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Russia's Foreign Policy toward Georgia in the Age of Uncertainty: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis

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Abstract

The dissolution of the Soviet Union altered Russia's geographical borders while simultaneously reinforcing its historical memory. Russian policy toward the states that seceded from the Soviet Union has placed these countries in vulnerable positions in terms of security, economic stability, and both domestic and foreign policy orientations. Their efforts to align with Western policies have rendered Russia's foreign policy toward former Soviet republics increasingly coercive. This dynamic has contributed to Georgia—having gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union—remaining in an age of uncertainty. Georgia constitutes a critical focal point in Russian foreign policy. Offering strategic access to the Black Sea and occupying a pivotal position in the Caucasus, Georgia represents a country of considerable geopolitical significance. An analysis of the underlying causes of Russia's assertive policy toward Georgia provides guidance for understanding Georgia's future foreign policy trajectory within this context of uncertainty. This study analyzes Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia through the lens of neoclassical realism within foreign policy analysis. The theory emphasizes both domestic-level factors and independent variables derived from the international system. By preventing a single-centered mode of analysis, this approach enables a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of foreign policy behavior. Neoclassical realism conceptualizes foreign policy as the dependent variable, while the effects stemming from the global system and regional relations constitute the independent variables; it further incorporates state-specific domestic factors into the analysis. Employing a mixed methodological framework grounded in neoclassical realism, the study examines Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia with particular emphasis on domestic factors. These domestic variables include historical memory, identity, the Orthodox Church, leadership, regime and government structure, and geopolitics. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that domestic factors constitute the most significant determinants of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia.

Keywords: Russia, Georgia, Foreign Policy Analysis, Neoclassical Realism, Local Factors

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1. INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of the Soviet Union represents an international turning point with profound regional consequences and global repercussions. The year 1991, marking the collapse of the Soviet Union, initiated a process characterized by significant regional and global transformations, propelling states into an age of uncertainty. While many newly independent countries assumed the responsibilities inherent in statehood, they were simultaneously compelled to sustain their aspirations for sovereignty and an idealized vision of independent nationhood. Alongside fragile economies, these states sought to construct futures distinct from Russia—despite shared historical memory, linguistic ties, and religious commonalities—thereby experiencing the multifaceted challenges of state-building at every level. Under these conditions, the newly independent states entered the twenty-first century, and an era of uncertainty emerged with respect to their foreign policy orientations.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia—having gained independence in the Caucasus—became one of the countries to experience most acutely the difficulties of sovereign statehood. Situated in Russia's immediate neighborhood, Georgia has consistently held strategic significance due to its connections to the Black Sea and the Middle East. Over time, it evolved into a geopolitical control point within the Caucasus and, from Russia's perspective, an indispensable component of Russian foreign policy. However, the strategic importance attributed to Georgia by Russia has simultaneously constituted a major obstacle to Georgia's independence, democratic development, and aspiration to consolidate itself as a fully sovereign state. Gradually, Russia has become increasingly involved in Georgia's regime dynamics, electoral processes, autonomous regions, and economy.

In Georgia, the electoral victories of pro-Moscow parties—contrary to prevailing public opinion—suggest that the elections were marred by irregularities and indicate potential Russian interference in Georgia's electoral processes. Moreover, Russia's occupation of South Ossetia following Georgia's pursuit of a pro-European political orientation has clearly demonstrated Moscow's direct intervention in Georgian affairs.

Under current conditions, although formally independent, Georgia remains subject to Russian engagement in matters of democracy, economic governance, and the status of its autonomous regions. In this regard, Georgia constitutes a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy in the Caucasus.

Over the years, Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia has been shaped by distinct and evolving dynamics. Within Russian foreign policy discourse, Georgia has figured prominently in terms of geopolitics, security, religion, and historical memory. Developments such as conflicts, revolutions, regime changes, and aspirations for membership in global organizations demonstrate that Russia's policy toward Georgia has gradually moved away from conventional diplomacy. This trajectory indicates that Russia's foreign policy pattern vis-à-vis Georgia is nourished by multiple and intersecting dynamics.

It can thus be argued that Russia's policy toward Georgia is pursued through a complex strategy shaped by both domestic and international factors. As the first quarter of the twenty-first century draws to a close, there is a pressing need to critically interpret and contextualize Russia's multifaceted approach toward Georgia. Indeed, it appears that the future trajectory of Georgia—situated within an age of uncertainty—is closely linked to the course of Russian foreign policy.

This study centers on an examination of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia from the perspective of neoclassical realism. A review of the existing literature addressing Russia's policy toward Georgia—both foundational and contemporary works—reveals the absence of an analysis that focuses exclusively on Georgia within the framework of foreign policy analysis theory.

Prozorov (2010), "Ethos without Nomos: The Russian–Georgian War and the Post-Soviet State of Exception," analyzes Russia's 2008 intervention in Georgia through the lens of spatial order and normative structures. The study offers a broad assessment of the disruptive political dynamics characterizing the post-Soviet period.

Similarly, Delcour and Wolczuk (2015), "Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratization?: Russia's Role in Georgia and Ukraine," examines Russia's involvement in the democratization processes of Georgia and Ukraine. The study ultimately clarifies the nature and extent of Russia's political interventions in these countries.

The 2020 study titled "Russian Foreign Policy and Geopolitics in the Post-Soviet Space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria" draws upon the theoretical frameworks of neorealism and constructivism. However, in this work, Rezvani examines Russia's foreign policy toward Tajikistan, Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria collectively, rather than providing a focused analysis of Georgia within a foreign policy analysis framework.

Götz (2022), "Taking the Longer View: A Neoclassical Realist Account of Russia's Neighbourhood Policy," demonstrates that Russian political elites have sought to establish a regional security order in the former Soviet space surrounding Moscow. Conceptualized through a neoclassical realist lens, the study argues that Russia's policies toward former Soviet states have evolved over time.

In this context, analyzing Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia through the foreign policy analysis framework of neoclassical realism constitutes a significant contribution to the literature. Theoretically, neoclassical realism offers a comprehensive and balanced perspective by jointly examining the domestic and systemic determinants of state behavior. The integrated analysis of internal and external dynamics thus enables a more accurate understanding of states' foreign policy orientations.

Another significant contribution of the study lies in the possibility of addressing Georgia's prolonged age of uncertainty—and the scope of Russian influence—through an explanation of the relevant domestic factors. A comprehensive analysis of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia is

crucial, as it directly shapes Georgia's vital domestic and foreign policy choices. Georgia sustains its political existence and formulates its foreign policy initiatives with careful consideration of Russia's reactions. The responses emanating from Moscow help to explain Georgia's cautious and calibrated foreign policy behavior. By analyzing Russia's policy toward Georgia with particular emphasis on domestic-level factors, the study also highlights the structural constraints and handicaps that Georgia faces in both its internal and external political spheres.

A further contribution of the study is its potential to facilitate a broader understanding of Russia's future foreign policy orientation toward other former Soviet republics. Certain domestic determinants shaping Russia's policy toward Georgia may also be applicable to some of the other post-Soviet states.

Accordingly, the principal objective of this study is to demonstrate that Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia is shaped by the interaction between domestic-level factors and systemic independent variables, as conceptualized by neoclassical realism. In this framework, Russia's policy toward Georgia emerges not only from the influence of domestic determinants but also from the pressures and incentives derived from the international system. The study thus presents a neoclassical realist analysis of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia in the post-independence period.

Like any scholarly inquiry, this study is subject to certain limitations; nevertheless, it advances the argument that domestic-level factors play a decisive role in shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. The clarification of the principal arguments underpinning Russia's policy toward Georgia—one of the former Soviet republics—constitutes the study's most significant contribution to the literature. By undertaking an in-depth analysis of domestic determinants, the study moves beyond surface-level assessments of Russia's policy toward Georgia and challenges the sufficiency of one-dimensional explanations. For this reason, neoclassical realism—an approach that jointly evaluates domestic factors and systemic influences within a foreign policy analysis framework—has been adopted as the theoretical foundation of the study.

The study first establishes neoclassical realism as its theoretical framework. The core components of the theory are elaborated in detail, with particular emphasis on its relevance as a foreign policy analysis approach. The subsequent section examines Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia within the neoclassical realist framework. In this context, the study also evaluates whether domestic-level factors are operative in Russia's broader policy toward former Soviet states. The fundamental dynamics shaping Russia's policy toward Georgia are identified and analyzed. Ultimately, the study seeks to answer whether Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia is shaped by the interaction between domestic determinants and systemic independent variables. The findings demonstrate that Russia's policy toward Georgia is indeed determined by the combined influence of domestic driving forces and independent variables derived from the international system.

2. NEOCLASSICAL REALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF ITS ELEMENTS AND METHODOLOGY

The dissolution of the Soviet Union not only transformed regional dynamics and geopolitics but also reshaped prevailing conceptions of states' foreign policies. The inadequacy of relying on a single explanatory perspective in analyzing foreign policy outcomes is confirmed by the diversity of factors that contributed to the collapse of the Union. The multiplicity of these determinants demonstrates that foreign policy is inherently multilayered in nature. Accordingly, it has become evident that these distinct layers must be systematically examined and subsequently synthesized through an integrative analytical framework.

Neoclassical realism was developed as a foreign policy analysis theory building upon the earlier traditions of classical realism and neorealism. It focuses on how both unit-level and systemic-level variables shape states' foreign policy behavior (Gvalia et al., 2019).

Neoclassical realism combines system-level and unit-level variables within an analytical framework in order to explain states' foreign policies. While the approach preserves structural realism's emphasis on the anarchic nature of the international system and the distribution of power, it argues that these systemic factors do not exert a direct and mechanical effect on foreign policy behavior.

In this regard, neoclassical realism constructs the causal relationship in a multi-layered manner. According to the theory, the independent variable represents the distribution of power in the international system and the resulting structures of opportunities and threats. The dependent variable, in turn, is directly the foreign policy of states. However, the relationship between the independent and dependent variables does not constitute a direct reflection. Accordingly, states' foreign policies are shaped through domestic-level factors (Lobell et al., 2009).

Neoclassical realism focuses on how systemic pressures are perceived and interpreted by states and how these perceptions and interpretations are translated into foreign policy. The fact that states facing similar systemic conditions exhibit different foreign policy responses is explained by the transformative role of domestic-level factors. This demonstrates that the theory incorporates not only structural constraints but also how these constraints are interpreted through domestic political processes (Ripsman et al., 2016).

From an analytical perspective, neoclassical realism establishes a causal chain that mediates between the system level and the unit level. Systemic factors determine the general direction and constraints of state behavior, while unit-level factors shape the timing, form, and scope of foreign policy outputs or actions. The theory provides a holistic explanation by addressing the gaps in existing approaches to foreign policy analysis. Thus, neoclassical realism does not reject the determinative role of the international system; rather, it demonstrates this determinism in conjunction with domestic-level factors, offering a theoretical framework that is both multi-level and analytically coherent (Rose, 1998).

Characterized by a mixed methodological approach, the theory preserves the state-centric framework of the first two phases of realism. However, it argues that classical realism and neorealism alone are insufficient to adequately explain states' foreign policy behavior. In particular, the multiplicity of factors that contributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Union confirmed that neither classical realism nor neorealism provides a sufficiently comprehensive perspective for foreign policy analysis (Sönmezoğlu, 2019). The prominent role of leadership in the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted a reassessment of the neorealist claim that the global system constitutes the sole determinant of interstate relations (Kiraz, 2018).

Neoclassical realism was first articulated by Gideon Rose in his article titled "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," published in World Politics in October 1998 (Rose, 1998). The principal objective of the theory was to advance a holistic analytical framework and to move beyond single-centered explanations of foreign policy behavior[1]. The theory posits that states' foreign policies are shaped by the combined influence of domestic and international dynamics. Accordingly, foreign policy does not emerge solely from systemic pressures emanating from the global structure. Nor can it be explained exclusively by internal determinants. Rather, neoclassical realism argues that a state's foreign policy is the product of the interaction and convergence of domestic and systemic factors. For this reason, any comprehensive analysis of foreign policy must evaluate internal and external dynamics in conjunction.

The theorist stated that, in order to analyze a state's foreign policy and distinguish neoclassical realism from other theories, several key points must be emphasized. Domestic factors—such as political structure, state traditions, the economy, and society—are influential in shaping states' foreign policies. In addition, influences emanating from the international system constitute another significant factor affecting foreign policy behavior. Neoclassical realism incorporates each of these dynamics into its analysis and develops a holistic perspective (Rose, 1998).

The components of neoclassical realism are identified as the dependent variable, independent variables, and domestic factors. Accordingly, the dependent variable refers to states' foreign policy. While not rejecting the influence of the international system, neoclassical realism conceptualizes the effects emanating from the global system as independent variables. Providing a multilayered framework for foreign policy analysis, neoclassical realism incorporates states' domestic factors into its theoretical structure and conceptualizes them as unit-level variables. These domestic factors are determined

[1] Gideon Rose stated that neoclassical realism had been used prior to his own formulation. In fact, neoclassical realism had not previously been employed as a fully developed theory. However, a perspective distinct from neorealism had been introduced. The authors who, prior to Gideon Rose, referred to the influence of domestic factors and leaders include Fareed Zakaria, Thomas Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, and William Wohlforth.

specifically for each state, as a dynamic that is significant for one state may not carry the same importance for another. Accordingly, the theory emphasizes that the identification of domestic factors must be based on the particular characteristics of each state. Among these domestic variables, however, the leadership factor holds particular significance in neoclassical realism. According to the theory, the leader functions as the decision-maker and constitutes a primary determinant of foreign policy. The transformation of systemic pressures and domestic dynamics into concrete foreign policy outputs is mediated by the leadership variable within the domestic sphere. Thus, in every foreign policy decision, the leader/decision-maker represents a fundamental factor (Rose, 1998).

Focusing more closely on the distinction between dependent and independent variables is crucial for understanding the methodological framework of neoclassical realism. Within its analytical logic, neoclassical realism systematically and explicitly establishes the context linking dependent and independent variables. A distinguishing feature of the approach is that this relationship is not direct but mediated.

The independent variable primarily encompasses the structural characteristics of the international system, including the distribution of power, power balances, and threat structures. According to neoclassical realism, these independent variables define the external constraints and opportunities that states face when formulating their foreign policies. Thus, the independent variable, representing the system level, serves as the starting point in neoclassical realist analysis and is conceptualized as the primary driving force determining the direction of foreign policy behavior (Rose, 1998).

Dependent variables, in turn, refer to the foreign policy behavior of states. They include concrete foreign policy outputs such as military strategy, crisis management, alliance choices (including whether alliances are formed), withdrawal, or expansion. The fundamental question that neoclassical realism seeks to answer—"why"—is reflected in the dependent variable, explaining why states with similar systemic conditions exhibit different foreign policy outcomes.

An important point to note here is the methodology of neoclassical realism. According to this approach, neoclassical realism does not establish a direct relationship between dependent and independent variables. Instead, the theory incorporates domestic-level factors that shape the relationships between these variables. Consequently, domestic factors emerge as a distinguishing element of the theory.

Analytically, neoclassical realism establishes a transmission chain. In this chain, system-level independent variables constitute the first stage, unit-level domestic factors form the second stage, and dependent variables, manifested as foreign policy outputs, constitute the third stage. This staged or chained structure of the theory allows for a more flexible, meaningful, and accurate analysis, and it underscores the analytical coherence of the approach (Rose, 1998).

Neoclassical realism follows a mixed methodology. The influences derived from domestic factors and from the international system—conceptualized as independent variables—are synthesized and subsequently transformed into foreign policy outcomes. Accordingly, states' foreign policies constitute the dependent variable, while the effects stemming from the global and regional systems represent the independent variables. In addition, another central component to which neoclassical realism pays particular attention in foreign policy analysis is domestic dynamics. At this point, it is necessary to elaborate further on the issue of domestic dynamics.

Neoclassical realism asserts that domestic dynamics must be identified on the basis of each state's specific characteristics. The recognition that not every domestic dynamic is applicable to every country has been recorded as a significant stage in the theorization of neoclassical realism. For instance, domestic dynamics that are valid for Russia may not be applicable to China. Differences in geographical location, ethnic and religious composition, and political systems mean that not every domestic variable becomes relevant for every state. Gideon Rose, the principal theorist of neoclassical realism, argued that this condition should be regarded as a state-specific characteristic in the determination of foreign policy (Rose, 1998).

Thus, the state whose foreign policy is being analyzed is not confined to a predetermined template with regard to domestic dynamics. This approach has been identified as a sound method for determining the actual impact and degree of domestic factors influencing states' foreign policies (Lobell et al., 2009). For example, while ethnic structure may constitute a significant domestic factor for one state, it may not hold the same relevance for another. Similarly, religious beliefs may shape the foreign policy of one state but exert no influence on another's external behavior. For this reason, neoclassical realism emphasizes that, in identifying the domestic factors affecting foreign policy, careful attention must be paid to the specific characteristics of each individual state. Possessing three core components, the theory synthesizes domestic factors and independent variables and transforms them into the dependent variable—namely, foreign policy.

The analytical strength of neoclassical realism stems particularly from placing the concepts of "perception" and "capability" at the center of causality. The perception dimension explains how foreign policy decision-makers interpret the international system, assess it, and prioritize threats. Capability refers to a state's ability to transform its material and institutional resources into the achievement of foreign policy objectives. When considered together, these concepts enable neoclassical realism to explain why, among states facing similar systemic conditions, some respond with balancing, accommodation, or threat assessment strategies (Zakaria, 1998).

Neoclassical realism emerged as a foreign policy analysis theory employed to explain the foreign policies of states in the post-Soviet era. Accordingly, it has been identified as a significant theoretical framework for understanding states' foreign policy processes in the twenty-first century. It

has been determined that the most foundational works emerged in order to conceptualize and clarify neoclassical realism. As a relatively recent theory, neoclassical realism has been theorized as a framework for foreign policy analysis and has focused on states' foreign policy processes. In the literature, numerous studies have adopted the theory as a methodological approach. However, following the foundational contribution of Gideon Rose, the most significant works have been those that sought to elaborate and interpret the theoretical premises of neoclassical realism.

The 2009 volume titled Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy provides a detailed examination of the theory. The work demonstrates the comprehensibility and analytical applicability of neoclassical realism. It asserts that the primary actor whose foreign policy should be analyzed is the state. Moreover, it argues that earlier stages of realism were insufficient and lacked comprehensiveness in explaining states' foreign policy behavior. Conceptualized as a foreign policy analysis theory, neoclassical realism emphasizes the importance of focusing on the process when analyzing states' foreign policies. This constitutes a central aspect of the theory (Lobell et al., 2009).

In the 2016 volume titled Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics, particular emphasis is placed on the leader/decision-maker, highlighting the importance of identifying who influences the formulation of states' foreign policy decisions. The authors assert that neoclassical realism represents the most advanced stage of realist theory and underscore that the reason states operating within the same systemic conditions adopt different foreign policy decisions lies in domestic-level factors (Ripsman et al., 2016).

The most significant explanatory work in the literature on the theory is the book From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role. Drawing on the example of U.S. foreign policy, the author argues that the most important dynamic in the foreign policy process is the leader/decision-making actor. Emphasizing that influences derived from independent variables are not the sole determinants of states' foreign policies, the author focuses on the importance of the leader's perception and position within the state's foreign policy process (Zakaria, 1998).

Having established a methodology grounded in dependent variables, independent variables, and domestic factors, neoclassical realism focuses on the processes underlying states' foreign policy decisions. As a foreign policy analysis theory that seeks to uncover the reasons behind states' decisions, it assigns significant importance to domestic-level factors while not rejecting the influence of the global system as an independent variable. By concentrating on the decision-making process in foreign policy, the theory produces more empirically grounded outcomes and has thus been methodologically formulated as one of the most appropriate frameworks for analyzing states' foreign policies. In particular, its emphasis on each state's specific domestic factors facilitates an understanding of why states produce different foreign policy outcomes when confronted with similar circumstances.

3. AN ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS GEORGIA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

Prior to attaining its present federal structure, Russia experienced different forms of governance throughout the twentieth century. Following the collapse of Tsarist Russia in the 1917 Revolution, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was established. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the present-day Russian Federation was formed, and Russia geographically retreated to narrower borders. For many years the administrative center of the Soviet Union, Moscow, lost control over Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia in the new era. Nevertheless, despite losing direct governance over these regions, Moscow has continued to assert its claim to being a Eurasian power.

In response to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to operationalize through its foreign policy the claim that it remains a Eurasian power in the territories it lost. The former Soviet geography—where Russia's historical memory endures—has become, in the new period, a sphere in which Moscow has aimed to reassert control and thereby sustain its post-Soviet ambitions. Within the hierarchical international system, Russia retains great power status, and its foreign policy dynamics indicate an objective of reestablishing dominance in its near abroad.

There are global and regional influences shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia (that is, independent variables according to neoclassical realist theory). In addition, it is understood that multiple domestic dynamics also shape Russia's policy toward Georgia. In this context, the study is structured into sub-sections. The subheadings identified by neoclassical realism as domestic dynamics—such as historical memory, geopolitics, and identity—must be examined separately in order to determine and understand the domestic determinants shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. However, not every domestic dynamic influencing Russia's policy toward Georgia affects foreign policy to the same degree. Therefore, it is evident that the level of impact varies among these domestic factors.

3.1. Domestic Factors of Russia's Foreign Policy toward Georgia

3.1.1. Historical Memory

By sustaining its historical memory through phenomena and concepts such as language, culture, and identity, the Moscow administration has sought to ensure that the countries which separated from the Soviet Union would once again gravitate toward Moscow. To this end, Russian elites formulated foreign policy without delay. In pursuit of influence over the geography defined as "Greater Russia," referring to the former Soviet space, several different approaches were proposed. The first advocated limited engagement with the former Soviet states. The second, more ambitious approach was based on the direct reestablishment of the Soviet imperial order. The third approach represented a middle path. This middle course envisaged Moscow maintaining control over the former Soviet states while simultaneously developing pragmatic relations with the West. Moscow's ultimate decision was to adopt a policy recognizing the formal sovereignty of the former Soviet republics, yet shaping their foreign

policies—particularly in the security sphere—thereby establishing regional influence (Charap et al., 2018).

In order to exert influence over the foreign policies of the former Soviet states, the Moscow administration established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), effectively constrained these countries' military and security policies. Russia instrumentalized conflicts between states and their autonomous regions as a means of intervening in their internal affairs and, over time, increased its economic pressure on these countries. In the new century, the Moscow administration adopted a more assertive neighborhood policy, becoming more deeply involved in the foreign policies of former Soviet states by emphasizing border security, Russian identity, and regional relations (Bluhm & Varga, 2025).

Russian foreign policy—appropriately characterized as neo-imperial—is assessed as exhibiting historical continuity. Accordingly, Russian foreign policy is rooted in its historical foundations, demonstrates continuity over time, and its assertive neighborhood policy is regarded as a consequence of the state's historical memory (Bakke et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the neo-imperialism instrumentalized in Russian foreign policy has not manifested at the same intensity in every period (Fomin, 2025).

Although the Russian Constitution prohibits the designation of any ideology as a "state ideology" (Fomin, 2025), it is nevertheless possible to observe the emergence of a semi-official ideology in the 2010s. Following public protests against the 2012 presidential elections, Moscow responded by adopting a neo-imperial nationalist discourse grounded in patriotic sentiment. References were made to state continuity, traditional Russian structures, and order (O'Shea, 2022). In subsequent years, it has been observed that President Putin's unofficial—yet frequently articulated—ideological orientation has focused on anti-Westernism, the notion of a great, strong, and enduring state, and conservatism (Fomin, 2025).

It has been observed that Russian foreign policy toward the states that separated from the Soviet Union has, at times, followed different approaches. Moscow's assertive and proactive policy has, in certain instances, transformed into coercive practices through economic sanctions, and in others through threats and the use of force. In addition to these measures, another method by which Russia has sought to generate influence and pressure over former Soviet states has been the provision of financial assistance and military-security support. The concept of "Greater Russia," rooted in its historical memory, has constituted the primary driving force behind Russia's policies of exerting influence (Götz, 2022).

Another point of connection with Russian historical memory has been the preservation of great power status in contemporary foreign policy. States seeking to maintain or strengthen their great power position tend to generate policies of regional influence and aim to establish control over neighboring countries. The expansion of regional influence and the assumption of a leading role in global decision-

making have contributed to the intensification of Russia's assertive policies toward its near abroad (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2024). Russian elites believe that the expansion and forceful maintenance of regional influence will ultimately elevate the country to a leadership position. Accordingly, the objective of becoming a leading power has evolved into a shared foreign policy vision among Russian elites (Götz, 2022).

Perceptions emanating from Tbilisi that Georgia was "departing from Russia's sphere of control" have been met with strong reactions in Moscow. Georgia's place within Russia's historical memory presupposes that the country should remain aligned with Moscow's authority and Russia's great power status. Georgia's attempt to orient its foreign policy toward Western policies, thereby moving beyond Russia's sphere of influence, activated historical memory within Russia and prompted efforts to reestablish influence through force. This development underscores the significance of domestic factors in shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia.

One of the principal dynamics shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia, within the framework of neoclassical realism, is clarified as historical memory—a key domestic factor. The most salient indicator of this dynamic was the 2008 war. Russia's occupation of the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 is interpreted as the outcome of a process in which Georgia had gradually distanced itself from Russia's historical sphere. In this sense, Georgia's attempt to expand its governance in regions where Russia exercised influence was perceived as evidence of a deliberate effort to detach the country from Russia's historical memory (Wilhelmsen, 2023).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's sphere of influence narrowed in terms of political geography. Nevertheless, Moscow aspires to regain its former breadth as a great power. The sphere of influence established in the near abroad aims to reposition Russia as a central actor and to restore its previous geographic magnitude. Seeking a central role in the former Soviet space, Russia aspires to become a dominant power and to enhance its effectiveness in international affairs. The principal actor guiding these objectives is President Putin (Götz, 2022).

It is evident that the objective of attaining and sustaining great power status through the expansion of regional influence is reflected in Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. Thus, it becomes clear once again that Russia's historical memory constitutes a significant factor in shaping its policy toward Georgia.

3.1.2. Identity

In Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia, the leader—and the importance he attributes to identity—must be considered a significant domestic factor. Vladimir Putin, who has served as President of Russia for many years, is known as a leader who upholds conservative values, respects the Church, embraces Slavic identity, espouses Russian nationalism, and pursues defined national objectives. Given

that the position of decision-making leadership directs Russian foreign policy, it is appropriate to focus on Putin's worldview and value system.

Russia, which is assessed as seeking to reestablish indirect and/or direct control over the former Soviet geography, has increased its influence over neighboring states that are not integrated into Western policies. By sustaining its historical memory, the Moscow administration has exerted pressure on the governance of these countries through issues related to identity, foreign policy orientation, geography, security, and regime type. In pursuit of its claim to serve as the principal center of authority, Russia has intervened in the domestic affairs and foreign policies of these states. Simultaneously aiming to enhance its domestic prestige and to regain its international influence—thereby ultimately restoring its position across the former Soviet space—Moscow has adopted an assertive policy stance. Moreover, the dissolution of the Soviet Union necessitated the reconstruction of Moscow's prestige as a governing center. The objective of reclaiming the former Soviet geography as a central tenet of Moscow's foreign policy has strengthened domestic support for the leader and positioned the Russian nationalist public behind the regime (Götz, 2022).

Putin has characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." His "nostalgia" for the Soviet Union has contributed to steering Russian foreign policy in a revisionist direction (Cheishvili, 2026). Putin's notion of "civilizational nationalism" has been advanced as an argument to encompass and guide citizens belonging to ethnic groups beyond Slavic Russians. The ideas of civilizational nationalism and interpretations of Russia as a great power in Eurasia have come to dominate and gain acceptance in the literature during Putin's presidency. Putin's conceptual orientation—shaping the spatial and ideational direction of foreign policy (Fomin, 2025)—has been reinforced through identity-based arguments. Discourses legitimizing revisionist foreign policy steps mobilize society by integrating notions of civilization and identity. Civilizational rhetoric not only advocates unity within Russia but also mitigates opposition to Russian foreign policy initiatives. It functions as an inclusive element against potential dissent among Russian elites. At the same time, it serves to legitimize Russia's revisionist foreign policy actions within the international system and to shape regional relations and the international community in accordance with Russia's own interests (Götz, 2022).

By invoking the shared historical past between Russia and Georgia, Moscow intervened in the war in Georgia. It justified the intervention by asserting that the Russian army acted to eliminate threats against its own citizens and emphasized that the objective was not territorial expansion but rather to assist individuals seeking security in asserting their Russian identity. Ultimately, Russia recognized the occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent and portrayed the Georgian leadership as the aggressor (Wilhelmsen, 2023). By distributing Russian passports to the populations of these regions, the Moscow administration expanded the sphere of Russian identity and thereby redefined the contours of the "Russian world" (Kasapovic, 2023).

Russia's perception of itself as a strong state and its conviction that it would not relinquish influence over historically significant territories became evident in the identity dimension of domestic factors, particularly in response to Georgia's potential integration into Western foreign policy frameworks (Isajiw, 2016). Nearly two decades after the occupation, Russia, as a great power, has ensured the freezing of conflicts in the occupied regions and prevented them from moving beyond Russian influence (Buzaladze, 2020). This situation has weakened Georgian sovereignty and constrained Georgia's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. The economic integration of the occupied territories into Russia and the absence of any realistic prospect of their reintegration into Georgia demonstrate that Russia has effectively curtailed the Georgian government's maneuverability in regions near its borders (Engvall, 2020).

3.1.3. The Orthodox Church

It is possible to argue that another domestic factor shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia is the Orthodox Church. Beginning in the 2010s, the increasing presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in state ceremonies and its closer relations with public institutions symbolized the rise of neo-conservatism in Russia. For Russia, neo-conservatism defends conservative values against what is perceived as the moral decline of the West and regards Russia as the principal guardian of Orthodox values in opposition to the West. It further maintains that, unlike the West, Russia will reinforce conservatism and uphold the claim that the state itself represents a distinct civilization (Fomin, 2025).

This neo-conservative perspective has necessitated positioning the Russian Orthodox Church as a reference point for defending the values of its close neighbor, the Georgian Orthodox Church. Traditionally and intrinsically linked, the two churches have found support from Russia in response to Western-oriented policies emerging in Georgia. Seeking to ensure that Georgian youth are raised in accordance with church values and patriotism, Russia has supported the establishment of youth organizations in Georgia through the Georgian Orthodox Church. According to some accounts, certain youth organizations have been affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church (Abrahamyan, 2015). Given the importance of religious adherence and conservatism for Russia, religion becomes a significant dynamic in foreign policy toward neighboring states that share common values. As the self-proclaimed guardian of Orthodox civilization, Russia does not view favorably any distancing of its close neighbor Georgia from church-based values.

3.1.4. Leaders

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia shaped its foreign policy toward Georgia— which gained independence— under the influence of both domestic and international factors. In order to establish dominant influence in Georgia, Russia at times intervened in Georgian politics and sought to ensure that Georgian leaders pursued pro-Russian policies.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first leader of Georgia, pursued an anti-Russian policy during his tenure. In his brief period of leadership, he emphasized Georgia's national identity. However, he was removed from office and replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union. Shevardnadze followed a more moderate policy toward Russia and maintained a conciliatory stance (Cecire, 2025).

Mikheil Saakashvili, who came to power in 2004, reshaped the formation of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia through his Western-oriented foreign policy stance. Saakashvili declared that he would pursue policies aimed at securing his country's membership in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). His commitment to offering definitive solutions regarding South Ossetia, a legacy issue from the Soviet period, shifted Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia into a phase of passive control. However, the arrest of Russian intelligence officers in Georgia in 2008 led Russia to move toward active control over Georgian politics (Wilhelmsen, 2023).

In addition, the foreign policy attitudes and preferences of Georgian leaders point to both domestic factors and independent variables in the formation of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. The Rose Revolution that took place in Georgia in 2003 resulted in a change of leadership within the country. The transformation, driven by popular demand, was led by Mikheil Saakashvili, who had been educated in the United States and subsequently won the elections. The new leader's pro-democracy stance, his strengthening of Georgian public institutions, and his efforts to eliminate corruption within the country drew Russia's attention to Georgia. Georgia's gradual departure from Russia's sphere of influence, coupled with Western support for the Rose Revolution aimed at democratization, necessitated a shift in Moscow's foreign policy toward Tbilisi (Cecire, 2025).

Over time, President Saakashvili's policies focused on weakening Russia's position in Georgian politics. As a proponent of a Western-oriented policy, Saakashvili obstructed Russian interests within Georgia, leading Moscow to adopt a more rigid stance toward Tbilisi. Despite Georgia's shared historical ties within Russia's historical memory, the objective of distancing the country from Russia under Saakashvili's leadership was met with efforts by Russia to encircle the Georgian government (Wilhelmsen, 2023).

The perception that Russia would be encircled by democratic Western regimes (Baldoni, 2016) is understood to constitute the independent variable derived from the international system in Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. Accordingly, Russia has shaped its foreign policy toward Georgia regarding Georgian leaders under the combined influence of domestic factors and pressures stemming from the international system.

3.1.5. Regime and Government

Seeking to prevent Western countries from developing policies toward its near neighbors, Russia has attempted to establish pro-Moscow governments within Georgia and thereby exert pressure

on Georgian administrations. The perception that Russia has interfered in Georgian elections has become a widespread view within Georgia. Indeed, it is understood that Russia regards the spread of democracy in its near abroad as a threat to itself. Russia seeks to limit the successful implementation of democracy in neighboring states, assessing that effective democratic governance in these countries could serve as a model for Russian citizens and potentially weaken domestic stability and autocratic leadership in Moscow. Russia appears to tolerate only those governments in its near abroad that are subordinate or closely aligned with the Russian administration. The belief that the Russian opposition could be influenced by nearby successful democracies has led the Moscow government to perceive democracies as prohibited regimes capable of generating a domino effect (Götz, 2022).

Aiming to cultivate political elites within Georgia who hold views close to Russia, Moscow has sought, through this strategy, to constrain democracy. The Georgian Dream Party, which won the 2012 elections as a coalition, is financed by oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Although the party initially pursued Western-oriented policies, it later opted for a more anti-democratic course (Courtney, 2024). Despite Ivanishvili's resignation from the premiership, he is considered to have contributed to the country's retreat from its EU and NATO aspirations. Reports have alleged connections between Ivanishvili and the Russian leadership. It is understood that Russia has played a role in Georgia's shift away from its pro-EU stance and that the country has been steered toward a Moscow-style governance model (Kennedy & Dunbar, 2025). Georgia's decision not to join sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, the increase in Russian companies operating in the country, and Russia's removal of Georgia from its list of unfriendly states constitute key indicators of political rapprochement between the two countries (Buziashvili, 2024).

Russia establishes relations with its near neighbors—particularly those with which it shares a historical unity—within the framework of regime security. The existence of regimes in these countries that are incompatible with Russia's own regime is perceived by the Moscow administration as a threat. The broad consolidation of democracy in Georgia and the country's governance through Western-oriented policies constitute, from Russia's perspective, a regime security risk. For this reason, it is understood that Russia has intervened domestically in Georgia, limited democratic processes, and distanced the administration from the West in order to ensure that the Georgian government follows a foreign policy line aligned with Russian policies. In doing so, Russia has prevented Georgia's integration into Western policies, hindered the development of democracy in the country, and succeeded in exerting influence over Georgian politics by shaping the positions of Georgian leaders. All of these developments are identified as being sustained particularly through the influence of Russia's domestic factors.

3.1.6. Geopolitics

Geopolitical concerns are identified as another factor shaping Russia's policy toward Georgia. From the perspective of political geography, Georgia's location in the Caucasus constitutes Russia's Black Sea and southern connections. Russia has constructed its foreign policy toward Georgia on the realities imposed by political geography. For Russia, ensuring that Georgia remains a secure neighbor in the Caucasus is crucial for the realization of its geopolitical objectives in the region and for the preservation of its influence.

According to neoclassical realism, geopolitics is evaluated both as a domestic factor and as an independent variable. It is considered a domestic factor insofar as the concept of geopolitics for states is directly related to political geography and policies of influence. In Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia, geopolitics is significant for maintaining Moscow's influence across the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Black Sea. As a great power, Russia does not wish to lose its geopolitical leverage over Georgia; therefore, it pursues coercive policies toward the country in order to preserve its regional influence.

Geopolitics, which functions both as a domestic factor and as an independent variable stemming from the international system in shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia, can be directly associated with security. Great powers develop sensitivities toward other powers near their borders and perceive them as potential threats. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia developed sensitivities toward the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) along its borders and sought to limit their eastward expansion (Kakachia et al., 2024). The EU's eastward enlargement into former Soviet territories through the accession of Romania and Bulgaria (Tsuladze, 2017) constituted a geopolitical risk for Russia. This situation, which limited Russia's influence over former Soviet states, led Moscow to adopt a more reactive stance toward Georgia's prospective EU membership. Georgia's possible accession to the European Union is interpreted by Russia as a factor that threatens its legitimacy.

Moreover, Georgia could become the EU's easternmost member and, aside from the Baltic states, the first former Soviet country to join the Union (Tsuladze et al., 2024). Such a development would weaken Russia's geopolitical influence in its own region and undermine its objective of restoring a "Greater Russia." Georgia's potential NATO membership, in particular, has generated a geopolitical threat perception in Russia, reinforced its historical memory, and heightened its sensitivity regarding border and national security. As a former Soviet state, Georgia is a close neighbor located on Russia's borders, with which Russia shares a historically rooted sense of common identity. This sensitive geopolitical security strategy toward Georgia has led Russia to regard Georgia—especially given its explicit declaration of intent to join NATO—as a military concern (Blackburn, 2024). Viewing NATO as a longstanding adversary, Moscow has responded firmly to indications that a neighboring state to which it attaches particular sensitivity, such as Georgia, intends to join the Alliance.

By initiating the 2008 war in Georgia, Russia sought to eliminate geopolitically driven security threats perceived as emanating from the West, including NATO. Even the possibility of Georgia's accession to NATO was regarded by Moscow as a geopolitical threat. Consequently, without delay, Russia moved to reestablish a geopolitical security perimeter along its borders and areas of strategic concern. The 2008 war thus confirmed that geopolitics constitutes a highly significant dynamic among the domestic factors influencing Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia.

3.2. Independent Variables of Russia's Foreign Policy toward Georgia

Within the framework of neoclassical realism, the analysis of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia incorporates the determinative role of system-level, or independent, variables. Structural features of the international system, such as threat perceptions, the distribution of power, and great power competition, shape Russia's foreign policy orientations and constitute the fundamental structural context that determines the direction and constraints of its policies.

First, in the post–Cold War period, the emergence of a unipolar system and the United States' dominant position in global affairs represented both a strategic constraint and a challenge for Russia. The resulting asymmetry of power in the international system compelled Russia to protect and expand its sphere of influence in its near abroad. Consequently, Russia adopted a more sensitive and reactive foreign policy toward neighboring regions. Georgia's geographic and geostrategic position inevitably made it a significant arena of systemic competition from the perspective of Russian foreign policy. This was further reinforced by Georgia's efforts to manage energy pipelines in the South Caucasus and its aspiration for integration with the West (Götz, 2022).

Georgia's pursuit of NATO membership represented a critical juncture for Russia and was perceived as a security threat. This constitutes a concrete reflection of the systemic threat structure, considered an independent variable in neoclassical realism. Russia interpreted these developments not merely as a regional orientation concerning Georgia but also as an attempt by the West to penetrate its sphere of influence (Tsuladze et al., 2024).

Another system-level determinant influencing Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia has been the relative change in the distribution of power. The relative shifts in power balances within the international system allowed Russia to adopt a more assertive foreign policy. During the 2000s, Russia experienced an increase in energy revenues and expanded its military capacity. These developments contributed to the partial restoration of Russia's foreign policy strength. Consequently, Russia emerged as a more assertive actor in the international system, consolidating its position and assessing the maintenance of the status quo in its near abroad. This dynamic was reflected in Russia's policy toward Georgia, providing the basis for the development of more interventionist strategies (Driedger, 2023).

As a result of pressures derived from the international system, Russia has progressively adopted a more rigid stance in its foreign policy toward Georgia. The objective of the West—led by the United

States—to expand democratic regimes eastward into Russia's near abroad constitutes an independent variable stemming from the international system and has been interpreted by Russia as a direct threat. In addition, NATO's activities have reinforced Russia's perception that it is losing a secure sphere of influence within its own region. Western support for Georgia, discussions regarding the country's potential NATO membership, and plans to deploy missile defense systems in Eastern Europe have been regarded by Russia as principal pressures originating from the international system. These pressures derived from independent variables have become among the main reasons for Russia's increasingly coercive, assertive, anti-Western, and uncompromising policy toward Georgia (Blackburn, 2024).

NATO's eastward enlargement and the acquisition of military bases are perceived in Russian politics as unacceptable forms of international pressure. At this juncture, geopolitical risks emanating from the international system are treated as independent variables. It is argued that NATO's expansion has fostered anti-Russian sentiment in territories historically regarded as Russia's near neighbors, threatened the existence of the Russian state, and affected its multiethnic structure (Fomin, 2025). In official documents, Russia persistently states that it considers NATO's eastward expansion a threat to its security. It further maintains that countries incorporated into NATO are gradually turned into adversaries of Russia and that buffer zones against the West are thereby eliminated (Charap et al., 2019).

Geopolitical pressures emanating from the international system were perceived as threats in Russia, and the Moscow government responded to both the Georgian government and NATO by occupying South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia, whose regional geopolitical influence was challenged by Georgia's request for NATO membership, increased its presence within Georgia and employed this enhanced presence as a strategy of deterrence (Götz, 2022). Through the occupation, Russia conveyed the message that it did not consider Georgia's rapprochement with the West to be legitimate and that a pro-Western foreign policy would ultimately undermine Georgia's own security (Bryc, 2019).

Having consolidated its strength and interventionist capacity, Russia continued over the years to pursue strategic choices aimed at limiting Western influence. In this context, the 2008 invasion of Georgia can be interpreted as Russia's exploitation of opportunities arising from shifting power balances. The invasion transformed Georgia into a geopolitical space in the South Caucasus where great power competition intensified. Within this systemic framework, Russia's policy toward Georgia can be understood, to some extent, as a regional manifestation of a balancing strategy (Fomin, 2025).

To constrain the West's eastward expansion to its borders and maintain its sphere of influence, Russia deployed military, political, and economic instruments during the 2008 war. Consequently, the Georgian invasion that began in 2008 represents the translation of the systemic pressures perceived by Russia into foreign policy outputs through military force. Therefore, the invasion of Georgia is not only a foreign policy action directed at Georgia but also a projection of power and an assertion of status toward the international system (Fomin, 2025).

The message conveyed to NATO was that eastward enlargement should be reconsidered (Götz, 2022). Until the conflicts are resolved, Georgia's membership in NATO does not appear feasible. Under the collective defense principle of the Alliance, an attack against one member requires a comprehensive response from all members. Such a scenario could potentially trigger a war between NATO and Russia (Tsuladze et al., 2024). In this respect, according to neoclassical realism, Russia succeeded in neutralizing the geopolitical pressure, regarded as an independent variable.

From the perspective of neoclassical realism, Russia's policy toward Georgia is shaped within a strategic framework determined by system-level variables. Factors such as the distribution of power in the international system, NATO expansion, and the intensification of great power competition emerge as the primary independent variables that determine the direction of Russia's foreign policy behavior. These variables provide an analytical basis for understanding Russia's interventionist and balancing policies toward Georgia.

From the perspective of neoclassical realism, the 2008 occupation of Georgia emerged under the influence of independent variables. According to the Russian view, Moscow succeeded in eliminating the perceived threats it faced. Primarily, it achieved its objectives of weakening Western influence over its near neighbors—an independent variable—and preventing NATO from advancing toward its borders. It discredited Saakashvili's leadership and demonstrated that policies incompatible with Russian interests could not be sustainably pursued within the Georgian government. In doing so, Russia acquired leverage in Georgian politics. Georgia was made to experience the consequences of the "possibility of membership in Western institutions," and it became evident that Russia could, if necessary, escalate local conflicts within Georgia (Driedger, 2023). The fact that the 2008 occupation resulted from both Russia's domestic factors and the pressures it received from the international system ultimately shaped the dependent variable—Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia.

4. CONCLUSION

The greatest mistake in analyzing the foreign policy of states is adopting a one-dimensional perspective. Neoclassical realism, when analyzing state foreign policy, not only takes into account pressures from the international system but also focuses on the states' domestic factors. According to the theory, the foreign policy of states is the dependent variable. Influences stemming from the global system and regional relations are considered independent variables. In addition, each state has its own domestic factors. State foreign policy (the dependent variable) is formed through the combination of influences from the global system and regional relations (independent variables) along with domestic factors. Thus, it is recognized that state foreign policy results from both domestic factors and the effects of the global system and regional relations. This prevents a one-sided approach when analyzing state foreign policy.

Like any study, this research has its limitations, but it analyzes Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. The method applied in the analysis is neoclassical realism, a theory of foreign policy analysis. Examining Russia's Georgian policy through the assumptions and methodology of neoclassical realism demonstrates that a unilateral analysis of foreign policy is insufficient. The study aims to provide guidance for understanding the final years of the 20th century following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and for determining contemporary political strategies.

According to the theory, Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia is the dependent variable, shaped by and influenced by both domestic factors and independent variables. The independent variables encompass Russia's influences from the global system and regional relations. Domestic factors, determined specifically for each state, include the most significant elements affecting policy. This study identifies the domestic factors shaping Russia's Georgian policy as historical memory, identity, the Orthodox Church, leaders, regime and government, and geopolitics.

When examining domestic factors in Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia through the lens of neoclassical realism, the study first focuses on Russia's historical memory. Historical memory forms the foundation of Russia's foreign policy continuity from the Soviet Union to the present. It is evident that the goal of maintaining influence over the former Soviet states constitutes a cornerstone of Russia's policy toward Georgia. Within Russia, there exists a policy aimed at establishing pervasive influence over neighboring countries, which has shaped its policy toward Georgia.

Although Russia has maintained its status as a great power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow still needed to restore its international influence and strengthen its domestic prestige. In this regard, it approached the former Soviet states with an emphasis on reputation. Russia has intervened in the internal affairs of these countries and has sought to influence their foreign policy orientations. The primary reason for this is its goal of reestablishing itself as the central power in the former Soviet space. The establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) can be interpreted as indicators of this policy. Historical memory, as a domestic factor, continues to be a relevant and operative element in Russia's policy toward the former Soviet states.

Another domestic factor shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia is identity. Russia intervenes in the governance of autonomous regions within former Soviet states and becomes involved in conflicts. The stated rationale for such participation is the protection and security of Russian citizens. By granting Russian passports to the residents of these autonomous regions, Russia places significant emphasis on Russian identity. This underscores the importance of identity as a factor in Russia's policy toward Georgia. References to former Soviet states in the ideological rhetoric of the Russian leadership indicate that Moscow is perceived as the central authority.

Under Putin's leadership, Russia focuses on identity, advocates for civilizational nationalism, commits to the goal of a "Greater Russia," and seeks to reassert its influence across the former Soviet space. The revival of the "Greater Russia" ideal in the post-Soviet region under Putin aligns with his aim of managing a cohesive national identity. Through the concept of civilizational nationalism, Putin simultaneously pursues the Greater Russia objective and seeks to legitimize Russia's stance within the international system.

The Orthodox Church, as a shared value between Russia and Georgia, inevitably emerges as a local factor shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. The Russian Orthodox Church's emphasis on conservatism in opposition to the West and Western values also affects Georgian foreign policy. Russia seeks to exert religious influence over Georgia, which shares common values (the Orthodox Church), thereby ensuring that Georgia does not distance itself from Russia's values and, by extension, its sphere of influence.

The presence of the Orthodox Church guides Russia's policy toward Georgia. For Russia, the Church and loyalty to it constitute an important value that is instrumentalized in Georgian foreign policy. Russia exerts influence over its close neighbor through religion, steering Georgian society toward the Russian Orthodox Church. By promoting neo-conservatism and opposing Western values, Russia positions itself as the true custodian of Orthodox civilization and does not allow its neighbor to deviate from shared values. The dissemination of these shared values and their defense under the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, in response to the moral decline of the West, are recognized as a key local factor shaping Russia's policy toward Georgia.

Another local factor is leadership. The pro-Russian foreign policy pursued over Georgian leaders has been identified as a method to prevent the neighboring state from pursuing Western-aligned policies. Russia's desire to see Georgia remain within its sphere of influence and maintain historical proximity is a central element shaping Moscow's policy toward Tbilisi. Intervention in Georgian politics and cooperation with Georgian leaders are methods employed to prevent Georgia from conducting an independent foreign policy contrary to Russian interests.

Russia does not accept the pursuit of Western-oriented policies by the decision-making leaders of the former Soviet states. It views the allowance of these states to exit its sphere of influence as equivalent to their integration into Western politics. Therefore, ensuring that the leaders of former Soviet countries do not adhere to Western-aligned policies constitutes a fundamental security concern for Russia. Consequently, Russia draws the leaders of these states into its political sphere and prevents these countries from adopting Western-oriented policies. Thus, leadership emerges as a key local factor shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia.

The local factors identified as regime and government are considered cornerstones of Russia's policy toward Georgia. Closely related to historical memory, regime security aims to intervene directly

or indirectly in Georgian politics to steer the country away from Western influence. One reason for this is Russia's desire to demonstrate continued authority over the governance of former Soviet states. Any drift of these countries toward Western-aligned policies is interpreted by Russia as a loss of influence. Another reason is the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, which generates regime security concerns for Russia. The broader dissemination of democracy could resonate among Russian citizens and challenge the Russian government. This perceived threat to regime security is considered unacceptable by Moscow and shapes Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia.

Russia interprets the presence of democracy and the successful governance of its neighboring states as a threat to its own regime. The possibility that democracy in these countries could serve as a model is perceived as a risk to the future of Russia's political system and policies. Therefore, Russia seeks to prevent the spread of democracy in Georgia to protect the security of its own regime.

Geopolitics manifests both as a local factor and as an independent variable. By preventing the influence of Western alliances over its geopolitical sphere, Russia has focused on this issue in its foreign policy toward Georgia, blocking the country's integration into Western institutions. The risk of a shrinking Russian geopolitical sphere is interpreted as a security threat perceived by Russia in the Caucasus. Accordingly, it can be understood that Russia's perceived geopolitical security and the local factor of historical memory overlap.

It is important to note that geopolitics functions both as an independent variable derived from the international system and as a local factor. Russia perceives the eastward expansion of Western institutions as a form of pressure from the international system, categorizing it as an independent variable. Georgia's aspiration to join Western institutions, on the other hand, is considered a local factor due to the risk of losing Russia's geopolitical sphere of influence. To mitigate this risk, Russia has limited Georgian democracy, preventing the country from drifting away from the Russian regime.

In addition, it is also possible to identify independent variables shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia. These independent variables reflect pressures that Russia receives from the international system and regional relations. Russia perceives the eastward expansion of the EU and NATO, and the potential inclusion of Georgia in these institutions, as a threat. The continual perception of this threat has caused Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia to adopt a more coercive, assertive, and comprehensive approach.

Indeed, it is evident that Russia's policies toward former Soviet states are significantly influenced by local factors. Russia formulates its policies toward Georgia under the combined effect of local factors and independent variables. Seeking to establish an effective sphere of influence in Georgia, Russia operationalizes these local factors to sustain its political objectives.

The analysis of Russia's foreign policy toward Georgia through the lens of neoclassical realism confirms that both local factors and independent variables exert a joint influence. This study validates

the hypothesis that Russia's Georgia policy emerges from the interaction of neoclassical realism elements—local factors and independent variables. It becomes clear that policies are pursued based on local factors such as historical memory, regime security, geopolitical sphere of influence, leaders, democracy, and the values of the leadership. Furthermore, Russia's objectives shaping its policy toward Tbilisi demonstrate that Georgia's politics are influenced not only by local factors but also by pressures derived from the international system as independent variables.

This study does not require ethics committee approval.

The author declares that the study was conducted in accordance with research and publication ethics.

The author confirms that no artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript.

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