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## Taking Stalk of What's at Stake in Europe's Frozen Conflicts on the First Anniversary of Russia's War in Ukraine

### Part II: Will Georgia be Putin's next stop after Ukraine?

#### Background

Prior to the dissolution of the USSR, Abkhazia and South Ossetia became autonomous regions within Soviet Georgia. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic conflicts broke out, and Georgia lost control over the two territories, triggering ethnic Georgians to flee from the two regions and move to other regions within Georgia. These two separatist regions remain unstable and supported by Russia till this day.

In 2008, tensions escalated between Georgia, the break off region of South Ossetia and Russia resulting in a five day war. Russia not only deployed naval, ground and air forces in the two secessionist republics – South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but also recognized them as independent. Today, Russia occupies 20% of Georgian territory and maintains three Russian military bases – two of them in South Ossetia (in Tskhinvali and Java) and one in Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast (in Gudauta) where an estimated 15,000 military personal are permanently stationed.

This tactic in Russian military operations has been used consistently in the post-Soviet space – first by backing up the pro-Russian regime in Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria, then a conventional invasion in Georgia to support separatist governments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, and now Ukraine, first the Crimea in 2014 and now the insurgency of pro-Russian separatist in Donbas. The aim is to thwart these countries aspirations of joining the EU and NATO, which would result in Russia losing its sphere of influence. Russia consistently has used the discourse of its duty to protect ethnic Russians from foreign aggression and has provided Putin a justification to intervene separatist territories that have all, with the exception of Moldova, been recognized as independent, thereby becoming "de facto" states. In each of these breakaway regions, they remain heavily dependent on Russia for its lifeline – financially and logistically.

#### Georgia pulled between Russia and the West

Immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Georgia, along with Ukraine and Moldova submitted applications to accede to the EU. However, only Ukraine and Moldova were granted an upgrade from associate to candidate status. Despite Georgia's successes in implementing the economic aspects of its Associate Agreement (AA) and Deep Comprehensive Free Trade (DCFTA) – exceeding that of both Ukraine and Moldova as well as other candidate states from the Western Balkans, the Georgian Dream government has moved the country further from European norms and consistently defied the EU over judicial reforms, and the conduct of local elections. There are concerns that Georgia is being subjected to "state capture," referring to a type of political corruption in which a small group subordinates or heavily influences a state's decision-making process that works to their advantage. Many of Georgia's ruling elite for example, have strong ties to Russian-linked billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Georgian Dream's founder whose business interests and those of the Georgian state have increasingly blurred.

Initially, it was assumed that Georgia's application signaled its readiness and wiliness to reform its political and judiciary practices. Rather, however, it appears that the government, along with the influence of Ivanishvili, used the membership application as a symbolic and superficial gesture to appease a large percentage of Georgians who see their future in Europe. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) polls for example, 81% of Georgian's support and see their future in the EU and NATO.

The ruling Georgian Dream party continues to play a balancing act between Russia and the West which has increasingly become more difficult with Russia's war in Ukraine. Although the government condemned Russia's aggression and offered humanitarian aid to Ukraine, the current prime minister Irakli Garibashvili has refused to impose international sanctions on Russia and allegedly prevented Georgian volunteer fighter efforts to support Ukraine, all of which triggered unrest and massive pro-Ukraine protests in the Georgia on the one hand and criticism from western leaders on the other.

#### Massive Protests erupt over the draft law on "foreign agents"

Since Russia's invasion in Ukraine, Georgia has increasingly become polarized amongst the ruling Georgian

Dream party and the electorally largest opposition party – United National Movement over two primary topics – Russia’s invasion in Ukraine and Georgia’s response to it, and European integration and its interpretations. Clashes between the two sides appeared to have reached their apogee on the 7th of March after a controversial “foreign agents” bill was rushed through parliament and endorsed by the Georgian Dream party in collaboration with the People’s Power party, an offshoot of the Georgian Dream party who sponsored it. According to the “foreign agents” bill, all NGOs and media outlets in Georgia receiving more than 20% of their total revenue would be required to register as “agents of foreign influence” and thereby prohibited from receiving information from civil servants and obliged to submit annual declarations. The justification of the ruling party and authors of the bill claimed that it would enable the government to more effectively control irregular foreign influence in the country and thereby support media by improving transparency of income and expenses of NGOs.

The opposition, the NGO sector, and Western leaders, however, outrightly disagreed and harshly criticized the bill, likening it to Russia’s 2012 law on the designation of “foreign agents” that Putin has used to squelch and marginalize any opposition to the Kremlin including critics, NGOs and independent social media. As with the Kremlin, opponents of the bill, viewed it as a means of severely restricting dissent, civil society groups and more importantly plunge the country further towards authoritarianism. The EU and the US for example, expressed their deep concerns about the bill, viewing it as contradictory to democratic values and contrary to the EU’s basic principles. Furthermore, they warned it would jeopardize the country’s prospects of receiving the long-awaited candidacy status. As many EU officials have pointed out, the bill not only undermines EU accession efforts, but violates Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia, which obliges constitutional bodies to take all measures within their powers to ensure full integration of Georgia into the EU and NATO.

However, it was only after two nights of violent protests by massive waves of protesters, that the ruling Georgian Dream party decided to announce it had “unconditionally” decided to withdraw the controversial “foreign agents” bill. Reportedly, the ruling party claimed it had decided to backdown to reduce “confrontation” in society while at the same denouncing “lies” about the bill by the “radical opposition”, leaving some opponents uneasy as to whether the government will attempt in the near future to revisit the bill. Meanwhile, the pro-European President Salome Zourabichvili, who had previously threatened to veto the bill, congratulated protesters for their victory as well as welcomed the steps taken by the government.

Despite the opponents victory, the future of Georgian remains uncertain. According to public statements by Western leaders, many continue to view Georgia and Moldova as Russia’s next likely targets. With Russian military bases in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia near Tbilisi, (in the case of the former only 40 kilometers away), Georgia will continue to face serious challenges in terms of ensuring its protection of independence and sovereignty. Although direct Russian aggression is not anticipated at present, the outcome of the war in Ukraine is connected to the future of the Georgian state.

### **Bottom Line**

Whether the most recent protests will drive the country’s leadership toward a pro-Western and pro-Ukraine position remains to be seen. The most recently contested bill however served as a clear indication of the direction and motivation of the ruling Georgian Dream party and its supporters, suggesting that more can be expected. This in turn places Georgia in a precarious and vulnerable position that the Kremlin and its propogandists will presumably seek to further exploit in order to obstruct Georgia’s integration efforts into the EU and NATO.