermine these controls (Smith, 2001; Brown, 2005; Jones, 1998).

Georgia, like Ukraine, suffers from severe corruption, particularly in the judiciary, weakening the rule of law and allowing manipulation of power (Miller, 2007; Johnson, 2003). Public mistrust in the independence of institutions exacerbates this issue, leading to potential rejection of their work and political violence (Taylor, 2002). This lack of accountability further endangers democratic institutions and weakens civil rights (Clark, 1995; Garcia, 2008). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive legislative reforms, institution building, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability (Robinson, 2010). By improving power separation and combating corruption, Georgia can strengthen its democracy and ensure the rule of law, equality, and democratic participation (Adams, 1999).

To strengthen Georgia's democracy, efforts to fortify the separation of powers must be accompanied by initiatives to improve civic education and participation, empowering the electorate to hold officials accountable (Green, 2012). Enhancing judicial independence and depoliticizing law enforcement are essential to protect the rule of law and citizens' rights (Baker, 2004). Building a culture of transparency and accountability within governance structures is crucial for rebuilding public trust (Campbell, 2015). Key measures include public disclosure of government expenditures, robust whistleblower protection, and strong oversight mechanisms (Smith, 2001), which also help reduce corruption and enhance institutional integrity (Brown, 2005).

Additionally, external actors significantly influence Georgia's political landscape. Changes in relations with regional and global powers, such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, can shape Georgia's foreign policy and its approach to Euro-Atlantic integration and regional conflict resolution (Taylor, 2002; Clark, 1995). Georgia's response will depend on its leadership's decisions and ability to defend national interests (Garcia, 2008). Political actors with close ties to foreign governments and international interest groups can heavily influence the country's international orientation (Robinson, 2010). Moreover, multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations can impact Georgia's foreign policy through lobbying and other means (Adams, 1999; Green, 2012; Baker, 2004).

To address the challenges of power separation and the influence of non-governmental actors, Georgia needs a swift and comprehensive approach (Brown, 2005). Constitutional and legislative reforms should protect the integrity of each branch of government and strengthen checks and balances (Jones, 1998; Taylor, 2002). Ensuring judicial independence and promoting the rule of law are essential to maintain public confidence and protect citizens' rights (Garcia, 2008; Robinson, 2010). Combating endemic corruption is crucial to restore trust in democratic institutions and ensure fair resource allocation (Green, 2012). Empowering law enforcement and fostering civic education will promote active democratic participation and accountability (Campbell, 2015; Smith, 2001). In foreign policy, Georgia should adopt a balanced approach, diversifying international partnerships to reduce reliance on any single actor and pursuing strategic objectives independently (Jones, 1998). Regional cooperation should focus on common challenges to promote peace and prosperity for all involved (Taylor, 2002).

The path to Georgia's progress depends on the active involvement of civil society, the private sector, and the international community (Clark, 1995). Civil society organizations are crucial for promoting democracy, investigating government actions, advocating for human rights, and encouraging citizen activism (Garcia, 2008; Robinson, 2010). Strengthening civil society is essential for fighting corruption, increasing government accountability and transparency, and educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities (Adams, 1999). Unified civil society efforts can align voter aspirations with political agendas, ensuring their implementation (Green, 2012).

The private sector plays a vital role in Georgia's economic development by fostering a business-friendly environment, protecting property rights, and attracting investments (Baker, 2004; Campbell, 2015). Additionally, the private sector contributes to sustainable development by adopting eco-friendly practices and financing green technologies (Smith, 2001). The international community supports Georgia's democratic and economic development through technical and financial assistance, cultural and educational exchanges, and advocating for integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions (Brown, 2005; Jones, 1998; Taylor, 2002). Ensuring that the Georgian government upholds human rights and freedoms is also crucial (Robinson, 2010).

Collaboration among civil society, businesses, and international partners is key to steering Georgia toward democracy, prosperity, and sustainable development (Green, 2012; Baker, 2004). With its rich cultural heritage, natural resources, and industrious population, Georgia is well-equipped to overcome challenges and achieve its aspirations (Campbell, 2015; Smith, 2001). Its strategic location between Europe and Asia offers unique opportunities for economic development, trade, and tourism (Jones, 1998; Taylor, 2002; Clark, 1995). Georgia's natural resources, such as minerals, forests, and fertile soil, can support various industries and contribute to its prosperity (Robinson, 2010; Adams, 1999; Green, 2012; Baker, 2004).

For the Georgian government to capitalize on its opportunities, investing in critical infrastructure is essential (Campbell, 2015). This includes enhancing transportation networks, railways, and ports to facilitate trade (Smith, 2001). Additionally, Georgia should promote the growth of the IT sector to become a regional hub for innovation and digital development (Brown, 2005). Alongside its pursuit of independence, Georgia has been on a continuous journey toward democracy and sustainable development (Jones, 1998). This dual focus aims to create a society that thrives politically and economically, ensuring that progress benefits all citizens (Taylor, 2002; Clark, 1995).

To achieve this vision, Georgia must address several key issues (Garcia, 2008). Ensuring fair and independent distribution of power will prevent any one entity from becoming too dominant and abusing authority (Robinson, 2010). Another critical challenge is maintaining sovereignty and making decisions in the best interest of its citizens, free from external pressures (Adams, 1999; Green, 2012). This will allow Georgia to pursue policies aligned with its values and goals (Baker, 2004).

Georgia's history showcases its resilience and determination (Campbell, 2015). By addressing issues related to the separation of powers, external influence, and corruption, while seizing opportunities for economic growth and regional integration, Georgia can pave the way for a prosperous and inclusive future for all its citizens (Smith, 2001).

To analyze Georgia's foreign policy, it's crucial to consider the systemic level of analysis and its impact on Georgia's agency. Georgia's foreign policy directly affects its national security, economy, trade, regional and global integration, and conflict resolution capacity (Suny, R. G. 1994). Foreign policy is key for a country's development and interest protection in the international system. Georgia's ability to exercise agency in foreign policy is vital for its autonomy and sovereignty, enabling it to form strategic alliances and promote national interests (Hey, J. 2003).

Agency in foreign policy refers to a state's ability to act independently and proactively in the international system, pursuing national interests. However, this capacity is influenced by systemic factors within which the state operates. The systemic level context can significantly impact a state's foreign policy agency (Keohane, 2011).

The contemporary international system is marked by complex interactions, with significant influence from non-state actors and dynamics such as multipolarity, multilateralism, globalization, and regionalism. Multipolarity involves the distribution of power among multiple key actors, allowing smaller states like Georgia to leverage different partnerships and strategies. Globalization increases economic, social, and cultural interdependence worldwide, facilitated by technological advances, which presents both opportunities and challenges for states (Keohane, 2011). Multilateralism, situated between multipolarity and globalization, enables Georgia to engage in cooperation and conflict resolution, making it closer to entities like the European Union and the United Nations. This approach allows Georgia to voice its concerns on global platforms and seek security through collective agreements (Kalandadze, 2020). Regionalism underscores the significance of regional organizations and cooperation mechanisms that align with global trends to influence state behavior and international relations (Keohane, 2011).

Georgia's foreign policy is affected by the resurgence of geopolitical competition among major powers, notably the United States, China, and Russia. This competition can provide Georgia with opportunities to assert its agency. However, unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus, particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, continue to destabilize the region, undermining Georgia's territorial integrity and hindering economic development and integration efforts (Popescu, 2010).

Given its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Georgia holds significant geopolitical importance in the Caucasus region. As a key transit hub for energy resources and trade routes, Georgia's foreign policy choices and strategic alignments attract close scrutiny from external actors aiming to advance their interests (Hey, 2003).

The dynamics of the international system greatly influence Georgia's ability to exercise agency in its foreign policy. As a small state in a complex geopolitical environment, Georgia must navigate systemic factors that shape its strategic choices and interactions on the global stage (Popescu, 2010). A major factor is the influence of regional powers, particularly Russia, which historically exerts significant control in the Caucasus. Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and support for separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have heightened security concerns and limited Georgia's foreign policy agency (Kalandadze, 2020).

Regional integration initiatives such as the European Union's Eastern Partnership and the Eurasian Economic Union present opportunities and challenges for Georgia. Closer ties with European institutions offer prospects for economic development and security cooperation, but require navigating complex geopolitical dynamics and balancing relations with other regional powers. International institutions also shape Georgia's foreign policy agency. Membership in organizations like the United Nations, NATO, and the OSCE provides platforms for multilateral diplomacy. However, the effectiveness of these institutions in resolving conflicts and promoting regional peace and security is often limited by the interests of powerful actors and geopolitical rivalries (Kalandadze, 2020).

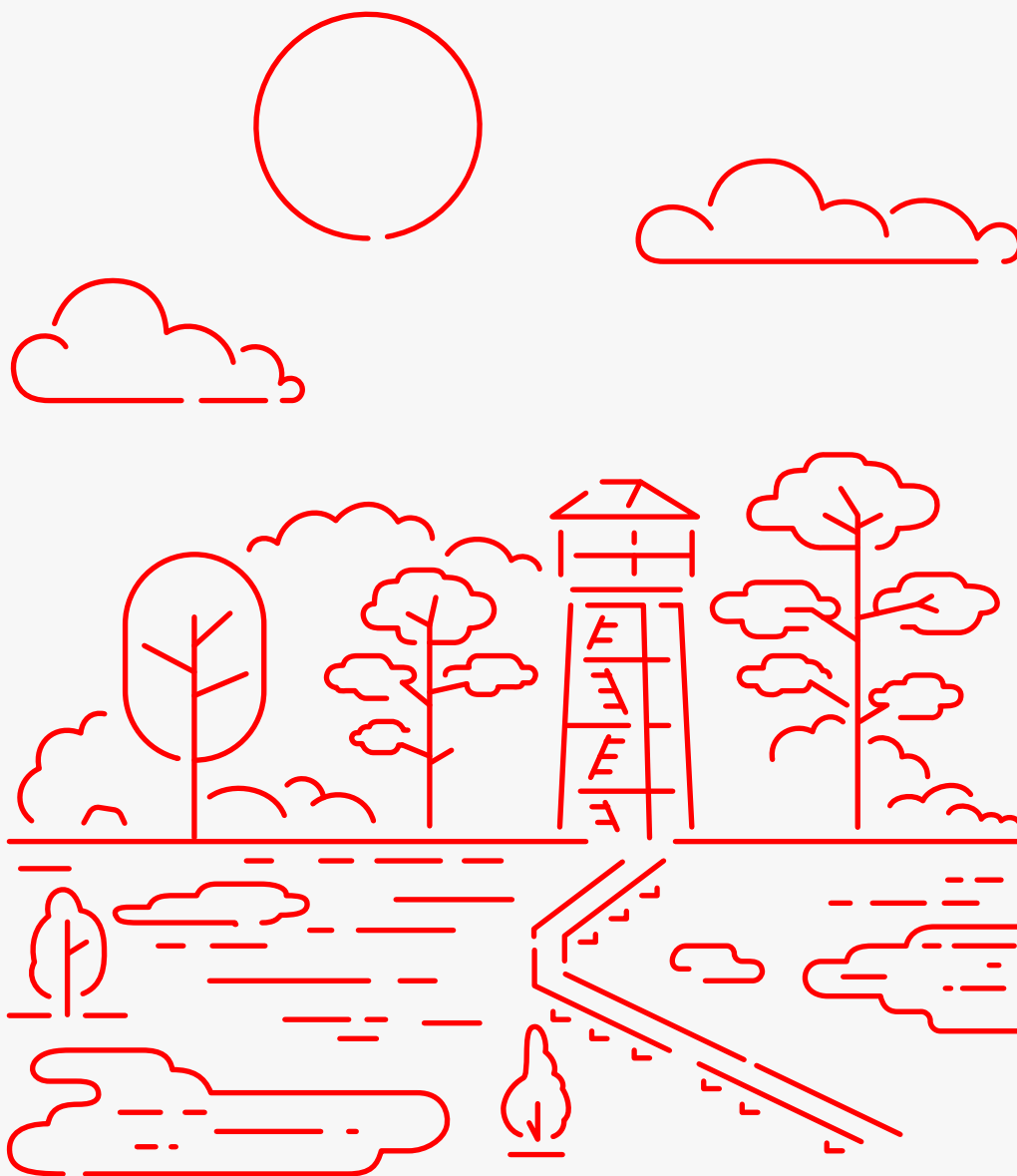
The country has shown resilience and resourcefulness in countering systemic pressures and maximizing its agency in foreign affairs. A prime example is its strategic partnership with the United States, which has bolstered its security capabilities and provided diplomatic support in international forums. Additionally, Georgia's pursuit of closer ties with European institutions reflects its commitment to European values and aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration (Kalandadze, 2020). The proximity to the EU, NATO, and the United States has granted Georgia greater flexibility in its foreign policy and increased its capacity to exert agency without interference from Russia. This alignment has diminished Moscow's ability to intervene in Georgia or support separatist regions, as the presence of the West limits Russia's leverage and introduces potential retaliation from these powerful entities.

Analyzing the systemic level is crucial to understanding Georgia's capacity to exercise agency in its foreign policy. By evaluating the impacts of regional powers, ethnic conflicts, regional integration, and international institutions, we can gain insights into Georgia's strategic choices and responses to systemic pressures. To enhance its agency and operate more independently and sovereignly, Georgia should focus on multilateralism, strengthening its security and defense capabilities. Deepening ties with multilateral organizations such as the European Union, United Nations, NATO, and OSCE will elevate Georgia's prestige in the international community and make it more challenging for external actors to undermine its interests and agenda.

Georgia should enhance its diplomatic capacities and establish strong relationships with as many countries as possible, particularly those influential in shaping its agency and foreign policy. Utilizing multilateral forums, Georgia can foster interdependence in its diplomatic and multilateral approaches. Additionally, improving defense capabilities is crucial; as a small state, Georgia should invest in advanced technologies and specialized training to effectively counter larger armies.

Georgia's full independence and sovereignty in foreign policy are complex due to its historical context of invasions and foreign influence. The systemic level approach helps explain the challenges Georgia faces in formulating foreign policy and the constraints from this systemic level. Multilateralism, multipolarity, and regionalism are vital for Georgia in creating and seeking agency in the international community. These approaches enable Georgia to form deeper ties with major powers, counterbalancing the threats from Russia and its regional influence.

Institutions like EU, NATO, UN, and OSCE positively impact Georgia's foreign policy formulation. Closer ties with these organizations reduce the likelihood of external influences, supporting Georgia's efforts to maintain sovereignty and independence in its foreign policy decisions.



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Thank you!
