

Can Russia Win the Ideological Battle in Georgia?

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Georgia has been one of the most vocally independent-minded countries among the Soviet Union's successor states. As Georgia's ambitions to draw closer to Europe and the transatlantic community have grown, its relations with Russia have deteriorated. After the Rose Revolution, Russian-Georgian relations remained problematic due to Russia's continuing political, economic, and military support for the separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nonetheless, Georgia sought to maintain good relations with Russia, despite the evidence that various Russian political and military forces rejected Georgia's state-building project as contradictory to Russia's national interests.

Russia is uncomfortable with Georgia's democratic and independent nature, as well as with the West's close ties to a country within Moscow's "legitimate" sphere of influence. Moscow worries that the successful integration of Georgia into Euro-Atlantic structures may cause Russia to lose influence and credibility not only in the Caucasus, but throughout the post-Soviet space. Georgia has demonstrated in recent years that there can exist in the Caucasus a functioning modern democratic state, one in which the economy can develop without government interference and where corruption does not reign. An economically and politically stable Georgia, which might, in the long run, become a successful Eastern European country, can be a model for development that other post-Soviet states, as well as Caucasian republics within the Russian Federation, might emulate. To the Kremlin, this scenario is a dangerous, and potentially costly, zero sum game.

By invading Georgia in 2008 and recognizing Georgia's separatist regions, Russia secured two footholds for stationing military bases in Georgia. One obvious motivation for this action was to compel the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to think harder

about its plans for future enlargement. Russia is also anxious about the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, which aims to draw the six post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus closer to the EU by improving human rights, easing visa regulations, and ensuring energy security. By asserting a sphere of influence, strategists in Moscow hope to prompt a suitably deferential reaction from the West, including, perhaps, regional withdrawal.

While Russia's invasion did not result in such a retreat, and was in fact seen as a challenge to Euro-Atlantic security, it did not justify NATO intervention. Georgia's Western partners routinely turn a blind eye to the unequal confrontation between Russia and Georgia, allowing, in the words of Georgian analyst Alexander Rondeli, the "smell of oil and gas [to] prevail [...] over feelings of sympathy and understanding." Eastern and Central European countries, with their own fresh memories of imperialism, tend to be more sensitive to Georgia's problems with Russia and try to support its struggle for real independence and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, their voices typically carry less weight in European councils. While Georgia received extraordinary international support after the war, there is still a feeling that more energetic and effective Western support is vital for the survival of Georgian statehood.

Georgian society understands the reality of Western impotence in the face of Russian aggression in the Caucasus. The public also recognizes the strategic complexity of the situation and does not want to be seen as provoking a new global conflict. Georgians acknowledge that their country has suffered a military defeat against Russia and, in the aftermath of conflict, must contend with the painful experience of military occupation. There is also a sober realization in Georgia that, with two wars and the repercussions of the global financial crisis, the country will be a lesser priority for Barack Obama's administration than for its predecessor.

At the same time, as Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia notes, while the vast majority of the Georgian people emphatically assert their commitment to Western institutions and values, they also understand that these values have not sufficiently taken root in Georgia. Georgia is an aspiring democracy, not a consolidated one. This gives Russia hope that Georgia's ambition to become a Western democracy can yet be reversed, if not through force, than by other means of persuasion – what might be referred to in other contexts as "soft power." Georgia's polity and institutions have already survived the test of war with Russia. It is unlikely that Russia will be able to achieve its objectives by other means, as long as it chooses to play the role of military occupier and seeks to hamper Georgia from making its own foreign policy choices.

Georgian Security after the Russian Invasion

With 20 percent of the country's territory occupied and Russian provocations continuing, the risk that hostilities will resume is high. Russian analyst Pavel Felgenhauer argues that another Russian-Georgian war is inevitable, not only to finish the business of 2008, but because Moscow has a strategic need to create a land bridge to its forces in Armenia. Of particular concern are Russia's continuing attempts to portray Georgia as a confrontational and aggressive state with which all countries should interact more cautiously. Russian politicians and experts also occasionally make

statements designed to encourage the destruction of Georgia's statehood as such. In this situation, political and moral support for Georgia from the West is essential.

In this regard, Georgia welcomed the launch of the NATO-Georgia Commission, aimed at helping it rebuild after the Russian invasion and prepare for future membership in the alliance. Similar to a body established in 1997 to oversee NATO relations with Ukraine, the commission will support Georgia as it moves toward fulfilling the promise made at the April 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia will eventually become a NATO member. At NATO's 60th anniversary summit in April 2009, the alliance elaborated that the NATO-Georgia Commission will serve to maximize advice, assistance, and support for Georgia's reform efforts. An Annual National Program (ANP) will allow the alliance "to closely monitor" the reform process. The NATO statement also noted that "the build-up of Russia's military presence" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia "is of particular concern," and alliance leaders called on Russia "to reverse its recognition" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

It remains unclear how the Russian invasion has affected Georgia's bid for NATO membership. A year ago, Georgia appeared to be on the brink of becoming a NATO member. That is now far less likely given Russian actions and the onset of the economic crisis, which has caused many member states to rethink what they are willing and able to do. If NATO decides not to offer membership to Ukraine or Georgia relatively soon, the consequences could prove dramatic and unsettling for the region. Both Kyiv and Tbilisi would feel that they had been misled, while their neighbors would assume that NATO's expansion was at an end, at least for a long time to come. Moscow would seek to exploit this situation by presenting itself as the obvious alternative to the West, an effort that might prove effective.

Understanding this, Georgia's partners have been quick to address some of its postwar challenges. The United States led international aid efforts by rapidly committing more than \$1 billion. The European Commission has already pledged €500 million and asked member states to contribute an equal amount. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will make \$750 million available to Georgia's Central Bank in the form of a standby arrangement. Even the Asian Development Bank, which is heavily influenced by China, contributed \$40 million. A series of diplomatic meetings with NATO, the EU, and others is underway. All of these efforts and assistance have given Georgia visibility and helped to restore investor confidence.

An assessment of the Georgian armed forces after the August war has also helped Georgia's security partners determine priorities for military training, as well as the kind of equipment necessary for Georgia's homeland defense. According to earlier statements of U.S. officials, the United States was willing to train the Georgian armed forces with a focus on the defense of Georgia. However, later statements suggest that the United States is more focused on enhancing the expeditionary capabilities of Georgia's armed forces (in Afghanistan) than on training it for internal defense. That announcement is the most specific indication of how the United States plans to assist Georgia's postwar military reforms. It remains unclear, however, how a country that still faces such a severe security dilemma will be able to benefit meaningfully from these efforts.

Can Moscow Win the Ideological Battle in Georgia?

The Russian invasion of Georgia resulted in the total alienation of Georgia's population from Moscow. It will require an enormous effort over several generations to repair the damage. Moreover, after Russia's aggression, Georgia left the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the last post-Soviet structure with which it was associated. By driving Georgia from the CIS, Russia lost legitimacy and influence over Georgia, a situation that was exacerbated by the suspension of diplomatic ties.

Taking this into consideration, and noting the failure of "hard power" to change Georgia's pro-Western orientation, Russian authorities have recently begun to utilize so-called "soft power" in relations with Georgia. In general, Moscow has sought a new ideology or image that it could promote within neighboring states, including Georgia, in order to increase sympathies for Russia and to gradually build a single or unified cultural-economic space around itself. Two components of this ideology are Eastern Orthodoxy and a so-called "common historical heritage." According to proponents of this idea, Russia should adopt a new Georgia policy, one that would temper Moscow's passion for regime change in Tbilisi and instead employ direct outreach to the Georgian people. As examples of such "straight-to-the-people" approaches, Russian political analysts have cited President Barack Obama's video message congratulating Iranians on the holiday of Nowruz and his administration's easing of restrictions on travel and money transfers to Cuba. The goal of this new policy would be to prevent the further alienation of Georgian political elites from Russia and help pro-Russian (or at least, Russia-neutral) forces come to power during the next electoral cycle.

How realistic is such an approach? Before implementing a markedly different Georgia strategy, Kremlin officials should realize that any attempt to install a pro-Russian government in Tbilisi is futile. By recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian authorities made it practically impossible for anyone in Georgia to create a political bloc oriented toward Moscow that would be capable of garnering wide electoral support. Voter sympathy for Russia does not exist. This is not merely due to the Russian invasion of Georgian territory (though the sight of Russian tanks, military planes, and bombs had a powerful effect); the political differences are simply too great, and the elites in both countries are too accustomed to viewing each other as opponents instead of partners.

Moreover, Russia's leaders should realize that a generational and mental shift has been underway over the last 15 years. Soviet stereotypes of Georgians, shaped largely by popular film, no longer pertain (if they ever did). Unlike in many other post-Soviet states, Georgian society is not dominated by a *nomenklatura* that harbors pro-Russian tendencies. This segment of Georgian society was marginalized long ago; it plays no role in Georgian political life and is unlikely to do so in the future.

Georgia's modern elites are largely Western-educated people who became alienated by Russia's aggressive policies toward Georgia and who now consider Russia a key adversary. Most of them grew up with anti-Russian sentiments and perceive Russian-Georgian confrontation in ideological terms, as a clash between authoritarian, imperial Russia and a pro-Western democratic Georgia. This clash dominates current Georgian political dialogue.

Also, the Russian language is being driven out of Georgian education and culture. Children and young people know less and less Russian. Ever fewer are able to read even an elementary Russian text. In this way, Georgia has become excluded from the former Soviet space, in which the language of interethnic communication, the *lingua franca*, remains Russian.

Under these circumstances, the Kremlin's ambitions for a regime change that would install a pro-Moscow leader in Georgia are counterproductive. Nobody in Georgia will support a geopolitical reorientation of Georgia toward Russia, which would be perceived as a betrayal of the country's vital national interest. There are some in Moscow who hope that, if Georgian opposition leaders who claim they would engage in pragmatic dialogue with Russia come to power, the situation may change. If any of these politicians did come to power, though, Moscow would see none of the strategic changes in Georgian foreign policy for which it hopes. The Russian political elite sometimes forget that Georgia's opposition is hardly different from Saakashvili when it comes to foreign policy, almost across the board pro-American and strongly pro-Western. Sober analysis of Russian-Georgian relations over the last two decades suggests that there has never been an independent Georgian government that was acceptable to Russia, and it is unlikely that there will be one any time soon. Neither the Georgian people nor any Georgian leader will agree to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In fact, bitterness about the occupation of Georgia's territory is the most unifying factor in its politics. Denied the support of a pro-Moscow *nomenklatura*, the Kremlin cannot win the minds and souls of Georgians, and, as a result, it cannot hope to win its "ideological battle" in Georgia. For the foreseeable future, the views of Georgians and Russians regarding Georgia's trajectory and role in regional security arrangements will be irreconcilable. Taking into consideration Russia's occupation of 20 percent of internationally-recognized Georgian territory, it is not possible to expect any major improvements in Georgian-Russian relations.

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