

# Russia-Georgia Today: An Illusory Stability

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## **Introduction**

Both the frozen and unfrozen conflicts of the past two decades in post-Soviet Eurasia have undermined regional progress and cooperation and have negatively impacted broader European security. Weak states and war-torn societies threaten international stability and the lives of millions of people around the globe. The Caucasus has served as the location for a number of intractable and violent conflicts, all of which have jeopardized or complicated efforts to establish sovereign states, develop political institutions, and achieve economic and social reforms. While the region remains in a democratic transition period, such conflicts are a source of insecurity. Consequently, instability and the potential for conflict in the resource-rich region matter to the international community.

Over two years have passed since the signing of the French-brokered ceasefire between Russia and Georgia that marked an end to large-scale hostilities between the two warring states. Yet, a lasting peace settlement remains a distant prospect, and the ongoing conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi continues to profoundly affect political and economic development in the region. While Russian troops continue to hold Georgian territories that the Kremlin agreed to vacate as part of a formal cease fire, large numbers of people, many of whom were displaced after the conflict, continue to live a precarious existence. Positions remain intransigent, insecurity and a lack of trust continue to underpin attitudes, and belligerent rhetoric reinforces a conflict dynamic that leaves little room for engagement with the other side, let alone compromise. While a cease-fire remains in effect, several hundred thousand refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have yet to return home. As war produced a new generation of IDPs in Georgia, there is a common view that sooner or later another conflict is inevitable. While the continuation of the fighting might have negative immediate and long-term consequences for all parties and civilian populations within the region, the goal of sustainable peace and justice with regard to Georgia's conflicts has yet to be discussed.

## **Stabilization Efforts of International Actors and Attempts at a Russo-Georgian Rapprochement**

Georgia has the dubious privilege of being one of the few countries in the world where the West and Russia are in direct competition. While neither the West nor Russia considers the unresolved conflict in Georgia as crucial to their bilateral relationship, they cannot seem to find a common understanding and mutual approach to stabilizing the South Caucasus region. The United States under Barack Obama has moved away from the insistent advancement of its goals (including enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and looks at everything through the filter of its own objectives in Afghanistan, which are frequently linked to U.S. domestic policy. The European Union has ambitions to play an influential role in Georgia, but there are limitations given the deeply divergent interests and positions of member states (especially on relations with Moscow) and the multitude of institutional players. Some say both Washington and Brussels have agreed with Moscow to disagree over Georgia but have otherwise wished to normalize relations.

With the international community focused on “resetting” relations with Russia and embracing the Kremlin, the U.S.-Russian and EU-Russian relationships have been replaced with cordiality, but this has not changed anything with respect to the poisonous Russian-Georgian relationship. Though Western leaders from time to time have raised this issue in talks with Russia, they have been reluctant to confront Moscow over the fulfillment of the cease-fire plan. The West continues to unequivocally support Georgia’s territorial integrity and sometimes even calls for the de-occupation of Georgia, but apparently the focus remains on Russia not being allowed to redraw international boundaries in Eurasia by using military force than to assist Tbilisi in finding durable solutions to the Russian-Georgian conflict. While postwar negotiations in Geneva continue, the conflicts in Georgia remain unresolved and their settlement remains elusive.

While Georgia’s preoccupation with the Russian occupation incapacitates its leaders in responding to other challenges the country faces, both the United States and Europe have exerted pressure on Tbilisi to increase its efforts at regional cooperation and to show strategic patience vis-à-vis Russia. At the same time, despite the Georgian public’s fear that change in the foreign policy priorities of the new administration affects U.S. relations with Georgia, U.S. policy toward the country has remained largely the same, with President Obama expressing his support for Georgia’s territorial integrity. A recent cascade of visits by high-ranking Western officials to Tbilisi and other East European capitals gave the impression that Georgia was not sacrificed and raised questions about whether the West would push to have the cease-fire plan fully honored. The main message that Tbilisi received during these visits was that regardless of all the difficulties, and notwithstanding the Kremlin’s well-known stance that it would not negotiate with Georgia’s current leadership, Georgia should engage in constructive talks with Russia.

While a normalization of relations between Tbilisi and Moscow is definitely needed, it is still not clear how Tbilisi could convince Moscow to sit down at the

negotiation table without compromising its vital national interests. Georgia has relatively few options available to it, in terms of changing the dynamics of its relationship with Russia so long as the current leadership in both countries remains in place, given their deep political and ideological differences and mutual personal hatred. Potential negotiations are further complicated by Moscow as Russian diplomacy is still trying to create an imaginary “new reality” in which two breakaway “sovereign republics” have become independent nations under the tutelage of the Kremlin. Russia knows that in the foreseeable future neither Georgia nor the international community will accept the forcible redrawing of borders based on an ethnic cleansing campaign and unilateral declarations of secession. However, its main goal at this stage is not to resolve the conflicts in Georgia but to maintain the unstable status quo and to use these conflicts as a lever of pressure against Georgia.

At the same time, Russian policymakers under the leadership of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin claim that Georgia can have a decent relationship with Russia as long as Tbilisi withdraws its application to NATO and terminates its de facto alliance with the United States. Russia is also hinting to Georgia that it will assist Tbilisi in resolving its conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia with a face-saving solution, but Moscow also demands that the Georgian public dispose of President Mikheil Saakashvili and his Western orientation. In order to help achieve regime change in Tbilisi, Russian leaders support those Georgians who promise to deliver their country over to the Kremlin in exchange for Russian support in bringing them to power.

As long as Russia’s regime change policy toward Georgia remains unsuccessful, decision makers in Moscow cannot afford to acknowledge it publicly. They have also failed to understand that the vector of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration and the aspiration to restore territorial integrity are not Saakashvili’s personal ideas, but the result of a clear public consensus. As recent public opinion polls conducted in Georgia by the U.S.-based International Republican Institute suggest, while many Georgians clearly see shortcomings in their own leadership and the institutional weaknesses of the Georgian state, they strongly support the democratic transformation of Georgia, its devotion to the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration, and the government’s Western-leaning political agenda. According to the same survey, while 83 percent of Georgians consider Russia to be the country’s greatest security threat and they also consider NATO/EU membership to be important, 89 percent still consider territorial integrity to be one of the country’s top two most important issues (together with job creation).<sup>1</sup> Such data suggests that between Tbilisi and Moscow a clear mismatch of political and security perceptions exists and that prospects for direct negotiations that exclude international mediators are grim.

### **IDPs as a Political Factor in Georgian Politics**

A public perception prevails in the West that Georgia’s poor decision making and weak political institutions were sources of its 2008 conflict with Russia. Meanwhile, the role of

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<sup>1</sup> For the full survey data, see <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-releases-survey-georgian-public-opinion-2>.

IDPs as a permanent force in mobilizing Georgian politics is usually overlooked. As Moscow and Tbilisi place their bids on a fruitless policy of dragging out negotiations, however, IDPs have emerged as a potential new lever of influence for Tbilisi in its protracted negotiations with Russia over a conflict-resolution plan.

IDPs from Abkhazia and South Ossetia exert a strong political and moral influence on Georgian politics and the decision-making process. They are actively involved in the Georgian NGO sector and represent a vibrant part of Georgian society. IDPs have their own government in exile, which functions as an assistance network for displaced persons from the conflict zones. The creation of a government-in-exile has allowed many displaced persons not only to keep their jobs but also to influence the political process within Georgia. While IDP-related issues dominate most of the Georgian political parties' agendas, IDPs frustrated by the inability of the government to ensure their return have decided to create their own political party called *Chven Tviton* (On Our Own). During the most recent parliamentary elections, the party managed to get several of its candidates elected and secured the nomination of its leader for the post of deputy parliamentary chairman. IDP representatives occupy many high-level posts in different Georgian ministries, including the "power" ministries and, as is currently the case, the Ministry of Economy and Development. One opposition leader, Irakly Alasania, who is considered to be a real contender for the presidential post has strong IDP ties. This and other examples of IDPs' political activities suggest that their opinions carry a lot of weight and cannot be neglected.

With several hundred thousand Georgian IDPs and refugees living resentfully in different parts of the country or other foreign lands, pressure on Saakashvili and other Georgian political leaders is high. One of the reasons why restoring the country's territorial integrity has remained one of the government's top policy priorities is that it has been confronted with demonstrations by IDPs who have become increasingly critical of the Georgian government, as well as of international organizations, because of their perceived incapacity to achieve progress in creating conditions for repatriation.

As the vast majority of IDPs remain committed to returning to their permanent residences, the most pressing human rights issue remains the inability of the Georgian government and the international community to facilitate their return home and to help them regain their lost properties. The situation is further aggravated as the living conditions and economic situation of many IDPs are disadvantageous. The unemployment rate among IDPs is high; in some cases, their existence depends upon state allowances and international humanitarian assistance. Although the Georgian government, with the active assistance of international NGOs, has started to improve the living conditions of IDPs, prospects for returning to their homes are as obscure as ever.

A gloomy future, coupled with the suffering and deprivation within IDP communities, creates a strong desire for revenge, as IDPs are refused the right to return home on the basis of their ethnicity. The embittered IDPs know firsthand how their rivals have used force to achieve their aims. Accordingly, after the Russia-Georgia war, they inevitably came to believe that only brute force triumphs and that negotiated

settlements are impossible except from a position of military strength. While believing that military action is necessary for their grievances to be redressed, the group fiercely opposes any deal with Russia that does not include provisions for return. In such circumstances, any hope that Georgia can engage in a durable peace process directly with Russia exclusive of IDPs' demands are slim.

## **Conclusion**

History shows that imposed solutions are generally less stable than negotiated ones, especially in a war-torn region like the Caucasus where one precedent creates another. The aim of Russian leaders to sell the present status quo in Georgia as a reality in fact only further instigates the "Balkanization" process currently underway in the region. Although Georgians regularly blame Russia for a lack of progress on the IDP issue, Moscow claims that it has failed to persuade its proxy regimes to accept international demands concerning the return of refugees. Moreover, Moscow's political advisers continue to underestimate the ability of Georgian IDPs to mobilize Georgian public opinion against Russia and to seek justice. For Tbilisi, the normalization of Russo-Georgian relations firstly means talks on the return of all displaced persons back to their homes and the restoration of their property rights, as well as on other issues related to bilateral relations, including political, economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian aspects. However, there seems as yet little indication that Moscow and the separatist regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali are prepared to countenance the return of IDPs and refugees driven out during the conflict. The Geneva talks sponsored by the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the EU have gone almost nowhere as Moscow insists that the future status of the breakaway regions must be resolved before IDPs return. Russia also actively blocks international efforts to create the security and economic conditions needed to enable the return of IDPs, as the Kremlin knows that if the IDPs return Moscow may lose influence over the separatist regions since a majority of original populations may support peaceful reunification with the rest of Georgia.

As long as the Russian state relies on proxy regimes and military force to ensure a "Pax Russica," civilians in conflict areas continue to pay the price of power politics through threats to their safety and welfare. Policymakers in Moscow should realize that neglecting fundamental principles of international humanitarian law may spark social and political discontent in Georgia, which can lead to unintended consequences. As long as a status quo based on injustice prevails, there will be no peace and stability in the Caucasus or any real hope for Russia-Georgia rapprochement.

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