



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**15**

**RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS AND  
THE REACTION FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION**

*EUGENE KOGAN*

**EXPERT OPINION**



**2013**



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To paraphrase the wonderful and humorous fable of Ivan Krylov, *The Musicians* it can be said that the famous nightingale's reply to the quartet can be substituted by President Vladimir Putin's reply to the political leadership of Georgia. President Putin says clearly and unequivocally: "To be a musician, one must have a better ear and more intelligence than any of you. Place yourselves any way you like. It will make no difference. You will never become musicians"<sup>1</sup> or members of NATO and the European Union (EU). And "I, President Vladimir Putin, will do everything in my power to hinder your efforts in joining both organisations." To sum up, that is how President Putin sees present - as well as future - of Russian-Georgian relations. Namely, Georgia should forfeit its aspirations of joining both organisations and reconcile with Russia under the terms offered by Putin. Still, after the October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia, Putin and his administration decided to give a chance to the newly-elected government to start anew.

Although newly-nominated Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's international priorities are similar to those of President Mikheil Saakashvili and include European integration and NATO membership, he has also pledged to improve relations with Russia. Ivanishvili said that he would try to convince Russia that Georgia's strategic aspirations were not a threat<sup>2</sup> to Russia and that Russia can live with these aspirations. The recent change of political leadership in Georgia in the aftermath of the October 2013 presidential elections, with the new President Giorgi Margvelashvili and new Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, is not likely to change the state of Russia-Georgian relations. Furthermore, the dual policy of Euro-Atlantic integration and improvement of relations with Russia initiated by former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili remain on the new leadership agenda.

Russia welcomed the result of the parliamentary elections, saying that the ties which had been suspended in the wake of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war could be renewed. Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, said that: "We are definitely looking forward to a fresh, new non-hostile, sober leadership in Georgia." Peskov continued that a new leadership would be "very good, very positive for us. If they have more political wisdom under a new leadership, then lots and lots of new roads can be opened for the country."<sup>3</sup> And if not, then perhaps lots of road blocks will be built along the Russian-Georgian highway.

As a first step to improve troubled relations with Moscow, on 1 Novem-

ber 2012 the then Prime Minister Ivanishvili appointed Zurab Abashidze as his Special Representative for relations with Russia. Ivanishvili also stated that: “Our countries are linked by a long history. We lived together for a long time before the Soviet Union, during its existence and after it collapsed. Now, we must first regulate matters and then move to a new kind of relationship.”

If Ivanishvili was hoping his initiative would get a warm response from Moscow, he was *disappointed* [author’s italics]. Alexander Lukashevich, Spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), gave a very guarded response to Abashidze’s appointment: “I will only say that he is known here for his work as ambassador to our country and for the trips he has made. He is personally well-acquainted with Russia.” While Moscow had taken note of statements coming out of Tbilisi, Lukashevich said that: “We are waiting for concrete, practical steps from the new Georgian government.”<sup>4</sup> As a well-trained diplomat and spokesman of the Russian MoFA, in particular, Lukashevich did not elaborate on the exact nature of concrete, practical steps.

During his first trip abroad since his election victory in October 2012, the then Prime Minister Ivanishvili used a press conference in Brussels with Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, to express his regret at Moscow’s lukewarm reaction. Ivanishvili said that: “Our government is disappointed by these statements. There has not yet been an equivalent response from Moscow. We are waiting and hoping for the Russian authorities to analyse the situation and act accordingly.”<sup>5</sup> Barroso said at the same press conference that “relationships of our partners with such an important neighbour as Russia is” were very important.<sup>6</sup> In other words, “You in Georgia should remain patient and attentive to the wishes of Moscow and not come to complain to us in Brussels. Do not be discouraged by Moscow’s lukewarm reaction, behave nicely and you will be rewarded.” As for Ivanishvili’s disappointment with Moscow, it shows his lack of understanding of Putin’s policy towards Georgia, in particular, and the South Caucasus, in general. Perhaps Ivanishvili is well-acquainted with the behaviour and mentality of Russian business elites; he is, however, less acquainted with the world of Russian politicians.

As for the concrete, practical steps that Moscow is expecting from the new Georgian government, it can be assumed that these steps mean toning down rhetoric related to Georgia’s aspirations to join NATO and the Euro-

pean Union; subsequent forfeiting of these goals and starting to think earnestly about improving relations with Russia as its largest neighbour and market for agricultural products, wine, mineral water and beer. Furthermore, steps undertaken by Tbilisi *should not be reciprocated* automatically by Moscow. The subtle reciprocity distinction was not stated explicitly by Lukashevich but the hint of it was in the wording. It appears that former Prime Minister Ivanishvili did not get the hint of this subtle distinction, namely “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Apparently, the newly-elected President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili, does not understand that Russia is not an equal partner. Otherwise, he would not have said what he said: “We in Georgia will build relations with Russia on an equal and positive footing and in this direction certain steps have been undertaken.”<sup>7</sup>

It appears that after a while, the new Georgian leadership appointed in October 2012, despite its good intention of improving relations with Russia, has hit the Kremlin brick wall. Instead of reciprocity, the Russian leadership decided to accelerate the creeping occupation of the lost Georgian territory of South Ossetia. This issue was extensively discussed in the open press. As we know it today, the policy of creeping occupation started in 2009<sup>8</sup> and accelerated between June and October 2013, in particular.<sup>9</sup> To sweeten the bitter medicine of the creeping occupation President Vladimir Putin made an overture to Georgia in an 11 June 2013 interview with Sophie Shevardnadze, a granddaughter of the former president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze. First, Putin acknowledged the existence of two “red lines” that neither side could cross: the Russian recognised “independence” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia versus the territorial integrity of Georgia. He added that he “could not imagine” Russia de-recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia but also admitted that Georgia “struggles for, as Tbilisi calls it, Georgia’s territorial integrity.” According to Putin, the proper approach “requires careful consideration, a competent solution and the willingness to solve this issue based upon the interests of all those who live in these territories.” Thus, Putin seems to strike a pose of equidistance or, at least, to awaken such hopes in Tbilisi; ostensibly, he rules nothing out. Nothing is non-negotiable. Putin insinuates that the ultimate status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not necessarily a closed question but might hypothetically be re-opened in the future. He seemingly professes to be agnostic about the optimal or ultimate solution. For all its vagueness and ambiguities, Putin’s interview amounts to an unprecedented overture to

Tbilisi. By hinting that nothing is non-negotiable, Moscow sees to nudge Tbilisi into *choosing* [author's italics] between its two sets of objectives: those associated with the Western orientation, NATO and the EU, on one hand and improving relations with Russia and re-creating Georgia's territorial integrity in some new form, on the other hand, through negotiations requiring Russia's co-operation<sup>10</sup> or, in other words, acquiescence to Russia. At the time that Socor's article was published, Ivanishvili's government was still trying to maintain the two objectives and not choose between them. In a recent article by Joshua Kucera, the Kremlin seems to have been caught flat-footed by the realisation that NATO membership is, in fact, a goal desired by a *broad swath of Georgia's political class* [author's italics]<sup>11</sup> and not merely the population of Georgia. Despite this realisation, Vladimir Putin's confrontational approach has not changed. As is known, Putin does not like to be fooled.

Until now, Russia's technique of the creeping occupation stopped short of a massive provocation that otherwise might compel Georgia and the West to respond. Instead, the creeping approach makes it somewhat easier for the Georgian government (or, at least, part of it) and its Western partners to remain passive, occasionally complaining *pro forma* [author's italics] without effect.

Verbal statements on the scene will remain ineffective unless Washington and Brussels raise this issue directly in Moscow but Moscow seems confident that this will not happen<sup>12</sup> and, as a result, Moscow is encouraged to proceed ahead unobstructed.

Almost one year into his prime ministership, Ivanishvili said: "What is happening; namely, the creeping occupation, is very unpleasant and unclear as I thought that a different kind of attitude would develop between the new government and Russia. We made all efforts to settle the situation. It is unclear to me and we are still trying to find out where it all comes from."<sup>13</sup> Vasili Rukhadze clearly explained the nature of the Russian intent. By constantly expanding the occupation zone, Russia tries to keep the flashpoint for conflict alive and, in fact, invites Georgia into an open clash. Evidently, Moscow believes that if it feels it necessary, it can reactivate this conflict at any time, dragging Georgia into a renewed, wide-scale, devastating conflict and, finally, shattering even the most remote dreams of a united, stable and prosperous Georgia.<sup>14</sup> Even if, as David Phillips, Director of the Programme on Peace Building and Rights at Columbia University's

Institute for the Study of Human Rights, says, Georgia should avoid aggressive rhetoric and confrontation with Russia is not in Georgia's interest.<sup>15</sup> Georgia may be provoked in the same manner that it was provoked before the outbreak of the August 2008 war. Again, the blame will be put on the side of Georgia and certainly not on the provoking and provocative Russian behaviour. Whether the West has learned the lessons of the Russian successful public relations smear campaign, preceding the August 2008 war and what is going to be reaction of the West next time, remain to be seen.

Unfortunately for Georgia and its population, former Prime Minister Ivanishvili's conviction that relations with the Kremlin can be improved by making positive gestures towards Russia but, at the same time, by pursuing European integration and NATO membership, has turned out to be unrealistic. President Vladimir Putin's consistent policy of forcing the Georgian leadership to surrender its sovereignty and Euro-Atlantic integration not only has not changed but has been pursued steadfastly.

Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia represents the most dangerous threat to Georgia's territorial integrity, independence and statehood. Although Moscow claims upon a regular basis to be the guarantor of peace and stability in the South Caucasus, its military presence, in fact, remains the single biggest challenge to peace and stability - not only in Georgia but in the entire South Caucasus region.<sup>16</sup> This assessment will be dismissed outright by the Russian officials who will claim the opposite and name Georgia responsible for the turn of events and the warmongering.

As long as the West talks softly to President Vladimir Putin's regime, Russia remains the dominant military power in the South Caucasus. Conversely, however, as long as Russia remains militarily entrenched in the region, the resolution of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts will continue to be elusive.<sup>17</sup> Thus, as long as the West stays a reluctant interlocutor between Georgia and Russia, Georgia remains vulnerable to Russia's creeping occupation policy and Georgian calls for concrete help from the West still stay unanswered.

One has to remember that for Europe [or, rather, the EU], the victory of Ivanishvili and his change of course in relations with Russia came as a surprise. Over the last years, European leaders have become accustomed to President Saakashvili and his pro-Western foreign policy course which advocated integration in EU and NATO structures at the expense of relations with Russia.



*Officially* [author's italics], the EU supports Prime Minister Ivanishvili's new policy course towards Russia. Stefan Fuele, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), has said repeatedly that an improvement of Georgian-Russian relations was also in the EU's interest. *Internally* [author's italics], however, the member states are worried that a second "Ukraine scenario" could occur. In other words, Georgia could eventually abandon its Euro-Atlantic integration path in exchange for Russian concessions over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Therefore, the Georgian-Russian rapprochement is met with scepticism and the EU repeatedly seeks reassurances from the Georgian government that improved relations with Russia will not affect the ongoing negotiations about the EU-Georgia Association Agreement which is supposed to be signed at the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit in late November 2013.

In light of the fading interest and ambiguous feelings, Georgia should not expect any meaningful support from Europe for the long-term normalisation of its relations with Russia. Nor is a European initiative for the resolution of the conflict with Abkhazia and South Ossetia likely in the near future. Georgia has to go down this path on its own – and get it right.<sup>18</sup> Namely, either going back to the renewed "USSR," going forward to the lukewarm EU if and when, the EU is still around or maintaining its sovereignty and independence at all cost and on its own. The author's assertion will be dismissed outright by EU officials. However, Georgian reality shows that the militarily impotent EU has left Georgia to its own fate. Furthermore, the EU is unwilling to antagonise Russia for the sake of Georgia and, as a result, leaves Georgia in a difficult position. The latter point is half-heartedly recognised by Georgian officials, however, at the same time officials are not willing to acknowledge it.

To conclude, unrealistic expectations on the side of the Georgian government regarding the potential improvement in relations with Russia have failed to materialise. Unfortunately, it is easier to criticise former Prime Minister Ivanishvili and his cabinet today than to provide sober policy analysis with potential options out of the deadlock. What is evident is that the Georgian political establishment from the start has been wrong in assuming or perhaps envisaging that the dual policy of Euro-Atlantic integration and improvement of relations with Russia was doable. At least this approach was tried, however, even though the end result proved to be futile. Apparently, the newly-elected President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili, failed to understand that the dual policy pursued by Prime Minister Ivan-

ishvili led to a dead-end. Otherwise, he would not propose pursuing the same dual policy.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the dual policy, the so-called policy of small steps regarding Russia: namely, the appointment of Zurab Abashidze and subsequent meetings between Abashidze and Grigory Karasin, have led to minor changes while in the bigger picture one steadily sees the deterioration of the relations between Russia and Georgia. At the same time, EU officials have left Georgia to its own fate and, basically, said: “We encourage you in Georgia to improve relations with Russia but we have nothing to do with the process. Go on and bless you!” As a result, Georgia has three choices to ponder:

- a) Pursuing the course of Euro-Atlantic integration *against all odds* since the European dream may not become a reality and the goal of joining NATO is slowly turning into a fading memory
- b) Maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity *at all cost and alone* since neighbouring Turkey is not going to side with Georgia militarily against Russia or
- c) Succumbing to the wishes of Putin and becoming a member of the Custom Union and, subsequently, the Eurasian Union.

Each choice that the Georgian government decides to pursue has both pros and cons that this time around need to be carefully assessed. Lessons learned from the experience of the past 12 months should not be repeated. However, this point needs to be emphasised. This time around, Putin and his administration are unwilling to give the Georgian government time to rethink its choice of policies. The grace period is over. Full stop.

As for the Russian side, the policy of wait-and-see has been terminated. Putin clearly stated that: “I will not tolerate Georgian government stubbornness and misbehaviour. Do not think that you can fool me again. The policy of the creeping occupation will continue at full force and you in Georgia may complain as many times as you wish. Your supporters in the EU will continue to behave meekly and talk softly. Finally, remember my interview with Sophie Shevardnadze and draw the right conclusion. The choice is in your hands. If you choose the right path, you will be rewarded. Otherwise, you will bear the consequences.”

## References

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- 2 For the complete article, see [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/02/georgia-president-saakashvili-election-defeat](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/02/georgia-president-saakashvili-election-defeat). For an excellent analysis on why Ivanishvili has no chance to convince Russia that Georgia's NATO membership, in particular, poses no threat to Russia, see "Georgia's Post-Election: Challenges and Priorities" in Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) *Policy Brief Number Two* (November 2012) online at: [http://csis.org/files/publication/121106\\_US-Georgia\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Bugajski.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/121106_US-Georgia_Policy_Brief_Bugajski.pdf); p. 5.
- 3 See [www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/02/georgia-president-saakashvili-election-defeat](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/02/georgia-president-saakashvili-election-defeat). A similar statement was issued by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev who added that the Kremlin's political party was "ready for dialogue about the future of Russian-Georgian relations." Alexey Malashenko, from the Carnegie Moscow Center, was more cautious. He said that: "For a while, ties will soften, there will be a prospect of improvement, but an exchange of embassies is not possible yet." For the complete article, see <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/early-vote-count-georgia-puts-opposition-ahead> - online on 2 October 2012. For a more extensive range of reactions from Moscow as well as the Kremlin's state of confusion, in particular, see Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russian Policy in Georgia in a State of Flux" in *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*; vol. 9, issue 181 online at: [www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39928&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=587&no\\_cache=1#.UIJ2AdJHJDQ](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39928&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=587&no_cache=1#.UIJ2AdJHJDQ) – online on 4 October 2012.
- 4 For the complete article, see Nana Kurashvili, "Georgia's New Leaders Seek Fresh Start with Russia" in *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)*, CRS issue 665 online at: <http://iwpr.net/report-news/georgias-new-leaders-seek-fresh-start-russia> - online on 16 November 2012. Hereafter cited as Nana Kurashvili, "Georgia's New Leaders." See also [http://georgianpeoples.com/print.php?lang=eng&news\\_id=7218](http://georgianpeoples.com/print.php?lang=eng&news_id=7218) - online on 12 November 2012. Zurab Abashidze's remit includes negotiations with Grigory Karasin, Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the issues of trade, transport, culture, tourism and healthcare.
- 5 Nana Kurashvili, "Georgia's New Leaders." Ivanishvili visited Brussels between 11-14 November 2012.
- 6 See [http://georgianpeoples.com/print.php?lang=eng&news\\_id=7218](http://georgianpeoples.com/print.php?lang=eng&news_id=7218) - online on 12 November 2012.
- 7 For the complete article, see [www.trend.az/regions/scaucasus/georgia/2205531.html](http://www.trend.az/regions/scaucasus/georgia/2205531.html) - online on 28 October 2013.

8 According to Abashidze: “They [the Russians] say that borderisation [or rather creeping occupation] `is a result of the August 2008 war; borderisation started in 2009 and funds were allocated from the budget for that purpose followed by the signing of agreements with these independent states and so we are helping them with the development of the border infrastructure.” For the complete article, see [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26497](http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26497) – online on 27 September 2013. See also Molly Corso, “Georgia: Tbilisi Bracing for Russian Pressure” in *Eurasianet.org* online at [www.eurasianet.org/node/67629](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67629) - online on 15 October 2013. Abashidze’s wording contradicts the information published earlier; namely, that putting up barbed wire fences *was first started* [author’s italics] by the border guard troops of the Russian Federal Security Service in April-May 2011 [www.civil.ge/eng/\\_print.php?id=26144](http://www.civil.ge/eng/_print.php?id=26144) – online on 4 June 2013. Abashidze’s wording also contradicts the information that metal barriers went up two years after the August 2008 war; namely, in August 2010. Goga Aptsiauri and Claire Bigg, “Georgian Villagers Irate as Fence Goes up on South Ossetian Boundary” in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL) online at: [www.rferl.org/content/georgia-russia-ossetia/25131531.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-russia-ossetia/25131531.html) - online on 9 October 2013. Hereafter cited as Goga Aptsiauri and Claire Bigg, “Georgian Villagers.”

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10 Vladimir Socor, “Putin Hints”. Sergei Lavrov, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, was very diplomatic and very ambiguous when he said that: “Moscow hopes that the new Georgian administration in the post-Ivanishvili era will pursue policies friendly to Russia.” For the complete article, see [www.rferl.org/content/georgia-election-osce-margvelashvili/25150602.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/georgia-election-osce-margvelashvili/25150602.html) - online on 28 October 2013. Georgia’s friendly policies towards Russia hit the Kremlin’s brick wall whereas the Kremlin did not intend to pursue friendly policies towards Georgia. Russian words

failed to match Russian deeds.

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15 Maia Edilashvili, “Phillips.”

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