

# The “Kosovo Precedent” and Russian-Georgian Relations

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has made the argument that U.S. and European recognition of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence will create a significant international precedent so many times that no elegant diplomatic turnaround on this point appears possible. Despite the strong denial of “precedentability” that accompanied recognition, precedent is always in the eye of the beholder.

It remains entirely unclear, however, what Moscow will make out of such a precedent. It is improbable that it will rush to recognize, say, the independence of Somaliland – Africa being totally absent from its political agenda – or Northern Cyprus – Greece being too important to its energy geopolitics. Likewise, the embrace of Kurdish or Basque separatists, mortally offending Turkey and Spain, would hardly be a smart move, while supporting Taiwan is definitely out of the question. Granting recognition to Nagorno Karabakh would upset the delicate maneuvering aimed at pulling Azerbaijan closer to Russia and disrupt the personal chemistry that Putin has developed with President Ilham Aliyev. Transdniestria is also an awkward case, not least because Russia has no direct access to this tiny quasi-state.

That leaves Georgia as the most probable object for demonstrating the seriousness of Russian warnings. The Kremlin has long accepted the proposition

that this little troublemaker should be punished for its many sins, from Eduard Shevardnadze's role in the breakup of the USSR to Mikheil Saakashvili's hand in triggering the wave of color revolutions.

## **Orchestrating An Exemplary State Failure**

By the time of Putin's arrival to the summit of power, conflicts with, as well as within, Georgia had acquired a chronic if stagnant character. Under Boris Yeltsin, an agreement in December 1999 on the withdrawal of Russian bases from Georgia could have opened up a new chapter in the strained Russian-Georgian relationship, but the Second Chechen War, which was a must-win but unwinnable test for Putin, cast a long shadow. Putin may have been somewhat irritated that Shevardnadze snuck Georgia into the United States' war on terror as an ally, earning the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) for his rundown military. However, this development did not change the basic assumption in Moscow that this troubled and troubling country was sliding into a crisis of governance. While it was tempting to exploit that weakness, the Kremlin was not prepared to shape its efforts into a consistent strategy, instead opting for a wait-and-see approach. It assumed that the "old fox" Shevardnadze would soon appear on the doorstep again begging for help.

The character and outcome of Georgia's spectacular public uprising in late 2003 took Putin's court completely by surprise. Before the infallible special services prepared their revised assessments, Saakashvili scored a crucial May victory in Ajara. In autumn 2004, the Georgian "anomaly" was reproduced on a grander scale as cheerful crowds in Kyiv, Ukraine secured the triumph of the Orange Revolution. Paralyzed by shock, the Kremlin sought to explain away Putin's personal failure as a result of Western hostile interference. More political earthquakes followed in 2005 from Kyrgyzstan to Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria.

Thus, the Russian leadership could not quite believe its luck as the wave of color revolutions quickly receded from 2006 and even as the spiraling instability in the North Caucasus, driven by a deadly mix of insurgency and terrorism, began to calm down. Gaining in confidence, Moscow began to entertain ideas about the inner strength of its rigidly centralized and manifestly undemocratic political system and how it could provide economic prosperity and enjoy broad public support.

These ideas may have worked in the election season. For this model to become compelling, however, the specter of the color revolutions needs to be exorcised and the revolutionary regimes need to be proven as failures. Georgia has thus become an ideological litmus test, and Moscow has had few doubts that with a bit of doctoring the desired result can be guaranteed. Moscow was not that disappointed when its attempt to persuade Azerbaijan to give a cold shoulder to its bothersome neighbor flopped, assuming that sooner or later President Ilham Aliyev, as a *bona fide* autocrat, would grow tired of Saakashvili's

revolutionary zeal. Russia has also had plenty of more direct levers to employ, from a sharp increase of gas export prices to the expulsion of migrant workers and ban on wine and mineral water imports. With these levers in place, the Kremlin perceived Georgia's economic collapse to be only a matter of time. It did not quite work according to plan, however, and Putin's court was already impatient when the forceful crackdown on opposition rallies in Tbilisi in autumn 2007 demonstrated the unmistakable rise of domestic discontent.

Saakashvili's victory in the January 2008 presidential elections, narrow as it was, has granted him an opportunity to reduce tensions with Russia that he overexploited in his first term. He has made several gestures of reconciliation, including the appointment of a new ambassador and organization of a special department in Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moscow, however, has not seen much rationale for normalizing relations with Georgia. The opposition camp may not be that promising, but the Kremlin still wants to prove its principal point that a revolution brings nothing but chaos and dislocation. It also can afford to wait, expecting either another escalation of domestic conflict in economically vulnerable Georgia or another provocative step from Saakashvili, who has to follow up on his 2008 New Year's address delivered from Abkhazia's Kodori Gorge promising Georgia's return to that breakaway province.

## **Military Means To An Uncertain End**

Inexplicable incidents and deadly shoot-outs happen so often on the front lines of the not-so-frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that they are seen as proof of military stalemate. Saakashvili's promises to restore Georgia's territorial integrity are increasingly taken for innocent bragging. There is, however, a new quality to the protracted security deadlock around the two 15-year-old secessionist quasi-states. This is partly related to the significantly greater combat capabilities of Georgian army battalions trained by U.S. instructors and seasoned by deployment to Iraq. To a greater extent, however, this new quality comes from the Russian side.

President Putin sternly delivered an ultimatum to Georgia on September 11, 2002, threatening to launch cross-border operations to destroy terrorist camps in the Pankisi Gorge. In a matter of days, however, he discovered that apart from air strikes of questionable precision there were no credible military options to choose from, and so he had to perform a rather clumsy back-pedaling after receiving a stern warning from Washington. Moreover, the war in Chechnya at the time demanded the maximum possible concentration of military effort, so Georgia was, for all intents and purposes, safe.

The situation has now changed. While by no means pacified, Chechnya has not required any operations by the Russian Armed Forces since the start of 2006. Similarly, since the start of 2007, the security situation in the North Caucasus, with the exception of Ingushetia, has visibly stabilized. Meanwhile, the grouping

of Russian Armed Forces in the North Caucasus military district has been significantly strengthened and is able to spend more time and resources on training and exercises. During a February 2008 meeting at the base of the newly-created mountain brigade in Botlikh, Dagestan (another brigade of this type is deployed in Karachaevo-Cherkessia), Putin emphasized the high combat readiness of these all-professional units. The strength of Russia's military grouping in the North Caucasus is what necessitated Russia's *de facto* unilateral withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, as its numbers have grown beyond the "flank limit" or "territorial ceiling" stipulated by the 1999 adapted treaty.

The availability of these usable military capabilities, which have only limited mobility and cannot be re-deployed elsewhere, does not necessarily mean that the General Staff is preparing a full-blown intervention against Georgia. Except for the Second Chechen War, really not of his making, President Putin has shown great reluctance to use military instruments. The last two years of his reign have actually been the most peaceful period in Russia's post-Soviet history. Putin also has an impressive record of withdrawing troops and bases, the most recent example being the 2007 closure of all Russian bases in Georgia, with the possible exception of Gudauta, used on a very limited scale to support Russia's ongoing peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia. It could be argued that the bases in Akhalkalaki and Batumi had no strategic significance and exposed Russian troops to unnecessary risks, and that their elimination has in fact increased Moscow's ability to act decisively in a critical situation. It could also be reasoned that, from a military point of view, a march on Tbilisi with its population of 1.5 million is not a sound idea, but a landing in Poti (similar to an October 1993 operation in the aftermath of the Abkhazian war) and advance toward Batumi could be a feasible proposition.

## **Georgia in the Russian Political Context**

The habit of manipulating the conflict with Georgia for political purposes exposes Moscow to the risk of losing control over fast-moving events, particularly since local actors in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have developed their own skills in orchestrating crises and forcing Russia's hand. These risks may be accentuated by Russia's increasing propensity to portray itself as a resurgent power that cannot be challenged with impunity. Many *agent provocateurs* are at work around the conflict zones; at any time, an unexpected and undesired chain reaction could occur. Such risks are by definition very difficult to predict, but it may be useful to examine how Georgia figures into two main Russian political contexts.

The first is the Western macro-context, which can be divided into American and European elements. Moscow is well aware that Georgia could become a contentious issue in its relations with the West; everything possible was done to

remove this issue from the agenda of the July 2006 summit of the Group of Eight (G8) in St. Petersburg. The Russian leadership assumes that the special attention the United States pays to Georgia stems both from its place in the East-West energy corridor and from the possibility of confrontation with Iran. This second aspect might become less acute in the near future as anxiety around Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program dissipates. In order to reduce the significance of the former, the Kremlin has demonstrated total indifference to the launches of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline in 2006 and the Baku-Erzurum gas pipeline in 2007. As for the European Union, Russia perceives its involvement in Georgia to be superficial. It also believes the EU's ability to forge a meaningful common response to a fast-evolving crisis, while worrying about its sensitive energy interests, is inconsequentially low, with Kosovo being yet another proof of fragmentation within the EU.

A potentially crucial change to this context is the prospect of Georgia's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which might be strengthened – but more likely left in limbo – at the alliance's April 2008 Bucharest summit. For most of the Russian political elite, this prospect is unacceptable, but the Kremlin certainly does not want to replay previous quarrels over NATO enlargement when the alliance shrugged off answers of "*nyet, never*" from Moscow. This time, the intrigue has been spun with greater diligence. Bitter disagreements about the CFE Treaty and the forward deployment of elements of U.S. strategic defense are combined with quiet squeezing on painful points like the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan and with tempting propositions regarding Russian cooperation in Afghanistan. This is done so that within the alliance the question of whether NATO members need another row with Russia is bolstered by the sense that they cannot afford one. Moscow has good reason to assume that Saakashvili's desperate efforts to get on a fast track into NATO will remain in vain. However, every encouraging signal sent to Georgia from Washington or Brussels still touches a raw nerve in Russia. It is entirely possible that a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia would activate a Russian preemptive plan to derail this endeavor.

The second context concerns domestic political developments in Russia, which are as complicated as they are nontransparent under a façade of monolithic stability. It has never been possible to establish with reasonable certainty how surges of activity on the Georgian front fit into the Byzantine intrigues around Putin's "throne," but it does seem that the ongoing reformatting of the power structure could generate both calibrated and spontaneous impacts. In hindsight, Putin's pronounced emphasis on demonstrating military muscle during 2007, from the resumed "strategic patrolling" by long-range aviation to the "Caucasian Frontier" exercises, may have been aimed to a significant degree at keeping the "top brass" out of the delicate decisionmaking on the transfer or non-transfer of power, which caused

internecine wars among Russia's special services. Since the unveiling of Dmitri Medvedev as Putin's chosen successor, the character of official discourse has drastically changed. The president-to-be not only avoids discussing urgent foreign policy and security matters, but the incumbent has also cut down on his confrontational rhetoric. This reluctance to stir up trouble probably means that for the time being Georgia is off the hook. Even after elections, however, the smooth execution of Putin's plan cannot be taken for granted. The disgruntled *siloviki*, who are effectively cut out of the mechanism connecting power and money, may try to test the new arrangement by triggering a high-profile local crisis, and Georgia could be an ideal target.

Even without such experiments, it is not at all clear how the duumvirate will work in real life. It remains to be seen whether Medvedev is going to assume the responsibilities of commander-in-chief or whether Putin is ready to get his hands dirty with problems like pension reform or the degradation of basic infrastructure. Regardless, the possibility remains that a change of economic fortune could cause a fast erosion of public support and rise in discontent. The "socially-oriented" president might then suddenly discover the need to reinvigorate his leadership by giving a thrashing to Russia's disrespectful neighbor.

## **Conclusion**

The pattern of relations between Russia and Georgia in the post-Soviet period, particularly since the Rose Revolution, has been shaped by a manipulation of conflict, which itself has gradually transformed underlying public attitudes. If, in Georgia, it is possible to blame Russia for all the country's economic ills and political messes, then in Russia Georgia is now perceived as a failed and hostile state. The Georgian leadership cultivates the idea that only Russia stands in the way of recovering Georgia's lost provinces and that only membership in NATO can overcome this interference. The Russian leadership believes that Georgian territorial integrity is a fictitious notion and that NATO encroachment into the Caucasus would constitute the crossing of a clearly marked red line. Furthermore, the recognition by the United States and key EU states of Kosovar independence has not prompted Russia to grant recognition to Abkhazia and/or incorporate South Ossetia, but it has established a precedent that would allow Moscow to take action of this sort if the issue of Georgia's accession to NATO turns into a practical proposition. A military escalation of the ensuing conflict could be contained and localized, but the damage to Russia's relationship with the West could be profound.

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