

Interpreting the Tension in Georgian–Russian Relations

By Tornike Sharashenidze, Tbilisi

Abstract

Russia's current leadership has many reasons to view Georgia as a threat, but the most important is that Georgia's partial success in reform and democratization serves as an alternative to the Russian model in the post-Soviet space. The Georgian leaders, for their part, benefit from presenting Russia as an enemy, but ultimately Georgians would like to see its powerful neighbor as a friendly, peaceful democracy.

A Variety of Motives

Russo–Georgian relations surpass all other bilateral relations in the post-Soviet space in terms of their tension and bitterness. Georgia is the only post-Soviet country which is not recognized by Russia within its legal boundaries and it is the only country that fought a war with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tensions will hardly disappear since no Georgian government can reconcile the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and every Russian government will find it extremely difficult to reverse the fateful decision of recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. However the problem of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is only the top of the iceberg; it is more a consequence than the cause of strained bilateral relations. The roots are much deeper; they require an examination of history and force us to assess the post-Soviet heritage from different perspectives.

Georgia became a part of the Russian empire in the end of the 18th century. According to Russian and Soviet sources, the Georgians themselves asked for help. According to Georgian historians, the Russian empire instigated domestic disorder in Georgia and left the Georgian king no other choice but to ask Russia to establish a protectorate, however the Georgians did not want to be annexed. Differences in interpreting history are hardly relevant for our analysis (although they serve as one more explanation for Russo–Georgian enmity) and it is much more important to understand Russian motives for annexing Georgia. Expanding its territories was supposed to be business as usual for the Russian empire, but Georgia was a special case. This small country enjoyed a strategic location since it controlled the entrance to the entire South Caucasus. In the late 18th century, Russia launched successful wars against Turkey, which controlled territory the Russians coveted—the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits. Georgia served as a convenient bridge-head for attacking the Ottoman empire. After it annexed Georgia, Russia attacked Turkey from both the Balkans and the Caucasus. Additionally, with its access to Georgian territory, the Russian empire expanded in the Caucasus and later in Central Asia. Georgia was the beginning, a necessary gateway for further expansion.

Of course, it is absolutely irrelevant to explain cur-

rent Russian motives by plans to capture the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits. Besides, Russia enjoys strong military positions in Armenia and it has only begun to deploy its bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which means that it hardly needs Georgia to maintain its influence in the region. Explaining Russian motives by its ambitions to serve as a sole transit route for Caspian energy resources could be more reasonable. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzerum pipelines became the first routes that made it possible to transport Caspian oil and natural gas without crossing Russian territory. But, at the same time, the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline hardly affected the status quo on the world oil market. The Baku–Tbilisi–Erzerum gas pipeline only impacts the immediate region and most likely it is destined to remain this way since the Nabucco project, which would carry Caspian gas to Europe, has stalled. Thus, Georgia poses little threat to Russia as an alternative energy corridor.

Georgia's aspirations to join NATO could serve as a more convincing explanation for Russian enmity toward its neighbor. Indeed, Moscow perceives NATO enlargement as a threat and it does not want NATO on its southern borders, right next to the North Caucasus, the most vulnerable part of the Russian Federation. But reasonable Russian policymakers should understand that the West is hardly interested in stirring up conflict in the North Caucasus and dismembering Russia. The Baltic states have been in NATO for almost a decade and their membership did not endanger Russia in any way.

Despite having found reasons to undermine all these motives, we should not discount their possible influence on Russian policy towards Georgia. On one hand, Russia may not be threatened by a Georgian energy corridor, but, on the other hand, it naturally is unhappy about the precedent of transporting Caspian energy resources bypassing Russia. Reasonable policymakers should not view NATO enlargement as a threat, but how powerful are such policymakers within the current Russian elite, which is led by a former KGB officer trained to fight Western interests worldwide?

Russia Sees Georgia's Alternative Path as a Threat

All these reasons (once again, with the exclusion of plans to take control of the Straits) are still more or less irrelevant. But there is another cause that has driven Russian behavior towards Georgia in recent years and that reached its apogee in August 2008: Russia views Georgia as a threat because it has offered an alternative development path for the post-Soviet zone.

This does not necessarily mean that a democratic Georgia is a threat to authoritarian Russia. In fact Georgia still has a long way to go to develop into a true European democracy. Georgia definitely enjoys freedom of speech, but the executive branch of government is too strong vis-a-vis the legislature and judiciary. The Georgian government that came to power after the Rose Revolution has mostly focused on modernization rather than democratization and it turned out to be a valid choice if we compare contemporary Georgia and Ukraine. After the Orange Revolution, the latter hardly undertook any reforms, but boasted of a higher level of democracy. However democracy without strong state institutions bred the current Ukrainian regime that pulls the country back to authoritarianism. As a result, the Ukrainian political model now differs little from Russia's—an outcome that cannot fail to make the Kremlin happy. Ukraine has fallen back as well Russia in terms of democratic development. Ukraine belongs to the category of Hybrid Regimes according to the latest report of the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index,¹ while earlier it belonged to the category of Flawed Democracies. Russia has fallen from Hybrid Regimes to Authoritarian Regimes. As for Georgia, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, it is still behind Ukraine (though well ahead of Russia), but in recent years it has shown modest but irreversible progress. That means that although Georgia cannot overwhelm the post-Soviet zone with its democratic standards, the trend of its development does not lead it toward the current Russian model. Slowly, but irreversibly, it leads Georgia to the West.

Moreover, the reforms undertaken by the current Georgian government look truly impressive. The almost total absence of low-level corruption and the provision of public services that can be considered effective by any standard—these are achievements that the Georgian people could not even dream about a decade ago and which still remain distant dreams for other post-Soviet republics (more or less excluding the Baltic states). The post-Soviet era has been dominated by corruption,

oligarchs, authoritarian rule and, even more importantly, a pessimistic view of the future—a belief that everything would remain the same and that nothing could make things change for the better. Russia's official propaganda also had an impact by portraying Western democracy as a “phony” system that did not really offer people freedoms. But the Georgian case demonstrated that at least corruption can be beaten and post-Soviet countries can change things for the better if they really try. Thus Georgia set a precedent that can be even more dangerous for the current Russian political elite than the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline. Corrupt and backward regimes hardly can impose their will over advanced societies. Consequently, the current Russian regime can expand its influence only over corrupt and backward regimes. If Georgia's successes continue, then Russia will lose its chance to subordinate this country under its political control. If the Georgian reforms set an example for other post-Soviet countries, then Russia's positions will be seriously shaken. This is why Moscow was so frightened by the wave of Orange Revolutions in the post-Soviet zone. As the Ukrainian revolution stalled (with some help from the Kremlin) and the Kyrgyz revolution turned into unfortunate civil disorder, Georgia still remains a successful case.

Georgia's Motives

Having discussed Russian motives, we now turn to an exploration of Georgian motives. It is obvious that the current Georgian authorities masterfully manipulate the image of Russia as an external enemy and thus distract Georgian society from domestic problems, such as unemployment and poverty. The Georgian authorities no doubt use (and sometimes abuse) the Russian card with their Western partners too by referring to the “Russian threat.” Despite living under a genuine threat (the Russian military bases are located some 40 kilometers from Tbilisi), it may be convenient for Georgia's leaders to have such an enemy.

But, at the same time, the current Georgian elite genuinely believes that the Georgian people have to be isolated from Russia for some time in order to form a new, European Georgia. During the Soviet era, Georgians enjoyed much greater prosperity and considerably more liberties than any other Soviet nation. This happened partly because the Soviet elite decided to turn Georgia into a resort area and partly because Georgians successfully adjusted to the corrupt Soviet system. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia suddenly became one of the poorest post-Soviet countries. Unlike Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, Georgia had no natural resources and Georgians could no longer steal money from the Soviet budget. Consequently, Georgians had to become truly

1 http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_Final_Dec_2011.pdf&mode=wp

competitive and this task will not be accomplished if Georgia remains exposed to the “corrupt Russian system.” Joining Europe can be achieved only through modernization. No doubt many Russians regard these ambitions with some irony since their views of Georgians are still based on Soviet stereotypes—Georgians are nice and talented people, but they are not equipped to run an independent state (in fact they lost their statehood some two centuries ago). This is why Russia’s Foreign Minister Lavrov once referred to Georgia’s President Saakashvili as “pathological” and “an anomaly” among the Georgian people.² Lavrov thus openly expressed how the current Russian elite feels about Georgians—they are good people, but they should not have ambitions to run an independent and successful state, since Saakashvili has such an ambition, he is an anomaly.

The Russian authorities sometimes make official Tbilisi’s job of presenting Russia as hostile easier. When the Georgian government unilaterally introduced a visa-free regime with Russia, the latter failed to reciprocate. Against the background of the official Russian rhetoric, which asserted that the Kremlin loved “the brotherly Georgian nation but did not like its government,” Russia’s decision to continue requiring visas hurt its image.

About the Author

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² <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23831>

It made clear that the current Russian elite does not prefer carrots over sticks and that it cares little about the “brotherly Georgian nation” in practice. No doubt Saakashvili and his aides were happy with the Russian response since Moscow met their expectations as an external enemy. At the same time, Russian tourists visit Georgia in increasing numbers and they discover that Georgia is not only modernized, but also surprisingly friendly. Russia is a huge country and a few thousand tourists cannot influence the hostile attitude towards Georgia, but with time the situation may change and the current Russian regime may find it more difficult to justify its current policy towards Georgia. This is what reasonable Georgians hope to see one day—that Russia will become friendly, peaceful and democratic too. One cannot change geography and it is better to have a good neighbor than to try to resist this neighbor forever, especially when the latter is both big and powerful. Russia is notorious for being unpredictable and it could turn out to be unpredictable in a positive way too. Georgia may be a country that has suffered a lot due to its problems with Russia, but Georgians are also truly interested in the democratization of Russia.

Russia and Georgia: Going Their Separate Ways

By Fyodor Lukyanov, Moscow

Abstract

For Russia, the 2008 five-day war was not about Georgia, but relations with the West. The war marked a turning point for Russia in which it has begun to build an identity based on the future rather than rooted in the past. Now that Russia has been admitted to the World Trade Organization, there is little in concrete terms that it wants from Georgia, whose leader is following the typical post-Soviet path into authoritarianism, although with a state that is more effective than Russia’s.

The Georgian War in the East–West Context

Russia marked the four-year anniversary of the Russian–Georgian war in August 2012 with a surprising controversy sparked by a movie of unclear origin posted on YouTube. In the online footage, former generals accused then-president Dmitri Medvedev of being slow and inde-

cise on August 6 and 7, 2008, when Georgia launched an attack to conquer South Ossetia in a bid to restore its territorial integrity. The Five Day War is no longer an issue in Russian political debate, making it particularly strange that this topic emerged. Commentators explained the appearance of this anonymous video as