

A Russian View

Russia Seeks to Promote Peace and Stability in the Caucasus

By Sergei Markedonov, Moscow

Summary

Georgia and Russia have a long history of close relations that soured in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras. Georgia blames many of its problems on the Russians. Because Russia is not ready for a unilateral exit from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia has opted for a strategic relationship with the US. Despite the antagonism of Georgian leaders, Russia has a vital interest in what happens in and around Georgia since the stability of the Russian North Caucasus and the integrity of Russia depend on events there. Russia can play a useful role in the “frozen conflicts” of the region through the provision of peacekeepers, which have the strong support of the ethnic minorities living in Georgia.

A Broader Context for Georgian-Russian Relations

Relations between Georgia and Russia are one of the most problematic aspects of politics in the Caucasus. The erstwhile “fraternal” republic has become for Moscow the most inconvenient and disagreeable partner among all the CIS countries. Today many Russian and foreign experts are concerned about the insistence with which Russia seeks to preserve its political dominance in this part of the post-Soviet space.

Russian relations with Georgia must be seen within a wider context. At the beginning of the 1990s, Russia gave up its territorial claims to Ukraine and Kazakhstan without wavering even though, in ethnic and cultural terms, the northern and eastern parts of Kazakhstan and the Crimea were much closer to Russia than Georgia. Russia’s policies toward the Baltic states were even more passive despite the large ethnic Russian communities in Latvia and Estonia. Compared to the South Caucasus, Russia is much less involved in the political processes in Central Asia. In 2001, Russia approved the American intervention into the region and now is not putting up much resistance to China’s “assimilation” of the territory. In the case of Transnistria, the Russian Federation is ready for an internationalization of the conflict resolution process.

The South Caucasus, and Georgia above all, is different. Here Russian foreign policy-makers are only ready for small concessions and compromises, seeking to preserve their exclusive role in the resolution of the “frozen conflicts,” and will not allow other “honest brokers” to become involved.

Problems Despite Years Together

Russian-Georgian relations have a paradoxical character. On one hand, there are strong tradi-

tional ties, particularly social-cultural, between the two countries. Moreover, over the course of 200 years, Georgia was part of a common state with Russia. Its political class was incorporated into the Russian elite (from the Bagrationi family to Shevardnadze). On the other hand, there is the weight of mutual claims against each other from the perestroika and post-Soviet periods.

The April 1989 events in Tbilisi, in which the soldiers of the Transcaucasus Military District dispersed a demonstration, was one of the catalysts for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Georgia’s acquisition of sovereignty coincided with a parallel growth of anti-Russian feelings. For Yeltsin-era Moscow, Eduard Shevardnadze was above all a colleague of the “hated Gorbachev.” As a result, Russian leaders of that time looked on all of Shevardnadze’s actions as potentially inimical.

Georgia Blames Russia for Its Problems

It seemed that the rise to power of Mikheil Saakashvili, having overthrown the “White Fox,” should have substantially transformed relations between our countries. However, the leader of the Rose Revolution began his policy of restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity with a search for an external enemy to blame for the collapse of the Georgian state. With this approach, post-Soviet Georgia’s responsibility for the multi-ethnic conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was transferred to Russia. In this way, the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts became Russian-Georgian conflicts.

Among the Georgian elite, the idea of fleeing the Russian empire became seen as the principle precondition for the liberalization of the country, and its ability to join the “civilized world” and the “west.”

Accordingly, the “young Georgian democracy” could only overcome its conflict with Moscow by gaining the full support of the US, European countries, and international organizations (above all NATO), according to the ideologists of Georgian independence. Such partners would presumably bring Georgia internal stability and restore calm.

Saakashvili's Western Priorities

The current Georgian leader became president on a revolutionary wave of hope for a quick resolution of the problem of the separatist territories, resettling refugees from Abkhazia, and an end to the national humiliation caused by these conflicts. Now Mikheil Saakashvili must pay back the political credits he has received and strengthen his reputation as a patriot and defender of “Georgian unity.”

In the battle to restore Georgia, he acts like a pragmatic politician. If in achieving this goal he can use the political resources of Russia, then he is ready to become a pro-Russian politician. But since Russia is not ready for a unilateral exit from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (without a full resolution of the conflict), Saakashvili opted for strategic partnership with the USA.

However, it might turn out that the US and Russia have common interests in stabilizing the situation in Georgia. The format of Russian-American relations in recent years makes it possible to think along these lines, however, it is obvious that neither the US nor the European Union has developed plans for removing their presence in the Caucasus, at least before the resolution of the intra-Georgia conflicts. Even the idea of a quickened entry of Georgia into the North Atlantic alliance is not accepted by all members of NATO (the US is an influential member of this organization, but hardly the only one).

Russian Security Depends on the Caucasus

Despite this, Russia remains one of the most important gravitational centers of the Caucasus. It is objectively interested in the existence of a unified, open, and friendly Georgia. Just as Tbilisi seeks to preserve its unity and territorial integrity, Russia would benefit from a neighbor capable of preventing part of its territory from being turned into a base for terrorists. A separate question is whether the return of Georgia's separatist territories should be achieved at any price, particularly with the use of “iron and blood.”

The Caucasus is a unified social-political organism despite the borders tyrannically imposed on it by the Bolsheviks. Any conflict beginning in

the South Caucasus might continue in the Russian North Caucasus. Russian dominance of the South Caucasus is not a question of its “imperial resurrection.” Securing stability in the former republics of the South Caucasus is a principle condition for the peaceful development of Russia itself and the preservation of the state's integrity.

Russia is a Caucasus state. This thesis is not a beautiful metaphor. Seven Russian regions are located in the North Caucasus and an additional four are on the steppe abutting the Caucasus. The territory of the Russian North Caucasus is larger than the size of the independent states of the South Caucasus.

Almost all of the ethno-political conflicts in Southern Russia are closely connected to the conflicts in the former Soviet Transcaucasus republics. The Georgian-Ossetian standoff led to a flow of refugees from the former South Ossetia autonomy and other parts of Georgia to the neighboring North Ossetia in Russia. The reconstruction of the Transcaucasus republics into independent “fraternal republics” took place in part by squeezing the Ingush from the Prigorodny district. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict made possible the consolidation and radicalization of the Adyg ethno-national movement in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeya, activating the Confederation of Caucasus Peoples, which became one of the chief actors in the Georgia-Abkhazian standoff. The removal from Georgia of the Kvarelsky Avars at the beginning of the 1990s led to the knotted conflicts in Northern Dagestan. The mountain-dwelling Avars sent to the Kizlyar and Tarumov raions of Dagestan came into conflict with the Russians and flat-land dwelling Nogai. As a result there was a significant outflow of Russians from the northern parts of Dagestan. Resolving the “Chechen Question” depends crucially on stabilizing the situation in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. Thus, it is impossible to provide security in the Russian Caucasus without stability in Georgia.

Russia Plays a Useful Role in Conflicts

One can criticize Russia for supporting Abkhaz separatism, but the pro-Russian feelings among the vast majority of Abkhaz society and their resistance to any but Russian soldiers as peacekeepers is a fact which cannot be ignored. As a result, there are simply no pro-Georgian politicians in Abkhazia. Moreover, the Abkhaz authorities in exile are led by ethnic Georgians.

The situation is slightly different in South Ossetia. Here there are pro-Georgian politicians (Dmitry and Vladimir Sanakoevy, Uruzmag Karkusov), though

their political motivations raise many questions. Dmitry Sanakoev, currently the “alternative” South Ossetian president, and Karkusov participated in the Georgian-Ossetian military conflict of 1990–1992. At the same time, while the Georgian leadership is prepared to engage in negotiations about an increased status for Abkhazia within Georgia (while the Abkhaz leaders seek full independence), their position toward South Ossetia is different. Until now the Georgian authorities insist on calling South Ossetia “Tskhinvalsky Region” and refuse to cancel the Zviad Gamsakhurdia-era (1990) order liquidating the South Ossetian autonomy. Effectively this decree realized the policy once described by Gamsakhurdia as “In Georgia there are Ossetians, but there is no Ossetia.” The popularity among the residents of South Ossetia of Eduard Kokoity, the current leader of this *de facto* state, secures a similar course by official Tbilisi.

The ethnic minorities living in Georgia are interested in a continued Russian presence in Georgia and view the Russian peacekeepers as a guarantee of their security. While the decision to withdraw the Russian bases from Georgia has already been made, hastily removing the Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be premature.

About the author

Sergei Markedonov is the head of the Interethnic relations issue group at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow.

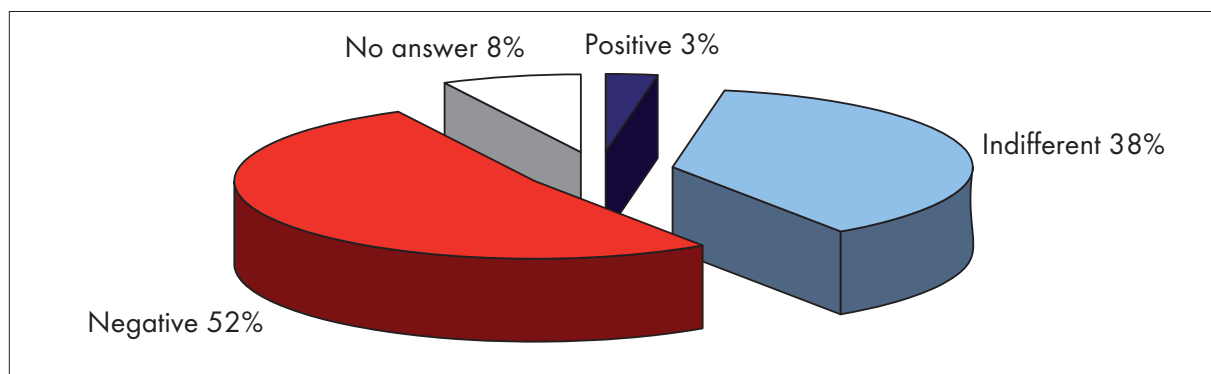
Of course, a unilateral and forced recognition by Russia of the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be a mistake. But the Georgians should rethink the current situation: Georgia is not a country only of ethnic Georgians. The effort of Georgia’s first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia to operate in disregard of this reality, rather than the “imperialist intrigues of Moscow,” led to the division of Georgia, a situation the country cannot overcome by itself today. Georgia will hardly be able to address this problem in the near future.

Russia is not now seeking to obtain new territory. Russia must show the Georgian elite and international society that the rejection of Russian peacekeepers would inevitably lead to a new round of confrontation, which would threaten the security of the Russian North Caucasus. The events around Tskhinvali in 2004–2005 demonstrated this. Of course, Georgia is a not a threat to Russia. However, the build up of Georgian military strength and its militaristic rhetoric toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia could raise tensions in the Russian border zone. This would represent more than a loss of face for Russia. These high stakes are the main reason behind Russian “ambitions” and increased emotionalism toward what happens in and around Georgia.

Opinion Poll

Russian Attitudes Towards Georgia

Diagram 1: What is Your Attitude towards the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili?



Source: Opinion poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation on 7 and 8 October 2006
<http://bd.fom.ru/zip/tb0640.zip>