Georgia and Russia: Bilateral View on the Quarter Century Relations
GEORGIA AND RUSSIA: BILATERAL VIEW ON THE QUARTER CENTURY RELATIONS

Research Report
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Caucasian House is a cultural-educational organization, which aims to establish an ideological and intellectual base for peaceful development in Georgia and the Caucasus. Caucasian House has been working on projects covering issues such as regional development and the integration of different Caucasian peoples for a long time. In recent years, the organization actively studies political and social processes in the Caucasus and its adjacent regions. Some projects have already been implemented, including collaborative research by young Georgian and foreign analysts, informational visits to Georgia and other countries of the region, meetings with experts and government representatives. Through this project over the last five years more than ten political document were published about the Georgian conflict regions, Georgian-Russian relations, the North Caucasus, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and other topics.

The present account was prepared in 2016. It was based on social research, which was implemented within the project 'Georgian-Russian dialogue for peace and co-operation', within which Georgian and Russian researchers participated. The goal of this project was to review the 25-year development of Georgian-Russian relations and to demonstrate major trends from that period. The research focused on two main questions: 1. What are the reasons for the ambivalence in Georgian-Russian relations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union? 2. Which factors influenced the formation of Georgia’s policy towards Russia, under the governance of Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, Saakashvili and “Georgian Dream”?

The account shows that, from 1991 until today (2016), Georgia’s policy towards Russia has gone through several differing phases. The margin between these periods mainly coincides with the terms of the four governments from this period. It should be noted that over these 25 years, Georgia tried almost all possible approaches towards its relations with Russia, from extreme confrontation to bandwagoning.

In contrast to Tbilisi’s approaches, the Kremlin’s policy towards Georgia has been far more homogeneous. In this context, the Russian elites have appeared more conservative and stable. Moscow has almost never changed its position from that described by Eduard Shevardnadze as the following: “The Russian leadership believes that Russia’s interests should be a priority for the former Soviet republics and that they should put these interests above their own.” However, we should not forget the Russian political landscape of the 1990s, when different interest groups and state institutions were pursuing different approaches towards Russia’s foreign policy, creating a fragile and unclear system of regional peace and security.
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**RUSSIA’S WORLDVIEW AND ITS RELATIONS WITH GEORGIA: GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND DOMESTIC LEVELS OF ANALYSIS**

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GEORGIA AND RUSSIA IN BETWEEN CLOSENESS AND CONFRONTATION: 25 YEARS OF RELATIONS

View from Georgia
INTRODUCTION

Georgian-Russian relations have equally been shaped by necessity and ambivalence. The necessity is derived from Russia being a powerful Orthodox empire capable of protecting Georgia from Muslim empires and raids by its North Caucasian neighbours, while the ambivalence has to do with Russia’s cultural domination coupled with imperialistic ambitions posing threats to the Georgian sovereignty, independence and the national idea. The Georgian intellectual elites regarded Russia both as a protector and an invader. Russia often tended to become a subject of harsh criticism in Georgia. At the same time, a widely shared opinion suggested that Russia saved Georgia from a demographic disaster in the 19th century and had served as a transmitter of Western liberal ideas. However, the situation has drastically changed and modern day discourse in Georgia perceives Russia as an anti-western force.

Modern Georgian-Russian political discourse has been marked with powerful propaganda, negative statements voiced by various players, the influence of international actors, speculations and interpretations. The complexity of the general context as well as the interplay of internal and external factors have created a valuable base for studying the variety of factors contributing to Georgian-Russian relations.

Presumably, the Georgian-Russian conflict was born out of all the above-mentioned factors, therefore, research into these relations begs the matter to be reviewed from various perspectives including the domestic political situation, personal-institutional level or international global context.

There is little consensus in Georgia when it comes to the motivations of the various stakeholders in Georgian-Russian relations and the influence of numerous factors over these relations. The present research attempts to ascertain which factors have contributed to shaping the current relationship pattern between the two states in question.

This report consists of a methodology section, five chapters and a conclusion. The chapters are constructed according to a timeline coinciding with the terms of various incumbent authorities in Georgia.

The first chapter provides an overview of Georgia’s policy towards Russia in the first years of independence. Under President Zviad Gamsakhurdia Georgia’s foreign policy priorities had been largely shaped by Gamsakhurdia’s personal attitudes towards various issues, the country’s internal situation and the geopolitical reality shaped by the Russian Federation. Gamsakhurdia’s attempts to get closer to the West in opposition to Russia turned out to be futile as Georgia failed to receive the desired support from the West and had to face Russia alone. At the same time, the Georgian government was forced to admit the country’s economic dependence on the Russian Federation. Finally, Georgia was left by itself in the foreign policy arena.

The second chapter deals with the period of interregnum and transition from the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia’s government to Shevardnadze’s accession to the country’s presidency. Georgia’s relations with its northern neighbour during the interregnum were influenced by Russia’s aggressive policy of supporting separatist regions and imposing economic obstructions on Georgia. Importantly, Georgia managed to achieve certain success in gaining recognition by Western countries with Shevardnadze playing a key role in this regard. However, succumbing to Russia’s pressure and the loss it sustained in the conflict with Abkhazia, Georgia was eventually forced to become a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States and agree to have Russian military bases and border forces deployed in its territory.

Shevardnadze’s reign, which is a subject of the third chapter, was marked by an ambivalent relationship with Russia. On the one hand, the goal of Shevardnadze’s policy was clearly to counterbalance Russia. Regardless of pressure from Russia, Georgia had managed to activate a Western direction in its policy, get closer to NATO and the EU, and become a member of the Council of Europe. An issue related to the transportation of the Caspian Sea oil to the West through Georgia was of special importance to Georgian-Russian relations of that time because of Russia’s highly controversial position towards the matter, which it perceived as harming its interests. The relations between the two countries sank to their lowest point during the Second Chechen war and the Pankisi gorge crisis. Russia accused the Georgian Government of protecting Chechen fighters and subsequently bombed the gorge on several occasions. Shevardnadze tried to resort to the American factor in his attempt to counterbalance Russia, taking advantage of America’s growing interests in the Caucasus after 9/11.

The second part of the report opens with the Rose Revolution of 2003. Mikheil Saakashvili and his political team managed to bring about the most significant breakthrough in Georgian-Russian relations. This period saw several distinct topics emerge in relations between Tbilisi and Moscow: a period of weak warming (January – June 2004), a conflict around the “conflicts”, the impact of Georgia’s internal political processes on bilateral relations and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The second chapter of the second part reviews the relations from the August War to 2012 – the change of authorities in Georgia. This period had seen Georgia walking on the brink of a renewal of a war while at the same time it was being ignored by Russia. After the August 2008 war the whole of the country’s political resources were spent on sustaining power and the theme of Russia was an important instrument in these attempts. Promoting an image of the enemy in the face of Russia, constantly bringing up the topic of “Kremlin agents” and carrying out a drastically confrontational foreign policy were all part of this attempt. In addition, after the August war Georgia began to pursue the audacious goal of bringing the north Caucasian topic to the fore. It should be mentioned that the Kremlin did not respond harshly in any way and the period passed in a ‘silent tension’.

The period following the year of 2012 may be assessed as an attempt to break the deadlock in Georgian-Russian relations. Tbilisi took numerous political steps to demonstrate to Moscow their readiness for the normalization of relations. Although normalization has been achieved to some extent in certain fields and tensions have discharged considerably, disagreements on
major political issues persist between the two countries. Moscow’s asymmetric approach and its attitude towards the Georgian state has hampered any attempts to achieve progress around issues circumscribed with ‘red lines’.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The following research is based on a set of diverse methodology including a systemic approach that incorporates both historical and political methodologies. This is due to the interdisciplinary nature of the research, which often reviews political problems from the angle of historical development. We chose to apply the comparative-historic and historic-descriptive methods. The historic-comparative method enabled us to analyze various stages of relations between Georgia and Russia while the historic-descriptive methodology helped us describe each of these stages.

We chose to use a process tracing method from political studies. This method is relatively new to political sciences and has only been around for 20 years. The process tracing method, introduced by Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, looks into the root causes of certain events of historic significance and is mostly used to analyze complex decision-making processes. This method is a tool for examining political developments, focusing on root causes which ultimately shape a bigger picture. The main goal of the process tracing method is to identify the logic involved in making important political decisions. George and Bennet recommend researchers to consult historic and archival documents, interview transcripts and other sources pertaining to the subject of research. In another of their articles George and Bennet underscore the importance of conducting interviews with decision makers and stakeholders to ensure that specific information is obtained from specific individuals. Interviews can address the gap in the analysis of information obtained from archives. In spite of these benefits, interviewing elites comes with shortfalls of its own: a politician who is being interviewed may boil down his or her own role in a decision to a minimum or may choose not to divulge all of the information. In order to avoid such kinds of situations the researcher should carefully study the personality of the respondent and his/her role in the developments to be examined, as well as their possible access to information and credibility (Tansey, 2007).

This research is based on documentary and analytical materials as well as the results of interviews conducted by the team of researchers. The findings draw on the analysis of researchers and respective field experts, reflecting their views and opinions. The research relies on qualitative methods, more specifically, in-depth interviews and desk research.

At the first stage of the research, the desk review was conducted to analyze materials on the history of the relationship between Russia and Georgia, as well as to identify various trends and factors contributing to shaping these relations. The desk review included an analysis of academic publications, official documents published by state agencies and materials kept in archives. At the same time the research team also worked to provide critical discourse-analysis of public statements made by state officials. In-depth interviews with former state officials and experts were conducted at the second phase of the research. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to highlight patterns emerging from findings in the first stage of the research and further strengthen these findings through personal accounts or expert analysis.

The team of two researchers studied Georgian-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union, identifying two distinct periods: from independence to the Rose Revolution and from the Rose Revolution to the present day. A selected editor provided consultancy to the researchers throughout the research phase and edited the body of findings.
Chapter 1: ZVIAD GAMSAKHURDIA’S STRATEGIC IDEALISM

“Georgian people have never come to terms with the loss of freedom” – said Zviad Gamsakhurdia on 9 April 1991 at the extraordinary session of the Georgian Supreme Soviet convened to discuss the matter of Georgia’s independence. Gamsakhurdia, who had been chairing the Round Table-Free Georgia bloc since October 1990, spoke about Georgian-Russian relations, the occupation of Georgia by Soviet Russia, the revolt of 1924, the bloodshed of 9 April 1989 and the March 1991 referendum on Georgian independence officially supported by 91% of the country’s population. Gamsakhurdia made a promise to the population to make independent Georgia a democratic state: ‘The Republic of Georgia, aspiring to acquire a due place within the international community, recognising and ensures all rights and freedoms granted to individuals, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups by international law and enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations...’

Among the factors shaping Georgia’s foreign relations during Gamsakhurdia’s time, three stand out due to their importance:

1. Zviad Gamsakhurdia himself and his attitudes towards internal and foreign politics; 2. The political situation in the country; 3. The existing geopolitical situation that was mostly dictated by the Russian Federation and unfavourable to Georgia.

At the same time, it should be noted that Georgia failed to solicit international recognition under Gamsakhurdia’s presidency. This is one of reasons that some researchers do not consider Georgia’s foreign policy under Gamsakhurdia to be a separate stage in the country’s international relations.

The first president of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia was one of the prominent campaigners for human rights in the 1960s and 1970s. Gamsakhurdia was also one of the founders of the Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights (1974) and the Georgian Helsinki Watch Group (1977). He had been arrested several times and spent most of his adult life under the supervision and surveillance of the Committee for State Security. However, in fact, Gamsakhurdia’s major focus was the political rights of Georgians rather than human rights in their broader sense. In underground journals he would constantly emphasize the threats of russification, the demographic decline of Georgians and the plight of Georgian communities abroad (such as, the Ingilos in Azerbaijan). After the introduction of Glasnost, Gamsakhurdia openly confronted liberal figures of Russia’s dissident movement, in particular Andrei Sakharov over the latter’s proposal for a new multinational union that gave all nations greater equality. Gamsakhurdia regarded this as a mechanism for preserving the empire.

Gamsakhurdia ascended to the leadership in extreme times characterized by economic collapse, state fragmentation and political polarization. His policies were an amalgam of nationalism, populism, religiosity and conservatism. Gamsakhurdia believed in a nearly mythological and “racially pure” Georgian past. He would compare Georgia with Lazarus restored to life from death. At the same time, Gamsakhurdia, being a follower of social conservatism, called for respect of the traditional family model, friendship, religion and loyalty, which he believed to be purely Georgian faculties. Gamsakhurdia did not manage to break free from his Soviet colonial heritage, as demonstrated by his authoritarian attitudes towards the press, parliament and opposition. In spite of the endorsement of progressive legislation on citizenship and the press, these laws were not effectively implemented. The fight against internal and external enemies was used to justify attempts to repress diverse opinions and hostile campaigns against alternative political ideologies. The language he used against his opposition was dominated by words characterizing the USSR of 1930s. Gamsakhurdia was constantly mocking the opposition and labelled its members ‘despicable’, ‘criminals’ and ‘anti-constitutional’, whilst saying they ‘conspired with Shevardnadze and other conspirators based in Moscow’. President Gamsakhurdia condemned his opponents as ‘enemies of people’, ‘agents of the Kremlin, ‘Judas’ and ‘criminals’. Derogatory and aggressive rhetoric led to the demonization of his opponents and undermined all possibilities of compromise and cooperation.

Gamsakhurdia, loyal to traditional values, did not intend to modernize Georgian society. Christopher Clapham has characterized cultures like Georgia’s as neo-patrimonial – where personal relations and status are the basis of authority structures with little distinction between the official and the private world. In such societies persons sitting comfortably in offices turn into sources of political power and resources. For most of the population personalities prevailed over institutions which helps to explain why parties based on grassroots participation or legitimate national institutions failed to take root in Georgia. Institutions were not the key to people’s needs; personalities were.

Some in Gamsakhurdia’s government, such as his last prime minister Besaroion Gugushvili, worked on a theory of state domination. His policies were an amalgam of nationalism, populism, religiosity and conservatism. Gamsakhurdia ascended to the leadership in extreme times characterized by economic collapse, state fragmentation and political polarization. His policies were an amalgam of nationalism, populism, religiosity and conservatism. Gamsakhurdia believed in a nearly mythological and “racially pure” Georgian past. He would compare Georgia with Lazarus restored to life from death. At the same time, Gamsakhurdia, being a follower of social conservatism, called for respect of the traditional family model, friendship, religion and loyalty, which he believed to be purely Georgian faculties. Gamsakhurdia did not manage to break free from his Soviet colonial heritage, as demonstrated by his authoritarian attitudes towards the press, parliament and opposition. In spite of the endorsement of progressive legislation on citizenship and the press, these laws were not effectively implemented. The fight against internal and external enemies was used to justify attempts to repress diverse opinions and hostile campaigns against alternative political ideologies. The language he used against his opposition was dominated by words characterizing the USSR of 1930s. Gamsakhurdia was constantly mocking the opposition and labelled its members ‘despicable’, ‘criminals’ and ‘anti-constitutional’, whilst saying they ‘conspired with Shevardnadze and other conspirators based in Moscow’. President Gamsakhurdia condemned his opponents as ‘enemies of people’, ‘agents of the Kremlin, ‘Judas’ and ‘criminals’. Derogatory and aggressive rhetoric led to the demonization of his opponents and undermined all possibilities of compromise and cooperation.

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Some in Gamsakhurdia’s government, such as his last prime minister Besaroion Gugushvili, worked on a theory of state capitalism. In the August 1991 economic program Gamsakhurdia claimed that theوزن theory of convergence would be beneficial for the country. The President himself was against the free market which is corroborated by his confrontation
with cooperatives and his vetoing an initial bill on privatization. Many goods were not freed from price control while industry remained under the control of the central government. The export of goods was strictly regulated, increasing Georgia’s economic isolation.¹ In light of these developments, the quality of life of an ordinary Georgian drastically deteriorated with bread and sugar being sold in individual rations. Georgia was facing an economic collapse.²

In the context of Georgia’s neopatrimonial culture and in light of underdeveloped state institutions, authority was embodied by the President. Charisma was Gamsakhurdia’s most dependable source of power while his management style had undermined the countries embryonic representative institutions. Gamsakhurdia used direct appeals to the masses to overcome institutional obstacles Economic chaos encouraged the search for scapegoats. In Georgia the was the communists, the ‘red intelligentsia’, the USSR and national minorities. Ernesto Laclau in his study of populism calls these sorts of arguments the ‘simplification of political space’.³ The popular fight consolidates around one issue while political diversity is replaced with the vision of ‘us’ and ‘others’. In her study of populism Margaret Canovan suggests that populist movements ‘involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to the ‘people’, and all are in one sense or another anti-elitists’.⁴ Scapegoating an ethnic ‘other’, intellectuals or foreign governments; a state managed economy; manipulation of the press; an emphasis on charismatic authority; a special destiny for the nation, and a leadership cult aided by a strong presidential system are all characteristic of populist authority.⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny argues that Gamsakhurdia’s increased authoritarianism led to the estrangement of many leaders, not necessarily only those who were not ethnically Georgian or of the national movement.⁶

As mentioned above, back in Gamsakhurdia’s time, Georgia, as a sovereign entity, had not yet been recognized by the international community. Some commentators hold that Georgia’s foreign policy of those times was not guided by strategic calculations and adequate assessment of the existing geopolitical situation but stood out with its so-called strategic idealism.⁷

In spite of the fact that one of the key challenges faced by Georgia’s incumbent leadership was lack of experience, there had been some attempts to define foreign policy priorities.⁸ One of the distinct priorities was an attempt by the Georgian authorities to distance themselves from Russia and gain the West’s support. Gamsakhurdia was cultivating the expectation that the West would support Georgia and help the country to free itself from Russia. The incumbent authorities had made several steps towards this goal. Gamsakhurdia, in his attempts to gain US support, sent his representatives to the States in March 1990. However, this attempt did not bring about any tangible outcome.⁹ One more feature marking Gamsakhurdia’s foreign policy was the decision not to get closer to Russia in spite of Moscow putting pressure on Georgia by supporting secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, Gamsakhurdia’s anti-Russian rhetoric failed to gain him support from western leaders and even that of the majority of Georgians.¹⁰

Gamsakhurdia believed that Christian Georgia had been a part of European civilization since ancient times, and this gave Georgia a place at the European table. ‘We, Georgians have always had a European orientation’, he declared, ‘WE want to be part of the common European home’.¹¹ Gamsakhurdia envisaged the West as a new patron of independent Georgia, but in August 1991, after President Bush’s ‘Chicken Kiev’ speech to the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, which pointedly condemned ‘suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred’ and offered US support for Gorbachev’s draft Union treaty,¹² Gamsakhurdia accused Bush of supporting ‘communism, tyranny, and mock reforms’.¹³ Instead of seeking Western patronage, he chose to concentrate on the regional context. He promoted the idea of a common Caucasian civilization and proposed a Caucasian People’s Forum.¹⁴ Gamsakhurdia developed especially close relations with the leader of the Chechen-Ingush autonomous republic Jokhar Dudaev.

Gamsakhurdia’s antagonism towards Russia and his apparent nationalism completed Georgia’s isolation. Gamsakhurdia exploited Georgians’ historical sense of victimization, but he faced a dilemma as to how he could combine radical nationalism at home with economic support from the former colonial centre. One hundred percent of Georgian grain, gas and oil came from the north. 66% of Georgia’s fruit and vegetable, 60% of its wine and 93% of its cognac went to the Union, mostly to Russia.¹⁵ From the very beginning Gamsakhurdia recognized the need for a gradual and civilized disengagement from the USSR. He was pragmatic enough to negotiate economic and political accords with Yeltsin’s Russia and with other former Soviet republics.

Georgian-Russian economic relations under the USSR were placed in a central planned economy system. Economic relations among economic subjects operating in Soviet republics were governed by a central body of economical planning – the Gosplan of the USSR. It should be noted that because of its small size, Georgia, together with the other small republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, was a part of the Transcaucasian economic zone.¹

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the destruction of the common economy and led to the progressive disengagement of the production chain connecting post-Soviet enterprises. This tendency was accelerated in Georgia. More specifically, the first post-Soviet Georgian authorities imposed an economic blockade on Russia by cutting off Samtsretdia railway, as a result of which production ties between Georgian and Russian (and not only Russian) enterprises were disrupted earlier than in other post-Soviet republics. Georgia had to shoulder the major brunt of this disruption. The above describes the first economic damage Georgia sustained, sadly, because of grave mistakes made by the Georgian authorities. It should be noted that Russia continued to remain the top trade partner for Georgia.²

Gamsakhurdia followed an unusual pattern among radical anticolonial leaders.³ He moved from accommodation to rejection of the former colonial power. His government’s relationship with the USSR was in perpetual crisis due to: conflict over secessionist south Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Georgian boycott of Gorbachev’s all-Union referendum, his Government’s refusal to join the Union treaty, Georgia’s condemnation of the USSR as an occupying force, the declaration of the primacy of national laws over union laws, the ‘nationalization’ of the KGB in November 1990, and the refusal to let Soviet troops participate in elections, all of which could be considered reasonable acts for a national government to take.⁴ However, Gamsakhurdia’s decision in September 1991 to break off official relations with the Soviet Union for its refusal to recognize Georgian independence only intensified Georgia’s isolation and Gamsakhurdia’s problems. The attempted coup-d’état of August 1991 in Moscow was soon followed by an insurgency against Gamsakhurdia. Under the State Committee on the State of Emergency Gamsakhurdia’s reaction was different from that of the Baltic leaders who unequivocally condemned the coup-d’état. His hesitation gave additional reasons to his opponents and further deepened the crisis in the government.⁵ The opposition had already been talking about the alleged influence of an eight-member State Committee over Gamsakhurdia.

The political crisis emerging in the fall of 1991 turned out to be fateful for Gamsakhurdia’s government. Gamsakhurdia, based on his own fears about the power of the National Guard, demoted it to a subunit of the Special Purpose Militia Detachment (OMON) and dismissed its commander Tengiz Kitovani, allegedly to protect it from attack by Soviet forces.⁶ The abolishment of the commander’s position turned out to be the main problem for Gamsakhurdia. The National Guard was formally under the Ministry of the Interior with the status of an internal army. Kitovani refused to submit to Gamsakhurdia’s order and led a loyal section of the 15,000 member National Guard into the forests of the Rkoni valley 40 kilometers north of Tbilisi. He was joined by Gamsakhurdia’s prime minister Tengiz Sigua.⁷

The situation became particularly charged in the aftermath of September 2, when government forces fired on a crowd at an opposition rally outside Kinos Sakhli (Movie House). At that time a big delegation of the US congressmen was visiting Tbilisi. The unfortunate event at the opposition rally provided the grounds for Gamsakhurdia’s opposition to make allegations against Gamsakhurdia’s anti-democratic policies ever stronger and worsened the disappointment amongst some groups of the population towards the incumbent authorities. Rustaveli avenue was split into two with hunger strikers and protesters filling up barricades erected by the opposition and Gamsakhurdia remaining in the Governmental Palace, relying on loyal National Guard members and supporters arriving from various regions of Georgia.

Tbilisi was also physically divided. The opposition was ensconced in the Philharmonia Hall, the TV Studios, Tbilisi State University and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism,³ Mkhedrioni still used the Chess House as his HQ. Gamsakhurdia’s supporters occupied the parliament building and other ministerial buildings. Tbilisi’s districts were also divided with Vake and Saburtalo being largely home to the ‘red intelligentsia’ and ‘gilded youth’ while residents of Gldani, Nadzaladzevi and Didube supported Gamsakhurdia.⁹ After yet another bloody confrontation in September at the offices of National-Democratic and National Independence parties Gamsakhurdia declared a state of emergency and threatened to dissolve the Parliament. Kitovani’s national guard re-entered Tbilisi and some journalists also joined the opposition. Ultimately, this series of confrontations turned into a civil war by the end of December.

On 6 January 1992 President Gamsakhurdia together with a handful of loyal supporters left the parliament building and fled to Armenia. The civil war left behind 107 dead and 527 more wounded. The hotel Tbilisi and School N1 were now just ruins. The war continued in Samegrelo.¹⁰ Erica Benner argues that movements and ideologies stemming from ethnic grounds are complex, and new circumstances overthrow their leaders within just a few years. These very circumstances also transform

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² В. Папава, и Т. Беридзе. «Проблемы реформирования грузинской экономики». Российский экономический журнал, 1994, № 3.
³ Stephen F. Jones; ‘Georgia: A Political History since Independence’. Tbilisi; Center for Social Sciences. pp. 68.
⁴ Ibid. pp. 68.
⁵ An interview with David Darchishvili, Professor of History at Ilia State University. 15 October, 2016.
⁶ Jaba Ioseliani. ‘Three Dimensions’. p. 28 [available in Georgian].
⁸ Institute of Marxism and Leninism.
their goals and forms of expression. Gamsakhurdia’s regime could hardly survive just a year. Its existence ceased as a result of a military coup. Three years after he was elected as chair of the Supreme Soviet with overwhelming popular support in 1990, Zviad Gamsakhurdia died under suspicious circumstances.

Chapter 2. INTERREGNUM

The three years following Gamsakhurdia’s government, from 1992 to 1995, were an interregnum between the exhausted radicalism of Gamsakhurdia’s second republic and the moderate politics of Shevardnadze’s third republic which came to life together with the adoption of the 1995 constitution. The interregnum was the ‘time of troubles’ marked with the emergence of powerful paramilitaries, ethnopolitical conflicts and foreign interventions, reinforced by an economic crash resulting in abject poverty, constant electric blackouts, high crime rates, unpaid salaries, and over 15,000 percent inflation.1

That is when an ex foreign minister of the Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze stepped in. In 1985 Shevardnadze, who had already introduced some elements of the market economy in Georgia (the Abasha and Poti experiments), caught Gorbachev’s attention and the latter invited him over to Moscow to lead the Union’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1990 Shevardnadze resigned. He was invited to Georgia by the triumphant but politically inexperienced Ioseliani and Kitovani to re-establish order and keep them safe.

On 7 March 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze flew to Tbilisi. Shevardnadze, whose arrival was met with sighs of relief from his supporters told a journalist that his decision to come to Georgia was the riskiest he had taken in his entire life.2 After a symbolic visit to Sioni Cathedral where he received the blessing of the Patriarch, and to the graves of those who fought in the two-week war against Gamsakhurdia, he declared ‘Everything is in ruins… we must roll up our sleeves and work to get things done’.3

Shevardnadze faced the fundamental task of reassembling the state. Charles Tilly refers to three major state functions – extractive, coercive, and incorporative (integrative).4 Back then, Georgia was incapable of defending its borders; it could not control crime; was unable to pay salaries and pensions or maintain adequate schools and hospitals. The state could not control regions outside of the capital and depended on local notables and warlords. The new Georgian government had to establish all three functions ascribed to the state by Charles Tilly: revenue generation, public order and citizens’ allegiance to the state including both resentful losers and alienated national minorities. The most outstanding issue that Shevardnadze had to deal with was to resolve the problem of Mkhedrioni and the National Guard, which had controlled the Military Council,5 economy and the regions. They were also mopping up operations against supporters of the former president. Shevardnadze had to put these operations to an end and seek ways towards national reconciliation. At the same time, it was a necessity to introduce new laws on citizenship, privatization, local government, the judiciary, elections, parliament, and the executive. Effective foreign and economic policies were also required to save the country and its population from poverty, which meant friendly relations with Russia and both recognition and investment from the West.6

The first positive outcome of Shevardnadze’s return was seen in the international arena. The framework of a developing relationship with the West emerged and gradually replaced Gamsakhurdia’s isolationist politics. German Foreign Minister Dietrich Genscher, US Secretary of State James Baker, and Turkish President Suuleyman Demirel arrived in Georgia within three months. On 23 March the European Economic Community (EEC) recognized Georgia and President Bush published a letter on 8 April promising Shevardnadze American investment. A US embassy opened later that month, and in July Shevardnadze led a delegation to Helsinki to participate in a Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe conference that extended its peace-keeping functions. On 30 July a Georgian-Turkish Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation was signed,7 and on 31 July Georgia became the 179th member of the United Nations, the last former Soviet republic to do so. Shevardnadze announced that this was “the birth of a new Georgia”.8

After Shevardnadze’s return, Georgia was recognized as a sovereign country by a considerable part of the international community. The first twelve months of Shevardnadze’s return to power, before Sukhumi’s surrender and Georgia’s accession to the CIS, saw the country’s foreign policy characterized by resistance to the return to Russia’s sphere of influence.9 Even though initially Shevardnadze’s policy towards the CIS was not much different from that pursued by his predecessor, Helena Frazer argues that he chose more pragmatic language while talking about the need to normalize relations with Russia.10

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2. Stephen F. Jones; ‘Georgia: A Political History since Independence’. Tbilisi; Centre for Social Sciences. pp. 76.
6. A military Council was created in December 1991, a few days before Gamsakhurdia’s flight. Its self-declared mission was to introduce economic reforms and maintain order until the new elections (Jones, PP. 80).
7. Stephen F. Jones; ‘Georgia: A Political History since Independence’. Tbilisi; Center for Social Sciences. PP. 78.
8. Ibid. PP. 85.
ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA

The ethnopolitical conflicts that fermented in Georgia during the interregnum are of utmost importance with respect to Georgian-Russian relations. These conflicts have largely shaped the state of affairs between Georgia and Russia and continue to play a pivotal role in relations between the two countries.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia suffered a crisis of relations with its ethnic minorities. Georgian-Ossetian confrontation escalated after the 20th Council of Delegates of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region made a decision, under the pressure of Adamon-Nikhas, to upgrade the status of South Ossetia to a Soviet Socialist Autonomous Republic on 10 November 1989 and make Ossetian the state language.

In 1990, the District Council of Delegates of South Ossetia made a decision to establish the South Ossetian Democratic Republic. The Council boycotted the first multi-party parliamentary elections to be held in Georgia and instead held the elections of the Supreme Soviet of the ‘South Ossetian Soviet Republic’. In this complicated situation, on 11 December 1990 the Georgian Supreme Soviet passed a law to abolish the South Ossetian Autonomous Region and declared the results of the December 1990 elections invalid.

The confrontation between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali worsened on a daily basis. In an all-Soviet referendum held on 17 March 1991 the majority of the ethnic Ossetian population of South Ossetia voted yes to the maintenance of the Soviet Union and boycotted a Georgian referendum on independence held on 31 March. Clashes began between the Georgian and Ossetian sides which were originally limited in scale, but gradually escalated into active armed conflicts. However, the scale of these hostilities was smaller than that with the Abkhaz.

In May 1992, South Ossetia declared its independence. South Ossetian leaders were accusing Georgians of a ‘genocide’, which aimed to push the Ossetian nation to the brink of extinction. In June 1992, in the Black Sea resort town of Dagomis, Shevardnadze signed a bilateral accord with the Russian Federation to end the bloodshed. The agreement, known as the Dagomis Accord, envisaged a ceasefire all over South Ossetia, a demilitarization plan and the establishment of a quadripartite control commission consisting of all the involved parties (Russia, Georgia, South and North Ossetia). In addition, a tripartite peace-keeping force was set up to prevent further escalation of the conflict. However, the conflict remained unresolved, in spite of various protocols for the return of internally displaced persons, commitments to cooperation in the reconstruction of infrastructure, promises to attract investments and regular meetings between Shevardnadze and his colleagues from South Ossetia. Declarations by the Russian Supreme Soviet in support of South Ossetia also helped to sustain the conflict.

Military actions taking place in the west of Georgia, more specifically in Abkhazia, presented an even greater threat. The modern Georgian-Abkhaz confrontation goes back to 18 March 1989 when a ‘Declaration of the Representatives of the Abkhazian People’ and an ‘Appeal to Mikhail Gorbachev’ were adopted in the Abkhaz village of Likhni on 18 March 1989. The documents highlighted the need for healthier inter-ethnic relations ‘through restoring Abkhazia’s political, economic and cultural sovereignty, within Lenin’s idea of federalism’.

The most violent of the early clashes occurred in July 1989 when 22 died and over 500 were wounded in demonstrations protesting the opening of a Georgian branch of the State University in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. In 1990-1991, tensions on the territory of Abkhazia reached their highest point. Gamsakhurdia attempted to soothe the situation by trying to strike a consortium agreement with the Abkhazians. The Abkhaz, who constituted 17.9% of the population in the autonomous republic, received 28 out of 65 seats in the parliament, while Georgians (46% of the population) got 26 seats. The remaining

1 Helena Frazer, A Case of Bandwagoning? Georgian Foreign Policy and Relations With Russia. (University of Oxford. MPhil in International Relations. 1997. p. 16).
4 An informal militarised organisation set up in South Ossetia.
7 Ibid. pp. 39-40 [available in Georgian].
8 Ibid. pp. 38-41 [available in Georgian].
9 Ibid. pp. 94-95 [available in Georgian].
11 seats were divided among Armenians, Greeks and Russians (together constituting 37% of the population). Constitutional changes required a two-thirds majority of votes, which provided some security for the Abkhaz to have their legal rights protected and exercise their political influence. 1 Former minister Paata Zakareishvili has stated that Gamsakhurdia made a positive decision at that time as it aimed to prevent a conflict with Abkhazia. 2 However, a number of factors, including the ineptitude of Georgian deputies, hampered the implementation of this agreement. The Supreme Soviet of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Republic endorsed numerous anti-Georgian decisions which aimed to separate Abkhazia from the territory of Georgia.

On 10 August 1992 the Presidium of the State Council of the Georgian Republic endorsed a resolution allowing troops under the ministries of defense and internal affairs to enter Abkhazia in order to protect a railway, eliminate incidents of robbery and cargo theft as well as to disarm local militias. Hundreds of Georgian troops under the leadership of Tengiz Kitovani entered Sukhumi. Abkhaz members of the government fled to Gudauta in the north of Abkhazia. On 14 August the Abkhaz Guard launched an attack against the Georgian army while the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia condemned the ‘limitless terror against and physical destruction’ of the Abkhaz people and called on the population to wage a ‘patriotic war to defend the nation.’

The Abkhaz were not alone in their fight. Kazak units, members of Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey and Syria and the Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus established in 1989 with Sukhumi as its capital, joined Abkhazian fighters. 4 Even though Abkhazians had been dreaming of independence, the actions of Russian politicians and military officers supporting the Abkhaz cause seemed to be directed at weakening Georgia rather than fighting for Abkhaz independence. “The Slavonic House and the conservative Soyuz”, which had branches in Tbilisi, promoted a specific ideology that called for a fight to sustain Russia’s imperial power. These establishments represented a vital stronghold for Russia’s anti-Georgian policies. 5 They were glorified by Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal-Democratic Party, Russian patriotic newspaper Den [the Day], Vice-President Alexey Rutskoy and the speaker of the Russian Parliament Ruslan Khasbulatov. These individuals were the most avid supporters of the “Abkhazian Issue.” 6 Russia’s support had practical aspects - it was guided by security concerns in the south (in particular, Russians were very concerned with the danger of losing an important section of the Black Sea coastline). In addition, Kazaks and Russian mercenaries fighting together with the Abkhaz were involved in a lucrative business of arms smuggling. 7

The war lasted 13 months and claimed around 8 thousand lives while the number of wounded reached 18,000. Agreements concluded under the aegis of Russia, the OSCE and the UN were regularly violated. The last ceasefire agreement signed on 27 July 1993 in Sochi under Russia’s brokerage, with the latter taking the responsibility for its implementation, was violated by the Abkhaz side with Russia’s covert consent on 16 September. After 11 days of fighting Sukhumi fell and around 250 thousand ethnic Georgians had to flee Abkhazia. 8

Gamsakhurdia tried to take advantage of the war and reclaim power. However, his attempt ended in failure in November 1993 and Russia stepped in to back up Shevardnadze in his confrontation with Gamsakhurdia. Georgia, suppressed by Russia, as Shevardnadze put it, was forced to membership to the CIS and sign a military agreement. 9 Russian troops were no longer required to withdraw from the country by the end of 1995. Nor were they to hand over ports to Georgia as was originally stipulated in the May 1993 agreement. Russia could also retain four military bases and was allowed to use Georgia’s ports and military training grounds. Russian border guards helped Georgia control a 2000km-long land border and more than 320km-long maritime border. There was no fixed date agreed for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia. The head of Tbilisi’s police force went as far as to ask the Russian troops to help him fight off criminals. 10

In light of tensions with the neighbouring country Shevardnadze chose to pursue a so-called ‘Two Russias’ policy. He claimed that the Supreme Council and military, rather than Yeltsin and the ‘democrats’ of the president’s office, were to be held responsible for this situation. At the same time, Georgia appeared to be a major issue for internal disagreements in Russia and as time passed, it became clear that the key to relations with Georgia was in the hands of the Russian military. 11

Shevardnadze’s government expected that the West would support and help solve the problems of a country tangled in civil and ethnic wars. However, after realizing that the expectation would not be met, Shevardnadze eventually started pur-
suing a policy of rapprochement with Russia. Later on, Shevardnadze described this decision as the ‘kneeling of Georgia’. The decision was followed by the legalization of the four Russian military bases in Georgia and signing of an agreement on Friendship, Neighborhood and Cooperation between the two countries in March 1994. The same period saw Russian sanctions against Abkhazia manifested in the closure of Abkhazia’s northern borers and Sukhumi airport. Paata Zakareishvili believes that by taking this action Russia was trying win back Georgia. It should also be noted that together with an escalation of the conflict with Chechnya, Russia intensified monitoring of its borders.

Many analysts argue that by making a decision to join the CIS Georgia surrendered to a major source of its insecurity. However, when examined closely, one can reveal that this ‘bandwagoning policy’ should not be regarded as entirely negative. More specifically, Shevardnadze took advantage of Georgia becoming a member of the CIS for two important reasons: first and foremost, he managed to appease a foreign aggressor and secondly, he managed to gain victory over Gamsakhurdia’s supporters and ensure the longevity of his own regime with the support of this very foreign actor.

The decision to join the CIS was a classic case of bandwagoning along with the source of threat, which is always an undesirable choice for any state. This is the reason why both Gamsakhurda and Shevardnadze initially resisted the accession to CIS. States chooses to pursue a bandwagon strategy only when they are weak, have no ally to help them balance looming threats and when it considers the source of threat as appeasable. All three conditions existed in Georgia in 1992. First of all, Georgia was considered a weak state throughout this period. Bruno Copieters argues that in the first half of the 1990s Georgia had not only been a weak state but it also moved into a subcategory of weakness known as ‘failing states’ because of the developments taking place in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as internal political confrontations. The second premise with respect to the bandwagon theory also holds: The state chose to pursue a bandwagoning policy only when it had no allies and no alternatives. In the course of the war in Abkhazia Shevardadze appealed in writing to the UN Secretary General to deploy peace-keeping forces in the conflict zone. However, the response was that the time to implement such a project had not yet come. Also, up until the mid-1990s neither Europe nor the US had any clear or consistent policy for the region in general. Zeyno Baran believes that the absence of such a policy was largely determined by the lack of knowledge of the region among US politicians and analysts. Svante Cornell argues that America’s other preoccupations (such as developments in the Balkans and Somalia) coupled with the perceived absence of important security interests in the South Caucasus precluded a significant US engagement with the region on a political level.

A shift within this policy occurred on 29 August 1995 when a bomb exploded in a car awaiting Shevardnedze who had just left the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. Shevardnadze, on his way to a celebration of the signing of the new constitution, was struck by stone and metal debris but miraculously escaped thanks to the poor timing of the would-be assassins. Igor Giorgadze, a figure of pro-Russian orientation and a head of Georgia’s security service was later alleged to be behind the attempted assassination. Jaba Ioseliani was also accused of being involved. Shevardnadze himself seized the opportunity to strengthen his power. Ioseliani and 200 fellow members of Mkhedrioni were arrested and sent to jail while arrests in the Ministry of Security were used to clear it of disloyal members. Giorgadze escaped to Russia from the nearest Russian military base. Shota Kviraia, the Minister of Interior was tasked to lead a campaign, initiated by Shevardnadze, against organized crime. Mkhdroni, which was left without its leader, was dissolved in October. The failed terrorist attack further reinforced Shevardnadze’s authority, which in turn had an impact on the course of foreign policy and Georgia’s relationship with Russia.

1 David Darchiaishvili, Georgia in the South Caucasus Regional Context (Building Democracy in Georgia, Discussion Paper 12, May 2003, p. 8).
2 Jonathan Wheatley, Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union (Free University, Germany, 2004, p.84).
5 An interview with Paata Zakareishvili.
6 Helena Frazier, A Case of Bandwagonning? Georgian Foreign Policy and Relations With Russia. (University of Oxford. MPhil in International Relations, 1997).
12 An interview with Irakli Menagharishvili, Director of Strategic Research Center. 13 October, 2016.
Chapter 3. EDUARD SHEVARDNADZE 1995-2003: A ROAD FROM COOPERATION TO CONFRONTATION

The year of 1995 saw the beginning of a new era in Georgia’s foreign policy following the adoption of the constitution, introduction of a national currency and emergence of relative stability inside the country. Since then, neutralizing external threats coming from Russia has been a key objective of Georgian foreign policy. Shevardnadze’s vision for achieving this objective by ensuring security safeguards from the West coincided with the growing European and, most notably, American interest in Caspian oil. Issues related to transferring Azeri energy resources through Georgia occupied an important place within Russian-Georgian relations. More specifically, Russia believed that the implementation of the project was against Russia’s interests. Respectively, Russia had no interest in developing a transport corridor through Georgia and resorted to various means to prevent the implementation of these projects. The same period saw the launch of two pipelines – Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, supported by the US.

From 1995, in spite of pressure exerted by Russia and the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia nevertheless managed to embark on a pro-Western foreign policy. This period of time saw Shevardnadze becoming ever more active in his diplomatic efforts with the West. In February 1995 Shevardnadze, who was visiting the United Kingdom, met with Queen Elizabeth II, Prime Minister John Major and other politicians. During the same visit, Georgia and the UK signed a declaration on friendship and cooperation. Georgia’s relations with NATO also became more active. The first move was made in 1992 when Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (in 1997 it was renamed into Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council). The partnership gained new momentum in 1994 when Georgia joined the Partnership for Peace Program and in 1999 it became part of a peace planning and review process. In 1997 Javier Solana, NATO’s Secretary General, visited Georgia under the Partnership for Peace Program. Solana met with Eduard Shevardnadze and the ministers of defense and internal affairs. Also, in its second phase of foreign policy, Georgia joined the Council of Europe (1999), a move which was acclaimed as an important recognition of Georgia’s European orientation. By the end of the 20th century, more specifically in November 1999, at an OSCE summit in Istanbul, there was an attempt to create a new Black Sea regional security system. According to the final agreement, the Russian Federation accepted the responsibility to remove military bases and border guards from Georgian and Moldovan territory. The agreement was seen as a cornerstone for regional demilitarization and conflict resolution. In April 1999 Georgia, together with Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, refused to prolong the CIS Collective Security Treaty. In October 1997, during a Council of Europe summit, four countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) founded the regional international organization GUAM. The organization aimed to deepen partnership between member states in the spheres of economy, security and democratic development. As early as in November 2002 at the NATO Summit in Prague, Shevardnadze officially voiced a desire of his nation to become a member of the Alliance.

This whole period was marked with tensions in Russian-Georgian relations. During Shevardnadze’s first term in office, he survived a second assassination attempt on 9 February 1998 by supporters of the ex-President. The perpetrators had been trained in Chechnya, which raised serious suspicions of the possible involvement of Russian secret services in the attack.

Russia’s 1998 financial crash badly affected the Georgian economy by shattering the stability of the Georgian lari. As a result of the default Turkey overtook Russia in international trade with Georgia. The situation continued until 2006 when Russia shut down its markets for Georgian wine and mineral water as well as other agricultural products.

However, tensions reached their peak during the second Chechen military campaign. Oksana Antonenko argues that unlike the First Chechen War, which contributed to the rapprochement of the Georgian and Russian stances, the Second War aggravated the crisis, which culminated during the events in Pankisi gorge in the summer of 2002.
PANKISI CRISIS

It is important that Pankisi developments be viewed in light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, after which the interest of the US in the South Caucasus was no longer limited to oil and the region appeared on the agenda as an important component of the Near East and anti-terrorism policies. The same period saw Russia’s support to the U.S. in the latter’s antiterrorism campaign, culminating in the signing of an agreement by Putin and Bush in 2002. In the declaration, both presidents recognized their mutual interest to sustain stability and territorial integrity in the regions of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. However, it soon became clear that Russia had been planning to use a declared commitment to fighting off terrorism as a cover to advance its own interests in Chechnya (and Pankisi).

In 1999-2000, around 7000 Chechen refugees penetrated Pankisi gorge. Local Kists, as blood relatives of the newcomers, had to shoulder the brunt of hospitality and a conflict between the former and the host community soon ensued. It became apparent that Chechens wanted to establish their rule in the gorge and started by convening a council of elders separate from that already existing in the Kist community. They mocked the colloquial Chechen language used by the local community and nurtured the perception that the Islam and Sufism followed by Kists was paganism and smeared with ‘heresy’. Chechens preached a radical form of Islam and tried to convert local Kists to a ‘pure’ religion pursued by the Prophet which had a growing number of followers in Chechnya itself. As a result of the confrontation Kists locked the doors of the local mosque to particularly avoid fighters against local traditions. Supported by Saudi Arabian missionaries, newcomers constructed their own mosques in the villages of Duisis, Omalo and Birkiani, which nowadays are referred to as ‘Wahhabist’. Only ‘true’ Chechens or ‘true’ Muslims were allowed to frequent these mosques. In spite of resistance to the neophyte refugees, the Kists no longer participated in celebrations they shared with local Georgians and eventually stopped attending baptisms and weddings held by highlander Georgians. A church in the village of Jokolo was soon deserted.

As time passed the tension escalated. 2001-2002 saw an increase in arms and drugs smuggling and the gorge became inaccessible except by local communities. Georgian troops, units of the Kists’ people’s militia and several checkpoints were deployed at the entrance of the gorge. A Japanese journalist, Kosuke Tsuneoka, wrote that the Pankisi gorge was beyond the effective control of the Georgian authorities: ‘Here exists a system of self-governance based on Islamic laws’. Tsuneoka argued that Ruslan Gelaev, a Chechen warlord, had such a strong influence that every single important decision made by the local Council of Elders had to be agreed in prior with him.

After the second Chechen War unverified information was released that Pankisi was taken over by Al-Qaeda fighters who had made the gorge their stronghold. Moscow was constantly arguing that Chechen terrorists were hiding in Pankisi. In 2001, Shevardnadze admitted that a Chechen warlord, Ruslan Gelaev, whose extradition had been demanded by Russia, was in fact in Georgia. Foreign Minister Ivanov went as far as to claim that Pankisi gorge was the hideout of Osama bin Laden. The subsequent period saw numerous violations of Georgia’s airspace by Russian military plans. Sergei Ivanov, the Russian Minister of Defense, kept on saying that as Georgia had no capacity to establish order in Pankisi, a terrorist ‘nest’, it had to be destroyed by means of Russian military intervention.

In light of deteriorating relations with Russia and the looming threat it posed, Shevardnadze started deepening diplomatic efforts with the West and tasked a special governmental commission to develop a programme for integration into NATO’s military, political and economic structures. The document had to be ready by November 2002. Almost at the same time, Putin made a statement expressing his readiness to ‘support’ Georgia and carry out a joint Georgian-Russian military operation to eliminate terrorists in Pankisi gorge. However, the Georgian authorities turned down Russia’s offer, stating that they were against the involvement of any foreign force in Pankisi issues. Contrary to this statement, Shevardnadze appealed to the U.S. to support Georgia in responding to the Pankisi crisis.

The same period saw the launch of the US-led Train and Equip programme with up to 200 US military training personnel arriving in Georgia to train the Georgian army. Russia’s harsh reaction created cracks in the friendship between Washington and Tbilisi.

2 The full text of the declaration is available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/05/20020524-2.html
5 Tracey C. German, The Pankisi Gorge: Georgia’s Achilles’ Heel in its Relations with Russia? (Central Asian Survey, 23(1), March 2004 p. 30).
6 The History of the Region and People. Available in Georgian at: http://www.pankisi.org/cgi-bin/blosxom.cgi/georgian/history_geo
8 The quiet fire of Pankisi. Available in Georgian at: http://shokoladi.ge/content/pankisis-chumi-cecxli (link doesn’t work).
9 Pankisi Gorge – A Criminal Enclave. Available at: http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=1041&search=
12 Tracey C. German, Faultline or Foothold? Georgia’s Relations with Russia and the USA (Conflict Studies Research Center. January 2004. p. 3).
13 Ibid.
and Moscow that had developed in the aftermath of 9/11. However, Russia had to reconcile itself with the presence of the American military in Georgia, recognizing that it would not be able to pursue aggressive politics at that point of time. In October 2002, Shevardnadze and Putin even agreed to normalize charged relations between the two countries. As a compromise, the US Department of State initiated the establishment of a tripartite coordination council bringing together representatives of the Georgian, Russian and American secret services for the purpose of exchanging information on developments in Pankisi.

According to a joint statement of the Ministries of Internal Affairs and State Security made on 14 January 2002, law enforcement launched ‘operative-search actions to free hostages, remove fire arms and eliminate the illegal turnover of drugs in the gorge’. Prior to the operation, negotiations had been held with Chechen fighters to leave the gorge. Some agreed and moved to Russia where they fell victims to an ambush as a result of which some were killed (e.g. Sabaev). The operation was supported by the Train and Equip programme supported by the US. Military trainings were organized in the vicinity of the gorge. As a result of the anti-terrorist operation law enforcement agents arrested individuals responsible for terrorist attacks in Moscow and Volgograd (e.g. Tekushiev), and extradited them to Russia. The local community welcomed the operation. They provided information to official forces and helped them stabilize the situation. In order to bypass a Russian ambush, the preparation for taking Ruslan Gelaev, the most influential warlord, out of Georgia continued for eight months. The Japanese journalist Kosuke Tsuneoka states that the transport of Gelaev’s group unit Pankisi to the Kodori gorge was organized by the Georgian special services. ‘Everybody was suddenly told that they had to move back to Chechnya. We left through the eastern part of the gorge. I was sitting in a Georgian army truck. Quite soon I realized that there was a secret agreement between Gelaev and the Georgians, that if he could move into Abkhazia, his group would receive weapons and food from Georgia’. According to Tsuneoka’s account there were several Georgian, Azeri and Ukrainian fighters alongside the Chechens. Later, the group was also joined by some Georgian partisans in Kodori.

The Georgian daily ‘24 Hours’ reported that after unsuccessful fighting, Gelaev fled Kodori gorge in a Georgian defense helicopter into Karachay-Cherkessia. The blockade of Pankisi gorge was over by the end of 2002 after the Georgian army, assisted by Kists, had cleaned the gorge of gangs. In 2003 the few remaining groups of fighters moved out from the gorge. By 2004, the situation had gone back to normal and security was restored in full.

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Shevardnadze’s decision was a classic case of attempting to counterweigh an aggressor. This case is very well explained by the balance of threat theory. Unlike with the CIS, when Georgia chose to partner with a source of threat, in light of the Pankisi crises, it decided to pursue a threat balancing strategy. The choice was based on several factors: First of all, in spite of the fact that Georgia remained a weak state in that period, the political situation inside the country was far more stable than in the first half of the 1990s. Secondly, unlike when Georgia joined the CIS, by 2002 the U.S. had developed distinct interests in Georgia and the latter now had an ally to help it cope with external threats. Finally, when the power balance and balance of threat theories are compared, the latter’s advantage is evident. Georgia preferred to take measures to balance a weaker and geographically closer aggressive state by means of a more powerful and distant state.

**PRELUDE TO THE “ROSE REVOLUTION”**

Some researchers argue that by the end of his term Shevardnadze once again attempted to switch his foreign policy course towards Russia. However, this attempt was not as apparent as the ones in previous years. Bruno Copieters argues that this switch in political course was determined by a change in the U.S.’s security policy. In light of the growing domestic political crisis, the U.S. explicitly directed its support towards a new government which had ascended to power as a result of the Rose Revolution.

Yet another reason behind this shift may lie in the reformation of Russian foreign policy methods. Even before the Rose Revolution the idea of creating a ‘liberal empire’ was becoming more and more popular. According to this concept, Russia would regain its influence over the post-Soviet space through economic expansion. More specifically, in the view of the architects of the liberal empire, it should be created not by means of violent military occupation but through the appropriation of key economic resources (in particular energy carriers) available on their territories.
Armenia was the first country which was pushed to engage in the formation of Russian Liberal Empire. More specifically, as a result of an assets-for-debt agreement concluded between Russia and Armenia as early as 2002, Russia received Armenian enterprises with enough worth to repay a debt of 93 million dollars. Eventually almost the whole of the Armenian economy became part of Russian liberal empire.2

The fact that Georgia and Azerbaijan are located in between Russia and Armenia represents a major barrier for uniting the two economies in a common space. A Georgian ‘route’ seems to be more convenient to achieve this unity because of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict. If Georgia became part of the liberal empire it would mean that Azerbaijan would follow the same path as the latter’s major transportation and communication channels, including key pipelines, lie through Georgia.

Attempts to drag Georgia into the liberal empire were initiated as early as in 2003 when RAO UES purchased stocks and other assets from an American company (AES-Silk Road) which owned Tbilisi’s electricity distribution network. As a result of the purchase RAO UES controlled 75% of the country’s energy system.3

Shevardnadze’s turn to Russia is perceived as an anomaly according to both the balance of threat and power balance theories as in fact, the level of threat coming from Russia remained the same as in previous years. Nor had America’s interest in Georgia and the region changed. Respectively, this latest attempt to bring about the country’s foreign policy course is better explained by the so-called theory of omnibalancing than the two theories mentioned above. In this case Shevardnadze, relying on a foreign force, tried to balance a threat looming from the internal political system.4

Meanwhile the political crisis in Georgia was taking an ominous turn. The combination of the inability of the country to penetrate into public life and uncollected taxes badly damaged its potential to protect the population from powerful unelected local groups and monopolies. There was no consensus on the concept of statehood, its political values and objectives. Deeply rooted corruption undermined such unifying institutions as the army and destroyed the national market infrastructure. The absence of economic livelihood affecting most of the country’s population delivered a blow to the value of citizenship and deepened the already existing gap between the state and the post-Soviet citizen.

Eduard Shevardnadze failed to fill the gap between the government and the governed. Nor did he manage to escape from the political asymmetry manifested by a powerful president backed up by a single dominant political party. Shevardnadze proved to be incapable of controlling the executive authorities, devolving power or ensuring civil participation in political processes. His focus on stability and consolidation of the public had been tolerated, but by the end of the 1990s it became apparent that his economic reforms had failed. In the last years of his presidency, central power has decreased to such an extent that it barely existed, undermined by corruption, plotting, unsolved crimes and an empty budget. The administration had no capacity to embark on the construction of an orderly and well-organized state. Unresolved conflicts further added to a myriad of problems. Finally, Shevardnadze’s reign ended with a revolution, an end that was not entirely unfamiliar to Georgians.

Chapter 4. 2003-2008: FROM TESTING RELATIONS TO CONFRONTATION: THE FIRST PHASE OF SAAKASHVILI’S POLICY

THE PERIOD OF WEAK WARMING

The Rose Revolution and new explicitly pro-Western government led to serious fracture in Georgian-Russian relations. Obviously, a western choice was not an exclusive trademark of Saakashvili’s team. However, the National Movement was the first political power which was given the opportunity to carry out targeted West-oriented policies. A strong western vector did not go unnoticed by the Kremlin. Nevertheless, it was not the primary cause of the emerging tensions between the two countries seeing as the new government made no major statements about its pro-Western choice in the first years of its existence.

The period leading from the change of authorities in Georgia to spring 2004 when the situation in South Ossetia intensified, saw seemingly improving relations between Russia and Georgia. The meltdown began with the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov to Tbilisi to broker talks amid the crisis that culminated with Shevardnadze’s resignation. Political analyst Kornely Kakachia argues that ‘by engaging in the process Russia wanted to demonstrate that it is an important factor in Georgia and nothing is going to be resolved without it’. He also believes that Russia viewed Ivanov’s positive role as a prospect for future investment in order to work with the Georgian authorities.5 Irakli Menagharishvili, then Foreign Minister of Georgia, agreed with Kakachia: ‘Russia was sick and tired with Shevardnadze’s balancing politics with an apparent inclination towards the West, and therefore supported the idea that he should be replaced.’6

1 Анна Зейберт. «Баланс интересов Армении и России нуждается в переоценке». Деловой Экспресс, Express.AM, 2006, № 4, 9-15 февраля, на сайте http://www.express.am/4_06/geopolitics.html
5 An interview with Kornely Kakachia, a founder of Georgian Institute of Politics. 20 October, 2016.
6 An interview with Irakli Menagharishvili.
A period stretching from five to seven months after the Revolution of 2003 saw some testing of the waters by Russia and Georgia. After an inaugural ceremony held on 24 January, the newly elected president Mikheil Saakashvili sent a clear message to the northern neighbour that patching up relations with Russia would be one of the priorities of his government. As a sign of his intent Saakashvili paid his first official visit to Moscow on 10 February 2004. During the two-day visit, he met with the highest of the political elite, including Vladimir Putin. At the meeting with Putin, Saakashvili said he was against the deployment of the U.S. military bases on the territory of Georgia and expressed his readiness to consider Russia’s interests in the region to the maximum extent possible. In turn, the Russian president seemed particularly hopeful that the new Georgian government would do their best to restore ‘traditional friendly ties’ between the neighbours.

The period of warming implied negotiations between the two countries on the restructuring of Georgia’s energy debt, reviving the so-called ‘Sochi Process’ to deal with the unresolved conflict in Abkhazia, negotiating agreements regarding media and information exchange, setting up a bilateral trade commission, and establishing close cooperation within the energy sector.

Glimpses of prospects for deeper relations showed up in the security realm. On 3 April 2004, the Georgian Defence Minister and his Russian counterpart made a statement on mutual commitment to combating terrorism, drugs, trafficking, illegal migration and arms smuggling. Tbilisi also pledged strong support to the Kremlin with respect to events in Pankisi and agreed to deploy shared checkpoints and on joint policing.

Liberal Russian experts called on the Kremlin to maintain a soft policy towards Tbilisi as they warned against more rigid politics that could push Tbilisi to seek a stronger alliance with the West. On the other hand, traditionalists dominating political and academic circles were skeptical towards the intentions of Georgia’s ruling trio (Saakashvili, Burjanadze and Zhvania) from the very onset. For instance, the director of the CIS Institute, Konstantin Zatulin, was sure that the Georgian Administration was striving to ‘get Georgia out of Russia’s influence and turn it into a U.S. ally once and for all.’ Interestingly, Dmitri Trenin, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center believed that by the end of 2003 it felt like ‘the calm before the storm.’ A victory gained by the new Georgian authorities in Adjara had a critical implication for the developments that ensued. Tbilisi had to regain effective control over Adjara that had been reigned by the defector Aslan Abashidze. However, they were also cautious of Russia’s possible intervention in the process. A military contingent of the 12th military base deployed near Batumi was Russia’s potential leverage in Adjara. Even though most of the service members were locals, most of them held Russian citizenship.

In April and May 2004, at the peak of the crisis, after President Saakashvili voiced his ultimatum to the Adjarian leader that allowed 10 days to step down, Moscow decided to play its role in the peaceful resolution to the conflict. Davit Darchiashvili, a former United National Movement member, believes that ‘unlike conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Adjarian conflict had no historic, ethnic or political precursors. At the same time, Russia had no shared maritime border with Adjara, which would have made it difficult for it to support the regime… They only asked only for a guarantee of the safe removal of Abashidze which was eventually granted.’

The end of Abashidze’s rule triggered an outbreak of negative responses in Russia. According to Irakli Menagharishvili, Putin slammed Medvedev for supporting Tbilisi during the Adjarian events. However, this remains unverified. Assessments of these events released by relatively free Russian print media and television outlets were quite interesting. Political analysts, journalists and politicians unanimously complained that the Russian authorities betrayed their most reliable partner in the South Caucasus and as a result lost their stronghold in the region. Media outlets published articles lamenting Russia’s shameful defeat and regretting the steady victory of Saakashvili’s politics.

Obviously, in light of such sentiments, there was an imminent threat that the Russian authorities would seek revenge or at least try to hamper Georgia’s next attempt to restore control over the ‘unruly’ territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

A CONFLICT AROUND THE “CONFLICTS”

A gradual transition of Georgian-Russian relations from a period of weak warming to a policy of containment was shaped by two major factors: 1. Georgia’s efforts to regain territorial integrity in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; 2. Georgia’s aspiration to greater integration in Euro-Atlantic structures, which acquired a distinct shape from 2005. At the same time, it is believed that these two variables have a strong correlation. With high likelihood, the degree of ‘Russian troubles’ in the conflict regions has been proportional to the degree of ‘pro-westerness’ of Georgia.

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1 For a better understanding of Saakashvili’s initial disposition towards Russia, refer to one of his first speeches in the Georgian Parliament at: http://www.palitravt.ge/yvela-video/akhali-ambebi/79262-saakashvili-thbilis-gamosvlia-ruseththan-dakavshirebith-comelic-namd-vilad-ar-nemakhesovrebath.html
2 Ibid.
3 Vladimir Inozemtsevi, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 17 August, 2004 [available in Russian].
4 Igor Tobarkovi. ‘Russian politicians try to deal with political changes in Georgia.’ Eurasia Insight. 11 January 2004.
6 An interview with David Darchiashvili
7 An interview with Irakli Menagharishvili.
8 http://www.contrtv.ru/print/362/
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
On 26 May 2004, in three weeks’ time from the events in Adjaria, the Georgian authorities celebrated Independence Day with the largest military march in years. Up to 5000 highly trained troops took part in the march alongside a demonstration of military equipment. In a televised address on the same day President Saakashvili put a strong emphasis on Georgia’s achievements in the military field: ‘if you ask any Georgian soldier why he serves in the armed forces his response will be “to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity”’, stated Saakashvili.1 In the same statement, Saakashvili noted that tanks alone would not suffice to reunite the country, but that economic development would be a major factor in convincing the Abkhaz and Ossetian people to live in a united Georgia (Saakashvili read some parts in Abkhazian and Ossetian). However, both Ossetians and Russians saw these statements, with their specific figures and laudatory statements about the army, including detailed lists of the types and quantities of weapons, as a clear example of demagoguery. By revealing a plan for reconciliation with a military march in the background, the course of events was clear. It was also apparent that the plan would not be welcomed by Tskhinvali and Sukhumi.

In general, the Georgian approach pursued from this period until 2008 was largely inconsistent and could be best described as a ‘stick and carrot’ policy. On the one hand Georgia was trying to please Abkhazia and, in particular, South Ossetia, by offering the latter ‘wider autonomy than that of North Ossetia under the Russian Federation’,2 supporting various humanitarian intervention initiatives, such as the delivery of fertilizers and food, and making promises that the local population would be eligible for Georgian pensions alongside those paid by Russia, etc. On the other hand, the Georgian authorities, without prior discussion within the Joint Control Commission,3 intensified security measures in South Ossetia, deploying additional troops and strengthening their control. Paata Zakareishvili, the former minister of reconciliation and civic equality, argues that in that period, ‘Tbilisi was implementing a “humanitarian attack”, partly designed to impress foreigners, while the rest was a pressure’.4 The chair of the Caucasus Strategic Center, Mamuka Areshidze, also holds this opinion. He believes that these actions were merely window dressing, while, in fact, there was a growing perception in Tskhinvali that they were being kept under siege.5

When troops of the Ministry of the Interior closed a marketplace in Ergneti on 31 May 2004, without offering any alternative served, rapid escalation in the conflict zone was triggered. As a result of the shutdown a space for trade, once believed to be the only remaining measure for confidence building between Georgians and Ossetians, disappeared overnight. The Ossetian authorities, as well as the local population, perceived this step as ‘yet another unfriendly action by the aggressive Georgian State’ incurring damage on the people of Ossetia, rather than as an anti-smuggling measure.6

Several weeks after the Ergneti market had been closed, Ossetian separatists, allegedly supported by the Russian special services, captured Georgian police officers who had entered the village of Vanati and forced them down on their knees in the full view of the public in the centre of Tskhinvali. Mikheil Saakashvili openly blamed Russian military intelligence for the incident and strictly warned them to stay out of Georgia’s domestic affairs. Moscow’s negative role in the conflict resolution process was further corroborated by the Georgian side when they detained trucks loaded with weapons belonging to Russian peacekeeping troops in July. The weapons were being taken to separatists.7 This period marked the beginning of the end of a brief warming between Georgia and Russia.

From 8 August the situation in South Ossetia approached a crisis and quickly led to an engagement involving grenade launchers and light artillery. These military actions claimed the lives of dozens of people. The Georgian side eventually realized that while Russia would intervene in the conflict, the West was not ready to fight for Georgia, and ordered the withdrawal of all military units from the conflict zone.8 The decision was further justified by a statement made by the White House, publicly calling on Georgia to refrain from escalating the conflict.9

In the long run, the twist of events of Summer 2004 affected Georgian-Russian relations in a number of ways. Firstly, Saakashvili learnt the hard way (he never cared much about the experience of his predecessors) that Russia would never be a partner in resolving the conflict under Georgia’s terms (the Adjarian scenario could not be applied to the other conflicts). Secondly, relations with the Russian authorities, and especially with Putin, were flawed from the start as the Russian president had never conveyed much trust in his counterpart. In an interview, Irakli Menagarishvili recalls hearing from several sources that after 2008 Putin would often complain that Saakashvili cheated him and that he would never deal with him again.10 Thirdly, faced with Russia’s ‘true face’, Tbilisi realized that it was vital to find a partner that would be able, if not to outweigh Russia, then to counterbalance it. Obviously, the circumstances dictated that the Georgian authorities should turn to the West.11

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1 Saakashvili speaks of peace amidst amid show of force. 25 May.2004. Available at:  
http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=7009&search=

2 Saakashvili rules out the use of force in South Ossetia. 2 July. 2004. Available at:  
http://www.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=7094

3 The Joint Control Commission (JCC) was set up in 1992 based on the Dagomis Accord. The JCC consisted of representatives of the Georgian and Russian authorities as well as members of the separatist government of so called South Ossetia.

4 An interview with Paata Zakareishvili.

5 An interview with Mamuka Areshidze, Chairman of the Caucasus Center for Strategic Research, 24 December 2016.


7 Arms seizure flares tensions in South Ossetia, causes controversy in Georgian cabinet. 7 July, 2004. Available at:  
http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=7280&search=

8 Several respondents (M. Areshidze, P. Mamradze, V. Maisaia) believe that late Prime Minister Zhvania played a vital role in deterring the conflict in 2004.

9 U.S. calls for avoiding further conflict in South Ossetia. 13 August, 2004. Available at:  
http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=7613&search=

10 An interview with Irakli Menagarishvili.

11 В Поисках Путей Нормализации Российско-Грузинских Отношений, collections of articles, p. 28. Available in Russian at:  
In 2004, Georgia decided that it preferred resolving the conflict in South Ossetia by offering several versions of peace plans and increasing the degree of participation of international organisations.\(^1\) In spite of numerous projects that, as Saakashvili put it, ‘gave Tskhinvali everything it wanted, except freedom’\(^2\), none of these messages appealed to their recipients. This was partly due to the lack of confidence the parties had in each other, and was also thanks to the Russian Federation which had given new momentum to further engagement between South Ossetia and Russia, bypassing Georgia. The disagreement between Georgia and Russia over these issues was so big that in 2007, as Sergey Markedonov, the head of Inter-ethnic Research Department at the Moscow Institute of Political and Military Analysis describes, mutual relations could only be improved in those issues which were not directly related to South Ossetian or Abkhazian issues.\(^3\) Russia was involved in these conflicts as a leading peacekeeper, an auxiliary force and a member of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General, but at the same time, it was clear that it was taking the side of the separatists regions. Russia’s Georgian policy was perceived by Tbilisi as ‘not connecting, but dividing’.

2007 marked a new stage in Georgian-Russian relations, with the two countries contributing to the escalation of the conflict. The new stage began with Saakashvili’s unprecedentedly harsh vitriol towards Russia. During a UN meeting Saakashvili blamed Russia for the ‘annexation’ and ‘criminal occupation’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.\(^4\) Russia found it very symbolic that Saakashvili’s speech at the 61\(^{st}\) session of the UN General Assembly took place two days after a session of North-Atlantic Alliance Council (also held in New York) where a decision was made to reinforce dialogue with Georgia.\(^5\)

Tbilisi’s actions were no less abrasive and irresponsible towards Georgia’s other conflict region, Abkhazia. The Schlaining Process, facilitating a series of informal meetings between Abkhazians and Georgians and contributing greatly to confidence building between the parties and overcoming post-military estrangement, was essentially ended in 2004.\(^6\) In 2006 Irakli Alasania, the head of the Government of Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, who, together with a then State Minister for Conflict Resolution, Giorgi Khaindrava, managed to bring Abkhazia’s de-facto Foreign Minister, Sergey Shamba, to Tbilisi, was completely sidelined from the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process. Interestingly and symbolically, as Alasania and Khaindrava were hosting Shamba, the President and the Defence Minister paid a visit to Senaki military base and made statements.\(^7\) The ensuing events in Kodori were a direct consequence of the unthoughtful conflict resolution policy. After cleansing Kodori gorge\(^8\) of illegal militias in 2006, the gorge became the home for a legitimate Abkhazian Autonomous Republic until, as an official statement suggested, ‘Georgian jurisdiction was restored throughout the whole territory of Abkhazia’. This decision meant an effective violation of the Moscow Peace Agreement by Tbilisi\(^9\) and in addition further increased the risk of an escalation of the conflict because of the particularly strategic military location of ‘Upper Abkhazia’.\(^10\) The ex-Defence Minister of Georgia, Davit Tevzadze, claims that a military operation to liberate Sukhumi was meant to be launched from Kodori gorge. Significantly, military ordinance in the gorge ‘exceeded the number of trees’.\(^11\)

The establishment of an alternative government on the Georgia-controlled side of South Ossetia further fuelled tensions and hatred. The ‘temporary South Ossetian Administration’ set up in 2007 also covered the historical Ksani gorge, thus essentially restoring the original borders of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District. Irakli Menagharishvili argues that these steps were taken to raise the profile and reputation among Ossetians of Dimitri Sanakoev, the head of the South Ossetian administration. Sanakoev was wanted by Tsakhinvali at that time.\(^12\) Later on, this fact played a role of its own during the Russian-Georgian war to justify Akhalgori’s occupation. As it closely monitored the intensification of Tbilisi’s policy towards the conflict regions, the Kremlin understood well that the restoration of the country’s territorial integrity was a priority for the Georgian government and that it would go by any means to achieve this, including military intervention. These signals from Tbilisi were used by the Kremlin to provoke the Georgian government into military action, leading to the war in August 2008.

**IMPACT OF GEORGIA’S INTERNAL POLITICAL PROCESSES ON BILATERAL RELATIONS; SAAKASHVILI’S ROLE**

An impartial assessment of developments following the Rose Revolution suggests that a well-organized and consolidat ed team vigorously worked at modernizing the country and building a nation-state. Strong support from the majority of the

\(^1\) At the General Assembly session held on 21 September 2004, Mikhail Saakashvili presented a plan for a ‘progressive resolution of the conflicts’. A series of peaceful initiatives were voiced at the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe in the beginning of 2005 and at an international conference held in Batumi the same year.

\(^2\) Tbilisi pushes South Ossetia peace initiative at Batumi Conference, 10.05.2005. Available at: http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=10328&search=


\(^4\) Saakashvili attacks Russia in UN Speech, 27.09.2007.Available at: http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15884&search=


\(^6\) For more information on the termination of Schlaining Process see Paata Zakareishvili’s brief publication titled ‘How the Rose Revolution Destroyed Georgian-Abkhaz Informal Meetings’.

\(^7\) A new military base in Senaki opened at the end of 2005 is located in close proximity with Abkhazia.

\(^8\) An area in the north-east of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic under effective control of the Georgian authorities after the war.

\(^9\) Former governor Emzar Kvtisiani and de-facto leader of the gorce openly disobeyed Tbilisi.

\(^10\) A ceasefire agreement concluded on 3 September 1992, according to which neither Georgian nor Abkhaz military forces should be deployed in the Kodori gorge.

\(^11\) A name used to denote the Kodori gorge among Georgian authorities from 2006 to 2012.

\(^12\) An interview with Irakli Menagharishvili.
population and a high level of legitimacy allowed the authorities to implement some painful and unpopular reforms soon after they had ascended to power. As a result of these efforts, and within two or three years after the change of power, the country managed to achieve notable progress in combating corruption, organized crime and administrative inefficiency, and bringing domestic affairs into order. The new team also managed to create a powerful and structured law enforcement system whilst also introducing changes to the legislature, economy, defence and education, which made it possible to eventually overcome its status as a failing state. In spite of progress, rigid, violent and radical reforms had led to growing discontent among the population and the growing perception of a strong and functional state that was entirely reliant on power and the iron hand of management. In this respect, the trend of forming new government structures led to comparisons with the centralized regime created by Vladimir Putin, especially in terms of his authoritarian tendencies. “Putin and Saakashvili both manage systems that are very different from each other, but both of them are state-builders operating a centralized and closed decision-making system and rely on personalized power and narrow pluralistic policies. They strive to make their countries prosperous, underscoring militarism. They both use emotional rhetoric and try to reinforce their control on disloyal territories”, says a Georgia based American scientist, Stephen Jones.1 This opinion is shared by the political scientist, Kornely Kakachia, who argues that ‘initially he [Saakashvili] admired Putin and carefully studied his experiences in order to learn from them, including Putin’s successful attempt to regain control over Chechnya’.2

A rise in protests among the population against the National Movement culminated in the November rallies in 2007, events that proved to be pivotal for Georgia’s recent history. Saakashvili’s use of violence to disrupt the rallies made it clear that he was prepared to make inept and fatal decisions to retain power. The regime that ruled Georgia at that time created a system of what may be labelled as ‘authoritarian modernisation’,3 whereby the authorities often emphasise a quest for development and progress on the one hand, while trying to achieve a massive concentration of power by exerting control over business, the media, the non-governmental sector and public life in general. Such systems of governance are rigid and linear, restricting room for manoeuvre and therefore more inclined towards war and confrontation. It can be assumed that Saakashvili’s unthoughtful and ambitious rhetoric also played its part in this regard. The government would make statements that the Georgian army ‘met NATO standards’, that Georgia had ‘the best police in the region’ and that ‘they had the capacity to regain control over Tskhinvali in a maximum of two weeks’ time’. Such statements gave rise to temptations to ‘duly’ respond to all opposing forces or provocateur’s (including the Russia-supported separatists in the conflict zone), so that that authorities could demonstrate the effectiveness of their police or military forces.

The events that unfolded on 7 November psychologically affected Saakashvili’s desire to regain control over the lost territories. In the aftermath of the November events, in the extraordinary presidential elections on 5 January 2008, the mobilization of enormous financial and administrative resources, as well as the mass media, won Saakashvili slightly more than 50% of the vote. Protests were planned as a reasonable suspicion suggested that the elections had been rigged and that a second round would have to be held. Saakashvili realized that he was not wanted by most of the country’s population and that he had lost popularity, a revelation that, as Petre Mamradze, then head of the State Chancellery, puts it ‘he found hard to digest’.4 As such, he thought that the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity would be enough of a success to make people forget their grievances and his name would forever be inscribed in the annals of Georgian history together with other national heroes.

GEORGIA’S EURO-ATLANTIC ASPIRATIONS

As early as in 2004 Andrei Kokoshkin, the chairman of the State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, argued that Tbilisi’s ‘overdependence on the West’ in attempts to resolve problems with its conflict regions had been a ‘grave mistake made by the previous government’.5 Russia’s main reason for discontent was Georgia’s ever increasing western aspirations with respect to its foreign and security policy. Obviously, Russia only formally recognized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of former Soviet republics, while in fact they were still perceived as Russia’s ‘immediate neighbourhood’. In this situation, these countries had a limited choice in pursuing foreign and security policies. The same applied to Georgia with which Russia had particularly tense relations. Russia responded to Georgia’s ‘western choice’ by launching a series of economic and diplomatic punitive measures, which are outlined below.

First and foremost, in order to be able to assess Georgian-Russian relations between 2004 and 2008, one has to keep in mind the overall geopolitical climate throughout the entire region. Notably, this period was marked with western and, in particular, American attention being given to the region. This attention turned out to be the strongest it had been in 25 years. What lay behind the interest was not only the access to Caspian energy resources and their transportability, but also a vision of the Bush (Junior) Administration towards Russia in general and, correspondingly, the White House’s policy choices in countries bordering Russia. Vakhtang Maisaia, a former diplomat and a military expert, believes that ‘Washington was following a geopolitical theory of some sorts aiming to contain Russia (this is also known as the Heartland Theory). More specifically, the approach implied that Russia had to be circumscribed by a circle formed by democratic (anti-Russian) countries which

1 An interview with Stephen Jones, a historian and political scientist. 17 November 2016.
2 An interview with Kornely Kakachia.
3 The term was coined by Ghia Nodia, a political scientist.
4 An interview with Petre Mamradze, a former member of the parliamentary committee for European integration, a political scientist. 11 November 2016.
5 NTV TV channel (Russia), 8 January 2004.
would prevent it from further expanding and cool its neo-imperialistic desires.\textsuperscript{41} In this context the South Caucasus was often perceived as a pivotal point for an anaconda loop\textsuperscript{2} at Russia’s vulnerable southern borders. Georgia’s proximity with such hotspots as Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran also seemed appealing to the U.S.

Western support translated into beefed up support from Europe and, in particular, the U.S. Reforms that the new government had embarked on in various fields were fully supported by the U.S., largely determined by the latter’s fears that Georgia, as a state, would fail. It seems that American support to Saakashvili’s government had additional, mostly ideological, bias and motives. Georgia had become a successful case of ‘regime change’ in the region. As Thomas de Waal puts it ‘Saakashvili soon became a poster child for the Bush Administration’s ‘freedom agenda’ and democracy promotion efforts […]’. With the sheen of the other colored revolutions fading, Saakashvili’s Georgian experiment became more and more celebrated, its deficiencies overlooked.\textsuperscript{11} In this light, President Bush’s visit to Georgia on 10 May 2005 was of historical importance.\textsuperscript{4} Together with becoming closer to Washington, an aspiration to join the North Atlantic Alliance had slowly become Georgia’s national project. A course towards NATO was supported not only by political elites, but also by 80% of the country’s population, the strongest among applicant countries in the previous few decades.\textsuperscript{5}

Unsurprisingly, as foreign diplomats and NATO’s high ranking representatives became frequent guests in Tbilisi, Moscow’s discontent grew stronger, demonstrated not only in harsh statements and rhetoric, but also in violations of Georgia’s air space, manipulations with gas and electricity supply and explosions in Gori and Tsetelubani, attributed to the Russian intelligence service by the Georgian side.\textsuperscript{6}

The fact that became perhaps the strongest indicator of the depth of crisis in Georgian-Russian relations and its emotional dimension occurred on 27 September 2006, when the Georgian authorities arrested four officers of the Russian Military Intelligence Service. Authorities claimed that the detainees had been trying to gather intelligence on Georgia’s potential accession to NATO.\textsuperscript{7}

The Kremlin’s response to the ‘spy scandal’ had terrible ramifications for Russia’s Georgian diaspora and smeared Russia’s reputation all over the world. The Washington Post argued that ‘until now, if government authorities contributed to public xenophobia it was through inaction, incompetence or irresponsibility. Now ethnic hostility is being incited by government figures – legislators and executive officials alike.’\textsuperscript{8} Following orders from the Russian government, relevant agencies put up to 200 Georgians, including children, in cargo planes and deported them from Georgia.\textsuperscript{9} Georgians remaining in Russia were then portrayed by the government as the national minority with the most links to organised crime. The campaign got even uglier when a number of schools were demanded by the police to hand over lists of children with Georgian surnames.

Importantly, the Georgian side deviated from the standard modus operandi while handing the arrested officers to OSCE officials, turning it into a performance, which contributed to the Kremlin’s mounting irritation. As Petre Mamradze puts it, ‘Georgians put up a truly fantastic performance which aimed to insult Russia’s political elite as much as possible’.\textsuperscript{10} The same opinion is upheld by former members of the cabinet. For instance, Giorgi Khaindrava, State Minister for Conflict Resolution and Abkhazia affairs, said that the whole incident was a forgery, with everyone in the government involved: ‘I think that the government has been involved in this affair from the beginning. After the incident, those in power rushed to the airports to deport the four officers’.\textsuperscript{11}

Together with political pressure, Russia tried to plug in economic leverages\textsuperscript{12} in order to influence Georgia’s foreign policy choice. As early as the beginning of 2006, Russia, under the pretext of low quality production, banned Georgian produced fruits and vegetables and then, in March the same year, prohibited Georgian mineral water and wine to enter the Russian market. Before the introduction of the embargo Russia had been Georgia’s strongest trade partner, making up 20% of Georgia’s foreign trade (notably, trade relations between the two countries had been strengthening). In spite of the fact that Georgia did not have a positive trade balance even before the closure of the Russian market, the ban nevertheless severely affected the former’s trade deficit: for instance, while imports in 2003 exceeded exports 2.5 times, in 2006 the difference hit as high as 4.2 (see figure 1 below). Notably, caught under an economic blockade, Georgia managed to diversify its trade, however, was it unable to replace the export potential of the Russian market.

\textsuperscript{41} An interview with Vakhtang Maisaia, a military expert and former diplomat. 12 December 2016.
\textsuperscript{2} A geopolitical strategy which aims at creating a circle of countries under the NATO or European security umbrella around Russia (in particular on the periphery of its eastern and south-eastern border).
\textsuperscript{3} Missiles Over Tskhinvali by Thomas de Waal, The National Interest, May/June 2010/er 2009.
\textsuperscript{4} Lynch, op. cit., p.51.
\textsuperscript{5} For a comparison: in Estonia 69%, Slovenia - 66%, Latvia - 60%, Lithuania - 46%.
\textsuperscript{6} Following orders from the Russian government, relevant agencies put up to 200 Georgians, including children, in cargo planes and deported them from Georgia.
\textsuperscript{7} How Russia is investigating an incident in Tsetelubani. Radio Liberty, 17.08.2007. Available in Georgian at: \url{http://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/1553954.html}
\textsuperscript{8} Russian officers arrested, charged with espionage, 27.09.2007 \url{http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13658&search=}
\textsuperscript{9} Masha Lipman, the Washington Post, 21 October 2006.
\textsuperscript{10} See the judgement of the Strasbourg court after 10 years: \url{http://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/strasburgahi-moqebuli-sagme/28188970.html}
\textsuperscript{11} Notably, Vladimir Putin himself is a former member of Russia’s security service and the ‘spy scandal’ struck close to home.
\textsuperscript{12} For a complete list of sanctions imposed by Russia against Georgia see the information resource section on the webpage of the Center of Security Analysis available at: \url{http://gfsis.org/qsac/eng/poin_point.php}
A key international event that set the tone for Tbilisi-Moscow relations was the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by the U.S. and EU member states in 2008. Russia made it clear that this model could serve as a blueprint for resolving separatists conflicts on former Soviet territories: ‘We need to find common principles for the wellbeing of all peoples residing in conflict affected territories… If some believe that Kosovo must be fully independent, why should we turn down Abkhazia and South Ossetia?’ Notably, Russia specifically selected Georgia as a target to use Kosovo as a tool for leverage. Irakli Menagharishvili argues that ‘clearly, Russia’s policy towards the Georgian conflict and the application of the Kosovo case is different from that towards Nagorno-Karabakh and Moldova’s Transnistrian conflict.’

Yet another important event, which also shaped the future of Georgian-Russian relations, was a NATO summit held in Bucharest in April 2008 when the state parties had to make a decision on whether or not to grant Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Despite the fact that the NATO Treaty doesn’t guarantee that countries with an MAP will be accepted into the alliance and, consequently, be under the ‘hood’ of the collective security system (Article 5 of the NATO Treaty), due to the efforts of the Georgian government the question of receipt or non-receipt of an MAP gained almost sacred significance. Vladimir Putin also attended the Bucharest Summit (this was his first ever attendance at a summit of the Alliance) and once again stated what he thought of granting MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine: ‘The deployment of a powerful military bloc at Russia’s borders, whose members guide their actions by Article 5 of the Washington Agreement, will be perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its national security’.

Ultimately, neither Georgia nor Ukraine were given an MAP. However, participants in the summit pledged that in the future both of these countries would become members of NATO. As Ronald Asmus puts it, ‘Britain’s Prime Minister Gordon Brown half-jokingly said to Bush: I am not sure what we have done. I understand we did not give them the MAP but I am not entirely sure either that we have not granted them membership anyway.’

There was yet another reason why the summit was important. During the summit, it was decided that it would not require a summit to decide on granting MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine. The authority to decide on this matter was given to the foreign ministers of member states. It was also decided that the Ministers would assess the progress made by Georgia and Ukraine by December 2008. This did not obviously that by that time both Georgia and Ukraine would become MAP holders, nevertheless, only a mention of a specific date made Russia upset and affected its plans.

In the aftermath of March and April 2008 military rhetoric in both Georgia and Russia was getting increasingly powerful. Aggressive statements were coupled with rapid armament and increase of the Georgian defense budget. In 2007 – 2008 Georgia’s military expenses totalled up to 1.5 billion GEL which was twice as much as in the year before. In parallel, Russia began wide-scale military training exercises close to the Georgian border in the North Caucasus and in the Black Sea. In addition, there was intense militarisation in Georgia’s breakaway regions, where, as Putin later admitted, they were training ‘so-called South Ossetian militia’ as a part of the General Headquarters’ plan. In spite of these developments, even in July most experts did not expect that wide-scale military actions would in fact begin. They argued that there could not possibly be any rational interest for the parties to wage a war. For instance, a reporter working for ‘Nezavisima Gazeta’ wrote that not even a person with the greatest imagination would be able to name a reason for which Tskhinvali might start military actions against Georgia. The same may be applied to Georgia whose economy very unlikely to be able to sustain lengthy military op-

1 Cited in Akcakoca etc. P. 26.
2 An interview with Irakli Menahgarashvili.
4 Ronald D. Asmus, A Little War that Shook the World, palgrave, Macmilan.
5 Georgia to increase defense spending to USD 783, 29.08.2007. Available at: http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=15685
6 The Georgian side claimed that Russia had used the rotation of its peacekeeping forces to deploy additional military forces in the conflict zone. Available at: http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12706
operations. Besides, by waging a war Georgia would risk losing the West’s support and compromise its chances to join NATO.

However, against all odds, in early summer both the Georgians and Ossetians launched artillery attacks on each other’s villages and checkpoints. The Ossetians had been incited and supported by the Russians as they suddenly appeared to have large calibre weapons, which had not previously been the case.\(^1\) As for the Georgians, many respondents believe that they had not been planning lengthy military operations, rather counting on a blitzkrieg.\(^2\) Respectively, it can be assumed that original expectations that the shootings would not turn into a war, was not only debunked, but also it appeared that the war had been planned for a long time. Obviously, the parties had conflicting interests and expectations.

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An assessment of Georgia’s foreign policy during the period following the Rose Revolution suggests that the country pursued a strategy for balancing external threat. Giorgi Gvalia, a professor at Ilia State University, argues that unlike Shevardnadze’s foreign policy under which the country relied only on external resources to keep a balance, Saakashvili’s government chose a double balancing strategy by trying to keep an alliance with the States and aspire to NATO’s membership as a tool for external balance, while increasing the country’s defence capacity to ensure internal balance.\(^3\)

**Chapter 5. 2008-2012: WALKING ON THE BRINK OF RENEWED CONFRONTATION: THE SECOND PHASE OF SAAKASHVILI’S POLITICS**

**CONSEQUENCES OF THE AUGUST WAR AND POST-WAR CRISIS DIPLOMACY**

Major political discussions in the aftermath of the August War, both inside Georgia as well as in an international arena, served to identify the so-called ‘the first shooter’. The most simplified views from Russia and Georgia in this regard are perhaps the following: In the Kremlin they argued that their actions had served to ‘coerce peace’ after the ‘insane’ Saakashvili decided to restore constitutional order through genocide in Ossetia. Tbilisi, on the other hand, claimed that Georgia was forced to engage in the war after Russian troops had come through the Roki Tunnel and launched a military attack so that ‘neo-imperialistic Russia could punish pro-Western Georgia’. It goes without saying that both claims attempt to present the reality in an overly simplified manner in order to justify the parties’ interests.

As for the West and the rest of international community, on 2 December 2008 a special fact-finding mission, also known as the Tagliavini Commission, was set up under the aegis of the EU. The Commission was tasked to look into any developments pertaining to the conflict.\(^4\) Even though the findings and conclusions of the report were quite late to be published (in September 2009), the West began to talk about the causes and perpetrators of the war almost immediately following the end of the hostilities. Logical analysis of the facts and sequence of events proved that Tbilisi launched military operations on 8 August, however, this assumption did not mean that Russia was to be excuses for what it had done. Irakli Menagarishvili believes that ‘in the West they knew that Georgia has initiated the conflict. They all remember the flags and stands that were carried to Tskhinvali and the famous statement made by General Kurashvili…Russia did everything in its power to make Saakashvili fire the first shot. However, the culprit is the one who lays the trap, not the one who walks into this trap’.\(^5\) Paata Zakareishvili agrees with the point above and adds that ‘from a legal point of view, a war per se is not a crime, even more so if it is waged to restore a country’s territorial integrity. However, I want to know what the Georgian state had done to prevent the war from occurring.’\(^6\) The West’s general assessment of Georgia’s involvement in the August War is well highlighted in the following piece from an interview the Los Angeles Times conducted with an anonymous, influential, high-ranking official in the U.S.: ‘Saakashvili had always told us he could not stand by while Georgian villages were being shelled, and we always knew this was a point of pressure. We always told him that he should not give in to the kind of provocations we knew the Russians were capable of.’\(^7\) Besides, the August war had reaffirmed suspicions that decisions made within the Georgian government were often hasty and unthoughtful. For instance, in her memoirs published in 2011 the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, says that ‘he [Saakashvili] is proud and can be impulsive, and we all worried that he might allow Moscow to provoke him to use force. In fact, he himself successfully provoked conflict in another breakaway part of the country, Adjara, and benefited when it had been reintegrated into Georgia through domestic and international pressure. The precedent, we feared, might make him think he could get away with a repeat performance in the territories located closer to Putin’s beloved Sochi.’\(^8\)

\(^1\) An interview with Komely Kakachia.
\(^2\) Other respondents – D. Tevzadze, M. Areshidze, P. Mamradze, V. Maiasia, Z. Abashidze etc also share this opinion.
\(^5\) An interview with Irakli Menagarishvili.
\(^6\) An interview with Paata Zakareishvili.
Obviously, the West did not justify Russia’s actions. According to the Tagliavini Report, the causes of the five-day war had to be examined, not only based on the developments that unfolded in August 2008, but in light of the bigger picture of the relationship between the two countries. Admittedly, Russia had been a party from the very onset of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the presence of Russian troops in the conflict zone in the capacity of peacekeepers was a total fiction. The West fully acknowledged the implications of delivering Russian passports to residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, restoration of Abkhazia’s railroad, intensified militarization and other violations of the peace agreement. Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Carl Bildt, noted that ‘No country has the right to force its way into the territories of another state only because compatriots or individuals with its passports live there. Attempts to pursue this doctrine had previously dragged Europe into war and therefore, it is critical that this doctrine never be used again.’ As Donald Asmus puts it, there was good understanding in the U.S. and Europe that by employing an ‘excessive response’ Russia was, in fact, trying to destroy the ‘New Order’ established after the end of the Cold War and undermine the foundations of European security. ‘In Washington they feared that Moscow was going to take a full advantage of Saakashvili’s mistake and deliver a deadly blow’ - he added.2

In fact, Moscow did take full advantage of the post-war period and achieved what it had long wanted. As one high-ranking U.S. official put it, ‘Russia had been drooling over this moment to come’.3 To sum up briefly, by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and deploying its own military bases in the region shortly after recognition, Russia completely cut off the troublesome North Caucasus from the surrounding world and postponed Georgia’s integration into NATO and the EU for a long time. In addition, Russia’s unexpectedly wide-scale response in the August War was a clear demonstration that it was going to protect its own regional interests to the very end, even at the expense of confrontation with NATO.

Even though the August 2008 War considerably worsened Georgia’s security situation, the Government kept trying to deter Russia by intensifying its relations with the U.S. and EU states. Giorgi Khelashvili, professor at Tbilisi State University, believes that the ‘Russian-Georgian war could have brought in realistic elements to the country’s foreign policy. However, this did not happen, which means that there were no changes to Georgia’s pro-Western policy’.4 This fact defies the logic of the power balance theory, according to which changes in the security environment should have led to a warming of relations with Russia, or at least bandwagoning.

In spite of harsh statements, the West’s political response to the aggression against Georgia was rather reserved and moderate. Leaders of EU countries made statements to condemn Russia’s actions and call on the latter to implement a six-point plan approved by Sarkozy and Medvedev on 12 August, but they were cautious to exert any pressure on Russia (which saw no rush to implement the fifth point of the Plan). Moreover, a month after the August events, NATO resumed its partnership with Russia, while an initiative to impose sanctions on Russia that was raised at the Assembly of the Council of Europe in the beginning of October was rejected by France and Germany.5 Petre Mamradze believes that at that point (August 2008), Washington’s active involvement in the ongoing processes may have been counter-productive by upsetting Russia even more and pushing it to undertake more aggressive actions.6 This logic explains why, after the August war, the U.S. gave the floor to the EU to broker a peace agreement between the parties whilst it took a step aside.

The White House’s policy for a ‘reset’ of relations with Russia in 2009 did not match Georgia’s declared interests. The Russian Reset represented a rethinking and re-evaluation of the views of the previous Bush administration. Georgian political analysts states that ‘a charter on a strategic partnership with the U.S. and EU states. Giorgi Khelashvili, professor at Tbilisi State University, believes that the ‘Russian-Georgian war could have brought in realistic elements to the country’s foreign policy. However, this did not happen, which means that there were no changes to Georgia’s pro-Western policy’.4 This fact defies the logic of the power balance theory, according to which changes in the security environment should have led to a warming of relations with Russia, or at least bandwagoning.

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claim that Georgia should have abandoned the CIS long ago. Tbilisi cut off diplomatic ties with Moscow while the Georgian Parliament announced Russia an occupant country and Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region as occupied territories. Besides this, the authorities embarked on a new policy towards the conflict regions in the aftermath of the War. A new vision suggested that Georgia had only one problem in its quest for territorial integrity - Russia.

Interestingly, Russia chose to respond to Georgia’s actions with an attitude akin to ‘I see nothing, I hear nothing, I do not want to hear anything’. This was corroborated by the fact that unlike the 2006 spy incident, Russia did not respond in any way to the arrest of individuals under the same allegations in 2010. Zurab Abashidze believes that ‘Russia had been trying to demonstrate that the Georgian government, and particularly Mikheil Saakashvili, were not worth its while. In Russia they believed that Mikheil Saakashvili was politically discredited, irrational and unpredictable’. Many believed that Saakashvili was viewed with suspicion by the West as well, and the absence of high level official visits to the western countries on the agenda of a man who had been famous for his frequent visits, further backed up this speculation. It was this period when Saakashvili started talking with other regional forces, including Iran (with which the U.S. was on the brink of waging war) on the need to deepen relations. In addition, discussions around the possible “Singaporisation” of Georgia, also came to the fore.

In spite of very anti-Russian politics, Saakashvili made some fragmented attempts to launch an unconditional dialogue with Russia. The Georgian authorities made repeated statements offering a direct dialogue with Russia, and as Zurab Abashidze argues, there had even been a portion of the budget allocated building dialogue with Russia. Saakashvili’s speech delivered at the European Parliament on 23 November 2010 confirms these efforts. In his speech, Saakashvili said that Tbilisi was ready to commit to the non-use of force against the Russian Occupation and for regaining control over the occupied territories: ‘we are ready to launch a deep and comprehensive dialogue with our Russian colleagues… Russia is having serious problems in the region and I believe it is within Russia’s best interests to take a course towards more open relations,’ – he added. Even though articles with headlines such as ‘Saakashvili extends his hands to Russia’ started to appear in the Western media, it was nevertheless obvious that Moscow was not going to respond to Saakashvili’s appeal. About a year after Saakashvili’s speech at the European Parliament, during a televised interview Saakashvili told the audience: ‘if negotiations had been possible, I would have been the first to start. Their politics are reptilian. Therefore, the further we stay away from this crocodile, the sooner we will reach the Promised Land.’ The Georgian authorities maintained this approach to Russia up until 1 October 2012.

It should be noted that Saakashvili’s anti-Russian policy turned out to be largely ineffective. Moreover, Russia was the one to benefit the most from Saakashvili’s rule. According to one of Lincoln Mitchell’s articles, Saakashvili is clearly not a part of ‘a secret Russian agenda’, however, his policies and political achievements seem to prove otherwise: With Saakashvili in office, Georgia lost its territories to Russia, made the prospect of NATO’s membership a bleak one, further weakened the country’s economy, shook America’s credibility in the Region and made the U.S. spend as much money as possible on Georgia. These arguments proposed by Mitchell were coupled with an economic theme: from 2004 to 2012 some of Georgia’s largest and most important strategic companies changed hands and became Russian property, a decision which was regularly criticized by the public.

GEORGIA’S NORTH CAUCASIAN POLITICS

During the difficult period following the August 2008 War, the Georgian authorities decided to use the North Caucasus against Russia. Mamuka Areshidze, an expert in North Caucasian affairs, believes that the driving factor behind Georgia’s tactic was a desire to create discomfort for Russia. One can assume that if Georgia had managed to find allies in the North Caucasus, it would have been able to use this alliance as leverage to exert pressure on Russia. In this sense, if Clausewitz’s famous quote was adapted to fit the current context, it would suggest that ‘Georgian post-war politics towards Russia was the continuation of the war by other means’. The North Caucasian project seemed to be acquiring growing importance in light of the need to deepen relations. In this sense, if Clausewitz’s famous quote was adapted to fit the current context, it would suggest that ‘Georgian post-war politics towards Russia was the continuation of the war by other means’. The North Caucasian project seemed to be acquiring growing importance in light of the need to deepen relations. The North Caucasian project seemed to be acquiring growing importance in light of the need to deepen relations.

1 An interview with Tomiike Sharashendiz.
2 An interview with Zurab Sharashidze.
3 An interview with Mamuka Areshidze.
4 An interview with Mamuka Areshidze.
5 An interview with Mamuka Areshidze.
6 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lincoln-mitchell/who-is-really-doing-what-i-am-actually-doing-russian-war_51751203.html
7 An interview with Mamuka Areshidze.
In addition to giving Russia a new headache, the North Caucasian policy of 2008-2012 may have had auxiliary goals. One of these goals may have been an intention to create friendly groups and extend Georgia’s soft power across the Caucasus. This move seemed particularly important in light of close ties between Abkhazians and North Caucasians, with some of the latter having even fought against Georgia.

Georgia’s North Caucasus policy can be separated into several different tracts: organizational, promotional-ideological and political. Pertaining to the first tract, in December 2009 efforts were made to set up friendship groups with parliaments of the North Caucasus republics in the Georgian parliament. This was important because a legislative body of an independent country (Georgia) was establishing links with parliaments of subjects of a foreign country (the Russian Federation), bypassing its center. At the same time, a committee for diaspora and Caucasian affairs was set up in the Parliament of Georgia while another commission for special Caucasian affairs was created at the Office of the State Minister for Diaspora Issues.

Ideological and propaganda initiatives soon followed organizational issues. Notably, in September 2010 Mikheil Saakashvili delivered a speech at the UN calling on the peoples of the Caucasus to build a unified and peaceful Caucasus. Among other messages, Saakashvili also warned Russia: ‘You have a choice to make: you either agree to participate in the transformation of the region or you have to watch this transformation occurring without you.’ In order to support the new project a new Russian language channel (First News Caucasus or ПИК (PIK) in Russian) was launched in January 2010 to provide relevant information. Unsurprisingly, this move was met with a notably negative reaction in Russia. However, Georgia’s recognition of the Circassian genocide was a decision that stirred perhaps the strongest turmoil of all steps made by Georgia as part of its Northern Caucasian policy. Zurab Abashidze regards the recognition as revenge of some sort against Russia for its recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence.

Among the political decisions made by Tbilisi were the revocation of visa requirements for residents of North Caucasian republics for 90 days’ stay in Georgia (the exemption was extended to all citizens of the Russian Federation two years later), scholarship opportunities for youth to pursue higher education in Tbilisi, etc.

Irakli Menagharishvili believes that ‘clearly, Georgia may have a specific policy towards the Caucasus region, in particular, North Caucasus, however, it should be based on thorough assessments of potential risks’. Petre Mamradze says ‘it would be too superficial to claim that Georgia will benefit from unrest in the North Caucasus. It would be the same as if a man living on the first floor of a skyscraper dreamt of the skyscraper collapsing’. Georgia’s policy was not approved by the majority of American and European experts. Walter Russell Mead, a political analyst specializing in U.S. foreign policy argues that Tbilisi’s move corroborated that the Georgian authorities were unpredictable and impulsive and that NATO’s European members would never accept arrogant and unthoughtful Georgia as a member of the Alliance.

If the North Caucasian project had proceeded according to Georgia’s wishes, it would have had to suffer vengeance from Russia for striking its weakest point – the North Caucasus. Also, one has to consider that over the course of many years, Russia’s well-tested instrument against Georgia was allegations against the latter for sheltering and supporting North Caucasian terrorists. If Tbilisi in fact had managed to cause unrest in the North Caucasus (even though it had little capacity to do so), Russia would have found it easy to justify stricter punishment than it had used in 2008.

In the long run, the Government’s efforts were not met with much enthusiasm in the North Caucasus and the modest reactions that followed the recognition of the genocide and the opening of the Russian language TV channel were fragmented and inconsistent. Notably, Tbilisi did not seem to have sufficient resources from the very onset. Nor did it have much room to manoeuvre (after all, it was impossible to travel to the North Caucasus). Also, as held by Zaza Piralishvili, Saakashvili’s government mostly favoured tactical actions, not paying much attention to a long term strategic vision and policy. It is worth noting that as a result of the 2004 events and the August 2008 war in South Ossetia, antipathy dominated perceptions towards Saakashvili in the North Caucasus. One Georgian respondent (who preferred to remain anonymous), tasked to organize a congress in Tbilisi with the participation of North Caucasian representatives, noted that: ‘we were willing and took measures to establish relations, but we eventually failed as there was no interest from the other side’.

RUSSIA AS AN IMAGE OF THE ENEMY IN THE COUNTRY’S DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES

Since 2006, and in particular after the August War, the Kremlin’s policies and Vladimir Putin himself have become a dominant theme in the Georgian public and political space. The authorities and groups associated with them constantly talked about Russia in an invariably negative context and this was not only related to Russian politics. The majority of public had become increasingly upset with certain media sources that had been trying to fuel up anti-Russian sentiments.

Considering the August War and Russia’s policy towards Georgia over the past years, anti-Russian sentiments in the public and governmental circles seem to be a natural occurrence. However, the picture that the authorities depicted was often distorted and devoid of rational and critical considerations, and in many instances took the form of hysteria and paranoia. This assumption was further corroborated by a ‘modelled chronicle’ aired by one of the most popular TV channels on 13

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17 An interview with Zurab Abashidze.
18 An interview with Irakli Menagharishvili.
19 An interview with Petre Mamradze.
20 We Don’t Have the Tools to Measure the New Economy (2017). Available at: http://www.the-american-interest.com/byline/wrm/
March 2010. The programme was dedicated to scenes of a fictional military interventions by Russia allegedly followed by mass disorder and an attempted coup-d’état led by an opposition leader. It was only by the end of the 30-minute long release that viewers were informed that the events depicted were just a hypothetical scenario. The footage of a fictional Russian intervention stirred turmoil and massive panic throughout the country.

The authorities tried to maintain power by using the Russian factor as a powerful tool for instilling fear. To achieve this goal they had been acting at both the domestic and international level. In the domestic field, the authorities would engage themselves in endless conversations about a fifth column, spies recruited and managed by the Kremlin, thus trying to sew constant fear and tension among the country’s population. These approaches helped the authorities to mobilize the public for their benefit and in support of Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well to shift blame for their own mistakes to others (‘blaming Putin for all ills’). Mikhail Saakashvili successfully played this card on 26 May 2011 when participants in protest rallies were brutally attacked, claiming four lives. The authorities justified their brutality though the fact that Nino Burjanadze, a lead organizer of the rallies, was regarded as a pro-Russian politician. Saakashvili used the same tactics against a billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili, emerging in Georgia’s political scene at the end of 2011, who the former labelled as ‘a puppet controlled by the Kremlin’. Notably, nobody from the authorities had ever suspected Ivanishvili of being disloyal to Georgia because he had poured his money into the budget and donated millions for the implementation of infrastructural projects.

The authorities used the same tools in their foreign policy. For instance, Vakhtang Maisaia, having served a sentence for alleged espionage, argued that ‘the authorities are in constant need to demonstrate to the West that they are threatened by Russia for being the only pro-Western force in Georgia and that if they lose, pro-Russian forces will take over the government. In fact, Saakashvili has been blackmailing the West non-stop and poses himself as a force irreconcilable with Russia’. In addition, Tbilisi loved to repeat that Georgia played the role of the ‘new Berlin wall’ in the ‘new Cold War’ between Russia and the West. Erosi Kitsmarishvili, the last Georgian ambassador to Russia before diplomatic ties were cut between the two countries, held that Tbilisi’s policy could have caused ‘Georgia’s Palestinisation’.

Thomas de Waal offers an interesting interpretation of this issue. He argues that it was the time when Georgia’s image as a ‘lighthouse of democracy’ had faded away in the West. Aware of this development, the Georgian authorities changed their strategy. Instead of making the West believe that they are true democrats, they were now trying to build their reputation as a stronghold against Russian influence in the region.

Importantly, a new U.S. Administration was far from craving to walk into a deadlock with Russia because of Georgia. The Reset Policy launched in the spring of 2009 focused on unchallenged themes rather than on contested issues. Nikolai Silaev, a Russian political scientist, believes that a confrontation with Russia was not a fundamental strategic choice for the U.S.: ‘throughout 70 years of confrontation the two countries have developed a model of conflict-cooperation interaction, which is not likely to be disrupted by such a weak stimulus as Georgia.’


HERE COMES ‘NORMALISATION’

For the first time in 20 years, Georgia had its authorities changed through elections and on 1 October 2012, the country began a brand new period in its historical development. A wind of change blew over not only Georgia’s domestic politics, but also its foreign policy, most notably, in Tbilisi’s relations with Moscow, which was the new government’s biggest challenge. Fyodor Lukyanov, a prominent Russian political analyst, provides a well-formulated summary of the relations between the two countries at that time: ‘Bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia are truly astonishing. They are almost always filled with strong emotions, inadequate expectations and senseless disappointments; overloaded with miscalculations leading to irrational actions or the opposite, a lack of action during those critical moments when the situation can still be saved.’

Unsurprisingly, a policy of constant confrontation and aggressive rhetoric was costly, more hazardous and damaging to Georgia than to stronger and bigger Russia. Besides, the Russian embargo on its most lucrative export items, complicated labour migration and threats to large volumes of remittances from Russia, coupled with unstable relations and constant tensions with separatist regions, had caused painful social ramifications for the Georgian population, while a looming fear of renewed military confrontations lingered in the air.

The situation surrounding the Georgian political leadership was much more complicated than that in Russia as the

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1 Staff, D. Interview: How has Georgia changed since 2012? (2015) Available at: http://dfwatch.net/interview-how-has-georgia-changed-since-2012-36947
2 An interview with Vakhtang Maisaia.
4 Thomas de Waal, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Spotlight on Georgia, The Foreign Policy Centre.
5 Сушенцов, А; Силаев, Н. Россия и Грузия: что за красными линиями? К долгосрочной повестке дня российско-грузинских отношений. РСМД, ИССН. 2014. № 42.
The Georgian Dream Coalition had to shoulder the “compulsory-voluntary” burden to fix its relationship with Russia without diverging from its strategic course towards Euro-Atlantic integration, an almost contradictory task. The compulsory part of the obligation was that Georgia, left outside the security umbrella, could not afford to be constantly walking on the narrow brink of war with Russia, a choice that would lead to moral and physical exhaustion and put its Western partners in a state of constant fatigue as tensions persisted. The Coalition set itself this goal, although to some extent it was a response to an objective demand present amongst the population. The results of a 2012 poll suggest that 72% of respondents believed that improved relations with Russia was one of the country’s priorities.

It should be noted that some Georgian experts questioned the expediency of engaging in a dialogue with Russia and any upcoming ‘compromises’ that they thought Tblisi would have to agree to. For example, before a potential launch of negotiations with Russia, former Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kapanadze raised the following question: ‘why should we give up anything for a dialogue with Russia? It is not us who occupied its territories, is it?’ Experts believed that engaging in a dialogue under unequal conditions carried a risk of Russia benefiting from the process more than Georgia.

In addition to opponents inside the country, the West viewed Georgian Dream’s potential links with Russia with certain suspicions. These suspicions were further reinforced by criminal proceedings that the incumbent authorities launched against some members of the previous government, a decision regarded as a relapse. Lincoln Mitchell wrote that until 2013 Washington believed the change of government had been a part of the Russian plan. In their turn, the National Movement was also trying to make life hell for the new government by destructively interfering in domestic political affairs and sabotaging foreign policy. Unlike the United National Movement, the new authorities did not enjoy strong links or contacts with Western political and diplomatic circles. Nor did they have experience in diplomacy, public policy or international lobbying that would help them to show themselves in a positive light to the West. The fact that the new prime minister, Ivanishvili, had had his business in Russia and that he unexpectedly emerged in Georgia’s political scene further complicated the picture.

Against all odds of finding a balance between the abovementioned conflicting imperatives, and in spite of the complicated task of following a relevant political strategy, the Georgian Dream, nevertheless, embarked on a so-called normalization policy with Russia. Irakli Menagharishvili holds that ‘it is impossible to normalise relations between two countries that have accumulated so many unresolved issues. Therefore, it would be better to regard this policy as an attempt to get affairs back on to a pragmatic track rather than calling it ‘normalisation’.

We will first touch upon positive trends in this policy.

First and foremost, the new team mitigated the confrontational tone of rhetoric previously used towards Russia. A month after the government hand changed in Georgia, the authorities introduced the new position of the Prime Minister’s special representative for relations with Russia. Zurab Abashidze, a former ambassador to the Benelux Union, EU and Russia, took this position. Abashidze reports to the Prime Minister, an arrangement that points to the great importance given to the matter. After some hesitation, Russia responded positively to Georgia’s move and appointed deputy foreign minister Gregory Karasin to a corresponding newly established position. In general terms, Russia’s response to the initial signals coming from the Georgian authorities after 2012 was something that, according to Neil MacFarlane, can be described as a ‘sigh of relief’: even though Tbilisi’s anti-Russian policy had no considerable impact on Russia, the Kremlin was still content that they were finally free from Saakashvili’s surprises, a development that could lay the foundations for future constructive relations between the two countries.

The agenda for the Abashidze-Karasin talks was quite broad. The parties agreed on a list of functional issues (e.g. economic and political relations, simplified visa regimes, etc.), which excluded sensitive political issues. However, there have been politically charged items that Abashidze and Karasin have had to include in their discussions, including the non-use of force against separatist regions and Russia’s intervention in these regions.

The Georgian Dream government drew a line between economic and social issues on one side, and political and security matters on the other. This move was justified from an economic perspective, especially considering the fact that the Russian market is a key destination for the country’s agricultural produce and a major source of remittances (see figures below). Within the Abashidze-Karasin format, the parties agreed that disputes over territorial issues should not hamper progress in all other areas. As described by one Georgian politician, in a bilateral context ‘they talked about tomatoes, rather than the occupation’.

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2 Importantly, the majority of the respondents perceive Russia as the greatest threat.
4 An interview with Tornike Sharashenidze, professor at the Georgian Institute of Politics. 03.12.2016.
7 An interview with Irakli Menagharishvili.
9 Medvedev: Election Results Show That Georgians Want Changes”, Civil.ge, 2 October 2012.
The outcomes became apparent as Russia eventually opened up its trade borders for agricultural produce (mainly wine and mineral water) from Georgia. Georgia’s exports to Russia increased by more than 300% compared with the year before and Russia has become the number three destination for Georgian exports (in 2012 it came 11th. See the figure below).

Interestingly, some experts and political analysts tend to disagree with the suggestion that Russia’s decision to allow Georgian produce into its market was an outcome of the ‘normalisation’ policy. Instead, they believe that Russia fulfilled its obligation to open its borders as a condition of the latter’s membership of the WTO. They also argue that the lack of diversification in Georgia’s trade relations and overdependence on the Russian market may help the latter to regain long-lost economic and possibly political leverages.

In response to the abovementioned assumptions, Abashidze reminds sceptical commentators that even though Russia was obliged to remove trade barriers, its ‘commitment’ to adhere to obligations is common knowledge. As for strengthening economic relations, Abashidze argues that there are far more potential benefits to this than there are risks: ‘if one day, an embargo is re-imposed, it will be painful, but not fatal, especially since the EU market has opened up’.


3 An interview with Zurab Abashidze.
Negotiations around the restoration of economic ties were soon followed by concrete offers of a political nature from Tbilisi. First of all, this concerned a rejection of the idea of boycotting the Olympic Games and a decision to cooperate Moscow for strengthening security. Notably, Georgia’s participation in the Games was a matter for national dignity, which faced considerable opposition from the public. Opponents grew increasingly upset when a number of factors insulting to Georgians came to the fore during the first part of the games. However, the Georgian side proved itself to be a reliable partner, as is corroborated by their actions.

Georgia’s participation in the Olympic Games effectively signalled the end of the North Caucasus policy, eventually followed by a steady decrease in projects that had given an opportunity to North Caucasian students to pursue higher education in Georgia. The new government decided to not resume funding to the PIK TV channel which had been shut down due to financial problems, while an increasing number of North Caucasian residents were rejected entry to the country. Eventually, Georgia’s North Caucasus policy was effectively placed within the context of Georgian-Russian relations.

The new government also changed its policy towards the Occupied Territories: the need to amend the Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories slowly turned into a talking point. Not only did the office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality replace the Ministry of Reintegration, but it also attracted former representatives of non-governmental organisations famous for their liberal thinking and enjoying a certain level of trust in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If the previous government made efforts to circumscribe the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in an overarching Georgia-Russian context, the new government chose to focus on more of an independent peace policy and embarked on several new projects to provide greater access to healthcare and social benefits to the communities residing across the Line of Occupation. In general, the approach that the new government has employed is more de-isolationist in its nature and engagement-focused than that of the previous government, which was full of duress, propaganda and provocations (including still unresolved explosions in Tskhinvali, Gali and Sukhumi. Even though the perpetrators remain unidentified, since 2012 there have been no such occurrences).

In parallel, Russia ceased to promote the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on its international agenda. No country has recognized their independence since 2012, and on the contrary – Nauru and Vanuatu even revoked their previous recognition of Georgia’s breakaway regions. The prospect of Tskhinvali region joining Russia or its accession to the Customs Union seems far-fetched. Russia will make this decision when it deems it to be appropriate for its interests. Changes in policy have led to a revival of cultural, social and humanitarian ties between Russia and Georgia. Negotiations resulted in an agreement and ultimately prisoners serving respective sentences for espionage were exchanged. The National Statistics Bureau of Georgia suggests that the number of tourists from Russia increased by 40% and this trend seems to be stable. As of today, there are regular flights between the two countries, including cargo shipments and the capacity of the border checkpoint operating on the Georgian Military Road has considerably increased. According to the official data from Russia, the number of visas issued to Georgian citizens has increased by 25%. By the end of 2015, Russia simplified the visa regime for Georgian citizens while Russian officials have made a few statements on the possibility of completely revoking the visa regime in the foreseeable future. Other changes in the dynamics between the two countries since 2012 are also worth noting (see figures below).

Source: (1) Results of public opinion polls in Russia administered by Levada-Center; (2) Results of public opinion polls administered by International Republican Institute in Georgia

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1 ‘We are not going to give up on Europe’s stability for Georgia’s sake’. Kviris Palitra. 28 October, 2013.
2 On 13 December 2013 Iusuf Lakaev, a Chechen citizen was arrested in Batumi. Lakaev was one of the list of those individuals who were believed to pose a threat to the Olympic Games and suspected of several politically motivated killings.
3 Blast kills four, injures six in Gali, 07.07.08. Available at: http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18702&search=

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Observations of bilateral relations on an international level also yield interesting conclusions: Georgia’s statements and actions in relation to Russia at international organisations or forums have become less aggressive and have acquired a more moderate and reserved nature. Explanations of this trend vary between political commentators. For instance, Kornely Kakachia holds that the Government acts in an undignified way by not articulating issues related to the Occupation on an international agenda.¹ Giga Bokeria, former chairperson of the Security Council, shares the same opinion: ‘the dialogue with Russia creates an impression in the West that there may have been some progress while Russia continues to damage our country step by step’, says Bokeria.² Tedo Japaridze, the advisor to the Prime Minister of Georgia on foreign policy, is of a different opinion: ‘The normalisation of relations [with Russia] will facilitate the greater engagement of our Western partners in sorting out our issues. This does not mean that Georgia should fall out of the international agenda. On the contrary, the dialogue needs to be further invigorated and our issues should become part of a wider and complex context…almost every American colleague, including those who have a reputation for being anti-Russian, has advised us to maintain so called ‘Abashidze-Karasin’ format.’³ Generally speaking, most Western leaders have welcomed the normalisation policy launched by Tbilisi. For instance, in a resolution adopted on 23 October 2013 by the European Parliament, the EU supports endeavours of incumbent Georgian authorities to reduce tension with Russia in parallel to maintaining the European course. However, as Kakachia puts it, ‘what may be ‘pleasant’ for Europeans is one thing, while what is better for our state interests may be another’.⁴ What is worth noting in the context of normalisation is that the achievements that Georgia have made in a pro-Western direction, most notably signing the Association Agreement with the EU, have not caused much open tampering and political pressure from Russia. The International community is well aware of the Kremlin’s ‘interventions’ in Ukraine and Armenia, while the former re-imposed an embargo on Moldova after its signing of the Association Agreement with the EU. Zurab Abashidze believes that the newly launched normalization policy has led to Russia’s ‘mercy’ for Georgia. Besides, they [Europeans] well recognized that Georgia has made more progress in comparison to other countries and therefore, the Kremlin hasn’t thought it necessary to be manipulative.⁵ However, in spite of the abovementioned positive outcomes, the normalization policy continues to remain very limited. First and foremost, the wishful thinking of some Georgian politicians that agreeing on less important issues could eventually lead to full normalisation, has turned out to be premature.⁶ Russia continues to treat Russia as its former colony with the aim of bringing it back to its sphere of influence sooner or later. The philosopher Zaza Piralishvili holds that for Georgia, which is disadvantaged in terms of political resources, the biggest challenge is to protect its own national interests on the one hand, and make considerable progress in relations with Russia on the other.⁷

‘RED LINES’ IN BILATERAL RELATIONS – POLITICS IN A DEADLOCK

As both countries started slowly approaching so called “red lines”, the process of normalizing relations started to show signs of stagnation. By the end of 2014, Zurab Abashidze stated that most of the items on the agenda, in other words, the majority of trade-economic, humanitarian and cultural issues had already been addressed, a statement that many perceived as a sign of both countries getting very close to the red lines.

Contested issues go back to as early as in August 2008 and include, as well as the former’s recognition of Georgia’s breakaway regions as independent states. High-ranking Russian officials have reiterated on numerous occasions that they are not going to revoke their decision. In addition, Russia signed a series of mutual agreements with the quasi-states between 2012 and 2016, pledging financial aid and support in the sphere of security. Moreover, deepening relations with these regions is one of Russia’s priorities, as formulated in the National Security Strategy for 2016 (in this regard, clauses included in the Strategies of previous years, have effectively remained the same).⁸ Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister, says that in order to maintain the normalization process, Georgia has to come to terms with what Lavrov calls the ‘new reality’: “any attempts to develop political ties with Russia without recognizing the new realities will be futile and counterproductive”.⁹ Maia Panjikidze, Georgia’s then foreign minister, was equally clear in turn, stating that Georgia would never reconcile with the conditions presented by Moscow: the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the permanent presence of Russian forces in the region. Panjikidze has stated: “Russia has occupied 20% of Georgian territories. Russia is an occupant country. It has two embassies: one in Tskhinvali and the other one in Sukhumi. As long as this is the situation, diplomatic ties will not be restored with Russia”.¹⁰

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¹ An interview with Kornely Kakachia, founder of Georgian Institute of Politics. 17.10.2016.
⁴ An interview with Kornely Kakachia.
⁵ An interview with Zurab Abashidze, the special envoy of the Prime Minister for relations with Russia. 12.12.2016. Tbilisi.
⁷ An interview with Zaza Pirashvili, Professor of Philosophy at Tbilisi State University. 29.12.2016. Tbilisi.
¹⁰ Cited in «New FM: No Diplomatic Ties with Moscow as Long as It Has Embassies in Tskhinvali, Sukhumi», Civil.ge, 26 October 2012.
In addition to issues related to the occupied territories, Tbilisi has crossed yet another red line that cannot possibly be subject to any kind of negotiation or consensus: the sovereign right to pursue a foreign policy of its choice and make alliances. The Georgian Government has repeatedly stated that, while they are trying to sort out their relations with Russia, they are not going to give up on the path towards greater integration with European institutions and NATO, which has been portrayed as the greatest threat by Moscow. Alexander Grushko, the Russian ambassador to NATO, made the following comment on the matter after the change of the government in Georgia: ‘I am sure that in NATO they understand the grave consequences that any move of Georgia towards NATO membership may have on Russia-NATO relations and European security’.

The normalisation efforts have been seriously hampered by a process that defies the very logic of normalisation – the installation of barbed wire fences along the disputed border with South Ossetia, also known as a policy of ‘borderisation’. Even though a decision on the demarcation of the border had been made way back in 2009, to everybody’s surprise, the process took a new turn in the midst of efforts to patch up relations between the two countries. Such a turn in the development of relations raised concerns among the Georgian public and put the credibility of the normalization process under question. Paata Zakareishvili believes that Russia is cautious about the new government’s policy towards Tskhinvali region and is trying to ‘cut off’ Ossetians who have started to frequent Georgia more often. Mamuka Areshidze, another Georgian expert, however, holds that this is simply a Russian style of exerting pressure, that they do not care about Georgia’s interests and are only concerned with the finalization of the project it has embarked on. So far, Russia has been content with the status quo in Georgia and therefore, is not going to go the extra mile to regulate relations with Georgia. The fact that Georgian citizens have routinely been detained for crossing the disputed border, even after 2012, is proof that Russia is not interested in improving the situation the region.

Unpredictable and fluctuating economic relations have also hampered the sustainable development of relations between Tbilisi and Moscow. As Tbilisi has moved closer to the EU, and two years after the embargo on Georgian produce was revoked by Russia, the latter’s main sanitary supervision service has begun reiterating statements on how Georgian wine doesn’t comply with required standards and the possibility to annulling the 1994 draft treaty on a free trade. Foreign Minister Lavrov has stated that Russia is going to follow any developments and act accordingly.

There is no reason to assume that, in the context of normalisation, Russia approves of Georgia’s endeavours to pursue its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. First of all, it was during the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership that Russia intensified its relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a decision that Tbilisi perceived as a policy of annexation. At the same time, signing the DCFTA and Association Agreement, which represent concrete steps towards visa liberalization with the EU, an opening of a NATO training base in Ktsanisi, etc., were able to come about because Russia’s was occupied with other regional problems at that time, not due to its ‘good will’. As Neil MacFarlane notes, the crisis in Ukraine (and possibly events in Syria) provided a strategic space to Georgia to get closer to the West as Russia’s attention was shifted to other places. At the same time, Russia believes that Georgia’s accession to NATO has been called off for quite some time, while Georgia’s approximation to the EU, as Zurab Abashidze puts it, is not likely to go beyond the visa liberalisation. It is possible that Russia’s confrontation with the Eastern Partnership process and its use of force in neighbouring countries has pushed the West to deepen its relations with Georgia. Kornely Kakachia believes that turning Georgia down would undermine key aspects of the Eastern policy – it is rather in the EU’s interests to demonstrate the successes of its policies (this very approach is the foundation of the EU’s security strategy of 2016, which perceives enlargement as successful). At the same time, as the Special Envoy for Relations with Russia notes, Georgia is effectively the only country among the six members of the Eastern Partnership that may serve as a success story for the EU, and this is something that Russia is well aware of. It is likely that these very factors have prompted the West to be more tolerant of the criminal prosecution of members of the former government, which had previously been seen as a potential trigger for spoiled relations between the parties.

Admittedly, the major conflict between Georgia and Russia still revolves around values. Russia lacks not only sufficient political and economic resources, but also ideological and visionary pull-factors that could turn it into a gravitational center for the Georgian elite, even through the Eurasian Union. Therefore, because of the above-mentioned issues, which are coupled with the incompatibility of political interests, any attempt to regulate or normalize relations with Russia still provoke fear and negative reactions amongst the general public. This may account for the absence of any meetings between Abashidze and Karasin for almost six months before the 2016 parliamentary elections and a drop in discussions on the importance of approximation to Russia amongst governmental circles (a meeting between Abashidze and Karasin was held on October 19, 10 days after the election).

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1 “Russian Diplomat on Georgia’s NATO Integration”, Civil.ge, 30 November 2012.
4 An agreement on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Space between EU and Georgia signed in July 2013.
5 An interview with Zurab Abashidze, the special envoy of the Prime Minister for relations with Russia. 12.12.2016.
6 For more information please see: David Cadier, Eurasian Economic Union and Eastern Partnership: the End of the EU-Russia Entre-deux, 27.06.2014. Available at: http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR019/SR019-Cadier.pdf
THREATS AND REALITY OF THE COMEBACK OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

Since 2012 the return of Russian soft power has been a popular topic for public discussions, articles, publications, conferences, etc. On the one hand, there has been a sort of political bias as opponents have tried to blame the new authorities for giving a green light to so-called pro-Russian forces and remind the incumbent authorities of Russia’s true intentions in the background of “normalization”. On the other hand, Russian soft power has clearly had certain objective characteristics and directions.

Some Georgian politicians take threats associated with the Russian soft power seriously. For instance, Davit Darchiashvili holds that ‘Russia now employs much smarter methods to invade Georgia. These methods are different from traditional ones.’ Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, has mentioned a ‘strategy of more intelligent approaches’. Trenin argues that the policy of sanctions against Georgia has failed and resulted in Georgia’s further alienation from Russia, not only from a political perspective, but culturally as well. The expectation that Georgians would ‘come to their senses’ may prove to be wrong; therefore, the time has come to give up on efforts to turn Georgians into hostages of Russian and Georgian political relations and, instead, make Russia more attractive to the Georgian public, or in other words, replace ‘hard power’ with ‘soft power’.2

Russian soft power in Georgia has been present from 2012 through an increasing number of educational activities offering Russian language courses, organizing days of Russian culture and promoting Russia in general. However, manifestations of Russian soft power have been much more powerful in media and information space. Several approaches can be identified in this regard. For instance, there are Russian TV channels in Georgia, Russian propaganda on Georgian-language TV channels, printed publications, etc. As Tornike Sharashenidze holds, some newspapers that are published in considerable numbers openly promote Russia and are saturated with anti-western and anti-U.S. messages, also encouraging radicalism and nationalistic sentiments.3

In addition to the information space, Russia has actively been using a parallel, informal policy towards Georgia, voiced by high-ranking Kremlin officials, as an instrument of its soft power. For instance, as early as in 2009, a year after Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Vladimir Putin was among the guests celebrating the birthday of Russia’s Tbilisi-born ex-prime minister Yevgeni Primakov, to whom Putin raised a toast and wished for Georgia to become united again, saying: ‘There are no unresolved issues for us’ and ‘the issue of Georgia’s integrity can be resolved’, adding that he wished his words could reach those beyond ‘[these] walls’. ‘With this statement, the Russian Prime Minister sent out a message, including to the West, that he had a “constructive” attitude towards Georgia and was ready for dialogue, while at the same time stressing that he was capable of anything - something that Georgia should be mindful of. This attitude is in line with numerous statements that the Russian authorities have made towards Georgia, conveying the message that ‘Russia has a problem with the Georgian authorities, not with the Georgian people’.4

Yet another attempt to promote the ‘Russian alternative’ was Putin’s statement on the possible revocation of visa regime for Georgian citizens, made a day prior to the release of a progress report on the implementation of Georgia’s obligations under a visa liberalisation action plan administered by the European Commission. Putin’s statement was soon followed by specific measures: Russia’s foreign Ministry confirmed a decision to simplify the visa regime for Georgian citizens from 23 December 2015. According to the Ministry, the visa regime for Georgians could eventually be lifted. Kornely Kakachia and other political analysts believe that the Kremlin’s above-mentioned decision is an initiative which aims to somehow counterbalance the visa dialogue between Georgia and the EU and compete with the West by keeping Russia as an attractive choice for Georgian citizens in the background of deepening Euro-Atlantic integration.5 Zurab Abashidze considers that the Kremlin may in fact make such a decision in the foreseeable future as it is embarrassing to have Georgians traveling to Europe without a visa while they cannot do the same if they travel to Russia.6

In spite of certain efforts in the political arena, Russia has been finding it hard to compete with the West in winning over Georgians, especially young people when it comes to values. As Viacheslav Novikov, a Russian political scientist, holds, ‘Russia has no ideology to offer to the world’.7 However, Russia is still striving to create an independent ideological axis, a key feature of which is its opposition, and image as an alternative, to the West. Lilia Svetsova offers the following description of this doctrine: ‘It creates the impression of a “hotchpotch soup” into which the cook has mindlessly thrown a bunch of incongruous ingredients: sovietism, nationalism, imperialism, Orthodox fundamentalism… He [Putin] has challenged the West by declaring that, through his leadership, Russian civilization will take on the mantle of reviving Christian values that have long been absent in the West. His only intent is not to turn Russia into a stronghold of moral and ethical norms, but to turn the post-Soviet world into an “independent centre of global development”. In short, Putin has announced to the world

1 An interview with Davit Darchiashvili. For analysis see http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/76875-rbili-urdzuleba
2 Дмитрий Тренин, Включить Мягкую Силу, Московский Центр Карнеги, 09.08.2010. Available at: www.carnegie.ru/publications/?-fa=41353
5 An interview with Kornely Kakachia.
6 Interview with Zurab Abashidze.
7 Вячеслав Никонов, Россия и мир: консерватизм в российской внешней политике, Тетради по консерватизму №1, 2014.
that with his leadership, Russia will turn into an anti-West, in other words, a structure to counterbalance and challenge liberal democracies.1

It should be noted that some of these messages have reached Georgia and gained a certain level of popularity amongst specific groups. For instance, in one issue of the national-faith journal ‘Kvakutkhedi’ (Cornerstone), the author wrote that the Russian aggression in 2008 was ‘a whip in God’s hand’, punishing Georgia for its approximation to the West. The author is hopeful that God will, as he has done in previous centuries, not allow Georgia’s full integration with the West.2

Relations between the churches of these two countries merits separate research. In the background of bad (by all measures) inter-state relations, the Orthodox churches have maintained orderly and respectful relations, based not only on shared faith, but on compatible political interests.3 A statement made by the Eparch of Odesa that conveyed the political dimension of the Russian Church should be analysed in this very context. In his statement, the Eparch talks about a fight against the global freemasonry and the necessity to seek alliances with those states, organisations and public structures which would be ready to support Russia’s new policy.4

The results of public opinion polls from 2015 raised deep concerns among Georgia’s pro-Western elite. It should first be noted, however, that the methodology of the polls have been widely criticized and the polls were not conducted in Georgia’s ethnic minority regions. Polls focusing on foreign policy perceptions among the public revealed that 28% of respondents supported Georgia’s membership to the Eurasian Union, while in 2013 only 11% were in favor of the same option. Also, if in 2014 Euro-Atlantic integration was supported by 54% of respondents, by 2015 the number had reduced to 45%.5 Notably, pro-Western sentiments had gained a new momentum in the post War period.

Reports prepared by Georgian experts on threats Russian hard and soft powers suggest that, as Russia revitalises its efforts, the Georgian authorities have no vision or strategy for fighting off the Russian propaganda machine. The Government either has failed to adequately assess the risks emanating from Russian information sources, or has chosen to turn a blind eye to them in order to avoid upsetting Russia or hampering the ongoing political dialogue, a compromise that cannot be justified.6

There are several counterarguments against this assumption. First of all, it would be unfair to blame only Russia for increased pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments among the public. Truth be told, there is still sympathy towards Soviet life lingering in the air and in addition, ‘fear’ of the West cannot possibly be explained only by Russian ‘intervention’. Because of the nature of soft power, it is often difficult to discern between propaganda and natural cultural influence of the neighboring state, especially given the circumstances whereby, despite bad blood between the two countries, Georgia is strongly attached to Russia’s immense social-cultural space, not only by historical ties, but also by the contemporary situation.

It can be assumed that conversations around Russian soft power in the Georgian media and political space often goes too far and resembles a kind of paranoia and hysteria that was typical for the last years of the National Movement’s government. Mamuka Areshidze believes that ‘we can talk about 2013-2014 as the period which saw Russian soft power becoming particularly strong. However, later on the wave began to calm down’.7 Even if assumptions about the Kremlin increasing pro-Russian sentiments in Georgia were true, in fact, clear-cut pro-Russian political forces in Georgia’s political landscape are extremely marginal, if they are present at all (even though there has been a tendency for a growing number of anti-Western forces). This assumption is corroborated by the results of 2016 parliamentary elections.

WHAT ELSE TO EXPECT FROM RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS?

The ‘reset’ policy initiated by Tbilisi at the end of 2012 can be assessed as limited in its operational scope, but pivotal. The key outcome of these negotiations was the end of the emotional-hysterical tension that had gone beyond all conceivable limits, as well as a nascent prospect to readjust relations into a more constructive pattern.

The limited space for relations has been a theme of numerous discussions. First of all, it is evident that the gap between the interests of the two countries is so deep that it cannot be possibly addressed in a limited format, including ‘friendly’ meetings in European cities. As of today, this gap does not stand a chance of being ‘filled’ unless the two countries agree to fundamentally revise their goals and approaches, something that neither is ready to do. It should be noted that a revision of ‘major goals’ in Georgia’s case means giving up on territorial integrity and being willing to surrender a significant chunk of the country’s sovereignty, which is not an option for Russia such a commitment would mean quenching its imperialistic aspirations. The level of ‘normalization’ achieved by the end of 2016 seems to have satisfied the Kremlin and presumably it will not rush to take on a broader response (as has been shown, in comparison with the desire of Tbilisi to achieve a “normalization” of relations, Moscow’s response has been much more sluggish). In the Georgian-Russian conflict there is almost no room for any agree-

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1 Шевцова П. Валдайская доктрина Путинна // Ежедневный журнал. 23 September 2013. Available at: http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=23280

2 National-faith based journal ‘Kvakutkhedi’ [Cornerstone], N8(27) September.

3 Khaindrava, I. ‘Searching New Ways of Development of Russian-Georgian Relations’.


5 Public perceptions in Georgia: August 2015. The poll was commissioned by the National Democratic Institute and conducted by Available at: https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_August_2015_Survey_public%20Political_ENG_v1.pdf


7 Interview with Mamuka Areshidze.
ment. In this regard an assessment of the situation by Nikolai Silaev, a Russian political analyst, seems quite accurate: Silaev believes that there is no pressing need for Moscow to make compromises for Georgia so that it will give up on its NATO aspirations, as prospects of the latter joining the Alliance seem quite bleak. In addition, Georgia is not capable of creating big enough problems for Russia so that it would revise its own decisions, including those made with respect to the occupied territories. Presumably, the fact that Georgia has no clear idea of how it would be ‘compensated’ in the hypothetical situation that it joined the Eurasian Union and adjusted its foreign policy presents another challenge.

It should be noted that if its willing to make further steps towards normalization, Moscow can still pursue actions to demonstrate its goodwill (without de-occupation and the revocation of recognition). First of all, this could be a long-promised but now forgotten idea of abolishing the visa regime for Georgian citizens. Irakli Menagarashvili believes that Moscow will wait as long as it has to until the political situation in Georgia is most in its favour so that it can ‘sell’ this ‘goodwill’ for the highest possible cost. Moscow is also capable of reopening OSCE and UNOMIG missions, the mandates of which had been blocked by Russia. Sergi Kapanadze holds that the OSCE ministerial council that convenes in every December could possibly restore its mission in Georgia through a status-neutral approach. If there is the political will, a decision could be made to extend the mandate of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to cover Tskhinvali Region and Abkhazia and allow the deployment of international rivers on the river Psou and at the Roki tunnel. Notably, an agreement on the above was reached by Georgia and Russia during negotiations preceding Russia’s accession to the WTO. Kornely Kakachia believes that allowing Georgians to visit the graves of their families and relatives in Abkhazia once or twice a year could be yet another manifestation of the ‘gesture of goodwill’.

If Moscow makes a decision to advance towards normalization, Tbilisi can proceed with its policies without fearing crossing the red lines. Potential areas of cooperation with Russia may include joint measures against radical Islam. ‘If one thinks that the destruction of ISIS will lead to a demise of Islamist radicalization, one is very wrong – this is a constant pain and a great concern for Russia’, says Mamuka Areshidze. In addition, Georgia could also liberalize its law on the Occupied Territories. Economic cooperation also offers a whole range of opportunities which, if pursued in a careful and thoughtful manner, may lead to greater development in this field.

Meetings of representatives of Russian and Georgian academic circles, educational and scientific projects on the study of bilateral relations, the continuation of official negotiations (which remain a priority for Tbilisi after the 2016 parliamentary elections) – such events could help the parties get to know each other and to accurately and objectively assess the situation.

**CONCLUSION**

Any review of 25 years of Georgian-Russian relations provides an insight into the history of independent Georgia. Russia has been the main topic and central challenge that has and continues to determine the formation of the Georgian state and, in a sense, national identity. In addition, Russia has been present in each and every event of significance that has unfolded in Georgia of the past quarter century.

For the Georgian political elite, relations with Russia are not confined solely to the Russian Federation but also include their relationship with the Soviet past and the way this past is analysed and assessed by modern Georgian society. In addition, views on Russia are also indicative of a political inclination, fundamental values and perceptions of independence, democracy, the national idea, degrees of freedom, etc. In addition, relations with Russia provide enormous political experience and act as a stimulus for greater awareness of statehood for Georgia’s relatively young democracy. As Merab Mamardashvili puts it, ‘Russia is an enormous boulder hanging above Georgia’.

Perceptions of relations with Russia among the Georgian mainstream have been also shaped by ambivalence that can be traced back through the past few centuries. On the one hand, Russia has been perceived as a savior that unified Georgia, and at the same time a country which has trodden Georgia’s sovereignty and disgraced its national identity. The same parallels can be made with the Soviet times, which saw Georgian culture on the rise, but on the other hand Georgians lost qualities which were necessary for building an independent state. Today, this ambivalence is manifested in new and different ways: It is inevitable to have good neighbourly relations with Russia, including economic ties and cooperation in other fields, but at the same time Georgia has to ‘stay away from the Kremlin’ and pursue any policy with great caution. The presence of the ‘frenemy’ dichotomy appeared to be clearly visible in the results of public opinion polls in 2015 with 70% of respondents

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2 The approach means that parties do not enforce the discussion of issues related to the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia agreeing to lead on discussions while leaving the matter neutral. The is the principle which serves as the ground for the 2011 agreement on WTO membership between Georgia and Russia, working groups under Geneva discussions, Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms etc.
4 An interview with Kornely Kakachia.
5 An interview with Irakli Menagarashvili.
6 This term has been coined to denote individuals who, despite fundamental controversies or rivalry, still remain friends. The term is used to describe personal, geopolitical and commercial relations.
indicating that the continuation of a dialogue with Russia was a priority. In the same poll, slightly more (76%) respondents said that Russia was a major threat to the country.\(^1\)

Between 1991 and 2016 Georgia pursued various policies towards Russia. Variations across these policies coincided with the offices of four incumbent authorities during their time in power. At the same time, it should be noted that every new government changed the course of its predecessors. For instance, Gamsakhurdia’s “emotional” and Saakashvili’s revolutionary nationalism were far more rigid and confrontational than Shevarnadze’s balancing policy and Georgian Dream’s moderate pragmatism. Importantly, for the past 25 years Georgia has tried almost all possible policies towards Russia – from extreme confrontation to bandwagoning (Georgia’s joining the CIS were perceived as a capitulation by many).

Unlike Tbilisi’s approaches, the Kremlin’s policy towards Georgia has always been more homogenous. Moscow officials have never diverged from their stance. As Eduard Shevardnadze once said, ‘the Russian leadership believes that Russia’s interests must be the priority for former republics and that Russia’s interests must prevail over their own’. Issues related to its power, glory and reputation have always been of paramount importance to Russia. It is for this reason, perhaps, that it often treats other countries, particularly small ones, asymmetrically and not as equal partners.

If there is the will to break the deadlock that has long characterized Georgian-Russian relations, Russia has to revise its ambition to unconditionally extend its influence over its neighbours and build relations on mutual respect and partnership. Simultaneously, Georgia needs to prove its integrity not only through angry statements and emotional rhetoric, but also through a more mature state of thinking and meaningful attachment to certain fundamental values – freedom, independence and democracy. If Georgia successfully manages to do this, Russia will have to take it more seriously.

\(^1\) These polls were conducted by the International Republican Institute. Available at: [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_0.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/iri_georgia_public_2015_final_0.pdf)
RUSSIA’S WORLDVIEW AND ITS RELATIONS WITH GEORGIA: GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND DOMESTIC LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

View from Russia
INTRODUCTION

Summing up relations evolving over a certain period of time requires the identification of phases and key trends in these very relations. There are a number of approaches to the periodisation of Russian-Georgian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, literature in Russian provides mostly approaches describing bilateral relations from the perspective of Georgia’s internal processes:

1) The attempt to restore Georgian independence through negotiations with the Soviet authorities (from the end of the 1980s through to 1991).
5) The Rose Revolution and an attempt to integrate with the West (2003–2008).

Yet another approach to the periodisation puts a greater emphasis on Russian politics:

1) State-building amidst harsh competition between elites (from the end of the 1980s to 1992).
2) Establishing links between Georgia and NATO and drastic changes in Russian policies with respect to the maintenance of territorial integrity of post-soviet states, as well as the encouragement of Georgia’s accession to the CIS (1994–2003).
3) Harnessing Georgia’s statehood and a new stage of strengthening Russia’s position at an international level (2003–2008).

Russian scholarly literature offers two bulks of work. The first one represents an attempt to rethink Russian policies towards the rest of the post-Soviet space or its individual sub-regions (the South Caucasus, Central Asia, the European part of the CIS). The second one focuses mostly on the periodisation of bilateral relations with post-Soviet countries according to changes of elites or foreign policy by Russia’s partner-states. In this respect, the present paper looks at 25 years of Russian-Georgian relations based on periodisation, which primarily takes into account the development of the Russian Federation’s foreign policy strategy. The above-mentioned periodisation of Russian foreign policy consists of the following phases:

2) State and nation-building according to both Russia’s national priorities and the rules of the Western world order (although Russia believed that these rules were often ignored by Western countries themselves) - from 1996 to 2007.
3) The construction of ‘sovereign democracy’ and Russia acting according to its own interpretation of the Western rules of the world order (from 2007 to present).

In order to understand Russia’s relations towards Georgia, one has to fathom the logic of Russia’s actions when pursuing its foreign policy. Its pattern of behaviour has depended on the development of the country as an independent state in the aftermath of 1991. At the same time, it is expedient that the logic of international behaviour be examined at several different levels of analysis: Firstly, personal interaction between heads of states; and secondly, the influence of the domestic situation on the formation of foreign policy; and thirdly, the impact of international trends on regional and global foreign policies. It is important to understand that Russia’s policy at the regional level of the post-Soviet space is closely tied to its self-positioning at the global level and its relations with great powers and regional organisations such as NATO and the EU. In some cases, Russia’s regional policies depend on domestic processes as well.

Western observers can be split into two camps. There are those that deem Russian foreign policy difficult to predict (as in the cases of the conflict with Georgia in 2008 and the reunification with Crimea in 2014, both of which came as a surprise to many in the West). On the other hand, there are those who consider it predictable, provided that the Kremlin’s regional policy is perceived as neo-imperial or predatory. In order to understand the key tenets of Russian foreign policy and its evolution, one has to look at official documents (foreign policy concepts, annual reviews of international and diplomatic activities, publications of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) since 2007), articles written by ministers of foreign affairs and speeches made by Russian presidents. The goal for both the Georgian and Russian parts of the research is to trace changes in official discourses, linking these shifts with the stages observed in the development of each of the countries.

2 This article, as well as the following one of Z. Bezhanishvili, was published in 2008 and therefore the periodization covers the timeframe up to 2008.

THE FORMATION OF RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS GEORGIA AT A DOMESTIC LEVEL

THE ISSUE OF THE COHERENCE OF OFFICIAL DISCOURSE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1990S

At this time, the formation of Russia’s foreign policy was primarily shaped by internal political and economic development of the country.

In the 1990s, the Russian Parliament began to engage actively in foreign policy. This was particularly the case with the State Duma, which started to use foreign policy topics in order to highlight disagreement with President Yeltsin, or to gain points in the domestic political struggle. Relations with Georgia were among those themes that caught the attention of Parliament members, with a Russian-Georgian agreement being signed in 1994 but never ratified.

In the period until the end of 1993, Russian foreign policy could be called anything but coordinated. The closing sentence of 1993 Foreign Policy Concept reads as follows: ‘It would be in the best interests of the country to develop the widest possible consensus on foreign policy choices’. As D. Baluev argues, even foreign policy after 1993 cannot be characterised as realist, because according to theories of international relations ‘realism’ suggests that the state is a monolithic unitary actor. However, in Russia at that time there was not even a consensus on what constituted the national interest.

The first phase of Russia’s foreign policy can be titled as a period of ‘incomplete sovereignty’ and characterised by trends such as the continuation of the process of decentralisation, particularly with regards to Russia’s regions that were attempting to strengthen their influence of national politics. These regions were pursuing Yeltsin’s invitation to ‘take as much sovereignty as you can swallow’, while federal authorities were cementing this principle in paper. As such, the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept holds that ‘subjects of the Federation are authorised to act as independent players in foreign and international economic relations, unless their behaviour contradicts the Constitution and federal laws of the Russian Federation’. Russia’s foreign policy was based on the interests of the Federation as a whole as well of its individual regions. These ideas are highlighted in the preamble of the Concept. However, the later editions of the Concept had no mention whatsoever of Russia’s regions in their preambles.

In the section dealing with the global dimension of Russia’s foreign policy, it was noted that firstly it was in Russia’s best interest to have a favourable international environment in order to support the development of the country’s democratic institutions. The 1993 Concept enshrines the idea that the fate of Russia’s reforms and ‘a normal life of Russian citizens’ require the growth of economic relations, the resolution of conflicts and sustainability as preconditions for the implementation of Russia’s foreign policy in the ‘far abroad’. That is to say, that Russia’s development within the post-Soviet region and its relations with neighbouring countries create the conditions for the formation of Russia’s foreign policy towards the West.

A PHASE OF ‘INCOMPLETE SOVEREIGNTY’

It appears that the description of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space as neo-imperial is based on the idea that immediately after 1991 the former Soviet republics began to interact with one another like independent, sovereign states. Accordingly, any action, which according to observers was taken outside of the framework of idealised relations between sovereign states, was interpreted as interference. However, one needs to understand that for these states to have suddenly gained legal sovereignty did not mean that they had immediate, complete independence, as interactions took place between these countries in the midst of incomplete state-building processes. The American authors Alexander Cooley and Hendrick Spruyt developed the concept of incomplete sovereignty. In their book, the researchers argue that collapsing empires give birth to mixed forms of sovereignty due to the division of property, territories, borders, etc. according to the wishes of the separate parts of the former empire. The transitional period towards effective sovereignty implies the presence of interim agreements that are later revisited.

When it comes to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the transitional period may be marked from December 1991 to the second half of 1993 because of certain developments that unfolded within this period. For example, the collapse of the ruble zone in August 1993 and abandonment of an idea of of the Joint Military Forces in the framework the CIS in favour of national armies in December 1993.

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THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE EARLY 1990S

In terms of foreign policy, the first phase coincided with the appointment of Andrey Kozyrev as the Russian Federation’s first foreign minister and continued until 1996, when he was replaced by experienced politician Yevgeny Primakov, whose actions were considered to be more pragmatic and less conceding towards Western interests. Russian experts typically consider this first phase (1991-1996) to be characterised by the country’s weakened position in the international arena while Kozyrev, notorious for his concession vis-à-vis the West, was nicknamed ‘Mister Yes’.

The Russian researcher A. Bogaturov characterizes this phase as a period of ‘democratic solidarity’, when the Russian leadership expected the West to demonstrate a sense of unity and care for the interests of Russia as a young democracy. There were hopes that such solidarity would nourish a favourable international environment for building democracy in Russia.

The country’s third foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, later wrote that the goal to create a benevolent international environment for internal development was based on the assumption that in the presence of a great number of unresolved domestic problems, foreign policy should, first and foremost, serve the interests of internal development. Otherwise, the inertia of the superpower mind-set would lead to the over-exploitation of domestic resources because of the desire to participate in all important international processes.

In addition, by 1994 it was evident that the aspirations of the Russian elites to be accepted into a benevolent international environment and for Russia to be treated as an equal partner were far from realistic. Kozyrev himself was well aware of this situation. In his article published in 1994 titled Strategy for Partnership, he wrote that the only option for the Kremlin to pursue in its foreign policy towards the West, and for the West to develop relations with the Kremlin, was to recognize ‘the equality and mutual benefit of both parties, and the status and significance of Russia as a great power’. If the Russian democrats could not realize the country’s independence or build its confidence with the support of Western partners, these very Russian democratic elites would soon be ‘swpt away by waves of aggressive nationalism feeding on demands of national and state self-affirmation’. Therefore, Kozyrev, who was considered to be an exclusively pro-Western politician, realised that Russia would seek ways to build its self-confidence; however, this quest could lead the country on either a constructive or a destructive path. According to Kozyrev, this venture could only be constructive if Western cooperation was based on certain conditions. He argued that ‘it would be ridiculous to expect to build an unequal partnership with Russia on the paternalistic principle that “if the Russians are good now, they must follow in our footsteps”; “partnership does not necessarily entail rejecting tough, even aggressive policies at times, when pursuing national interests”.

Kozyrev also wrote about Russia’s position with respect to conflicts in other post-Soviet countries. He believed that, broadly speaking, the ‘narrow nationalistic and egocentric approach’ nurtured by ‘aggressive nationalism’ would eventually push the system of international relations back to 1914. Kozyrev argued that ‘democratic states must employ a firm moral stance and not support the opposition of some nations to others’.

However, the minister of foreign affairs tried to justify Russia’s special role in resolving conflicts in the post-Soviet space. For instance, Kozyrev compared the peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia with the one undertaken by the U.S. in Somalia, where the US had to withdraw its forces: ‘A fundamental difference between Somalia and Abkhazia or Tajikistan is that we cannot ‘distance’ ourselves from conflicts raging in the former USSR, the way Americans could in Somalia. I think that if the U.S. had had similar conflicts at its doorstep and in the proximity to practically open borders, they would not have allowed themselves to withdraw.’ Kozyrev also provided arguments for why the West should consider Russia to have a special role and responsibility with respect to the former USSR countries. If the West was not ready to pay for the oil and gas provided to the former republics or to pay off the latter’s debts, then the West had to recognize Russia’s role as it ‘serves as a stabilizing factor and a driver of economic reforms in the post-Soviet space’, even though it ‘cost us billions of dollars’.

Kozyrev made parallels with the European Union, where the economic leadership of large member-states (such as France and Germany) has long been recognized. Therefore, in this case, why should Western partners not support Russia in its pursuit of the progressive reintegration of the post-Soviet space ‘on a voluntary and equal basis?’

1 Held the office of the Foreign Minister from 1990 to 1996.
2 In comparison to the Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Gromiko, known in the West as ‘Minister No’ for his harsh negotiation style.
4 The same goal was laid out in the first foreign policy concept of Russia adopted in 1993.
7 Ibid, P. 185.
8 Ibid, P. 186.
9 Ibid, P. 190.
RUSSIA’S GEORGIAN POLICY: THE LEVEL OF PERSONAL INTERACTION

YELTSIN-GAMSAKHURDIA

Before the collapse of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin and Zviad Gamsakhurdia had established relations based, to some extent, on a shared desire to obtain independence from the central authorities. After Shevardnadze’s accession to the presidency of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia was generally referred to as a politician with radical nationalist views. However, it should be noted that, on the eve of the collapse of the USSR, nationalist sentiments and the desire to obtain independence were widely shared among the Soviet republics and dominated political processes at the level of the republics.

As Soso Tsiskarishvili recalls, in reality Yeltsin supported Gamsakhurdia after the events of 9 April 1989 in Tbilisi.1 Yeltsin visited Tbilisi in May 1989 and held a meeting with a Georgian commission investigating the April events. Yeltsin told members of the commission that ‘Abkhazia is Georgia! The Abkhaz and Georgians can resolve their own problems between themselves. This is not our question.’2

The next important meeting between Yeltsin and Gamsakhurdia took place in Georgia on 23 March 1991 when Yeltsin arrived in the capacity of the Chair of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Soviet Federal Republic following an invitation from Zviad Gamsakhurdia, then the speaker of the Georgian Parliament. It should be noted that Georgia abstained from the all-Soviet referendum on the preservation of the USSR held on 17 March 1991. Nevertheless, the referendum was conducted in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the self-declared Republic of South Ossetia where the local populations voted for the maintenance of the USSR. On 31 March 1991, Georgian authorities announced a referendum for the restoration of Georgian independence. As such, Yeltsin’s visit took place amidst developments that were important for Georgia’s independence. Furthermore, the official meeting resulted in the signing of a protocol that confirmed the intention of the parties to draft an agreement on intra-state relations between the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Republic of Georgia in April 1991.3

Notably, in the protocol South Ossetia is referred to as the ‘former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast’, something both Yeltsin and Gamsakhurdia had compromised on. The leader of North Ossetia, Akhsarbek Galazov, who was present at the meeting, also agreed to compromise on the title.4 After Yeltsin’s visit, protesters in South Ossetia took to the streets with signs saying ‘Shame on Yeltsin for his conspiracy with Georgian Fascists’, condemning the meeting for going ahead without the participation of South Ossetian representatives.

However, it should be noted that Yeltsin’s visit to the Caucasus and his attempts to resolve the Ossetian-Ingush and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts were met with a considerable level of scepticism in Russia.5 The newspaper Kommersant wrote that Yeltsin acted like an amateur while his peacekeeping efforts were guided primarily by his desire to gain support from the autonomous republics, as less than half of the population residing in these regions had voted for the establishment of an office of the president of the Russian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic. In addition, Yeltsin was often blamed by his political opponents for ignoring the interests of minority groups.

According to experts, Yeltsin was trying to take the initiative to resolve the interethnic conflicts before the Soviet centre in order to boost his political ratings. It should be mentioned that in his ‘Appeal to the people of Abkhazia’ of 15 March 1991 (before the all-Soviet referendum), Gamsakhurdia accused the Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba of supporting the ‘outdated Communist order’ while the ‘whole world condemns Gorbachev’s repressive policies against ‘enslaved peoples’. Thus, against the backdrop of Gorbachev’s ‘imperialistic policies’ (as they were referred to by Gamsakhurdia), Yeltsin appeared to stand a chance of becoming a truly democratic leader. Overall, Yeltsin’s policy towards issues of separatism during the collapse of the Soviet Union was largely shaped by the logic of stoking confrontation between the leaders of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the USSR. Later on, this logic idea was further supported by additional factors such as growing separatism within Russia.

To highlight Yeltsin’s good relations with Zviad Gamsakhurdia, it should be noted that the latter was appointed as the toastmaster at an inaugural banquet dedicated to Yeltsin’s presidency.6

At the same time, however, Shevardnadze came to power in Georgia, Moscow’s attitude towards Gamsakhurdia changed: as Gamsakhurdia was a rival to Shavardnadze, who enjoyed considerable support in Moscow, references to the former leader eventually became negative.8

1 For more about the events of 9 April 1989 from a military perspective, see the interview with the military commandant of Tbilisi Igor Rodionov: Igor Rodionov: ‘The country was managed from the U.S. when Yeltsin was in Office’, Patriot, N7(51), 2007. PP. 5-7. Available in Russian at: http://km.ru/2007/04/01/Patriot-7-51.pdf
The following important phase observed in Yeltsin’s policy towards Georgia is linked to his relationship with Edward Shevardnadze.

Even before Shevardnadze was elected as the Chair of Supreme Soviet of Georgia in October 1992, he was involved in signing the Moscow Agreement on a ceasefire between the conflicting parties in Abkhazia on 3 September 1992. In the course of the signing of the agreement, Moscow exerted additional pressure on Abkhazia by inviting leaders of the North Caucasian republics to express their opinion on the matter, a step that turned out to be decisive for Vladislav Ardzinba. In general, the signed agreement favoured Georgia with respect to territorial integrity and only to a limited extent took the wishes of the Abkhaz side into account.

However, peace did not ensue and on the eve of the elections in September 1992, the Georgian media blamed Russia for its alleged support of Abkhaz separatists. The State Council of Georgia sent letters to the UN Secretary General, NATO and OSCE denouncing the ‘evident conspiracy between Abkhaz separatists and reactional forces in Russia, as shown by the resolutions of the Russian parliament in opposition to the interests of a democratic Russia under Yeltsin’s leadership’. Thus, in spite of the crisis in bilateral relations caused by the issue of Abkhazia, Yeltsin continued to be perceived by Georgians as a representative of progressive democratic forces and a supporter of Georgia’s territorial integrity.

The Abkhaz side also believed that ‘evidently Georgia enjoyed unprecedented military-political support from Russia and Yeltsin personally at the early stage of the war. Yeltsin’s support was believed to stem from the similarities of the situations in Abkhazia and Chechnya. Both Yeltsin and Shevardnadze were confident that it would be just a matter of days before the Abkhaz separatists would quietly fall, and then it would be Chechnya’s turn. Unsurprisingly, volunteers from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus rendered military support to Abkhazia and Shevardnadze perceived this as Russian aggression against Georgia. Such ingratitude from the Head of the State Council of Georgia greatly upset Yeltsin who had provided him with military support by considerably lifting all available quotas stipulated by the Tashkent Agreement (of May 1992). Stanislav Lakoba believes that by making claims that Georgia was fighting against Russia in Abkhazia, Shevardnadze was trying to justify Georgia’s military fiasco. Lakoba also argues that by the spring of 1993, it had become evident that the Russian military deployed in Georgia had been playing a double game by supporting both Abkhazia and Georgia.

November 1992 saw the first round of negotiations with the aim of drafting Russian-Georgian agreements on friendship and partnership. Over the course of the negotiations, there were no disagreements on the status of Abkhazia or South Ossetia as Russia and Yeltsin officially supported Georgia’s territorial integrity. The central question of the negotiations was to determine the status of Russian military forces deployed in Georgia and a handover of former Soviet military assets to Georgia. However, Yeltsin’s approach to the Russian-Georgian agreement did not have the approval of all political forces in Russia. In February 1993, Sergey Shakhray, a chair of the State Committee of the Russian Federation for National Policy and Ramzan Abdulatipov, a chair of the Nationalities Council in Russia’s Supreme Council, paid a visit to Georgia. As a representative of the Russian Parliament, Abdulatipov was supposed to debunk impressions in Georgia side that the Supreme Council had been pursuing an imperialistic policy and tampering with democratic Yeltsin’s intentions to build constructive relations with Georgia. Interestingly, in a commentary dedicated to the visit, the Kommersant newspaper mostly referred to South Ossetia as the Tskhinvali Region.

In mid-March 1993, Russian-Georgian relations took a downturn, however this did not result in the suspension of the fourth round of negotiations on the Russian-Georgian agreement. Furthermore, in late March Shevardnadze delivered a speech in support of Yeltsin’s cause and its struggle against the Supreme Council: ‘I have high hopes that Yeltsin will remain in power, as there is no alternative to him’. In addition to problems with the Supreme Council while implementing his policy towards Georgia, Yeltsin was also forced to consider the position of the Confederation of Mountain People of the Caucasus. The group threatened that the people of the North Caucasus would vote against Yeltsin in an upcoming referendum of 25 April 1993 (vote of confidence on Yeltsin’s rule). Ultimately, the people of the North Caucasus voted against Yeltsin in the referendum.

It should be noted that two domestic situations had a serious impact on Russian-Georgian relations: firstly, the confrontations between Yeltsin and the Supreme Council that culminated in a parliamentary crisis and subsequent “shelling of the Parliament” in October 1993; and secondly, the situation in the North Caucasus, including the Ossetian-Ingush conflict and the first Chechen campaign, beginning with the deployment of troops in Chechnya in December 1994.

In the second half of 1993, the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated drastically. As a result of military actions by the Abkhaz side, Georgia lost control of Sukhumi. Georgia started accusing Russia of failing to act as a guarantor of the implementation of the 1993 peace agreement. However, Russia had taken certain measures: the Russian authorities made a statement

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2 Shevardnadze warns Yeltsin. Kommersant, 6 October 1992 Available at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/25717
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
cerning the Abkhaz actions, followed by a visit by Pavel Grachev, the Russian defence minister, on 17 September 1993. He spoke separately to both Vladislav Ardzinba and then Edward Shevardnadze, as a result of which the Abkhaz side stopped shelling Sukhumi where Georgian troops had been deployed. In spite of this, within several weeks the Abkhaz side managed to occupy Shukhumi and declared its victory in the conflict. The situation in Georgia was further complicated by the simultaneous military attack by supporters of Gamsakhurdia who were attempting to bring the former president back to power.

Georgia was inclined to blame Russia for its defeat in Abkhazia as the latter had failed to maintain the status quo after the signing of the July ceasefire agreement. However, one should not forget that the period from the second half of September to the beginning of October 1993 was not a watershed moment for Georgia alone. In this period, Russia was going through a parliamentary crisis, which began on 21 September and culminated in the seizure of the Supreme Council building between 3–4 October 1993. Considering the nature of these developments, it would have been unrealistic to expect Russia to have provided active support to Shevardnadze. It seems that Shevardnadze himself was aware of the circumstances and in the beginning of November 1993 he expressed his support to Yeltsin in the latter’s efforts to uphold constitutional order in Russia. As soon as the parliamentary crisis appeased, Russia joined the process of resolving issues related to refugees from Abkhazia.

As mentioned above, both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides blamed Russia for rendering support to the other party. A number of Russian commentators provide the following justifications to explain Georgia’s defeat in the conflict with Abkhazia: 1) The weakness of Georgia’s armed forces (such as the absence of a regular army, which Russia pledged to help create in the agreement of 1994); 2) ongoing military actions undertaken by Gamsakhurdia’s supporters; 3) support provided by the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus and Kazakh militias to the Abkhaz; 4) the presence of Russian military advisors in Abkhazia, as well as the provision of Russian armaments.

A former Russian ambassador to Georgia, F.I. Stanevsky, argues that Shevardnadze, as a president, should be held responsible for his own personal role in the defeat in Abkhazia as from the a military perspective, the above-mentioned operation had been poorly planned and executed. The same may be said about Russia’s poor performance with respect to the planning and executing of its first special operations in the Chechen Republic. Again we should remember that Russian domestic politics in the first half of the 1990s were far from consistent with various political actors (the President, the Supreme Council, the leaders of the North Caucasian republics, military) taking different sides in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Sergey Markedonov holds that ‘to Shevardnadze’s dismay, many officers in the Russian army supported Abkhazia. However, regarding this support as consistent policy pursued by the Russian Federation would largely defy the truth. The Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus also participated in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which Tbilisi continued to perceive as Russia’s condonation of separatism. Mindful that I may seem cynical, I would still venture to make the following conclusion: The Kremlin’s ‘condonation’ of the Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus was in fact, an act of ‘channelling separatism’ to Abkhazia. Time has proved that Yeltsin was right to distance the Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus from Nalchik, Maikop and Cherkas and direct its vigor to Gagra and Sukhumi. Political cynicism or national selfishness? Maybe. But faced with the Chechen challenge and Ossetian-Inghush conflict, the Russian authorities chose to eliminate an imminent Adyghe threat, the ghost of which later acquired quite realistic contours in the summer-autumn 1992 in Nalchik.

As for joining the CIS, officially this issue was not raised first by Shevardnadze, but by the speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Vakhtang Goguadze, a few days after military operations had resumed in Abkhazia in September 1993, but before the fall of Sukhumi. The speaker believed that membership of the CIS would contribute to securing Georgia’s territorial integrity and improving the country’s economy. At that time, the majority of Georgian MPs did not support this idea. However, at a summit of the three South Caucasian republics held in Moscow in September 1993, Shevardnadze, who shortly before had rejected this possibility, declared that Georgia would join the CIS. It should be noted that this very decision and Georgia joining the CIS allowed a peacekeeping operation to take place in Abkhazia under the aegis of this regional organisation (a series of multilateral agreements had been made in South Ossetia without any international organisations present). F.I. Stanevsky believes that for Shevardnadze, Georgia enjoyed certain benefits from its membership of the CIS. He argues that Shevardnadze, as a former foreign minister of the USSR had a wide international network. Thanks to his reputation he had considerable influence over the CIS space, which he relied on because it was easier for him to build contacts at a regional level through the confederation. At the same time, Georgia (as well as the rest of the member states) could afford to carry out only those obligations that were in line with its interests. Therefore, it could be assumed that membership was not a burden for the country.

After the parliamentary crisis had been resolved in favour of Yeltsin, it might have been expected that there would have been greater consolidation of Russian political actors with respect to Russian-Georgian relations. Nevertheless, the same problems remains: the republics of the North Caucasian continued to pressure Russia against the signing of the agreement with Georgia before the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were finally resolved. The signing of the agreement also stirred...
negative reactions among all the fractions in the Russian State Duma. The agreement was nevertheless signed on 3 February 1994 but in the end, the State Duma did not ratify it. One particular article in the agreement that pledged for Russia to support the Georgian army turned out to be the most controversial as it did not comply with the interests of the Russian Parliament, Abkhazia nor South Ossetia. However, the State Duma was willing to compromise and promised to ratify the agreement as soon as the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been resolved.

The Georgian Prime Minister’s special representative for relations with Russia and former ambassador to the Russian Federation, Zurab Abashidze, wrote the following about the situation surrounding the ratification of the agreement by the Georgian parliament and resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia: ‘After the armed conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia foreign policy towards Russia was based on the hope that Moscow would contribute to the conflict’s peaceful resolution and Abkhazia’s return to Georgia. In 1993, Georgia joined the CIS and the collective defence treaty within the CIS. It also signed an agreement on the establishment of Russian military bases in Georgia for a period of 25 years. In order that the Georgian Parliament would ratify these agreements, Georgia requested that Russia meet the following two conditions: firstly, that Russia would render effective assistance for the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia and secondly, that it would help to build the capacity of the Georgian army. The Parliament waited for around two to three years, yet neither of these conditions were ever met. When problems first began to emerge in Abkhazia, NATO and the U.S. had been nowhere to be found. However, as the situation further escalated and because of Russia’s ambivalent policies, Georgia began to seek solutions to its problems under the aegis of NATO. Had solutions to the conflict been found in a timelier manner, there would not have been any need to seek support from somewhere further away.’

CIS membership brought some positive outcomes for Georgia with respect to the Abkhaz conflict. More specifically, in January 1996 the CIS Council of Heads of state adopted a decision to introduce economic sanctions against Abkhazia so that the latter would acquire a more flexible approach towards the issue of refugees. However, Russia revoked these sanctions on 6 March 2008. Even though the decision to lift the sanctions was officially justified by Abkhazia’s alleged fulfilment of its obligations with respect to refugees, unlike Georgia who failed to do so, in fact the discontinuation of the sanctions was a response to the declaration of Kosovo’s independence on 17 February 2008 and Russia’s subsequent protests. It seems that the international context was far more important to Russia than the logic of the resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in its decision to end the sanctions.

Some commentators believe that Georgia grew disappointed in Russia’s role in the resolution of the Abkhaz conflict after Russia refused to activate its peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia’s Gali region in 1998, which it justified by the desire to stay on good terms with Abkhazia. It should be noted that before this, during the first Chechen war, Georgia had made a stop towards Russia and allowed the latter to deploy its border forces on the Georgian side of a section of the border with Chechnya from 1994 to 1998. After the failure of Russia to take action on the issue of Abkhazia, Georgia demanded that Russian border forces and troops be withdrawn from Georgia. The demand was further enshrined in the Agreement on the Adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.


To balance out the pro-Western foreign policy of period until 1996, Yevgeny Primakov was appointed the minister of foreign affairs. He was considered a ‘statist’ and an avid protector of Russia’s national interests in the international arena. The most evident demonstration of Primakov’s particular course was his famous ‘U-turn over the Atlantic Ocean’: when on his way to the U.S. for an official visit, he heard the news that NATO had begun to shell Yugoslavia without a UN mandate. Primakov ordered the plane to turn back as a sign of protest.

In his article published in 1996, Primakov wrote that since the end of the Cold War, the previous balance of power had yet to be replaced by a multipolar system based on equality. The article provides a number of key ideas, which, to the large extent, can be observed in Russian foreign policy discourse to this day.

1 Moscow and Tbilisi are willing to be friends and allies. Kommersant, 4 February 1994. Available at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/70376
5 See the interview ‘Evgeni Primakov: the U-turn over the Atlantic was unavoidable’. Pravda, 24 March 2014. Available in Russian at: https://www.pravda.ru/video/politics/14152.html
THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF RUSSIA’S DOMESTIC POLICY: KEY CHALLENGES

NATO ENLARGEMENT AS A THREAT TO RUSSIA’S NATIONAL SECURITY

The Minister made the following comment on potential NATO enlargement: ‘we are far from contemplating the idea that NATO’s enlargement is designed to harm Russia. However, in politics intentions can vary, whilst potential is a constant.’ Russia, as Primakov put it, did not claim to have any right of veto over the ascension of any state to NATO, however, he believed that the proximity of NATO military infrastructure to Russia, ‘would worsen our geopolitical situation, particularly in military terms.’ In fact, this is the position that has informed Russia’s current approach towards NATO enlargement. Even though the Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (1993) make no mention of NATO, the Alliance is the fourth and fifth most frequently referenced (though indirectly) major external threat according to the military doctrine of 2000 due to fears related to its enlargement. These threats were:

- The establishment (build up) of groups of troops (forces) leading to the collapse of the existing balance of power near the state border of the Russian Federation and those of its allies, as well as in their neighbouring seas; - The enlargement of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the military security of the Russian federation.

In the Russian Military Doctrine of 2010, first in the list of main foreign military threats was ‘the desire to increase the power of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) by endowing it with global functions, carried out in violation of international law, and to move the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation including by expanding the bloc.’ The same article was kept in the Military Doctrine of 2014.

THE ‘WINNERS’ AND ‘LOSERS’ OF THE COLD WAR AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Going back to Primakov’s article, the Foreign Minister highlights yet another obstacle on the way to this multipolar world based on the principle of equality: the emergence of the post-Cold War mentality of the “leaders” and the “followers” on which the unipolar world order is based. This idea was further elaborated in Russia’s official discourse. In an article in 2000, Igor Ivanov (Russia’s foreign minister from 1998 to 2004) wrote the following: ‘…many in the U.S. and even some Western European countries, misguided by the false idea of being the “winners of the Cold War”, failed to see democratic Russia as an equal ally, which, in the best-case scenario, would have been assigned the role of a junior partner. Any indication of independence or aspiration to stand on its own grounds would have been perceived as a relapse towards Soviet “imperialistic” policy.’

This very idea was later voiced by Vladimir Putin in 2014: ‘The Cold War had ended. However, it did not bring about ‘peace’, nor clear and transparent agreements on maintaining existing rules and standards, or creating new ones. The impression developed that the so-called ‘winners’ of the Cold War had decided to take advantage of the situation and reshape the world solely for themselves and their own interests.’

THE UNDEMOCRATIC CHARACTER OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

According to Primakov, the third obstacle to building a multipolar world was the undemocratic nature of international economic relations. Primakov supports this assertion with reference to the U.S. Helms-Burton Act on ‘punishing’ every country that established and supported economic ties with Cuba. He characterised the Act as a ‘dangerous precedent as an attempt to domestic legislation an extraterritorial character.’ In a section of Russia’s 2016 foreign policy concept concerning

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2 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
relations with the U.S. it is indicated that ‘Russia does not recognize the extraterritorial implementation of U.S. jurisdiction outside the framework of international law and does not accept its attempts to exercise military, political, economic or any other pressure, while reserving the right to respond to hostile actions, such as by bolstering national defence and taking retaliatory or asymmetrical measures’.

**A SYSTEM OF PAN-EUROPEAN SECURITY**

Another of Primakov’s topics was later included in the draft of the Agreement on European Security promoted by the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008. In 1996, Primakov offered the following: ‘A model of European security should, one way or another, rely on all international organisations operating in the field of European security – the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe and NATO – and cooperate with the Partnership for Peace, European Commission, Western European Union and CIS. The model, however, should not only rely on, but also involve all these organisations in a single system. For this to happen, all issues related to the interaction between these organisations should be dealt with. A draft agreement, introduced by Dmitri Medvedev, failed to gain approval from Western countries, who expressed doubts that it was necessary to create new documents on principles that had already been enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents. Interestingly, in his article Yevgeny Primagov offered to place the OSCE at the core of the European security system as an organization having a coordinating – rather than a controlling – function. Amidst the Ukrainian crisis, the European security system is likely to move in this direction as the past few years have certainly seen the OSCE reborn as a security organization.

**THE DEMOCRATISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE WORLD ORDER**

Scepticism towards the West’s strategy for democratization had emerged in Russian foreign policy discourse even before the colour revolutions. As Igor Ivanov wrote in 2000, the West believed that the promotion of democratic values and a transition to a liberal market economy would play a powerfully stabilizing role in foreign relations. However, the democratization process, for all its advantages, ‘is not an ‘organizing principle of the global security’. This thesis is proven by an argument about the nature of intrastate conflicts in the 1990s: ‘such conflicts originate not from the incompatibility of democracy and dictatorship, but rather from intraethnic and religious hostilities, social degradation and violent separatism’.

**THE NEW WORLD ORDER**

In the foreign policy concept of 1993 there was no reference to an understanding of the world order that was to replace that of the Cold War. However, the text provides a list of features that characterized the global situation at that time:

– the disappearance of the global bipolar structure;
– the multiple variables of international politics as a consequence of disappearing global bipolarity;
– the emergence of relations based on regional centers of power.

The 2000 concept talks of an emerging U.S.-promoted trend towards a unipolar world order. Meanwhile, it says Russia ‘will try to form a multipolar system of international relations, one that is reflective of the diversity of the modern world and its wide range of interests’. The effectiveness of the multipolar system can be ensured through the mutual consideration of interests, mechanisms for collective resolutions of problems, the priority of international law and the wide-scale democratization of international relations.

Also in 2000, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor Ivanov, noted that the struggle over the key principles of the world order, which was to replace that of the Cold War, had not yet finished and the system at that time was in a transitional stage. Interestingly, speeches given by Vladimir Putin between 2014 and 2016 stressed the expediency of agreement on the principles...
ples of the world order, which had not been agreed since 1991. Since 2000, Russia’s foreign policy concept has been adapted three times: in 2008, after the election of Dmitry Medvedev (before the Russian-Georgian conflict), in 2013 to reflect the global financial crisis, Arab Spring, and of course, the conflict with Georgia; and in 2016, when changes were made with respect to the crisis in Russia’s relations with the West.

Even though the Foreign Policy Concept was adopted in November 2016, Putin gave perhaps the most consistent and clear picture of the New World Order in a speech at a session titled New rules to the game or the games without rules? held at the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2014. The Russian President held that the stability of the World Order during the Cold War was secured by the balance of powers, the rights of the ‘winners’, their mutual respect and the desire to negotiate. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. declared itself the winner and argued that the emerging system of international law, as well as the system of restraints and counterbalances, could be discharged as they were believed to hamper the creation of a unipolar world order. The main problem of the unipolar model is the propensity for imposing one’s own models universally. The sovereignty of states has become increasingly dependent on their loyalty towards the U.S. At the same time, the unipolar order does not allow for the resolution of global problems (drugs trafficking, international terrorism, etc.), nor does it make global processes more manageable.

Putin additionally says that polycentrism (a term that has appeared in Russian foreign policy discourse to replace ‘multipolarity’) is not a guaranteed remedy for all problems, as the more great powers there are, the more difficult it is to negotiate. It is worth clarifying that this view on polycentrism is a new phenomenon in official Russian discourse, as previously it had referred to the idea of a world order based around numerous centres of power as an absolute virtue and counterbalance against an unfair unipolar system. Putin continues by saying that joint responses to problems are ‘difficult to achieve’: ‘success and tangible results are only feasible in those cases where the key actors in international processes are able to agree on basic interests and reasonable self-restriction, and therefore, provide an example of positive and responsible leadership. It is necessary to define clearly where the limits of unilateral actions lie and where the need for multilateral mechanisms arise in order to improve international law and solve the dilemma between the actions of the international community on security and human rights, and the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs’.

The Russian President argues that a compromise on these conflicting stances can be achieved by ‘creating a new form of interdependence’, as in the long run, this will lead to the emergence of ‘powerful regional organizations’, setting out rules for their interaction, which in its turn, would contribute to the resilience of international relations. Thus, Putin has, to some extent, returned to the Foreign Policy Concept of 1993, which highlights the emergence of regional centres of power instead of a global logic of power balancing as a key trend.

**REGIONAL AND INTERNAL EXPLANATORY LOGICS OF RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE POST-SOVIET SPACE**

In the Foreign Policy Concept of 1993, its authors openly relayed the potential difficulties that Russia might encounter with other post-Soviet countries.

On the one hand, the creation of a ‘safety belt and benevolent neighbourhood’ around Russia (a goal which reoccurs in the concept of 2000) through the construction of a zone of ‘constructive regional cooperation’, would be optimal for Russia. The development of these neighbouring states is often described as the ‘development crisis of the post-totalitarian period’, which create grounds for national and territorial conflicts. The authors of the Concept believed that the transition to democracy and a market economy was likely to be tough and painful. The document provides an understanding of the specificity of the decentralization processes in the former USSR: ‘the development of foreign policy in a number of CIS countries is characterized by an exaggerated need to distance themselves from Russia, which is typical of the process of acquiring independence. This trend is further reinforced by territorial disputes instigated by nationalistic sentiments, including claims to Russia, as well as a kind of an allergy towards everything that can be seen as a reminder of past dependence on Soviet structures. It will take time before they come to recognize the objective reality and the fact reliance on the renewed Russia will make it easier for them to achieve their national goals’.

According to the Concept, Russia should actively engage in the process of shaping its geopolitical environment, including by, where it is needed, using force to protect international law and the rights of national minorities. At the same time, it was stressed that relations with post-Soviet countries should be raised to the level of ‘full-scale intergovernmental relations, providing them with broad cooperation based on reciprocity’. Again, this approach demonstrates that back in 1993 the former Soviet republics were hardly perceived as fully sovereign and independent from each other.

In 1999, Alexey Arbatov wrote that Russia’s major dilemma of the 1990s was finding a balance between dealing with its neighbours as sovereign states (for example, establishing international prices on energy resources) and maintaining special relations (like protection of interests of Russian military staff and civilians abroad; maintenance of industrial and military

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2. Ibid.
RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS

From the perspective of the 1993 Concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation, conflict resolution should take place ‘first and foremost, through bilateral forms of Russian mediation and peacekeeping efforts, as well as multilateral mechanisms under the CIS, which can be aided, where need be, by sanctioning these efforts through the UN, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the EU, etc.’. Interestingly, by the time the Concept was adopted, the CIS had not yet obtained observer status from the UN General Assembly, which meant that it had no right to conduct peacekeeping operations under its own mandate. The priority given to bilateral formats of settlement through Russia is also noteworthy.

Arbatov wrote that if Russia isolated itself and exclusively focused on its domestic development, it could have led to chaos and disorder in neighbouring countries as well as interventions by third parties. On the other hand, Russia’s supremacy over the region would unavoidable lead to resistance and make Russian speaking communities a hostage in the hands of local authorities, while ‘taking over territories populated by ethnic minorities by force would turn the rest of republics into hostile ‘sanitary cordon’ and eventually trigger confrontation with the West. 2

Arbatov evaluated the outcomes of Russia’s peacekeeping efforts in the post-Soviet space as dubious with respect to the country’s capacity to exert control over the situation. He believed that the special operation carried out in South Ossetia was the lone success. Even though Russia’s actions had led to the end of the military phase of the conflict, the researcher wrote that the failure to achieve a political resolution to the conflicts and their ‘frozen’ status was becoming a source of confrontation between Russia and CIS countries.3

Dmitry Baluev called for a multi-faceted approach to the assessment of Russia’s intervention as ‘many post-Soviet countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia have difficulties in establishing their own sovereignty and for this reason they have approached Russia for its support.’4

Baluev identified several areas that fell under Russia’s sphere of interests in the region:

• Setting up military bases for Russian troops within the territories of the former Soviet republics.
• Flexible interpretation of already concluded agreements regarding the deployment of Russian troops to the territories of other CIS countries. For instance, Moldova insisted on the withdrawal of Russian troops after the expiration of a three-year term, while the Russian defence minister Kondratiev declared that Russian troops should stay and continue to provide security.
• Common security by signing an agreement on collective security, joint border protection and joint peacekeeping operations.
• Launch negotiations for setting up a Union state with Belarus and multilateral negotiations on establishing a customs union.

The last item on Baluev’s list was Russia’s leadership in the CIS space.5

The role of the West and Russia in the South Caucasus

The renowned specialist of the history of the Caucasus, Vladimir Degoev, argued that ‘Russia’s ownership of the North Caucasus, the size of which is twice as large as the South Caucasus, makes the country a main ‘Caucasian’ state and a lead actor in pan-Caucasian politics’. 6 The researcher wrote that this is something that the West often forgets about when they offer Georgia and Azerbaijan their ‘protection’ from Russia. The West believes that Russia should coordinate its policies in the South Caucasus with the West, while the West itself, and particularly the U.S., is not going to communicate anything about its own policies to Russia and instead interacts with regional states on a bilateral basis. Degoev’s concerns were mostly caused by the fact that models of regional security offered by the West have no role for Russia, nor for other traditional regional players like Iran and Turkey. In addition, the EU and the U.S., which can be considered as non-regional actors, have been trying to play a lead role in the South Caucasus.7

Degoev concluded that ‘Moscow, at least for its own sake, has to formulate its principle message in a very clear and

facilities abroad inherited by Russia; maintenance of a common defence system; interference in their domestic conflicts; protection of former Soviet borders, etc. 1
unequivocal manner: Russia is a major Caucasian state from a geographic, geopolitical and historical perspective. Its highest priority in the region is to ensure security, a goal which is directly linked with the international status and foreign policy orientation of the South Caucasian countries.’

Alexey Malashenko characterised the conflicts in Georgia in the 1990s as both regional and internal and raised the question as to whether or not Russia capitalises on these conflicts to influence domestic affairs in conflicting countries. The scholar asserted that the correct answer to the above question is ‘yes’: ‘in their attempts to manipulate conflicting parties, Russian diplomats and its military often act so rigidly that they undermine Russia’s reputation rather than foster it. Unsurprisingly, local elites in South Caucasian countries would prefer international brokerage than rely on Russia when it comes to the regulation of domestic and interstate disputes’. This inefficiency, according to Malashenko, came from the fact that at the beginning of the 1990s Russia had not formulated its interests in the conflict zones. They had not decided whether they should regulate or support the conflicts, or what instruments they should use towards these aims. In addition, any attempt to exert pressure on the South Caucasian countries aimed at preserving former influence of the USSR rather than enlarging Russian presence in the region. Malashenko recommended that Russia pay closer attention to the internal processes in the neighbouring countries of the CIS, as Russia should adjust its foreign policy in line with these processes.

Kortunov agreed that Transcaucasia’s military-political issues could not possibly be resolved without Russia’s involvement through ‘active brokerage, diplomacy and limited peacekeeping acts’. Without Russia’s active role a ‘vacuum of power’ (a term in frequent use in the first half of the 2000s) will be filled by the U.S. and Germany, which have been trying to squeeze Russia out from the region. Turkey and Iran are also likely to attempt to fill up the vacuum. In order to avert this scenario, Kortunov suggested thinking about the creation of a full-scale military union of Russia, Georgia and Armenia.

**A RUSSIAN MODEL FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Not so many Georgian experts would agree on the assumption that Russia can play a positive role in the South Caucasus. However, there have been some cases of positive expectations.

At the same time, even authors who are considered to be radically pro-American and anti-Russian demonstrated examples of positive expectations that could exist in Georgian society towards Russia. However, these expectations did not come true due to the lack of will and resources on the Russian side to play a constructive role. For example, in his article published in 2006, the then president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Alexander Rondeli wrote: ‘Russia does not, nor will have enough resources or desire to play a constructive role in Georgia, that is to help [the latter] “stand up on its feet”, build a modern, stable and democratic state with a new economy’. Instead of this, Rondeli argues, Russia wants to push Georgia back into the Russian orbit and strives to place pro-Russian authorities amongst Georgia’s leadership.

According to this Georgian expert, the problem lies in ‘Russia’s failure to offer its fragile neighbour a somewhat attractive model’ because Russia, ‘with its propensity towards authoritarianism, did not wish to support Georgia in its efforts to become a democratic state’.

In addition, scrutiny into the Russian official documents, and in particular, the Annual reviews of foreign relations and diplomatic activities, and publications of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia since 2007 help to reveal the model that Russia has been planning to offer to the region’s countries.

In a section concerning the CIS in the 2006 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ review, it is written that ‘Russia is interested in having friendly, prosperous, democratic and stable neighbours along its borders’. This wording debunks the widespread perception among Western experts and politicians suggesting that Russia is interested in having weak authoritarian neighbours, which continue to be dependent on Russia. On the contrary, the review further indicates that the emergence of weak and dependent states in the region poses considerable threats to its development.

The review also provided a blueprint to help Russia transform itself into a leader of the post-Soviet space, more specifically through ‘developing an attractive and realistic model to offer to its neighbours in order to facilitate an evolutionary transition to fully-fledged market economies and democracy’. There are two aspects to this that need to be highlighted: Firstly, the review outlined that the establishment of such models would only be a foundation for leadership, meaning that at that time Russia did not consider itself a fully-grown leader. Secondly, the ways in which Russia could achieve leadership status were also important for the country. In this particular case, we are talking about so-called soft power, which would be dealt with in official foreign policy documents later on. In its essence, soft power is the elaboration of attractive models of development, which may be adopted by other states. The authors of the review believed that this model was an evolutionary

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1. P. 76.
2. PP. 89-90, volume 3.
3. P. 90.
4. Most researchers of the 1990s referred to the region as Transcaucasia. The paper uses unified approach by using the term ‘South Caucasus’.
8. Ibid, p. 78.
9. Ibid, p. 79.
and complete transition to a market economy and democracy. One of the possible interpretations of the above-mentioned thesis is as follows: at that time, there were no developed market systems nor democratic regimes in CIS member states. In addition, it appears that the thesis focuses on an evolutionary nature to the proposed model rather than the revolutionary paths pursued by Georgia and Ukraine. In the period following the Rose Revolution and the Orange Revolution, fears amongst the Russian establishment of a possible revolution and change of power in Russia had become much more important. Therefore, the authors of the review offer the same model of progressive development and reformation to those countries that had not been affected by revolutions, with transformations through gradual development and reform.

The same ideas are proposed in a section that deals with the situation in the Central Asian republics after the end of the US-led operation in Afghanistan. It is indicated that Russia should work further to develop ‘attractive, competitive and feasible perspectives for both political elites and the broader public’ within the Central Asian states. It is also underlined that Russia could offer an evolutionary path towards transformation without shockwaves in contrast to the West, which favoured so-called colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space.

In the modern context it is interesting to observe how ‘Russia’s European choice’ was shared by the public and political elite of other CIS countries. This approach demonstrates that Russia had no doubts over its major direction of cooperation: the EU. However, later reviews contain a variety of vectors with considerable attention being paid to non-European directions of the country’s foreign policy.

With respect to economic cooperation in the CIS, there was a strong and consistent suggestion in the document of the need to de-politicise economic relations between member countries. The following phrase regarding abstaining from ‘favouritism’ in relations with CIS countries is quite indicative: ‘What is meant here is the crucial element of mutual emancipation, which may disperse all vestiges of the past and instead build pragmatic, future-oriented relations based on mutual trust and mutual benefits.’ Once again, it should be noted that such an approach contradicts the widespread opinion in the West that Russia has strived to maintain the dependence of regional countries through economic cooperation.

In a section dedicated to the CIS as a geopolitical priority, the authors conveyed a series of interesting suggestions that uncover the philosophy of Russian politics in the post-Soviet space. In the document, it is indicated that the CIS space is not merely a region that harbours Russia’s interests in the fields of security and economy, but also a source of challenges to Russia’s national security. The review of 2006 remains the only one that provides an honest account of Russia’s relations with CIS member states and conveys the country’s grievances alongside achievements in these very relations.

The 2006 review was the only one that mentioned the South Caucasian (and Central Asian) regions. Subsequent reviews have referred to bilateral relations with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Thus, we can see a shift either in official language and terminology or the view of the South Caucasus as a coherent region has subsided.

An important thought that has run through the integration of the post-Soviet space is that the ultimate goal of such partnership is to create an economic system ‘that would ensure efficient development for all of its participants’. Overall, the above-described positions suggest that Russia has been trying to persuade its partners within the CIS that regional integration into the post-Soviet space will ultimately benefit all those involved, while integration with other international bodies would be far less productive. Russia tried to use argumentative persuasion rather than ideological slogans to attract the other former Soviet republics to its form of integration.

THE LEVEL OF PERSONAL INTERACTION

PUTIN-SHEVARDNADZE

The following phase of bilateral relations is linked with Vladimir Putin taking the office of the prime minister of Russia on 9 August 1999, a year after the collapse of the ruble in August 1998 and two days after a militia groups raided Dagestan, an event which triggered the second Chechen war. The decision to appoint someone with a record of the service in the security services was based on the necessity to ensure national security.

Relations between Russia and Georgia began to deteriorate in early November 1999 as a result of Russia’s operations in Chechnya. The tension in Georgia ensued after Putin disclosed the content of a conversation that took place between Yeltsin and Shevardnadze at the end of October 1999 about the possibility of providing Russian troops access to Chechnya via Georgia. The conversation also concerned joint patrolling of the border with Chechnya by Russian and Georgian border forces. It was believed that Shevardnadze, who initially gave his consent, later changed his mind. According to the Russian media, Shevardnadze’s change of decision was a result of the U.S.’s condemnation of Russia’s military actions in Chechnya and the former’s promises to channel greater financial support to Georgia. In turn, Shevardnadze declared that he did not want to interfere in Russia’s domestic affairs in any way. Russia took the refusal as a rejection of their strategic partnership and proposed to introduce visa regulations in order to prevent militants entering the country via Georgia (the visa regime took effect in December 2000). However, in reality this move was Moscow’s retaliation for Georgia’s alleged rejection of their strategic partnership. The visa regime for Georgian citizens has never been lifted, even though Georgia has made positive moves forward.

1 Today Dagestan will be separated from Russia. Kommersant, 10 August 1999. Available in Russian at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/223416
The former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Irakli Menagarishvili (1995–2003), put together a list of Russia’s demands that Georgia had to comply with in order to avert a visa regime. These demands were ‘to allow Russia’s military bases to remain in Georgia; to provide access for Russian troops to airfields and bases in order to undertake operations in Chechnya; Georgia’s membership to the Customs Union and the newly created Eurasian Economic Community; and to turn down a project on the transportation of Caspian oil through the proposed Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.1

By 1999, it had been two years since Georgia had embarked on an anti-Russian path under the GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova) Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development, and in April 1999 Georgia (together with Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan) refused to prolong its participation in the Collective Security Treaty signed it 1992. When it comes to the wider context, one should not forget that 1999 turned out to be quite an uneasy year for relations between Russia and the West: in March 1999, NATO launched an air attack against Yugoslavia without a prior mandate from the UN, while April 1999 saw the first wave of NATO enlargement since the collapse of the USSR (with Hungary, Poland and Czech Republic joining the Alliance). As tensions in Russian-Georgian relations were reaching their peak in 1999, a historic OSCE summit took place in Istanbul to discuss an updated version of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.2

The following phase of Putin-Shevardnadze relations reached a new level. For the first time, Putin met the leaders of most CIS countries in the capacity of the acting president of the Russian Federation in February 2000, shortly before he was officially elected a president in elections on 26 March 2000. Interestingly, media reports of the time suggested that there were some hopes among the Georgian public as they expected that the newly elected Russian president would be able to bring about some positive changes in bilateral relations. Shortly before he took off to participate in a CIS summit, Shevardnadze himself proposed that Putin be selected as a chair of the CIS (the Tajik president, Emomali Rakhmon, was not optimistic about being unanimously elected as the chair, even though according to the rotation rule it was Tajikistan’s turn to have the chair).3 Upon his return to Tbilisi, Shevardnadze made a statement on the need for building equal relations with Russia in order to maintain independence.4

Shortly afterwards, bilateral relations between Georgia and Russia developed amidst disputes over the alleged presence, or absence, of Chechen militants in Pankisi gorge (during Igor Ivanov’s visit to Georgia in June 2000),5 and discussions over Georgia’s debt, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia and the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (during the August 2000 CIS summit in Yalta).

The summer and fall of 2001 saw the crisis in Pankisi gorge further exacerbated after Georgia once again attempted to resolve the conflict in Abkhazia by using force and support offered by the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev (the previous attempt took place in May 1998 in the Gali region). The former Russian Ambassador to Georgia, F. Stanevski, argued that by making these two moves Shevardnadze put himself in a difficult position: the first operation in 1998 was poorly prepared while the second one took place against the backdrop of 9/11. In addition, the U.S. authorities regarded Gelaev as a terrorist and therefore it was difficult for Shevardnadze to justify this partnership with Gelaev to his American partners.6

In October 2001, Vladimir Putin said that Russia would not try to keep Georgia in the CIS if the latter decided to leave the Commonwealth.7 According to Putin Russia was even ready to discuss the withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping forces from Abkhazia as demanded by the Georgian Parliament.

During a meeting between Vladimir Putin and Shevardnadze at the Kremlin in November 2001, the Russian President pledged that Georgia could count on Russia in the former’s attempts to fix its economic problems. Notably, the meeting took place amidst yet another deterioration in bilateral relations after Georgia blamed Russia for violating its sovereignty and bombing its territory (Pankisi gorge) on the night of 28 November 2001.

In December 2001, Shevardnadze declared that Russian peacekeeping forces deployed in Abkhazia were irreplaceable because the international community was preoccupied with the fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan after the events of 11 September 2001.8 In turn, Russia stopped blocking the UN resolution on the core principles of Abkhazia’s status within Georgia.9 By February 2002, Georgia disclosed the presence of militants and Chechen refugees in Pankisi gorge. However, it was only after by Vladimir Putin’s harsh statements that Georgia agreed to hand them over to Russia: ‘if the Georgian authorities are unable to create a safety zone along the Russian border, continue to ignore UN resolution 1373 of 28 September 2001, and refuse to put an end to rebel attacks in areas adjacent to Russia’s borders, we retain the right to act pursuant to Article 51 of the UN Charter entitling each and every member-state to exercise its inherent right to individual or collective self-defence.’10 Georgia agreed to hand over the fighters but continued to shift some of the blame to Russia. Later on, a Georgian spokesperson, Nino Burjanadze, stated that the Pankisi crisis was ‘on the one hand a continuation of the Ab-

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7 Putin: Russia will not keep Georgia in the CIS. Kommersant. 12 October 2001. Available at: http://kommersant.ru/doc/924634
khazia crisis, and on the other an attempt to justify the failure of the Russian troops in Chechnya. Interestingly, in January 2003 Richard Armitage, the United States Deputy Secretary of States, declared that the U.S. was not going to criticize Russia if the latter decided to deliver a preventive attack against Chechen fighters in Pankisi gorge.

**PUTIN-SAAKASHVILI**

The Rose Revolution is considered to have been the main turning point in relations between Georgia and Russia in the Putin period. Shevardnadze had lengthy consultations with Russia regarding Georgia’s domestic political situation against the backdrop of the November 2003 elections in order to guarantee Russia’s non-intervention in the events that ensued after the elections, an attempt that proved to be successful thanks to a series of negotiations.

However, it is worth noting that even before their defeat in the Rose Revolution, Georgian elites had been accusing the U.S. of intervening in Georgia’s domestic affairs as well as of organizing opposition and funding the revolution. For instance, in November 2003 Aslan Abashidze made the following statement: ‘the ongoing campaign has been funded from inside and outside’. The people who have taken to the streets have been trained in how to conduct such demonstrations. We cannot be at ease unless the plans of those behind this campaign change or they lose their funding’. Interestingly, it was only later on that Russia started to employ the idea of foreign interference in their own official rhetoric.

On 23 November 2003, Igor Ivanov paid a visit to Tbilisi where he brokered a deal between Saakashvili and Shevardnadze which led to the decision the latter to resign. According to some sources, Shevardnadze’s decision sent shockwaves to the Kremlin where they expected Shevardnadze to call early elections. It is important to note that at that time Ivanov did not regard the November events as a coup. However, these events were perceived as a revolt in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Adjara whose leaders took part in negotiations held on 28 November 2003 in Moscow. Media outlets reported that these three regions gave their consent that Russia could protect their populations and territories from Georgia’s new leadership, which effectively posed a threat to them. However, at that time Russia saw this as a potential opportunity rather than a realistic plan before the situation in Georgia began to change.

Newly elected President Saakashvili planned his very first international trip to Russia in February 2004, which experts regarded as a signal of some sort of his willingness to launch a constructive dialogue and possibly for expressing gratitude for Russia’s decision not to support Shevardnadze during the events of the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili made the following statement: ‘I have come here to make friends with you. Russia is a great state while we are just a small country, albeit with our own interests, pride and history. This very history is linked with great Russia. We hope that we will resolve all our issues. Even though it may take time, eventually dialogue will yield results’. During Saakashvili’s visit, Vladimir Putin noted the following: ‘I would like to draw your attention to our willingness to always accept Georgia’s offer to discuss various issues, in fact every issue including the re-structuring of debt and energy provision’.

In his interview with Izvestya published in April 2004, Saakashvili talked with enthusiasm about Putin always keeping his promises: ‘Putin has supported the concept of “Georgia’s territorial integrity” and by doing so forced the Adjarian leader agree to a more constructive dialogue with Georgia’. Saakashvili also stated that ‘we are now strongly convinced that the Russian troops which remain on Georgian territory will either support the legitimate authorities of the country, or, in the most extreme circumstances, observe neutrality’.

According to the Georgian President, he had had weekly phone calls with Vladimir Putin, which contributed to the predictability of bilateral relations. Saakashvili complained that because of that hostile opponents had accused him of being a Russian agent. ‘With thanks to God, we have turned past this sad page in Georgian-Russian relations once and for all’, added Saakashvili.

The crisis in Adjara in Spring 2004 led to a bloodless revolution that followed scenario that Moscow had to approve: it was the Georgian side who approached Russia with the request that it played the role of mediator (again through Igor Ivanov, this time in the capacity of the Secretary of the Russian Security Council) and provide political shelter to Aslan Abashidze should he agree to resign.

Unsurprisingly, Russia was generally cautious about the prospects of cooperation with Saakashvili in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution. For instance, in his 2004 article, the Deputy Director of the Fourth Department for the CIS Countries in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, A. Chepurin, wrote that ‘promises made by Saakashvili to start relations from a “blank page” were perceived as accepting relations on “Georgian terms”, whereby Georgia was imposing its own positions in dis-

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1. “We will be wise enough not even to declare that we are going to bomb Russian territory”. Kommersant. 16 September 2002. Available in Russian at: [http://kommersant.ru/doc/341142](http://kommersant.ru/doc/341142)
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
cussions of real issues while stressing ‘friendship’ and ‘fraternity’ in joint declarations. Therefore, Saakashvili’s statements about friendship with Russia were met with considerable scepticism in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Russian experts were not optimistic about Saakashvili. They described Saakashvili’s actions during his first term as ‘the swaying of Tbilisi from one side to another’ with frantic campaigns that were meant to demonstrate ‘a desire to be friends’ with Russia but made no progress in resolving any practical issues on the Russian-Georgian agenda. The situation was further exacerbated by the unpredictability, sporadic actions and frequent impulsive behaviour demonstrated by our hero – Saakashvili. Russian policy analysts often resorted to using metaphors and informal expressions (such as ‘our hero’) when writing about Saakashvili, something that is not typical of scholarly literature.

The following comment was made by a Russian author concerning the expectations amongst the Russian leadership of partnership with Saakashvili in early 2005: ‘Unfortunately, there has never been a transfer from ‘nice words’ and affirmations on the Georgian side to real actions and we are not to be blamed for this. Victorious euphoria during the first months, coupled with the ‘bloodless’ integration of Adjara, generated a feeling of false confidence that they are capable of anything and that they can resolve the ongoing inter-ethnic conflicts with Ossetia and Abkhazia overnight by using force’. Interestingly, this forecast and assessment turned out to be quite true as president Saakashvili chose a military path to resolving the conflicts with the separatist regions.

The ‘honeymoon period’ of the relationship with Georgia came to an end by late 2004. Some sources suggest that Putin’s treatment of Saakashvili as a junior partner drastically changed after it had become clear that the President of Georgia was supporting the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

However, there is another explanation: Adjara’s integration may be analysed against the backdrop of the Georgian authorities’ efforts to restore the central authorities’ control over Georgian territories in order to harness state sovereignty, which entailed a fight against ethno-criminal communities controlling border regions and hampering the development of economic ties with neighbouring countries. These efforts coincided with a ‘new phase of the strengthening of Russia’s positions at an international level: Georgia’s final decision to aim to integrate with NATO and EU further complicated this situation. Partnership with NATO and military assistance to Georgia stirred concerns within the Russian military leadership, which had been trying to obtain information on the actual scale of such assistance and the deployment of forces in the region to carry out intelligence activities.’

Soon relations between the two countries headed into a downturn marked by two dramatic instances, the ‘Wine Scandal’ and the ‘Spy Scandal’ that both took place in 2006. On 27 March 2006, imports of Georgian wine were banned in Russia. It is possible to account for these events solely from the perspective of bilateral relations between Russia and Georgia, however, it is worth keeping in mind that the Georgian wine was not the only product banned for importation, with Moldovan wine sharing the same fate. It took a relatively shorter period of time to achieve an agreement on Moldovan wine and subsequently the ban was lifted by the end of 2007, although it was re-imposed on several occasions in the following years. As for the embargo on Georgian wine, it should be noted that Abkhaz wine was also banned. However, the Abkhaz authorities established contacts with the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being, as a result of which Abkhaz wine companies were allowed on the Russian market while Georgian ones were not. In addition, between 2006 and 2013, the Georgian mineral water brands Borjomi and Nabeghlavi were banned. According to Russia’s chief sanitary doctor, Onishchenko, in 2007 the Federal Service for Supervision of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being tried to establish contacts with its Georgian counterparts to negotiate issues related to the quality of the products and possibilities of lifting the embargo, but the Georgian authorities did not show much enthusiasm. Interestingly, the population of Russia, as revealed by findings of public opinion polls, had approved of the ban over the poor quality wine.

Moreover, the Russian population also supported the harsh measures of the Russian authorities in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Spy Scandal’ of 2006. As a response to the scandal, Russia recalled its ambassador to Georgia, minimised diplomatic relations and undertook a series of measures which are sometimes referred to as the ‘expulsion of Georgians from Russia’. Some experts regard the Kremlin’s rough response as ‘emotional’, and therefore, not long after the Russian authorities made a decision to refrain from its anti-Georgian campaign.

There are several explanations as to why the anti-Georgian campaign was curtailed so abruptly. These explanations include harsh reactions from the West, negative publicity and coverage of the campaign by the Russian media, and awareness that the anti-Georgian campaign did harm to the Georgian public rather than Saakashvili’s regime.

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5 Chepurin. Literary art is more valued than winemaking. Rossisskaia Gazeta. 4 October 2007. Available in Russian at: https://rg.ru/2007/10/04/chepurin-literary-art-is-more-valued-than-winemaking.html
10 For more details on the course of the campaign and its coverage by Russian media please see the report from Memorial, ‘Anti-Georgian Campaign: Discrimination Based on Ethnicity. (End of September 2006 – October 2006). Available in Russian at: http://old.memo.ruhr/discrim/georgia.html
RUSSIAN NATION BUILDING AND APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF SEPARATISM

In order to understand Russia’s approach to interethnic conflicts across the post-Soviet space, including the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian cases, it is important to understand Russian approach to nation-building. Unlike other countries that emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had previous experience of independent statehood before 1917. However, it lacked the experience of building a nation-state, as it had been an empire before the October 1917 Revolution. In 1991, Russia faced the task of building the Russian nation. ‘Dear Russian citizens’ – an address often used by the first Russian president Boris Yeltsin – made his audience smile rather than produce a sense of pride and belonging to the nation.

A definition of the Russian nation emerged only in the Russian Constitution adopted after the parliamentary crisis in December 1993: ‘we, the multi-ethnic people of the Russian Federation’. However, even by the end of 2016 there was little understanding at the official level of what the term ‘Russian nation’ meant. In October 2016, while speaking at a session of the Council for Interethnic Relations, Putin supported a proposal to elaborate a federal law on the Russian Nation and Management of Interethnic Relations based on a Strategy for the state national policy for 2012-2025. Therefore, it is obvious that the process of nation-building in Russia is far from complete and the country’s political elites are yet to find a unifying national idea.

Overall, it is difficult to conclude that the process of nation-building is complete in other post-Soviet countries. The former republics have inherited a series of problems from the Soviet Union in the field of interethnic relations. The newly formed states have not completely hardened to shake off all their Soviet inheritances: Sergey Markedonov argues that the departure from ideology did not automatically entail the rejection of the territorial-administrative boundaries that were established under the Soviet Union without consideration for historical interethnic relations. In addition, the new elites lacked experience of ensuring national peace without resorting to imperial or Soviet instruments. Consequently, the elites in the newly formed independent states chose a strategy of ethnic nationalism, which, as Markedonov believes, automatically meant that the legitimacy of such states was partially or completely compromised by ethnic minorities that did not accept this model of the nation. In Georgia, this was the case with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, it is important to understand the specifics of the relations between so-called titular nations and ethnic minorities under the Soviet Union. As noted by V. Tishkov and Y. Shabaev, historically national minorities were excluded from the ‘membership’ in titular nations within the so called national republics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this practice was inherited by the new elites who came to think that a nation is an ethnic community that belongs to a particular territory and forms the respective state.

The Russian approach to nation-building is based on the historically shaped conception from the Soviet period of ‘bad’ nationalism that was oppressive, and ‘good’ nationalism that gave freedom to the different regions. The inertia of this Soviet approach prompted Yeltsin to make his famous statement addressed to regions of Russia: ‘take as much sovereignty as you can swallow!’ Based on the very thesis that ‘liberating’ nationalism is unequivocally positive, Russia supported separatist territories at the beginning of the 1990s. However, the emergence of a separatist movement in Russia’s North Caucasian republics, and separatist sentiments in some other republics (for instance in Tatarstan, Bashkiriya and Yakutia), led to changes in Russia’s official approach to supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan.

The issuance of Russian passports to residents of unrecognized republics, generally, should be analyzed within a wider context of the Russian strategy for resolving interethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Foreign experts often see this passportization as a manifestation of Russia’s neo-imperialistic policy. On the other hand, the Russian understanding is that the policy of ‘passportization’ is a part of a unified Russian nation-building effort rather than an effort to manage conflicts abroad.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russian and Russian speaking communities continued to reside beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, which led to the idea of Russians as a divided nation. The introduction of dual citizenship in 1993 turned out not to be very successful in resolving this issue. The initiative was later followed by the adoption of the law on the Russian citizenship in 2002, which allowed ‘USSR passport holders having resided or residing in the former Soviet republics, who have been denied citizenship of these countries and are therefore stateless persons’ to obtain Russian citizenship. This wording allowed ethnic Russians residing in other former Soviet republics to obtain Russian passports. At the same time, the opportunity was granted to residents of the unrecognized states of Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In general, before the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 the Russian ‘compatriots policy’ was not coherent enough and did not quite correlate with the goals of Russian foreign policy. As Igor Zevelyov argues, the final legitimation of the
discourse of Russians as a divided nation was provided in Vladimir Putin’s speech of 18 March 2014 after the integration of Crimea. According to Zevelyov, Russian elites securitized the concept of the ‘Russian world’: Russia is now responsible for providing security to a community bigger than that in the country itself.\footnote{Zevelyov I. Borders of the Russian World. Russia in the Global Politics. N2. 2014. Available in Russian at: http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/granitcy-russkogo-mira–1682}

**GROUNDS FOR INTERVENTION**

There is a perception that the Russian stance towards international intervention and sovereignty is ambiguous and inconsistent. For instance, with respect to the conflict with Georgia in 2008, Georgia’s actions against South Ossetia are reminiscent of Russia’s actions in Chechnya. The recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and a later integration of Crimea, contradicts Russia’s position on the recognition of independence of Kosovo by Western states. Russia’s leading role in peacekeeping operations in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Tajikistan in the 1990s without a UN mandate contradicts Russia’s position regarding the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999 and the U.S.-led operation in Iraq in 2003, as both operations were launched without a UN mandate.

Some Western saying that experts would explain this contradiction by authoritarian Russia (as many Western countries see it), in the interests of the ruling regime, has been hampering the principle of ‘responsibility to protect’ in order to prevent precedents of intervention in domestic affairs. The basic Western assumption is that participating in the settlement of the conflicts of the 1990s and the conflict with Georgia in 2008 were indicators of Russian neo-imperialism. However further assessment may be based on the question as to whether these trends were positive or negative. In addition, there may be alternative explanations accounting for inconsistencies in Russia’s stance.

If one shares the view that Russia has neo-imperial ambitions, wants to be an arbiter in all post-Soviet conflicts and support separatist republics (Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh), then it would be logical to expect Russia not to stop at military stage of settlement in the 1990s, but to push for a political resolution beneficial for Russian interests, instead of long-term unsuccessful mediation. However, it did not happen. Similarly, in 2008 Russia did not send its troops to Tbilisi and did not overthrow Saakashvili’s regime, even though this would have ensured the security and safety of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, Russia could have justified such a decision through the responsibility to protect principle. In order to provide security to the two unrecognized states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it made a decision to recognize their independence, but refrained from changing Saakashvili’s regime with which the Kremlin had serious issues. Surely, there is a conventional realistic explanation to these events: At the beginning of the 1990s, issues related to Chechen separatism were of the utmost importance, because of which neo-imperialistic ambitions had given way to the need to prevent the emergence of separatism in the post-Soviet space. In other words, neo-imperialism (a desire to annex separatist territories as colonies of sorts) clashed with the imperative of protecting the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation (the problem of separatism in the 1990s). By 2000, the Chechen problem had been resolved to a certain degree and the risk of separatism in Russia had diminished as compared with the 1990s. Therefore, Russia changed its approach and made the decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

**THE INFORMATION PROPAGANDA DIMENSION OF THE 2008 CONFLICT**

The conflict of August 2008 had a clear propagandistic dimension: the rapid development of events made it difficult for the international community and the societies of the countries involved to what was happening, as a result of which the interpretations of those involved played an important role. Military actions were accompanied by an information war, the first phase of which was won by Georgia, while Russia had to go on the defensive and respond to accusations from the Georgian side who had painted their own picture of the developments that had been aired and released through international media. In spite of Russia’s military victory in the conflict, the country failed to win the information war. In the aftermath of the conflict of 2008, its resolution was raised to the international level with the involvement of a number of international organisations and the creation of international platforms. For this very reason, it had become crucially important for both Moscow and Tbilisi to justify their actions to the international community rather than to their own societies.

The first important aspect is the clear dividing line between M. Saakashvili and the people of Georgia. Official rhetoric underscored that Russia was in conflict with a specific individual who had made a specific decision while there were no such problems between the Russian and Georgian nations. In his speech delivered on 26 August 2008, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov, told the audience: ‘I am confident that the Georgian nation, with whom we share the most sincere friendship and sympathy, deserves authorities who are capable of taking a good care of their country and avoiding those moves that can do irreparable harm to their own country—authorities who are able to build relations with neighbouring peoples based on mutual respect, benevolence and equality.’\footnote{Transcript of a speech and Q&A of the Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov. Sochi, 26 August 2008. Available in Russian at: http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/Brp_4.nsf/arh7544CB0343E837DBC32574B200585C857?OpenDocument}

Another initiative, aimed at the international community, was to qualify Georgia’s actions against the communities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as genocide. This line of assessment was seen in the statements of D. Medvedev, who provided...
justifications for Russia’s recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The international practice of recognizing the independence of unrecognized states demonstrates that at the current stage in the development of international relations, wide-scale violations of human rights, including genocide, can serve as sufficient grounds for recognizing the independence of the state in question. It was the very need to legitimize such actions at the international level that prompted the usage of the above mentioned term. Metaphors referring to the Holocaust were used to draw the attention of Western partners to the developments in South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the conflict, such as in the following statement regarding the termination of the delivery of gas: “Russia has repeatedly raised concerns at numerous international formats and with its Western partners, and stated that it is unacceptable to allow for the ‘suffocation by gas’ of South Ossetia.”

THE PERSONAL LEVEL OF INTERACTION

MEDVEDEV-SAAKASHVILI

The circumstances surrounding the conflict of August 2008 have been well researched and accounted for in scholarly literature and expert comments. Thus, not to be repetitive, the section below provides just one very characteristic example of relationship between Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia.

In his interview in 2011 about the political conflict between Russia and Georgia, Medvedev talked about personal antipathy towards the Georgian president: “Saakashvili has committed a crime against the Russian Federation and its citizens. He ordered the killing of hundreds of our citizens, including members of peacekeeping troops. I will never forget him and I will never talk to him.” After having named the Georgian president “a person with whom he would not shake hands”, Medvedev added the following: “the President of Georgia should be grateful to me as, I, at some point stopped the advancement of troops. If they had entered Tbilisi, it is very likely that Georgia would have had someone else as a president as we speak”. 4

One of the possible explanations of the strong dislike demonstrated by Medvedev is that it was the result of a disappointment and vain expectations from the first meeting between Medvedev and Saakashvili on 6 June 2008: the meeting provided some hope for restoring a constructive dialogue. More specifically, during the meeting Saakashvili stated that “Russia and Georgia are two countries that have been very close to each other from historical, cultural and human perspectives. The current situation is artificial.” 1 As stated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, the meeting “made the Russian side feel that the President of Georgia in fact wants to make conflict resolution a priority”. 5 It was only two months later that Georgia started resolving the conflict with South Ossetia through military force, a move that Russia perceived as a breach of trust.

Another line of personal relations: after the conflict of 2008, Shevardnadze maintained positive relations with Putin on a personal level: in an interview published in 2012, the former president of Georgia said that he had known Putin since he was a child and that “there is no reason to assume that Putin’s return will be disastrous for Georgia” because “Russia is our great neighbour. Why does Russia need to occupy Georgia? It is already entrenched in our economy. A large part of our strategic assets, that is what we know and what we do not know, are already in Russia’s hands. It has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia) because it has no reason to occupy Georgia”. 7

It should be noted that there has been a series of internal political implications of the 2008 conflict for the Russian authorities. The Russian military expert, S. Melkov, gave the following as the key implications of the conflict: 1) the consolidation of Russian society; 2) the political elite as a whole supported the use of force and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; 3) Russian president D. Medvedev demonstrated a strong political will to protect the interests of Russian citizens; 4) reputation of the Russian military forces within the Russian society has considerably improved. 8

One can make the following generalization drawn from an assessment of Saakashvili’s term: enthusiasm for the new leader who ascended to power as a result of the Rose Revolution was demonstrated by the Russian media rather than experts, political researchers or representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It took the latter little time to observe that promises were not bringing about any real actions. Moreover, many experts managed to predict the course of developments even before the 2008 conflict based on observations of Saakashvili’s behaviour.

At the same time, it is important to understand the context of the crisis in bilateral relations with respect to a turning point in Russia’s foreign policy (for more details please refer to the respective section of the paper). By 2006–2007, Russia had already started engaging more actively in developing a global agenda and openly disclosing its discontent with the unipolar

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3 Medvedev: Saakashvili’s victory in the elections is unlikely to improve the relations of Georgia with the Russian Federation. RIA Novosti. 5 August 2001. Available in English at: https://ria.ru/politics/20110805/412248918.html
4 Medvedev reveals why Saakashvili should be grateful to him. RIA Novosti. 5 August 2011. Available in Russian at: https://ria.ru/politics/20110805/412429796.html
5 Medvedev and Saakashvili agree that there are no unresolved issues in relations between the Russian Federation and Georgia. Izvestia. 6 June 2008. Available in Russian at: http://izvestia.ru/news/427048
6 Ibid.
7 E. Shevardnadze: I have known Putin since he was almost a child. RBK. 3 October 2011. Available in Russian at: http://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/10/2011/5703ecf09a7947633d386e3
structure of international relations, as conveyed in Putin’s famous ‘Munich Speech’ of 2007. This could have accounted for Russia’s harsh reaction of banning Georgian wine and launching the anti-Georgian campaign as these measures were likely to be perceived by Russia as a response to NATO and the EU, the potential expansion of which had ignored Russia’s interests in terms of its military and economic security. Georgia was not the only country affected by Russia’s harsh style of bilateral relations. Moldova, Ukraine (with the so-called ‘gas conflict’ of 2005-2006) and Belarus (in 2007) were also targets of strict Russian policy (the gas tariff for Georgia was also raised in 2005). In general, Russia has aimed at liberalizing economic relations in the post-Soviet space. In the Russian foreign policy review for 2006, the authors provided the following explanation for the rise in the price of energy: ‘the transition to market-based economic relations with CIS countries is long overdue. ‘Favouritism’ in respect to relations with particular partners not only contradicts commonly accepted international practice, but also distorts processes of their internal development, deters systemic reformation of their economies and does not accommodate our aspiration to join the WTO. In addition, Russia is ready to consider potential scenarios for a progressive transition to new energy prices. Our goal is to prevent the politicization of economic partnership and distortion of our relations. Survey findings suggest that this goal corresponds with the expectations of the Russian public. Previous prices were politically conditioned, which did not bring any benefits to the provider or consumer countries. We are talking about the most crucial element of mutual emancipation, allowing the removal of all past vestiges and building pragmatic relations based on future aspirations as well as mutual respect and benefit.’


Since the change of authorities in Georgia in 2012, relations between Russia and Georgia have been heading towards normalization, albeit without crossing the ‘red line’ – the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, intact. Russian officials and experts have routinely used the term ‘normalization’ with respect to the country’s relations with Georgia. Interestingly, the term had emerged a few months before the conflict erupted. In April 2008, Vladimir Putin, during the final days of his presidency, stated that the normalization of relations with Georgia should be continued. More specifically, Putin gave directives for the resumption of postal service and transport communication. In addition, Putin also ordered preparation for the abolition of visa restrictions, acceleration of the process of the reconstruction of the Upper Larsi border crossing and the launch of consultations with experts on the admissibility of Georgian produce on the Russian market.

The question on visa-free movement for Georgian citizens travelling to the Russian Federation was raised again in December 2016 during a major press-conference when Vladimir Putin stated: ‘…at the end of the day, we should, of course, think about normalization, and I do not exclude the possibility of restoring visa-free entry for Georgian citizens to Russia. I think that there are sufficient conditions for this, even more so now that we have been receiving certain signals from some government structures of Georgia. It is of the utmost importance to establish normal relations between our special services and law enforcement agencies in order to fight against terrorism together and so that under no circumstances shall the visa-free regime compromise our security in this very fight against terrorism. I believe that this is absolutely feasible.’

In his speech, the Russian President also talked about different topics and the normalization of Russia’s relations with Turkey, Ukraine and the U.S. At its current stage of development, it is important that Russia demonstrates its readiness for normalized relations with partners that have been undergoing serious crises.

An important milestone in the normalization of relations was the Abashidze–Karasin format created after the Georgian Dream coalition won the parliamentary elections in October 2012. The victory of an opposition coalition in Georgia had provoked very positive reactions from Russian political analysts, while Vladimir Putin in December 2012 confirmed that regardless of the rigidity of the parties on revising their positions on South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it was still possible to expect some improvement: ‘We, in fact, very much want normalized relations with Georgia. However, it is obvious that Georgia is more interested in economic relations than Russia, but we will not be so arrogant as to say that we do not need it. No. We believe that relations between our two very close peoples have to be normalized and we need to strive for this. So far, I do not have an answer as to how we can overcome the challenges to our relations. However, as long as there are people who are ready to sort this out professionally, let us think over this together.

In a section on bilateral relations on the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia’s relations with Georgia are highlighted in a separate paragraph, together with relations with the U.S., EU, NATO, China, India and Turkey. More specifically, the section indicates that ‘Russia continues to look forward to developing good neighbourly relations with Georgia and the Georgian people. There will be no hindrance from our side and the degree of normalization will fully depend on the political will and realism coming from Tbilisi.’ Thus, Moscow points out that relations are indeed in a deadlock,
however, Russia is ready for a positive dialogue if in Tbilisi there is a political will to do it. In this sense, Russia is somewhat passing the responsibility for the state of bilateral relations to Tbilisi.

By the next Georgian elections in October 2016, Russia had already experienced some constructive relations with Georgian Dream. On the eve of the elections, the Russian expert Nikolai Silaev formulated the following characterization of the relationship between the two countries: ‘what is good about Georgian Dream is that it is predictable. For the first time since 1991, we have Georgian partners who do not push us into scandals on a weekly basis. Indeed, there are individuals, including the former defence minister Tinar Khidasheli who resigned on 1 August, and who expressed herself to the extent that even the Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs, Grigori Karasin, known for his composure, decided to step in. However, these individuals do not represent the core of Georgian politics, unlike in Saakashvili’s office’. 1

Russia did not stop talking about normalization, even when it was preparing for agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2014: Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, did not see any inconsistencies in doing so.2

An important factor in the normalization of relations was, according to some experts, the “disconnection” of Georgia from Ukraine in the Russian public consciousness, mainly due to the balanced position of the Georgian authorities on the Ukrainian crisis.3 A bonus of some sorts from the normalization of relations with Georgia might be the demonstration effect: If Russia manages to rebuild contacts during a crisis, other countries, also having political conflicts with Russia, will no longer be able to use the argument that Russia is unable to find a common language with anybody.4 At the same time, in spite of the potential for the normalization, the prognosis can also be gloomy. If relations are to be improved, this can only happen against the backdrop of the long-term settlement of the crisis between Russia and the West, as after having patched up the relations with Georgia, Russia can no longer stick to a harsh position towards Ukraine.

**FORECAST FOR THE RELATIVELY LONGER TERM NORMALISATION**

Overall, the following forecast can be made based on an analysis of the current course of normalization in relations between the two countries:

1) The restoration of diplomatic relations is not likely to come with a change of the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The two countries will probably sign a document to cement their differences with respect to the status quo.

2) Initially, a decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia had been shaped by the need for ensuring their security and protecting them from military invasion. The same necessity for protection served as grounds for signing the agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2015. In this respect, if Russia is assured of guarantees of the security of the two republics, Moscow may declare that, if South Ossetia and Abkhazia make a sovereign decision to join Georgia, it will accept such a decision as it will be a decision made by independent countries to join the other state. In fact, this is the course that the Crimean scenario took (a declaration of independence followed by joining another state). It is worth remembering that in 2015, Vladimir Putin indicated that reintegration with Georgia was a possibility: ‘As for the territorial integrity of Georgia, it is up to the Georgian people, South Ossetians and the Abkhaz. It is necessary to work with them. We will accept any solution’.5

3) At the same time, Russia’s position towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia is affected by its position towards the reunification with Crimea and the Ukrainian crisis in general. If Moscow decides to give the green light to the reintegration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with Georgia based on the political will of the latter, this will undermine Russia’s position towards Crimea from the perspective of the West, because it will see that Moscow may abandon some of its decisions, which were previously proclaimed as final. In this respect, it seems that one should not expect any progress before the conflict around Crimea is resolved. At the same time, the resolution of the conflict is not viewed in the context of Russian-Ukrainian relations, but rather in light of the Russian-Western relationship. Otherwise, Russia may launch negotiations with the West, tying its own concessions regarding South Ossetia and Abkhazia with the West’s recognition of the reunification with Crimea. Thus, this would be a part of a broader ‘trade-off’.

4) Russia’s lifting of the visa regime will not necessarily be tied up with the restoration of diplomatic relations. Overall, for the past few years there has been a trend towards the normalization of relations in the economy and interactions at the social level. Therefore, visa-free movement may come to be in the short- or medium-term. The abolishment of the visa regime will likely come with specific anti-terrorism measures undertaken by Georgia, and with deep cooperation on an anti-terrorism issues between the two countries.

5) The potential change of authorities in Russia after the presidential elections of 2018 or 2024 will not affect the official position towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia, similarly to the situation in Georgia when the accession of Georgian Dream to power did not entail the change of the country’s position towards the two republics.

6) Georgia’s potential ascension to NATO will result in Russia taking on a harsher tone and, in the best-case scenario, delaying the settlement of the dispute at the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to the unforeseeable future. The polit-

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4 Ibid.

ical conflict between Russia and NATO is highly unlikely to be resolved in the long-term perspective to the extent that would allow Russia to employ a neutral position towards NATO enlargement to its bordering states.

7) Georgia’s potential ascension to the EU will not bring about as harsh of a response from Moscow as it would in the case of NATO. However, Russia’s willingness to build a constructive partnership in the field of the economy may fade away and visa-free movement (if it is restored by that time) will be revoked. Again, the matter in question largely depends on the extent of progress achieved by Russia and the EU: if the political crisis is settled, Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions revoked, visa-free regime introduced between Russia and the EU, then Georgia’s potential accession to EU will not derail bilateral relations between the two countries.

CONCLUSION

From a sociological perspective, 25 years makes up one generation. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, people who never lived in the USSR have taken up their professional careers. Russia’s political elites and academics consist of those whose professional careers originated before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Likewise, people with Soviet experience still work in Georgia’s political and academic communities. However, since the end of the Saakashvili period representatives of younger generations have considerably outnumbered those whose work records go back to Soviet times. In some respects, this is a unique situation for the post-Soviet space where most of the political elites still remember the Soviet Union. An analysis of the development of the early foreign policies of both Russia and Georgia can be undertaken from this very perspective: in the first years, many decisions were made either in opposition to the past or as a subconscious attempt to copy past experiences. At the same time, the generation that did not live through the tough 1990s and transition period has grown up and therefore, a historic review of the recent past is of great importance.

25 years is too short a term for state-building. At the same time, the societies in both countries have had to adjust to new realities and undergo numerous changes during these 25 years, which has been more active in terms of power changes from Gamsakhurdia to Shevardnadze, Saakashvili and the Georgian Dream. From this perspective, the Russian elites seem more conservative and stable. However, one should not forget the political landscape of Russia at the beginning of the 1990s when various interest groups and state institutions pushed conflicting approaches to Russia’s foreign policy, a situation which did not support regional peace and security.

If you take a person’s life, active self-identification in personal and professional spheres takes places after 20 years. This is what happened to both of our countries: Georgia made a U-turn in 2003 with Russia following bit later in 2006-2007. In addition, for both countries the opinion of the West was important to understand their priorities and goals: after the fascination of the early 1990s, the West has become Russia’s significant ‘Other’, while Georgia, having made the decision to make Russia its significant ‘Other’, continues to undertake efforts to become part of the West.

An observation over a long period and assessment of the findings allows for a deep analysis of foreign policy decisions with both domestic factors and the international context playing important roles. Certain decisions are often attributed to mean intentions, while in fact, such decisions were shaped by the logic of internal political processes aiming to consolidate the public and preserve sovereignty.
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