

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.

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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

a sign of internecine fighting within the ruling class, whose factions are poised in a state of fragile and unstable balance.

Otherwise, neither this war, nor relations with Georgia are part of the current political debate in Russia. Russia's leaders were surprised in 2008 that the military rout did not lead to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's political collapse. Initially his survival provoked disappointment and anger, but then attention waned.

Approximately two years after the war and against the background of Russia's discussion about modernizing its own political and economic systems, interest in the Georgian reform experience began to rise, and even some of Saakashvili's staunchest critics acknowledged that the Georgian model has not been as unsuccessful as Russian propaganda tried to portray it. But the Georgian reforms already have reached their peak, and the political leadership seems to be focused on keeping power with an eye toward important parliamentary elections scheduled for this fall and the presidential elections set for next spring. President Saakashvili most likely will repeat the trick used by Vladimir Putin to stay in power, although with some enhancements. Not only will Saakashvili move from the presidency to the prime minister's office, but he will also re-distribute power in favor of the parliament. In this light, Russian commentators have been laughing about U.S. descriptions of Georgia as a beacon of democracy.

When passions calmed down after the first war Russia fought against one of the post-Soviet states, it has become apparent that there was no real agenda between Russia and Georgia. It is increasingly clear that for Russia the Georgian war was a global, rather than a regional exercise, and Georgia *per se* has not been a political target.

Whatever formal reason has been offered, the broader background was obvious to everyone. As Medvedev put it bluntly last fall, "For some of our partners, including NATO, it was a signal that they must think about geopolitical stability before making a decision to expand the alliance." The real cause of the five-day war was tensions that had been accumulating in the broader region for several years. In the mid-2000s, the US administration decided to expand NATO into the post-Soviet space. Ukraine and Georgia hoped to join, but were eventually denied membership due to resistance from some EU countries—primarily Germany and France.

Washington and several European capitals disregarded Moscow's warning that expansion would be interpreted as crossing the line. They argued that Russia has always been against the alliance's growth, but ultimately accepts the inevitable. Moscow failed to convince its partners that there is a major difference between Poland—or even Estonia—and Ukraine.

Ultimately, tensions came to a head and Saakashvili recklessly gave Moscow an excellent pretext to draw a bold line.

A Turning Point

The war was a major turning point for all sides involved. For Russia, it was something approaching psychological revenge after a 20-year geopolitical retreat, proof that Moscow can say no. Russia showed the United States and its allies that it can be resolute and serious. The signal was received. Objectively speaking, the Russian army did not demonstrate outstanding military capability during the war, but what little it had to show proved enough to reaffirm and even strengthen its standing. Advocating NATO's eastward expansion has become practically taboo.

The 2008 war marked the end of the post-Soviet era in Russia's foreign policy, during which Moscow was focused on restoring its status and proving that it remained a great power. After August 2008, it began working on a new approach in which the collapse of the former superpower is not the point of departure. This is a very difficult process because it requires building a new identity projected into the future and not inspired by the past. The undertaking affects all aspects of the Russian polity, but in terms of foreign policy it means awareness of the country's capabilities and limitations, a focus on more practical goals, and the concrete balance of interests. The Eurasian Union, for example, is, contrary to many views, not the realization of imperial ambitions or an attempt to restore the Soviet Union, but a calculated economic project inspired more by the European integration model than older Russian or Soviet aspirations. The ultimate goal is not to re-unify all former Soviet states, but to attract some of them who are commercially interesting. So, Georgia unintentionally contributed to this transformation of Russia, but did not benefit much herself.

Russian–Georgian Relations

Russian–Georgian relations had always been bumpy and almost ground to a halt after the five-day war. True, there have been some signs of improvement: the two countries have restored regular flights and are discussing reopening the Russian market to Georgian goods. Most importantly, they struck a compromise that allowed Russia to join the WTO. Just six months ago, Tbilisi's objections to Moscow's entry were considered insurmountable because they were linked to a sacred issue for both sides, the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

However, these signs of improvement do not change the overall situation: Russia and Georgia remain at odds over Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Osse-

tia as independent states and that will not change in the foreseeable future. Numerous attempts at mediation by various European institutions have failed. To put aside propaganda, territorial settlement is a non-issue in real terms. From the point of view of practical security and safety, the situation now, with Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is much better than before the war. Prestige aside, the military defeat relieved Georgia of a burden and deprived Russia of a major lever; everything is clear and neither side can play on the previous ambiguity of the situation.

There is one potentially dangerous issue between Russia and Georgia, connected to Georgia's desire for revenge. In May 2011 the Georgian parliament voted to recognize the 1864 genocide against the Circassian people in the Russian Empire. Givi Targamadze, head of the parliamentary committee on security and defense, similarly proposed discussing acts of genocide against other North Caucasus peoples. The political calculus behind Georgia's actions is obvious. But the risks are significant.

The issue of genocide was a popular political tool in the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, until recently, it was the responsibility of the ethnic group claiming to be the victim of genocide to win international recognition of the crime. This was the case with the Armenians, Ukrainians (Holodomor), Poles (the Katyn massacre), Ossetians (after the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali), and the Georgian claim regarding Abkhazia.

But the Circassian genocide is different because the claim has been taken up by a third party, Georgia, after being widely discussed by the Circassian diaspora. The Russian government has long brushed the problem aside, apparently failing to appreciate its significance. The North Caucasus is the most volatile region in Russia and Moscow's biggest headache. The Georgian government was certainly aware of that when it aimed its latest blow. Any mention of genocide generates a huge international reaction and guarantees considerable attention given the nature of today's information environment and how widespread the humanitarian ideology is. The proximity of the region in question to the site of the next Winter Olympics gives the claim even more publicity. Tibet employed a similar tactic shortly before the Beijing Olympics.

Surprisingly, Georgia does not seem to expect this move to boomerang. Although destabilization of the North Caucasus might give Georgian politicians some satisfaction, the country itself is not immune to what happens on its borders. The Chechen war was a massive inconvenience to Georgia, which had no means of controlling the militants infiltrating the country. Any other conflict in the region will have the same effect;

worse still, the consequences will be even less predictable because the international situation has grown more complex since then.

Moscow is unlikely to stand idly by as Georgia destabilizes the region. Some in Georgia believe Russia cannot hurt Georgia anymore after having stripped it of one-third of its territory. But that is not true. Georgia is not an ethnically homogenous country. There are Armenian and Azeri enclaves that can retaliate. Even though Russia does not control these populations, any complex and unstable society is prone to external influence. In Georgia, interethnic relations are stable but not ideal. There is no need to mention that the Russian side will closely follow Georgian moves and reciprocate if Moscow feels a real threat to stability in the Northern Caucasus or the Sochi Olympics.

The picture became somewhat more complicated in September 2012, when a group of fighters, mainly of North Caucasus origin, tried to infiltrate Russian territory (Dagestan) from Georgia. Georgian soldiers confronted the fighters and killed them. For the first time since the 2008 war, the Georgian security service, through Switzerland, gave its Russian counterparts detailed information about the dead guerillas, a sign that Tbilisi is concerned about developments in the Russian part of the Caucasus and is not interested in fueling instability there.

Since the only practical issue with Georgia—the WTO accession—has been settled, there is not much else that Russia wants from Tbilisi in concrete terms. The ideological challenge is there, but it seems to decrease as well. Under Saakashvili, Georgia sought to create a conceptual alternative to Russia by providing an example of a complete and irreversible break of historical and cultural ties with its powerful neighbor. The essence of his experiment is to forcibly re-educate the Georgian people. The president has a very low opinion of his compatriots, whom he wants to teach to live and work properly. Saakashvili and his very young team employ methods reminiscent of the Bolsheviks, albeit toward liberal goals. His strident Russophobia is more a means than an end. A decisive break with Russia and the nations' shared cultural traditions seems to be the best means of rebuilding the Georgian nation.

Saakashvili has accomplished one indisputable achievement—he has built an effective state machine. Suffice it to mention Georgia's polite and well-groomed police and border guards, the absence of low-level corruption (in a country where it used to be regarded as endemic), flawless government services (whereas lazy indifference had been considered part of the national character) and better tax collection. No other post-Soviet state has come anywhere close. Saakashvili has built an

authoritarian state where the main agency is the Interior Ministry, which keeps the Georgian people under close supervision. This result has its pros and cons. On the one hand, the government machine is working smoothly, but it can always be used to crack down on any opposition. In a way, this kind of efficient authoritarianism is more irritating for Russia than a democratic Georgia might be, because it proves that even the authoritarian regime in Russia is less able.

But this administrative model cannot ensure Georgia's further development. Moreover, continued attempts using crude means to destroy Georgia's national mentality and tradition will engender resistance. It is necessary to rethink the reforms with due account of the country's unique "human raw material" rather than attempting to remake it. However, this is not what the authorities are going to do. They hope to dominate the decisive parliamentary election in the fall because next year Geor-

gia will turn from a presidential republic into a parliamentary one, and Saakashvili intends to become prime minister. He has descended into a strategy of retaining power by any means, which has never produced the desired effect. The government's Bolshevik approach is polarizing society and fostering discontent. The political aspirations of Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest man, helped the opposition to consolidate its strength.

Saakashvili is sincerely confident in his mission. He believes he cannot and should not leave power until he realizes his vision for Georgia. In practical terms, this means he will increase pressure on the opposition, which he considers a "force for chaos," and try to hold onto power, whatever the cost. This is a dangerous approach that does not guarantee success. Moreover, it is a painfully familiar post-Soviet road—one that the Georgian reformer detested and tried so hard to avoid.

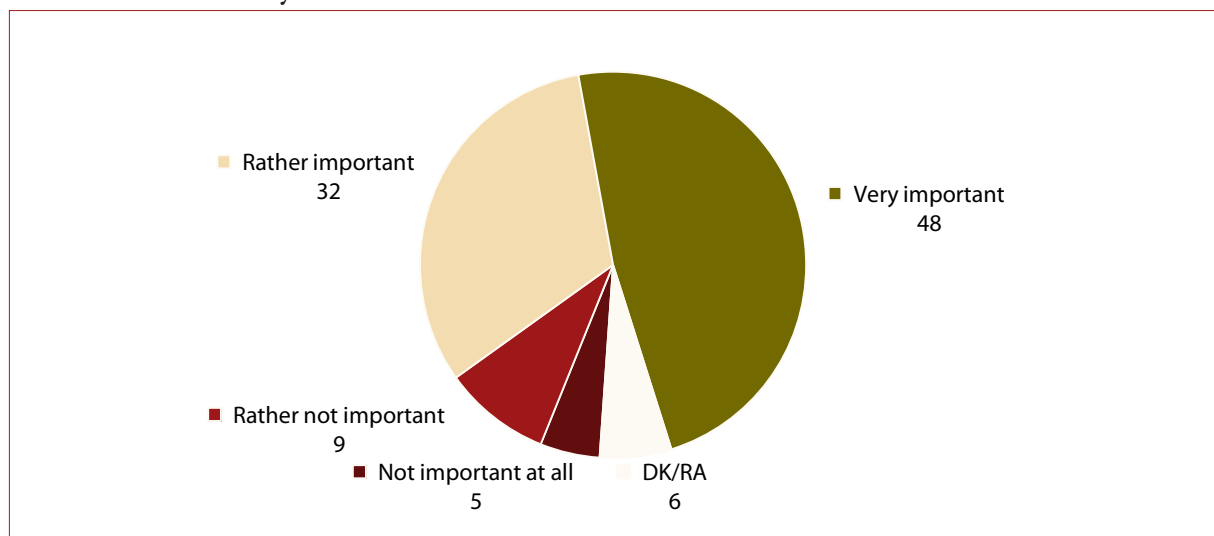
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OPINION POLL

Georgian Public Opinion on Relations With Russia

Figure 1: In Your Opinion How Important Is It For the Georgian Government to Strengthen the Country's Ties With Russia?



Source: CRRG EU Survey 2011