

CONNECTIONS

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Russia's View of Its Relations with Georgia after the 2012 Elections: Implications for Regional Stability

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the impact of political developments in Georgia since the 2012 parliamentary elections on Russo-Georgian relations. First, the authors examine the effect of changes in Georgia's politics towards the Caucasus, Russia and the Euro-Atlantic region. Second, the authors analyze the opportunities for improving Russo-Georgian relations through studying the three following aspects of this bilateral relationship: creation of common economic space between Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia; transformation of the Georgian North Caucasus Policy and its shift towards cooperation with Moscow; and implications of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration for the regional security. The article suggests that Russo-Georgian relations are not doomed to be strained and have the potential for improvement.

Keywords: Russo-Georgian relations; Georgian domestic policy; South Ossetia; Abkhazia; international relations in the Caucasus.

In October 2012 Georgia saw a change of power. Since that time Russia and Georgia have broken the stalemate in their relations, which have been normalizing despite the skepticism coming from both sides.¹ A political dialogue has been in progress between the two states. Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin has been holding regular meetings with the Georgian Prime Minister's Special Representative in Relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze. The hostile rhetoric from both sides has significantly diminished. Back on the Russian market are traditional Georgian goods, and the influx of Russian tourists in Georgia has grown by 40%. Amendments to the Law on Occupied Territories are under discussion in the Georgian parliament. It is expected that visits to Abkhazia and South Ossetia made by Russian citizens without Georgia's permission for the first time will be decriminalized. Additionally, contacts between the two

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¹ Nikolai Silaev and Andrei Sushentsov, *Georgia After the Elections and Prospects for Russo-Georgian Relations* (Moscow: MGIMO, 2012).

countries in the cultural sphere have intensified, and the scientific communities of Russia and Georgia have been actively interacting.

Before the Sochi Olympic Games 2014 Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili offered assistance to Moscow in providing security during the event. The detention of Mikhail Kadiev, Rizvan Omarov² and Yusup Lakaev, the suspects of murdering of some Russian officials, could also be seen as a result of cooperation between Georgia and Russia on security issues. This cooperation is especially important with Russian President Vladimir Putin having said in 2013 that the efficiency of a joint terrorism counter-action may be the first step towards restoring visa-free regime between the two countries.³

Naturally, these symptoms of rapprochement in the Russo-Georgian relations are combined with some serious obstacles. The latter are inevitable taking into consideration the long period that Moscow and Tbilisi had been at loggerheads. Nonetheless, the general dynamics of the bilateral relationship today is positive. The purpose of this paper is to analyze, why the normalization of these relations came so late and in what way it may affect both the Russo-Georgian relations and the regional security.

A Deferred Normalization

It has taken more than four years for conditions to ripen enough politically to finally raise the question of possible normalization of Russo-Georgian relations damaged by the August conflict 2008 between Georgia and South Ossetia. On August 8 in violation of international treaties Georgian leader Mikhail Saakashvili launched an artillery and ground assault on the breakaway region of Tskhinvali near the Russian border. Under its peacekeeping mandate, Moscow responded with a military campaign to coerce Georgia into ceasing its operations. After five days of hostilities Russian forces expelled the Georgian troops from South Ossetia. In order to prevent further attempts by Tbilisi to capture Tskhinvali by force, Russia decided to recognize South Ossetia as an independent state and to provide it with military deterrence capabilities.

Moscow believed that coming to any agreement with Mikhail Saakashvili was impossible. In the Russian leadership's eyes he became notorious for failing to keep his word. The most striking—although not the only—example of this was the shelling of Tskhinvali on 8 August in 2008 several hours after he had announced a unilateral ceasefire on Georgian television. Had Moscow started relations with Georgia afresh, would there be any guarantee that this will not happen again? At the same time Georgia was also giving contradictory signals, and discerning the general logic of its policy was impossible. Saakashvili made some statements that could be considered encouraging. For instance, he spoke in favor of dialogue with Russia and promised not to use force against

² “Moscow Demands Extradition of the Detained Terrorist from Georgia,” *Georgia Times*, 17 June 2013, <http://www.georgiatimes.info/news/91797.html> (in Russian).

³ “Visit to the *Russia Today* Channel,” official site of the President of Russia, 11 June 2013, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/18319> (in Russian).

Abkhazia or South Ossetia, he promised from the podium of the European Parliament.⁴ However, in the wider perspective of the Georgian government policies these speeches were hardly convincing, and shortly after the call for dialogue, Saakashvili claimed that Russia's sole goal was to "swallow Georgia."⁵

While the Georgian government's State Strategy on Occupied Territories was intended to expand contacts with the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the adoption of this strategy was followed by imposing restrictions on interaction between people of Tbilisi, Tskhinvali and Sukhumi and on activities of NGOs in the two republics.

In this climate of uncertainty Russia had no intention to bring up the agenda from before the August conflict within neither the European international politics arena nor the post-Soviet space. Moscow's response to the NATO military exercise in Georgia in May 2009 was rather sharp. Russia strongly objected to any Georgia – NATO interaction as if there had not been a war in August 2008 or a tragic lead-up to the conflict.⁶ For a year and a half the Georgian president was not welcomed in Europe and in Washington, which was an obvious sign of isolation – not of Georgia, but of its leader. Would it have been wise on Russia's part to act to end Saakashvili's isolation? These international political circumstances pushed Moscow to bide its time.

The authors of this paper suggest that there is no predetermined outcome in the further development of Russo-Georgian relations. The two countries are not doomed to confrontation. It took long time for a military conflict to break out and the diplomatic relations between two countries to break down. Today a number of obstacles, which appear insurmountable, remain hindering normalization of Russo-Georgian relations. Yet, resources for improving relations exist. Contacts between the societies of the two countries continue, and the political enmity has not affected the relations between the people of Russia and Georgia. Both sides share the impression that this ongoing estrangement is abnormal.

The changing political situation in Georgia in autumn 2012 brought the Georgian Dream opposition coalition to power. The new government of Bidzina Ivanishvili, and subsequently Irakli Garibashvili, has announced that one of its priorities is revising the political course of the country's previous leadership towards Russia. Despite the clear difficulties that the new Georgian government faces and will continue to face, a window of opportunity has opened to normalize relations with Russia.

⁴ "Georgia's Saakashvili Pledges Peaceful Solution to Dispute with Russia," official site of the European Parliament, 23 November 2010, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20101122FCS94327/7/html/Georgia%27s-Saakashvili-pledges-peaceful-solution-to-dispute-with-Russia> (in Russian).

⁵ Nestan Charkviani, "Georgian MFA: Moscow Meant to Misunderstand Saakashvili's Metaphorical Speech," *Voice of America*, 8 February 2011, <http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/nc-georgia-russia-2011-02-08-115589774/201972.html> (in Russian).

⁶ Yureva Darya, "Russian MFA Called the NATO's Clarifications 'Cheap,'" *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 23 April 2010, <http://www.rg.ru/2009/04/23/nato.html> (in Russian).

Georgia After the 2012 Elections

The opposition coalition Georgian Dream, led by entrepreneur and philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the parliamentary elections on 1 October 2012, taking 55 % of the popular vote, which was 15 % more than what Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) party managed to achieve. Most importantly, the Georgian Dream victory was registered in most of the majority constituencies.

As a result of the negotiations between the leadership of the Georgian Dream and Georgia's president Saakashvili, Bidzina Ivanishvili was offered the post of prime minister. With the parliament's confirmation he received *carte blanche* to form a new government. Meanwhile, Saakashvili's term as president was due to end in January 2014. In late October 2012, Ivanishvili proposed that constitutional amendments that will make the prime minister an actual head of government take effect as soon as possible, but later abandoned his proposal.

Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power on the tide of Georgian voters' support. He was able to bring together all of the opposition, which none of his predecessors had managed to achieve. He is very popular within the country personally and enjoys boundless—by the Georgian standards—financial resources.⁷ All these characteristics make Ivanishvili an obvious leader of the ruling coalition.

At the same time a certain weakness is inherent in Ivanishvili's team. A number of the key governmental and parliamentary positions were taken by the Free Democrats party and the Republican Party. Both these parties are proponents of accelerated Westernization and Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia.

It is impossible to disregard the fact that voters' expectations and the actual course set by the new government diverged. The Republican Party, which now largely controls the parliament, had never gained its success in elections independently before. In 2004 its members were elected as parliament members through forming a coalition with the UNM. Although the Republicans were criticizing Saakashvili's authoritarian rule vigorously, they did share the strategic orientation that the UNM had chosen. Like many liberals in the post-Soviet space, the Republicans are strong secularists and do not have a good relationship with the Georgian Orthodox Church. In this respect their position was similar to that of the president Saakashvili. Georgian Dream, in contrast, won the elections with unofficial, but poorly camouflaged support from the Church. This circumstance appears to have led to softening of the secularist Republican rhetoric.

Pre-election polls showed that voters favoring the opposition coalition are hardly unanimous in support for NATO, and that they object to sending Georgian soldiers to Afghanistan.⁸ Moreover, 32 % of Georgian voters favoring Georgian Dream saw NATO as “an aggressive military bloc,” 53 % agreed with the statement that Georgia's and

⁷ “The World's Billionaires: #293 Bidzina Ivanishvili,” *Forbes*, <http://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili>.

⁸ “Georgian Poll: The Popularity of Political Parties and the People's Attitude toward NATO” (Institute of Eurasia, 25 September 2012), <http://geurasia.org/rus/1305/qartuli-gamokitxva-politikuri-partiebis-reitingi-da-mosaxleobis-damokidebuleba-nato-sadmi.html> (in Russian).

NATO's interests diverge, and 88 % said that Georgia should not be sending soldiers to Afghanistan. Thereby they saw Ivanishvili's campaign pro-NATO rhetoric merely as a diplomatic gesture towards the US.

While the voters who doubt the wisdom of seeking the country's integration with NATO are underrepresented in the public discourse, the Georgian political elite continues to believe in the possibility of their country's Euro-Atlantic integration, following the model of the Central and Eastern European countries, including the Baltic states. They preserve this belief even though these countries now have to deal with the EU crisis and the decreasing US interest in Central Eastern Europe and post-Soviet affairs, which shifted to the instability in the Middle East. The new Georgian governing coalition may lose its support, because it is not considering any discussion of other means of ensuring Georgia's security and is not looking for any alternative course in the foreign policy. Avoidance of discussions of Georgia's security is accompanied by palpable frustration concerning the unattainability of the EU and NATO integration goals.

Despite Saakashvili's UNM defeat in the 2012 elections, the party has a relatively strong position in the parliament. A number of MPs on the UNM slate joined the majority in the parliament in October 2012 with no signs of fissures within the party. After October 2012 Saakashvili suffered a number of political setbacks. Some of his associates were removed from power and were arrested, like ex-prime-minister Ivane Merabishvili and ex-minister of defense Bacho Akhalaya. Saakashvili's hope for the electoral victory of a Republican candidate in the US presidential elections did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, until early 2014 he retained the power to appoint regional governors, kept his grip on the judiciary and still has control over his main media assets. The government and the parliamentary majority thus have to function in the conditions of antagonism with the opposition. October 2013 presidential elections showed that the UNM still plays a significant role in the Georgian politics when its candidate David Bakradze came second in the presidential race with comfortable 21 % of the popular vote.

Ivanishvili's victory spawned inflated expectations about the country's socio-economic development and the normalization of Russo-Georgian relations. In these circumstances, the prime minister had to act carefully trying to avoid the collapse of the coalition. Apparently, the unstable domestic situation in Georgia was hindering a breakthrough both in economic and foreign affairs. Consequently, the new government saw its special task in cooling the overheated expectations of voters without taking away their hope. At the same time, the leadership had to keep the support of these voters and retain its political initiative in opposing the UNM in both domestic and foreign affairs.

An important resource of the new Georgian government in its relations with Moscow was that there was no negative background with them. Mikhail Saakashvili, who lost his trust with the Russian leadership and saw no benefit in improving the situation, was an obstacle to the normalization of Russo-Georgian relations. His personal talent in quarreling with Moscow made him a poor peacemaker. Considering the importance of the "Russian question" to the Georgian audience, rapprochement with Russia highlighted the figures on the domestic political scene in Georgia who could be more capable of

reconciling with Moscow than Saakashvili. For its part, Russia was in no rush to make any overtures to Georgia, for the Russian leadership realized that in the pre-election conditions such moves could only strengthen Saakashvili domestically. Given his inability to come to agreement, any efforts would have been wasted.

Another resource of the new government concerning relations with Moscow is what can be called a *low expectations effect*. In other words, the bilateral relations are so troubled that any improvement will be seen as a huge success. Thus, despite the inflated expectations shared within the Georgian society, there was a general understanding that no quick resolution of the conflict could be reached. Moscow is guardedly optimistic about the actions of Zurab Abashidze, who was appointed as a Special Representative of the Prime Minister in Relations with Russia.⁹ All in all, with the new Georgian government refraining from anti-Russian rhetoric and actions, new possibilities for dialogue have opened up. And most importantly, these possibilities do not require the countries to reconsider their basic values or to make concessions unacceptable in their respective domestic political arenas.

It is vital that at the outcome of the elections the atmosphere, in which relations with Russia are discussed, has changed in Georgia. Politicians and nonprofit sector activists and experts, who have been pushing for the normalization of relations with Russia, no longer risk being politically isolated or labeled as “Russian spies.”

South Ossetia and Abkhazia

However the end goals for resolution of the Georgian-Abkhazian and the Georgian-Ossetian conflicts are perceived or the peace process in the 1990s and 2000s is seen, the current state of Russo-Georgian relations can only have a negative effect on this key aspect of Georgian policies. The status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia exists irrespective of whether regional and extra-regional powers recognize these regions or not. The longer this continues – the more permanent this situation becomes. The Abkhazian and South Ossetian issues cannot be resolved without Russia’s participation. Without a Russo-Georgian dialogue on this issue there are no prospects for resolution.

Russia does not recognize its military intervention in South Ossetia in August 2008 as an invasion. Instead, it insists that it carried out an operation to coerce Georgian leadership into ceasing its assault against South Ossetia.¹⁰ The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission paper on the conflict in Georgia (the mission of Heidi Tagliavini)

⁹ “Russian Foreign Ministry Made the Comment over the Appointment of Zurab Abashidze,” *Ist Channel* (Georgia), 2 November 2012, <http://1tv.ge/news-view/43587?lang=en> (accessed 27 June 2014).

¹⁰ “Dmitry Medvedev: Joint Press Conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel,” official site of the President of Russia, 15 August 2008, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/08/15/2259_type82912type82914type82915_205379.shtml.

recognizes that the hostilities began with Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali. However, the mission views Russia's response as overreaction.¹¹

Additionally, Moscow rejects the term 'occupation' used in relation to the status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, arguing that it does not have any effective control on these two republics.¹² It is important to emphasize that the term "occupation" is inaccurate and not only from the legal point of view. It denies the very fact of the existing Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts and suggests that the only thing happening is confrontation between Russia and Georgia – and that Russia is "occupying" Georgia's territories.

The key problem in the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian rifts is that Tbilisi views Russia as a leading player in these processes. However, no matter how much weight is ascribed to Moscow's influence, this perception hinders actual understanding of the situation. It leaves the necessity of Georgian peacemaking initiatives out of the equation. Furthermore, by labelling the entire situation a "Russian occupation" Tbilisi neglects the interests of the Ossetians and Abkhazians, who in Tbilisi's view do not have the right to an opinion.

Saakashvili's government was considerably dissatisfied with the necessity to make significant concessions to Sukhumi and Tskhinvali as a condition for strengthening the Georgian territorial integrity. It was also very difficult for Georgia to engage with the two regions as equal partners in negotiations. Against this background, Russia's neutral position in the peace process was seen by Tbilisi as anti-Georgian. In 2004, in violation of international agreements, Saakashvili chose to squeeze Russia out of the peace process and shift to the policy of "reintegration" of these republics by force. The goal of Saakashvili's foreign policy was to transform the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhaz conflicts into a Russo-Georgian one, and then to put the country within the context of the Russia-US confrontation. The tragic events of August 2008 revealed miscalculations and destructiveness of this kind of strategy.

Despite Saakashvili's actions, Moscow consistently supported the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity and until 2008 took part in CIS sanctions against Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹³ Since the early 1990s Russia's position on the peace process remained unchanged. President Vladimir Putin elaborated this position during the escalation of the Georgian-Ossetian confrontation: "Russia ... is ready to do what it can do to bring peace and restore the territorial integrity of Georgia. We do not intend to speak for one side.

¹¹ "Report on the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 30 September 2009, http://eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_9045_en.htm.

¹² "'Occupied Territories' Term Inapplicable to Abkhazia, South Ossetia – Foreign Ministry," *Interfax*, 9 June 2012, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?pg=8&id=338719>.

¹³ "Karasin on Withdrawal of Sanctions from Abkhazia," *Ajara TV* (Georgia), 18 March 2008, <http://ajaratv.ge/en/index.php?page=shownews&id=2083>.

We are ready to act as a mediator and a guarantor of any agreements that have been arrived at freely.”¹⁴

Tbilisi’s political line, which is based on viewing Russia as an “occupier,” not only sharpened differences between Russia and Georgia, but also engendered the inaccurate understanding of Sukhumi’s and Tskhinvali’s motivations. If we set aside Tbilisi’s responsibility for the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts in the early 1990s, it is clear that Saakashvili’s government could not provide any valid answer to the question of whom Sukhumi and Tskhinvali see as their primary security threat. Nor was Saakashvili willing to give a clever answer to the question why the leadership in the two republics would not find the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration appealing.

The torpedoing of the peace process was accompanied by a propaganda campaign aimed at the West. The negotiating tactic used by Georgian diplomats under the leadership of the UNM was to embed US and EU observers in the peace process as a way to compel Russia to accept Georgia’s terms. Meanwhile, Tbilisi failed to notice that the observer mission did not guarantee significant engagement of Western states in the negotiating process. The European stance was that Georgia was “right” in its conflict with Russia. The EU countries refrained from the practical matter of peacemaking, refusing to get deeply involved or push for concessions from Moscow. While Saakashvili boasted of success, in reality he suffered a political loss that strengthened the status quo. This troubling circumstance made the opposition parties, who came to power in Georgia in 2012, reconsider Tbilisi’s policy towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

With Georgian Dream in power, Tbilisi recognized that the obstruction of the peace process with the governments of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be deleterious to Georgia’s long-term interests. Members of the Georgian Dream coalition believed that if in the next 10 years Tbilisi does not offer a reasonable reintegration proposal, it will create the conditions for the international community (primarily the EU) to formalize Abkhazia’s status as a part of the Black Sea Region.¹⁵

The weight of stereotypes from the 1990s and the effective anti-Russian propaganda of the Saakashvili government had a considerable effect on how Georgians viewed the events of August 2008. The leader of Georgian Dream, new Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili,¹⁶ described Russia’s actions in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict as Moscow’s endeavor to “cross the Caucasus.” While recognizing Saakashvili’s government as the initiator of the conflict, only a slight minority in Georgia’s political establishment was willing to hear out Russia’s point of view, expressed by Dmitri Medvedev in

¹⁴ “V. Putin Conference at the Conclusion of a Meeting with the President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma,” official site of the President of Russia, 18 August 2004, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2004/08/75603.shtml> (in Russian).

¹⁵ Paata Zakareishvili, “Recognizing Alternatives,” Heinrich Boll Stiftung, <http://ge.boell.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Zakareishvili.pdf>.

¹⁶ “Ivanishvili: ‘Saakashvili’s Actions Allowed Russia to Occupy Our Territories,’” *Civil Georgia*, 24 October 2012, <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=24054> (in Russian).

2011:¹⁷ “We are forced ... to recognize the international legal existence of [Abkhazia and South Ossetia] in order to protect them.” It is vital to mention that Russia took the path of recognition only after Saakashvili rejected Moscow’s ceasefire offer, which included the condition of providing international guarantees for the security of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In principle, Moscow does not exclude the possibility of a political union between Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (e.g., as a confederation). However, it could only be achieved under agreement of all the three sides. This stance was elaborated in a number of Medvedev’s statements during his presidential term.¹⁸ In his interviews with *Russia Today*, PIK TV and Ekho Moskvyy Radio Station in August 2011 Medvedev¹⁹ pointed out some scenarios of the future development on the situation: “I would be very happy if, say, the leadership of Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia were to sit at the negotiating table and think about how they were going to continue living together, how to create peace and the rule of law ... Russia will never be an obstacle to this.”

Georgian Dream leadership’s statements²⁰ indicate that any national or state initiatives for Abkhazia and South Ossetia will require actual support of Abkhazians and Ossetians. For Georgia to become democratic and to thrive, the past cannot be treated as a simple misunderstanding, triggered by historic mistakes that can be easily rectified. This motivates the Ivanishvili government to work hard on restarting a direct dialogue with the governments of these de facto republics.

Similarly, the Abkhazian and South Ossetian leadership are interested in normalizing relations with Tbilisi. First, the current state of relations between Russia and Georgia, Georgia and Abkhazia and Georgia and South Ossetia hinders the creation of a solid legal foundation for peace. Second, the Georgian population of Abkhazia—and especially that of South Ossetia—suffers because of the uncertainty of their legal status and the tough border-crossing regime. This regime is one of the reasons why integrating the societies of two new independent states and creating stable democratic political regimes there is difficult. Third, in practice both republics lose much as a result of the tension and uncertainty in their relations with Georgia. Specifically, tensions with Georgia hinder full use of the transit routes that unite Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

We have reason to believe that a “small steps” strategy remains possible. Successful implementation of such a strategy can lay the ground for a discussion of strategic political solutions, including proposals that could possibly be the focus of such a strategy and that would be more easily accepted by all sides in this conflict.

¹⁷ “Dmitry Medvedev: Interview to *Russia Today*, PIK and Ekho Moskvyy Radio Station,” official site of the President of Russia, 5 August 2011, <http://kremlin.ru/news/12204> (in Russian).

¹⁸ “Dmitry Medvedev: Interview with TF-1 TV,” official site of the President the Russia, 26 August 2008, http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2008/08/26/2300_type63379type63380_205786.shtml (in Russian).

¹⁹ “Dmitry Medvedev: Interview to *Russia Today*, PIK and Ekho Moskvyy Radio Station.”

²⁰ “Ivanishvili: ‘Saakashvili’s Actions Allowed Russia to Occupy Our Territories.’”

The Georgian government's notion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia being "occupied" leads to Tbilisi's inability to accept their (disputably) legal and political standing as territorial entities. Tbilisi recognized them as political entities until August 2008 as Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, and Sukhumi remained signatories of the cease-fire agreements.²¹ Georgia's current position is weak. If Tbilisi chooses the course of peaceful resolution of these two conflicts, it will have to engage directly with the leadership of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This means that recognizing the legal and political being of these two territories in some shape or form is inevitable.

In these circumstances it is necessary to separate the discussions of humanitarian issues (e.g., the status of peoples in the border region) from political considerations about the future of the region. The question of the quality and level of Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia can hardly be sustained. Connecting political and military issues with humanitarian ones means erecting an unnecessary diplomatic obstacle in solving humanitarian issues.

The gradual desecuritization of relations would make it possible to consider renewing social and economic ties between the sides. The best case scenario would be creation of a common space for the movement of people, goods, capital, and services between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia – with the direct participation of Russia. Russia, too, would be one of the structural elements of this space.

In November 2012 new Georgian Minister for Reintegration Paata Zakareishvili proposed the resumption of railway communication between Georgia and Abkhazia.²² This initiative met objections both in Georgia and Abkhazia, which made Zakareishvili withdraw his proposal. In spite of the obstacles that the practical implementation of this plan faces, the resumption of the rail link could create a new impetus for positive economic and political processes in South Caucasus, which constitutes a common interest for the neighboring countries. Revival of the rail and other transport links in the region would not only be a symbol of normalization of relations, but would also encourage renewal of social connections between the sides. Negotiations on restarting rail links between Georgia and Abkhazia would shape a new form of Georgian-Abkhazian engagement. A new railroad negotiation process would be unconnected to the legacy of the 2008 conflict (even though existing Geneva negotiations are deeply connected with the war). This kind of political process would be no less important than its result.

²¹ "Agreement on Principles of Settlement of the Georgian – Ossetian Conflict (Sochi Agreement)," official site of the United Nations, 24 June 1992, <http://peacemaker.un.org/georgia-sochi-agreement92>; "Agreement on a Cease-Fire and Separation of Forces (Moscow Agreement)," official site of the United Nations, 14 May 1993, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/1994/583.

²² "The New Government of Georgia Is a Chance for Russia to Normalize its Relations with Georgia," *Public Dialogues*, 30 October 2012, http://publicdialogues.info/en/Paata_Zakareishvili%3A_The_New_Government_of_Georgia_is_a_Chance_for_Russia_to_Normalize_Its_Relations_with_Georgia.

An important signal of change in Georgia's approach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be to repeal of the Law on the Occupied Territories.²³ A number of sections of that law hinder both economic development for Abkhazia and Ossetia and humanitarian cooperation between Russia and Georgia. In our opinion, legal regulation of interaction between Georgian citizens and residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be better executed under other legal acts that are not based on counter-productive concept of "occupation."

Georgia's North Caucasus Policy

During Mikhail Saakashvili's presidency Georgia was conducting a *New North Caucasus Policy*. The latter consisted in efforts to destabilize the Russian Caucasus region by means of taking advantage of the existent contradictions between Moscow and other regional authorities. Among the core points of this policy were supporting the Circassian national movement and using Islamist organizations in the Russian republics of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. The implementation of such a policy became possible after full control over the Georgian territory had been established by Tbilisi.

Russia recognizes that the Georgian state's effective control over the whole Georgian territory—except for the ex-autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—is a true achievement for the contemporary Georgia. During the Shevardnadze era (1992-2003) the absence of such control hindered cooperation between the two countries in the fight against terrorism in the North Caucasus. The large-scale destabilization of Georgia can create a situation, in which terrorist groups from the north side of the Caucasus would freely use Georgia as a base, despite the Georgian stance on the matter. Yet, Moscow's loss of control over the North Caucasus and its destabilization can significantly increase the range of threats, which Georgia has to deal with today. The overall population of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia is equal to the population of Georgia and grows rapidly.

The main result of this policy for the Georgian government is that North Caucasus intellectuals no longer harbor disdain for Georgia, which was a result of the 1992-1993 unsuccessful Georgian war with Abkhazia. Activists from Circassian ethnic organizations were delighted by Georgia's recognition of the "Genocide against Circassians" during the Caucasian War.²⁴ Meanwhile, those who support the Russian government qualify this stance by saying that Georgia must first recognize the genocide against the Abkhazians and Ossetians. But this position appears to be more of an obeisance to Moscow than a sincere one. Both opposition and pro-government ethnic Circassian organizations see the Russo-Georgian antagonism as a possibility to maneuver between the two sides, improving their own political status and strengthening their image in the media:

²³ "The Law of Georgia on Occupied Territories," official site of the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, 23 October 2008, <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc216.pdf>.

²⁴ "Circassian Genocide Documents," *Circassian Genocide*, www.circassian-genocide.info/Documents/English.pdf.

“Since Russia won’t talk to us, we’ll talk with Georgia,” “Moscow should have recognized the genocide earlier than Georgia,” and “Poland and the Baltic states now recognize the genocide we have suffered.” Russia reacted firmly and with emotional restraint to the recognition of the “Circassian Genocide” by the Georgian Parliament.²⁵ The Russian government’s unwillingness to discuss this issue with Circassian ethnic organizations weakens the latter’s position.

If the cost of cooperation with Georgia—as well as with the American Jamestown Foundation—extends beyond joint conferences and the erection of monuments, it could be prohibitively expensive for the Circassian activists. The activists’ attempts at securing foreign financing for their efforts have been unsuccessful. Both pro- and anti-Russian Circassian ethnic organizations are financed domestically by regional governments and Circassian businessmen with no traces of Georgian participation.

Circassian ethnic activists have expressed dissatisfaction at the Tbilisi Center for Circassian Culture’s attempts to expand its activity to the Chechen and Ingush peoples. These attempts were seen as a bid to combine the peaceful and secular Circassian opposition with the armed and Islamic opposition. Circassian activists of Kabardina-Balkariya—who in association with the Center for Circassian Culture have been Georgia’s primary North Caucasus partner in the campaign for the recognition of the “Genocide”—treasure their secular status. At the same time, the principles of the New North Caucasus Policy, being a major irritant for Moscow in a sensitive area, are pushing the Georgian government to alliance with Islamist groups in the North Caucasus. Proofs of such alliance have appeared in the Russian and Georgian press, and the Russian intelligence agencies have also pointed to this alliance in their statements.²⁶ The most indicative incident was Georgia’s neutralizing of an armed Islamist group in the Lopota Gorge in August 2012, where Georgian citizens turned out to be among the rebels.²⁷

Even though Georgia’s parliament recognition of the “Circassian Genocide” is perceived in Russia as an extremely unfriendly move, this kind of alliance is not a critical threat to the security of the North Caucasus. However, if Tbilisi continues this course, especially considering its ambiguous relationship with the North Caucasus terrorist underground, it will further complicate Russo-Georgian relations. Georgia’s actions make one doubt how responsible Georgia’s political elite are and call into question the country’s European and Christian identity. Any improvement of Russian-Georgian relations is unlikely unless Tbilisi clarifies its approaches in this matter – both in political rhetoric and practical steps.

While the current state of Russo-Georgian relations creates no new threats to the North Caucasus security, lack of cooperation between the two countries to achieve a

²⁵ Nikolay Silaev, “Ethnicities and Politics in the North Caucasus: ‘The Circassian Issue’” (Moscow: The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), 16 October 2013), <http://georgiamonitor.org/upload/medialibrary/986/986100753f91d53739c00177f0f0d8eb.PDF>.

²⁶ Anastasiya Kashevarova and Yuliya Tsoy, “Tamerlan Tsarnaev Was Recruited by a Georgian Fund,” *Izvestia*, 24 April 2013, <http://izvestia.ru/news/549252> (in Russian).

²⁷ “Two Georgian Citizens Among Gunmen Killed in Clash at Russian Border,” *Civil Georgia*, 3 September 2012, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25171>.

long-lasting stability in the region is a negative factor. Ultimately, the lack of such cooperation has pushed Russia to strengthen its Caucasian borders. Moreover, the opaque manner, as Georgia sees it, in which some elements of Russia's new regional security project have been implemented, has led Tbilisi to doubt Moscow.

Apparently, there are no obstacles for the new Georgian government to renounce its support for terrorist groups in the North Caucasus, and conditions are ripe for Moscow and Tbilisi to start the creation of an information exchange system on the eastern international border between them. Such cooperation will not only strengthen mutual security along this border, but could also constitute the climate to sowing the first seeds of trust between the security agencies of the two countries.

Georgia's economic and humanitarian ties with the regions of the North Caucasus can start a new and positive life, if Tbilisi chooses cooperation with Moscow over annoying or bypassing it. There is an objective need for creating these forms of regional engagement that would engage intellectuals, civil society activists, and journalists from Moscow, Tbilisi, and the regions of the North Caucasus and Southern Russia. This cooperative interaction would reflect the historical traditions of the region and the need for more information about one another – a need that is felt on both sides of the Main Caucasus Range. Subsequently, discussions of means of regional economic integration could follow. Prospects in this sphere include creation of a common space for the movement of people and goods, security, education, and culture.

NATO and Regional Security

Georgian analysts share the common impression that the Rose Revolution 2003 was followed by an “authoritarian modernization.”²⁸ A specific feature of Saakashvili's modernization experiment was to subordinate all branches of government to the president. Under Saakashvili's rule, libertarian thinking in economic policy was mixed with the executive's tight control of social and cultural initiatives in Georgia's life. The sociocultural experiment in raising a generation of “free” Georgians, i.e. with Western values and anti-Russian sentiments, led the government to launch a massive anti-Russian campaign. The consolidation of a part of the Georgian society on the grounds of Western values helped to entrench the view of Russia's involvement in the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as anti-Georgian.

One problem with the sociocultural experiment was that Georgia's neighbor is Turkey. On the one hand, the two countries share a long history of military, political, religious and ethnic antagonism that lives on today. Historically, this adversarial climate was never of benefit to Georgia and at times even threatened the Georgian people. On the other hand, Turkey, which is a NATO member since 1952, shares its political orientation with Tbilisi, namely Euro-Atlantic integration. Taking into account common anti-Turkish sentiment among Georgians, the UNM government decided to skirt the issue.

²⁸ Kenneth Yalowitz, Ivlian Haindrava, Ghia Nodia, and Shorena Shaverdashvili, “Lessons Learned from 20 Years of Independence and Statebuilding: Georgia,” *Carnegie Europe*, 28 November 2011, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=46090&reloadFlag=1>.

Tbilisi's Euro-Atlantic integration propaganda substituted geographic context of Georgia's security threats. This propaganda artificially placed Georgia among the Central and East European states, which had been united for the past 20 years by a shared political trajectory (from the Warsaw Pact to NATO) and a shared perception of an ostensible Russian threat to their security.

Among the striking qualities of the UNM government was its intention to break the tradition of state power in Georgia in particular and in the Caucasus in general. Given that everyone in the cabinet was younger than Saakashvili, a significant part of their education and professional biography took place outside of Georgia. The high level of confidence of the elite surrounding Saakashvili was based on ideological solidarity and great team spirit. UNM officials would unabashedly boast that their government was "compact, mobile, and highly skilled in handling certain issues."²⁹

The Ministry for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration was one of the key elements in the UNM government. The main task of this ministry consisted in developing state reform standards by means of adapting the American model of liberal democracy for Georgia. It was also responsible for ensuring the implementation of the "homework" that its Western mentors provided. This government body often misled the West, creating the image of Georgia's successful advancement towards democracy.

It was able to do so as the government had the political initiative in domestic policy and dominated the airwaves. Statistically, almost 80 % of Georgians received news via television with the three main TV channels being government-controlled. The massive propaganda campaign based on half-truths led to significant support for seeking NATO membership among the public. This campaign did not convey the rationale and goals of such a process. Opposition politicians believed that the Saakashvili government created a "virtual Georgia" in the consciousness of its citizens.³⁰ As the September 2012 mass riots against torturing prisoners of the Gldan Prison demonstrated, such a delusional picture of reality can lead to inflated self-confidence, the public's overblown expectations of the government and, as a consequence, wild fluctuations in the general societal mood when the government proved its inability to meet these expectations.

This misreading of the external environment and overestimating the availability of resources necessary to achieve the foreign policy goals led Georgian diplomacy to a dead end. The UNM leadership appeared to have no distinguishable goals other than European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Notably, Georgia's institutional state structure has gained many characteristics inherent to Western countries. For instance, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a separate department for relations with Russia, which are dealt with within the department for CIS affairs.³¹ While the UNM

²⁹ Thomas de Waal, *Georgia's Choices: Charting a Future in Uncertain Times* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/georgias_choices.pdf.

³⁰ "Bidzina Ivanishvili's Address to Politicians, Media and the Public," *News Georgia*, 12 October 2011, <http://www.newsgeorgia.ru/politics/20111012/214234359.html>.

³¹ "Departments," official site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=37.

would say it was ready to reestablish diplomatic relations with Russia, it did not know how to accomplish this goal. Using the argument that “Russia is giving contradictory signals,” the government arrived at the paradoxical conclusion that to create order in its relations with Russia, Georgia must join NATO.

In the face of its failures vis-a-vis Russia, the UNM-led Georgia’s main declared policy goal was the “democratic mission” in the Caucasus and the CIS countries in general. In this context the strategic partnership with Azerbaijan was linked by Georgia’s Foreign Ministry with the assertion that the West saw Baku and Tbilisi as two elements of the same initiative. In Tbilisi’s view the results of the Euro-Atlantic process for Georgia would over time be carried over to Azerbaijan. This logic did not take into consideration Azerbaijan’s wish to be neutral and the possibility of Georgia becoming the target of influence for Turkey.

Basically, under the UNM lead the Georgian government lost its main skill – the ability to negotiate. Thus, it was limited to two roles: the supplicant or the victim. With Georgian diplomacy high dependency on the opinion of its Western partners, the government’s political line became very unsteady. The UNM preferred easing the diplomatic process with Brussels, which did not force Tbilisi into any concessions, to the tense Russo-Georgian, Georgian-Abkhazian, and Georgian-South Ossetian negotiations.

The UNM reacted especially sensitively to the West’s inattention or its direct criticism of the Georgian government. The steady decline in international support for the political course of Saakashvili’s government coincided with the decrease in international financial assistance. For 22 months after the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict, President Saakashvili was not hosted by any of the European leaders. Many Western politicians realized that the *carte blanche* that the UNM had for the regime was doing Georgia a disservice.³² This caused doubts as to the sincerity of Saakashvili’s democratization, his military capacity building and regional policy initiatives.³³ Brussels was especially concerned that the Saakashvili government’s irresponsible actions in August 2008 could lead to a full-blown confrontation between NATO and Russia. Taken together, these concerns led to reducing the priority of the Georgian dossier in policy-making circles in Brussels.

With the full recognition of the fact that the challenges in respect to Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s status as well as Georgia’s membership in NATO cannot currently be resolved, it is reasonable to talk about the following possibilities for discussion of these issues.

The point is not that Russia opposes Georgia’s European integration, for the geopolitical pluralism in the post-Soviet space, including in the Transcaucasus, is now a reality that came with the independence of the ex-Soviet republics. Like many other post-Soviet countries, Georgia sees the West as a source of modernizing influences, investments and

³² Michail Vignanskiy, “Georgia Should not Become a Bone of Contention Between the West and Russia,” *Izvestiya*, 26 September 2012, <http://izvestia.ru/news/536213> (in Russian).

³³ SPIEGEL Staff, “Did Saakashvili Lie? The West Begins to Doubt Georgian Leader,” *Der Spiegel*, 15 September 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/did-saakashvili-lie-the-west-begins-to-doubt-georgian-leader-a-578273.html> (in Russian).

technologies. Russia also shares this views of the West with one difference – it has no illusions about the ability of external factors to exert any significant influence on its own process of socio-political modernization. Western influence is weak in Russia because of its geographical size, its military and political power, and its historical traditions. It is worth mentioning that Georgia's socialization in the context of contemporary Europe historically took place through cultural borrowing from Russia.

There are two interconnected principles that are important to Moscow. First, Georgia's "European" or "Western" orientation should not automatically become an anti-Russian one. In other words, the principle of geopolitical pluralism should be applied to Russia as well. Yet, since the late 1980s, Georgia's foreign policy has been based on colliding the West and Russia. Second, Georgian "European" or "Western" orientation should not mean installation of NATO's military infrastructure on the Russian borders.

Having identified the "Western" choice with being anti-Russian, Georgia's former ruling elite operated under the assumption that Russia's foreign influence will fade or at the least will not grow. However, Russia is clearly not in a decline. The bet on Russia to weaken made the success of the Georgian strategy dependent on factors that are not in Tbilisi's control. In the end, this bet gets in the way of Georgia to benefit from Russia's economic growth. These are benefits that Russia's neighbors enjoy, namely the business groups in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan.

The radicalism of the UNM's state experiment in Europeanization has weakened the sense of regional identity among Georgians and alienated Georgia from its Caucasian neighbors. This alienation has been especially significant in Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian relations. Tbilisi's Atlantic rhetoric resulted in a firm belief of Tskhinvali and Sukhumi that the EU and NATO were indulging the aggressive plans of Saakashvili's government. This seriously complicated Georgia's NATO membership efforts. Georgia wanted to join the organization with its pre-war borders, because it still considers Abkhazia and South Ossetia parts of the country's territory. Joining NATO would have required the assent from all the peoples of Georgia.

Meanwhile, NATO is not seriously considering the question of how to integrate Georgia into the organization, because given the differences in views of the goals of its member states it is experiencing its own internal crisis. The possibility of having to apply Article 5 of the NATO Charter against Russia eliminates the likelihood of Georgia's joining the organization under the current status quo. While Brussels does not reject the possibility of Georgian integration, it is taking no noticeable action to create the conditions for bringing it about. NATO, in its turn, appears to expect these conditions to be created later. In the meantime, NATO has suggested that Tbilisi continues its operational cooperation with regional NATO members, most importantly with Turkey, which in the past few years has been seeking to strengthen its military and political influence in the region, especially along its borders.

Under these circumstances, it seems unwise for Tbilisi to tie its future to exclusive engagement with NATO. Ironically, the only state that can take effective measures in regard to the long-running threats to Georgia's security and dampen Tbilisi's ongoing sense of homelessness caused by its Muslim neighbors – is Russia.

However, in the current situation, characterized by the lack of diplomatic relations, contradictions on the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and mutual distrust, a rapprochement between Russia and Georgia on the grounds of a common approach to the regional security is unlikely.

Meanwhile, a certain change in the US and EU stances on Georgia has become obvious. First, in conditions of its tangible financial deficiency Washington's attention is concentrated on the Middle East and Asia-Pacific regions. The military experience in the Middle East has made the US leadership realize the importance of stability in the process of democratic proliferation around the world.³⁴

Second, the publication of materials by Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia in 2008 also led to a certain decrease in significance of Georgia in the US foreign policy.³⁵ A possibility of a large-scale military conflict with Russia as a result of the Georgian provocation has never been a plan for Washington. In that period for the first time American analytical publications voiced strong and founded criticism concerning Georgian participation in NATO.³⁶ This was partly a result of some lobbies' efforts in informing the American elite on Saakashvili's government crimes.³⁷

Third, the North Atlantic leadership is sharing the impression of a lessened ability to manage world affairs, which were formerly managed by NATO members. And the rise of Bidzina Ivanishvili's party on the Georgian political arena is one of the signs of this reduced ability from the US point of view. And during 2012–2013 Washington was watching the Georgian Dream government policies on equitable treatment of the UNM figures and revival of ties with Russia with a certain degree of incomprehension and suspicion.

According to the Wikileaks archives, US diplomacy was turning a blind eye to the national peculiarities of Georgia and was unable to comprehend the motives of its domestic policies.³⁸ In practice it led to miscalculations in assessment of political development in Georgia. For instance, in the days of the upcoming presidential elections in 2012, misguided by the poll results provided by the National Democratic Institute, the US embassy was expecting the UNM to win and the Georgian Dream to form a strong

³⁴ "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 24 September 2013), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

³⁵ "Report on the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia."

³⁶ Doug Bandow, "Georgia's Dangerous Slide Toward NATO," *The National Interest*, 26 April 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/georgias-dangerous-slide-toward-nato-8403>; Doug Bandow, "NATO's Georgia Nightmare," *The National Interest*, 9 August 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/natos-georgia-nightmare-8860>; Doug Bandow, "No, NATO Shouldn't Let Georgia In," *The National Interest*, 22 August 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/no-nato-shouldnt-let-georgia-8932>.

³⁷ Boris Mezhev, "Saakashvili's Regime Terrors Were Shown in the US Congress," *Izvestia*, 24 October 2013, <http://izvestia.ru/news/559496> (in Russian).

³⁸ "Saakashvili's Inaugural Address: Hitting the Right Notes. Embassy Tbilisi Unclassified Cable," *Wikileaks Cable Gate Archive*, 22 January 2008, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2008/01/08TBILISI86.html>.

opposition. In his interview for the *New York Times* Tedo Japaridze, who was at the moment of the election campaign responsible for international relations in Ivanishvili's party, noted that during his contacts with the American embassy the latter was interested in knowing the stance of the Georgian Dream in case of their defeat.³⁹ According to Japaridze, the US did not consider a slight possibility of Ivanishvili's victory.

After Georgian Dream had won the elections, the US witnessed some untypical for Tbilisi, and therefore suspicious, foreign policy moves. Washington was confused by the change that had happened in the Georgian politics, and it switched its attention from the Caucasus to the Middle East decreasing its financial support for the regional governments by one quarter. The support for Georgia was reduced from 85 to 68.7 million dollars. Retaining its interest in Tbilisi's Euro-Atlantic political orientation, the US was deviating from accelerating the process of Georgia joining NATO. And with the intention of preventing any conflict between Russia and Georgia, Washington wished to preserve Tbilisi's pro-American stance. Therefore, having seen some of Ivanishvili's political actions as symptoms of an undesirable turn of events and having been a target of Saakashvili's lobbyists, the US political elite started sending warning signals to Tbilisi through influential media.⁴⁰

For the last eleven years the Euro-Atlantic integration has been the main priority for the Georgian foreign policy, yet there is no sign of any upcoming success in this direction. NATO-Georgian and the EU-Georgian relations have, obviously, exhausted their potential for political breakthroughs. With the foreign policy orientation of the Georgian government remaining with the EU and NATO, Tbilisi has realized that its step-by-step Euro-Atlantic integration is no longer suitable for Georgia. This may be concluded from the failure to achieve any practical results in the NATO-Georgian dialogue in the form of some solid security guaranties or economic integration. The macroeconomic effect of the EU-Georgian free-trade zone and its impact on Georgian producers remain unclear.

Western investments in the Georgian economy have always been local, and the Georgian Dream government does not expect them to grow into a massive influx. With the unfavorable results of the previous government's economic policies, Bidzina Ivanishvili and Irakli Garibashvili have been rather skeptical of Georgia's advancement in international ratings of investment climate, foreign business opportunities, etc.⁴¹

This may be the reason why Tbilisi today does not see any benefits for Georgia in the US and EU policies of promoting democracy and curbing the Russian influence in the post-Soviet countries. The Saakashvili government was an important component of these policies for the previous Georgian president was among the strongest proponents

³⁹ Ellen Barry, "Georgian Leader Emerges as an Enigma," *New York Times*, 8 October 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/world/europe/georgian-leader-bidzina-ivanishvili-emerges-as-an-enigma.html>.

⁴⁰ Denis Corboy, William Courtney, and Kenneth Yalowitz, "Justice or Vengeance?" *The New York Times*, 26 November 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/opinion/global/justice-or-vengeance.html>.

⁴¹ Yuriy Roks, "Georgia Has Lowered Its Rating by Itself," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 28 January 2013, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2013-01-28/7_gruzia.html (in Russian).

of the Western political model both regionally and globally. The West expected the same zeal for westernization from the new Georgian leader. However, the new government seems reluctant even to participate in discussions concerning democratization of the region, and this is perceived by the Western leadership as a return to authoritarianism. Tbilisi does not aspire to associate itself with the Western and Central European states, who were the fiercest supporters of Saakashvili's political stance. Apparently, the new Georgian leadership has realized that aligning with Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states, which have historically shared an anti-Russian stance, does not lead to any success.

As the priority of the Euro-Atlantic orientation in the Georgian foreign policy has been gradually shrinking, Tbilisi has been active in developing its relations with neighbors, who may be significantly influential as far as the Georgian economic wealth is concerned. Prime Minister Ivanishvili preferred to do it in person. In 2013 in Davos he held meetings with his Russian counterpart D. Medvedev and some Russian business figures, and went to visit Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey.

Georgia-Russia and Georgia-EU: A Choice of Identity

Among the most vital issues for Georgia today is finding its path in economic development while trying to secure its specialization in the world market. Deciding between the EU and Russia to be its main economic partner, Tbilisi is not making a pragmatic choice, but a choice of its values and identity. This explains why the increasing vagueness of Georgian membership in the EU has brought up the formula: "moving towards European standards and values is an achievement in itself." Georgian experts have been persistent in trying to establish a pragmatic basis for the economic union with the EU, pointing out the flaws of Saakashvili's European integration policy. For instance, Georgian economist Vladimir Papava has claimed that the UNM's Georgia, in spite of promoting its European orientation, was developing Singapore's economic model, which led the country away from the European economic model – and the EU itself.⁴²

Nevertheless, apart from the European orientation, the Georgians see some other options.⁴³ The formula "Georgia is Europe" was being imposed during Saakashvili's presidency, but it did not gain absolute approval among the Georgian society. As time passes Tbilisi may realize that democracy, free market and high standards of governance, although vital as they may be, are not everything a country needs for decent development. They are important instruments, but they cannot become an end in themselves. Thereupon, Russian international strategy sets a good example of running its own course towards a common political and economic future with Europe. Unlike Tbilisi, Moscow is guided by pragmatism and the intention to preserve its leverages in its integration with

⁴² Vladimir Papava, "Georgian Economy in Search of a Model for Development," *Mir Peremen* 3 (2013): 54.

⁴³ Zaza Shatirishvili, "National Narratives and New Politics of Memory in Georgia," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20:2 (June 2009): 391–399.

Europe. In fact, Russia is not an alternative to the EU, for Russia itself is aiming at developing ties with the EU to become its equal partner.

In November 2013 the EU and Georgia initialed an Association and a Free Trade Agreements, which was a symbolic achievement of the current Georgian political elite. However, for the EU this step did not come as a recognition of the Georgian European identity, but marked the line between Europe and Georgia. Similarly, the EU signed Association Agreements with such different countries as Algeria, Chile, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, South Africa, etc. with Mexico and the Palestinian Administration, apart from the European Andorra, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, as members of the Free Trade Zone. Negotiations to join the Zone are currently in progress with Columbia, Peru, South Korea and a number of African and the Eastern Partnership states.

It is vital to understand that the EU producers entered the Central and Eastern European markets to witness their own economic growth for twenty years by means of replacing local manufacturers. Accordingly, by entering the markets of post-Soviet states the EU is expanding the same policy of exploiting consumer resources of the newly joined countries. In these circumstances, it is not unfounded to expect the cheaper EU products to hinder the recovery of the Georgian manufacturing. Any Georgian leadership that plans to develop the country's manufacturing, but not transit or services, will have to take measures to protect the internal market. According to the legal approach, which is popular with Georgian experts, the mere existence of international institutions is a guarantee of a favorable regulation of the global trade processes for all the participants. Meanwhile, the policies of some of the larger states prove them wrong, with the US, Japan, China, Germany or Russia seeking preferences for their own producers within the international trade regimes.

As far as Abkhazia and South Ossetia are concerned, Russian diplomacy has noticeably lowered its vigor in promoting the international recognition of the two republics. Their membership in the Eurasian Customs Union does not look like a real prospect.⁴⁴ However, absence of the wide international recognition does not influence the Abkhazian or South Ossetian status, whose leaders persistently claim that the Russian guarantees of their status are comprehensive.

Georgia realizes that no power in the world is willing to bear the considerable expenses of forcing Russia to renounce the recognition of the two republics. At the same time Tbilisi continues to push forward its stance on the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on different international platforms, yet with no remarkable results. As much as the US and the EU support the Georgian stance, these influential partners of Georgia will not make or try to convince Russia to change its position. Furthermore, when during the WTO negotiations an issue of transit on the Abkhazian part of the Russian border arose, Washington virtually made Tbilisi accept the Russian conditions. And the voting

⁴⁴ "Vladislav Surkov: We Are Overcoming Difficulties That South Ossetia Previously Met," *PEC Information Agency*, 4 December 2013, <http://cominf.org/en/node/1166500441> (in Russian).

in the UN General Assembly on the resolutions concerning the two republics, which ended well for Georgia, has not had any practical result.

While the Geneva talks have brought significant contribution to ensuring security in the two conflict zones, they are hardly capable of achieving a full-scale settlement. Partly this is caused by the Georgian insistence on Russia recognizing itself a party to the conflict in August 2008 and refusal to sign the Geneva declaration draft on abstaining from the use of force.

Another cluster of differences between Russia and Georgia concerns the future of the European security system. Tbilisi is a strong proponent of NATO enlargement and is seeking membership in the Alliance. At the same time Russia, while recognizing Georgia's right to choose allies, sees a threat to its security in the process of NATO's approaching the Russian borders. And this threat does not only consist in arranging the Alliance's military infrastructure by the Russian borders, for Moscow also fears its expulsion from the European security system.

Despite the promise made to Georgia during the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008 to accept the country into the Alliance, no exact dates have been set and no Action Plan for its membership has been presented. Further expansion of NATO on the CIS countries, namely Ukraine and Georgia, was initiated by the George W. Bush Administration and approved by the newly joined Central and Eastern European members, while many of the older members of the Alliance, especially France and Germany, were rather skeptical about this. In the end the stance of the latter became one of the reasons for these plans to fail. Subsequent Barak Obama's Administration paused the process of enlargement without making any binding promises.

The major part of the Georgian political elite acknowledge the vagueness of the NATO membership for their country; however, this issue is still on the agenda. As a matter of fact, Tbilisi refuses to consider any other mechanisms of ensuring their national security, claiming this an endeavor to violate the principle of freedom to choose alliances. This claim has become a "red line" in Georgia's relations with Russia.

Georgian experts tend to overestimate the prospects of their country's membership in NATO and the EU. This overestimation is applied both to the possibility of joining the two blocs, despite the unsettled question of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's status that hinder NATO membership, and the real value of the guarantees that Georgia may gain as a member of the Alliance. There is another side of this issue, which is mostly neglected by these experts. NATO membership can make Georgia one of the possible targets for a strike in the Russian military planning and the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is likely to be expanded. Experts also seem to ignore the fact that moving towards NATO membership will require strengthening military, strategic as well as economic and cultural ties with Turkey, which is considered unfavorable by a large part of the Georgian society.

What needs to be emphasized is that there is no room for any kind of bargain in the Russo-Georgian collision. There is no need for Russia to make concessions in order to make Georgia abandon its strive for NATO membership, for the probability of Tbilisi to succeed in this is rather insignificant. There is no leverage at Georgia's disposal to force

Moscow to reconsider its stance on the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence – and the failure of Saakashvili's North Caucasus Policy experience proved this. There is no urgency for the US and NATO in investing extra resources to secure Georgia's interests, for Tbilisi is showing its interest in strengthening cooperation with them anyway. These patterns ensure predictability and stability of Russo-Georgian relations, and enable Moscow and Tbilisi to interact without touching upon security issues.

Through eliminating tensions on the Georgian policies in the North Caucasus, Russo-Georgian relations may witness desecuritization. In the midterm perspective this change will open new prospects for development of the region by means of activation of cross-border economic cooperation and gradual deregulation of goods and human flows across the Russo-Georgian borders.

A certain degree of desecuritization may also be expected in Georgian relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Involvement of the societies of the two republics in the joint programs implemented by Moscow and Tbilisi will shift Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian interaction from the status and security agenda to some issues of practical cooperation.

Most importantly, Russia cannot afford to pause its relations with Georgia. Otherwise, some other powers, who have regional interests, will take its place. For instance, Turkey has been intensifying its economic and political presence in Georgia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between the two historic competitors—Russia and Turkey—have gained positive dynamics mostly because they ceased sharing the border. With the new border shaping in the Caucasus, however informal it may be, this course of events can hardly be seen as favorable. Moreover, Georgia can return to being used as—what the George W. Bush Administration considered—an anti-Russian foothold. The worst-case scenario for Russia's inaction is Georgia's gradual weakening and depopulation, which may turn the latter into the space that every state and non-state actor willing to destabilize the vulnerable Russian South might use in their interests.

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