

Russia-Georgia Relations: Among *Illusions* and *Visions*

By Zaur Shiriyev*

Leaving public opinion aside, the leadership of all post-Soviet countries enjoy reasonably amicable relations with Russia. The exception is Georgia, whose ongoing conflict with Russia is recognized as the most acute across the entire post-Soviet territory. Following the August War in 2008, Russia and Georgia are now officially enemies: direct diplomatic relations between the two countries has been cut. Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi have been seriously damaged by Russia's official recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "independent states", or, in reality, Russian protectorates. In light of the worsening political relations between Georgia and Russia, ordinary Georgians overwhelmingly desire a positive relationship with Russia. According to a poll undertaken by the *Caucasus Research Resource Center* (CRRC) in August 2009, 54% of Georgians continued to favor extremely close political cooperation with Russia [1]. But this bilateral dispute is highly personal, with Russia's leadership saying it will not engage with President Saakashvili. And the dispute between these two countries is not based on a misunderstanding; it is a power conflict rooted in specific choices made by the political leaders of Russia and Georgia.

Most local analysts believe that relations will improve with new leadership, and have focused on the search for short-term political parallels in the 2012 presidential elections that will take place in both Russia and Georgia: will Saakashvili use the "Putin Model"? If so, who will be the Georgian "Medvedev"? But there is no speculation that really illuminates Georgia's political trajectory and its future relations with Russia. Perhaps the most striking issue is that personal relations at the highest level are extremely poor; the mutual dislike between Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has in some ways come to define the current relationship between Russia and Georgia. The impact this clash has had on relations between the two countries reflects the intense role that personality plays in governments of the former Soviet states. The information war between Russian and Georgia after the August War was based largely on the mutual accusations of culpability between leaderships [2]. It seems that the problem is to do with the leadership; the majority desire of Georgians for close cooperation with Russia changes when the focus is placed on Moscow's current government. According to a Gallup poll, Georgia is the country with the highest per-

centage of people who do not approve of Russia's leadership (76%) [3].

Tbilisi's choices

Saakashvili and his government face a dilemma with regard to next year's parliament elections and afterwards presidential elections. Either they can try to focus on the problems more important than regaining the lost territories, or they can continue to dangle the illusions of future EU and/or NATO membership. Most Georgians – and this is true across the demographic – would be convinced by a short term government commitment to liberate Abkhazia and South Ossetia and make them part of Georgia, and moreover, few are willing to pay the costs associated with further military action, after the August War [4]. The net result is that Georgia can neither change the reality nor accept it. The Georgian government does not believe that there is any point in forming relationships with Sukhumi and Tshkinvali, official or otherwise, on the grounds that at this stage, the issue is Russian occupation. Thus for as long as that continues, there is nothing to be gained by engaging with these de facto authorities [5]. There are two pillars of the government's current policy: non-recognition [of independence] and diplomatic engagement. While both of these approaches entail maintaining or establishing contact with the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, they do not necessarily sit easily together. The Parliamentary Elections next year and Presidential elections in 2013 will be politically decisive, and the current government's concrete planning is in tension with fear about a change in government.

Parliament and Presidential Elections: defining Georgia's political future

"The Putin Model", where the post of Prime Minister follows Presidency, will be tested next year in Tbilisi, and lies at the heart of the political speculation in Georgia, and many other lines of speculation are connected to this notion. In the meantime, Saakashvili's constitutional reforms have strengthened the position of Prime Minister. Members of the Georgian opposition before and after the August War, connected powerfully with the population through ex-

hortations to "change the present authorities through demonstrations"; now this seems to have lost its applicability, even though, arguably there are autocratic elements in Saakashvili's ruling methods. The Georgian public doesn't want to see protests and demonstrations, which will likely have a negative impact on Georgian statehood. This sentiment is summed up in Alexander Kukhanidze's words: "We know that Saakashvili is not ideal, but he is the best choice [6]. The constitutional changes that will come into effect from 2013 were introduced in order to strengthen the position of Prime Minister, and have fueled speculation that President Saakashvili is hoping to continue his political career as Prime Minister. Under these reforms, the powers of the president have been curtailed: the state's development will no longer depend quite so much on the

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presidential whim. The prime minister and parliament will play a more significant role, and serve as a serious check on the actions of the future head of state. However, the public supports the attitude of the current government, which is "if you want to change the leadership, the only way is through elections". President Saakashvili is neither denying nor confirming such speculation, saying simply: "No. Theoretically, there is such an opportunity. But I'd like to repeat that this opportunity is useful for us [7]. With Saakashvili not actively denying this speculation, many of the opposition parties and analysts in Tbilisi have no doubt that the president intends to become prime minister. Irakli Alasania, leader of Our Georgia Free Democrats (OGFD) and a former Tbilisi mayoral candidate, has declared, "The proposed



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model is an attempt to tailor the new position personally for Saakashvili.”

Arguably, Georgians are not happy to see political models named after Putin; they want to see their own model, which ideally should entail the continuation of the current government, less emphasis on the personality of the President, and improvements in Russian-Georgian relations. Importantly, the first elections scheduled in Georgia will be the Parliament Elections in October 2012, followed by the Presidential Elections in January 2013. For this reason, the implementation of the “Putin Model” now seems out of the question. The outcome of the Russian Presidential election will refine the speculation about Saakashvili’s future plans.

One thing that can be said about Saakashvili’s Georgia in 2011 is that it is a very different environment to Putin’s Russia in 2000. But for Saakashvili’s legacy to be one of a genuine reformer, he must personally endorse and demonstrate democratic reform in action, and step down from power in 2013; it is clear that head of government will be elected by a majority in parliament, where at the moment the President’s United National Movement has an unchallenged majority. There is no need to focus on personalities so much, because party policies are unlikely to change very much.

Conclusion

The future relations between Russia and Georgia are strongly dependent upon these elections, upon who will be the future leader. One thing is clear: in both

Moscow and Tbilisi, the new leaders will come from current political ruling elites. If future relations continue to be pre-dominated by conflict resolution and the attitudes of leaders, the relationship will not develop beyond a dialogue of illusions. There is a crucial need to find areas of common ground as points for discussion, such as economic relations. The best example of this is the Enguri hydroelectric power plant, which is being used by both Abkhazia and Georgia. Enguri produces up to 40% of Georgia’s winter electricity supply needs. The plant is located in Abkhazia, and the dam is located on undisputed Georgian territory – and yet there have not been any significant disruptions in transmission to undisputed Georgia since the 2008 conflict. The same principles could be applied more broadly to Russian-Georgian relations. For instance: if Georgia broke its embargo of Russian membership to the World Trade Union (WTO), Russia would end its embargo on Georgian wine, mineral water and agricultural produce, because such an embargo contravenes WTO rules. The golden rule is: improving economic relations will improve state relations at a political level. **PR**

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- 1) http://home.gwu.edu/~cwelt/Russian_Analytical_Digest_68.pdf
- 2) Vladimir Putin 'wanted to hang Georgian President Saakashvili by the balls', The Sunday Times, November 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article5147422.ece>
- 3) Russia's Leadership Not Popular Worldwide, August 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/148862/Russia-Leadership-Not-Popular-Worldwide.aspx>
- 4) Author’s discussion with members of expert community of Georgia, 14-23 August 2011
- 5) Interview with Professor Ghia Nodia, full text to be published in Second issue of “Caucasus International”
- 6) Author’s discussion with Professor Alexander Kukhanidze, 17 August, 2011, Tbilisi, Georgia
- 7) Saakashvili cannot be like Putin, <http://www.georgiatimes.info/en/articles/57595-1.html>