



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

3

**GEORGIA-RUSSIA: FROM NEGATIVE TO
POSITIVE UNCERTAINTY**

ALEXANDER RONDELI



EXPERT OPINION

2013



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

EXPERT OPINION

ALEXANDER RONDELI

**GEORGIA-RUSSIA: FROM NEGATIVE TO
POSITIVE UNCERTAINTY**

3

2013



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia.

Editor: Jeffrey Morski
Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Copyright © 2013 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-5484-6

Introduction

Within the post-Soviet space it is difficult to find a state which resists Russia's hegemony more than the small country of Georgia, located in the center of the South Caucasus.

Since 1991, Russia has been using all kinds of pressure on Georgia, both 'sticks' and 'carrots,' to make it an obedient satellite but these were more 'sticks' culminating in the occupation of 20% of the country's territory. Today, with a new political force in charge in Tbilisi, Moscow once more hopes that this time it will be more effective in forcing Georgia to turn its back on the West and restore the "brotherhood" with the northern "older brother." This time will also not be easy but Moscow, it seems, will use all its diplomatic skill and the ability to blackmail Tbilisi in order to achieve its strategic goal.

Georgian-Russian Contradictions

For a small state, the biggest external national security challenge is usually the role of powerful neighbors. The situation is aggravated when the neighboring great power is a former colonial master. This is the case in Georgia. There are different geo-political and geo-economic advantages and constraints on Georgia's sovereign existence but the war with Russia in 2008 suggests that the most serious external constraint on Georgia's development as a sovereign, stable and democratizing state is Russian neo-imperialism.

Since Georgia's independence, Georgian-Russian relations have been difficult and conflicting. Russia tried to maintain a military presence in Georgia and keep the country within its military-political orbit. Moscow always considered Georgia to be a crucial country from the point of view of its presence in the Caucasus. From the very beginning of independence, which was extremely difficult for the newly-born state, Georgia found itself under pressure from Moscow which tried to "keep" the country at any expense through political pressure, economic blackmailing and support of separatism in the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹

For Moscow, Georgia is a strategically key country in the region. Russia believes that if it does not retain control over Georgia, it will be unable to restore its power in the South Caucasus and reclaim its role as the major power in the region. Control over Georgia allows Russia to feel more confident about its control over the unstable North Caucasus and to slow Turkey's increasing influence over former Soviet Turkic-speaking republics and peoples. As a satellite of Russia, Georgia could cut off energy-rich Azerbaijan and Central Asian land-locked states from the West by closing access to the Black Sea. Russia would have a major military presence in the region and easy access to its ally in the South Caucasus—Armenia—which is hostile to Turkey and Azerbaijan. Finally, by controlling Georgia, the Kremlin would more easily block the penetration of European and Euro-Atlantic structures in the Caucasus. Invading Georgia in 2008, Moscow wanted to show its neighbors and the world that in the so-called “near abroad” (post-Soviet space), Russian rules would operate and no one else's. As Stephen Jones argues, “...for Russia, the war was not fundamentally about Georgia. It was bound up with larger international issues such as eastward expansion of NATO, the recognition of Kosovo, Russia's security in the North Caucasus and the West's challenge to Russian control of oil and gas supplies in Eurasia.”² These are all good reasons why the Kremlin believes Georgia must be kept in Russia's military-political orbit and a powerful factor that explains Moscow's efforts to put Georgia under constant pressure. Retaining control over Georgia would restore Russia as an unchallenged hegemon in the entire region and strengthen Moscow's ambitions and efforts to dominate the post-Soviet space.

It is important to mention that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia remains the only neighboring country with which Georgia still has not concluded a so-called framework agreement. Both countries failed to sign such a document because of the fact that Russia insisted on including two paragraphs in the text of the agreement: one about Russia's special rights in the conflict regions of sovereign Georgia and another about the obligation of the signing parties not to allow any third party to deploy its military and military infrastructure on the territory of the signing parties. So, it was clear that in spite of Russia's numerous statements that it respects the territorial integrity of Georgia, Russia, from the very beginning, actually did not respect Georgia's sovereign rights and was not interested in acting as a friendly neighbor and fair mediator.

The August 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia showed that *Realpolitik* remains an instrument of politics in the post-Soviet space. Analyzing the August 2008 war, Anthony Cordesman argues that “...more powerful states will bend or break rules when they feel it is in their interest to do so and when there is no opposing power bloc that can pose a convincing threat.”³

Despite the certain periods of relative improvement of Georgian-Russian relations (one was immediately after President Saakashvili’s coming to power), mistrust between these two countries never disappeared and the relations were already tense. Russian propaganda against Georgia was extremely intense and reached a point where a large part of the Russian population started to consider Georgia as the most hostile and dangerous (!) country. Georgian authorities, in their turn, accused Russia of neo-imperialism, support of separatism in Georgia, economic blackmailing, etc.

As Russian expert, Sergey Markedonov, correctly mentions, the numerous problems between the two countries accumulated beginning from the 1990s and took on a new impulse after the “Rose Revolution.”⁴

The Georgian Government somewhat underestimated the determination of Moscow to obtain whatever it wanted and not to concede the post-Soviet space and, specifically, the South Caucasus to the West and, most of all, to the US. Moscow managed to out-maneuver Tbilisi in August of 2008 and by using the mistakes of Georgian authorities, invaded Georgia not only with the aim of annexing South Ossetia and Abkhazia but also with the goal of replacing the government in Tbilisi with one more “friendly” towards Russia. Diplomatic actions from the West forced Russia to stop while approaching the capital of Georgia. The West’s interference led to a peace agreement but Russia has violated the conditions of the agreement, did not leave Georgia and, in August of 2008, recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two Georgian provinces. On the basis of these agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia deployed its military bases in those territories; i.e., *de facto* occupying these two Georgian provinces comprising around 20% of Georgian territory.

Post-War Cold Peace

After the August war, Russia and Georgia have completely opposite and practically incompatible views on the existing situation. Georgia believes that its historic provinces, Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia), are

occupied by Russia and Russia should stop the occupation while, on the other hand, Russia's stance is that there are currently three independent states – Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's position is supported by the EU, the US and the greater part of the international community while Russia's has the backing of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Vanuatu and Tuvalu.

Georgia's declared goals to ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as fulfilling European and Euro-Atlantic integration and ensuring the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus transit corridor are considered as largely unacceptable by Moscow. As Tengiz Pkhaldze and Nikolay Silaev argue, "Georgia considers the position of the Russian Federation to be the main obstacle to implementing objectives that emanate from its national interests..., furthermore, it sees Moscow as the main source of challenges and threats to its security."⁵

The positions of the West and Russia on Abkhazia and South Ossetia are also radically different, even mutually excluding, and the West has no instruments to force Russia to abandon its position. Russia's goal is to defend its "gains" from the 2008 war and it is difficult to imagine Russia stepping back.

Georgian-Russian economic relations received a serious blow when, in 2006 as a result of a political crisis (spy scandal) between the two countries, Moscow unilaterally blocked Georgian exports to Russia in order to suffocate the Georgian economy. Despite that fact, Russia's investments in the Georgian economy never stopped and even after the 2008 war were among the highest – for example, Russia ranked third in FDI in Georgia in 2010 behind the Netherlands and the US.⁶

Will Relations Improve?

The situation is in a deadlock and it is extremely difficult to find a way out. Probably, many in Moscow hoped that the new government in Tbilisi would not manifest its pro-Western sympathy so apparently and they did have certain basis for such a judgment: the new Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has earned his billions in Moscow, knows the Russian elite quite well and, thus, would listen to Moscow. So far, from the statements of the new Georgian PM, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other Georgian officials, we observe calls for the improvement of relations with Russia

while maintaining the course towards the West, the EU and Euro-Atlantic structures.

After the oppositional coalition, “Georgian Dream,” came to power in Tbilisi, the new Georgian authorities made several steps towards Moscow. It stopped the broadcasting of the Russian language TV channel PIK, a channel which had long irritated Russia, made several statements regarding the necessity and desirability of improving relations between the two countries—first of all, in the sphere of economy and trade, as well as culture—and appointed an experienced diplomat, Zurab Abashidze, as a Special Representative of the Prime Minister for negotiations with Russia. We should not forget the fact that even before the “Georgian Dream” came to power, Tbilisi did not block Russia’s accession to the WTO.⁷

In the beginning, Russia behaved as if it did not get the signals from Tbilisi and a number of Russian experts even started to assert that Georgia should strongly request that Russia improve relations as it was Georgia which needed Russia and not the reverse.⁸ Certain Russian experts even reacted aggressively at Tbilisi’s attempts.⁹

The fact that the new authority in Tbilisi announced integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as its strategic goal did not give rise to enthusiasm in Moscow but Russians do not believe that Georgia will achieve this goal.¹⁰ Moscow needs normal relations with Georgia. It needs the railway through Georgia, a transit route for military cargo for Russian bases located in Armenia and many other things. First of all, it needs Tbilisi’s refusal to follow the Western route and return under Russia’s “guardianship.”

Obviously, an improvement of relations between Georgia and Russia cannot be achieved without direct dialogue between Moscow and Tbilisi. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were disrupted as a result of the August war of 2008. The Geneva negotiations are the only existing format for relations between the two countries but no progress is visible. Russia is stubbornly maintaining its position and is not going to concede whatever it has conquered. Georgia, naturally, cannot recognize the loss of its two historic provinces and accept a “new geopolitical reality” as Moscow has defined the situation created as a result of the 2008 war. Until very recently, Moscow has shown that it is not bothered by the absence of normal relations with Tbilisi and that it is not going to have relations with

President Saakashvili, emphasizing exactly his negative role in the absence of normal relations between the two countries.

Recent developments (Moscow softened its position on Georgian exports) raise hopes for gradual progress toward normalization and the establishment of wider economic linkages between the two countries.* As has already been noted, economic relations between the two neighbors continued to exist. As Vladimir Papava mentions: “Despite the difficulties and confrontations in Georgian-Russian relations, especially after the August 2008 war, the economic activities between the two countries have not been interrupted. Russian capital flow and investments in the Georgian economy have continued.”¹¹ So, if relations between the two countries have to improve, there is already quite a significant economic basis for this to happen.

Although Russia tries to create an impression that Georgia is unimportant and Georgia itself is more interested in improving the relations with its bigger neighbor, these claims are not quite true. Russia not only wants to restore its influence on Georgia but also hopes to lobby and dictate the idea of confederation which had already been mentioned several times in Moscow by some Russian politicians and experts. The idea consists of the following: Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia forming a confederation and joining the Eurasian Union. Moscow probably hopes that Georgia, left without the active support of the West (true or false?), would accept a nicely described model of confederation and then Russia will agree on “restored brotherhood” with Georgia. Of course, the Kremlin is not naive to consider this plan to be easily achievable although by using different factors at once, it considers the task to be doable. As for the Georgian population, part of it might consider the model of confederation as acceptable but, for the most part and especially for the youth, the Moscow bait would be unacceptable. It seems that Moscow still needs to continue to put strong pressure on Georgia but even these actions are not a guarantee to success. There is only one way for the real normalization of relations – the rejection of the neo-imperialist policy from Moscow’s side and the establishment of truly good neighborly relations with a much weaker neighbor. But the question is this - Is this way acceptable for Moscow?

* Some Russian experts believe that the restoration of the economic linkages between Russia and Georgia would not be enough to have a positive effect on Georgia. See Александр Крылов, “Южный Кавказ: новые проблемы для Москвы” at www.kavkazoved.info/priew/2013/04/02/yuzhny-kavkaz-novye-problemy-dlya-mosvy.html, 4.15.2013.

Conclusion

In its current stage of development, Georgia has clearly made its choice in favor of the West but because of the changing security environment and certain internal political shifts, the question still remains whether or not this choice is final and irreversible. To a great extent, the answer depends on the ability of the local elite to deal with complex issues of nation- and state-building and socio-economic development. Relations with Russia are one of the powerful factors capable of changing Georgia's ability to continue its pro-Western orientation.

It is clear that Moscow's pressure on Georgia will continue not only in order to force Tbilisi not to follow pro-Western policy but, first of all, to convince Georgia to accept the so-called "new geopolitical reality;" i.e., the loss of its breakaway provinces and Russia's strengthened military presence on Georgia's sovereign territory. One can guess that this time Moscow will be more "creative" and will use a combination of its traditional blackmail mixed with the elements of soft power.

The new leadership in Tbilisi sends signals to Moscow that it wants to normalize bilateral relations with Russia but it is not clear what it considers "normal" in the relations between the two countries and what price Georgia is ready to pay for this normalization. It is difficult to imagine that Russia could change its demands on Georgia and soften its position.

Despite the fact that state institutions today are much more developed than a decade ago and Georgia managed to ensure the peaceful transfer of power through electoral mechanisms, personalities continue to play a very significant, if not decisive, role in Georgian politics. Hence, the political leadership will largely determine Georgia's future strategic choices.

As usually happens with weak powers, external factors and conditions may decisively influence Georgia's foreign policy behavior and strategic orientation. These factors (Russia's role in the region, relations with the West, regional security problems, shifts in Europe's energy policy and so on) are mostly uncertain and volatile and, thus, not easy to predict.

Endnotes

- 1 For Russian experts writing about those issues, see: А. Арбатов, *Безопасность: Российский выбор*, Эпицентр, Москва, 1999, стр. 163-170; Сергей Ознобищев, “Кого лечить «от Грузии»?,” *Международные процессы*, Том 9, №2 (26), Май-Август 2011, www.intertrends.ru/seventeenth/016.htm.
- 2 Stephen Jones, *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence*, I. B. Tauris, London-New York, 2013, p. 250.
- 3 Anthony Cordesman, “The Georgia War and the Century of ‘Real Power,’” *CSIS Commentary*, August 18, 2008.
- 4 Сергей Маркедонов, *Россия-Грузия: без завышенных ожиданий*, Политком. ру, 12.10.2012, www.politcom.ru/print.php?id=14668, 15.10.2012.
- 5 Tengiz Pkhaladze, Nikolay Silaev, “Russian-Georgian Relations in the Context of European Security,” in *Russia and Georgia: Searching the Way Out*, GFSIS, 2011, p. 12.
- 6 *Civil.ge*, 12 марта 2010, www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=21772.
- 7 “Russia’s Accession to the WTO: The Perspective from Tbilisi,” International Alert, 12.20.2011, www.international-alert.org/print/3165.
- 8 Андрей Епифанцев, *Давайте, разрешим Грузии поухаживать за Россией*, Regnum, 04.11.2012, www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1589591.html?forprint, 01.14.2013; Interview with Fedor Lukianov, IPN (Interpressnews), www.interpressnews.ge/ge/eqskluzivi/217960-thu-saqartvelo-uars-ar-itkvis-af (in Georgian).
- 9 Яна Амелина, *Команда Иванишвили – «второе издание» режима Саакашвили*, Regnum. 19.11.2012, www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1594982.html?forprint, 20.11.2012.
- 10 Fyodor Lukianov, Georgia as Russia’s Future Asset, “Russia in Global Affairs,” 15 February 2013, p. 2, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/print/redcol/georgia-as-Russia’s-Future-Asset> - 15852 04.06.2013.
- 11 Vladimir Papava, “The Evolution of Economic Relations between Georgia and Russia in the Post-Soviet Period: Past Trends and Perspectives,” in *Russia and Georgia: Searching the Way Out*, GFSIS, 2011, p. 64.