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IRAKLI SIRBILADZE

# 144

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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Over the past three decades, Georgian-Russian relations have been marred by difficulties and disagreements caused by the incompatible state interests of these two countries. In the early 1990s, both Russia and Georgia went through a turbulent transition from the Soviet Union, facing separatism as well as civil unrest. Yet, due to Russia's support to separatist causes in Georgia, Georgia was unable to maintain de facto control over parts of its internationally recognized territories while Russia, with the excessive use of force, has, in the end, restored de facto and de jure control over separatist Chechnya.

Russia's support to separatist forces in Georgia then became a major issue that set the two countries apart. Although Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1994, the decision was motivated more by necessity rather than by Georgia's acceptance of Russia as a trusted ally. By joining the CIS, Georgia secured Russia's formal recognition of its territorial integrity and sovereignty, yet, in practical terms, Russia has been attenuating Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including by taking the role of a "mediator-cum-supporter-cum-combatant" to establish hierarchical power relations in the CIS region.<sup>1</sup>

Georgia's aspirations to join NATO, most pronounced from the early 2000s, have become another issue that complicated Georgian-Russian relations even more. Russia has been hostile to the idea of NATO's further enlargement to the east to the extent that Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 to put the brakes on Georgia's membership in the Alliance.

As a result, in 2008, two major issues of contention between Russia and Georgia – sovereignty and territorial integrity and Georgia's NATO aspirations – have intertwined as Russia occupied Georgian territories and recognized them as independent states. With that, Russia has – and now legally too – violated Georgia's territorial integrity and, by stationing its military bases in the occupied territories, has effectively paused Georgia's NATO membership prospects.

The year 2008, therefore, was the year which radically altered the nature of Georgian-Russian relations. If before this time the room for dialogue and flexibility existed, the circumstances following the 2008 war rendered that flexibility impossible. Russia sees the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia as an irreversible policy path while Georgia conditions any major improvement in its relations with Russia on de-occupation and on Russia's reversal of its recognition policy.

Russia's continued opposition to NATO enlargement and Georgia's steady NATO and EU membership path make the prospects of major improvements in relations even more distant, if not impossible.

Yet, following the democratic change of power in Georgia in 2012, the new government adopted a partial reset policy in relation to Russia – that is, restoring relations in the economic, trade and humanitarian realms with dialogue taking place on a bilateral level while engaging with Russia on the issues of sovereignty, security and conflict in an international setting.

As the decade came to an end and Georgia now approaches new parliamentary elections, it is worth discussing the major patterns and issues that have emerged over the last eight years. Based on these patterns, it is then the aim of this opinion paper to sketch out the issues that are likely to define Georgian-Russian relations in the coming decade.

### **Eight Years of Relations: Key Issues and Patterns**

In 2012, following the change of power in Georgia and at Georgia's initiation, the two countries started to reset their relations in the economic and cultural spheres. Georgia appointed a Special Representative of the Prime Minister of Georgia for Relations with Russia to which Russia reciprocated. This has paved the way for a setting of bilateral negotiations – informally also known as Karasin-Abashidze talks – periodically held in Prague and largely focused on economic and cultural issues.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2012, Georgian-Russian relations have hence unfolded in two major ways: bilateral talks on the issues of low politics (the economy, trade and cultural relations) and international talks on the issues of high politics (sovereignty, security and conflict).

Before delving into these issues more comprehensively, it is worthy of note that despite major challenges in the politico-security aspects of relations over the past years, the two countries have managed to keep the initial set-up of the relations going – that is, separating low politics from high politics. Talks on the economy and culture have not collapsed despite the worsening of relations in the political and security domains.

As noted above, to capture the key trends of Georgian-Russian relations, two clusters of issues are to be highlighted – economic-cultural and politico-security. These two clusters stand seemingly separate, yet they are in-

tertwined and one could have an impact on how the relations in the other domain will proceed.

In terms of the economy, as compared to the pre-2012 state of things, Georgia and Russia have improved their bilateral engagement. At the end of eight years of a partial reset in relations, Russia has not imposed an embargo on Georgian products and established itself among Georgia's top trading partners.<sup>3</sup> The only exception has been the events of June 2019 – anti-government and anti-Russia protests held<sup>4</sup> in Georgia amid the visit of the Russian MPs as part of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy – in response to which Russia suspended<sup>5</sup> direct flights to Georgia, thus intending to harm Georgia's tourism-dependent economy.

However, progress has not been achieved when the further advancement of economic relations clashed with issues of politics and security. The case in point is the Russian-Georgian WTO Agreement signed in 2011 to allow an international monitoring of the trade in goods between Russia and Georgia through three pre-determined trade corridors. The implementation of this agreement was hindered largely due to political differences over the issues of sovereignty and borders.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of cultural and people-to-people contacts, relations between the two countries have also improved when measured in terms of the rise in tourist numbers. The number of tourists coming from Russia has been increasing annually, surpassing the one million mark for the first time in 2018.<sup>7</sup> Other aspects of cultural relations – for example the idea of opening a Russian language and cultural center in Tbilisi – has not gained traction<sup>8</sup> largely due to societal protests as well as due to its association with Russian propaganda and soft power tools.

Relative progress in economic engagement and people-to-people contacts has been overshadowed by political and security developments since 2012. Two years after the announced partial reset, Russia annexed Crimea which naturally had an impact on the relations between the two countries. Russia's actions in Ukraine have been a continuation of its aggressive foreign policy against its Western-leaning neighbors, first manifested in Georgia in 2008. Georgia joined Ukraine and Western countries in condemning Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue that worsened the political and security relations between Russia and Georgia was Russia's decision to sign new treaties with the

Georgian regions of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia (independent states from Russia's point of view) in 2014 and 2015, respectively.<sup>10</sup> By so doing, Russia extended control over the de facto territories and brought them more aligned to and integrated into the Russian system of governance. Georgia reacted with a condemnation of Russia's decision<sup>11</sup> and went on with the implementation of its non-recognition policy which has been active since 2008.

A corollary to this, and a source of continued tensions between Russia and Georgia, is Russia's borderization policies against Georgia. Borderization refers to the practice of Russia and de facto authorities erecting border signs along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) which was formed following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and divides Georgia into territories controlled and not controlled by the Georgian state. In addition to violating Georgia's territorial integrity, the practice of borderization has brought dire humanitarian consequences for the people living across the ABL,<sup>12</sup> thus becoming a serious bone of contention between Russia and Georgia.

The borderization policy is believed to be guided by Russia's desire to, among other things, derail Georgia from its Western integration path.<sup>13</sup> The most worrying escalation of this policy came in 2019 when the security situation deteriorated at the Chorchana-Tsnelisi area of the ABL<sup>14</sup> leading to increased mediation efforts by the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM). Although an armed confrontation has been avoided, the incident made it clear that without careful engagement by the sides of the conflict and trusted mediation from the EU, the security environment could worsen at any time.

Thus far, it is evident that the major disagreements between Russia and Georgia over political and security issues stem from Russia's decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. This decision naturally forces Georgia to think strictly in terms of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, thus making it impossible to achieve any significant improvement in political relations. Georgia's post-2008 international engagement and foreign policy efforts are largely aimed at preserving support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and at achieving de-occupation and the reversal of Russia's recognition policy.

In addition to issues related to Georgia's occupied territories, progress in Russian-Georgian political relations are limited by Georgia's foreign policy choices of joining NATO and the European Union. Although Russian ag-

gression in 2008 did take Georgia's immediate NATO membership issue off the agenda, it has not stopped Georgia from pursuing closer political and military relations with NATO. Some even argue that Russia's actions in 2008 had a reverse effect<sup>15</sup> making Georgia believe that the only way to ensuring its security is balancing Russia through a close partnership with the West.<sup>16</sup> To that end, over the past eight years, Georgia has advanced its political-military engagement with NATO, reflected in the periodic joint military trainings with NATO and US forces as well as in specific programs that allow Georgia's better alignment with NATO standards.

Georgia is also making progress on its EU integration path materialized by the signing of the Association Agreement (including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) and by the visa free regime with the EU enabling Georgian citizens to enjoy free movement in the Schengen Area.

Georgia's successful advances on its Western integration path have made the country an object of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. These campaigns, it is argued,<sup>17</sup> aim at undermining Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration (including through portraying the EU and the West as antithetical to Georgian culture and values) and eroding the trust of Georgians in their own political institutions as well as in their country's ability to govern itself democratically. In terms of disinformation, of notice is the Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center which has been a target of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns even before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>18</sup> The Russian state machinery took a more serious hit vis-à-vis the Lugar Laboratory as the pandemic arrived, hence securitizing the presence of the lab close to the Russian border.<sup>19</sup>

The most recent development that demonstrated the futile state of Russian-Georgian rapprochement was the events of June 2019. Protests in Georgia erupted as a result of the ruling party's decision to host a session of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) in the Parliament of Georgia. In his capacity as the President of the General Assembly of the IAO, Russian MP, Sergei Gavrilov, took the Speaker's chair which caused protests from Georgian Members of Parliament as well as from the wider public later in the day. Protests with anti-government and anti-Russia slogans ended with police using rubber bullets, causing physical harm and eye loss to a number of protesters.

Russia responded to the events in Georgia in two ways: with a specific action and with a narrative construction. The specific action implied the



suspension of direct flights from Russia to Georgia, thus intending to cause harm to Georgia's tourist-dependent economy. Russia's response made it clear that despite the aim of keeping the economic and political realms separate, Russia still uses, and is willing to use, its economic power over political disagreements with Georgia. That said, however, talks<sup>20</sup> on the possible resumption of flights between Georgia and Russia soon followed – Grigori Karasin, the counterpart of the Georgian PM's Special Representative for Relations with Russia, remarked that Russia wants "Russian-Georgian relations to be stable regardless of domestic political processes."<sup>21</sup>

In terms of the narrative construction, Russia has characteristically dubbed protests taking place in Georgia as Russophobia. Russia's Security Council emphasized "the dangerous nature of the Russophobic provocation against Russian lawmakers that had been orchestrated by local radicals."<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia instructed its citizens to refrain from travelling to Georgia.<sup>23</sup> Georgia denied any danger to the safety of Russian citizens in Georgia<sup>24</sup> and expressed a desire to 'defuse and de-escalate' current tensions in order to maintain progress in the economic and humanitarian realms.<sup>25</sup>

Russia's use of Russophobia charges and the construction of a narrative of a possible threat to its citizens is a continuation of its similar policy both in relation to Georgia and Ukraine. In 2008 as well as in 2014, Russia discursively justified its interventions in Georgia and Ukraine as necessary to protect ethnic Russians and Russian citizens.<sup>26</sup> Russophobia charges are also deployed against Russia's other political adversaries, including the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Russia's construction of Russophobia charges in relation to the 2019 protests in Georgia indicates that it could use a similar discursive ground in the future in order to justify its foreign policy action (i.e., intervention) vis-à-vis Georgia or other neighbors.

This overview of the key issues and developments in Georgian-Russian relations over the last eight years allows us to make the following observations:

1. Since 2012, Georgian-Russian relations have proceeded on two tracks – that of low politics and high politics.
2. Economic and humanitarian relations have progressed as evidenced by the increased economic and people-to-people contacts.

3. Where economic considerations clashed with political ones, the former took precedence over the latter as demonstrated by the non-implementation of the Russian-Georgian WTO Agreement signed in 2011.
4. Improvement in the economic and humanitarian domains has not resulted in improved political relations due to Russia's occupation and recognition of Georgian territories.
5. Political relations have worsened even more due to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its attempts to integrate Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia into its system of governance (also known as a creeping annexation policy), its borderization policies in Georgia (leading to conflict escalation in 2019) and its opposition to Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration efforts, including through the use of propaganda and disinformation campaigns.
6. The events of June 2019 demonstrated that despite the improved economic and cultural contacts, the Georgian public and civil society still see Russia as a threat.<sup>28</sup> It has also revealed Russia's intentions to harm the Georgian economy if political differences arise. Furthermore, by playing the Russophobia card, Russia is preparing a discursive ground for the justification of its future foreign policy actions against Georgia.
7. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia intensified its disinformation campaigns against the Lugar Laboratory, presenting it as a threat to Russia's national security. This, although largely a product of the Russian-Western geopolitical rivalry, points to an emerging issue in Russian-Georgian relations.

This summary of the patterns in Georgian-Russian relations, although rather inconclusive, allows us to deliberate on the issues that will define the nature of these relations in the coming decade.

### **Coming Decade: Issues to Watch**

To an important extent, the way in which Russian-Georgian relations will unfold depends on the results of the upcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia. The elections in 2020 are comparable to the elections in 2012 in a sense that it allows the possibility for another change of power in Georgia.

Looking at the history of the change of power in Georgia, the pattern has emerged that the incoming government takes tactically different policy measures in relation to Russia. Hence, the policy approach to Russia during 2004-2012 differed from the policy approach to Russia during 1995-2003 while the policy approach taken during 2012-2020 also differs from the ones pursued before. That said, it is safe to argue that a different Russia policy is likely to emerge depending on the election results.

However, irrespective of which political party secures the ruling majority in 2020, there are three interrelated constants in Russian-Georgian relations that are going to remain on the agenda for a foreseeable future:

First, issues related to territorial integrity and sovereignty. The absence of political relations between Russia and Georgia is due to Russia's invasion of Georgia and its decision to recognize the independence of the occupied Georgian territories. To counter this, Georgia conducts a non-recognition policy and seeks partnerships all over the world which naturally puts its interests at odds with Russia's interests. Furthermore, major political disagreements between Russia and Georgia (for instance, the one on the 2011 WTO Agreement or on the Open Sky Treaty) are the extensions of and responses to Russia's recognition policy. That said and other things being equal, Georgia and Russia are going to remain at loggerheads over the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Second, security is an important cause of concern for Georgia. The Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and that against Ukraine in 2014 as well as the presence of Russia's military bases in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia is a constant reminder that Russia is a malign power ready to use military and other means to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Hence, the National Security Concept of Georgia stresses the possibility of Russia's renewed military aggression against Georgia.<sup>29</sup> In addition to that possibility, Russia's borderization policy worsens the everyday security environment and could lead to a conflict escalation as demonstrated in 2019.

Third, Georgia's NATO and EU aspirations are likely to be one of the major causes behind Russia's decisions to undermine Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty and threaten its security. As Georgia has been building close political, security and economic partnerships with the West, Russia is going to at least keep the status quo going in order to thwart the realization of Georgia's foreign policy objectives. That being said, Georgia's

Western-leaning policy path, particularly its NATO membership goal, is going to define the nature of future Georgian-Russian relations.

In addition to the aforementioned three broader issues of contention, there are sub-issues that are to be watched in the coming decade:

1. *Borderization*. As a corollary to Russia's decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Russia's borderization policy is going to affect Russian-Georgian relations for a significant period of time. As Russia has been legitimizing the de facto states since 2008, Russia's policy reversal in relation to these entities seems rather unlikely. That said, Georgia is left with no choice but to deal with the practice of borderization and look for the ways in which new conflict is avoided while simultaneously sustaining the support for Georgia's territorial integrity.
2. *Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns*. Especially since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has made information warfare an important part of its foreign policy action and calculus. Russia has been conducting propaganda and disinformation campaigns in relation to its political adversaries, including Georgia. In the Georgian context, the aim is to derail Georgia from its Western aspirations, present the West as antithetical to Georgian values and portray Georgia as a failed state unable to govern itself without outside interference. These campaigns are going to remain on the agenda, especially given the increasing geopolitical competition between the West and the Rest. Countering these narratives is an important task in order to maintain public support for Georgia's foreign policy priorities.
3. *Charges of Russophobia*. The justification of Russia's foreign policy action has discursively rested on the notion of defending its nationals from the alleged threats posed to them in other countries. This has become a justificatory basis for Russia's wars against Georgia and Ukraine. During the June 2019 events, Russia constructed a Russophobia narrative in response to protests in Georgia. That rhetorical device could, therefore, become a tool in Russia's political arsenal in case Georgian-Russian relations deteriorate amid the change of power in Georgia.
4. *Discourse on biological security*. Particularly since Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict and its use of a nerve agent on UK territory in 2018, Russia has advanced disinformation campaigns against the

Lugar Laboratory which forms an invaluable part of Georgia's public health management system. As the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it the blame attribution game among major powers, Russian officials have re-emphasized their doubts about the transparency of the activities of the Lugar Laboratory, requesting access for a Russian delegation to inspect the facility. Georgia has stressed transparency and invited Russia only as part of international delegations.<sup>30</sup> Russia's securitization of the Lugar Laboratory points to its possible calculations to instrumentalize the discourse on biological security in order to advance its foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis Georgia.

## **Conclusion**

The past three decades have demonstrated that the causes of the spoiled Georgian-Russian relations are structural, thus requiring structural solutions to bring relations to normality. Russia as a great power sees Georgia's foreign policy choices as antithetical to its national interests, hence undertaking economic, political and military actions that will hinder the realization of Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Georgia, on the other hand, both in response to security threats from Russia and due to its proclaimed European and Euro-Atlantic identity, advances steadily on a Western integration path. These incompatible interests and positions cause disagreement and difficulty in the relations between Georgia and Russia.

However, in 2012, Georgia sought to take a partial reset policy approach towards Russia, separating the issues of low politics (the economy and people-to-people contacts) from the issues of high politics (security, sovereignty and conflict). In the first domain, relations proceed on a bilateral basis while in the second domain they take place in an international setting.

Despite progress achieved in the economic sphere and with people-to-people contacts, political relations still remain troubled, causing a deterioration in the economic realm as well. This has been exemplified in Russia's reaction to the June 2019 protests in Georgia when Russia unilaterally suspended direct flights to Georgia with the intention of harming the country's economy. This notwithstanding, the format introduced in 2012 – separating economic issues from political ones – has not collapsed and the parties are still committed to pursuing economic cooperation and maintaining people-to-people contacts.

However, political and security relations have worsened due to Russia's further revisionism in relation to Ukraine as well as its ongoing occupation and legitimization of Georgian territories. That, together with its borderization policy, makes political relations between Russia and Georgia impossible to mend.

As a new decade ensues and Georgia approaches parliamentary elections, it is likely that a new policy approach towards Russia will emerge. Irrespective of which political party (or parties) is going to secure the majority, issues related to territorial integrity, security and Western integration will remain high on the agenda of Georgian-Russian relations.

In addition to this, borderization, Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, alleged charges of Russophobia and Russia's insistence on biological security are the issues that will dominate the Russian-Georgian agenda. The presence of heavy political issues on the agenda makes it unclear as to how specifically the Russian-Georgian economic relations will continue as well as whether or not the existing format of relations will be sustained.

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