

Georgian Perceptions of the North Caucasus and of U.S.-Russian Relations

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 148
May 2011

George Khelashvili
Tbilisi State University

Introduction

Georgian-Russian relations have been frozen since the August 2008 war. This “freeze” resembles the situation of other “frozen” conflicts that have existed in the Caucasus since the 1990s. Indeed, the Georgian-Russian conflict has little chance for settlement in the foreseeable future, while containing vast potential for a renewed violent outbreak. What keeps the situation from thawing? Are there any signs that the underlying differences of the two countries’ positions are easing? The main argument of this paper is that neither the Georgian nor Russian government has changed its position in the conflict or its underlying assumptions about regional politics – this situation sets the “frozen” conflict on an unavoidable collision course over the next few years. The apparent stabilization of Georgian-Russian tensions is predicated on the recent U.S.-Russian rapprochement rather than on any significant change in Georgian-Russian relations. Underlying causes as well as perceptions of the conflict remain unchanged and are fraught with the danger of a resumption in hostilities in the case of a cooling down of U.S.-Russian relations. Renewed Georgian-Russian hostilities would at best postpone any meaningful discussion about the new European architecture.

In addition to Russian intransigence toward Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, this danger is also due to a certain angle entertained by the current Georgian leadership in its confrontation with Russia as a response to the obvious power asymmetry between the two countries. First, Tbilisi launched a successful diplomatic offensive to portray Russia as an aggressor and “occupant” of Georgian breakaway territories. Second, the Georgian government cautiously sought to undermine Russia’s authority in the North Caucasus. Third, Saakashvili apparently hoped (and tentatively tried) to re-open the rift in U.S.-Russian relations in order to capitalize on the two great powers’ differences. This paper examines underlying assumptions and possible implications of the last two approaches.

Georgia and the North Caucasus: A New Potential Irritant for Moscow

Since the war of August 2008, the increased presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has posed a direct military threat to Georgian independence and the survival of Saakashvili's government. No direct confrontation between Georgian and Russian, Abkhazian, or South Ossetian troops has happened. All sides have displayed a certain prudence, unlike the period preceding the conflict in 2008. The potential *casus belli*, however, may now be shifting from the southern to the northern slopes of the Caucasus Range.

Overall, Russian-Georgian diplomatic relations remain tense. Georgia has accused Russia of occupying its territories, a view that has been subsequently shared by U.S. and EU officials. This largely successful rhetorical and diplomatic offensive has been supplemented by a rhetorical appeal to the peoples of the North Caucasus. Saakashvili has publicly described these peoples as living in a "ghetto" under the authority of "feudal lords." To elaborate, Georgia's diplomatic policy in the North Caucasus against Russia has been evident in several related ways:

- The Georgian government significantly eased visa procedures for North Caucasians through the re-opened Kazbegi-Zemo Larsi border crossing in the north of Georgia. This easing applies to all residents of the "ethnic" republics of the North Caucasus, including Chechnya. This policy decision was officially explained by a "desire to restore [Georgia's] traditional relations with [its] neighboring peoples."
- Georgia invested significant amounts of resources to restore broadcasting of a Russian-language TV channel, *Kanal PIK* ("First Caucasus News"), aimed at Russia's Caucasian republics and seeking to "correct" the negative image of Georgia as presented by Russian news channels. A previous attempt to establish such a channel was unsuccessful after the presumed intervention of Gazprom, which reportedly bought nearly all of the new satellite's broadcast space.
- In May 2011, the Georgian Parliament officially recognized the Circassian genocide, committed by the Czarist Empire in the 19th century.
- The Georgian government, together with academic institutions and think tanks closely associated with the government, established contacts with North Caucasian civic movement leaders. A group of ethnic Dido activists from Dagestan (about 15,000 Didos live there) even appealed to the Georgian parliament with a request to incorporate them within Georgia's jurisdiction. A series of academic conferences on the question of the Circassian genocide was held in association with the conservative U.S.-based Jamestown Foundation.

- Saakashvili has recently emphasized his sympathy toward the idea of a so-called "common Caucasian home," which had previously been embraced by the first Georgian nationalist president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. These steps seem to be coordinated and represent aspects of a single approach.

However, the Georgian government's actions have little policy thinking behind them. Georgia has little, if any, chance of political success in the North Caucasus. North Caucasians – particularly in western provinces, such as Adyghea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachai-Cherkessia – became rather hostile to Georgians after the conflict in Abkhazia during 1992-93. Moreover, they became skeptical of Georgia's ability to resist Russia and help the North Caucasian people in their struggle with Moscow after the August 2008 war. Furthermore, it is not nationalism but Islamic fundamentalism that is a major mover of North Caucasian, anti-Russian sentiments. These factors leave little room to maneuver for Tbilisi, which counts on a resurgence of nationalist sentiments among Russia's southern republics.

Relations with the North Caucasus have been a major security issue for Georgia ever since its independence. The conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are rooted not only in Georgia's relations with its minorities but also with these minorities' relations with their northern kin (Abkhaz with Circassians, Kabardians, and Adygheans; South Ossetians with North Ossetians). The Georgian government's policy toward the North Caucasus oscillates between total neglect and awkward attempts at rapprochement, including the latest recognition of the Circassian genocide. A persuasive explanation for the Georgian government's approach to the North Caucasus lies with Tbilisi's overall perception of the fundamental nature of relations between Russia and the West, the United States in particular (as explained below).

It is not the purpose of this brief paper to discuss the merits and faults of the Georgian government's approach to the North Caucasus and Russia. The North Caucasus is not an aim in Georgia's policy but rather an instrument to advance its foreign policy agenda. The change of tone toward the peoples of the Caucasus is a derivative of Georgia's overall policy of antagonizing the U.S.-Russia relationship. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Tbilisi's North Caucasian policy is a manifestation of a larger pattern: Tbilisi perseveres in its assumptions about the character of the contemporary international system and of bilateral U.S.-Russian relations. These assumptions will be discussed in the next section. They are as nebulous and questionable as they were before August 2008. The precarious "calm" in the Caucasus holds only due to the tentative U.S.-Russia "reset" and does not provide a basis for conflict resolution or durable peace.

Comparative Perspectives: Georgian Perceptions of U.S.-Russian Relations

At first glance, Saakashvili's policy toward Russia is a mere extension and radicalization of former President Eduard Shevardnadze's insubordination to Moscow. However, there appears to be a fundamental difference between the two leaders' understanding of Russia and its relations with the outside world. More specifically, the current Georgian

government's worldview, including its perspective on the North Caucasus, stems from its peculiar understanding of the fundamental nature of U.S.-Russian relations.

It is true that Shevardnadze tried persistently to insulate Georgia from Russian influence, especially after 1995, when his policy of rapprochement with Russia spectacularly failed (in exchange, he managed to attract American political support and loyalty for Georgia). Shevardnadze believed there was an intrinsic disagreement and even conflict between Russia and the United States. He also well understood the existing asymmetry of power between Russia and the United States, especially evident during Russia's weakness in the 1990s. Yet, Shevardnadze realized that a belligerent Russia, however weak in comparison with the United States, posed an overwhelming danger for Georgian independence and sovereignty. Therefore, Shevardnadze tried not to establish Georgia as an irritant in U.S.-Russian relations. He managed to keep Vladimir Putin's Russia at bay and secure expansion of Georgia's political autonomy from Moscow at the same time, with significant U.S. material and political support.

Saakashvili, on the other hand, has based his political calculations on the asymmetry of power between the United States and Russia. According to this calculation, Georgia was supposed to be on the side of a more powerful state with the promise of material and political windfall from the "wave of the future." Like Shevardnadze, Saakashvili assumed a lingering conflict between Moscow and Washington. In contrast, however, Saakashvili's policy was aimed at widening this perceived rift between the United States and Russia, with the vague hope that Georgia could capitalize on it.

In so doing, Saakashvili disregarded two essential factors that Shevardnadze never failed to appreciate. First, he neglected the difference in the regional reach of the two powers, which gave Russia an advantage over the United States in exercising its military and economic power in its immediate vicinity. Second, Saakashvili underestimated the dangers of irritating Russia, even under the circumstances of the latter's weakness vis-à-vis the United States. Saakashvili's "irritation" policy was successful with the administration of George W. Bush, with tragic consequences. As for President Barack Obama's administration, Saakashvili can barely conceal his disappointment with the Democrats, particularly after Washington's refusal to hand Georgia so-called "defensive weapons." The underestimation of the dangers emanating from a renewed U.S.-Russian rift is obvious and potentially fatal for Georgia's existence as a united and independent state.

Conclusion, Dangers, and Implications for Designing a New European Security Architecture

Failed assessments already led to one catastrophe. Following the August 2008 war, Saakashvili has continued "the line" – neither submitting to implicit and explicit Russian demands nor ceasing Georgia's role as an irritant in U.S.-Russian relations. Tbilisi's active policy toward the North Caucasus, as a means to aggravate the "Georgian question" in U.S.-Russian relations, is yet another manifestation of the persistence of assumptions that underpin Saakashvili's policy toward the United States

and Russia. The relative calm in the Caucasus over the past two years is predicated on Russia's acquiescence to Washington's "reset" policy and relative insignificance of Georgia for Russia's overall foreign policy, not on a fundamental improvement of the security situation.

It is true that Saakashvili has little chance to improve relations with Moscow, even at the expense of significant political concessions. He is also afraid that any of his potential successors would compromise Georgian sovereignty under Russian political, economic, and military pressure. Russian intransigence toward Saakashvili is more than obvious, too. These factors leave the whole process of conflict resolution between the two countries at an impasse. This situation is dangerous.

Despite Saakashvili's perceptions, Moscow's acquiescence to Washington is not caused by the existing asymmetry of power between the two states. Rather, this acquiescence is caused by a temporary absence of the ideological need to re-open a confrontation with Washington and hopes about renegotiating European security agreements. This confrontation may be renewed in the event of a breakdown in arms control or European security negotiations, or an increase in the domestic legitimacy of Putin's power at any time. Such a possibility is particularly obvious in the context of a worsening situation in the North Caucasus and interethnic relations in Moscow. Georgian meddling in this issue exacerbates the situation even further. This circumstance is rather ironic because the North Caucasus provide a logical point of convergence of Georgian and Russian security interests in terms of regional peace and stability.

Unfortunately, the current situation in the North Caucasus may provide a very expedient pretext for Russia's renewed belligerence toward Georgia. This was already the case when Chechen mercenaries found refuge in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge a decade ago. In the case of a renewed Georgian-Russian confrontation, U.S.-Russian relations may deteriorate again, much to Saakashvili's pleasure, but this would not rescue Tbilisi from the undesired repercussions of such a rift. Misguided hopes associated with a U.S.-Russian conflict may play the role of a self-fulfilling prophecy, fundamentally undermining the current precarious *modus vivendi* between Russia and the West.