

13 May 2007 - 16:31

Permanent URL:

<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/19/1116.html>

To main page

The Paradoxes of Russia's Georgia Policy

© "Russia in Global Affairs". № 2, April - June 2007

Sergei Markedonov, Cand. Sc. (History), is Head of the Department for Interethnic Studies at the Institute of Political and Military Analysis.

Relations between Russia and Georgia are going through their worst period since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Even during the Georgian-Ossetian (1990-1992) and Georgian-Abkhazian (1992-1993) armed conflicts, Moscow did not impose an economic or transport blockade. Moreover, the information wars were far less pitched than they have been in the past two years.

The once "brotherly" republic has become the most difficult and uncooperative CIS member state with respect to Moscow. In a review of Russia's foreign policy published in March 2007, Georgia was "awarded" the most negative value amongst all of Russia's international partners.

PAST AND PRESENT

Many Western experts are perplexed by Moscow's perseverance to preserve its domination in this part of the post-Soviet area.

Indeed, in the early 1990s, Russia effortlessly abandoned territorial claims to Ukraine and Kazakhstan, although in the ethno-cultural respect, northern and eastern Kazakhstan, or the Crimea and Donbass in Ukraine, are considerably closer to Russia than Georgia. The Kremlin's Baltic policy seemed far more passive than its policy in the Caucasus, even though Latvia and Estonia have large ethnic Russian communities.

Moscow is involved in Central Asian political processes much less than it is in the South Caucasus. In 2001, Russia gave the go-ahead to America's penetration into the region, and today does not particularly object to its "development" by the Chinese. Although Russian-Moldovan relations also leave much to be desired, Moscow, at least in word, is ready to revise its policy of sanctions against Chisinau. Moreover, it does not rule out the involvement of other countries in the settlement of the Transdnestrian problem.

Georgia is an utterly different case. Here, Russian diplomacy is the least inclined to make concessions or compromise. The Kremlin is also striving to preserve its exclusive role in resolving “frozen conflicts” and to exclude other “honest brokers” from the process.

Russian-Georgian relations are rather paradoxical. On the one hand, there are traditional – primarily socio-cultural – ties. As is known, for over 200 years Georgia had been part of the Russian Empire. Its political class was incorporated into the Russian establishment (from the Bagrationi Dynasty to Eduard Shevardnadze). The Georgian elite (primarily Georgian generals and officers in the Russian Imperial Army) were highly instrumental in establishing Russia’s domination in the Caucasus. Without such an imperial outpost as Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Russia’s successful operations in the Caucasus War (1817-1864) would have been impossible; ditto for the quelling of the 1866 uprising in Abkhazia, not to mention wars against Persia (1804-1813 and 1826-1828) and the Ottoman Porta (1806-1812, 1828-1829, 1853-1856, and 1877-1878).

For almost one and a half centuries, Georgia and Georgians were associated in the minds of the North Caucasus peoples with Russian imperial policy. Even in the lead-up to the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, in its numerous declarations, regarded the “little empire” (Georgia) as a natural ally of the “great empire” (Russia). Historically, the key role in the South Caucasus belonged to Georgia: unsurprisingly, the residence of the Russian viceroy in the Caucasus was located in Tiflis.

But on the other hand, there is a burden of mutual claims and contradictions inherited from the perestroika and post-Soviet period, which seems to prevail now. The April 1989 events in Tbilisi (when Transcaucasian Military District forces were used to break up a demonstration) marked a turning point for independent Georgia, becoming a catalyst in the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The acquisition of sovereignty was accompanied by a rise of anti-Russian sentiments in Georgia. Meanwhile, in the eyes of Moscow’s military-political establishment in the 1990s, Eduard Shevardnadze was seen primarily as an associate of the “contemptible Gorbachev.” Therefore, any actions by the Georgian leader were viewed as potentially hostile.

It would have seemed that the ouster of the former member of the Soviet Communist Party Politburo and the advent of Mikhail Saakashvili should have substantially changed relations between the two countries. But the policy pursued by the leader of the “rose revolution,” designed to consolidate the Georgian lands, began with a search for an external enemy who could be blamed for the Transcaucasian republic’s failure to become a viable state. With such an approach,

post-Soviet Georgia's responsibility for the interethnic conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was laid at Russia's doorstep. Thus, the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts effectively turned into Russian-Georgian conflicts.

In Georgia's political establishment and expert community, the idea of "fleeing the Russian Empire" (virtually no distinction was made between pre-1917 Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation) became the keynote of its foreign policy, as well as a precondition for its liberalization and integration into the community of "civilized states" and the "Western world." Therefore, according to ideologues of "nascent Georgian democracy," it could only emerge victorious in a confrontation with Moscow by placing a bet on full-scale cooperation with the United States, European countries and international organizations (primarily NATO). The general expectation was that the "Western choice" would bring Georgia internal stability and peace. This position has naturally provoked a strong reaction from Moscow, which is resentful of any extra-regional players appearing in the post-Soviet era.

Today, it seems that the array of mutual charges and claims has been exhausted. The question arises: Will the entire positive experience in Russian-Georgian relations be limited to historical recollections? If politicians in both states are not being disingenuous when saying that good-neighborly relations between the two countries are in the national interests of both Russia and Georgia, where is the potential for breaking the deadlock and restoring trust?

AN OBJECTIVE APPROACH

Today, like never before, analysis of Russian-Georgian relations requires an objective approach. Objectivity is not synonymous to impartiality: it would be naive to believe that the ethno-political problems of the Caucasus today can be studied on the basis of the "without anger and bias" principle.

First, all talk about hidden motives behind Moscow and Tbilisi's actions will remain pure speculation until researchers gain access to essential documents and archives. What were the circumstances in which the Georgian authorities made the decision to "march on Tskhinvali" in 1989, or to bring troops into Abkhazia in August 1992? What was really happening in the Pankisi Gorge in the late 1990s, and who stood behind Ruslan Gelayev's raid in the Kodori Gorge in 2001? What unidentified flying objects appeared in the zones of the frozen conflicts? Finally, who in Russia prepared and issued the orders to deport Georgians in the fall of 2006? All these questions can only be answered after the relevant archival materials have been studied. In the meantime, we will have to make do with memoirs, eyewitness accounts, sociological surveys and anthropological studies.

Second, no matter how much Russian and foreign analysts talk about their objectivity, it is unavoidable that the researchers' level of "impartiality" will be minimal. For most analysts of Caucasian affairs today, concepts such as militants, refugees, terrorists or advocates of the national idea and religious revival are not abstract notions.

So what is an objective analysis of Russian-Georgian relations? Today, post-Soviet politics have become extremely personified. We say 'Georgia,' when we actually mean Mikhail Saakashvili. We say 'Russia,' when we are really talking about Vladimir Putin. Oftentimes, there are attempts to limit the tensions in the Caucasus (disputes between Russia and Georgia, the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the problems of the unrecognized states) by explaining them as confrontations between particular personalities, be it Putin and Saakashvili, or Ilham Aliyev and Robert Kocharyan.

Meanwhile, an in-depth analysis of the situation in the region leads to the following conclusion: even the highly influential leaders of the Caucasus countries (among them Russia, which includes seven Caucasian and four "near-Caucasian" administrative entities of the Russian Federation) have to act within the narrow corridors of opportunity. The leadership of the Caucasian administrative entities is tied hand and foot by objective circumstances, and taking these circumstances into account is essential for strategic policy planning in the Caucasus. An objective approach would help avoid both illusions and inadequate assessments concerning the prospects for the evolution of a particular ethno-political crisis.

Today, the Georgian president (whoever he might be now or in the future) cannot abandon political claims to Abkhazia or South Ossetia without putting his position at risk. Therefore, attacking Mikhail Saakashvili for excessive Russophobia is a serious over-simplification of the situation. Likewise, the assertion that Saakashvili is a "U.S. puppet" is too sweeping of a generalization and categorical. In striving to "consolidate Georgia," he is acting like a pragmatic politician. If Russia's political resources were used to attain this objective, he would become pro-Russian. But since Moscow rules out the possibility for a unilateral withdrawal from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (without fully resolving the conflicts in these trouble spots), Saakashvili opted for a strategic partnership with the United States.

The Georgian leader is not an easy partner to deal with. He is prone to populism and ethno-nationalism. Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that he enjoys considerable popularity in his country (this is even acknowledged by his opponents in Georgia). Nor can one disregard the consensus on Abkhazia and South Ossetia that has evolved within Georgia's political and expert community. Today, the president is being criticized for his antidemocratic and populist policies (voiced by the Republican Party and the New Right Forces of Georgia), for shortfalls in Georgia's social policy and extreme "Westernism" (voiced by the Labor Party, led by Shalva

Natelashvili), and his insufficient stance in dealing with Russia and the CIS (voiced by the Republican Party). At the same time, all of these parties completely support the president's approach toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Even Igor Giorgadze, former security minister and now leader of the Justice party (who is seen in Georgia as a Russian spy), in his policy speeches, says that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are inalienable parts of a single Georgia.

Not even Eduard Shevardnadze was ready to give up Abkhazia, although the former first secretary of the Central Committee of Georgia's Communist Party was linked to Russia (both formally and informally) much closer than his successor is now. It was on Shevardnadze's watch, in 1994, that Georgia joined the CIS, acceded to the Collective Security Treaty, gave the go-ahead to a peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia, and started demonstrating a pro-Russia mood. In 1993, the former Transcaucasian Military District Force was reorganized as the Group of Russian Forces in the Transcaucasia. A year later, Moscow and Tbilisi signed a treaty on military cooperation, and then the Group of Russian Border Forces in Georgia was created. During the first half of the 1990s, the Russian military bases in Georgia became a target of critical attacks by the opposition, but not by Tbilisi.

Shevardnadze hoped to regain control of Abkhazia with Russian assistance, but to no avail. The short-term resumption of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1998 pushed Georgia toward the United States, but Shevardnadze could not be blamed for that. Any Georgian leader in his place would have done the same or almost the same.

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND THE SECURITY OF THE NORTH CAUCASUS

The Russian position is also clear-cut. Russia's interests in Abkhazia were formulated by Boris Yeltsin, who at first was not ready to support Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba. Shevardnadze, Yeltsin's former colleague at the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee, was closer to him in many respects, but objective circumstances compelled him to distance himself from the "White Fox."

Those circumstances included the Adyg-speaking parts of Russia (Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Adygeya, and the Krasnodar Territory). These are regions with complex histories and a long list of complaints against Russia – from the Caucasus War and the resettlement of Abkhazians to Turkey after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-878, to cultural assimilation. Had Russia just "ditched" Abkhazia, Russia's "internal Abkhazia" could have caused serious problems. Against the backdrop of Chechnya and Dagestan, such a move would have been dangerous to Russia's internal security.

A similar situation is developing in South Ossetia, as distinct from Adzharia, another breakaway region in Georgia (Russia has no ethnic or cultural links with

the Adzharians, thus, the striking contrast between Moscow's reaction to two events in 2004: the ouster of Adzharian leader Aslan Abashidze and an attempt by Georgia to lay a siege on Tskhinvali). Tbilisi continues to dramatize the problem of Georgian (or rather, Megrelian) refugees from Abkhazia, but keeps silent about the exodus of Ossetians from Georgia in the early 1990s. In pre-war Georgia, about 100,000 Ossetians lived outside South Ossetia, whereas in the former South Ossetian Autonomous District they numbered 63,200 (according to 1989 statistics). Ossetians were the fifth largest ethnic community in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, after Georgians, Armenians, Russians, and Azerbaijanis, while their overall number exceeded the number of Abkhazians who lived in concentrated settlements (according to the 1989 nationwide poll, there were 93,000 Abkhazians). Before the 1990-1992 hostilities, Ossetians lived mainly in Tbilisi (33,318), Tskhinvali (31,537), Gori (8,222), and Rustavi (5,613).

Today, there are about 30,000 Ossetians in Georgia. It is very difficult to make judgments about their real situation since no monitoring has been conducted for the past few years. However, there is no reason to trust Tbilisi's statements that the rights and freedoms of Georgia's ethnic Ossetians are fully guaranteed. Meanwhile, almost all refugees from Georgia's inland regions (including South Ossetian residents) have settled down in North Ossetia, which is a part of Russia (including in the Prigorodny District, which is being claimed by neighboring Ingushetia). This category of North Ossetia's population became the susceptible to the nationalist rhetoric of North Ossetian political leaders in the early 1990s.

During the Ossetian-Ingush conflict of 1992 (the first armed conflict on Russian soil), residents of Georgia's inland regions and South Ossetia played a rather active role. This accounts for the strong reaction from Russian leaders whenever there are any indiscrete actions or militarist rhetoric coming out of Tbilisi (for example, the statement by former Defense Minister Irakly Okruashvili about 'celebrating the New Year in Tskhinvali'). New waves of refugees to North Ossetia would only serve to worsen Ossetian-Ingush relations.

The majority of ethno-political problems in the south of Russia are closely linked to conflicts in the former Soviet Transcaucasian republics. This refers not only to open but also latent conflicts. The forcible ouster of Kvareli Avars from Georgia in the early 1990s created trouble spots in the north of Dagestan. The Avars, who were moving to the Kizlyar and Tarum areas of Dagestan, came into conflict with ethnic Russians and Nogays, which caused a substantial outflow of Russians from northern parts of Dagestan. The settlement of the "Chechen issue" is to a considerable degree contingent on the settlement of the situation in Georgia's Akhmeta District (Pankisi Gorge). Therefore, security in Russia's Caucasus is impossible without stability in Georgia.

Russia can be criticized for supporting Abkhazian separatism, but the pro-Russian mood of the overwhelming majority of the Abkhazian community (as well as of Abkhazia's other ethnic communities – Armenians, Russians) and their reluctance to see anyone but Russian troops as a peacekeeper is a fact that cannot be ignored. Unsurprisingly, there are simply no pro-Georgian politicians in Abkhazia – this, given that the Abkhazian “government-in-exile” is led by ethnic Georgians. The situation in South Ossetia is somewhat different. There are pro-Georgian politicians there (e.g., Dmitry Sanakoyev and Uruzmag Karkusov), while both Sanakoyev (the current “alternative” president of South Ossetia) and Karkusov fought against the Georgians in the 1990-92 conflict.

Whereas Tbilisi is ready to negotiate the high status for Abkhazia as part of Georgia (although the Abkhazian authorities today are striving for full independence), its position with respect to South Ossetia is different. Presently, officials in Tbilisi use the term “Tskhinvali District” in reference to the area, and refuse to revoke a decree, dating back to the days of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, on the abolition of the South Ossetian autonomy (1990). In effect, they still adhere to the formula devised by Gamsakhurdia himself: “there are Ossetians in Georgia, but there is no Ossetia.”

This explains the popularity of Eduard Kokoity, the leader of the de-facto state of South Ossetia. Ethnic minorities in Georgia are interested in the Russian presence in Georgia and regard Russian peacekeepers as a guarantee of their security. And whereas the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia is a foregone conclusion, it is premature to push for the pullout of peacekeepers from South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Especially considering that they ensured the repatriation of about 60,000 Georgian (Mingrelian) refugees to Abkhazia, and also prevented further Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts – in the spring and summer of 1998, the fall of 2001 and the winter and summer of 2006.

As for Russian operations in South Ossetia, in the early 1990s they helped protect Georgian villages there.

The overriding priority for Moscow today is not to acquire new territories. Russia has to show to the Georgian elite, as well as to the international community, that rejection of Russian peacekeepers is bound to revive conflicts, jeopardizing the security of Russia's North Caucasus – consider the events around Tskhinvali in 2004-05 and the Kodori Gorge in 2006. But the build-up of Georgian military might and militarist rhetoric with respect to South Ossetia and Abkhazia can destabilize Russia's border regions, which would be more than just a “loss of face” to Russia.

So, improvement in Russian-Georgian relations can only be expected in areas that are not directly connected with South Ossetia or Abkhazia. For Georgia to leave

Abkhazia or South Ossetia means to admit the failure of the “Georgian independence” project, which started in April 1989. To Russia, that would mean further destabilization in the North Caucasus. But what are the alternatives for ending the stalemate?

Today, Russia and Georgia have different views on the causes and character of these interethnic conflicts. Tbilisi and Moscow differently assess the “Westernization” of the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet area as a whole. In Georgia’s estimation, European and North Atlantic integration is a criterion of civilization and democracy; for Russia, it is an encroachment on her special interests. The two also disagree on Russia’s military-political presence in the Caucasus. Whereas to Moscow, it is primarily an issue of security in the North Caucasus, to Tbilisi, it is imperial ambitions and the threat of annexation.

IN SEARCH OF A NEW “MENU”

The list of contradictions, claims and counterclaims made by the two countries could be continued ad infinitum. Unfortunately, it is far more difficult to “inventory” possible areas of rapprochement and harmonization of interests. Meanwhile, such areas do exist, as Moscow and Tbilisi have stated repeatedly. It is another matter that such areas of overlapping interests have not been systematized. Experts from both countries have not taken it upon themselves to prepare a new “menu” of Russian-Georgian relations.

There is some experience along these lines in Eurasia. In the early 1990s, Russian-Azerbaijani relations dramatically plummeted. Bilateral relations were plagued by the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, which Azerbaijan lost in 1994. But by excluding the autonomous area from the Russian-Azerbaijani agenda and concentrating on other issues, which earlier had seemed secondary (cross-border cooperation, the problem of “divided people,” cooperation in the Caspian, economic relations, and the fight against Islamic radicalism), the two countries brought their positions considerably closer to each other. The fruit of the efforts were quickly forthcoming: two official visits by the Russian president to Azerbaijan, a deal with Baku on the future of the Gabala radar in Azerbaijan, active cooperation between the countries’ business elites, and the recognition of Moscow’s role as mediator in the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute.

Incidentally, the statement about the need to deploy peacekeepers (quite possibly from Russia) in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was first proposed not by Yerevan but by Baku. During his first visit to Azerbaijan, in 2001, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the burial site of Baku residents who were killed in a police operation in January 1990, which was perceived as a positive signal. Unfortunately, later, during a breakdown in energy negotiations between Russia and Azerbaijan in late 2006, critically referred to as a “gas attack,” practically

wiped out the achievements that Moscow had made in its relations with Baku in the previous six years.

Constructive development of Russian-Georgian relations today requires a similar “Azerbaijanization.”

First, the Ossetian and Abkhazian issues should be excluded from the political “menu.” They should be transferred from the category of propaganda provocations to the pile of diplomatic problems.

Second, emphasis should be placed on tackling problems affecting the national security of both countries, primarily the joint protection of the Chechen, Ingush, and Dagestan sections of the state border. Incidentally, the U.S. administration no longer provides Georgia effective assistance in guarding its borders. Russia could assume this responsibility, also enlisting the support of the international community and clearing itself of charges of pursuing an anti-Georgia policy.

The security of areas bordering Georgia is a key to stability in Russia’s North Caucasus, especially considering that politicians and experts in Tbilisi still shudder at the memory of “free Ichkeria,” with many Georgian officials stating off the record that the “self-determination of the North Caucasus” would be a nightmare for their country. Georgia needs Russia as a strong and viable state, capable of effectively controlling its southern borders. Further destabilization of Dagestan will not be limited to a “Pankisi scenario” for Georgia. In the event of a full-scale crisis in this Russian republic, Georgian territory will quickly become a place of missionary activity by the Salafis (Wahhabis), already fraught with a rise in sectarian problems and interethnic conflicts.

The next important step in improving our relations should be revisiting the idea of creating joint anti-terrorist centers. Nino Burdzhaneladze, Gela Bezhuashvili and many other high-ranking state and government officials in Tbilisi put forward this idea. Russia could thus preserve, in some form or other, its military-political presence in the region and also help Georgia create effective anti-terrorism forces. Today, Tbilisi would probably make this plan contingent on a number of conditions. However, it must be said that this idea was much closer to its practical implementation in 2004 than it is now – at least there was no “Abkhazian” or “Ossetian” linkage then.

Finally, our two countries cannot ignore the subject of economics; Kakha Bendukidze (economy minister) and Salome Zurbishvili (former foreign minister who is now in opposition to the Georgian presidential team) drove home this point. Privatization of Georgian enterprises by Russian business would be a sure guarantee of Georgia’s successful development without any confrontation with Russia. The United States and the EU consider the South Caucasus a high-risk

region, whereas Russian business, supported by the Russian and Georgian states, could also be useful in expediting Georgia's economic recovery and economic diversification.

To jumpstart the deadlocked relations, it is essential to abandon the phantoms and delusions that have affected the minds of politicians and diplomats on either side of the Caucasus Ridge.

It is time Moscow realized that economic blockades and "wine wars" can only strengthen Mikhail Saakashvili's regime. Meanwhile, internal discontent with his populist policies and authoritarian methods recedes in the face of the looming threat from the north, which strengthens national solidarity. The fear of the Russian Federation unites people with different political views around the Georgian president.

If the Kremlin has a problem with Saakashvili and identifies Georgia's policy with him, betting on such politicians as Igor Giorgadze is not a very good way of forcing a regime change. It seems that the experience with Raul Khadzhimba (Russia's protege at the presidential elections in Abkhazia in 2004) has taught it nothing; betting on "reliable people" only because they belong to the "intelligence community" does not seem to work. Giorgadze – unlike Salome Zurbashvili, a strong opposition figure, or Kakha Bendukidze, who is slightly critical (in particular, on the issue of Georgia's CIS membership) – does not enjoy much support in Georgia and is rather reminiscent of an ordinary political émigré. Today, Russia needs "reliable Georgians" – not at well-guarded facilities near Moscow – but in Tbilisi.

At the same time, Georgia's hopes for Western assistance seem naïve at best. To the Americans, the Caucasus is important primarily as an element in their complex geopolitical schemes (Iran, the Middle East). To the United States, which is seeking political domination in the Middle East, the reopening of ethnic conflicts is something it would obviously want to avoid. Washington, which is becoming bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the standoff with Iran, will not want to get involved in some war for "great Georgia."

Europe, with its "policy of good-neighborliness," also has a different agenda. The EU is interested in building bridges to hydrocarbon-rich parts of the Caspian and Central Asia, while the Caucasus is a transit territory whose stability is crucial for these plans. Resolving ethnic conflicts and spreading the European system of values is the EU's priority in the Caucasus.

But when the EU takes stock of the situation in the Caucasus from a political perspective, factoring in the problem of unrecognized states, it will see the possible implications – e.g., Tbilisi's military revenge in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, accompanied by a surge in xenophobia and military hysteria, casualties,

and a flow of refugees. After the trouble it had in the former Yugoslavia, the EU will hardly want to take responsibility for resolving the problem of Georgia's territorial integrity. Especially considering that in the foreseeable future, the EU will have too much on its plate to get involved in external problems. Furthermore, judging from its experience in Yugoslavia, the EU is more likely to recognize new states than fight for somebody else's territorial integrity.

Thus, U.S. and EU presence in the South Caucasus, so desired by Tbilisi, would only complicate rather than facilitate the "consolidation of Georgian lands." Moreover, Moscow's position will continue to toughen as Georgia moves toward NATO. Attempts to bypass Russia by way of the Western flank will be to no avail. Therefore, there are no alternatives but to identify those "points of convergence" between Moscow and Tbilisi.

© 2004 "Russia in Global Affairs".