



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
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WANTED: GEORGIA'S POLICY FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS

SHOTA UTIASHVILI

122

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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For the time being, the Georgian Government does not have any proactive policy for its next-door neighbor – the North Caucasus. The Georgian State Concept for Relations with the Peoples of the North Caucasus, a national strategy adopted by the Georgian Parliament in June 2012, was shelved after the election of the new government in the fall of 2012. This paper aims to examine policy options and make policy suggestions.

History

Since Georgia regained its independence in 1991, relations with the North Caucasus deteriorated almost immediately, chiefly because of Georgia's internal conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. North Ossetians supported their ethnic kinsmen while most other North Caucasians (primarily but not limited to the western part of the North Caucasus) supported the Abkhaz. These conflicts have created lasting animosity between Georgians and their northern neighbors.

Georgia was not involved in any significant way in the First Chechen War (1994-1996) but it had a major impact on the country. After defeat in the war in Abkhazia (1993) and facing a threat from the forcibly deposed ex-President Gamsakhurdia, President Shevardnadze had in effect capitulated to the Russian Government. The deal, under which the Russian military defeated and dispersed pro-Gamsakhurdia armed groups, allowed the Russians to keep their military bases in Georgia for 25 years and appoint key ministers (defense, security, and internal affairs) in Shevardnadze's government. Georgia remained an independent state in name only. Russia's defeat in the First Chechen War allowed Shevardnadze to get rid of Russia-appointed or pro-Russian officials and start building independent government institutions.

Chechen President Maskhadov was received with the honors of a head of state in Tbilisi but relations between Georgia and inter-war Chechnya had little substance.

The Second Chechen War had probably an even bigger impact on Georgia. Soon after the war broke out, Russian Prime Minister Putin asked Georgia to allow the passage of Russian troops in order to strike at rebel positions from the south. President Shevardnadze refused and immediately paid the price as Russia imposed a visa regime on Georgian citizens.

War spilled over across the Caucasus Mountains and more than 10,000 Chechen refugees settled in the Pankisi Valley in north-east Georgia. Hundreds of armed militants soon joined them. Pankisi became a refuge and a transit point for Chechen fighters who quickly took control of the valley. Senior commanders from Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations as well found refuge in Pankisi.

Putin was more than happy to blame Georgia for Chechnya's continued resistance. On a few occasions, it bombed Pankisi and other areas inside Georgia's borders with these bombings causing the first fatalities in August 2002. The Russian general staff threatened a land operation inside Georgia's territory.

Russia claimed that under international law it had the rights to launch a military operation in Georgia since it was abetting terrorism. To counter that threat, the US committed itself to train Georgian military. The US claimed that Georgian security services were unable rather than unwilling to take effective action against foreign fighters on its soil – and this was something which was largely true.

Eventually, after the Rose Revolution, the government restored control over the Pankisi Valley, forcing Chechen fighters to withdraw back to Russia. Since 2003, no sizeable group of militants has been observed in Georgia; however, Russia continued to accuse Georgia of helping Chechen terrorists and threaten Georgia with retaliatory action. Although Russia never presented any evidence vis-à-vis its accusation, the Georgian Government viewed this as a thinly veiled threat of military action and took it extremely seriously. The new Georgian Government's initial policy to improve relations with Russia by expelling Chechen fighters or unofficially handing wanted Chechens to Russia failed. In 2004-2008, Georgia's policy towards the North Caucasus had three main goals: 1. Not to allow Russia any pretext (supporting terrorism, etc.) for taking action against Georgia, 2. Keep tight control over Pankisi and 3. Keep channels of communication with Chechen society open. Relations with other North Caucasian republics were virtually non-existent.

In conclusion, in 2004-2008 while some slight hope of finding a mutually acceptable solution for the problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Russia existed, the Georgian Government tried to avoid any proactive policy in the North Caucasus, chiefly to avoid an unnecessary irritant in its relations with Russia.

One can also argue that the excessive militarization of the North Caucasus since the Second Chechen War and, especially, after the raid on Nalchik in 2005 created fertile soil for Russia to launch the war against Georgia in August 2008. The 2007 Decision of the International Olympic Committee to hold the 2014 Olympics in Sochi was a strong contributing factor as well.

It might seem counterintuitive and may not be well appreciated by scholars, but since independence to 2008 few other countries or regions had more importance for Georgia than the North Caucasus: North Caucasian support to the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians in the wars of the early 1990s was important in determining their outcome, the Russian defeat in the First Chechen War helped the institutionalization of Georgian independence, the Second Chechen War brought a collapse of Georgia's security architecture and finally led to the first major American military assistance program. Russian victory in the Second Chechen War resulted in an increased militarization of the North Caucasus and Russia's greater appetite for military actions as an instrument for achieving policy goals. Although the North Caucasus did not feature prominently in the August War of 2008, the number of irregular fighters as well as looters from this region was still quite large.

In 2008, the Georgian political elite came to the realization of the importance of the North Caucasus and also no less importantly it lost any hopes of normalization with Russia; therefore, nothing could stand in the way of a new proactive policy towards the North Caucasus.

The new policy is formulated in the Georgian State Concept of Relations with the Peoples of the Caucasus adopted in summer 2012 but its concrete policies were implemented from 2010.

In March 2010, Russia agreed to open the Larsi checkpoint after four years, the only official border crossing point between Georgia and Russia. From October 2010, Georgia introduced visa-free travel for residents of the North Caucasian republics. In May 2011, Georgia became the first nation to recognize the Circassian genocide. In January 2010, Georgia's first Russian-language TV channel PIK (Perviy Informacionniy Kavkazskiy) was launched, first on the internet later on satellite. The Caucasus Fund and the Circassian Cultural Center were established to promote educational, cultural and scientific exchanges with the North Caucasian peoples. Georgian universities offered Masters Degree programs to North Caucasian students free-of-charge. Georgia also reached out to North Caucasian diasporas in third countries.

Russia's reaction to Georgia's new initiatives was frosty but no concrete counter-steps were made.

What was Georgia trying to achieve? Multiple explanations have been offered starting from vengeance for the war and ending with changing attitudes towards Georgia in the North Caucasus. Under one theory, this whole soft-power initiative was just a cover for Tbilisi's efforts to develop relations with North Caucasian militants in order to gain the capacity to carry out operations deep in the enemy's territory if Russia invaded Georgia again. Another theory popular in Russia was that Georgia was becoming a recruiting ground for the CIA and the MI6. Yet others believed that Georgia wanted to compete with Russia for the "hearts and minds" of the North Caucasians.

State Concept for Relations with the Peoples of the North Caucasus

This concept is Georgia's only policy document towards the region. Although the new government elected after 2012 effectively ceased its implementation, it has not been recalled and no alternative policy has been suggested. On the contrary, the government has received a lot of criticism for abandoning proactive policies towards the North Caucasus. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore this document in some detail. The document focuses on the following issues:

1. Human Dimension
2. Human Rights, Free Mass Media and Civil Society
3. Education and Science
4. Economy and Trade
5. Support to the Establishment of Historic Truth
6. Traditions, Culture and Sport
7. Diaspora Relations
8. Healthcare

Human Dimension. The document makes two important proposals: first, Georgia should welcome North Caucasian visitors and second, since Georgia is between North Caucasian Muslims and their holy places, Georgia should facilitate pilgrim travel through its territory.

Human Rights, Free Mass Media and Civil Society. The document proposes that Georgia helps human rights defenders in the North Caucasus by acting as bridge between them and the international community as well using its resources to raise international awareness on human rights violations in the North Caucasus. Giving access to free (i.e., not controlled by the Kremlin) information to the people of the North Caucasus is the second field and strengthening co-operation between civil society organizations from both sides is the third one.

Education and Science. The document spells out two main priorities: increased access to education for North Caucasian youth (i.e., allowing them to study in Georgia) and co-operation with North Caucasian scientists in studying North Caucasian languages, history, archaeology, etc.

Economy and Trade. Georgia should welcome investments from the North Caucasus. Georgia should offer its services as a trade and logistical hub and cooperation in tourism.

Establishment of Historic Truth. Under the Tsars as well as the communists, the North Caucasian peoples, including Circassians, Ingush, Chechens and others have suffered terrible injustices. These should be properly studied and presented to the international community.

Traditions, Culture and Sport. Promotion of cooperation in these fields.

Diaspora Relations. Georgia will build relations with North Caucasian diasporas in third countries as well as support developing ties between Georgian and North Caucasian diasporas.

Healthcare. Georgia will welcome and promote North Caucasians visiting Georgia for healthcare reasons.

Although some items of the list might sound like propaganda or be too general to be translated into actual policies, most of the concept has been a workable document. Visits by North Caucasians to Georgia have increased dramatically. Georgia is also used for land transit for pilgrims. There was the Russian language Georgian TV station which worked in 2010-2012, education and scientific exchanges have been intensified, there is an increasing number of small traders from the North Caucasus doing business in Georgia, the Circassian genocide has been recognized and relations with the North Caucasian diaspora were established, etc.

Relations with the North Caucasus after 2012

In October 2012, Saakashvili's government lost the elections and was replaced with the Georgian Dream coalition, headed by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. The new government declared that the normalization of relations with Russia was one of its top foreign policy priorities. One of the first to suffer from the change of priorities was Georgia's North Caucasian policy. PIK was closed down almost immediately. Educational programs for North Caucasians were phased out. The government's support for bilateral seminars and conferences dried up. In general, the new government decided that relations with Russia were too important to be put under additional stress with proactive policies towards the North Caucasus. The Georgian Dream decided to treat North Caucasians as with the rest of Russian citizens, and sometimes even worse, because of security considerations.

It is an established fact that before and during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, Georgian security services cooperated with their Russian colleagues and limited the movement of North Caucasians (especially young males) across Georgian borders. There are reports that on at least two occasions Georgian security services unofficially handed over North Caucasian fugitives to the Russians. Since 2012, ISIS has emerged as a security threat for Georgia and it forced the Georgian Government to take additional measures at the borders as well.

Interestingly, in observing 25 years of Georgian independence one key fact stands out: as an independent state, Georgia either has a proactive policy towards Russia or it has one towards the North Caucasus. So far, it has not managed to have both.

There are many who argue that having a policy towards the North Caucasus that is different from the overall policy towards Russia makes no sense because it is either not feasible or would undermine a much more important policy. Finding answers to these two questions is the key for the successful strategy: firstly, Georgia needs a long-term comprehensive and consistent policy towards the North Caucasus that will not depend on twists and turns in its relations with Russia (although it will never be possible to fully isolate the North Caucasus policy from the Russia policy) and, secondly, this policy must have practical implications for both Georgia and the North Caucasus.

Contours for the Future Strategy

Underlying Assumptions

To devise a strategy, you need to make several key assumptions. Obviously, if the assumptions prove wrong, then the whole strategy will easily turn out to be wrong or irrelevant. Also, any strategy towards the North Caucasus should take into account the differences that exist between the different republics (including the differences in the relations and attitudes towards Georgia) but this is a matter for far more detailed research.

Georgia-Russia Relations: They are more likely to stay generally the same. Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has created an insurmountable obstacle towards the normalization of relations. As mentioned above, the Georgian Dream government came with a declared goal of improving the relations but it quickly realized that beyond restoring trade and resolving some logistical issues there are no items on the agenda where the sides can reach real progress. The Russian Government sees its relations with Georgia not as a bilateral issue but more through the lenses of confrontation with the West. Therefore, any compromise with Georgia is viewed as a concession to the West (the so-called “creeping annexation” is the best example of this). Georgian public opinion remains strongly pro-Western (more than 80% wants to join the EU according to the NDI opinion polls released in July 2018) and it will not tolerate excessively conciliatory steps from its government. Georgia will continue its efforts to integrate into the EU and NATO and Russia will try to prevent that. In conclusion, slight improvements are possible but positive breakthroughs are hard to imagine. It is also hard to imagine that a pro-Russian government that will give up on the occupied territories or the pro-Western course will come to power in Georgia.

Russia and the North Caucasus: Predicting what might happen in Russia is extremely difficult and certainly beyond the scope of this paper. Of course, at some point in the future, drastic changes are expected but this strategy is based on the following assumptions: Mr. Putin or somebody very similar continues to rule Russia. Confrontation with the West continues. Direct war is avoided but proxy wars are possible. Due to international sanctions and internal problems like corruption, mismanagement and inefficient state-capitalism, the Russian economy continues to stagnate. Russia continues to rule the North Caucasus with an “iron fist.” Because of the

decreased allocations from the center, local elites are increasingly looking for business opportunities elsewhere. Local elites feel less secure. Violence continues but on a smaller scale. Fighters who had earlier joined ISIS find it difficult to return to Russia and restart the rebellion. The share of ethnic Russians in North Caucasian republics continues to decline.

Objectives for the Strategy

What should Georgia's objectives in the North Caucasus be? How can Georgia benefit from relations with the North Caucasus?

Any new strategy towards the North Caucasus must be based first and foremost on economic benefit. Historic ties, cultural similarities and strategic considerations are important but unless the new strategy is based on commercial gain, it will not be sustainable or effective.

Since the Rose Revolution, Georgia has emerged as the most liberal economy in the region. In the World Bank's Doing Business index, it has gone from below 100 to the top 10. Not only is it easy to start and operate business but it is also very easy for foreigners to get all of the necessary papers required for such activity and engagement. This may not be very important for large Western corporations, but is extremely important for small and medium-sized regional businesses. Georgia has received hundreds of millions of dollars in investments from Armenia and Azerbaijan and, of late, they are also increasing from Iran and Russia. The investors are small and medium-sized businesses which are tired of corruption in their home countries, those whose relations with their governments have deteriorated and are afraid of possible consequences for their businesses, high-level government officials who cannot exactly prove the origins of their wealth, dissidents who move to Georgia and want to start a new life and Iranians and Russians who are afraid of the effects of the international sanctions, etc. Basically, Georgia is seen in the region as an island where you can do your small or medium-sized business without corruption, government interference or the fear of organized crime.

No less important is tourism. With a population of 3.7 million, Georgia had more than 7.5 million international visitors last year and this number continues to grow very fast. Eighty-one percent of tourists to Georgia are coming from the countries with which it shares a land border (Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan).

Georgia has emerged as a regional trade hub. Because of low taxes and free trade agreements with economic powerhouses (the EU, China, Russia and Turkey), millions of consumers or small traders visit Georgia from neighboring countries every year to buy their household items, cars and spare parts, and clothing, etc.

In addition to that, Georgia is becoming a destination for medical tourism, international seminars and conferences, and trade fairs, etc.

As mentioned above, 81% of international visitors are from neighboring countries. What is even more important is that the majority of these 81% come from driving distances. It will be extremely unwise of Georgia if it did not promote itself actively in the North Caucasus.

Similarly, North Caucasians will have an increased interest in doing business with Georgia. Local elites whose stability is not guaranteed, would want to have an “insurance policy” if their situation becomes precarious at home. Dissidents would want a place to which to flee if danger looms. Those who have built successful businesses might want to expand into Georgia to be protected from adverse effects of international sanctions or a hypothetical economic breakdown in Russia.

In addition to the economic interest, the North Caucasus matters for Georgia in terms of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. North Ossetia can be seen as a bridge to South Ossetia, especially given the fact that Russians have built a barbed wire fence between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia. Circassians can play the same role in Georgian-Abkhaz relations.

In terms of security, the presence of North Caucasian business interests should make Georgia less and not more likely to be become a target of North Caucasian extremists.

To attract North Caucasian investors, traders and tourists to Georgia, there is a need to actively promote the country in the region as has been previously mentioned. Therefore, parts of the older strategy need to be brought back to life such as 1. Human Dimension, 2. Education and Science, 3. Economy and Trade, 4. Culture, Sports and Traditions and 5. Diaspora Relations.

In practical terms, this means: no special restrictions for North Caucasians at the border or in Georgian Government institutions, supporting the haj through Georgia, renewing of educational and scientific exchanges,

continuing funding joint cultural and sports activities and building on relations with the North Caucasian diaspora with a more business and economic angle.

In addition, special emphasis must be placed on the protection of North Caucasians residing in Georgia. This means: no unofficial extraditions (and official extraditions only in exceptional cases), special guarantees for property protection and not allowing anyone from the North Caucasus to racketeer their kinsmen in Georgia. Government agencies must not discriminate against North Caucasians which is often the case now.

Although political propaganda should be put aside, Georgia should actively publicize both its policies and individual successful cases and so it needs a Russian language media outlet, preferably an internet resource.

Georgia must demonstrate special respect to the religion of Islam and Muslims. This is important not only in terms of the North Caucasian policy but for internal cohesion and stability as well.

Whatever policy Georgia pursues with Russia (as described above, major shifts are unlikely) it should make very clear that the North Caucasus policy will not again become a bargaining chip and that the security and the property of North Caucasians in Georgia will be guaranteed.

Certainly, security will remain an important aspect of the relations with the North Caucasus but it should not be the only priority.

Conclusions

Georgia's new strategy towards the North Caucasus should be based on mutual commercial benefit. Georgia should actively promote itself as a safe and profitable place to do business. It should continue, or rather restart cultural, education and scientific ties in order to improve its image in the region.

Georgia should decouple its North Caucasus strategy from its Russia strategy. It is important to have a consistent and long-term policy towards the region.

Security should stop being the only priority in relations towards the North Caucasus.