

free transit by Georgian citizens to and from the region. While difficult to achieve, progress on Georgian IDPs and Akhlagori could set the stage for future negotiations regarding the reestablishment of ties with South Ossetia on a “status neutral” basis.

Conclusion

To serve as the basis for conflict resolution in the South Caucasus, the Report of the EU Fact-Finding Mission has to be regarded as the first word on the Russian-Georgian war, not the last. Bringing Russia and Georgia to a common understanding of the facts will not be

easy, but it is a precondition for substantive progress and avoidance of future conflict. In particular, it could lead to an agreement by all parties on the non-use of force followed by a range of “status neutral” measures related to the welfare of Georgian citizens in, and new IDPs from, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The unfortunate “new reality” of the postwar environment is that a final political settlement to the conflicts is further away than ever before. The stark choice for all parties is between lasting enmity and physical divide or difficult compromises that ease the situation today and possibly the path to reconciliation tomorrow.

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Recommended Reading

- Cory Welt, “The Thawing of a Frozen Conflict: The Internal Security Dilemma and the 2004 Prelude to the Russo–Georgian War” (*Europe–Asia Studies*, forthcoming in January 2010).
- See also: “The EU Investigation Report on the August 2008 War and the Reactions From Georgia and Russia”, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 10, 2 November 2009, <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/>.

Georgia’s Policy towards Russia and the Conflict Regions: Options Now

By Ghia Nodia, Tbilisi

Abstract

After the August 2008 war, the line of confrontation between Tbilisi and Moscow is much more clear-cut, as all former ambiguity regarding Russia’s role in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been removed by Russia’s occupation and subsequent recognition of these two territorial entities. There are no direct diplomatic relations between the two sides, and Moscow is not ready to talk to the Georgian government as long as Saakashvili remains president. Under these circumstances, Georgia’s maneuvering room vis-à-vis Russia is limited and, at least for the moment, trying to improve relations with Russia is pointless. Georgia should instead seek to develop its internal political institutions in order to make them more stable and effective, and also continue to democratize these institutions. At the same time, Georgia should seek closer relations with Western states and international organizations, as such ties will enhance its security. Finally, Georgia should strive to reestablish links to the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia regardless of the current political situation.

The New Realities

The new reality created after the Georgian–Russian war in August 2008 pushes Georgia to redefine its policies towards Russia and the conflict areas: two issues that can hardly be separated. The main change is that the confrontation has become sharper and less ambiguous. Russia no longer functions as a peacekeeper and mediator: Abkhazia and South Ossetia are now officially

Russian protectorates, or “independent states” recognized only by Russia, Nicaragua and Venezuela; from the Georgian perspective, they are territories occupied by Russia. Additionally, the territories and communities are much more strictly demarcated. After ethnic Georgian enclaves within Abkhazia and South Ossetia were cleansed, these (almost) unrecognized states feel more secure internally, while travel and human con-

tacts between these territories and the rest of Georgia have become much more difficult.

Russia and Georgia are officially enemies: Direct diplomatic relations between the two countries have been cut. The Russian leadership openly says that under no circumstances will it talk to Saakashvili's government, but it loves the Georgian people and is ready to talk to Saakashvili's successor. Georgians see this as a thinly veiled demand to change their political regime, and suspect Russia may still be contemplating some "active measures" to help this happen.

So, what should Georgia's strategy be under these circumstances? No clear and comprehensive vision has been defined so far. This failure is not due to laziness or a lack of understanding about the need to act. The objective dilemmas are so complex that formulating a long-term strategy may involve addressing some politically awkward questions.

Shattered Illusions of Conflict Resolution

Apart from the situation on the ground, attitudes towards the conflicts underwent the deepest change. This development may actually be a positive by-product of the war: Now it may be possible to have a clearer understanding of the issues.

Clear thinking is often impaired by political considerations, whether of political correctness or romantic nationalism. Before Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, international attitudes to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been deeply inconsistent. As a frequent participant in conferences on conflict resolution, I can attest to the discrepancy between what I call plenary presentations and coffee-breaks discussions. During plenary sessions, participants often try to instill a sense of urgency: It is wrong to call these conflicts "frozen," people cannot suffer indefinitely, efforts to resolve conflicts should be accelerated. Over coffee, more *Realpolitik* resignation reigned: "Come on, we all understand these conflicts are unsolvable, right?"

Saakashvili behaved as if he took the politically correct talk of conflict resolution at face value and set the objective of resolving the conflicts within a relatively short period of time. He actually pledged to do this within his term in office. This approach proved to be a mistake. The international community-talk also changed: "No, no, you misunderstood, conflict resolution is supposed to be a lengthy process, it may take many years." Saakashvili's aggressive moves to win the hearts and minds of ethnic Ossetians – partly by supporting an alternative, pro-Georgian Ossetian administration and trying to make it a showcase for other

Ossetians – backfired. It threatened the status quo and alarmed potential losers from the conflict resolution process – the separatist authorities and Russian leadership whose geopolitical schemes did not include the prospect of Abkhazia and South Ossetia returning to Georgia's fold.

The single most important result of the August war is that nobody expects significant progress in resolving the conflict in the foreseeable future. By recognizing the independence of the two territories, the Russian leadership has burnt bridges for itself and its successors: It is hard to imagine a future Russian government that would agree to take back the act of recognition. The idea of building peace over the long term through incremental confidence-building steps, so much loved by conflict-resolution organizations, also looks even more utopian than it did before.

Solve the Conflicts by Giving in?

So, what to do? Living indefinitely in perpetual conflict with a Russia whose military installations are now about 25 kilometers from Tbilisi, in a situation marked by frequent shootouts and kidnappings, is certainly not an attractive prospect.

Of late, Westerners frequently ask Georgian politicians and analysts (though usually not in public): Why not just solve the conflicts by giving in? After the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there is no way back for Russia, and Georgia cannot win a war against it. The West also cannot induce Russia to compromise, and even if it could, it would require making this issue priority number one in international politics – also very unrealistic. Georgians may feel wronged, but who said that life is fair, and Georgians also are not angels, after all. What are your options, under the circumstances? Is it not smarter just to accept the new realities, put the issue behind you and move forward? The question may be accompanied by a hint: You could also sell your consent – for instance, for NATO membership.

Prima facie, this argument sounds perfectly rational, and certainly worthy of discussion. However, there are at least three reasons why the Georgian government cannot and should not take that step, and it also is not in the West's interest if Georgia does this.

First of all, Georgia may be insufficiently democratic in a normative sense, but it is too democratic to take this kind of step even if we assume it is objectively in the interest of Georgia. In a survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute in June 2009, 92 percent of those polled said they would never accept the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

(two previous polls in September 2008 and February 2009 gave similar results). Suggesting such an outcome is taboo even for supposedly pacifist Georgian NGOs. Some well-wishers of Georgia suggest that despite the public mood, President Saakashvili should “show leadership” in the way President de Gaulle did in resolving the Algeria crisis. But this is not a good comparison: the level of commitment of Georgians to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is qualitatively different from that of French people towards Algeria: the latter territory had never been part of France in the same way in which Georgians consider Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be part of Georgia. It is highly questionable whether de Gaulle would “show leadership” in the same way to forsake French claims to Provence or Alsace. Anyway, regardless of the historical comparisons, even if President Saakashvili believed the recognition of the break-away provinces was in the best interest of Georgia (which I do not think is his opinion), taking such a step would amount to his immediate and painful political suicide – something politicians in their right minds are very unlikely to do.

Secondly, even if “accepting the reality” were politically feasible, there is no guarantee at all that Georgia will get what it is supposed to get from that concession – sustainable peace and stability. In August 2008, Russia did not go to war to consolidate control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, most of which it had controlled anyway. It looked for control over its “near abroad”, and undermining Saakashvili’s pro-western regime was key for achieving that goal. So, if the expectation is that Georgian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remove the root of the problem, it is wrong: the issue is control over Georgia, not Akhlagori.

Thirdly, by taking that step Georgia would not be acting in the interest of international peace and security. From the latter perspective, the best result of the August war was that Russia did not achieve its major political aim: It failed to change the regime in Georgia or even destabilize it in a major way. To be sure Russia did not pay a sufficient price for directly challenging international peace, but neither did it get the kind of results that would encourage it to take similar steps in the future. It did not become more of a hegemon in its “near abroad”. The war did not have as huge a destabilizing effect as it might have.

Any significant concession to Russia – such as recognition of the two states – would amount to legitimizing Russia’s action in August and embolden Russia to take the same course towards its other neighbors. If Georgia took such a step, it would amount to a betrayal of countries like Ukraine or Estonia, who may be

the next targets of Russia’s “passportization for re-occupation” scheme. So, even if it were advantageous for Georgia to give up on its break-away provinces, Georgia should not do it as a responsible member of the international community.

Reducing Harm and Moving Forward

The net result is that Georgia can neither change the reality nor accept it. Neither can it be seen doing nothing about the situation. Not a very pleasant condition to be in.

Not everything is so bad, however. Georgia may be more secure now than it was before the war. The war with Russia was not an unfortunate contingency: in general, it had been predicted and expected. Now, Georgia has put the war with Russia behind it – and, given the respective powers of the participants, it got away relatively unscathed. For a small country, this is a considerable achievement. A new war cannot be fully ruled out – but it would be much more difficult for Russia to invent a remotely credible pretext. The “Kosovo precedent”, extremely questionable as it has been, is now exhausted.

At this point Georgia has two major objectives. One is to develop its internal political institutions in order to make them more stable and effective while at the same time making them more democratic. Combining these objectives while Russia is after Saakashvili is not easy, but neither is it impossible. Keeping the country’s institutions from imploding during and after the war with Russia was a considerable achievement in itself. The way the government handled the political standoff with the opposition this spring and summer is generally encouraging but there is still a long way to go until the consolidation of democratic institutions. A smooth and democratic transition from Saakashvili’s government to its successor in 2012–13 will be a major test, while the municipal elections expected in May next year will be an important landmark along the way.

Garnering international support for reducing the destabilizing effects of the Russian military presence on Georgian territory is another vital necessity. At a minimum, the EU Monitoring Mission should be maintained and pressure should continue on Russia to allow for expanding the international peace mechanisms. Involving the US in them would mark important progress. More broadly, any steps bringing Georgia closer to NATO, the EU and the US will also produce greater security for the country.

Any attempts to improve direct Georgian–Russia relations, even if theoretically desirable, are pointless at

the moment. So are specific steps aimed at resolving the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Harm reduction is the only realistic policy objective in that area.

At the same time, Georgia cannot afford to lose ties to the people who live in Abkhazia and South Ossetia now – whatever political attitudes they may have. This is not easy, but Georgians – both in government and in society – should be creative and inventive on this point. Apart from technical impediments for such contacts, the trick is that there can be no short-term political advantages coming from such contacts, and people

usually are not focused on activities that cannot bring anything tangible in the short run.

As to the long run, one should admit that nobody can confidently predict what will be happening in the region in ten–fifteen years time or beyond that. Georgia has too much on its hands right now to be too involved in speculations about it. It is rational to focus on objectives that can be achieved and not allow things that cannot be changed for the time being to get one depressed.

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Georgian Attitudes to Russia: Surprisingly Positive

By Hans Gutbrod and Nana Papiashvili, Tbilisi

Abstract

What do Georgians think about Russia? What relationship would they like to have with their northern neighbor? And what do they think about the August conflict? Data collected by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) allows a nuanced answer to these questions: although Georgians have a very critical view of Russia's role in the August conflict, they continue to desire a good political relationship with their northern neighbor, as long as this is not at the expense of close ties with the West. Georgians remain favorable to Russians as individuals, and to doing business with Russia. Culturally, however, Georgians are orienting themselves towards the West.

Political Attitudes

Following the conflict in August 2008, the geopolitics of the Georgian–Russian relationship have received significant attention. Moreover, the Levada Center in Russia has published a series of analyses of Russian public opinion on the conflict. Yet the view of the Georgian public so far has received little attention.

Between 2007 and August 2009, the CRRC conducted seven different nationwide surveys in Georgia, and also in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Interviewers worked countrywide (with the exception of the contested territories), in face-to-face interviews according to international standards, with more than 1,600 respondents (and up to 3,200). Detailed information on the general survey methodology is available on the CRRC website (www.crrccenters.org).

Georgians overwhelmingly desire a good political relationship with Russia. This view was clearly demon-

strated by all the polling that CRRC has undertaken since 2004. In 2007, for example, 57% said that they wanted full political cooperation with Russia. Only 13% suggested that they wanted limited political cooperation. At the same time, a majority of Georgians desired an equally close political cooperation with the United States, while also favoring NATO membership (with 63% in favor, and only 6% explicitly against, the remainder being neutral or *don't knows*).

This positive view of cooperation with Russia has remained stable. In August 2009, 54% of Georgians continued to favor extremely close political cooperation with Russia. (see diagram overleaf)

Even right after the war, in October 2008, 20% of the Georgian population named re-establishing good economic and political relations with Russia to be the fourth most important issue for Georgia. Politically, Georgians carry no grudge.