

Georgia's Alternative Diplomacy and Its Participants

Central governments typically assert monopolies on violence and foreign and monetary policies. Historically, the most contested monopoly has been in the domain of violence, whether through riots, uprisings, or revolutions. Victors, having established their dominance, would enforce their own monetary policies without challenge. Foreign policy has consistently been regarded as the prerogative of rulers and their entourages, even when entourage members diverged from the ruler's priorities. Any attempt by the masses to break these monopolies would result in cataclysmic consequences for the country or state.

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The prominent role of foreign policy in Georgian politics is evident. Presently, major political clashes revolve around foreign policy orientation, or the perception thereof, encompassing economics, security, development, jobs, education, and various other aspects of domestic policies. Even the theme of Georgian identity is overshadowed by foreign policy, with opponents of the European development vector asserting that the West is “stripping us of Georgianness,” whatever that term implies. Recent massive rallies were centered around issues directly related to foreign policy, such as European integration, support for Ukraine, the visit of the vice-speaker of the Russian Duma, and the so-called foreign agents' law.



Temuri Yakobashvili
Contributor

Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili distinguishes himself as an accomplished leader in government, crisis management, and diplomacy. As the founder of TY Strategies LLC, he extends advisory services globally. A pivotal figure in co-founding the Revival Foundation, aiding Ukraine, and leading the New International Leadership Institute, Yakobashvili held key roles, including Georgia's Ambassador to the U.S. and Deputy Prime Minister. With the rank of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, he is a Yale World Fellow, trained at Oxford and Harvard. As a co-founder and chair of the Governing Board of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, he actively contributes to global media discussions on regional security. His significant contributions have merited the Presidential Medal of Excellence.



In Georgia's' recent history, a “tradition” has emerged where external forces moderate irreconcilable domestic differences. Examples include the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the James Baker-brokered transition, the 2004 confrontation between the central government and Adjara leader Aslan Abashidze resolved by Igor Ivanov, the 2007 clashes of Saakashvili with the opposition and subsequent elections brokered by Joseph Biden, and the most

recent political crisis of 2021 when the opposition first refused to join the Parliament due to rampant fabrication of the parliamentary elections but then followed the deal brokered by the European Council President Charles Michel.

The extensive foreign policy agenda in Georgian politics is not surprising. Not only does the current international order enable a country like Georgia to exist

as a nation-state, but regional or global politics significantly influence security, the economy, and welfare. The Georgian economy relies heavily on export markets, transit fees and services, foreign direct investments, and remittances sent by relatives working abroad. Its cultural relevance necessitates a “breathing ground,” which can only be provided by active collaboration with cultural entities abroad. Many Georgian talents, whether opera singers, artists, or sportsmen, find successful international careers beyond Georgia. Notable figures in Georgia’s recent history obtained education abroad, making the importation of knowledge an aspiration. Thousands of Georgian students seek opportunities in European and American universities. All these opportunities demand an active foreign policy to ensure freedom of movement, special trade regimes, transportation logistics, and favorable attitudes.

Foreign policy, like any other policy, requires vision and resources, including human resources. Since the early days of independence in 1918, Georgian leaders have not had issues with vision. The leadership of the first independent Republic considered itself part of the global socialist international. Subsequent Communist leaders saw Georgia as a springboard for larger ambitions and agendas, trying to match visions of the “greater Georgian” - Joseph Stalin or consequent Communist leaders. After the collapse of

the Soviet Union, the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, dreamed of the Caucasian House, a self-sufficient political entity where Georgia would play a pivotal mobilizing and coordinating role. Returned from the Kremlin, former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze promoted Georgia’s role as a transit country, benefiting all neighbors through reliable transit and trading routes. Mikheil Saakashvili propelled Georgia’s image as a country that defied conventional wisdom about corruption, the speed of transformation, democratization, and modernization. All three leaders had an active foreign policy with significant resources allocated. Saakashvili was so engaged with international affairs that Georgians used to joke: “If one plane takes off and one lands at Tbilisi airport, both of them will have Saakashvili onboard.”

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Under Bidzina Ivanishvili, the foreign policy vision became elusive, blurred, and constantly adjusted to one person’s needs, phobias, and business interests. Consequently, the official foreign policy establishment mimics allusiveness, blur, and a lack of initiative. Even the President, with a representational function granted by the Constitution, is restricted from traveling

outside of Georgia and representing the country to foreign policy communities.

Regarding human resources, current or former Georgian diplomats traditionally played a distinctive role in Georgian politics. The most recent 2018 presidential elections featured two candidates, both former foreign ministers of Georgia. The core leadership of the Free Democrats party, formerly part of the Georgian Dream coalition led by the former Ambassador to the UN, Irakli Alasania, was made up of former diplomats. The diplomatic corps of Georgia nurtured ministers, deputy ministers, and high-ranking officials operating in various fields of Georgian politics.

After the Georgian Dream coalition assumed power, disenchanted by Saakashvili's policies, former diplomats found themselves as allegedly "valuable members of the coalition." Currently, most of them, along with a significant number of Saakashvili's senior diplomats who are unwanted by the current regime, are scattered among Georgian political opposition, domestic or Western academic institutions, or private businesses. Politically motivated persecutions directly affected members of the Georgian diplomatic community. The notable case was the groundless persecution of the David Garedji Monastery negotiation team and its members, which deeply scarred the foreign policy establishment. The remain-

ing cohort of trained and experienced diplomats diligently continues to serve their country in a silent mode.

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It is painful to observe how Georgia's once prestigious foreign policy community visibly shrunk and became insignificant. The most potent pro-Western political allies of the Georgian Dream were ostracized over time. Serious cracks started to appear in the belief that the Georgian Dream seriously intended to lead Georgia to EU and NATO membership. The war in Ukraine exposed that these intentions were not real. On the contrary, more facts suggested a fundamental shift in Georgia's foreign policy orientation and self-abdication of a once proactive pro-Western diplomacy.

Georgia's Alternative Diplomacy

A new phenomenon of Georgian alternative diplomacy is forging and gaining shape.

Against this backdrop, a new phenomenon of Georgian alternative diplomacy is forging and gaining shape. Executors of the popular demand for integration of Georgia into the Western family of countries started to go beyond traditional diploma-

cy and foreign policy establishments.

Who are the actors of alternative foreign policy? First and foremost, the most visible part of it is the opposition political spectrum. Conventionally, that is what the parliamentary/systemic opposition should do. However, in Georgia's case, new opposition forces emerge almost every quarter due to in-party splits and re-organizations, all seeking foreign support. Delegations of various political opposition groups frequently visit Washington, DC, Brussels, London, Berlin or Paris. Their messages might not be congenial or coordinated, often blaming the government and each other. Nonetheless, their visits undoubtedly affect the comprehension of Georgian politics by observers in these capitals.

Opposition parties actively collaborate and associate themselves with ideologically organized pan-European political party families such as the EPP (European People's Party) and the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe). Therefore, the European Parliament becomes one of the venues where Georgian issues are discussed, and resolutions are adopted with the active involvement and influence of Georgian opposition parties. A similar process can be observed in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, where the Georgian opposition is also a frequent visitor.

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The second group of actors in alternative diplomacy surely are the civil society organizations of all kinds, from advocacy groups and watchdogs to think tanks. Their access and partnerships with colleagues and like-minded institutions abroad enable them to loudly voice their opinions outside Georgia. By default, they become a reference point for any journalists, domestic or international, assessing political developments in Georgia. Various coalitions and platforms provide a powerful platform for Georgian NGOs to coordinate and promote their vision among European and Western establishments. These coalitions often organize protests, take steps, and issue joint statements regarding vital issues for the country, including foreign policy ones, such as integration into the EU.

It is very noticeable that think tank-organized events bring more of Georgia's external friends to the country than government-initiated endeavors. Unfortunately, the government's representation at such events is either negligible or a complete boycott, further disenfranchising it from an active foreign policy practice. So-called "government-organized non-governmental organizations" (GONGOs) have very lit-

the effect on foreign policy, if any.

Media outlets critical of the government also discovered their power to affect the country's foreign policy. It is not only domestic reporting on international events and how Georgia is scoring (or mostly not scoring) on such events. Accredited Georgian journalists can pose critical questions to the leadership of the EU or NATO, the White House, or the Department of State. Such questions require a qualified response and serve as an incentive to address issues in the questioned areas.

The next group is the business community. While globalization envisions the active participation of major multinational companies in the fates of small countries, as of today, no major multinationals operating in Georgia can be a determining factor for foreign policy. However, there is a tendency of harassed local businesses forming, or supporting a political entity to defend their interests from unfair treatment. All those "industrialist" parties seek a sympathetic ear abroad by spending significant resources to affect the policies of Western countries toward Georgia. The most vivid example is the Lelo political party and the founders of the TBC business group who stand behind it. Harassment of foreign entities has almost the same effect, save the formation of a political party. The Frontera Group, which claimed unjustified persecution from the current Georgian government, relied on lobbying ser-

vices in the US whose purpose was exactly that - affecting foreign policy.

Chambers of Commerce, comprising businesses from various countries, are increasingly critical of Georgian governments and their treatment of the business environment for Western companies. They serve as "canaries in the coal mine," indicating shifts in domestic and foreign policies and inadvertently affecting external attitudes toward Georgia.

In some cases, businesses basically substitute an official foreign policy channel. Georgia's relations with the Central Asian countries are largely dominated by private companies that either advise the region's governments on various reform agendas or organize transportation and logistics on the East-West trade route through Georgia's territory and its ports.

Traditionally, diaspora organizations are considered powerful instruments in one's foreign policy. Today, the Georgian diaspora is not as organized, capable, or powerful to play in the same league as the Armenian diaspora worldwide. However, foreign policy actors may emerge from very unexpected places, too. Almost 2,000 Georgians, currently fighting alongside Ukrainians, can be considered foreign policy players who, unlike the officials in Tbilisi, ensure continuous friendship between Ukrainian and Georgian nations.

Ronald Reagan used to joke: “Today, if someone offered us the world on a silver platter, most of us would take the platter.” Historically, the silver platter in the hands of rulers was carrying Georgia itself to various contenders. Today, pro-Western political and intellectual elite consider integration into Western institutions a silver bullet rather than a platter for security challenges and economic development. As for the platter, the non-governmental players of alternative diplomacy accuse the government of melting the platter into the 30 silver coins.

An ideal solution for the stable, sustainable, and successful development of Georgia and its foreign policy would be to merge these parallel lines of diplomacy into one bold line.

One can argue whether the activity of alternative diplomacy makes any practical sense or has any meaningful consequences. Foreign policy, in general, is a combination of a multitude of small vectors, directing and supporting the main vector. However, a significant number of small vectors can profoundly affect the direction of the main vector. Evidence of the effectiveness of today’s alternative diplomacy is manifested not only in yet intangible and hardly quantifiable attitudes of the Western countries toward the Georgian leadership of the foreign policy establishment but also in very concrete decisions

like granting Georgia (though with conditions) EU membership candidate status. Accompanied justification that the status is deserved by the people of Georgia rather than its current government serves as yet another proof of the success of parallel diplomacy.

By definition, parallel lines are lines that never intersect. Nevertheless, they can overlap. An ideal solution for the stable, sustainable, and successful development of Georgia and its foreign policy would be to merge these parallel lines of diplomacy into one bold line. ■