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***Between Russian Assertiveness and Insecurity:  
Georgia's Political Challenges and Prospect after  
the Conflict***

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# Between Russian Assertiveness and Insecurity: Georgia's Political Challenges and Prospect after the Conflict

Kornely K. KAKACHIA\*

## ABSTRACT

Since its independence, Georgia has been one of the most vocally independent-minded countries among the Soviet Union's successor states. As Georgia's ambitions to draw closer to Europe and the transatlantic community have grown, its relations with Russia have deteriorated. After the Russian aggression and under the global financial crisis Georgia faces security dilemma exacerbated by ambivalent prospect of its Euro-Atlantic integration. The article explores current political challenges in Georgia and "new tone" of Russia's diplomacy aimed to win ideological battle inside the Georgia. It also deals with Georgia's National security issues aftermath of "five day war" and prospects of Russo-Georgian relations.

**Keywords:** Georgia, Russia, Conflict, Perception, Security.

## Rus İddiaları ve Güvensizlik: Gürcistan'a Siyasal Tehditler ve Çatışmadan Sonraki Gelecek

### ÖZET

Bağımsızlığından bugüne Gürcistan Sovyet sonrası ülkeler arasında en bağımsızlık düşünceli ülkelerden biridir. Gürcistan'ın Avrupa ve transatlantik topluma yakın olma isteği arttıkça Rusya ile ilişkileri kötüleşmiştir. Rus saldırısı sonrasında ve global ekonomik kriz döneminde, Gürcistan Avro-Atlantik bölgesi ile entegrasyonunu belirsiz geleceğini şiddetlendiren güvenlik ikilemi ile karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Bu makale Gürcistan'daki siyasal tehditleri ve Gürcistan'da ideolojik mücadeleyi kazanmayı amaçlayan Rusya diplomasisinin "yeni tonunu" incelemektedir. Aynı zamanda Gürcü-Rus savaşından sonra Gürcistan ulusal strateji meseleleri ve Gürcü-Rus ilişkilerinin geleceğini tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Gürcistan, Rusya, Çatışma, Algı, Güvenlik.

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## Introduction

Since its independence, Georgia has been one of the most vocally independent-minded countries among the Soviet Union's successor states. From the beginning of its independence as Georgia's ambitions to draw closer to Europe and the transatlantic community have grown, its relations with Russia have deteriorated. After the Rose Revolution, the efforts of the Georgian government to distance itself from Moscow-centered economic and security organizations, and the campaign to substitute an international presence for Russian peacekeeping forces were perceived in Moscow as a humiliating affront. Moreover, at a time when Russia was widely viewed in the West as increasingly undemocratic and corrupt, Georgia was being hailed as an example of a serious commitment to democratization and market reforms.<sup>1</sup> The 2006 Freedom House report ranked Georgia above Russia in seven of eight indicators of political rights and civil liberties,<sup>2</sup> while Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Georgia as less corrupt than Russia.<sup>3</sup> This caused some irritation in Moscow. In addition Russian-Georgian relations remained problematic due to Russia's continuing political, economic, and military support for the separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nonetheless, Georgia sought to maintain good relations with Russia, despite the evidence that various Russian political and military forces rejected Georgia's state-building project as contradictory to Russia's national interests.

Russia's interest in the southern slopes of the Caucasus derives from its wish to defend its own territory: the former Soviet republics remain a bastion (as friendly/satellite states) for keeping the rivals (the West) away. Adding up to that, Russia does not make distinctions between the North and South Caucasus, as it sees it as one territory, which constitutes as a good buffer. The reason it sees Georgia as the key for gaining control over the southern Caucasus is due to the many Soviet military bases which were located in Georgia,<sup>4</sup> not to mention Georgia's geographic centrality holding the Caucasus together; therefore, in Kremlin's strategic thinking if you have Georgia under your control, you have the appropriate military infrastructure to control the whole Southern Caucasus. Furthermore, in order to

<sup>1</sup> The Georgian government has cited a September 2006 World Bank and International Finance Corporation report that called Georgia the world's fastest reformer as proof that its reform policies are attracting investors and improving the business climate. The report ranked Georgia 37th out of 175 countries surveyed for ease of doing business, a 75-place improvement compared with the year before. See, [www.doingbusiness.org/documents/Press\\_Releases\\_07/DB\\_Globalpressrelease.pdf](http://www.doingbusiness.org/documents/Press_Releases_07/DB_Globalpressrelease.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> See, Freedom House, Special Report 2006, Table of Independent Countries– Freedom in the World 2006, p.2, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/WoW/2006/TableofIndependent-Countries2006.pdf>, (Accessed on 4 February 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See, Transparency International Georgia, Corruption Perception Index 2008, December 2008, p.2, [http://www.transparency.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=142&info\\_id=504](http://www.transparency.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=142&info_id=504), (Accessed on 3 February 2010).

<sup>4</sup> For more detailed information related to Russian military bases in Georgia see Kornely Kakachia, "The End of Russian Military Bases in Georgia: Social, Political and Security Implications of Withdrawal", Luís Rodrigues and Sergiy Glebov (eds.), *Military Bases: Historical Perspectives, Contemporary Challenges*, NATO Science for Peace and Security Series - E: Human and Societal Dynamics, Vol. 51, 2009, p-196-206.

achieve full control of the region, a policy of divide-and-conquer is being implemented: the creation of micro-states and zones of instability enables Russia to remain the dominant regional actor.

Russia is uncomfortable with Georgia's democratic and independent nature, as well as with the West's close ties to a country within Moscow's "legitimate" sphere of influence. Moscow worries that the successful integration of Georgia into Euro-Atlantic structures may cause Russia to lose influence and credibility not only in the Caucasus, but throughout the post-Soviet space. Georgia has demonstrated in recent years that there can exist in the Caucasus a functioning modern democratic state, one in which the economy can develop without government interference and where corruption does not reign. An economically and politically stable Georgia, which might, in the long run, become a successful Eastern European country, can be a model for development that other post-Soviet states, as well as Caucasian republics within the Russian Federation, might emulate. To the Kremlin, this scenario is a dangerous, and potentially costly, zero sum game.

By invading Georgia in 2008 and recognizing Georgia's separatist regions, Russia secured two footholds for stationing military bases in Georgia. One obvious motivation for this action was to compel the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to think harder about its plans for future enlargement. Russia's another concern seems to be the upward trajectory of U.S.-Georgian security and military cooperation, one of the pillars of the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership. Joint exercises of the American and Georgian military have already become commonplace. The United States has also committed itself to providing Georgia with military planning and training assistance. Although the declared goal of the exercises was to train Georgians for their participation in NATO's military operations in Afghanistan, Russia's reaction was unusually swift and critical, making clear its deep suspicion about the role of the American military in Georgia. It seems Moscow's worst nightmare would be an American military presence in Georgia that would entirely thwart the current Russian leadership's geostrategic aspirations regarding "a zone of privileged interests."<sup>5</sup>

Russia wants to recreate the erstwhile world order in which Moscow again plays a major role, and it's strategy is to cultivate fear of Russia (as it has been Russia's historical culture) to force submission from their rivals. Due to the above mentioned it is also anxious about the European Union's Eastern Partnership program (EaP),<sup>6</sup> which aims to draw the

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<sup>5</sup> Giorgi Kvelashvili, "Russia Casts a Wary Eye on Deepening U.S.-Georgia Cooperation" 3 November 2009, <http://jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com/2009/11/russia-casts-wary-eye-on-deepening-us.html>, p.1, (Accessed on 23 January, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> The Eastern Partnership is an organization aiming to improve the political and economic trade-relations of the six Post-Soviet states of "strategic importance" - Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia with the European Union. The Eastern Partnership and European Neighborhood policies of the EU are initiatives to help provide incentives to countries in the region to become closer to the EU and Western norms. Such measures have included the promotion of democracy and good governance, funding for projects to reduce socio-economic imbalances and increase stability, and fostering alignment with EU declarations in the Common Foreign and Security Policy arena on a case-by-case basis.

six post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus closer to the EU by improving human rights, easing visa regulations, and ensuring energy security. Moreover while dealing with European Union as a security actor Russia considers individual EU members as partners, however it sees European Union as a whole rival block which potentially could undermine its influence.<sup>7</sup> By asserting a sphere of influence vis-à-vis EU, strategists in Moscow hope to prompt a suitably deferential reaction from the West, including, perhaps, regional withdrawal.<sup>8</sup> While Russia's invasion did not result in such a retreat, and was in fact seen as a challenge to Euro-Atlantic security, it did not justify NATO intervention.

Georgia's Western partners routinely turn a blind eye to the unequal confrontation between Russia and Georgia, allowing, in the words of Georgian analyst Alexander Rondeli, the "smell of oil and gas [to] prevail [...] over feelings of sympathy and understanding."<sup>9</sup> Russia also benefited from the EU's inability to coordinate a common policy toward it. European politicians threatened Russia with hell and damnation after the August 2008 war with Georgia, but they did nothing in the end. Eastern and Central European countries, with their own fresh memories of imperialism, tend to be more sensitive to Georgia's problems with Russia and try to support its struggle for real independence and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, their voices typically carry less weight in European councils. While Georgia received extraordinary international support after the war, there is still a feeling that more energetic and effective Western support is vital for the survival of Georgian statehood.

Georgian society understands the reality of Western impotence in the face of Russian aggression in the Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> The public also recognizes the strategic complexity of the situation and does not want to be seen as provoking a new global conflict. Georgians acknowledge that their country has suffered a military defeat against Russia and, in the aftermath of conflict, must contend with the painful experience of military occupation. There is also a sober realization in Georgia that, with two wars and the repercussions of the global financial crisis, the country will be a lesser priority for Barack Obama's administration than for its predecessor. Although, Obama administration is clearly less supportive, but it does not wish to appear to compromise the interests of either Georgia or Ukraine as it "resets" relations with Russia.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the entire Russian political establishment seemed puzzled about the United States' future steps vis-à-vis Georgia's security problems.

<sup>7</sup> Fedor Lukianov, "Цена вопроса", *Коммерсантъ*, 19 November 2009, p.9, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-rss.aspx?DocsID=900421>, (Accessed on 22 November 2009).

<sup>8</sup> John Vinocur, "Georgia is Focal Point in U.S.-Nato-Russian Tension", *New York Times*, 5 May 2009, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Rondeli, "Georgia's search for itself: Open Democracy", 8 August 2008, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/georgia-s-search-for-coexistence>, p.1, (Accessed on 22 September, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> *The public skepticism of western policies towards Georgia began with the failure of the West to respond adequately to Russia's withdrawal from the treaty on conventional forces in Europe (CFE) in July 2007; continued with Nato's refusal to grant Georgia and Ukraine a membership action plan (MAP) in April 2008; and culminated in Europe's inadequate response to Russia's repeated invasions of Georgian airspace in June-July 2008, and its disregard for Georgian sovereignty in Abkhazia*

<sup>11</sup> E. Wayne Merry, "Needy Nations", 24 July 2009, p. 3, <http://nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=21896>, (Accessed on 25 September 2009).

Meantime, Washington is trying to engage Russia in positive way thus easing relationship between former cold war rivals. However, Russia has recently taken a series of actions that are prompting doubts about Washington's ability to engage Moscow. In August 2009, the Kremlin increased its military presence in Georgia's pro-Moscow breakaway regions, violating a European Union-brokered cease-fire. Soon after this, the Kremlin drafted legislation to make it easier to send troops abroad to "defend Russian citizens" and "prevent aggression against another state."<sup>12</sup> Besides Russia has more and more southern passes on Russo-Georgian border under control – it pushes the border every day, which is possible because there is no marked, agreed-upon demarcation. These developments must be considered as highly dangerous because if the international community accepts sphere of influence, Russia may use it as leverage to incapacitate Georgia. In other words, submit Georgia to its full influence.

For nearly two decades, Georgia has been struggling to develop its democratic political system. Although, significant progress has been made in democracy and election process, multi-party systems, rule of law the country still characterized by a democratic deficit, a weak civil society, administrative inefficiency and an infant parliamentary culture. As Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia notes, while the vast majority of the Georgian people emphatically assert their commitment to Western institutions and values, they also understand that these values have not sufficiently taken root in Georgia. Georgia is an aspiring democracy, not a consolidated one.<sup>13</sup> While Georgian society analysis impact of the war on Georgia's democratic development, Saakashvili's government is trying to convince Georgia's elite that his approach of overtly rejecting Russian influence in favor of the West was a stance beneficial to the country's long-term interests, and worth the cost of a terrible war. Whether he succeeds or not depends very much on Western actions, particularly in figuring out how to address Georgia's security problem.<sup>14</sup> This gives Russia hope that Georgia's ambition to become a Western democracy can yet be reversed, if not through force, than by other means of persuasion - what might be referred to in other contexts as "soft power."

Georgia's polity and institutions have already survived the test of war with Russia. It is unlikely that Russia will be able to achieve its objectives by other means, as long as it chooses to play the role of military occupier and seeks to hamper Georgia from making its own foreign policy choices. Though Georgia received extraordinary international support, there is still a feeling that energetic and effective western support is vital for the very existence of Georgian statehood at the moment. It is time for the EU to understand that promoting EU values abroad is not about some magic magnetism, it is hard work. Perhaps with the

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory Feifer, "How Obama's Russia Reset Is Playing" *RFE/RL*, 8 September 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/How\\_Obamas\\_Russia\\_Reset\\_Is\\_Playing/1817684.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/How_Obamas_Russia_Reset_Is_Playing/1817684.html), p.1, (Accessed on 7 October, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Ghia Nodia, "Russian war and Georgian Democracy", 22 August 2008, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/russian-war-and-georgian-democracy> p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Julie George and Christophe Stefes, *The fate of Georgian Democracy. Current History*, October, 2008, p.344-347. at <http://www.harrimaninstitute.org/MEDIA/01263.pdf>, (Accessed on 21 August 2009).

Lisbon Treaty ratified, the EU will be able to mobilize itself for more ambitious policies in the neighborhood. Unless the EU presents a success story, be it in Moldova, Georgia or Ukraine, it may find even fewer believers in European ideas a few years down the road in the post-Soviet space.

## Georgia's National Security after the Russian Invasion

With 20 percent of the country's territory occupied and Russian provocations continuing, the risk that hostilities will resume is high. Russian analyst Pavel Felgenhauer argues that another Russian-Georgian war is inevitable, not only to finish the business of 2008, but because Moscow has a strategic need to create a land bridge to its forces in Armenia.<sup>15</sup> Meantime, while the global economic crisis has devastated the Russian economy, it still gives Russia the opportunity to exploit the weakness of the much smaller nations in post-Soviet space who lack Russia's raw material wealth.

A main goal of the Russian leadership is to portray Georgia as an unreliable and unpredictable country that is unready for any of the international clubs that it aspires to join, namely NATO and the European Union. It also wants to show other countries - namely Ukraine - that they should stay away from realizing the full potential of their sovereignty and their relationships with NATO and the United States.<sup>16</sup> Of particular concern are Russia's continuing attempts to portray Georgia as a confrontational and "aggressive state" with which all countries should interact more cautiously. Russian politicians and experts also occasionally make statements designed to encourage the destruction of Georgia's statehood as such. In this situation, political and moral support for Georgia from the West is essential.

In this regard, Georgia welcomed the launch of the NATO-Georgia Commission, aimed at helping it rebuild after the Russian invasion and prepare for future membership in the alliance. Similar to a body established in 1997 to oversee NATO relations with Ukraine, the commission will support Georgia as it moves toward fulfilling the promise made at the April 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia will eventually become a NATO member.

At the April 2009 summit in Strasbourg and Kehl celebrating NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance stated that they were maximizing advice, assistance and support for Georgia's and Ukraine's reform efforts. A joint statement released after the Strasbourg/Kehl summit by NATO heads of states said this assistance will be carried out by separate NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions, "which play a central

<sup>15</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia's Coming War with Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 6, Issue 29, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=34493](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34493), p.1, (Accessed on 23 November, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Sergei Konoplyov, "Caucasus Is Real Citadel of Russian Power", *Moscow Times*, 18 September 2009 <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/383525.html>, (Accessed on 19 October 2009).

role in supervising the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit.”<sup>17</sup> The statement reiterates a decision of the April, 2008 Bucharest summit that the two countries will become NATO members sometime in the future; it also, however, notes that both should first pass through the Membership Action Plan phase. The annual review of Annual National Program (ANP), the document says, will allow the alliance to continue “to closely monitor” the two countries’ reform processes. According to Georgian officials, the ANP is now in the process of elaboration.

In the statement, the alliance leaders also reaffirmed “continued support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders.” They called on all sides in the Geneva talks to play a constructive role and to engage in “rapid implementation” of incident prevention and response mechanisms agreed upon during the recent round of talks in February. The statement says that Russia has not completely complied with its commitments pledged as part of the August 12 and September 8 ceasefire accords. “The build-up of Russia’s military presence in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia without the consent of the Government of Georgia is of particular concern,” it reads. The alliance leaders have also called on Russia “to reverse its recognition” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They have also said that international monitors should have access to “all of Georgia, including the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.” The joint statement, however, also reads that “despite our current disagreements, Russia is of particular importance to us as a partner and neighbor.”

It remains unclear how the Russian invasion has affected Georgia’s bid for NATO membership. A two year ago, Georgia appeared to be on the brink of becoming a NATO member. That is now far less likely given Russian actions and the onset of the economic crisis, which has caused many member states to rethink what they are willing and able to do. If NATO decides not to offer membership to Ukraine or Georgia relatively soon, the consequences could prove dramatic and unsettling for the region. Both Kyiv and Tbilisi would feel that they had been misled, while their neighbors would assume that NATO’s expansion was at an end, at least for a long time to come. Moscow would seek to exploit this situation by presenting itself as the obvious alternative to the West, an effort that might prove effective.

Understanding this, Georgia’s partners have been quick to address some of its postwar challenges. The United States led international aid efforts by rapidly committing more than \$1 billion. The European Commission has already pledged €500 million and asked member states to contribute an equal amount. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will make \$750 million available to Georgia’s Central Bank in the form of a standby arrangement. Even the Asian Development Bank, which is heavily influenced by China, contributed \$40 million. A series of diplomatic meetings with NATO, the EU, and others is underway. All of these efforts and assistance have given Georgia visibility and helped to restore investor

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<sup>17</sup> “Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration”, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg/Kehl on 4 April 2009 [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news\\_52837.htm?mode=pressrelease](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52837.htm?mode=pressrelease), (Accessed on 30 July 2009).



confidence.<sup>18</sup>

An assessment of the Georgian armed forces after the August war has also helped Georgia's security partners determine priorities for military training, as well as the kind of equipment necessary for Georgia's homeland defense. According to earlier statements of U.S. officials, the United States was willing to train the Georgian armed forces with a focus on the defense of Georgia.<sup>19</sup> However, later statements suggest that the United States is more focused on enhancing the expeditionary capabilities of Georgia's armed forces (in Afghanistan) than on training it for internal defense. That announcement is the most specific indication of how the United States plans to assist Georgia's postwar military reforms. It remains unclear, however, how a country that still faces such a severe security dilemma will be able to benefit meaningfully from these efforts.

As to European countries they are themselves split as to how far to encourage Georgia's integration with the West, especially as relations between Tbilisi and Moscow grew increasingly hostile aftermath of August war. Some states with extensive commercial and energy ties to Russia, especially Germany and France, are reluctant to antagonize Moscow, while Britain, Sweden, and several of the newer East European EU members offered stronger public support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Others, most notably Spain and Italy, remained skeptical of the pro-US tone and ties of the Saakashvili administration. And throughout the corridors of Brussels, "expansion fatigue" curbed the EU's appetite to engage with Tbilisi beyond the projects contained in the Eastern Partnership Initiative.<sup>20</sup>

In overall, it seems that transatlantic community has no choice: Georgia is an urgent matter of international concern that will require sustained engagement and transatlantic unity. Having recognized Kosovo independence and denying Georgia's bid for MAP at Bucharest Summit, West indirectly contributed to the Georgian crisis. Thus it's high time for Western powers now to initiate a constructive international process that might bring about a lasting solution of Russian-Georgian conflict. A positive development is that European Monitors are now on the ground in Georgia - though the fact that they are there because of war is a tragic reminder of the region's dangers. It must be hoped that they become the advance-guard of a much broader engagement -not just confirmation for Europeans that this beautiful mountainous region is a permanent headache that can never be cured.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> David Philips, *Post Conflict Georgia*, Policy Paper, September 2008, p.8, <http://www.acus.org/publication/post-conflict-georgia>, (Accessed on 4 September, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Etuna Tsojniashvili, "US pledges to retrain the Georgian Army", 1 April 2009 [http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/1826\\_april\\_1\\_2009/1826\\_misha.html](http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/1826_april_1_2009/1826_misha.html), (Accessed on 28 July, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Cooley, "How the West Failed Georgia", *Current History, A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs*, Vol.107, No.711, October 2008, p.343.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas De Waal, "The Caucasus: a region in pieces", 8 January 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-caucasus-a-region-in-pieces>, (Accessed on 5 December 2009).

## **Do the Personalities Matter in Russian-Georgian Relations?**

Sometimes certain political analysts say that personal relationships are the source of the confrontation in Georgian-Russian relations. The two leaders' impact on relations between their countries reflects the intense role that personality plays in governments in the former Soviet states, where official structures tend to be weak and democratic values even weaker. Of course personal factors play some role in the relations of a country, and personal sympathies or antipathies, interests and other factors might affect any relationship between two countries. But as it seems personalities are not the main issues in Russo-Georgian relations. It is assumed that leaders of state should conduct themselves according to their state's national interests, particular in circumstances such as those presently existing between Georgia and Russia. Conversely, the various Russian leaders have personally disliked all presidents of the independent Georgia. They did not like first Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia because of his dissident past and continual attack of the Soviet Union and his eventual attempts to take Georgia out of it. Neglecting many security risks associated with political dealings with Kremlin, escape from the USSR was the primary goal of Gamsakhurdia. His political ideas also were accompanied by a romanticized idea of a unitary, Russia free "Caucasian home" which caused outrage in Moscow.

Moscow did not like another Georgian leader Edward Shevardnadze either as he was accused of facilitating the collapse of the Soviet Union and withdrawing the Soviet Army from Afghanistan and then Europe. The destruction of the Berlin Wall was also partly attributed to him. He also was hated by the Kremlin for first suggesting a transit corridor which would break the Russian monopoly on transporting energy from Asia to Europe and for being the first to knock on NATO's doors, an issue which rumbles on to this day.

Ironically, at that time, a large part of the political elite around Eduard Shevardnadze believed that Georgia's future lay in close cooperation with Russia. In believing this legend and declaring Russia as a principal strategic partner Shevardnadze decided that Georgia should join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and expected that orientation towards Russia would lead to resolution of Georgia's territorial conflicts and would bring economic prosperity. However, during his term in office in Tbilisi, Shevardnadze was unable to appease the harder-line elements of the Russian elite. As these expectations were frustrated, Shevardnadze's government gradually drifted towards orientation to the West. When Shevardnadze stepped down after the Georgia's Rose Revolution it was said that the personal Shevardnadze factor would no longer influence Georgian-Russian relations.

Indeed when Mikheil Saakashvili came to power the Russian political elite did not have any significant negative attitude towards him. Rather, he was seen as the one who had kicked the disliked Shevardnadze out of office. Moreover, Saakashvili declared on the day of his inauguration that he was stretching out a hand to Russia and suggested restarting bilateral relations with a blank sheet. Five years have since passed. Nothing positive has come out of Saakashvili's attempts to improve relations. On the contrary, Russia has been making life hard for Georgians and continued its strategy of dragging out and stalling negotiations with

Georgia. Gradually, Russo-Georgian relations have transferred from verbal confrontation to military and Russia has occupied about 1/5 of Georgia's territory. Alongside that a noticeable personal animosity has developed between the Georgian and Russian leaderships. Their dealings have turned nasty - schoolyard taunts and all - in part because each man (Putin and Saakashvili) seems to be vying to become the most influential figure in the post-Soviet space. Each wanted to show the way forward and turn his nation into the model. Putin is obviously the more powerful of the two, which is why it may be all the more infuriating for him that Mikhail Saakashvili has had some success at evening things by embracing the United States.<sup>22</sup> Even though personal relations are not main determinant in this relations it would be naive to assume there is no connection between the two.

Russians leadership and political elite claims they retain deep affection for Georgian culture, society and food, but at the same time the Moscow has a problems to respect independent Georgian statehood and its leaders. Sober analysis of Russo-Georgian relations last 18 years suggests that there is no president of Georgia that was acceptable to Russia and it's unlikely to be in any time soon.

### **Can Moscow Win the Ideological Battle in Georgia?**

The Russian invasion of Georgia and attempt of partition of sovereign state resulted in the considerable alienation of Georgia's population from Moscow. It will require an enormous effort over several generations to repair the damage. Moreover, after Russia's aggression, Georgia left the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the last post-Soviet structure with which it was associated. By driving Georgia from the CIS, Russia lost legitimacy and influence over Georgia, a situation that was exacerbated by the suspension of diplomatic ties.

Acknowledging that Russia's war in Georgia caused great concern in other Post Soviet states, Moscow has sought a new ideology or image that it could promote within neighboring states, including Georgia, in order to increase sympathies for Russia and to gradually build a single or unified cultural-economic space around itself. While Russian strategist still need to define what Russia's ideology should be, it seems that so called "Eurasianism" is a principle on which Russia's future could be built. Two components of this ideology are Eastern Orthodoxy and a so-called "common historical heritage."

Noting the failure of "hard power" policy aimed at changing Georgia's pro-Western orientation, Russian authorities have recently begun to utilize so-called "soft power" in relations with Georgia. Understanding that dialogue on foreign policy and security issues are senseless, as Georgia is not going to trade off its territorial integrity or change its political stance in regards of NATO and European union, Russian diplomacy is trying to pursue a policy to hold a dialogue based on the principle of "agree to mutually disagree" (when your partner acts within a certain framework and is controlled in that way). According to proponents of this idea, Russia should adopt a new Georgia policy, one that would temper

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Levy, "The Georgian and Putin: A Hate Story", *The New York Times*, 18 April 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/weekinreview/19levy.html>, ( Accessed on 24 November 2009).

Moscow's passion for regime change in Tbilisi and instead employ direct outreach to the Georgian people. As examples of such "straight-to-the-people" approaches, Russian political analysts have cited President Barack Obama's video message congratulating Iranians on the holiday of Nowruz and his administration's easing of restrictions on travel and money transfers to Cuba.<sup>23</sup>

The goal of this new policy would be to prevent the further alienation of Georgian political elites from Russia and help pro-Russian (or at least, Russia-neutral) forces come to power during the next electoral cycle.<sup>24</sup> As some pro-Kremlin analysts claim this sort of policy is better and more advantageous than going on the all-out defensive.<sup>25</sup> Most evident attempt of this policy was recent unofficial statement of Vladimir Putin. Russian Prime Minister, who has often described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest tragedy" of the 20th century, said that the "reunification" of Georgia has "already been decided", a suggestion some of his listeners believe was a call for restoring Moscow's control over Georgia and even the former USSR as a whole.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, he personally encouraged and met presently opposition politician, former Georgian Prime minister, Zurab Nogaideli in Moscow.<sup>27</sup> Thus, hinting the Georgian public that it's still worth to speak with Moscow about future unification of country under the tutelage of Russia.

How realistic is such an approach? Before implementing a markedly different Georgia strategy, Kremlin officials should realize that by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian authorities made it practically impossible for anyone in Georgia to create a political bloc oriented toward Moscow that would be capable of garnering wide electoral support. Voter sympathy for Russia does not exist. This is not merely due to the Russian invasion of Georgian territory (though the sight of Russian tanks, military planes, and bombs had a powerful effect); the political differences are simply too great, and the elites in both countries are too accustomed to viewing each other as opponents instead of partners.

Moreover, Russia's leaders should realize that a generational and mental shift has been underway over the last 15 years. Soviet stereotypes of Georgians, shaped largely by popular film, no longer pertain (if they ever did). Unlike in many other post-Soviet states, Georgian society is not dominated by a *nomenklatura* that harbors pro-Russian tendencies. This segment of Georgian society was marginalized long ago; it plays no role in Georgian political life and is unlikely to do so in the future.

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<sup>23</sup> Some Russian politicians write with certain envy about the proliferation of "Obama-mania" in the world -but what they missed is Obama's administration came to the helm of the United States after a victory in a tough election struggle and not as the result of another presidential message.

<sup>24</sup> "Sakartvelo Revisited: Russia Must Adopt A New Georgia Policy", 22 April 2009, [http://theivanovosti.typepad.com/the\\_ivanov\\_report/2009/04/sakartvelo-revisited-russia-must-adopt-a-new-georgia-policy-.html](http://theivanovosti.typepad.com/the_ivanov_report/2009/04/sakartvelo-revisited-russia-must-adopt-a-new-georgia-policy-.html) (Accessed on 29 August 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Sergey Markedonov, В ПОИСКАХ ДИАЛОГА, <http://www.politcom.ru/9049.html>.

<sup>26</sup> "Путин сказал, что нам все вернут!", [www.gazeta.ru/column/rynska/3287611.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/column/rynska/3287611.shtml).

<sup>27</sup> "Ex-PM Nogaideli Meets Putin in Moscow", *Civil Georgia*, Tbilisi, 23 December 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21825&search=nogaideli%20putin>, (Accessed on 26 December 2009).

Georgia's modern elites are largely Western-educated people who became alienated by Russia's aggressive policies toward Georgia and who now consider Russia a key adversary. Most of them grew up with anti-Russian sentiments and perceive Russian-Georgian confrontation in ideological terms, as a clash between authoritarian, imperial Russia and a pro-Western democratic Georgia. This clash dominates current Georgian political dialogue. Moreover, within Georgian elite Russia is firmly associated with the Kremlin with the subversive actions of the special services, or, as a minimum, with the agents of influence associated with them.

In addition, while official Russian propaganda emphasized the need to give the Russian language "second-language status" in the Post-Soviet states and claiming that Russian language needs to be nurtured abroad the language is being driven out of Georgian education and culture. In the cultural sense Georgia is moving away from Russia, turning into a Western country. The neo-imperial policy of Kremlin, particularly imposition of visa regime, economic embargo and anti-Georgian informational propaganda in Russian media outlets on the whole encouraged these tendencies. Children and young people in Georgia know less and less Russian. Ever fewer are able to read even an elementary Russian text. In terms of languages, the orientation towards the West is also stark. In an EU-focused survey, 75% of Georgians agreed that if Georgian students want to receive a quality education, they need to know one of the European languages. Skills in European languages are gaining ground. English is in the lead, followed by German and then French. In this way, Georgia has become excluded from the former Soviet space, in which the language of interethnic communication, the *lingua franca*, remains Russian.

Under these circumstances, the Kremlin's ambitions for a regime change that would install a pro-Moscow leader in Georgia are counterproductive. No major political force in Georgia will support a geopolitical reorientation of Georgia toward Russia, which would be perceived as a betrayal of the country's vital national interest. There are some in Moscow who hope that, if Georgian opposition leaders who claim they would engage in pragmatic dialogue with Russia come to power, the situation may change. If any of these politicians did come to power, though, Moscow would see none of the strategic changes in Georgian foreign policy for which it hopes. Simply put it no responsible Georgian political forces (even Kremlin supported) ever agree on "Balkanization" of Georgia.

The Russian political elite sometimes forget that Georgia's opposition is hardly different from Saakashvili when it comes to foreign policy, almost across the board pro-European and strongly pro-Western. Mikheil Saakashvili and Georgian opposition leaders very seldom agree with each other, but they are equally enthusiastic about Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Besides, it's more typical in Georgian political debate for the opposition parties to criticize the government for not being consistent enough in its orientation towards Western institutions and for making too many concessions towards Russia. In general, consensus on the main foreign policy issues exists among all relevant political parties. This is certainly, a major factor of stability for the country.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ghia Nodia and Alvaro Pinto Scholtbach, *The Political Landscape of Georgia: Political Parties, Achievements, Challenges and Prospects*, The Nederland's, Eburon Delf, 2006, p.41.

## **Conclusion**

The postwar Georgian state faces a sizeable challenge. Moscow's attempts to destabilize Georgia have neither stopped nor declined after the war. It is clear that internal stability in Georgia no longer meets Russian interests. Russia has largely achieved what it wanted from the conflict. It coveted Abkhazia's coastline, of potential use to the navy. It has secured control of territory just south of the resort of Sochi, too - host to the 2014 winter Olympics, an event crucial to maintaining its global prestige. Even landlocked South Ossetia which is poor and depopulated, but it still gives Russia a military base close to pipelines taking oil and gas from the Caspian Sea to the west.

But gains made in the war come at a cost for Russia. Kremlin dealt the most devastating blow to its reputation in the post-Soviet region. The Russia-Georgia war confirmed that Russia had become a revisionist power in the region. No CIS ally has followed Moscow in recognizing separatist Georgian regions. The reason is that it could set a dangerous precedent and could ultimately threaten the sovereignty of CIS states as well. Several republics have large ethnic Russian populations and possess former Russian territories. By recognizing the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia violated its long-standing principles of respecting a nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity inscribed in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe convention, the CIS convention and multiple bilateral friendship treaties with CIS countries.<sup>29</sup> Due to this reasons Kremlin needs to restore its respect for its neighbors' territorial integrity to be able to improve its relations with them.

Moreover, despite Moscow's incessant attempts to bring Tbilisi back to its geopolitical orbit, Georgia, is now further from Russia than ever before. Even the war that Russia waged against Georgia in August 2008 failed to produce the outcome Moscow very much hoped for, namely, a regime change that would bring to power a pro-Russian leadership in Tbilisi or create anarchy and instability throughout Georgia. Quite the contrary happened during the course of the war. Georgia abruptly withdrew from the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States, to which Russia purportedly extends its "zone of privileged interests," severed diplomatic relations with Moscow and in an even more surprising development signed the Charter on Strategic Partnership with the United States a few months later, in January 2009.

Russian leaders probably see a good deal of unfinished business in Georgia. Georgia is weakened, but not destroyed. Its economy has not collapsed. Political pluralism survives. Recovering from the war with Russia and from the global crisis, the government of Mikheil Saakashvili is still in power and remains true to its principles: liberal politics, unconditional friendship with the West, presenting itself in Europe as the energy alternative to Russia. Even Saakashvili's former allies are heartily fed-up with his presidency, acknowledge that Georgian politics is still commendably open and contestable.

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<sup>29</sup> Anders Aslund, "The Leader of the CIS is Lonely and Weak", *Moscow Times*, 28 October 2009, p.3.

Russia also failed to achieve a desired outcome in regard to Georgia's NATO membership which Moscow apparently wanted to undercut by invading Georgia. Although the prospect of Georgia's membership might seem more distant now than would have been in the absence of the Russian military aggression, it is not at all taken by NATO's enlargement agenda. Georgia continues to seek membership in NATO and control over the export of Caspian oil and gas transit routes. West has not abandoned Georgia. One reason for that is that the notwithstanding all the frustration with the administration's autocratic tendencies, and despite all the pressing priorities elsewhere, the core commitment to Georgia is intact. America's "reset" of relations with Russia did not uninstall the program "Georgia 1.0". Partly because of the principle of defending sovereignty, partly out of enthusiasm for Georgia's political and economic achievements, and partly because of energy politics, America and Europe are staying engaged.

Kremlin knows that securing outright international recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remain mission impossible in the foreseeable future. But Russian diplomacy is trying to create a "new reality" in which two appendices fenced off with barbed wire would be independent states and Georgia should put up with it, beginning its relations with Russia from scratch. One would think that time would have softened the bad feelings from the August war among the Georgians. Alas these feelings are only growing stronger and for psychological rather than political reasons. Confrontation with Russia has become a source of a national unity for the political elite of Georgia. Moreover, no conceivable Georgian government will be in a position to contemplate ceding Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and perceived EU or Turkish collusion in Russian attempts to manufacture legitimacy for its dismemberment of the country. On the contrary if such attempts were made it could force it to withdraw from the EU Eastern Partnership and could ruin Georgian-Turkish friendly relationship, rendering the latter defunct in the process.

Critical analysis of Russian-Georgian interstate relations over the last two decades suggests that there has never been an independent Georgian government that was acceptable to Russia, and it is unlikely that there will be one any time soon. Neither the Georgian people nor any Georgian leader will agree to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or engage in talks related to dismemberment of country. In fact, bitterness about the occupation of Georgia's territory is the most unifying factor in its politics. Moreover, Georgia's insistence on being a liberal democracy is largely identity-driven, in the sense that the country wants to be a liberal democracy in order to prove that it is Western and that it can be a modern nation-state without depending on Russia. In this circumstances denied the support of a pro-Moscow *nomenklatura*, the Kremlin cannot win the minds and souls of Georgians, and, as a result, it cannot hope to win its "ideological battle" in Georgia.

As it seems for now there is a clear clash of national interest between Georgians and Russians how they see the prospect of Georgia and its role in regional security arrangements. Taking into consideration Russia's occupation of 20 percent of internationally-recognized Georgian territory, it is not possible to expect any major improvements in Georgian-Russian relations. The differences are too great, and the elites in both countries are too accustomed to viewing each other as opponents rather than partners. Thus in short and medium terms

it's hardly possible to expect any major improvements in bilateral relationship. For the foreseeable future, the views of Georgians and Russians regarding Georgia's trajectory and role in regional security arrangements will be irreconcilable.

The new Georgian state, and its leaders, has faced a number of objective obstacles that suggests that pullout of Russian troops from Georgia is inherently difficult, especially from conflict regions like Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These two unresolved territorial conflicts are legacies of the demise of the Soviet Union and are considered as the most serious challenges facing Georgia today. For a time being Georgia's highest priority is to settle these conflicts peacefully and restore Georgia's constitutional rule within its borders, using direct dialogue with local populations, de facto leaders, and impartial mediation by the international community. As many friends of Georgia pointed out Georgia must cease focusing on its conflict with Russia, set aside the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the time being and regain its passion for democracy and reform at home.

It is also widely believed that Georgia must pursue a coherent approach to solve the current problems and advance democratic changes. As it seems now this is the only way to regain the political and moral high ground, attract foreign capital, convince the west to embrace it more firmly and keep open the hope of one day convincing the Abkhaz and South Ossetians to come back peacefully to a unified Georgia. In the long term, the development of Georgia as a stable and prosperous democracy is its best guarantee of its long term security.



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