

THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN RELATIONSHIP: PERSONAL ISSUES OR NATIONAL INTEREST?

The Russian-Georgian conflict over South Ossetia in 2008 brought renewed international interest in the South Caucasus. Since the conflict, the Russo-Georgian relationship remains tense and is characterized by threats, recriminations, and mutual suspicion. Those who ignore historical events between Georgia and Russia, assume the personal relationship between the leaders of the two countries is the source of confrontation. This article argues that while personal factors certainly play some role in the “poisonous” relations between the neighboring states, clashing national interests, ideological differences of ruling elites and other important factors also feed into this situation.

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The course of history is determined by the decision of political elites. Leaders and the kind of leadership they exert shape the way in which foreign policies are structured. Ralph Waldo Emerson's view, that "there is properly no history, only biography," encapsulates the view that individual leaders mold history. Some political scientists view "rational choice" as the driving force behind individual decisions, while economists see choices as shaped by market forces. Yet, many observers are more impressed by the mysterious aspects of the decision-making process, curious about what specific factors may determine a given leader's response to events. The military conflict between Georgia and Russia over Georgia's separatist region of South Ossetia in August 2008 surprised many within the international community and reinforced growing concerns about increasingly antagonistic relations between these two neighbors.

While ignoring historical data on the long-uneasy relationship of Georgia and Russia, many political analysts highlight the role of personal conflicts in souring the political relationship between the two nations. Former Russian President (and current Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's personal impact on foreign relations reflects the intense role that personality plays in the current governments of Post-Soviet states, where state institutions tend to be weak and democratic values even weaker. It is certain that personal factors play some role in the relations of a country, and personal sympathies or antipathies, interests and other factors might affect the relationship between any two countries. But, in the case of Russia and Georgia, antagonism between leaders is not the main "poisoning factor" in worsening bilateral relations.

Chronicles of Personal Enmity in Russo-Georgian Relations

In international relations, it is assumed that in order to act coherently in the international system, a state must identify what is termed its "national interest" – its goals and ambitions in economic, military and cultural domains. The formulation of policy, both domestic and international, is then relatively straightforward; it is simply the pursuit of the nation's identified national interest. It is assumed that leaders of state will orient themselves according to their state's national interests, particularly in circumstances such as those presently existing between Georgia and Russia.

Russia is uncomfortable with Georgia's democratic and independent nature, as well as with the West's close ties to a country within Moscow's "legitimate" sphere of influence.¹ Moreover, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, various Russian political and military forces rejected Georgia's state-building project as contradictory

¹ Bruce Jackson, Charles King, Dmitri Trenin and Mark Medish, "Crisis in Georgia: Frozen Conflicts and U.S.-Russian Relations", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 October 2006, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=920>

to Russia's national interests. Moscow worried that the successful integration of Georgia into Euro-Atlantic structures may cause Russia to lose influence and credibility not only in the Caucasus, but also throughout the post-Soviet space.²

Conversely, the various Russian leaders have personally disliked all presidents of independent Georgia. They did not like the first Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, because of his dissident past and continual attack of the Soviet Union, as well as his eventual attempts to free Georgia of Soviet grasp. Neglecting many security risks associated with political maneuvering with the Kremlin, escape from the USSR was Gamsakhurdia's primary goal. His political ideas were also accompanied by a romanticized idea of a unitary, Russia-free "Caucasian home," which caused outrage in Moscow.

Moscow did not relish another Georgian leader, Edward Shevardnadze, either, as he was accused of facilitating the collapse of the Soviet Union and withdrawing the Soviet Army from Afghanistan and then Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall was also partly attributed to him. As Russian political analyst Leonid Radzikhovsky points out: "Russian patriots and nationalists have an equal measure of love for Stalin and hatred for Shevardnadze, and this seems strange at first glance. Stalin's name is associated with the murder of millions of Russians. His toast "to the health of the Great Russian people,"

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which he made public shortly after the end of the Second World War, can scarcely compensate for it."³ As for Shevardnadze, he never committed such atrocities, but the hatred toward "traitor Gorbachev" also extended to "traitor Shevardnadze". Hence, Shevardnadze was never popular within Russian security circles, especially given his uncompromising refusal to allow Russian troops to use Georgian territory for military operations in Chechnya in 1999. He was also hated by the Kremlin for first suggesting a transit corridor which would both break the Russian monopoly on transporting energy from Central Asia to Europe, and for first knocking on NATO's doors, an issue which rumbles on to this day.

² Kornely Kakachia, "Post 8/8 Shaping Georgia's Future After the Russian Invasion", *Cicero Foundation*, Great Debate Paper No. 9, 5 June 2009, http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Kornely_Kakachia.pdf

³ Leonid Radzikhovsky, "Georgiophobia", *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4, October-December 2004, http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/print/number/n_3879

Ironically, at that time, a large part of the political elite around Eduard Shevardnadze believed that Georgia's future lay in close cooperation with Russia. By believing this "legend" and declaring Russia as a principal strategic partner, Shevardnadze decided that Georgia should join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and expected that orientation towards Russia would lead to the resolution of Georgia's territorial conflicts, and bring economic prosperity. However, during his term in office in Tbilisi, Shevardnadze was unable to appease the harder-liners within the Russian ruling elite. The Shevardnadze government gradually drifted towards the West as Tbilisi's expectations to neutralize Russia's

negative impact on conflict resolution in Georgia did not materialize.⁴ When Shevardnadze stepped down after the Georgia's Rose Revolution it was said that the personal Shevardnadze factor would no longer influence Georgian-Russian relations.

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Putin and Saakashvili Trend of Hostility Continues

When Mikheil Saakashvili came to power, the Russian political elite did not have any significant negative attitude towards him. Rather, he was seen as the one who had kicked the disliked Shevardnadze out of office. Moreover, Saakashvili declared on the day of his inauguration that he was stretching out

a hand to Russia and suggested restarting bilateral relations with a blank sheet.⁵ Five years have since passed. Nothing positive has come out of Saakashvili's attempts to improve relations. On the contrary, Russia has been making life hard for Georgians by continuing its strategy of dragging out and stalling negotiations with Georgia. Gradually, Russo-Georgian relations have transformed from verbal to military confrontation and Russia has occupied about one-fifth of Georgia's sovereign territory.

⁴ Thomas de Waal, "The Caucasus: A Region in Pieces", *Open Democracy*, 8 January 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/the-caucasus-a-region-in-pieces>

⁵ "Georgia's Saakashvili Seeks New Beginning in Moscow", *CACI Analyst*, 2 October 2004, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/1882>

In addition, a noticeable personal animosity has developed between the Georgian and Russian leaderships. The current Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and the former Russian President Vladimir Putin are worlds apart, in terms of their respective personalities. Putin, the staid, former KGB colonel, who is proud of the fact that he was a “hooligan, not a pioneer” during his youth, contrasts greatly with the impulsive Saakashvili, a Western-educated lawyer.⁶ Their dealings have turned into nasty schoolyard taunts in part because each man (Putin and Saakashvili) seems to be vying to become the most influential figure in the post-Soviet space. Each wants to show the way forward and turn his nation into the model. Putin is obviously the more powerful of the two, which is why it may be all the more infuriating for him that Mikhail Saakashvili has had some success in establishing high level contacts in Washington and embracing the United States.

As many observers have noted, Saakashvili’s enthusiasm, volubility, and charm helped him to cultivate American politicians in such a way that only a few former Soviet leaders have. In some ways, the force of Saakashvili’s personality elevated his country’s status beyond what its size would usually merit.⁷ Moreover, known for his blunt speeches, Saakashvili irritated the Kremlin on many occasions. His unequivocally pro-Western orientation, and in particular, Georgia’s ambition to join NATO, as well as the promise that he would integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia by the end of his presidency caused outrage in Moscow. He invited the United States military to train Georgian forces, and his government expedited the removal of two Russian military bases from Georgia. Russian leaders were also profoundly irritated because Saakashvili got away with things for which the Russians were chastised in the West. A case in point is the introduction of constitutional amendments shortly after President Saakashvili was elected in January 2004, aimed to expedite political reforms,⁸ which ended up concentrating power in the hands of the president. While Georgia was hailed as a “beacon of democracy” and declared a success story, Russia was considered an authoritarian state for the centralization of power. The Russian authorities did not think this was fair and blamed the West, particularly the Americans. They essentially hated Saakashvili’s skill in manipulating the West.

On the other hand, Russian leadership and especially Vladimir Putin despised Saakashvili, as the man who hated “everything Soviet-related” and was trying to

⁶ Tracey German, “David and Goliath: Georgia and Russia’s Coercive Diplomacy”, *Defence Studies*, 1743-9698, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 224–241.

⁷ Wendell Steavenson, “Marching Through Georgia”, *The New Yorker*, 15 December 2008, p. 64, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/12/15/081215fa_fact_steavenson#ixzz11Ho0c4sT

⁸ More concretely, in making these changes, the government was motivated by the multiple external challenges that the country had to face within the next critical years for its statehood. These were mounting pressures and expected provocations from Russia, potential manipulations with Georgia’s troubled conflicts, especially with Kosovo independence debates blinking ahead, and the important decision on a possible upgrade for Georgia’s cooperation with NATO - expected exactly in Spring 2008.

disassociate himself and Georgia from Russian dominated post-Soviet security surroundings.⁹ And in order to stop him to doing this, Putin has strived mightily to subvert Tbilisi, through trade boycotts, embargoes on Georgian wine, fruit, and mineral water, deportation of thousands of Georgians who worked in Moscow, cutting transport links, turning off the oil and gas, and stopping the post.¹⁰ In 2006, during a personal meeting with Putin, Saakashvili was he warned that unless Georgia stopped its rift towards Euro-Atlantic institutions, it could end up creating a Northern Cyprus model of conflict over the separatist regions of Georgia.¹¹ But this did not help. Even worse, in August 2008, the two countries engaged in a disastrous war more known as “Russo-Georgian five day war”.¹²

As a result of the conflict, relations between the two leaders came to an all-time low. Personal attacks were voiced during the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 when Vladimir Putin had threatened to hang Saakashvili “by the balls”.¹³ Putin made his “balls” remarks to the French President Nicolas Sarkozy, after he flew to Moscow to broker a peace deal between Georgia and Russia. Putin is said to have been particularly incensed after Saakashvili allegedly described him as “Liliputin” – a mocking reference to Putin’s diminutive height.¹⁴ While analyzing personal relations between two leaders Richard Holbrooke rightly observed: “This is not just a strategic issue. It is also deeply personal: Saakashvili as David and Putin as Goliath.”¹⁵

Personal Relations After the Conflict

After the war, attacks on the Georgian president’s leadership and personality by the Russian authorities have become increasingly vitriolic. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev who inherited hatred towards Saakashvili from his predecessor, called Saakashvili “a political corpse” and called on the United States to “reassess” its ties with the current leadership of Georgia.¹⁶ But the crude public attacks

⁹ Owen Matthews, “Why Puppetmaster Putin is More Dangerous Than Ever”, *Dailymail*, 12 August 2008, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1043684/Why-puppetmaster-Putin-dangerous-ever.html>

¹⁰ Ian Traynor, “Putin’s Second War Can Have Only One Victor”, *The Guardian*, 11 August 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/11/georgia.russia10>

¹¹ Lucian Kim, “Putin Warned Georgia Before War, Saakashvili Says”, *Bloomberg Newsweek*, 1 March 2010, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-03-01/putin-warned-georgia-two-years-before-war-saakashvili-says.html>

¹² Ronald Asmus (ed.), *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

¹³ Chales Bremner, “Vladimir Putin ‘Wanted to Hang Georgian President Saakashvili by the Balls’”, *The Times*, 14 November 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5147422.ece>

¹⁴ “Saakashvili Testifies Before War Commission”, *The Financial*, 28 November 2008, http://www.finchannel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25547&Itemid=15

¹⁵ Richard Holbrooke, “David and Goliath: Putin Tries to Depose a Neighbor”, *The Washington Post*, 27 November 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/26/AR2006112600953.html>

¹⁶ Ellen Barry, “Russia President Dismisses Georgia’s Leader as a ‘Political Corpse’”, *The New York Times*, 2 September 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/03/world/europe/03russia.html>

on him by Putin and his sidekick Medvedev, who publicly called Saakashvili a “lunatic” and “bastard”, have only served to strengthen him both in Washington and Tbilisi.

Even two years after the conflict, personal attacks from each side continued. Asked at a joint news conference with his Ukrainian counterpart, Yulia Tymoshenko, in Yalta on 20 November 2009 about Saakashvili’s visit to Kiev (where the latter had a meeting with President Yushchenko on the same day) Prime Minister Putin said: “If the two presidents decide having a dinner together, they’d better not to wear ties. Ties are expensive these days... Well, you know what I mean.”¹⁷ Putin was alluding to a video footage of Saakashvili chewing his tie as he waited to be interviewed during last year’s August war. In response, Saakashvili said that he could understand “when the King of such a huge country... with its millions of problems, whose economy, unlike of ours, is collapsing, has nothing to talk about but of a tie of the President of a neighboring, small state, whose territory’s 20 percent it (Russia) has occupied, it already means that we have succeeded.”¹⁸ Referring to Putin’s remarks while meeting Sarkozy, Saakashvili also said: “I am now calm, because previously he [Putin] was speaking with President Sarkozy about other parts of the body, threatening other parts of the body and I will be calmer as he moves upper.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Regional observers who are somehow involved with a discussion on the legal or political aspects of the Russo-Georgian conflict rarely mention the impact of the personal and psychological components of the conflict. Even though personal relations are not the main determinant of relations between Georgia and Russia, it would be naive to assume that there is no connection between the two. In fact this component strengthens the presence of negative stereotypes, hostile attitudes, negative opinions and feelings, which enflame the attitudes of each side toward the other.

After the war with Russia, Georgia, as a nation, has moved further away from Russia. Taking into consideration Russia’s occupation of internationally-recognized Georgian territories, it is not possible to expect any major improvements in Georgian-Russian relations in the foreseeable future. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili recently said that his country’s problems with Putin’s Kremlin would end when “Russia accepts us as we are.” But Putin, who clearly views Saakashvili’s

¹⁷ “Saakashvili: Revolution Continues”, *Civil Georgia*, 23 November 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21706>

¹⁸ Charlie Rose, “A Conversation with President of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili”, *Current Affairs*, 24 September 2008, <http://www.charlirose.com/view/interview/9275>

¹⁹ “Saakashvili: Revolution Continues”, *Civil Georgia*, 23 November 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21706>

actions as a personal affront, is showing no signs of relenting. Russian policymakers under the leadership of Putin, claim that Georgia can have a decent relationship with Russia if Tbilisi withdraws its NATO application and terminates its *de facto* alliance with the United States. Moscow is thus hinting that it will assist Georgia in resolving its conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia if Georgia returns to the Russian “sphere of influence.” But this also means the Georgian public could need to dispose of Saakashvili and his pro-Western policy, which is unlikely to happen.

Russian policy toward Georgia seems to have been driven almost as much by a deep-seated personal animosity toward Saakashvili on Putin’s part –a desire to teach a painful lesson to a rebellious upstart who had contemptuously thumbed his nose at the Kremlin and to remind him who his boss is– as it has by broader strategic considerations. But as recent public opinion polls conducted by National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Georgia suggest, while many Georgians clearly see shortcomings of their own leadership, they strongly support the democratic transformation of Georgia and a devotion to the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration.²⁰ There clearly are clashes of national interest between Georgians and Russians, and how they see the prospect of Georgia and Russia and their respective roles in regional security arrangements. Moreover, though Vladimir Putin and the Russian political elite claim that they retain deep affection for Georgian culture, society and food, at the same time Moscow has a problem respecting the independent Georgian state and its leaders. Sober analysis of Russo-Georgian relations in the last 20 years suggests that there is no president of Georgia that was acceptable to Russia and it is unlikely that a Georgian leader will arise whom Russian politicians will favor both politically and personally, any time soon.

²⁰ “Saakashvili: Revolution Continues”, *Civil Georgia*, 23 November 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21706>