

A Georgian View

Have Russian-Georgian Relations Hit Bottom or Will They Continue to Deteriorate?

By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi

Summary

Russia and Georgia have opposing views of their conflict. Georgian leaders claim to have sought better relations but believe that Russia is unwilling to compromise with them. The main flashpoint, and a cause of considerable concern in the West, is the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia sought to exert intense pressure on Georgia in 2006, but did not achieve any of its political aims. As a result, the Russian leadership may have given up on its efforts to effect regime change in Georgia. The problem of the separatist regions, however, remains unresolved.

Two Views of the Same Problem

During the last fifteen years, Georgian-Russian relations have been moving from bad to worse, to a little bit less bad, and then to crisis again. Nobody expects them to improve in the near future. It is only natural to ask: Why are relations so bad? And – most importantly – have these relations hit the bottom already, or can they still get worse?

Both sides have radically different views on what exactly is at issue here. The most frequent complaint I have heard from Russians is that Georgian leaders are prone to blame them for their own disastrous policies, so they are bad-mouthing Russia just to re-channel their people's wrath. (Sometimes they like to add that the Georgian people cherish a secret love for Russia but bad leaders do not allow them to consummate it). During the last three years, after Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, another charge has emerged: Georgians are preparing to renew wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus undermining stability in the Russian south. Of course, Russia must prevent this from happening.

Georgians argue that the Russians are stuck in 19th-century-style geopolitical thinking. Russia's outlook is all about the wounded self-esteem of a fallen empire: a failure to control Georgia causes it to experience phantom pains, as if it is missing a limb. There are also ethnic stereotypes at work: Russians see Georgians as hopelessly frivolous and disorderly people who enjoy delectable food and accomplished dancing but cannot be trusted to have a state of their own. They believe that Georgians owe them special gratitude because more than two centuries ago, the Russians were the ones who saved their fellow-Orthodox country from being annihilated by its Muslim neighbors. Therefore, when Georgians claim to be a European country and

say that NATO and eventually EU membership are its due, Russians take this as a personal offense. For two centuries we have fed and protected these hapless Georgians, and look how ungrateful they are: they like Americans better!

Running the risk of being accused of a bias, I would say that I find the Georgian perception closer to truth. This does not imply that my compatriots are without blame. It is handy for any government, especially that of a small and weak country, to have a powerful foreign enemy, and for the last fifteen years Russia has been excellent in this role. While taking the initial steps towards statehood, inexperienced and nationalistic Georgian leaders did quite a few stupid things which led to civil wars and economic breakdown. Naturally, they were happy to explain their incompetence away by blaming Russia for everything that went wrong.

Georgia Seeks Good Relations

However, it was obvious that having decent relations with Georgia's northern neighbor was crucial – and the Georgian leaders tried hard to achieve this result. The two most recent presidents, Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikheil Saakashvili, despite their enormous differences, followed a similar trajectory: both sought to find a *modus vivendi* with Russia, but failed and ended up at loggerheads with the northern neighbor. In late 1993, after Abkhazian separatist forces – with sizeable Russian support – prevailed in the war with the national government, Shevardnadze went out of his way to appease the former metropolis: he signed an agreement on Russian military bases (which was never ratified), legitimated Russia's exclusive control over Abkhazia by inviting Russians to serve as peacekeepers, and allowed Russian border

troops to control its borders with Turkey. It seemed that the Russians considered relegating Georgia to the status of a Russian-satellite state as a return to normality, but did not propose anything in return. As Shevardnadze began to realize this, he gradually drifted to a pro-western orientation and formally announced his bid to join NATO. Relations with Russia reached a nadir in 2001, when Russia accused Georgia of harboring Chechen terrorists in Pankisi Gorge and seriously considered a military invasion. Russia bombed Georgian territory several times then.

That crisis was, in part, explained by personalities: Russian generals simply would not forgive Shevardnadze for his role in giving away the Soviet empire to the West, analysts argued. When the fresh, young Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, he made a new effort to improve relations, proposing a more or less clear deal: we will welcome Russian economic investments, not press for the withdrawal of military bases, and cooperate on the Chechen issue, but you should accept our wish to integrate into the European and Euro-Atlantic community. He also implied that Russia should take a more favorable attitude to Georgia's wish to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There was no distinct answer from the Russians, but for the first six months of Saakashvili's presidency, relations appeared to be on the mend. The summer 2004 crisis in South Ossetia, when the Georgian government tried to solve the issue through a mixture of humanitarian offensive and military intimidation, put an end to this – and relations have steadily worsened ever since.

Dealing with the Separatist Regions

The events of 2004 lead us to the alleged Georgian project to renew the separatist wars. Following the really unfortunate summer 2004 episode, this is the most serious criticism against Georgia and one that makes many western leaders – including those who generally favor the new Georgian government – think twice about rendering support. Can Saakashvili and his youthful advisers be considered credible and predictable partners?

Immediately after coming to power, Saakashvili's government hoped that it could solve the issue of the separatist conflicts quickly. Such aspirations were mistaken, though the desire to address this issue is fully understandable since the presence of unresolved conflicts is the single most important impediment towards economic development and stable democracy in Georgia. However, while Saakashvili has a habit of making some statements that are hardly diplomatic (like referring to an unfriendly leader as Lili-Putin, for

instance), he has also showed himself to be a rational player who knows how to learn from his mistakes. His clear priority is state-building, which is a natural priority in a country which had frequently been described as a “failing state” in the past. He has achieved serious – arguably, even spectacular – triumphs in this regard: for the first time in modern history, the Georgian state is providing public services, its public servants get salaries they can live on, the armed forces are well-fed and under control, corruption and organized crime are down dramatically, and last year the World Bank officially recognized Georgia as the country that has made the fastest progress towards creating a more attractive business environment. The flow of foreign investments has already increased, though Saakashvili clearly hopes for much more. The October 2006 local elections confirmed a strong popular mandate for the incumbent political party. While NATO membership is far from decided – mainly because of the reluctance of western Europeans who have developed an aversion to anything smacking of “enlargement” – Georgia is now in “intensified dialogue” with the alliance, which makes it a credible candidate for membership: Bringing Georgia to NATO is clearly the highest priority of the government. Saakashvili knows very well that if he stirs up trouble in the separatist regions, he will lose western support and be left one-on-one with an unfriendly Russia. The conventional wisdom in this government is that Russia's goal is to provoke Georgians into doing something stupid in Abkhazia or South Ossetia thus undermining Georgia's NATO ambitions. The recent removal of Irakli Okruashvili, the former minister of defense who had made a foolish pledge of spending New Year's Eve 2007 in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, was a symbolic gesture to alleviate the remaining western fears.

Georgia's Answer to Western Critics

Some critics (especially western Europeans) argue: This is all very well, but why does Saakashvili try to annoy Russians without need? Is it so vital to insist on NATO membership – if this is what makes Russians so mad? Why put salt on Russians' wounded pride by demonstratively arresting Russian spies (no one argues they were not spying – but this is not the issue, right?).

The Georgian answer would be: being nice and reasonable would make sense had there been any chance of getting anything in return from Russia. But nobody in Tbilisi believes Saakashvili can do anything to make Putin happy. Every time Georgians ask Russians a straight question: what should we do so that you do not try to destroy us, there is never a clear

answer, just nebulous hints. The story one hears often from Georgian politicians is about Putin's reaction to Saakashvili's question: What will Georgia get in return if it gives up its bid to NATO membership? The problems you already have will not get worse reportedly was the answer. Russia cannot accept Georgia for what it is: confident, independent, wanting to integrate with the West. It wants to change Georgia, not its specific policy.

Russia Seeks Regime Change

Which in practice means regime change. Russia's steps as well as rhetoric give some credibility to this hypothesis. The Russian political elite appears to believe the theory repeatedly voiced by the Russian media during the last two years: Saakashvili is too emotional, probably mentally unstable, his popularity is dropping, and he is bound to end up like Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's temperamental first president who was in office just over a year before he was removed from power after an armed uprising in January 1992. Some trends in the first half of 2006 seemed to corroborate that theory: there was an increasing tide of public protests against different policies of the government, including some rather brutal behavior of its police. The Russian government apparently financed some political groups (at least that's what almost all believe in Georgia) such as the anti-Soros movement or the Justice Party led by Igor Giorgadze, an ex-KGB officer sought by Interpol and frequently interviewed by Russian TV, that took active part in the protests. On the other hand, Russia believed it could aggravate the situation by causing additional economic grievances – for instance, by blowing up gas pipelines on the coldest days of the winter (in January 2006), or banning Georgian wines and mineral waters from the Russian market. These products were Georgia's most important exports.

In August 2006, when a local warlord started an uprising in Kodori Gorge, the only part of Abkhazia still partially under Georgian control, Russian politicians opined this was the beginning of the end of Saakashvili's regime. The uprising was easily quelled (so, maybe this was really just a local affair), but after this event Saakashvili decided not to take chances and arrested the bulk of the allegedly Russia-backed activists of the Justice Party (they were charged with plotting a coup) and the Russian spies (who the gov-

ernment believed could also help organize some subversive actions).

One may believe this particular conspiracy theory or not. But this is the assumption on which the Georgian government acts. Therefore, the most popular question in Tbilisi is: what else can Russia do to Georgia? Has it exhausted its levers, or does it still have something up its sleeve?

With most economic ties cut and the price of gas raised to western European levels, economic sanctions seem to have reached their limit. Painful as they are, all these measures may be a blessing in disguise. Russians – including Russian politicians – appear to have sincerely believed that even after the Soviet demise Russia had been “feeding Georgia” and could force its southern neighbor down on its knees by cutting the lifeline. If so, in 2006 the lifeline was cut, but Georgia survived: the IMF estimated its GDP growth to have been around 8 percent in 2006. Without Russian sanctions it would probably be closer to 10 percent – unpleasant, but not lethal. If Kremlin strategists hoped that they could help change the regime in Tbilisi – as I suspect they did – they have by now probably given up on this idea.

This outcome allows me to end on a cautiously optimistic note: the best thing about 2006 may have been that Russian-Georgian came very close to hitting the bottom. But there is still one issue that may make things worse: this is a Russian project to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The highest ranking Russian politicians, including President Putin, have hinted that if the international community recognizes Kosovo, Russia might respond by recognizing separatist entities in its “near abroad”. Although the Kosovo solution has been postponed, the Russians still want to move forward: recently the Russian Duma adopted a resolution that recommends that the president recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Putin is still considering the options, but following the Duma recommendation looks like a plausible one. It is hard to say what Russia may gain from such a step, but just the urge to punish insolent Georgia may prove too strong to resist. There may also be a calculation that this time the emotional Georgian president will really be provoked into doing something stupid. I hope not – but this will be a real point of crisis. If this happens, though, it will also be the moment when Russia really exhausts its leverage against Georgia.

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