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GEORGIA'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER THE NEW BALANCE OF POWER IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR

The article examines the specific features of Georgia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. The key interests that shape the foreign policy orientation of Tbilisi (European and Euro-Atlantic integration; liberation of the occupied territories; use of the state's transit potential) are determined. The article analyzes the position of Georgia in relation to the current regional initiatives, which form the agenda of the South Caucasian politics after the events of the Second Karabakh War. The readiness of Georgia to play the role of a mediator in the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan is emphasized – however, at the same time, the limited potential of Tbilisi in this matter is pointed out. Concerns from some of the Georgian experts about the prospects of unblocking the Armenian-Azerbaijani border are describes, as such scenario may deprive Georgia of its exclusive role as a transit hub. The impossibility of Georgia's participation in the work of multilateral regional formats, which include the Russian Federation, is explained. Also, the influence of the internal political factor on the foreign policy of Tbilisi is considered in the article. Aggravation of the confrontation between the authorities (“Georgian Dream”) and the opposition (“United National Movement”) exacerbates the situation, threatening the interests of the state. At the same time, the critical approach of certain Western experts to assessing the activities of the Georgian authorities is noted, as they see signs of a deliberate undermining of the pro-Western course from Tbilisi. These fears do not affect the immutability of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which is being implemented by Georgia. No alternative for such course is determined by public opinion, which demonstrates an extremely high level of support for the idea of membership in the EU and NATO. However, a clear pro-Western orientation at the same time limits Tbilisi's regional potential. In fact, it is difficult for Georgia to find its place in the region in the context of an intensified competition for influence between the Russian Federation and Turkey, as well as under the conditions of decrease of Western influence in the South Caucasus.

Keywords: *South Caucasus, foreign policy, Georgia, European and Euro-Atlantic integration, Second Karabakh war, 3+3 Platform.*

Formulation of the problem. Georgia is an important foreign policy partner of Ukraine. The documents that form the foundations of the foreign and security policy of our state define the strategic level of the Ukrainian-Georgian relations. It is based on the presence of a common problem (Russian aggression and occupation), as well as the commitment of Kyiv and Tbilisi to a common geopolitical orientation (a course towards achieving membership in the European Union and NATO). Partnership with Tbilisi remains an important element for the Black Sea and Caucasian policy of Ukraine, as well as for the intensification of transcontinental ties, access to Asian and Middle Eastern markets. However, the development of Ukrainian-Georgian relations requires an expert assessment of the main components of Georgian foreign policy. This is especially true for its regional dimension.

An urgent task is to define the role of Georgia in the South Caucasus. This makes it possible to assess the potential of Tbilisi as a so-called “door” to the region for Ukraine. At the same time, the recent changes in the regional balance of power caused by the results of the Second Karabakh War require close attention to the South Caucasian problems in general. An assessment of the region's prospects is of great importance in the context of the Ukrainian-Russian confrontation (taking into account the interest of the Russian Federation in maintaining its hegemony in the South Caucasus). Characterization of the regional position of Georgia is becoming an important element in the study of the South Caucasus and the prospects for the implementation of promising projects (transport corridors, multistate regional formats) within its borders.

The purpose of the article is to determine the main characteristic features of Georgian foreign policy, formed by the current geopolitical balance of power and the state of the regional environment in the South

Caucasus, understanding Georgia's national interests and the domestic political agenda. At the same time, the study focuses on the impact of the new status quo in the South Caucasus after Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War on Georgia's regional positioning. The assessment of Tbilisi's position regarding current regional processes (for example, the issues of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and the potential unblocking of transport routes) forms a specific part of the general problematics, which is still not well represented in comprehensive studies of Georgia's foreign policy.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The topic of the research is being studied in the works of many experts. However, given the rapidly changing regional situation in the South Caucasus, some of them are already significantly outdated. Modern tendencies and transformations of Tbilisi's regional policy were reflected primarily in the works of Georgian researchers – such as G. Vasadze [2], Z. Anjaparidze [8], V. Unanyants [6; 7]. Also, A. Gegeshidze and T. de Waal addressed certain aspects of this topic in the context of regional processes [11]. A. Ayvazyan tried to characterize the conceptual foundations of Georgian foreign policy on the eve of the Second Karabakh War [1]. It is worth mentioning the articles by B. Hodges [13], J. Kelly and D. Kramer [14], in which American experts assess the current trends in Georgian politics, expressing fears about the hidden sabotage of the pro-Western course by the authorities in Tbilisi.

Main material presentation. The foreign policy of Georgia in general remained unchanged for many years. It is formed by the geopolitical orientation of the state and the presence of urgent threats to its security and territorial integrity. The key interests of Georgia in the foreign policy area remain: completion of the processes of European and Euro-Atlantic integration; restoration of territorial integrity (de-occupation of Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia); maximum use of the regional balance of power in the South Caucasus in one's own interests (transit potential in the implementation of regional transport links).

Georgia adheres to a good-neighborly approach in its policy towards neighbors in the region. However, it does not always find an appropriate response from partners. In general, the Georgian-Azerbaijani partnership remains fruitful and mutually beneficial. In the conditions of the blockade of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, Georgia remains the most important route for ensuring the export of Azerbaijan's energy resources and the development of transport links with Turkey. Relations between Tbilisi and Baku are somewhat clouded by territorial disputes over border demarcation (the situation is complicated by the presence of religious sites in these areas). However, the actualization of this issue lately has only internal reasons for Tbilisi. On the eve of the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Georgian authorities tried to use it to compromise the opposition, promoting a narrative about “treason” by M. Saakashvili's team, which made unreasonable territorial concessions to a neighbor [5]. The situation does not have a significant impact on the real nature of Georgian-Azerbaijani cooperation. At the same time, Georgia's relations with Armenia remain ambiguous. Communication between Armenia and the Russian Federation is carried out through the Georgian territory. However, Georgia's role as a “transport window” for Armenia does not lead to trust in interstate relations. For a long time, they were undermined by the problem of Armenian separatism in Javakheti. During active hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, Tbilisi adhered to neutrality, closing its territory for the transit of military cargo to the parties to the conflict. However, this approach as a whole was rather beneficial for Azerbaijan, complicating military supplies to Armenia, which was blocked from almost all sides.

An active conflict between the states of the region is not beneficial to Tbilisi. It threatens the stability of the South Caucasus and creates preconditions for strengthening Russian influence in the region. Opposing such a scenario, Georgia is ready to assume the role of mediator in the settlement of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. The Prime Minister of Georgia I. Garibashvili made a proposal on the anniversary of the start of the Second Karabakh War to create a platform in Tbilisi for negotiations between Baku and Yerevan. Georgia refers to the successful experience – in June 2021 through its mediation it was possible to organize an exchange of Armenian citizens detained in Azerbaijan for maps of minefields left by Armenian forces in the liberated territories of Karabakh [15]. Georgia is interested in resolving the conflict and stabilizing the situation along its southern borders. Also, Tbilisi does not have excessive global ambitions that would affect its mediating position. However, the lack of influence weakens Georgia's ability to secure a real peace process. It is extremely doubtful that the Georgian initiative will be successful, given Russia's course towards de facto “privatization” of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

In matters of regional policy Georgia takes a moderate position. It is an important participant in the development of the transport corridor between Azerbaijan and Turkey (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway). However, in the trilateral partnership it mainly plays the role of a transit state, not being an equal partner in terms of financing the implementation of these projects. At the same time, it is making good use of its strategic position in the absence of an alternative transport route within the East-West corridor. This is reflected in the tariff

policy regarding the transit of goods, where Georgia's approach sometimes displeases partners. Overall, it can be argued that Tbilisi has benefited from blocking the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. As a result, not only the transport corridor from Azerbaijan to Turkey runs through the Georgian territory, but also the only road from Russia to Armenia. The transport dependence of the parties on Georgia strengthened its geopolitical position. It is an important achievement in conditions when the absence of significant reserves of natural resources and the presence of a conflict with the Russian Federation threatens its regional status [9].

Georgia verbally welcomes the idea of unblocking transport routes in the South Caucasus. However, in the matter of the practical implementation of such initiatives, Tbilisi takes a restrained position. It is widely believed that the potential functioning of the Zangezur Corridor will weaken the Georgian position in the South Caucasus, undermining its potential as a transit hub in regional transport (both between Azerbaijan and Turkey and between Russia and Armenia) [8].

One cannot deny the historical significance of Tbilisi for the South Caucasus as a cultural and educational center of the region. It defines the role of Georgia as a unifier of the regional space – the main source of Caucasian identity. Tbilisi verbally supports the idea of a multilateral regional format designed to solve problematic aspects of interstate relations and ensure the establishment of stable cooperation between the states of the South Caucasus. Georgia's position on this issue is important in the context of the actualization of the discussion around the Turkish initiative on the 3+3 Platform (proposed format with participation of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Russia and Turkey). The potential consent of Tbilisi to join this project could turn the existing foundation in the form of the Azerbaijani-Turkish alliance into a real multilateral platform for dialogue, at the same time refuting fears about the anti-Armenian ideology of the bloc. Initially, the President of Georgia S. Zourabichvili positively assessed the Turkish initiative regarding the Caucasus "Platform of Six", designed to create a platform for dialogue between regional players. According to her, "... to bring all peoples together was and is the historical role of Georgia. Therefore, I am deeply convinced that we cannot stand aside and be passive with regard to the "Caucasian platform" ..." [6]. However, the Georgian Foreign Ministry quickly clarified the official position of the state. Georgia is pinning its hopes exclusively on work in the narrow, trilateral format of the South Caucasian states. Tbilisi is not ready to participate in broader regional projects. The main reason for this remains the occupation of 20% of the Georgian territories by the Russian Federation. Under these conditions, Tbilisi cannot work in the joint diplomatic platform with Moscow [3]. Also, Georgia is taking into account the position of its Western partners. The creation of the 3+3 Platform means the final fixation of the removal of the West from the South Caucasus. According to K. Gogolashvili, an expert at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Tbilisi should not agree to the removal of the United States and Europe from regional issues, because only these players are able to protect its interests [6]. Georgia is not interested in closing the South Caucasus to Western influence – this puts it at a disadvantage. Thus, in practice, the participation of Tbilisi in the work of the Platform is currently excluded. As a result, it became the only state that has already de facto rejected the Turkish proposal.

It is difficult for Georgia to find its place in the current balance of power in the region. At the moment, two camps have been formed in the South Caucasus. On the one hand, Turkey and Azerbaijan formalized their union by signing the Shusha Declaration on June 15, 2021. On the other hand, Russia continues to increase its influence on Armenia, essentially depriving it of its real sovereignty. According to the head of regional programs of the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center G. Vasadze, in these conditions there is simply no place for Tbilisi in regional formats of relations [2].

The emphasis on the implementation of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration policy contributes to a kind of Georgia's departure from regional self-identification in favor of strengthening relations with the states of Eastern Europe that have similar ambitions (Ukraine, Moldova). This approach was formalized in 2021 in the form of the "Association Trio" format. Also, Georgian experts are considering options for strengthening security policy through the development of regional partnership in the Baltic-Black Sea region – with Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland [2]. Thus, the regional policy of Georgia is actually subordinate to its global positioning, based on a consistent orientation towards the West.

There is no alternative to the implementation of a pro-Western political course for Georgia. It is clearly visible from broad public support for this direction of foreign policy. A consolidated position regarding the European future of the state has been formed in Georgian society. According to sociological research, since 2012 the level of support for EU membership has not dropped below 61% (in August 2015). In December 2020, it reached 80%. There is also a consensus on NATO membership. The lowest level of support for the ideas of Euro-Atlantic integration for the same period was in November 2016, and also amounted to 61%. At the end of 2020, 74% of Georgian citizens supported the idea of membership

in the Alliance [16].

The Russian threat remains an important factor determining the popularity of the pro-Western foreign policy course in Georgian society. The key challenge to the security of Georgia is the occupation of a part of the territories (Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region) by the Russian Federation. The issue of the territorial integrity of the state remains one of the priorities for the Georgian society. There could be no compromises on it for the majority of population. The Georgian authorities continue to declare the invariability of their position regarding territorial integrity at the diplomatic level. A new elite has formed in Georgia. It is completely oriented towards the West and clearly defines the Russian Federation as an aggressor state [2]. This is confirmed by the low electoral support of political forces promoting the clear pro-Russian agenda (for example, the “Democratic Movement – United Georgia” party of N. Burjanadze). Part of society retains extreme antagonism towards Russia due to the Russian occupation of Georgian territories. It is illustrated by mass demonstrations (for example, the protests on June 20, 2019 against the presence of State Duma deputy S. Gavrilov in the building of the Georgian parliament) [1, p. 88].

At the same time, the last decade has seen a gradual de-escalation of the confrontation caused by the coming of moderate politicians to power in Georgia (whom the opposition accuses of having ties with the Russian Federation). Tbilisi does not have the potential to resolve the issue of restoring territorial integrity by force. Also, Georgian opportunities to respond to Russian provocations (the phenomenon of “creeping occupation”) are limited. As a result, it can be stated that for the current Georgian authorities, the issue of de-occupation de facto fades into the background. In practice, the focus in state policy is made on strengthening the capacity of Georgia and implementation of the integration ambitions in a “limited” form (without full control of the state’s territories).

At the same time, fears are expressed that the ruling forces in Georgia – the “Georgian Dream” party – are deliberately implementing a policy aimed at covertly blocking the integration ambitions of the state. First of all, it is about reducing foreign investment flows and undermining relations with the West. According to B. Hodges, the government’s position on the construction of a deep-sea port in Anaklia raises questions. Implementation of this project should significantly increase the transit potential of Georgia and strengthen its position in the region. Despite the fact that in words the project enjoys the full support of the authorities, some analysts argue that the delay in its implementation is caused by Tbilisi’s unwillingness to irritate Moscow. The Georgian authorities also tried to block the sale of the Georgian company “Caucasus Online” (an operator of an optical cable running along the bottom of the Black Sea) to Azerbaijan. In 2020 special amendments were made to the legislation, which complicate the execution of the deal. In both cases, we are talking about slowing down the implementation of projects that strengthen Georgia’s ties with other states – and thus contradict the interests of Russia [13]. The West’s relations with Georgia are also undermined by the conservative positions of the Georgian leadership, for example, on the rights of sexual minorities. The beating of the participants of the LGBT march in Tbilisi in early July 2021 caused a negative reaction from the American embassy, provoking a confrontation with Prime Minister I. Garibashvili [14].

The internal political balance of power in Georgia has a significant impact on the foreign policy potential of Tbilisi. It is characterized by a confrontation between two key political poles – the ruling “Georgian Dream” party of B. Ivanishvili and supporters of the former President of Georgia M. Saakashvili, united in the “United National Movement” party [11] (“dreamers” against “mishists”). The former came to power on the wave of dissatisfaction with Saakashvili’s policies in 2012, and continues to hold the lead. However, the absence of real qualitative changes in the development of the state – contrary to loud promises – contributes to the disappointment of a part of the electorate. At the same time, Saakashvili remains a toxic politician for a significant part of the Georgian population. His attempts to return to active political activities are causing an extremely ambiguous reaction. Due to internal disagreements, several influential figures who advocated reducing Saakashvili’s influence in the party (D. Bakradze, G. Ugulava) broke away from the UNM in 2017.

In general, “Georgian Dream” manages to retain the leadership in the political life of Georgia. The last elections in the state brought her success. In 2018, the “dreamers” managed to secure victory in the presidential race for the formally independent candidate S. Zourabichvili, who enjoyed their full support [4]. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, “Georgian Dream” also celebrated its victory. However, it should be borne in mind that the parliamentary successes of the party in the last elections are primarily due to the total domination in single-mandate districts. At first, in 2012, “dreamers” received only 41 out of 73 mandates from them, while 32 mandates went to their opponents from the UNM [17, p. 60]. But then the situation changed dramatically. In 2016, “Georgian Dream” won elections in 71 of 73 single-mandate districts [18]. In 2020, it achieved victory in all 30 single-mandate districts (their total number was reduced

at the insistence of the opposition) [10]. The very nature of the electoral process according to this scheme leaves wide space for subtle manipulations and machinations, when state resources are used to support a candidate from the ruling party. Overhauling the Georgian electoral system in favor of eliminating single-mandate districts could change the balance of power.

The last important battleground for the Georgian authorities and the opposition was the local elections scheduled for October 2, 2021, which were intended to resolve the internal political crisis. On April 19, a preliminary agreement was signed on possible early parliamentary elections through the mediation of the president of the European Council C. Michel. According to its terms, if the opposition succeeds in the local elections, “Georgian Dream” agreed with the need to re-elect the parliament in 2022. In order to avoid such a scenario, Ivanishvili’s party must gain at least 43% of the vote. However, at the end of July, it refused to comply with the terms of the agreement. The chairman of the “Georgian Dream” I. Kobakhidze said that the party does not deny the possibility of re-elections. However, it is ready to do this not as a fulfillment of an obligation, but solely as an act of goodwill “... if from the actions of opposition political parties we will see that our political system is ripe for effective coalition government and such a regime will not harm its interests” [7]. At the same time, the non-signing of the agreement by the radical opposition and Europe’s inability to influence it were named as the reasons for the cancellation of the previous agreements. This approach of the Georgian authorities has sharpened the criticism of the West against them.

The election results showed that “Georgian Dream” secures a confident leadership in the state. It gained more than 46% of the vote, and also won the mayoral elections in almost all cities of Georgia [12]. However, this does not mean the end of the internal crisis in the state. The return of Saakashvili to Georgia on the eve of the elections and his detention becomes a new reason for the intensification of the political struggle. The “Saakashvili factor” was unable to influence the electoral process. However, mass demonstrations organized by the opposition in support of the politician show that it can be used. At the same time, it plays a role not only for the domestic political agenda, but also for the Georgia’s foreign policy. Saakashvili is becoming a kind of “banner” or “symbol”. The criminal case against him is presented as an example of political repression, on the basis of which the opposition is trying to discredit the Georgian authorities in the eyes of its Western partners. The fact that he still has a high reputation in the West complicates the situation for the “Georgian Dream”, whose representatives have taken a fundamentally tough stance towards their political opponent.

Conclusions. Analysis of the regional policy of Georgia shows a certain limited potential of Tbilisi in the South Caucasus. Georgia views the development of good-neighborly relations with the states of the region as an important area of foreign policy designed to ensure the most beneficial use of its geopolitical position. However, the key direction of Georgian foreign policy remains the implementation of the course towards achieving membership in the EU and NATO. It is extremely difficult for Georgia to find a place in the new regional environment, which is characterized by a competitive struggle between external players (Russia, Turkey) and a decrease in the influence of the West. Tbilisi cannot get involved in the development of new initiatives and projects identified after the end of the Second Karabakh War. Participation in the 3+3 Platform is impossible for Georgia because of the conflict with the Russian Federation, and the unblocking of transport links in the region rather worsens its geopolitical position.

The situation for Tbilisi is complicated by the internal political crisis, which affects relations with partners. Some controversial decisions of the Georgian authorities negatively affect the state’s foreign policy positions, undermining its relations with Western partners. One of them remains the criminal prosecution of the former President of Georgia M. Saakashvili. It must be taken into account in the development of Ukrainian-Georgian relations. Despite the intensification of cooperation within the framework of the “Association Trio” format, Kyiv and Tbilisi are still far from achieving a real strategic partnership. At the same time, the softened position of the Georgian authorities in relation to the Russian Federation, as well as the limited potential of Georgia in the South Caucasus, raise concerns about its prospects. Georgia remains Ukraine’s companion on its way to the EU and NATO. However, in the Caucasus, it should not be viewed as an exclusive, priority partner of our state.

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Замікула М. О., Фротвейт М. М. Зовнішня політика Грузії в умовах нового балансу сил на Південному Кавказі після закінчення Другої Карабаської війни

В статті розглядаються характерні риси зовнішньої політики Грузії на південнокавказькому напрямку. Визначаються ключові інтереси, що формують зовнішньополітичну орієнтацію Тбілісі (європейська та євроатлантична інтеграція; звільнення окупованих територій; використання транзитного потенціалу). Аналізується позиція Грузії щодо актуальних регіональних ініціатив, які формують порядок денний південнокавказької політики після подій Другої Карабаської війни. Наголошується на готовності Грузії зіграти роль посередника у мирному процесі між Вірменією та Азербайджаном – проте водночас вказується на обмежений потенціал Тбілісі у цьому питанні. Відзначається занепокоєння частини грузинських експертів щодо перспектив розблокування вірмено-азербайджанського кордону (оскільки це може позбавити Грузію її виняткової ролі транзитного хаба). Пояснюється неможливість участі Грузії у роботі багатосторонніх регіональних форматів, які включають Російську Федерацію. Окремо розглядається вплив внутрішньополітичного чинника на зовнішню політику Тбілісі. Загострення протистояння між владою («Грузинська мрія») та опозицією («Єдиний національний рух») ускладнює ситуацію, загрожуючи інтересам держави. При цьому наголошується на критичному підході окремих західних експертів до оцінки діяльності грузинської влади, в якій вони бачать ознаки свідомого підриву прозахідного курсу. Ці побоювання не впливають на незмінність курсу європейської та євроатлантичної інтеграції, що реалізується Грузією. Його безальтернативність визначається громадською думкою, яка демонструє надзвичайно високий рівень підтримки ідеї членства в ЄС та НАТО. Проте чітка прозахідна орієнтація водночас обмежує регіональний потенціал Тбілісі. Фактично Грузії складно знайти своє місце в регіоні в умовах загострення конкурентної боротьби за вплив між РФ і Туреччиною, та зниження впливу Заходу.

Ключові слова: Південний Кавказ, зовнішня політика, Грузія, європейська та євроатлантична інтеграція, Друга Карабаська війна, Платформа 3+3.