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### SHAPING GEORGIA'S FUTURE AFTER THE RUSSIAN INVASION

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#### **Introduction**

Since its independence, Georgia has been the most vocally independent-minded country in the former Soviet Union. As Georgia's ambitions to draw close to Europe and the transatlantic community became clearer, its relations with Russia deteriorated. After the Rose Revolution relations between Georgia and Russia remained problematic due to Russia's continuing political, economic and military support to separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nevertheless, Georgia pledged to maintain good relations with Russia from the beginning, despite the fact some political and military-forces of Russia view Georgia's state-building project as not in Russian national interests.

Russia wants to demonstrate it feels threatened by the sudden move of NATO and other Western political structures into an area previously very much part of its own backyard. At the same time, by recognizing separatist regions of Georgia, Russia has secured two footholds where it could station military bases in the foreseeable future in a region into which NATO could also expand. Russia also is anxious about the EU initiated "Eastern Partnership" program, which does not offer EU membership but is aimed at drawing the six former Soviet republics closer to the bloc by improving human rights, easing visa regulations and ensuring energy security. By asserting a "sphere of influence", strategists in Moscow hope to prompt a reaction from Europe and the West. They no doubt hope that some in Europe may be tempted to back off. Hopefully, Europe does not.<sup>1</sup>

It's also no secret that Russia is uncomfortable with Georgia's democratic and independent nature and the West's close ties with a country in Moscow's "legitimate sphere of influence." Moreover, Moscow is worried that a successful integration of Georgia and Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic structures may cause Russia to lose influence and credibility in the other former Soviet republics, as well as in the Caucasus generally. In recent years, Georgia has demonstrated that there can be a modern, democratic and functioning state in the Caucasus. This is a state in which the economy can develop without government interference, where it is possible not to have corruption. An economically and politically stable Georgia, which in the long run might become a successful Eastern European country, could become a new model for development and exert "gravitation power" for other former soviet republics - including Caucasian entities within Russian Federation - to emulate. This scenario could be viewed by the Kremlin's present rulers as a dangerous zero sum game which they cannot afford to lose.

Russia's invasion of Georgia was certainly seen as a challenge to the "Euro-Atlantic security," but on balance, one that did not justify NATO intervention. At the same time, western friends of Georgia routinely turn a blind eye to this unequal confrontation, or allowing, as Alexander Rondeli has stated, "the smell of oil and gas prevailing over feelings of sympathy and understanding". The east-central European countries with their own fresh memories of the "imperium" tend to be more sensitive to Georgia's problems with Russia and to try to support

its struggle for real independence; but by the same token, their voices carry less weight in European counsels<sup>2</sup>.

Georgian society understands the reality of Western impotence against Russia's aggression in the Caucasus<sup>1</sup>. Georgia's public also recognizes the strategic complexity of the situation and do not want to be seen to be provoking a new global conflict. Georgians acknowledge that the country has suffered a military defeat against Russia, and in the aftermath of the conflict, is undergoing the painful experience of military occupation. There is also a sober realization of the fact that with two wars and a global economic crisis at hand, the Obama administration will make Georgia a lesser priority than it has been for the previous administration. Moreover, as the Georgian political scientist Ghia Nodia noted, while the vast majority of the Georgian people emphatically assert their commitment to western institutions and values, they also understand that these values have not sufficiently taken root in Georgia. Georgia is an aspiring democracy, but not a consolidated one. This gave Russia hope that Georgia's ambition to become a western democracy could yet be reversed. Some observers were not sure whether the nation would be firm enough under such permanent Russian pressure<sup>3</sup>. But the Georgian polity and institutions have survived the test of war with Russia. It is also very clear that Russia is not achieving its objectives. Georgia's juvenile democracy is standing. It is thriving. Though Georgia received extraordinary international support, there is still a feeling that energetic and effective western support is vital for the very existence of Georgian statehood at the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> The public skepticism of western policies towards Georgia began with the failure of the West to respond adequately to Russia's withdrawal from the treaty on conventional forces in Europe (CFE) in July 2007; continued with Nato's refusal to grant Georgia and Ukraine a membership action plan (MAP) in April 2008; and culminated in Europe's inadequate response to Russia's repeated invasions of Georgian airspace in June-July 2008, and its disregard for Georgian sovereignty in Abkhazia.

## **Georgian Security in the Aftermath of the Russian Invasion**

Under conditions where 20 percent of the country's territory is occupied and Russian provocations continue, the risk of the resumption of hostilities is high. The Russian analyst Pavel Felgenhauer, for example, argues another Russo–Georgian war is inevitable – not only to finish the business of 2008, but because Moscow has a strategic need to create a land bridge to its bases in Armenia it simply cannot afford to disregard<sup>4</sup>. Particular concern is the continuing Russian attempts to portray Georgia as a “confrontational aggressive state”, with which everybody should develop cautious relations. In this situation political and moral support by the West for Georgia is essential.

As expected, after the war, NATO launched a new NATO-Georgia Commission aimed at helping Georgia rebuild, following Russia's August 2008 invasion and prepare for future membership in NATO. Similar to a body established in 1997 to oversee NATO relations with the Ukraine, the commission will support Georgia as it pursues a future path to NATO membership as pledged at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania. It will also help Georgia assess damage from the Russian incursion and restore essential services to communities in the conflict zone.

At the April 2009 summit in Strasbourg and Kehl celebrating NATO's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance stated that they were maximizing advice, assistance and support for Georgia's and Ukraine's reform efforts. A **joint statement** released after the Strasbourg/Kehl summit by NATO heads of states said this assistance will be carried out by separate NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia Commissions, “which play a central role in supervising the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit.”<sup>5</sup> The statement reiterates a decision of the April 2008, Bucharest summit that the two countries will become NATO members sometime in the future; it also, however, notes that both should first pass through the Membership Action Plan phase. The annual review of Annual National Program (ANP), the document says, will allow the alliance to continue “to closely monitor” the two countries' reform processes. According to Georgian officials, the ANP is now in the process of elaboration.

In the statement, the alliance leaders also reaffirmed “continued support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders.” They called on all sides in the Geneva talks to play a constructive role and to engage in “rapid implementation” of incident prevention and response mechanisms agreed upon during the recent round of talks in February. The statement says that Russia has not completely complied with its commitments pledged as part of the August 12 and September 8 ceasefire accords. “The build-up of Russia’s military presence in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia without the consent of the Government of Georgia is of particular concern,” it reads. The alliance leaders have also called on Russia “to reverse its recognition” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They have also said that international monitors should have access to “all of Georgia, including the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.” The joint statement, however, also reads that “despite our current disagreements, Russia is of particular importance to us as a partner and neighbor.”

In addition, an assessment of the Georgian armed forces after the August war helped allies of Georgia to understand priorities for training, as well as what new types of equipment were needed for Georgia’s homeland defense. According to US officials, the United States will train the Georgian armed forces with a focus on the defense of Georgia<sup>6</sup>. The announcement comes as the most specific indication to date of how the United States plans to assist Georgia's post-war military reforms. While Georgia and the United States are moving to a completely new higher level of cooperation in the military-political sphere, Georgia remained committed to a peaceful resolution of conflicts.

However it is still unclear, how Russia's invasion affected Georgia’s bid for NATO membership. A year ago, Georgia appeared on the brink of becoming a NATO member. Now, that is far less likely given Russian actions and the onset of the economic crisis which is causing many member states to rethink what they are willing and able to do. If, as now seems more likely, NATO decides not to offer membership to either Ukraine or Georgia anytime soon, the consequences could prove equally dramatic and unsettling across the region. On the one hand, both Kyiv and Tbilisi would certainly feel that they had been misled; their neighbors would assume that the

alliance's expansion was at an end, at least for a long time to come, and Moscow would seek to exploit this situation by presenting itself as the obvious alternative to the West, an effort that might bear fruit.

Understanding this, the initial international response was quick in addressing some problems in the post-war situation. The United States has led international aid efforts by committing \$1.06 billion. The European Commission has already pledged €500 million and has asked the member states to contribute an equal amount. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) will make \$750 million available to Georgia's Central Bank in the form of a Stand-By Arrangement. Even the Asian Development Bank, which is heavily influenced by China, contributed \$40 million. A series of NATO, EU, and other diplomatic meetings is underway<sup>7</sup>. All these efforts and assistance have given Georgia visibility and help restore investor confidence.

### **Can Moscow Win the Ideological Battle in Georgia ?**

The Russian invasion of Georgia resulted in the absolute alienation of Georgia's population from Russia. According to sober judgments, it will require enormous efforts over several generations to repair this damage. Moreover, after Russia's aggression, Georgia was forced to leave the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the last Post-Soviet structure with which it was associated. Thus, in driving Georgia from the CIS, Russia lost legitimacy and influence over Georgia, which was exacerbated when diplomatic links between the two countries were suspended.

Taking all this into consideration, and failing to change the pro-western orientation of Georgia through "hard Power", Russian authorities have recently begun to exercise so called "soft Power" towards Georgia. According to proponents of this idea, Russia should adopt a new Georgia policy, one that would temper Moscow's passion for "regime change" in Tbilisi and would instead employ a direct outreach to the Georgian people. (As examples of such "over-the-head" approaches, they cite President Barack Obama's video message to Iranians celebrating Nowrus and easing restrictions on travel and money transfers to Cuba). The goal of

this new policy would be to prevent further alienation of Georgia's political elites, and help pro-Russian (or at least, Russia-"neutral") forces come to power during the next electoral cycle<sup>8</sup>. How realistic is it? And can Russia win the hearts and minds of Georgians?

Before applying such a different strategy towards Georgia, Kremlin officials should realize that any attempt to install a pro-Russian government in Tbilisi is futile. As a result of having recognized the Georgian enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian authorities made it practically impossible for anyone in Georgia to create a political bloc oriented towards Moscow that would garner wide electoral support. Voters' sympathies for Russia do not exist. This is not just due to the fact that Russia invaded territory which is internationally recognized as part of Georgia. The sight of Russian tanks, military planes and bombs has had a powerful effect too.

Moreover, Russia's leaders should realize a generational and mental change in Georgian society has been underway over the last 15 years. Stereotypes of Georgians as portrayed in older, popular Soviet movies no longer pertain to present-day Georgians. Unlike other former soviet republics, Georgian society is not dominated by "soviet nomenklatura" who may harbor pro-Russian tendencies. On the contrary, this segment of Georgian society was marginalized long ago, and they have no role or future in Georgia's political life.

Georgia's modern elite consists of western-educated people who became alienated by Russian politics towards Georgia, and thus consider Russia as adversary number one and Russian imperialism as a direct threat to the national security of Georgia. Most of them grew up with anti-Russian sentiments and perceive the Russo-Georgian confrontation in ideological terms; i.e., an authoritarian and imperial Russia versus a pro-western and democratic Georgia. The present Georgian political dialogue is dominated by this clash.

In such circumstances, Kremlin hopes for "regime change" and to install a leader more amenable to Moscow in Georgia is counterproductive. Nobody in Georgia will support a geopolitical reorientation of Georgia towards Russia, since it is perceived as a betrayal of the country's vital national interest. There are some in Moscow who hope that if Georgia's opposition leaders (who claim that they would engage in pragmatic dialogue with Russia on

disputed issues) come to power through Russian assistance, the situation may change. But if any of these politicians come to power, Moscow would see none of the strategic changes in Georgian foreign policy it would like to see. Unlike other post-Soviet republics, where Russia enjoys great support from former “nomenklatura”, the Kremlin cannot win the minds and souls of Georgians and as a result it cannot win its “ideological battle” in Georgia.

## **Conclusions**

The new Georgian state faces a sizeable challenge: it is going to take a skilled mediator to maintain the necessary balancing act between the conflicting interests that have emerged within the country. It is clear that internal stability in Georgia no longer meets Russian interests. Despite this, Georgia must pursue a coherent approach to solve the current problems and advance democratic changes. In order to assist Georgia, the international community should be focused on several points:

- EU policymakers must reject the Russian notion of “spheres of privileged interests” and take actions to demonstrate a commitment to creating a more secure environment in the region. Russia can always play some role in this part of the world, but it should do so while treating its neighbors as fully independent states that control their own domestic politics and foreign policy choices. The West should also address regional conflicts in order to better secure the region.
- International institutions (especially the EU) must intensify their involvement in Georgia and work actively to give new impetus to the peace and stabilization processes in the country, thus minimizing Russia’s detrimental geopolitical influence. They need to persuade Russia to reverse its “recognition” of the separatist enclaves of Georgia, and refrain from any unilateral measures affecting Georgia and its citizens without the prior consent of the international community.
- The Georgian government and international organizations involved (UN, OSCE, EU, etc), should continue to engage in the Geneva talks and revise the current security

arrangements in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to obtain a more efficient and more tangible resolution of the conflict. A clearer and more energetic mandate and a single managing authority could achieve better integration of the international effort towards conflict resolution.

- A principled position of the EU and other international actors (Council of Europe) regarding the Russian occupation of Georgian territories will foster the implementation of the agreements achieved by the conflicting sides, including the one regarding the return of refugees and IDP-s in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
- Special assistance is needed to remove foreign military bases in Georgia in accordance with the international agreement reached with Georgia: the government solved the pull out of Russian military bases from other parts of Georgia relatively easily, but new Russian military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be more difficult to deal with. It may take a longer time, and will require EU, NATO and Russian cooperation. Nonetheless, resolving both conflicts is essential for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Georgia has managed to transform dramatically towards a strengthening democracy in a very short period of time. Despite existing problems, the country's course towards democracy and integration into NATO is very evident. Russia needs to recognize that a Western-integrated Georgia would pose no threat. To the contrary, a Western-integrated Georgia would be a source of regional security and stability. Bringing Georgia into NATO would not be dangerous vis-à-vis Russia; rather, it would stabilize the relationship between Russia and Georgia, much as it did with the Baltic-Russian relationship. Moreover, it is necessary to convince Russia that Georgian progress and rapprochement with the West is irreversible.

Although it remains to be seen whether Georgia will be able to bargain the best deal for itself, one thing is certain - Georgia's place in the region, and its relations with both Russia and the West, are entering a crucial new phase. Simply put, it's make it or break it time for Georgia.

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