

Georgia Again in Putin's Shadow

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Introduction

As the government of Georgia continues its quest for economic modernization and admission into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU), it must first normalize relations with the Russian Federation to facilitate achievement of these long-term goals. The nation must weigh the benefits of a patient short- and medium-term policy of non-alignment versus an aggressive policy of immediate Western integration. This will be the most effective path for Georgia to improve its citizens' living conditions while ensuring physical security along its borders, which are currently areas of heightened tension. The animosity between the Russian and Georgian governments is counter-productive for both nations, though much more so for the Georgian populace. Georgia has the most to gain from rapprochement, and therefore should initiate the dialogue, ensuring that Russian withdrawal from South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not preconditions for negotiations.

The recommendations put forth in this essay will likely be anathema to many citizens of Georgia, and especially to those in the Georgian political sphere. The events that have transpired and sacrifices that have been made in Abkhazia and South Ossetia can only truly be appreciated by the citizens directly involved. Distaste for Russia among the Georgian people is understandable. Most sovereign nations have no appetite for foreign advice involving their internal affairs, but Georgia must recognize and consider the factors identified below related to their security situation, even if they choose not to act.

Perhaps the most notable facts to consider are the following:

- Vladimir Putin has been elected to the Russian presidency
- Iran is becoming more unstable
- No nation has provided Georgia with security guarantees
- The EU and Turkey are too energy dependent on Russia, and are economically and politically unwilling to significantly pressure their trade partner.

With respect to Georgian hopes for assistance from the United States, the U.S. has no desire to aggressively antagonize Russia over Georgian matters. Notably, the most

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significant outcome of the meeting between U.S. President Barack Obama and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili at the White House on 31 January 2012 was a commitment to studying a free trade agreement between the two nations. This identical commitment had been made three years earlier in the United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, announced on 9 January 2009. There were no U.S. security guarantees resulting from the visit. The United States is also reluctant to antagonize Russia for other reasons. The U.S. needs Russia to ferry astronauts and supplies to the International Space Station. Washington is pursuing economic interests in Russia resulting from Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization, including repealing the Jackson-Vanik Act. In addition to the effort to "reset" U.S.–Russia relations, the U.S. is also facing its own financial challenges, and the military is shifting some of its focus from Europe to the Pacific. The United States has great respect for Georgia and its leadership, but has broader strategic interests that must be considered. Noting these factors (and others that are not discussed here), Georgia must recognize the need to take steps to reduce tensions with Russia if they hope to achieve an atmosphere of security and improved economic vitality.

What Can Georgia Do?

There are several immediate, simple, and inexpensive options available to Georgia to encourage détente with Russia. These efforts will not compromise Georgian sovereignty and may actually improve Georgia's relationships with Western governments, since any endeavor that seeks to lessen friction in the Caucasus would be viewed favorably by EU and U.S. politicians. Options that could be considered include:

- Deemphasize the role played by the North Caucasus in Georgian politics
- Positively promote the 2014 Sochi Olympics
- Assuage Russian anxieties about the possibility of NATO expansion
- Reduce the level of overt anti-Russian rhetoric in public statements, official documents, and parliamentary actions
- Lower the priority of resolving Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence in national politics.

Georgia does not need to become a "cheerleader" for Russia, but they do require a functional relationship with their northern neighbor if they are to achieve their full potential.

The North Caucasus Strategy

The U.S. administration highlighted Georgia's strategy toward the North Caucasus as an area of concern both in 2011 and 2012, when LTG (Ret.) James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, briefed the U.S. Congress that Georgia's approach to the region was increasing tensions in the Caucasus and increasing Russian suspicions regarding Georgia's intentions. Georgia assuredly recognizes Russian sensitivities concerning the region. As recently as 2010, some estimates claim that there were as many as 1700 Russian national casualties in the North Caucasus. Any Georgian outreach efforts that serve

to isolate citizens of Chechnya, Dagestan, Balkaria, and other regions from the remainder of Russia—such as Georgia’s policy of allowing visa-free travel *only* for North Caucasians—could be perceived as intended to increase instability in Russia. The short-term economic benefit associated with increased travel will not likely outweigh the strategic costs of collapsed diplomacy.

Promotion of the 2014 Sochi Olympics

It is widely accepted that Vladimir Putin considers the effective execution of Russian-hosted international events a key part of his strategy to improve the Russian Federation’s standing in global opinion. He stated this in a lengthy, personally-penned article on foreign policy published in *RIA Novosti* on 4 March 2012, shortly before the Russian presidential election. There are several high visibility events scheduled over the next six years of Putin’s presidency, but because of its close proximity to Abkhazia, Sochi has attracted the most interest in Georgia. After initially supporting Russia’s bid for the 2014 Winter Olympics, Georgia has subsequently consistently and publicly alleged that Russia is pillaging the resources of Abkhazia to prepare Sochi for the games. Though Georgia’s sudden defense of Abkhazian environmental interests is admirable, politicizing the Olympics will most likely backfire. Georgian opposition will not cause any nation to abandon the games, and it will provide Russia with ammunition to launch accusations at Georgia if there are any security challenges at the games.

Ease Russian Concerns about NATO Expansion

Putin addressed the issues of NATO expansion and the United States’ missile defense plan in his previously mentioned foreign policy article, written at the end of his presidential campaign. He indicated that NATO expansion undermines Russian security and global stability. Georgia should not push its accession agenda at near-term NATO summits. Instead, Georgia should consider one of two steps in relation to NATO accession. It should either announce that it is reviewing its NATO membership plans, or it should simply quietly let the issue rest for a few years. In either case, Georgia will not renounce their intent to eventually join NATO, but merely reduce the pace of overt steps on the path toward full membership, steps that stoke Russian anxiety. Since most analysts agree that NATO membership is much further away than Georgia desires, there is no risk of slowing down its pursuit of accession to NATO. It will potentially come someday. But the facts on the ground bear out the reality that Georgia’s process has already been slowed, and this is not a bad thing, either for NATO or for Georgia. There is a benefit to reduced animosity between Georgia and Russia, yet slowing the pace poses no risk to Georgia’s eventual accession to NATO membership.

Reduce Anti-Russian Rhetoric

The recommendation to reduce the level of overt anti-Russian rhetoric in Georgian media and government statements does not require Georgia to openly promote Russia. Rather, Georgia should choose its forums appropriately to air grievances against its

much larger neighbor. It is virtually impossible to read public statements from Georgian officials without finding some derogatory comment or indirect taunt directed at Moscow. The National Security Concept of Georgia, passed by the Georgian Parliament in December 2011, is peppered with negative references to the Russian Federation. The parliament even went so far as to pass a resolution in May 2011 recognizing a Russian genocide against Circassians in the 1800s. Clearly there was nothing to gain from this official recognition but increased Russian anger. Repeated Georgian attempts to humiliate Russia internationally will be no more effective now than they have been in the past, so they must be reduced.

Reduce Focus on South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The final recommendation offered here is that Georgia must place less emphasis on resolving the question of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This will clearly be the most difficult aspect of reengagement, as the emotional scars related to these conflicts are fresh. These territorial disputes are an impediment not only to Russian relations, but also to EU and NATO accession. If Georgia were to pause its accession strategy, or cede full independence altogether to these regions, it would eliminate the border dispute, and perhaps pave a more expeditious path to eventual admission into either NATO or the EU. Ceding these territories does not mean they will never return to Georgia. But, for the immediate future, the territories do not wish to be part of Georgia, and neither force nor diplomacy will resolve this. Between 1801 and today, with the possible exception of the 1918–21 period, Georgia never had effective control of these regions. Few (if any) ethnic Georgians currently reside in the territories, and it is questionable whether they would choose to return if given the opportunity. Georgia should prioritize Russian engagement above Russian de-occupation.

Conclusion

Russia has committed significant atrocities against the Georgian nation. Hundreds of thousands of citizens have been displaced since the 1990s, and thousands have been killed or wounded on all sides since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Despite these offenses, Georgia has to look forward rather than back, and recognize that they remain in the shadow of Putin and the Russian Federation. Their geographic location requires diplomatic nuance and skill that many others may never have to achieve. Georgia has no international security guarantees, and is signatory to no mutual defense agreements. Though the election of Ivanishvili to the post of Prime Minister may be a step in the right direction, there is much work to be done. Putin's reign as president for another six to twelve years likely ensures that the undesirable status quo of insecurity in Tbilisi will continue, unless positive overtures from Georgia are implemented. Georgia should act immediately. Georgia's progress and achievements have been remarkable since independence, and they will become nothing short of impressive if they can walk the fine line between Russian engagement and Western aspiration. Given what they have achieved to date, we should not discount their chances.