



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

GEORGIA'S PLACE IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

TORNIKE SHARASHENIDZE

64

EXPERT OPINION





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

EXPERT OPINION

TORNIKE SHARASHENIDZE

GEORGIA'S PLACE IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

64

2016



The publication is made possible with the support of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency.

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 © 2016 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-9287-9

Russian-Georgian relations are a rather interesting topic for discussion not only owing to the fact that Russia constitutes one of Georgia's principal security challenges, but also because, on the one hand, this involves one of the world's leading and most influential states, which seeks to secure an exclusive sphere of influence in its neighborhood and play a more or less independent game. While, on the other hand, Georgia, once a part of the Russian empire, used to play a distinguished role in Russia's political and social realms and the Russian political elite (as well as a large part of the population) still deem it worthy of particular attention.

Attitudes towards Russia in Georgia are heterogeneous. All the evils of the world are frequently attributed to Russia (including accusations of clandestine funding of terrorist organizations) and it is blamed for all of Georgia's misfortunes. There is also (albeit a much more marginalized) an opposing viewpoint, which paints Russia as the protector of spirituality and "true Orthodoxy", and therefore, Georgia's patron, having repeatedly delivered the latter from harm, and without which the country and its people are doomed.

In short, assessments of Russia are replete with emotions, and despite the fact that the history of Georgia's relations with Russia date back over two centuries, there is still a serious shortage of knowledge and awareness about Russia in our country. Along with excess emotions, this is also due to the fact that a considerable segment of the new Georgian political elite are Western-educated and have not earmarked any particular attention to the study of Russia. The younger generation has been virtually severed from Russia and do not command the Russian language. This, on the one hand, may be a positive development, since it diminishes Russian propaganda in the country; however, on the other hand, it gives rise to a significant knowledge gap, which ultimately leads to a more negative than a positive outcome.

All of the above is reflected in state policies aimed at Russia. Virtually all of the Georgian political elite, upon their rise to power, have sought to mend ties with Russia, which has inexorably been followed by disappointment and criticism from the opposition. Subsequently, said opponents, once in power, took the exact same path, leading to predictable consequences.

Our objective is not to expound on the priorities and directions of Georgian policy in relation to Russia. Although, at the same time, we will attempt to

analyze Russia's attitude towards Georgia, its root causes and historical grounds, and respectively explain Russian policy in terms of Georgia. Given the above, the work may prove instrumental in elaborating policy principles towards Russia.

The Traditional Interests of Russia as a Great Power

Russia is not only Georgia's biggest and most powerful neighbor; it is also one of the leading players on the global political arena. Evidently, said player has its interests anchored in its immediate neighborhood and, especially, the former Soviet Union. Russia has endured many a war, which has induced a severe security complex. World War II was particularly difficult, following which, the Russian then-government resolved to put maximum effort in preventing unexpected enemy attacks in the future (similar to that launched by Germany on June 22, 1941). Consequently, it was then decided to establish satellite-states in the Soviet neighborhood, which would preclude any type of aggression ensuing from these territories. To the Western leaders (primarily in the United States), this intention was understandable and they were well-accustomed to the notion that Eastern European states were to maintain an amicable disposition towards Russia (the Soviet Union) and take Moscow's interests into account when building their foreign policy (as was the case in Finland during the Cold War). However, Moscow deemed this achievement insufficient and it was ultimately decided to institute satellite Communist regimes within Eastern European countries. Owing to this arrangement, the Soviet Union surrounded itself with a security belt; however, on the other hand, Moscow was unable to anticipate that such a move would be pursued by an appropriate retaliation from the West, involving the Soviet Union in an exceedingly arduous confrontation, which would ultimately lead to its collapse.

Clearly, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the situation drastically changed in this regard. Not only did Communist regimes fall, but the majority of the Eastern European countries joined NATO, resulting in the disintegration of the post-WWII security belt. Moscow had never concealed the fact that it would not tolerate such a development, and as soon as it gathered momentum, it began resisting NATO expansion by all means available. The current Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expressly

stated that the 2008 war with Georgia was a war against NATO expansion. Certainly, at least in part, the fear of Ukraine's conceivable entrance into NATO also provoked the annexation of Crimea and triggered a limited war in Eastern Ukraine. Generally, it is difficult to pinpoint where Russia's fear of a foreign state's invasion ends and the desire for imperial expansion begins, although, perhaps, it would be unwise to completely disregard the fear factor.

With both fear and the imperial expansion in mind, the presence of another large state in its neighborhood is decidedly unacceptable for Russia (especially if this presence is of a military nature). This approach also applies to the South Caucasus, which Russia secured in the 19th century following a war with other great powers (early Turkey and Iran). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia relinquished the largest part of the South Caucasus without a fight and coming to terms with this circumstance has been no easy feat. Moscow is all the more irritated by the fact that the South Caucasus has conciliatingly provided a foothold to its principal rival - the United States.

Clearly, when referring to the fear factor, a question arises with regards to whether this fear is justified and why Russia is unable to coalesce with the West (which it fears), join the European Union and strive for NATO membership? This question becomes logical only if Russia is viewed as a typical European state, whose citizens are primarily concerned with their own wellbeing rather than the prestige and glory of their country. Russia is certainly not such a state. It does not claim to be part of Asia, but, simultaneously refuses to become a full-fledged constituent of the West, since in that case, it will emerge as an ordinary member-state of the EU and surrender the very foundation of the Russian national identity - the ambition to be one of the global axes. Said axis thus naturally finds it vitally significant (again and again) to at the very least secure the influence over its own neighborhood.

Russia's Attitude toward Georgia: Historical Background

Russia's particular position in relation to Georgia has been determined by a number of factors.

Imperial expansion factor. The conquest of Georgia has played a pivotal role in the history of the Russian Empire. It was after Georgia's annexation that

Russia managed to ultimately subdue the North Caucasus. After occupying Georgia, Russia also opened a new frontline in the war against Turkey (prior to that, it was only capable of attacking Turkey from the Balkans). Georgia became a bridgehead of sorts, from which Russia continued its expansion to the South Caucasus, and after gaining a foothold in the South Caucasus, Russia went on to expand into the Central Asia. Thus, Georgia was the inaugural country, after the conquest of which, Russia proceeded to conduct successful campaigns (not only against Turkey, but also Iran and Afghanistan) and annex new territories. Stemming from this historical experience, Russia sees control over Georgia as a necessary precondition for exerting control over the South Caucasus (and, in part, Central Asia). This not only augments Georgia's significance and weight for Russia, but also determines the latter's particularly bitter perception of rival large states' (primarily, the United States) increasing influence in Georgia - if Georgia falls under the influence of any rival state, then the latter may expand said influence (and, in all likelihood, its control) over the entirety of the Caucasus and, possibly, Central Asia (as Russia itself has done in the past).

Moreover, Georgia is separated from Russia by a natural barrier in the form of the Caucasus mountain range, which is the actual boundary between Russia and the South Caucasus. Consequently, it is inadmissible for Russia to let this natural barrier fall into someone else's hands. Besides the Caucasus Mountains, Georgia's geography is distinct due to its access to the Black Sea, which has traditionally been one of the most vulnerable areas for the Russian Empire and the extension of jurisdiction over it constituted one of Russia's principal objectives. Russia has expended considerable effort to secure Constantinople and establish control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits, effectively barricading the Black Sea from belligerent states (the wars with Turkey were conducted for this purpose). This scheme ultimately failed, however, evidently, Russia's interest in the Black Sea still persist - as it is unable to control the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits, Russia attempts to establish dominion over at least a large segment of the Black Sea, thereby minimizing the perceived threat. The annexation of Crimea has clearly demonstrated the degree of importance that Russia attaches to the Black Sea.

Georgia's geography is noteworthy for Russia also from the viewpoint of the country's direct proximity to the North Caucasus. The latter is the most

unstable region for today's Russia with the Russian political elite fearing that the country's destabilization (and possibly even disintegration) may be triggered in this region, and that external hostile forces may use Georgia as a springboard for this purpose.

Alternative trade and energy route factor. Since the late 1990's, Russia has been sparing no effort in its attempts to thwart the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project. Clearly, the project itself posed no significant threat (the amount of oil carried by the pipeline is certainly incapable of shaking up Russia's position as a key energy supplier); however, the threat arose from the precedent itself that exporting Caspian energy resources to the global market would take place bypassing Russia. Moreover, the project rendered Georgia an interesting country for the West and strengthened its positions. Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan was succeeded by the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum project, which drastically reduced Georgia's dependence on Russian gas and thus further bolstered its stance. Following Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, the construction of the Nabucco pipeline (running from Turkey through Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria) was placed on the agenda, which seriously rivaled Russia as Europe's primary gas supplier. Nabucco has been suspended owing precisely to the fact that Russia expended boundless resources for this purpose (by launching the alternative "South Stream" project, which, too, was deferred, once Nabucco was frozen).

Besides the fact that Georgia offers an alternative path (or a segment of such a path), it does not suit Russia to see Georgia develop energy and trade routes on its territory since this would strengthen the country further. As for all small states, it is vitally significant for Georgia to identify its own function. It is this function that the trade and energy corridors serve (more so, since Georgia boasts a similar historical experience: during David the Builder's reign, the country gained power by becoming an element of the Silk Road). Without its transit function, Georgia will become significantly debilitated and thus easily fall under the influence of its largest and most powerful neighbor (Russia).

Expansion of democracy and Western influence. It is far more difficult for Russia to impose its influence on democratic states and, hence, it considers the spread of democracy in its neighborhood a threat. Georgia is still in a transition period and has a long way to go before becoming a full-fledged democracy, but even the fact that the country has already experienced a peaceful and democratic transition of power is somewhat precarious for

Russia, since it signifies that if the latter succeeds in installing an allied regime in Georgia, it may not be elected by the people. In addition, Russia's political elite is gripped by a fear of an "Orange Revolution" (clearly manifested in the retaliatory actions to the Maidan protests). As a rule, the Russian political elite sees the US intelligence service as being behind these processes with an attempt to extend the revolutionary wave over Russia. Thus, any democratic transformation is cause for panic even when it occurs in remote regions (such as the "Arab Spring" in North Africa).

Clearly, Russia takes even more seriously the prospect of NATO and EU expansion in the South Caucasus. This will signify the democratization of the region and deal a considerable blow to Russia's imperial ambitions. Russia's leaders believe that since their country once put great effort and sacrifice into commandeering the South Caucasus from Iran and Turkey, the territory should not be relinquished peacefully. The 2008 war was a demonstration of the fact that Russia is prepared to defend its position in the region at any cost.

Particular emotional dependency on Georgia. Georgia holds a special place in Russian consciousness, which isn't determined solely by its geopolitical significance. Georgians had become an integral part of Russia's political, military and cultural elite and greatly contributed to the establishment and strengthening of the Empire. Not to mention General Bagrationi, Mensheviks Karlo Chkheidze and Irakli Tsereteli, Bolsheviks Joseph Stalin and Sergo Ordzhonikidze, or the film director Georgiy Daneliya, numerous Russian public figures were raised in Tbilisi (for instance, Yevgeny Primakov). The fact as of the 19th century Georgia served as a favorite resort for Russia's cultural and political elite also should not be neglected.

Moreover, according to a widespread myth, the Georgian people were rescued from certain annihilation and conversion to Islam by none other than Russia, and at the time Georgia itself addressed Russia with a plea for help. It is not worth pondering on how much truth this myth contains. The key point is that this myth is staunchly upheld in Russia, and thus, attempts by Georgia to implement independent policy and, especially, its ambition to further converge with the West, are seen as ungrateful and pigeonholed as "betrayal". When such "betrayal" comes from a coreligionist nation, which was once so close to the Empire and which was "rescued" by said Empire from "certain annihilation", the reaction is much more onerous than it should be. Russia's particularly hostile attitude towards Georgia

since the 90's onwards can perhaps, *inter alia*, also be attributed to this. Georgia's aspiration towards independence (manifested in the late 80's) and the country's rapprochement with the West (beginning in the late 90's) irritated Russia to a much higher degree than similar processes in the Baltic States. Georgia is perceived as a mistaken and ungrateful child, who should be punished and should accept this punishment as fully legitimate and well-deserved.

Russia's Attitude towards Georgia: The Present Situation

As is likely the case with all empires, Russia finds it difficult to recognize its colonies as full-fledged states. An establishment particularly close to the Kremlin, under the title Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, openly states that under no circumstances should Russia treat former Soviet republics as subjects of international law. This is indicative of the fact that Russia is not only incapable of perceiving its former colonies as independent states, but has no desire for them to establish themselves as such, hence, treating them accordingly. Clearly, Georgia is no exception. Furthermore, our country's close relationship with the United States also leaves its mark on Russia's attitude towards Georgia. Russia generally considers the United States' role and influence excessive and sees US involvement everywhere. Accordingly, Russia's estimates of US impact on Georgia are equally exaggerated. This, clearly, further aggravates bilateral relations: from the Russian point of view, the United States artificially established state institutions and an army in Georgia, wiped the Russian language from Georgian minds and essentially caused the estrangement of Georgia from Russia. All pro-Western political powers or individuals in Georgia are seen as an "American project". It is the United States and US agents that are dragging Georgia into NATO, as Georgians themselves would not consider such an option.

In order to somewhat exhaust the NATO subject, it must also be mentioned that Russia believes that NATO membership is an end in itself for Georgia. As if the latter (or rather, the Georgian political elite established by the United States) primarily seeks to become a NATO member to spite Russia, which does not seem to grasp that NATO in Georgia is seen as a means for achieving security and that Georgia has legitimate reasons for this. Such a notion does not exist, as, for instance, a large part of the Russian

population is unaware that Russia openly supported Abkhaz separatists during the war, and the majority of those who are aware tend to justify it, tracing Abkhazia's inclusion into Georgian territory to Stalin's decision, which "gifted" Abkhazia to "its native land". The entirety of Georgia, as well as the Georgian elite, have been identified as the culprits in the 2008 war, having been, once again "enticed by the Americans".

Such a disposition towards Abkhazia is no exception - to the Russian political elite and the majority of population, a unified Georgia is an artificially manufactured phenomenon, in the establishment of which, they believe, Russia played a significant part. It was Russia that rescued Georgia, in segments, from the grip of Muslim conquerors and subsequently unified the country under its wing. The role that this narrative of "deliverance from Muslim invaders and salvation" plays in Russian historical memory was already discussed above.

At present, interest towards Georgia in Russia has relatively dwindled. Georgia no longer holds a prominent place in Russian media as it once had during Saakashvili's tenure, and, more importantly, the country is no longer a victim of targeted demonization in Russian media, owing to which, Georgia was at one time cited as one of Russia's primary enemies. Although, recent history has shown that if necessary the Russian authorities are capable of promptly reprogramming the propaganda machine to demonize any state, which, among other things, may be aimed at galvanizing public opinion ahead of aggression perpetrated against said state. Thus, the current thaw in bilateral relations may not carry as much significance. If Moscow deems it necessary, it will swiftly re-demonize Georgia with all possible ensuing consequences.

All the more, Russia not only no longer conceals its hostility towards the West, but rather attempts to deter the West and its colonies (evidently, including Georgia) by a show of force. This approach has been well-reflected in Russia's official documents (military doctrines, National Security Strategy, etc.). The Russian military doctrine for 2000 already mentioned the threat posed by the limitation of the rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens living abroad and the need to protect them. If we recall that it was then that Russian passports began to be distributed in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, it becomes clear who Russia had in mind when referring to its citizens abroad. Following the 2008 war, the 2010 military doctrine used a much harsher tone and announced that

Russian citizens living beyond its borders would be defended by the use of armed forces. The same is reiterated in the 2014 doctrine.

In the 2010 doctrine, the advancement of NATO infrastructure towards Russia's borders (including, by way of NATO expansion) is already declared a threat. The 2014 doctrine reiterates approximately the same in relation to NATO and also introduces Abkhazia and South Ossetia, cooperation with whom is cited as one of the priorities for reinforcing common defense and security.

Russia's National Security Strategy for 2016 lists Abkhazia and South Ossetia alongside the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, as a foreign policy priority, and NATO expansion remains a declared threat.

The document also highlights an interesting point, which emphasizes modern Russia's confrontation with the West not only on a geopolitical, but also on the ideological and the information front. "Traditional Russian spiritual and moral values are being revived ... We are seeing the consolidation of civil society around the common values that shape the foundations of statehood such as Russia's freedom and independence, humanism, interethnic peace and accord, the unity of the cultures of the Russian Federation's multiethnic people, respect for family and faith traditions, and patriotism," states the Strategy. There is no mention of democracy and human rights.

Instead of a Conclusion

Russia has perceived Georgia not only as part of its legitimate sphere of influence, but also as a geopolitically significant area, the control of which (or, at the very least, the prevention of Western influence over which) is absolutely necessary.

Georgian independence has been the cause of misconception for Russia; hence, it also has no comprehension of the legitimate security interests that Georgia may harbor. Georgia's interests and aspirations have been severely misconstrued and distorted in Russia, with the latter's rivals (primarily the United States) having been customarily seen as being behind these interests and aspirations.

Given the exaggerated influence of the United States on Georgia and the equally exaggerated merit that Russia claims in the salvation and strengthening of the country (as well as, perhaps, Georgia's role in the security of the Russian Empire), Russia's exceptionally hostile attitude towards the Georgian state should in no way be surprising.

In terms of Russia's attitude towards Georgia, the biggest problem for the latter is likely the fact that within the consciousness of the Russian political elite and a large part of the population, its statehood is illegitimate and from their perspective, Georgia, as a rule, should be a constituent of the Russian Empire, or, at least, part of its sphere of influence.