



**Prospects of Georgian-Russian Relations: the international and bilateral contexts<sup>1</sup>**

**Caucasian House**

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Centre for Cultural Relations — Caucasian House is a cultural, educational, and peacebuilding organisation which aims to create a platform for ideological and intellectual regional cooperation and peaceful development of the Caucasus.

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The annexation of Crimea and ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as well as recent unrest in Abkhazia impacts the development of Georgian-Russian relations. These events create certain difficulties in relations of the two countries both in international and bilateral contexts. On May 29, Caucasian House organized a round-table on the topic of “Prosepects on Georgian-Russian relations.” The participants of the discussion were beneficiaries and the management of the project “Georgian-Russian Dialogue for Peace and Cooperation”. The future plans of the project were also discussed on the event. The speeches were delivered by Giorgi Gvimradze, Analyst of Strategic Research Centre, Giorgi Kanashvili, Executive Director of Caucasian House and Tato Khundadze, Project Coordinator at Caucasian House.

### **International Context of Georgian-Russian Relations: Crisis in Ukraine and Creation of Eurasian Union**

The ongoing process in Ukraine is important for Georgia in the context of Georgian-Russian relations. Although the presidential election was held in Ukraine, the future of the country is still vague. What is happening in East Ukraine can be called a civil conflict. Some experts expected that the creation of Eurasian Economic Union would be threatened by the crisis in Ukraine. Though, as of May 29 it was officially established and the agreement signed. Armenia’s possible membership in the Union has gained the momentum again. Moreover, protesters in Abkhazia, among others, demanded Abkhazia’s entering the Eurasian Union. However, such development is expected to be resisted by Belarus and Kazakhstan. Armenia’s joining the Eurasian Union will create certain problems for Georgia. Though, it is not worth exaggerating this problem, as it is still not clear what this Union will be. Kazakhstan and Belarus, of course, have their interests. Kazakhstan does not want the Eurasian Economic Union to be given a political context as it sees the Union as a potential threat for sovereignty.

A salient issue discussed at the meeting is the lack of systemic knowledge of Russian foreign policy. Although there are a lot of analytical institutions, in reality Georgia does not have enough specialists who can conceptualize what Russia's interests are in Ukraine and what Europe's interests are. Georgia is still observing and experts might have some "feelings" but not real understanding of the interests.

### **Bilateral Context – Unrest in Abkhazia**

The views of the unrest in Abkhazia vary. The most widely accepted of them include the following: protests as a response to internal political and socio-economic processes, and overthrow of power provoked by the Kremlin to install a leadership more favourable to Russia.

The leader of opposition party called for further intensification of Abkhazia's ties with Russia in the fields of security, defense and economy. It is not a typical annexation but Abkhazia is sliding towards becoming a province of Russia. The rationale behind this process of such kind of integration with Russia is unclear. Furthermore, it was suggested that in case of annexation of Abkhazia, it will be very difficult for Georgia to continue the normalization process with Russia – it will be hard to morally justify this process. The government will hardly explain to the population the importance of trade relations or export of agricultural products in Russia in the case of annexation.

On the level of civil society, it is also very difficult to continue the dialogue. However, sides have shifted now: it is obvious that Russians try to be initiators of the dialogue, unlike previous years, when the initiator of the dialogue was mainly Georgia. The various institutions from Russia are trying to establish contacts with local actors. However, there is one important problem. Georgian civil activists cannot freely go to Russia and meet officials or experts. It is a quite rare possibility. On the other hand, Russian civil activists, researchers and experts can come to Georgia without visa or any other problems and meet here who they like. Yet, it has to be

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emphasized that the importance of the dialogue will increase if the political situation is becomes tenser.

Although the Russia-centric explanation of Abkhazian unrest may be sufficiently legitimate, it was suggested that the current turmoil in Abkhazia is more likely to be internal crisis. There are several reasons for this:

- The crisis in Ukraine is an important issue for Russia. At this stage, Russia is not interested in additional problems in Abkhazia;
- The idea of joining to Russia is not popular with the Abkhaz. So in case of annexation, Russia might face problems (for instance it can support the North Caucasian resistant movement). The demand of opposition leader about the closer relations with Russia is aimed to gain support from Russia and it is not targeted at the internal society.

The issue of the Gali residents in Abkhazia was discussed as the protesters have demanded expelling ethnic Georgians from Gali. There is a range of opinions about this issue. One view suggests that the issue of Gali is instrumentalized mostly for the mobilization purposes of the society as it is an important topic in Abkhazian internal discourse. But when the opposition comes in the government, usually, they have more responsible approach towards the issue. However, it cannot be denied that the fears on the possible expel of the ethnic Georgians from Gali district has the right to exist. In case of such unfortunate scenario Georgia will have a new wave IDPs.

Despite all the aforementioned issues, the crisis in Ukraine and recent events in Abkhazia, that emotionally create negative background for the dialogue, the participants of the discussion consider that the dialogue process with Russia should be continued both on governmental and civil society level. The Abashidze-Karasin format should be preserved as well. It gives Georgia more sense of security and demonstrates that Russia considers Georgian government as a legitimate actor, especially in the absence of any other security guarantees.

### **New thinking for Georgian foreign policy**

It was proposed that Georgia may need to review and rethink its strategic directions, visions and partners, as there are no constant partners. Georgia should act according to the rules of realpolitik, given the current political context in the world. The mistake of Europe with Ukraine was the fact that Brussels made Kyiv take sides between Europe and Russia. This is not a rational approach and it should not be repeated in the case of Georgia. Georgia should be allowed to have economic, trade and other relations with both Europe and Russia. Only in case of communication we can normalize relations with Russia. The historical experience also proves that more involvement of Russia in different partnership programs can make Russia more predictable.

### **The project Georgian Russian Dialogue for Peace and Cooperation: Future prospects**

The future plans of the project “Georgian Russian Dialogue for Peace and Cooperation” were also discussed at the meeting. The overview of the general context of the process and the events in Ukraine and Abkhazia show that they have influence on Georgian-Russian relations, at least on the level of perceptions. The recent public polls demonstrate that the trust towards Georgian-Russian normalization process decreased and the perception of threat from Russia has increased. In this situation, it is difficult to require from the actors, both on the state and civil level, to undertake more courageous steps. The project had short term as well as mid and long term goals. It involved young experts from Russia and Georgia who had direct access to their respective governments and consequently, offer the recommendations and policy alternatives to the governments. This is why the Gorchakov Foundation, Russian Institute of Strategic Studies and other institutions were involved in the process. A few years ago, Russian experts had problems to come to Tbilisi. Caucasian House worked actively in this

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regard, recommended the government of Georgia to allow Russian experts in the country as the project management considered it could contribute to the normalization process. It is unclear whether it was due to the recommendations of the Caucasian House or other factors, but that fact is that currently Russian experts do not have problems to visit Georgia.

At this stage, considering the general context, Caucasian House is more oriented on long term perspective. Therefore, it will adopt Functionalist approach, which means that cooperation in concrete spheres of the so-called low politics such as economy, trade, etc. in a long term perspective will influence the so-called high politics, i.e. security.

The first visit within the current project is planned to be organized in July and will bring Russian economists to Tbilisi. Together with Georgian economists they will elaborate joint policy documents. Besides, Caucasian House is planning to work actively with Georgian government. The project management already has similar experience of Caucasian House offering its expertise to the government of Georgia. The topics the project management will work on are the following: North Caucasus, Russian soft power, borderization, cooperation between law enforcement agencies, Georgian Diaspora in Russia, economic issues etc. All in all, in the framework of the project, three study dialogue visits will be organized in Tbilisi and five policy briefs will be issued. A visit in Moscow is planned as well, though it mainly depends on external factors.

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