


# Can Small States Reshape Their Regional Identities? Examining Georgia’s Cognitive Dissonance between South Caucasus and Eastern Europe

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## Abstract

Georgia represents an interesting case to study the agency of small states in reshaping their regional identity and external environment. Although much of the world has considered Georgia as politically part of the South Caucasus region, the country’s political elites themselves have long attempted to escape the geographic boundaries of the South Caucasus region and relocate their country into Eastern Europe. We argue that Georgian elites were partially successful in their quest for foreign political identity change. Although they did not manage to entirely change the international perception about Georgia’s geographic belonging, the country has politically moved closer to Eastern Europe and is considered to be part of “Associated Trio” together with Ukraine and Moldova—and recently became an EU candidate. From a theoretical perspective, we argue that Georgia’s quest for foreign policy identity recalibration fits the constructivist paradigm of international relations well. It can be argued that Georgia’s political elites were partially driven by ideational factors and were ignorant of the balance of power in their external environment, which cost the country the lost wars and compromised territorial sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Georgia; Black Sea; Eastern Europe; Regionalism; misplacedness; Foreign policy

## Introduction

This article explores Georgia’s pro-Western foreign policy through the lens of the theoretical model of misplacement. It seeks to answer two research questions: Why has Georgia chosen to abandon the South Caucasus<sup>1</sup> region and the broader post-Soviet area, and how much has it succeeded in redefining its regional belonging in the eyes of powerful actors? We also examine who the primary drivers of Georgia’s misplacement policy are and what the implications of a misplacement policy are for the country.

Georgia’s foreign policy since the independence from the Soviet Union has remained somewhat of a puzzle for many foreign policy analysts and international relations scholars alike. The realist approaches would expect Georgia as a small state with limited state capacity to pay more attention to its environment and attempt to adapt to the regional security order in the South Caucasus and a broader post-Soviet space. However, during the last three decades, the country has not acted according to expectations. Instead, the country’s political elites have tried to distance themselves from the region and pursued a pro-European and pro-Western foreign policy even if the Western attention toward the country has been limited.

Attempts to distance from its own region and neglect regional dynamics partially contributed to tensions with the biggest neighbor and a regional hegemon—Russia—and resulted in deteriorated security, economic problems, and political instability. Russia punished Georgia's attempts to escape the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet space—considered by the Kremlin as its sphere of influence—by occupying part of Georgian territories and waging a yearlong economic war against Georgia's small-scale and vulnerable economy. The West too until very recently has been anything but unanimously supportive of the pro-European drive of Georgia, which in eyes of many Western European politicians is not even part of Eastern Europe (Civil.ge 2022). Therefore, from the perspective of the rational choice actorness, Georgia's misplacedness policy seemed to be irrational both politically and economically. Due to its misplacedness policy, Georgia lost its main export market, experienced a severe energy crisis because it was forced to replace Russian energy sources in a short period, and ultimately fought several wars with Russia and its proxies. Although the EU stepped up as a key economic partner for Georgia, over the long term the economic and security-related implications of worsened Russia-Georgia relations still inhibit country's national integrity and economic development.

Although not openly challenging Georgia's drive away from the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet space, the other three neighbors—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, were not particularly supportive of Georgia's foreign policy behavior either. Turkey's recent support of the Russian proposal to include Georgia in the 3+3 format that included regional countries and excluded the Western powers demonstrates a difference in perceptions between Ankara and Tbilisi about Georgia's regional belonging and how the two states view the geopolitical processes in the South Caucasus region. Although Turkey prefers cooperating with illiberal regional powers and excluding Western actors, for Georgia, it is the other way around: for Tbilisi, being in a format that includes Russia and, at the same time, excludes the West is a nonstarter. However, neither Russia's coercive policy nor lack of support by other neighbors has managed to reverse Georgia's drive toward Europe, which has only accelerated over a decade.

Literature on Georgia's foreign policy is quite developed considering that Georgia is a small state. Scholars of foreign policy analysis and international relations have explained Georgia's puzzling behavior by the ideational foundations of Georgia's ruling elites (Gvalia et al. 2013; Kakachia, Minesashvili, and Kakhishvili 2018; Sabanadze 2022), misperceptions of ruling elites about the external environment (Oskanian 2016), capacity and elite cohesion (Gvalia, Lebanidze, and Siroky 2019), and elite–society cleavages (Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023). In this article, we supplement the existing literature by introducing another explanatory factor for Georgia's stubborn drive away from the South Caucasus region and toward Europe: Georgia's regional identity. We argue that Georgia considers itself a regionally misplaced state and that the country's elite and society cognitively view the country as belonging to political Europe via Eastern Europe and not to the South Caucasus region and the post-Soviet space.

To explore Georgia's puzzling approach to its regional identity we resort to the theory of misplacedness by Aslam et al. (2020). According to this theoretical model, misplaced states are the “states who perceive that they do not properly fit in the regions they happen to be located in” and “espouse an identity, manifested in different ways, in marked contrast to the states around them” (Aslam et al. 2020, 505). The theory of misplacedness seems to be appropriate to explain Georgia's foreign policy trajectory and its puzzling approach toward the regionalism and the regional security complexes in Georgia's neighborhood and beyond. It also is helpful for developing a useful analytical framework for answering other important questions related to Georgia's regionalism practices, which have been so far neglected in academic discussions: who the main drivers of Georgia's misplacedness policy are and to what extent it has been successful.

Analyzing Georgia's misplacedness strategy can also be relevant to better understanding Georgia's Europeanization process because Tbilisi's misplacedness policy and its pro-European and Euro-Atlantic policies go hand in hand. From Tbilisi's perspective, distancing from the

South Caucasus region and post-Soviet regional complex and getting closer to the EU(rope) are the two sides of the same coin. Therefore, from both a policy-relevant and an academic perspective, it is interesting to explore how Georgia's misplacedness policy contributes to Tbilisi's pro-European foreign policy as well as the Europeanization process of Georgia's domestic policy and polity.<sup>2</sup>

We also discuss alternative explanations to misplacedness model throughout the article. Many realist authors would argue that Georgia's pro-European drive is dictated by the rational to balance the regional hegemony of Russia (Waltz 2010) or the perceived Russian threat (Walt 1990). Another alternative angle would be to view Georgia's pro-European policy as driven mostly by materialist factors. Both rational choice institutionalists (March and Olsen 1996) and some realists (Schweller 1994) would see Georgia's European integration attempts as bandwagoning for profit.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the first part we discuss the theory of misplacedness as the theoretical framework of our study. In the second part of the article, we explore the extent to which Georgia's approach to regionalism can be described and examined from the prism of misplacedness theory and its analytical indicators. In the third and fourth parts, we then explore two important questions that have so far been neglected in studies on Georgia: who the main drivers of Georgia's regionalism are and to what extent it has been successful. Finally, we conclude with a few thoughts about theoretical and empirical implications of study findings and future avenues for research.

## Theoretical Framework

The theory of misplacedness or misplaced states is relatively young and was first elaborated by Aslam et al. (2020) in the Special Issue of *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. The authors define a misplaced state as

a state that experiences a degree of (cognitive) dissonance between its geographic location and its cognitive sense of place. This dissonance manifests itself in a mismatch between a state's national aspirations and the way other states recognise it. (Aslam et al. 2020, 510)

Misplaced states feel that "they belong in a part of the world that is different from their geographical location" (Aslam 2020, 543); therefore, they are "cognitively disassociated" from their "geographic home" (542) and feel "less connected" (506) to it. Instances of misplaced states include, among others, Pakistan (Aslam 2020), South Africa (van der Westhuizen 2020), Japan (Koga 2020), and Chile (Wehner 2020).

By distinguishing between cognitive and material/geographic dimensions of regional belonging, we can locate the theory of misplacedness under the constructivist school of international relations. The constructivist authors generally ascribe to the (shared) ideas, norms, and perceptions the same or even more importance that they give to material factors. From this perspective, we can differentiate among moderate (Wendt 1992) and radical (Guzzini 2000; Onuf 2013) constructivists.<sup>3</sup> The misplacedness theory can be placed under the moderate constructivist school because it sticks to causal epistemology and does not entirely disregard the importance of material factors such as geographic proximity, economic embeddedness, and security and political regional arrangements.

It is also noteworthy that misplacedness theory ascribes a strong agency to misplaced states, as they are "misplaced by choice" (Aslam et al. 2020, 514). Thus, the misplacedness model contradicts structural theories of international relations, which view small states as objects of an international system that are forced to respond to the incentive structure of their external environment (Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 2010). Instead, the model used unit-level variables (such as state–society relations, elite ideas, or governance form) to explain the foreign policy behavior of misplaced states.<sup>4</sup> In this article, we focus on two unit-level variables—ruling elites and civil society—and the interaction between the two.

The authors of the misplacedness theory further identify three subgroups of states on a continuum of placement and misplacement: well-placed states, soft-misplacement, and hard-misplacement (Aslam et al. 2020). Well-placed states “do not face serious domestic or international contestations about the relationship between their geographical and cognitive positions in the world,” and “cognitive aspirations of the citizens to belong somewhere are the strongest regarding their geographical locations” (Aslam et al. 2020, 513). Their status is widely acknowledged, and they are usually well integrated with their geographic region. These states possess “a sense of cognitive certainty” about their regional belonging (513). Softly or moderately misplaced states are in the middle of the placement continuum, feeling cognitively “somewhat misplaced,” but their “cognitive aspirations” are accompanied with “little or no institutionalised distancing from the region” (513). Finally, hardly misplaced states “consistently express their dissatisfaction over their regional setting in the long-run and act in order to detach themselves from the region to which they psychologically and physically belong” (513). Cases of hard misplacement go beyond cognitive aspirations and can result in institutionalization of “regressive regional relations” “through diplomatic and even military security practices” as well as in complete “cognitive dissociation from the geographic region” (514).

In this article, we will test to what extent Georgia can be considered a case of hard misplacement. To explore Georgia’s misplacedness, we further follow an implicit analytical framework provided by the authors of the special issue for conceptualization and operationalization of misplacedness. The authors identify a toolbox for action for the misplaced states (Table 1). It includes six components. They cover the misplaced state’s relations with the members of both the immediate physical neighborhood and a distant region of which it perceives to be part. In the next part of this article, we will use the six indicators to inquire to what extent Georgia’s ruling elites have followed the foreign policy trajectory and regional policy of a misplaced state.

The misplacement model also gives some theoretical insights about consequences of misplacement. According to Aslam, following misplacement policy may have several negative implications for the effectiveness of a state’s foreign policy and regional standing such as “lack or loss of legitimacy from the other states in the region where it is located,” “active attempts [by neighbors] ... to counterbalance the misplaced state (including military means),” reduced soft power of misplaced states, and “societal/elite disjuncture” (Aslam et al. 2020, 515) The latter refers to a conflictual dynamic within the misplaced states when “elites might push to cognitively associate with a different region while its ordinary citizens might not be inclined that way” (515). Or it can be other way round—society as the main misplacedness agent with the elite either participating forcefully or sabotaging the process. Therefore, it is analytically important to identify who the main driver behind the misplacedness policy is—society/public or the elite. Although the misplacedness

**Table 1.** Toolbox of action of a [extremely] misplaced state

1. State elites seek to connect to an alternative other <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1. <i>Creation of new regional organizations</i></li> <li>1.2. <i>Redefinition of what constitutes region</i></li> <li>1.3. <i>Engagement in initiatives across a variety of issue areas to signal</i></li> <li>1.4. <i>Growing self-identification with another region</i></li> </ol>
2. Seek a closer alliance with a great power to compensate for its purported regional distance
3. Provide regional and cultural public goods to buy off neighbors’ dissent
4. Construct a narrative which highlights its exceptionalism (most likely related to its history)
5. Draw upon a traumatic past to justify role conceptions that emphasize its distinctiveness
6. Use the misplacement strategically to achieve certain economic or political gains

Source: Aslam et al. (2020, 511–512).

policy can be either elite driven or society led, the ruling elites remain the major “identity entrepreneurs” who frame their country’s regional policy in either direction (517).

### Georgia as a Misplaced State

In this part of the article, we explore Georgia’s major characteristics as a misplaced state. We do so in three parts. First, we examine the role of ruling elites in shaping Georgia’s misplacedness policy and regional identity. Second, we examine the role and attitudes of public and civil society toward Georgia’s misplacedness policy. Finally, we analyze the consequences of Georgia’s misplacedness policy for Georgia’s foreign policy effectiveness and to what extent Georgia managed to relocate itself from the Caucasus to Eastern Europe.

Since regaining independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Georgia has employed an entire toolbox of misplaced states in its attempts to distance from the post-Soviet region. Ruling elites in Georgia attempted to institutionally distance from the post-Soviet area and to connect to Europe already in the early 1990s when the alternative foreign policy options were virtually nonexistent. Georgia was the only non-Baltic post-Soviet country that was refusing to join the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), after the dissolution of the USSR for two years. Tbilisi only joined the CIS in 1993 after the bloody civil war and the Russia-backed secessionist conflict in Abkhazia (Corso 2005). Institutional distancing from the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet region has continued and even intensified since the end of 1990s. Although Georgia was initially forced to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—due to internal conflicts and deteriorated security—later it withdrew from the Russia-led military alliance and declared NATO and EU membership as an ultimate objective of its foreign policy instead. Tbilisi also tried to build the regional alliances with like-minded countries who also attempted to escape post-Soviet space and join the EU-dominated part of Europe. In 1997, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Azerbaijan established the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, which was considered to be an alternative integration project to the CIS and other regional groupings but failed to live up to its expectations.<sup>5</sup> As a latest attempt of misplacedness policy, Georgia also became part of Eastern partnership initiative and later the so-called Associated Trio—a provisional regional grouping on the path to integration into EU structures.

There have also been bilateral and unilateral attempts by Georgia to establish alternative institutional structures within the framework of misplacedness policy and with the objective of advancing Georgia’s European integration. For instance, in 2005, Georgia and Ukraine, together with other Eastern European states initiated the “Community of Democratic Choice” (RFE/RL 2005). The initiative excluded Russia and was directed at fostering “political, security, and economic rapprochement between the Western and Eastern part of the European continent” (RFE/RL 2005). Since the 2000s, Georgia has significantly accelerated institutional relations with the nonregional actors—EU and NATO and the United States. The country signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 and became a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner country in 2016, a status that ensures “all of the privileges that alliance members receive except for the collective security umbrella” (Paul and Andguladze 2018).

The deepening of institutional relations with Western organizations was accompanied by Georgia’s attempts to “seek a closer alliance with great power[s] to compensate for its purported regional distance” (Aslam et al. 2020). On a bilateral level, Georgia’s main priority over past decades was to establish strategic partnership with the USA. In 2009, the United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership was established, and in 2021 the two sides signed another agreement that was directed at modernizing the Georgian military—the Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative (US Embassy to Georgia 2022).

Georgia’s attempts to connect to an alternative other also included “growing self-identification with another region” (Aslam et al. 2020). This happened through constructing a narrative that highlighted its historical exceptionalism and drawing on a traumatic past to emphasize its

distinctiveness (Aslam et al. 2020). Over the years, Georgia's strategic documents have referred to Georgia as an Eastern European and/or Black Sea country and have avoided any strong reference to the South Caucasus or post-Soviet geographic identity. Georgia's (2011) National Security Concept is exemplary in this respect. According to the document,

as a Black Sea and Southeast European country, Georgia is part of Europe geographically, politically, and culturally; yet it was cut off from its natural course of development by historical cataclysms. (MOD Georgia 2011)

It is interesting that although Georgia's strategic documents often omit the reference to the South Caucasus in connection to country's regional identity, they often refer to Georgia as a Black Sea country and consider the Black Sea as a bridge toward Europe. For instance, the 2019–2022 Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia mentions the “Eastern-European-Black Sea region,” which also includes Georgia (MFA Georgia 2019). It seems that linking the Black Sea and the Eastern Europe together is part of attempts by Georgia's ruling elites to tacitly redefine Georgia's political geography away from the South Caucasus and post-Soviet Eurasia toward Europe (Aprasidze 2022). As Kakachia and Minesashvili observe, Georgia's political elites “preferred to be labelled as a member of the Black Sea community as a way to become affiliated with the rest of Europe” and this affected Georgia's regional posturing because the government switched its focus “from the South Caucasus to the Black Sea region in official documents” (Kakachia and Minesashvili 2015, 178). From this perspective, the “Black Sea” identity is to be equated with the “Eastern European” regional identity, as both geographic spaces bring Georgia closer to the EU countries. Moreover, from the perspective of the EU, the Black Sea is the EU's littoral sea, as it hosts two EU member states—Bulgaria and Romania—and is not a distant region, unlike the South Caucasus.

Georgia also tried to boost its quest for a new regional identity by providing regional and cultural public goods both in its neighborhood and to the countries of its imagined regional community. In doing so, Georgia also endorsed and became an integral part of the energy and transport corridors via the South Caucasus, enabling the delivery of Azerbaijani and potentially also of the Central Asian gas and oil to Turkey and Southern Europe as well as potentially linking Asian markets to Europe via Turkey and the Black Sea. Important energy and transport projects with Georgia's direct or indirect participation include the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil pipeline, the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline, and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (Tsereteli 2020).<sup>6</sup> Georgia's attempt to portray itself as a strategically important bridge between Asia and Europe, although being of strategic nature, was also dictated by Tbilisi's desire to find its niche policy within the EU and to improve Georgia's image as a security-provider and not only a security-consumer within the EU and other Western structures.

In the South Caucasus region, although not an important security actor, Georgia also attempted to play a low-profile mediator role, conducting “shuttle diplomacy” between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and offered itself as a neutral ground between warring parties (Samkharadze 2022). For instance, in coordination with the USA Georgia played a primary role in the prisoner exchange that took place between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2022 (Samkharadze 2022). Georgia also attempted to act as a security-contributor for its Western partners by participating in overseas civil-military missions and offering its strategic location.

Finally, Georgia also attempted to “use [its] misplacement strategically to achieve certain economic or political gains” (Aslam et al. 2020, 512). Georgia portrayed itself as a strategically important country connecting Asia with Europe and with the transit potential to bring the Central Asian energy resources to European markets. Tbilisi attempted to rip tangible material benefits from its close partnership with the Western actors including a security umbrella against Russia and economic and financial resources. From this perspective, it is debatable which train of thought dominated Georgia's misplaced regional policy toward Europe: logic of appropriateness or logic of consequences (March and Olsen 1998). Perhaps both considerations were present in



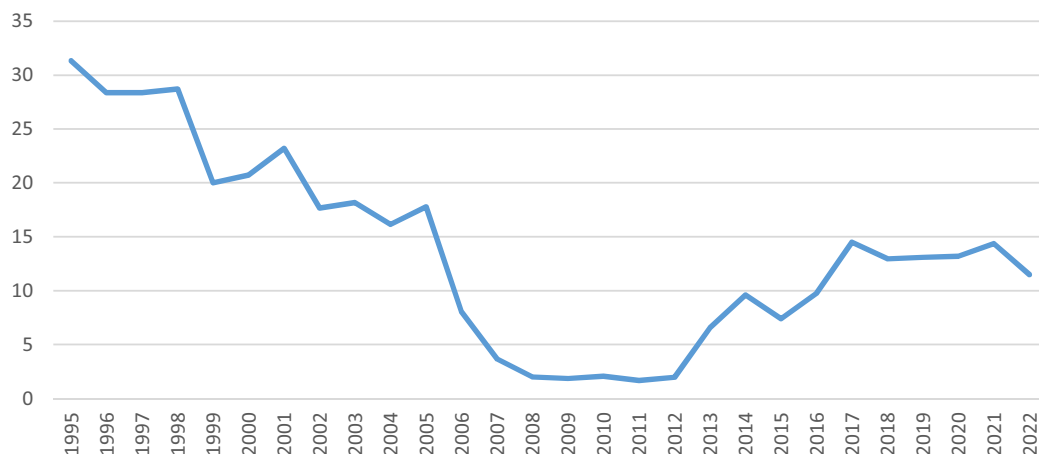
Georgia's decision to relocate itself into (Eastern) Europe. On one hand, the misplacedness policy was certainly driven by security and material considerations—to strengthen deteriorated security and sovereignty, restore territorial integrity, defend itself from Russia's assertive regionalism via membership of NATO and the EU, receive financial support, and benefit from a preferential trade regime with the EU, to name just a few (logic of consequences). On the other hand, however, there seems to be a strong ideational component to Georgia's misplacedness policy both at the elite and at the societal level and to what extent prospects of material incentives influenced Georgia's regional drift toward Europe is debatable (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dubovyk 2019). In the end, the country had to pay very high material costs for its misplacedness policy—in form of deteriorated security and territorial integrity and economic war with its former metropole.

In summary, we can observe most of the elements that are employed by the misplaced states in Georgia's regional policy: (1) the country attempted to redefine the understanding of the region by connecting to Europe via Black Sea and distancing from the South Caucasus, (2) sought a closer alliance with the USA and the EU countries to compensate for its purported regional distance, (3) tried to provide regional and cultural public goods both in the region and globally, (4) constructed a history-based narrative of returning to Europe, and (5) attempted to use the misplacement strategically to achieve certain economic or political gains.

It is noteworthy that, contrary to the prediction by the misplacement theory, Georgia's misplacement policy did not result in deteriorated relations with its neighboring states, except for Russia. However, Russia's negative reaction to Georgia's pro-Western policy was rather driven by the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with Georgia attempting to escape Russia's perceived sphere of influence, which goes beyond the South Caucasus and encompasses the entire post-Soviet space, except for the Baltic States. Still, from Tbilisi's viewpoint, this was the main adverse effect of its misplacement policy. Russia unleashed its entire toolbox of coercive measures on Georgia, which included support for secessionist regions and occupation of 20% of Georgian territory, full-scale military invasion in 2008, and a continued hybrid war that included the so-called borderization process—a unilateral border demarcation process alongside the administrative boundary lines between Georgia and its two breakaway regions (Kakachia et al. 2017). Russia's reaction was especially severe after the so-called Rose Revolution in Georgia when Mikhail Saakashvili's government attempted to speed up Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. To punish Saakashvili's government, next to military measures, Russia also applied pressure on Georgia's energy security by quadrupling the gas prices and imposed full economic and transport embargo on Georgia (Lebanidze 2020). As a result, Georgia lost its main export market and energy source (Figure 1) and had to diversify its energy and trade relations under huge political and social pressure. Most importantly, however, the country's security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity were dealt irreparable damage, as Russia has been occupying parts of Georgian territory. Nevertheless, although Russia has managed to destabilize the country and slow down Georgia's rapprochement with NATO, it failed to make Georgia revoke its pro-Western foreign policy. Georgia continued its misplacement policy and achieved significant progress along the way.

### Drivers of Georgia's Misplacedness

Over last two decades, Georgia has been characterized as a hybrid regime (Freedom House 2022b) or a partly-free country (Freedom House 2022a). Although the ruling regimes can insulate themselves from public pressure to some extent, especially in the field of foreign policy making, they are not immune to public discontent. We have witnessed many cases over the past decades when the governments have encountered fierce public resistance amid foreign policy issues, such as the large antigovernmental protests in 2019 and 2022. Moreover, as is usual with hybrid regimes, although the political playing field is skewed in favor of incumbent regimes, the governments can still lose the elections to opposition or be toppled through coups or revolutions. Over last 30 years, Georgia has witnessed a velvet revolution in 2003, electoral power transfer in 2012, and tense, often



**Figure 1.** Share of Georgia's Exports to Russia (percent).  
*Source:* Geostat Database, 2023.

head-to-head competition between the government and opposition since then. Therefore, we can assume that although the incumbent regimes guide day-to-day foreign policy making, they also need to consider public opinion and societal demands. Thus, we can identify two potential drivers of Georgia's misplacedness policy: ruling elites and Georgian public and society.<sup>7</sup> Below we explore the influence of each of them on Georgia's misplacedness policy.

The first stones of Georgia's misplacedness policy were laid by the government under a former Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who ruled the country during the 1992–2003. Shevardnadze came to power after a devastating civil war and ruled the country in a semidemocratic manner, relying on patronal–clientelist networks. Although Shevardnadze himself as a politician was a product of the Soviet system, he slowly started distancing from Russia and the post-Soviet space and driving toward the West in the second half of the 1990s. It was Shevardnadze's government that first sought membership in Western organizations. Shevardnadze requested to join NATO as early as in 2002 (RFE/RL 2002). At the NATO summit in Prague, the Georgian president justified his desire by the need for security guarantees for Georgia:

NATO membership means security for Georgia. It means that we will have final security guarantees. Throughout our history, we have seen a lot of hardship, and I think that today the only right decision is to become a member of NATO. (RFE/RL 2002)

Shevardnadze also maintained close ties with the USA, called them a “strategic partner” (RFE/RL 2003), and invited the US military instructors to train Georgian army forces within the The Georgia Train and Equip Program (State.Gov 2003). However, due to the dysfunctionality of Georgian state institutions and the poor state of country's economy and democracy, Georgia's pro-Western ambitions could not be seriously considered back then (Gvalia, Lebanidze, and Siroky 2019).

Amid domestic discontent, Eduard Shevardnadze was toppled in the 2003 “Rose Revolution” and a new government under Mikheil Saakashvili came to power. It is noteworthy that, unlike Shevardnadze's administration, the degree of socialization of the new government with the Western world—or a technocratic linkage (Levitsky and Way 2010) with the West—was immensely high. Between 2003 and 2012, the number of Western-educated officials in the cabinet of ministers and other high-ranking positions skyrocketed and varied between 50% and 80% (Lebanidze 2020, 101).<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that the new government intensified Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy,

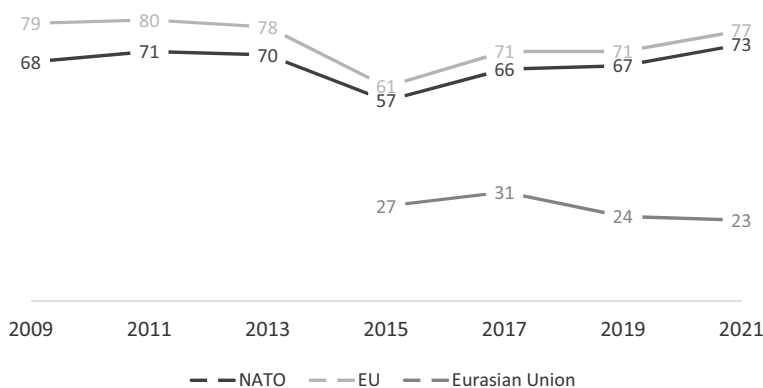


expressed ambition to join both the EU and the NATO, and deepened relations with the USA and the Eastern European and Black Sea countries—especially Turkey and Ukraine. To coordinate Georgia’s European integration, a new portfolio of State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration was created in the government and the Committee for European Integration established in the parliament. Thus, the misplacedness policy acquired a new dimension and became a centerpiece of government’s foreign policy agenda. The ruling elite was the main driving force behind the hard misplacedness strategy of Georgia during 2003–2012.

Perhaps the main reason why the Georgian political elite decided to play solo and did not seek to develop a regional approach to European integration, for instance, unlike the Visegrad countries, was its disillusionment with the unfolding dynamics in the region. Georgia’s political elite is not known for its strategic patience—Georgia did not want to wait for Armenia and Azerbaijan to solve issues of mutual enmity and of reorientation of their foreign policies toward the European integration. Lack of perspective regarding a resolution of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict and the low degree of democratization in Azerbaijan and Armenia, especially after the first years since the so-called Rose Revolution, when Georgia became a “beacon of democracy” (Cornell and Nilsson 2009) and the best performer in the region (World Bank 2012), the two neighbors were viewed as obstacles to Georgia’s European integration. Furthermore, the unwillingness of the political elites in Baku and Erevan to become part of the deeper European integration process up to full EU and NATO membership further discouraged political elites in Georgia from seeking closer regional integration with its Southern Caucasian neighbours. This development confirmed that although the south Caucasian states have a similar past, their perceptions about their futures are divergent, and unlike Baltic region, South Caucasus emerged as a “failed region” (German 2016). With unresolved conflicts, lack of homogeneity (cultural, linguistic, ethnic, political, religious, etc.), the absence of common vision, and a weak regional identity and security framework, the region is becoming an area of apparent rivalry, with isolationist policies and zero-sum game logic serving as guiding principles for the regional actors (Kakachia 2013).

Next to political elites, Georgian public and society also seem to have a significant influence on Georgia’s hard misplacedness strategy. Since independence, political life in Georgia has been characterized by conflictual dynamics between incumbent regimes/political classes and the Georgian public. Major cleavages generally take place over domestic issues, but some of recent developments have also encompassed clashes over foreign and security policy. This became visible after the 2012 power change when Mikheil Saakashvili’s government was defeated in elections by the Georgian Dream (GD) party led by multimillionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. In the first years of being in power, the GD continued Georgia’s pro-Western foreign policy but attempted at the same to normalize deteriorated relations with Russia. At later stages, however, the GD’s relations with the EU and other Western partners continued to steadily deteriorate, mostly due to lack of democracy and rule of law reforms in the country, and the party was often accused of sabotaging Georgia’s pro-Western policy and, at the same time, warming up too much to Russia. Moreover, some of the GD officials and close affiliates recently started a negative campaign against the European and the US politicians, accusing them of having a negative influence on Georgia and attempting to drag the country into war against Russia (Kakachia and Kakabadze 2022).

Therefore, unlike the predecessor governments, the GD has not unanimously been considered as a driver of Georgia’s misplacedness strategy. This has resulted in public discontent with GD’s somewhat softened misplacedness approach. In 2019, a visit of a Russian parliamentarian in the Georgian parliament resulted in mass protests in Georgia and the resignation of some of high-ranking officials, including the chair of the Georgian parliament. Later, in 2022, Georgia again witnessed one of the largest protests of last decades when public again protested GD’s soft Russia policy in light of the Russia-Ukraine war and demanded that the government speed up the formal application process for EU membership alongside Ukraine and Moldova (Kakachia and



**Figure 2.** If there were a referendum tomorrow, would you vote for or against membership of ....  
Source: CRRC Database. 2022.

Lebanidze 2019). The government again bowed to public pressure and formally submitted an application for EU membership in March 2022 (Emerson and Blockmans 2022). Thus, we can observe the Georgian public emerging as a significant driver of Georgia's misplacedness policy since the mid-2010s when it felt that the ruling regime was backtracking from previous misplacedness strategy.

It is noteworthy that Georgia's pro-European orientation as a core pillar of Georgia's misplacedness policy seems to be one of the few topics of national accord in the country (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dubovyk 2019), which is otherwise marked by high degree of polarization and radicalization. Figure 2 shows constant high support for Georgia's EU and NATO membership and low support for the membership of the Eurasian Union. Therefore, the Georgian governments are aware that any action that is perceived as a danger to the misplacedness policy of Georgia has a potential to galvanize antigovernmental protests in the country. The incumbent regimes also need to ensure that their policies do not deviate too much from the popular sentiments and do not result in electoral exodus. This makes the Georgian public a guardian of Georgia's misplacedness policy, especially in times when actions by a ruling elite are believed to be endangering the country's misplacedness strategy.

To conclude, at various junctures, Georgia's misplacedness policy was either elite led or society driven. Different administrations pursued Georgia's misplacedness strategy at varying paces and with varying enthusiasm. Under Zviad Gamsakhurdia's short-lived presidency, Georgia did not have a clearly formulated pro-European foreign policy, but the country, unlike its neighbors, tried to navigate away from the post-Soviet structures. Eduard Shevardnadze, while being a pragmatic actor, continued keeping Georgia at arm's length from regional and Russia-dominated alliances, except for the CIS. Under the administration of Mikhail Saakashvili during 2003–2012, the ruling elite was in the avantgarde of Georgia's misplacedness policy. The country made the biggest leaps toward Europe and away from the South Caucasus region. Although the public became increasingly discontent with the domestic policies of Saakashvili over time, they tacitly accepted and supported Georgia's misplacedness policy as a core pillar of Georgia's foreign and security policy. However, the dynamic changed after the mid-2010s when the perception emerged that the new government under GD was rolling back on Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy. Through mass protests, the Georgian public and civil society decided to intervene and put limits on GD's Russia-accommodating and Western-skeptic foreign policy. In doing so, Georgian public effectively became the main driver of Georgia's misplacedness policy.

## Conclusion

This article explored Georgia's hard misplacedness policy, its forms of manifestations, and main drivers, as well as its implications for Georgia's standing on international arena. It is argued that Georgia's misplacement policy has been driven by two actors—political elites and society—and the interplay between the two has ensured the continuity of the strategy. Over the past 30 years, there have been fluctuations in different administrations in Georgia regarding their perception of Georgia being a misplaced state, but they were constrained by Georgia's civil society, which has slowly turned into the main guardian of Georgia's misplacement policy. When Georgian governments have attempted to distance themselves from the misplacement strategy, society has intervened and managed to correct what it perceived as distorted behavior by the state authorities.

We argued in the article that Georgia was a case of hard misplacement. Georgia's continued attempts to avoid membership in any regional or broader post-Soviet institutional structures can be seen as evidence of hard misplacement. However, on the other hand, Tbilisi does not show signs of regressive regional relations with its immediate neighbors, which would put it closer to soft misplacement. But the main issue that disqualifies the country from being a case of soft misplacement is its continued institutionalized distancing and cognitive dissociation from the region. Therefore, perhaps, it would be more accurate to see Georgia's foreign policy as being located between soft and hard forms of misplacement.

Overall, the misplacedness model of foreign policy behavior proved to be a useful theoretical lens through which to view Georgia's foreign policy. Yet, the model also has its conceptual and methodological limitations. One limitation of the model is that Georgia's misplacedness policy did not result in adverse effects within Georgia's relations with its immediate neighbors, except Russia, in contrast to the predictions of the model. It did not result in a loss of legitimacy for Georgia, or in the counterbalancing of Georgia's misplacedness attempts by the neighbors, or in a reduced soft power for Georgia. It did result, though, in occasional cleavages between ruling elites and society; furthermore, civil society proved itself to be an equally important "identity entrepreneur" next to ruling elites.

Still, the model retains its explanatory power if analyzed in conjunction with other explanatory factors, such as balancing the Russian threat (balance of threat theory) and bandwagoning with the West for material considerations (bandwagoning for profit). The misplacedness model works well in explaining the aspect of Georgia's steadfast pro-European policy, which goes beyond balancing the incoming threats from Russia and cannot be explained by material considerations, as it has often resulted in material losses and a negative net outcome in terms of material cost-benefit calculations.

Georgia's misplaced identity can also be a symptom of a much larger phenomenon of fragmentation of the South Caucasus region as well as broader post-Soviet space. After 30 years since getting independence from the Soviet Union, it is obvious that the three states of the South Caucasus have failed to develop common regional identities and to establish regional integration formats. On the contrary, the region has been marked by continuous military confrontations and political and economic fragmentation. Similar dynamics have been unfolding on a broader scale in the post-Soviet space when Russia's neoimperial policies largely alienated former satellite countries from Ukraine to Kazakhstan. Thus, Georgia is not the only state in the region that is somewhat alienated from its neighbors. However, Georgia was perhaps the only country that responded to the challenges by establishing a hard displacement policy and ignoring geographic boundaries, and the country literally tried to escape from its geographic region by attempting to join the institutions that are geographically distant.

Georgia's hard displacedness policies brought both risks and opportunities to the countries. On an upside, Georgia's ruling elites managed to somewhat change the perceptions in the West about the country as being part of Europe and, when the window of opportunity emerged after the Russian

invasion of Ukraine, Georgia was offered EU-membership perspective alongside Ukraine and Moldova. This is certainly an important achievement that perhaps would not have happened without Georgia's stubborn misplacedness policy for decades.

On a downside, however, a hard misplacedness policy brought many troubles to Georgia. Deteriorated relations for Russia manifested in territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the beginning of 1990s, a full-scale war again in 2008 and occupied zones, continuous hybrid warfare waged by Moscow against Georgia, and episodic economic and energy wars that put Georgia's statehood to test several times. To this day, Georgian statehood has survived the Russian toolbox of coercion but at heavy cost—with 20% of the country being occupied by Russia.

What is more, Georgia's hard misplacedness policy, at least initially, did not enjoy a warm welcome in the West either. The EU has often been puzzled and overburdened by Georgia's hyperbolic drive toward the Western institutions. France and Germany, supported by a number of European NATO members, effectively refused to grant Georgia and Ukraine the NATO Membership Action Plan in 2008 (Spiegel Online 2008) and denied the EU accession perspective for more than a decade. However, the ice was broken in 2022 when Georgia's misplacedness policy was finally fully acknowledged and rewarded with a clear EU perspective—the first time that Georgia's misplacedness policy has not been at odds with but supplements the EU objectives and policies in the region. Ursula von der Leyen's recent appeal to Georgia, alongside Ukraine, Moldova, and Balkans in her State of the Union speech marks this significant shift in EU's grand vision: "You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!" (European Commission 2022).

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## Notes

- 1 The South Caucasus region can be seen as Georgia's immediate natural geographic habitat; however, at the same time, it is a part of a much larger regional complex—the post-Soviet space. The post-Soviet space, with the exclusion of the Baltic States, is claimed by Russia as its zone of influence, and the Kremlin reacts negatively to any real or perceived interference by Western actors in this area. However, from a Georgian perspective, there is a significant geographic difference between the two regions. Although some parts of the post-Soviet space (which can also be called Russia's Near Abroad or the Former Soviet Union)—such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus—are geographically closer to Europe so are naturally considered part of Europe by the EU and other Western actors, this courtesy is not extended to the countries of the South Caucasus. In fact, the EU has had a long record of attempts to exclude the South Caucasus not only from its integration schemes but even from its neighborhood programs as a geographically distant region.
- 2 On Europeanization processes and prospects in Georgia, see Börzel and Lebanidze (2015), Börzel and Pamuk (2012), Delcour (2013), Emerson and Blockmans (2022), and Langbein and Börzel (2014).
- 3 On two strands of constructivism, see Köhler (2019).
- 4 On levels of analysis in International Relations discipline, see Singer (1961) and (Waltz 2001).
- 5 The Organization for Democracy and Economic Development could also be seen as an attempt to balance Russia's regional influence.
- 6 In fact, the joint energy and transportation projects together with Turkey and Azerbaijan can be considered forms of regional integration within infrastructural and connectivity developments. However, this approach was never supplemented by a broader political regional vision from Georgia and remained tactical in nature, seeking to achieve geopolitical benefits, benefit economically, and develop energy independence from Russia.

- 7 On a role of public opinion on foreign policy making, see Christensen (1996), Moravcsik (1997), Rose (1998), Zakaria (1999), and Baum and Potter (2008).
- 8 For a comparison: The same figure was below 10% in other former Soviet republics such as Ukraine, Armenia, and Belarus. See Lebanidze (2015, 101).

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