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Black Sea Geopolitics after the Russia–Ukraine War: View from Georgia

By Salome Kandelaki (Georgian Institute of Politics) and Bidzina Lebanidze (University of Jena)

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Georgia’s foreign and domestic policies and the country’s place and role in the Black Sea region. It draws on interviews and expert surveys to examine how Georgia’s foreign policy community views recent dramatic developments in the Black Sea area and the impact of the latter on Georgia’s security, stability, and development. The article further critically assesses Georgia’s response to the Russia–Ukraine war and how it fits with the country’s main foreign policy trends, including the much criticized Finlandization policy towards Russia. The article concludes that while the Black Sea area remains of paramount importance to Georgia, the Russia–Ukraine war made Georgia’s security more vulnerable to risks and threats emanating from the region. Furthermore, the war deepened the political and societal polarization in Georgia and, as our data suggest, exacerbated the schism between Georgia’s mostly pro-Western foreign policy expert community and the government’s balanced foreign policy.

Introduction

The article is part of the collaborative research project “Black Sea Cooperation for Stronger Security: Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan”. It explores the impact of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war on Georgia and the perceptions of Georgia’s foreign policy community towards changing geopolitical circumstances in and around the Black Sea region. The article draws on qualitative interviews with Georgian political experts as well as a quantitative expert survey.¹ The article starts with a brief articulation of the importance of the Black Sea area for Georgia. It continues with a discussion of the impacts of the Russia–Georgia war on Georgia’s domestic and foreign policy as well as subsequent changes in the Black Sea area and Georgia’s role in the region.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had profound effects on not only Ukraine but also the entire security architecture of the Black Sea region and Europe. The ongoing war has fundamentally reshaped some key assumptions on politics and security and initiated a broader debate on the region’s future. The war has had profound effects on Georgia as well. Specifically, the Russia–Ukraine war has had a paramount, mostly negative impact on Georgia’s foreign and security policy as well as domestic politics. It has had less of an impact on the perceptions of Georgia’s foreign policy community², which, however, was expected. Unlike many European or regional countries, Georgia already had quite

a negative view of Russia and considered NATO and other Western actors as key pillars of security and stability in the broader Black Sea region and broader Europe. Therefore, the results of the survey conducted in this study do not deviate much from the overall spirit in the country that existed prior to the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

Importance of the Black Sea Area for Georgia

Over the last three decades, the Black Sea region has played an important role for Georgia from three key perspectives: economic, military-political, and ideational. From an economic perspective, Georgia’s location in the Black Sea makes it a strategically important transit country. In terms of geographic scale, the Black Sea has two main functions: regional/local and global. Regionally, the Black Sea connects the littoral states with each other. In a peaceful environment, this transportation and connectivity ring could generate significant economic dividends (Dzebisashvili, 2022). Globally, the Black Sea connects Asia to Europe and the West to the East and gives the Black Sea littoral states, including Georgia, the potential to develop transport infrastructure and become a regional and global trade and transportation hub (Dzebisashvili, 2022). If this transit potential is fully realized, the South Caucasus could become a landly-connected Suez Canal—an important transit artery for the entire world (Tsereteli, 2022).

1 Overall, 5 expert interviews were conducted (one state official, one parliamentarian and three policy experts) and 16 security and policy experts participated in the expert survey. The main criteria for selecting respondents for expert survey and interviews (except state officials) was their political expertise, high academic and public visibility, nonpartisanship, and party-political neutrality. We excluded experts who are either affiliated with government or opposition parties or whose opinions are broadly regarded as politically biased.

2 We mostly understand the foreign policy community as an epistemic, or a knowledge-based, community. According to the conventional definition, an epistemic community refers to “...a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (Haas, 1992). While we acknowledge the limited representability of our field research (21 participants overall), considered with the desk research, the generated data can still provide an approximate snapshot of the dominant views and opinions of the Georgian expert community.

From security and military perspectives, the Black Sea builds an important security and geopolitical ring around Georgia that can be a source of both dangers and opportunities. Russia's aggressive policies and its continued occupation of Georgian territories are often viewed as major sources of threat. For Russia, Georgian stateness as such remains a problem (Tsereteli, 2022). Therefore, for Georgia, through its palette of activities, Russia remains an operational, tactical, and strategic threat (Tsereteli, 2022). In regional terms, Russia's assertive regional policy is also viewed as a spoiler of peaceful cooperation and regional development among the Black Sea countries (Dzebisashvili, 2022).

Finally, from the ideational perspective, the Black Sea is also seen as Georgia's geographic compass and an important bridge to the EU and NATO (Kakachia et al., 2022). The Black Sea is the only area that offers Georgia direct geographic links to the EU and NATO member states of Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania. The Black Sea helps Georgia to disconnect itself from the non-European world, connect symbolically and physically with the Eastern European States and find its way "back to Europe". This narrative is also enshrined in Georgia's strategic documents. For instance, according to the Georgian National Security Concept, "as a Black Sea and Southeast European country, Georgia is part of Europe geographically, politically, and culturally; yet it was cut off from its natural course of development by historical cataclysms" (MOD Georgia, 2011).

On balance, Georgia perceives the broader Black Sea region as an important pillar of its security and prosperity and the main passageway to the EU and NATO. Therefore, the Russia–Ukraine war and further destabilization in the Black Sea area have endangered Georgia's strategic interests and have had strong spill-over effects on the country's domestic and foreign policies.

Impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on Georgia and Its Place in the Black Sea Area

The Russia–Ukraine war has highly affected both Georgia's domestic and foreign policy as well as the country's overall security environment. First, the war added another layer of cleavage to the country's already highly polarized domestic politics and triggered a severe political crisis. The failure of the Georgian government to firmly oppose Russian aggression sparked mass protests, and the opposition demanded the resignation of the government (Pfeilschifter et al., 2022). Second, in terms of foreign policy, the Russia–Ukraine war exposed the limits of the balancing foreign policy of Georgia's ruling party, the Georgian Dream (GD). While supporting the pro-Ukraine resolutions in international organizations, the Georgian government did not join sanctions against Russia and half-heartedly supported Kyiv politically and diplomatically. Some scholars call Georgia's new-

found balancing policy towards Russia a new Finlandization strategy aimed at accommodating the concerns of its northern neighbour through self-restraint and strategic patience (Kakachia and Kakabadze, 2022). GD's nonirritational Russia policy is negatively viewed by many observers in Georgia. As one of our interview respondents argued, "[a] nonirritational policy towards Russia is not a real option for Georgia if it does not want to further have its sovereignty reduced and become a second Belarus" (Muchaidze, 2022).

A moderate reaction to the Russia–Ukraine war has been accompanied by rapidly deteriorating relations between the Georgian government and its Western partners. The pro-governmental voices responded to the growing criticism of democratic shortcomings from the EU and the US by accusing the West of attempting to drag Georgia into war with Russia (Civil Georgia, 2022). Lack of progress in areas of democracy and the rule of law is indeed seen by many in Georgia as an important impediment to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. As Giorgi Muchaidze noted, "it is very important, next to military reform, to also pay attention to reform agenda in democracy and rule of law, since without these reforms Georgia will not advance either with NATO or the EU, and even the door to NATO will remain only partly open" (Muchaidze, 2022). As he explained, democratic reforms mean security dividends for Georgia, as Europe and the USA see democratic states as more akin to allies, and they view the shift of democratic borders towards the East as part of their security interests (Muchaidze, 2022). Russia-accommodating foreign policy and mounting criticism towards Western partners by the GD government could perhaps also be viewed as extension of Georgia's domestic politics. As Georgia's European integration advances, the EU and other Western partners expect more stringent democratic reforms from the authorities, which could endanger the GD's grip on power. Hence, the GD faces a known dilemma of Georgia's ruling regimes of pursuing two conflicting, not fully reconcilable objectives: conducting democratic reforms and ensuring their stay in power.

The Russia–Ukraine war and changing geopolitical circumstances have also provided Georgia with new opportunities as the EU decided to consider Georgia, alongside Ukraine and Moldova, for candidacy in the EU. However, the opportunity soon turned into another political crisis after the EU decided to not give Georgia candidacy status due to democratic recession in the country. Unlike the Georgian government, Georgian society remains staunchly pro-European. The decision not to grant Georgia candidacy status was accompanied by the largest rally in a very long time. Some 120,000 people protested against the failure of the Georgian government to

obtain candidacy status (Georgian Journal, 2022). Georgia's political elites, however, both in the government and opposition, seem to be caught in a politically immature zero-sum game of polarization, radicalization, and political infighting. Overall, decoupling from Ukraine and Moldova seems to be a geopolitical loss for Georgia. While Ukraine (and Moldova) enjoyed certain geopolitical bonuses due to Russian aggression, Georgia was removed from the Associated Trio and grouped with a group of EU potential candidates from the Western Balkans, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This change also broke up an important geopolitical grouping (the Associated Trio) around the Black Sea area once designed to advance EU-led good governance practices in a region marked by authoritarianism and bad governance.

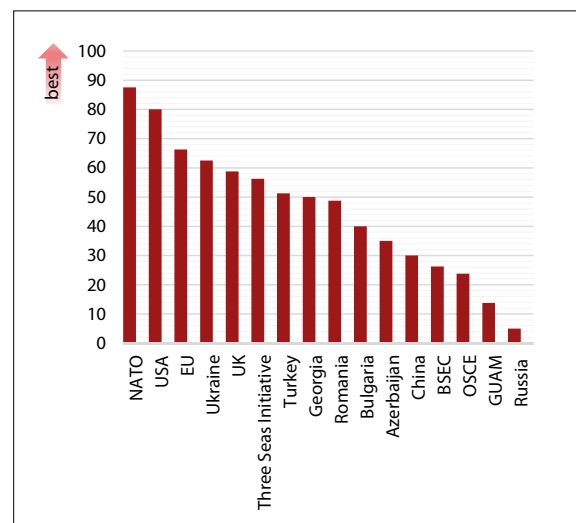
Finally, the Russia–Ukraine War also directly affected Georgia's security environment—in at least three ways. First, direct threats to Georgia's security and stability have further increased. Many scholars consider Georgia alongside Moldova to be the next target of Russian aggression (Kapanadze, 2022). The Georgian government also partly justified its ambivalent positioning towards the war by a need to avoid a new confrontation with Russia. In the case of renewed fighting, Georgia will be very vulnerable to Russia's military machine. The asymmetry in military capabilities of the two countries is particularly visible in the Black Sea area, where Georgia does not have significant military naval presence and is exposed to Russia's naval supremacy in the Black Sea. Second, the war in Ukraine has also affected the occupied zones in Georgia. Russia has reportedly withdrawn some of its troops from the Abkhazia and Samachablo regions and even sent local South Ossetians to fight in Ukraine (Eurasianet, 2022). Local economies in Abkhazia and South Ossetia may further suffer from sanctions against Russia and may see Russian subsidies further reduced due to Russia's economic crisis (Pfeilschifter et al., 2022). Finally, the Russia–Ukraine war may open new economic opportunities for Georgia as a South Caucasus and Black Sea transit country, as the EU may rely more on alternative routes to trade with Asia and focus more on Caspian energy resources to partly substitute for Russian gas and oil. However, structural deficiencies such as the absence of the deep sea port in the Black Sea may seriously inhibit Georgia from making best of its transit potential.

Perceptions about Security Challenges and Opportunities in the Black Sea Area

According to Georgia's foreign policy epistemic communities, the Russian–Ukraine war has not changed much regarding the security of Georgia and the wider Black Sea region. The expert survey shows that the majority

of Georgian experts consider NATO, the USA, and the EU to have the most positive roles “in strengthening security in the wider Black Sea region” (Figure 1). This perception corresponds to an overall image of Georgian society as a staunchly pro-Western and Russia sceptic. The USA was also unequivocally named the most important ally of Georgia by interviewed respondents, along with the UK, Poland, the Baltic States, the EU, and NATO (Akubardia, Tsereteli, Muchaidze, Dzebisashvili, 2022). Interestingly, the experts did not mention other Western powers, such as France and Germany, among Georgia's key strategic partners. On the other hand, Russia's role is considered the least positive, as is China's. Interestingly, Georgian experts also have very low trust in non-Western international and regional organizations. For instance, the BSEC, OSCE and GUAM all received very low scores as security-providing organizations for the Black Sea region (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How Would You Assess the Possible Positive Role of the Following Actors in Strengthening Security in the Wider Black Sea Region? (Standardized on a Scale of 0–100 Best)



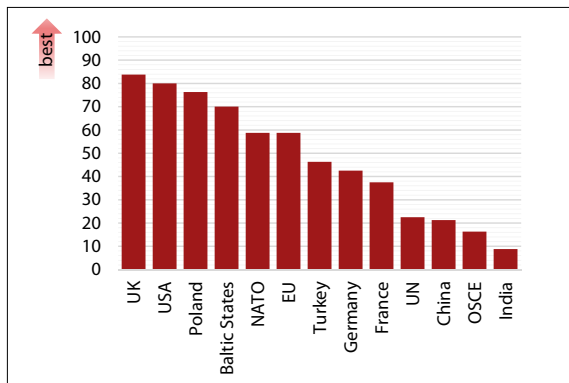
See Appendix 2 on p. 27 for the data used to create this chart.

The picture is mostly similar but with few interesting deviations in regard to the perception about the role of key actors in the Russia–Ukraine war. The UK seems to have become a particularly trusted actor in terms of the “containment of Russia's assertive regional policies”, while Germany and France received less than average scores and are seen as the least favourable Western actors by Georgian experts (Figure 2). Interestingly, Poland and the Baltic States also scored higher than NATO and the EU. The EU's image seems to have suffered somewhat during the Russia–Ukraine war. One expert predicted: “The EU will probably fail to learn lessons and become a strategic actor” (Tsereteli, 2022). Therefore,

they believe that Georgia needs to look for new regional security configurations that could emerge among Poland, the UK, Ukraine, Turkey and other Eastern European and Black Sea States (Tsereteli, 2022). Another positive development in the Black Sea area would be strengthening the Three Seas Initiative³ (Akubardia, 2022). This initiative could become a significant boost as a result of Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO and the Baltic Sea becoming a NATO sea (Akubardia, 2022).

On the other hand, the Russia–Ukraine war seems to have further cemented Georgian scholars' low trust in non-Western international organizations as well as in non-Western state powers. The UN, OSCE, China and India are the least trusted actors to have a positive role in the Russia–Ukraine War and in the containment of Russia's assertive regional policies (Figure 2). Lack of trust in international organizations is certainly linked to their inability to enforce principles of international law in the Black Sea area. According to one respondent, "Russia violated the Helsinki principles and stopped acknowledging that small states too are sovereign. These key principles should be reestablished and relations between large and small states should be based on respecting each other's sovereignties" (Tsereteli, 2022).

Figure 2: How Would You Assess the Role of the Following Actors in the Russia–Ukraine War and in the Containment of Russia's Assertive Regional Policies? (Standardized on a Scale of 0–100 Best)

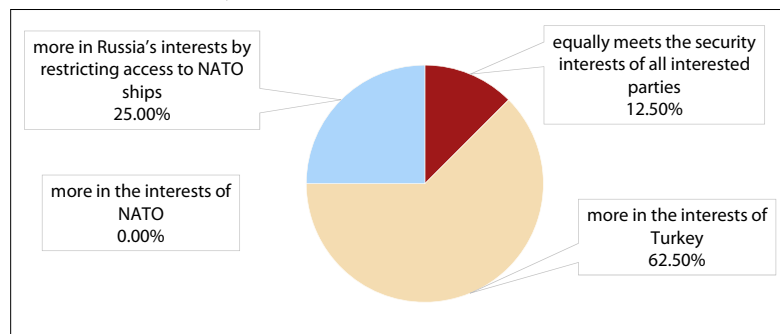


See Appendix 2 on p. 27 for the data used to create this chart.

Interestingly, the Georgian expert community seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards Turkey. On the one hand, Turkey is seen as a key strategic, military, and economic partner of Georgia. At the same time, Turkey's hesitant position towards NATO's involvement in the

Black Sea region and Ankara's opportunistic relations with Russia make many in Georgia feel uncomfortable. As one respondent noted, "Turkey's Black Sea Policy has not been directed at [the] active involvement of NATO in the Black Sea and has been prioritising the regional formats of cooperation [with Russia's involvement] to solve the problems and challenges in the Black Sea area. For instance, the 3+3 initiative was aimed at exclusion of the West and problem-solving together with Russia" (Muchaidze, 2022). According to the interviewed experts, Turkey's balancing policy between NATO and Russia should be a concern for Georgia (Muchaidze, 2022). Moreover, while Turkey is positioned to remain Georgia's key trade partner, Tbilisi also needs to further diversify its connectivity and trade roots. According to one respondent, "While [a] railway connection to Turkey is important, for Georgia it is of paramount importance to have [a] direct connection to Europe via the Black Sea ports of Constanza, Odessa and other ports" (Tsereteli, 2022). The experts were also sceptical about the utility of the Montreux convention.⁴ The majority of surveyed respondents agreed that it was more in the interest of Turkey, while none of them believed it was in the interest of NATO (Figure 3).

Figure 3: How Does the Montreux Convention Affect the Security of the Black Sea Region Today?



Georgians seem to have even less positive opinions of China. According to one expert, "Unlike Central Asia, in the South Caucasus, it is unlikely that China will balance Russia. In contrast, China can become a promoter of Russia's interests in the South Caucasus in exchange for Russian concessions in Central Asia" (Muchaidze, 2022). Even in terms of economic cooperation, Georgian experts advise caution with China: "Georgia may

³ According to the official webpage of the initiative, it is "a politically inspired, commercially driven platform for improving connectivity between twelve EU Member States allocated between Baltic, Adriatic and Black seas" (Three Seas, 2022).

⁴ The Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits was signed in 1936 by Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and Turkey. It "gives Turkey control over the water route between the Black Sea (...) and the Mediterranean Sea and beyond" and "sets limits on the passage of civilian vessels and military warships through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus straits, with the Sea of Marmara between them forming the seagoing link between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean" (Ozerdem 2022).

benefit from cheap Chinese loans and procurements, but Georgia should [be] careful that strategic objects, if privatized, are given to Western and not to Chinese companies” (Muchaidze, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, Russia is unequivocally viewed as a major spoiler of Black Sea security among Georgian foreign policy experts. According to an interviewed expert, “Russia intends to turn the Black Sea into its zone of influence, its defensive bastion. It should serve a platform from where Russia can project its power in the Mediterranean region, and, on the other hand, to contain Western involvement in the post-Soviet area” (Muchaidze, 2022). In this sense, Black Sea—and the South Caucasus republics—should be kept as a buffer zone to halt the advancement of democracy.

Regarding the future of the Black Sea region and Georgia’s place in it, Georgian experts seem to have similar opinions. To strengthen security in the wider Black Sea region, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine need first to strengthen cooperation with NATO (Figure 4). A large majority of surveyed experts also indicated that preventing further destructive actions by Russia in the Black Sea region could be achieved by admitting all countries in the region to NATO that wish to do so. Most surveyed and interviewed experts said that the final stage of Georgia’s relations with both EU and NATO should be membership. Some interviewed experts considered NATO membership to be a guarantee of security and survival more important than EU membership (Tseteteli, 2022). To prove this point, one of the respondents paraphrased the Estonian policymaker: “NATO for us is about life, and EU is about good life” (Muchaidze, 2022). On balance, Georgian experts’ perceptions about the future of the Black Sea region seem to be strictly Western-oriented and focused on regional collaboration

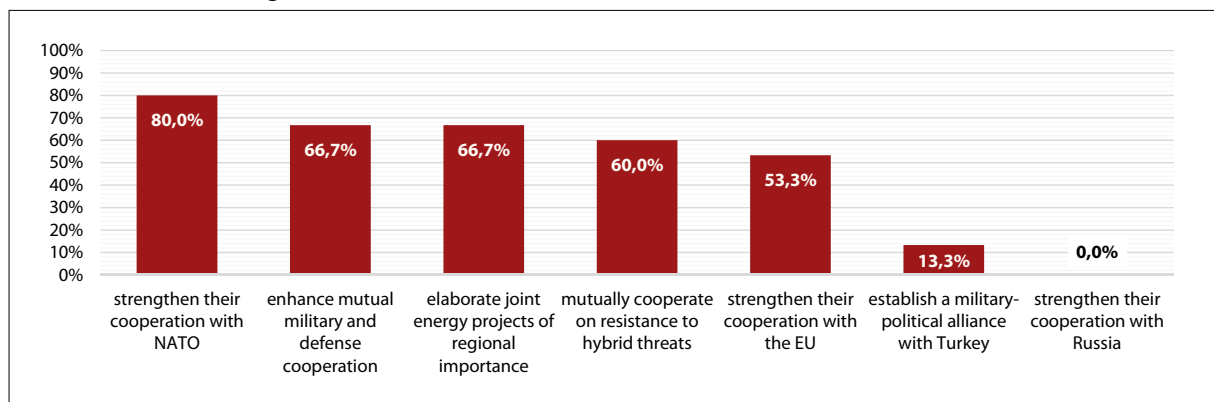
among smaller littoral states (Figure 4). In contrast, very few experts seem to trust Turkey, and none of the surveyed respondents wish to strengthen cooperation with Russia (Figure 4 below).

Conclusion

This article analysed the perceptions of the Georgian foreign policy community about the new geopolitical shifts in the Black Sea region after the Russia–Ukraine war. On balance, Georgian experts and security practitioners depict strong pro-Western views. The USA, NATO and the EU are seen as key stabilizing forces in the Black Sea area, while Russia is seen as a major spoiler. The UK’s image has received the largest boost in light of the Russia–Ukraine war, while expectations remain low towards regional and international organizations (OSCE, UN). Views towards non-Western state powers also vary from ambivalent (Turkey, India) to rather negative (China). Finally, while Georgian experts unequivocally support Georgia’s NATO and EU membership, they also see more regional opportunities emerging on the horizon after the Russia–Ukraine war, such as the Three Seas Initiative or the UK-supported regional grouping of the Black Sea states (Akubardia, 2022).

Interviews and surveys of Georgian experts, even if limited in number, also show a certain discrepancy between foreign policy visions of Georgian government and at least part of Georgia’s foreign policy community. GD’s Russia-accommodating foreign policy coupled with increasing criticism of the West seems not to be the consensus among Georgian experts and the foreign policy community. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have further widened the schism regarding foreign policy priorities in Georgia.

Figure 4: What Could Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine Do To Strengthening Security in the Wider Black Sea Region?



See p. 26–27 for information about the authors, references, and appendices.

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Appendix 1: List of the Diplomats and Experts Interviewed During 31 May – 13 June 2022 for the Research Project “Black Sea Cooperation for Stronger Security: Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan”.

1. Akubardia, Teona. Parliament of Georgia, Deputy Chairwomen of the Defence and Security Committee. Personal communication: 3 June, 2022, Tbilisi, Georgia.
2. Anonymous. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. Personal communication: 20 June 2022, Tbilisi, Georgia.
3. Dzebisashvili, Lasha. University of Georgia (UG), Supervisor of the Programs of IR and Politics Department. Personal communication: 13 June, 2022. Tbilisi, Georgia.
4. Muchaidze, Giorgi. Atlantic Council of Georgia, Executive Director. Personal communication: 31 May, 2022. Tbilisi, Georgia.
5. Tsereteli, Mamuka. American Foreign Policy Council, Senior Fellow for Eurasia. Personal communication: 1 June, 2022. USA.

Appendix 2: Tables with Data for Figure 1 on p. 23 and Figure 2 on p. 24

Table 1: How Would You Assess the Possible Positive Role of the Following Actors in Strengthening Security in the Wider Black Sea Region? (Standardized on a Scale of 0–100 Best) (Data for Figure 1 on p. 23)

NATO	87.50
USA	80.00
EU	66.25
Ukraine	62.50
UK	58.75
Three Seas Initiative	56.25
Turkey	51.25
Georgia	50.00
Romania	48.75
Bulgaria	40.00
Azerbaijan	35.00
China	30.00
BSEC	26.25
OSCE	23.75
GUAM	13.75
Russia	5.00

Table 2: How Would You Assess the Role of the Following Actors in the Russia–Ukraine War and in the Containment of Russia’s Assertive Regional Policies? (Standardized on a Scale of 0–100 Best) (Data for Figure 2 on p. 24)

UK	83.75
USA	80.00
Poland	76.25
Baltic States	70.00
NATO	58.75
EU	58.75
Turkey	46.25
Germany	42.50
France	37.50
UN	22.50
China	21.25
OSCE	16.25
India	8.75