



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

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**QUADRUPLE RELATIONS:
RUSSIA/EU/NATO/US-GEORGIA**

EUGENE KOGAN



EXPERT OPINION

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Russia-Georgia.

Since the protracted conflict between Russia and Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia has not been resolved, the looming confrontation between Russia and Georgia has been merely postponed for some time into the future. Since the end of the August 2008 war, Russia has entrenched its military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia¹ and thus sent a clear signal to the Georgian government that 'We are here to stay for as long as it takes' and 'We may interfere in the democratic process of Georgia at a time which is suitable to Russia.'

Even though Georgia strives to become a fully-fledged democracy, President Vladimir Putin and his government are not interested in having a democratic country on their doorstep. President Putin and his government perceive Western-style democracy as unwelcome phenomena, panacea to troubles and, finally, wish to have a submissive Georgia in their sphere of influence. The author has no illusion that Russian officials will dismiss his assertions out of hand.

As a result of their world vision and security outlook, President Putin and his government continue a consistent policy of bullying and intimidation versus Georgia. If needed, the bullying and intimidation campaign can go hand in hand with the fully-fledged media and diplomacy smear campaign that blames Georgia for all evils. We need to bear in mind that the recent borderisation process or, simply put, the installation of fences by the Russian troops across parts of the South Ossetian administrative boundary began in April-May 2011 and not in February 2013² and was an example of what may be yet to come. Furthermore, Georgia and Russia have no demarcated border and, as a result, Russia is likely to replicate the borderisation process along the not yet demarcated border. Russia's recent initiative to change the facts on the ground shows that President Putin and his government are doing their best to identify the weakest points in the Georgian defence system and probe them assertively.

Learning a great deal from how West at large reacted to the August 2008 war, President Putin and his government concluded that the EU member states will not get involved militarily in the defence of Georgia's interests in potential conflict in the future. As for the critical statement made by Hill-

ary Clinton, the then US Secretary of State, that “We strongly support the territorial integrity and independence of Georgia and we do not recognise the secessionist areas,”³ it does not change Russia’s position. President Putin and his government have heard such statements since the end of the August 2008 war and are used to hearing them time and again. I would further argue that such statements encourage Putin and his government to pursue their policy towards Georgia even more forcefully. There is a clear understanding in Russia that as long as the Georgian government does not complain or rather belatedly complain, as in the case of the borderisation process, the EU reaction remains meek and not effective.

EU-Georgia.

As long as the EU lacks a coherent and unified military policy to support Georgia against Russia, Georgia remains a vulnerable country open to intimidation and threats by Russia. The latter, as was presented above, will look for any opportunity to show who is the master in the South Caucasus region.

Even though the truth about the state of the EU military capabilities is not a pleasant fact for the EU member states, the EU cannot escape its miserable reality. It can be said for certain that the sharply declined defence budget in the EU member states is not going to be increased over the next three to five years, at least. In military terms, just three out of twenty-eight member states possess military capabilities and maintain a defence budget of about or slightly above 2%. They are France, Poland and the UK. However, even these three countries are not going to support Georgia militarily when worst comes to worst.

There is also no guarantee that the EU political and diplomatic machinery will cause serious damage to the well-oiled machinery and well-articulated policy of Russia’s smear campaign. In other words, politically, diplomatically and militarily the EU cannot help Georgia. However, the EU officials will continue to urge the Georgian government to improve relations with Russia even to the detriment of Georgia. At this point, the Georgian government has to understand its limits of improving relations with Russia and not to pursue policies that can be detrimental to the national security of Georgia. This requires sobering analysis and policy recommendations.

In addition, as long as the EU officials avoid prodding President Putin and his government to improve relations with Georgia, such a one sided and imbalanced policy causes more harm than good. Can the same EU member states that are also members of NATO somehow change the situation in favour of Georgia?

NATO-Georgia.

Although NATO's Open Door Policy and its embrace of Georgia by NATO are commendable, there is one crucial impediment to such a policy. Georgia's path to the door is hindered by Russia. Russian officials will dismiss the author's claim outright and will say that Russia has no veto power over the sovereign policy of Georgia. In reality or, rather, the real world, Russia imposes implicit veto over the decision of Georgia to join NATO and President Putin is not shy to state 'No to NATO.'

At the time that the Baltic States joined NATO, the leadership of Russia half-heartedly accepted their case. However, the August 2008 war changed the situation irreversibly and has made the case of the Baltic States joining NATO obsolete and irrelevant. The August 2008 crisis seemed to drive home an important message: Russia treats its national interests in the Caucasus as seriously as ever while the war also demonstrated the impotence of NATO. In other words, President Putin has stated clearly and unequivocally 'No.' It can be further said that Putin is likely to say the following: 'If you in Georgia dare to go against Russia's wish to join NATO, then you in Georgia will need to count dead bodies.' Perhaps the author's statement is too far-fetched but it nevertheless conveys a sobering assessment of how things look through Putin's eyes. NATO should not entertain illusions about its ability to impact Putin's worldview and mind-set, in general, and on the issue of Georgia, in particular.

Five years after the August 2008 war, NATO has reached a crucial juncture in its policy towards Georgia. If and when NATO decides that it is ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with Georgia and *confront* Russia militarily, it will need to consider three most important factors and their long-term implications for NATO. These factors are: political-diplomatic, military and the most crucial, economic, including defence economics. Deterring Russia means also confronting it head-on if it is necessary and not to flinch-

ing at the first opportunity. It appears at the moment that the EU NATO member states and Turkey as the only non-EU state are still dependent upon gas supplies from Russia and militarily impotent to confront Russian military head-on. As a result, NATO is most likely to pursue its open door policy towards Georgia without bringing Georgia in. The decision to bring Georgia in is postponed under the pretext of further reforms or, to use the words of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO Secretary General, Georgia “is on the right path” and moved “closer to NATO” but “the burden may still be on you now to continue to deliver the necessary reforms.”⁴ This tune has been heard repeatedly in Georgia and Georgian officials are getting impatient, frustrated and disappointed by the NATO foot-dragging. Furthermore, Georgian public support for joining NATO might be shifting.⁵ Despite the non-lethal military assistance that the US provides the Georgian military with President Barack Obama’s foreign policy since 2009 has shifted away from the South Caucasus. This shift has created a feeling of unease in Georgia and a sense of insecurity that the US has abandoned Georgia to its own fate. The US officials are likely to disagree with the author’s assessment, however, the reality supports the author’s point of view.

US-Georgia.

As long as President Obama supports a shift in his foreign policy direction away from the South Caucasus to Africa, East Asia and the Middle East, it is a senseless task to appeal to the President to reengage in the South Caucasus. As a result, President Putin sees himself as the paramount leader in the South Caucasus game and feels that time is on his side. In other words, over the next five to ten years Putin can pursue his agenda in the South Caucasus without resistance from the EU, NATO and the US despite Russian domestic problems. Thus, the sense of Georgian insecurity and a feeling that Obama’s administration has left Georgia to its own fate is not an invention of the author but a shift in the US priorities that President Putin closely monitors.

Conclusion

The author strongly believes that what Georgia really needs is Partnership for War. This is, however, a tall order that is not going to happen any

time soon. Even Turkey, as a country the adjacent to Georgia will not back Georgia militarily in case of a confrontation between Russia and Georgia.⁶

Moscow considers the Black Sea region and the Caucasus to be its exclusive area of operations and not a shared condominium as Ankara may believe. The beliefs in Ankara are based upon sand and not a realistic assessment. For instance, Turkey's muted reaction to the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 reinforces the author's assertion. When needed, Russia plays a hard ball game versus Turkey in the Black Sea region and in the Caucasus. Turkey's Caucasus Stability and Co-operation Pact (CSCP) initiative, proposed after the August 2008 war, was initially disregarded by the Russian officials and then it silently disappeared from the agenda. Today, only the Turks might remember that such an initiative was even proposed.

In addition to the wishful thinking expressed by the author, namely the Partnership for War, he wishes to make the following suggestion. Georgian Minister of Defence, Irakli Alasania, in an interview to *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, stated that "We need to outsmart the Russians." The author suggests his Georgian colleagues and officials pursue a policy of outfoxing and duping the Russians or using the Russian method of deception, called *maskirovka*. One important and crucial point needs to be emphasised at this juncture - Georgia is not going to join NATO either today or tomorrow or in the next three to five years. This time span provides Georgia with the time to design its policy versus Russia and NATO. As a result, the author suggests his Georgian colleagues and officials pursue a two-pronged policy: first, Georgian officials should *very gradually* tone down their rhetoric that the country is joining the Alliance and gradually convey the message to Moscow that Georgia is accepting Moscow's rules of the game. The current government has toned down its rhetoric but not regarding Georgia's aspirations towards joining NATO. The Georgian government should remember that it deals with smart KGB and other power ministry officials. The KGB officials might be blind but they are not deaf and as the professional "musical team", they know exactly how to listen carefully and distinguish between the right tone and the false tone.

At the same time, the Georgian government should intensify its co-operation with the Alliance and even enhance it. The latter requires very close

co-operation between Georgia and NATO without leaks to the press. Such a policy requires not just vision but also well-articulated ideas and options of how to pursue such a policy shrewdly and successfully.

Georgian officials can learn a great deal from the experience of Sweden during the Cold War. Sweden saw the Soviet Union as an adversary that was probing the Swedish defence system in the Baltic Sea. On the one hand, the Swedish government presented itself as peace-loving, friendly, neutral and not really militarily capable. On the other hand, the Swedish government maintained robust military ready for territorial defence, allocated 3% of GDP annually to the defence budget and government maintained a well-built defence industry that expanded during the Cold War era. In addition, the Swedish military participated in a variety of peace-keeping operations around the world and, as a result, gained necessary experience. However, the crucial point that was unknown to the Swedish people until the end of the Cold War and that was kept by the government for the sake of its own people was the military co-operation with the United States during the same period.

The author does not suggest Georgian officials to imitate the example of Sweden but, rather, utilise the experience and apply components of Swedish behaviour to the case of Georgia.

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