



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

# Security Review

Giorgi Bilanishvili

**Recent Dynamics of Georgian-Russian Relations**

2018

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. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2017 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

Developments after the assassination of Archil Tatumashvili in the Tskhinvali region on February 22, 2018 clearly demonstrated, time and again, the complexity and danger of Georgia's relations with the Russian Federation. Presumably, characteristics of these relations will not be changed in the near future. Hence, while contemplating the further development of relations with Russia, we should carefully consider the consequences of any new initiative for Georgia's internal as well as foreign policy.

After the 2012 parliamentary election, the "normalization" of relations with Russia became one of the cornerstones of the newly elected Georgian government's foreign policy. For this purpose, on November 1, 2012, the new position of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Relations with Russia was created and assigned to Zurab Abashidze.<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy that the very first official reaction of the Russian Federation to this new initiative of the Georgian government was not very promising. In response to a question related to this matter on November 3, 2012, the Official Representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Alexander Lukashevich, unambiguously declared that Russia, above all, expected concrete and practical steps from the new Georgian government.<sup>2</sup>

Even more revealing was the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov's, response to the question related to Georgia on December 4, 2012: "Our Georgian neighbors speak about the normalization of relations; however, they assert viewing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as occupied territories. I presume that this kind of rhetoric does not support the initiation of a dialogue without preconditions."<sup>3</sup>

The first meeting between Zurab Abashidze and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Grigory Karasin, took place in Geneva on December 14 of the same year.<sup>4</sup> Since then, meetings are held on a regular basis.

The agenda of the Abashidze-Karasin setting is concerned with economic and humanitarian issues. During the last years, the value of exported production from Georgia to

---

<sup>1</sup> Ivanishvili: We Begin Relations With Russia From a New Page 01/11/12  
[www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=26167](http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=26167)

<sup>2</sup> „Ответ официального представителя МИД России А.К.Лукашевича на вопрос РИА «Новости» в связи с назначением З.Абашидзе спецпредставителем премьер-министра Грузии по вопросам взаимоотношений с Россией“. 03/11/12. [www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/ge/-/asset\\_publisher/uwHHxf8KDaOY/content/id/136202](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/ge/-/asset_publisher/uwHHxf8KDaOY/content/id/136202)

<sup>3</sup> „Выступление и ответы Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова на вопросы СМИ в ходе пресс-конференции по итогам заседания Совета Россия-НАТО на министерском уровне, Брюссель, 4 декабря 2012 года“. 04/12/12.  
[www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/132046](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/132046)

<sup>4</sup> Georgian and Russian Diplomats Met in Switzerland <https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=26332>

Russia reached approximately USD one billion. At the same time, communications through air and land transportation have been intensified.<sup>5</sup>

As for Georgian-Russian political affairs, no substantial positive developments are observable to date. On the contrary, the so-called “borderization” process is ongoing with a heightened pace. Abductions of Georgian citizens by the occupying regime are frequently recurring; unfortunately, some of these are tragic such as the murders of Archil Tatumashvili, David Basharuli and Giga Otkhozoria.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, after Georgia initiated the process of the normalization of relations with Russia, the Russian Federation signed so-called bilateral strategic treaties with Tskhinvali and Sokhumi. In Georgia, these treaties were evaluated as creeping annexation.<sup>7</sup>

All of the abovementioned indicates that the Russian government has no intention of altering its position on the matter of Georgian territorial integrity which, per se, is the fundamental issue when we discuss the normalization of political relations with Russia.

## **Recent Developments**

Apparently, the Georgian government is interested in identifying new ways for dealing with Russia which would facilitate the resolution of political issues between the two nations. The Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, in his parliamentary address on December 20, 2017, noted that there is ongoing work, along with strategic partners, to elevate the level of the Geneva international discussions format from Deputy Minister to Minister. In addition, he underscored his readiness to personally become involved in the Geneva format if it were to proceed to the Prime Minister level.<sup>8</sup>

Afterward, this topic was elaborated further – on March 9, 2018, a statement was released by the Prime Minister of Georgia which reaffirmed his readiness to participate in the process of the Geneva international discussions and also articulate a new initiative. “We are also ready for a direct dialogue with the Abkhazians and the Ossetians, and a genuinely

---

<sup>5</sup> Commerce and Tourism: What Did the Dialogue With Russia Brought for Georgia?, 10/07/17, <https://sputnik-georgia.com/video/20170710/236584896/vachroba-da-turizmi.html>

<sup>6</sup> Shota Utiashvili, International Sanctions for the Human Rights Abusers in the Occupied Territories, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/library/view/2531>

<sup>7</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane, Two Years of the Dream: Georgian Foreign Policy During the Transition, Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, 2015. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/20150529GeorgianForeignPolicyMacFarlaneGeorgian.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Giorgi Kvirikashvili Expressed His Readiness to Become Involved in Geneva Discussions, 20/12/12, <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/469754-giorgi-kvirikashvili-zhenevis-diskusiebis-formatshi-charthvis-mzadyofnas-gamothqvams.html?ar=A>

constructive approach from the Russian side would be welcome in this context. With political will in place, we believe it feasible to take other sensible steps as well,” read the Prime Minister’s statement.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, this statement by the Prime Minister found itself at the epicenter of the political discourse, all the more because it was made in the aftermath of the unfortunate event of Archil Tatumashvili’s murder when the political temperature in Georgia was already elevated.

What is more important is that a few days later, on March 12 of this year, the Russian Federation, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responded to the Georgian Prime Minister’s statement.<sup>10</sup> The reaction, over again, vividly demonstrated that Georgia has no tangible reasons to believe in the possibility of achieving an agreement with Russia on matters of political significance. Moreover, the risk that the Russian Federation will try to reinterpret the Georgian government’s proposals for its own benefit and use this against Georgian interests is extremely high.

### **Key Messages of the Russian Response**

The Russian response contains several key messages that clearly define Russian intentions and the Russian position with regard to Georgia. For a sound understanding of the issue, let us first identify these vital messages and then analyze them through the lenses of Russian interests and Russia’s position.

#### ***Key Messages***

- “We are pleased about the intention, expressed in the Georgian Prime Minister’s statement, to continue to deepen the process of bilateral normalization” (*original*: “С удовлетворением отмечаем выраженный в нем настрой на продолжение и углубление процесса двусторонней нормализации.”).
- “As in the past, Russia is interested in improving relations with neighboring Georgia and is ready to do so to the extent that Georgia is prepared for this” (*original*: “Россия, как и прежде, заинтересована в оздоровлении отношений с соседней Грузией и готова идти настолько далеко, насколько к этому готовы в Тбилиси.”).

---

<sup>9</sup> Statement by the Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Kvirikashvili, 09/03/18, [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=497&info\\_id=63748](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=497&info_id=63748)

---

<sup>10</sup> „Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с заявлением Премьер-министра Грузии Г.Квирикашвили“. 12/03/18. [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3117514](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3117514)

- “Mr. Kvirikashvili’s mention of [Georgia’s] striving for progress at the Geneva discussions makes us hope for Georgia’s constructive position during the next round in late March” (*original: “Упоминание Г.Квирикашвили о стремлении к прогрессу на Женевских дискуссиях внушает надежду на конструктивность грузинской стороны в ходе следующего раунда в конце марта.”*).
- “Naturally, we welcome the declared strive for a direct dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is the only realistic road to settle issues that concern Georgia and are beyond the bilateral Russian-Georgian agenda” (*original: “Нельзя не приветствовать также декларируемое стремление к прямому диалогу с Абхазией и Южной Осетией. Именно таков единственный реальный путь к урегулированию волнующих Грузию вопросов, выходящих за рамки двусторонней российско-грузинской повестки.”*).

### ***Analysis of the Key Messages in the Context of the Russian Federation’s Interests and Position***

- As long as its policies and approach towards both occupied territories of Georgia and the direction of Georgian foreign policy remains intact, Russia, indeed, has a stake in underscoring Georgia’s strive for the normalization of bilateral relations. It provides an opportunity for the Russian Federation to assert that Georgia has accepted “the new realities,” as the recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region is called in Moscow, and is ready to advance relations with Russia from this perspective.
- Hence, it helps Russia affirm on the international stage that Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region will never be returned to Georgia. At the same time, a possibility is opening for Moscow to underline that the deepening of relations with Russia is a request of Georgian society, which is being thwarted by specific political groups whose intentions are to force the political trajectory of European and Euro-Atlantic integration upon Georgian society.
- As for the pronouncement in the Russian statement about the readiness to rejuvenate relations with Georgia, it should be underscored that this position is nothing new. An approximately similar position is articulated in the latest foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation; however, the acceptance of the “new realities in the Caucasus” is required as an essential precondition.<sup>11</sup> In this particular case, the Russian side simply avoided using exactly the same formulation. However, the ending of the Russian

---

<sup>11</sup> „Россия заинтересована в нормализации отношений с Грузией в тех сферах, в которых к этому готова Грузинская Сторона, при учете политических реалий, сложившихся в Закавказье.“ Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации. 30.11.16. [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248)

Federation's statement about redirecting Georgia to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in order to resolve the "bilateral problems" must be seen as a demand from Russia for the necessity to recognize the "new realities in the Caucasus."

- The expressed expectation about the next round of the Geneva international discussions is also noteworthy. It proves that Russia attached a particular significance to the meeting scheduled at the end of March. Evidently, they anticipated reaching an agreement about a joint statement on the non-use of force. Incidentally, in the statement made after the meeting, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its regret over the inability to reach an agreement on this matter.<sup>12</sup> The only incentive, in this instance, that might drive Russia is the content of the statement – it must contain acceptable formulations for Moscow. These are the kinds of formulations which would help Russia divert the formal responsibilities placed upon it as a participant of the conflict after orchestrating the military aggression against Georgia in 2008.
- The Russian position, about the necessity of initiating a direct dialogue between Georgia, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, articulated at the end of the statement, serves the same goal of removing formal political obligations. Obviously, in the case of such a dialogue, Russia will try to separate itself from the responsibilities of conflict participant altogether. At the same time, it is unclear what the benefits of a direct dialogue with the regimes of occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region would be for Georgia.

---

<sup>12</sup> „О консультациях по безопасности и стабильности в Закавказье“. 28/03/18.

[http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3144233](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3144233)