

Georgia, Russia: Power of Perception

Transcript of talk by Gela Charkviani, Foreign Policy Advisor to Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze

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For more than a year now a recurring theme in the world media and scholarly papers has been Russia's renewed efforts to reassert its influence in the former Soviet territory. One country frequently referred to in this context is Georgia. The two events or, rather, the two decisions of the Russian government regarded as most indicative of its intentions have been the introduction of an unfair visa regime, whereby Georgia's two secessionist territories were granted privileges, and cutting off gas supply to Georgia in December of 2000, even though the recipient company had paid in advance. In his recent Washington Post article Peter Baker puts it bluntly: Russia is "escalating her campaign of intimidation to punish Georgia for its Western orientation."

And indeed, today's Georgia is a western-oriented country in two significant ways. It espouses western liberal values and it regards integration into European and EuroAtlantic institutions as its ultimate foreign policy objective.

Within a limited timeframe, from 1995 until this day the country has made impressive headway in both directions. Even the harshest critics can hardly deny that today's Georgia is a free nation, a free society where the basic rights of citizens are essentially guaranteed and where power of everyone of the political institutions or personalities, for that matter, is limited by the checks and balances inherent in the political system and, even more importantly, by the vociferous and, at times, ruthless free media. Private ownership of 80% of the country's wealth, including the land, further helps to keep state power at bay.

Regarding Georgia's westward movement, points that merit special mention are the following. Over the last several years Georgia has established very close links with the United States and the European Union. With the latter it has signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Georgia has gained membership in the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization. The country is a founding member of the EuroAtlantic Partnership council and an active participant in the NATO Partnership for Peace Program. So much so, in fact, that in the coming month Georgia will be hosting a major PFP event - a multi-national military exercise, in which most of the countries present at this seminar will take part.

All that said, one must admit that with its unresolved conflicts, 300.000 IDP-s, recent fiscal failures, widespread corruption and meager incomes of significant segments of the population, modern Georgia is far removed from that shiny-clean, prosperous model nation envisioned by some at the dawn of its independence. On the other hand, with its minimum inflation rate, stable currency, constant, if recently somewhat small, GDP growth, entrepreneurial spirit on the ascendant, prospects of higher revenues and new-employment opportunities stemming from participation in huge infrastructure projects collectively known as the New Great Silk Road, Georgia may look to a brighter future and is certainly anything but a failed state as some political forces within and without the country are trying to present it.

For a small country like Georgia located in a zone of high geopolitical uncertainty, it is all too natural to look for outside sources of security, and that is precisely what Georgia has done for several centuries now, particularly after the fall of Constantinople in 1452 as it found itself totally isolated from Europe. As life became unbearable from the 17th century onward, largely due to Iranian and Ottoman aggressions, devastating raids by Caucasian mountaineers and endless internecine conflicts, Georgian kings intensified their search for a protector. The original source was the Catholic world. In fact, several embassies were sent to persuade Western governments

to show greater interest in the region. Sul Khan Saba Orbeliani, a well-known Georgian writer and a public figure, who had become a Catholic monk for some 20 years prior to his European trip, met with Pope Clement XI and visited the court of Louis XIV of France. Despite some promises nothing of any consequence followed those meetings. The Western world was clearly not ready to interfere.

Yet I find it useful to draw your attention to the memorandum on the proposals of the Georgian diplomat drawn up on April 25, 1724 in Marseilles. It illustrates what the Georgian political elite of the time hoped to achieve. Curiously enough, along with the security of the nation from external aggression, it was the protection of the trade routes, that could allow a safe passage of cargoes through Georgia from East to West and, thus, help to generate badly needed revenues. The Georgian side also requested that French officers train Georgian military personnel. One cannot help wondering how familiar these requests sound. Things do not appear to have changed much. One change did occur, though - instead of silk and spices, it is oil and gas that Georgia intends to move across its territory towards Western markets.

After it became clear that the Western option would hardly produce tangible results any time soon Georgian kings shifted their eyes toward another potential source of security - Russia. It should also be noted that at the time at stake was the political survival of the nation, since over several centuries Georgia's population had dramatically declined in numbers. Unlike Europe, remote and unprepared to interfere, Russia had already begun its advance in the direction of the Caucasus, edging slowly, building forts in its proximity. In 1783 the Treaty of Georgievsk placed the East Georgian kingdom under Russian protection. This was followed by an angry Iranian response - an invasion that culminated in serious bloodletting in Tbilisi, which is widely believed to have prompted Georgia's ultimate decision to accept total control from co-religionist Russia or in other words - abolition of the Georgian state.

Ever since that time this decision has been a matter of serious controversy in Georgia. Many have questioned its wisdom, but even more numerous have been those who have argued that at the time, at least, this was the only way to survive. Aside from survival, however, there were other benefits to reap. The newly gained security allowed for the rehabilitation and further development of Georgia's devastated economy. Russia's vast cultural and scholarly experience helped raise educational standards. Also, after centuries of isolation, through Russia Georgia could now gain an easier access to European ideas and practices. In a way Russia has served as a kind of an available, makeshift Europe, a simulacrum of the West. This became even more so in the Soviet times when Moscow took full control of information flow and foreign travel. Direct access to western sources was practically banned and, thus, Moscow established a virtual monopoly on the West allowing the union republics to partake of it only vicariously. Curiously enough, this is one role that today's Russia still seems unwilling to give up fully. Its message seems to be: "O.K., go west, but not ahead of me. Better still, if you follow in my footsteps."

To be sure, over the years the West has lost some of its mythical glamour in the eyes of Georgians. But despite the anti-western propaganda, some sui generis, yet other supplied from the outside, whereby the U.S., and to a lesser degree, Europe, are presented as selfish hegemony, aspiring to dominate the world by imposing their culture that dangerously blends sexual promiscuity, self-seeking and ennui, most of the Georgians still regard the West with respect and confidence.

The decade that followed the disintegration of the USSR has seen frequent shifts in Georgian-Russian relations. Along with references to co-religionism, cultural affinity and the necessity to maintain the best possible relations, statements were made that rendered all the good intentions unfeasible. Such a high degree of ambivalence can be explained by the heavy load of historical memories that the Georgians and the Russians share. This contradictory mix boasts an easy rapport and the close friendly bonds that have existed all along between the artistic and intellectual elite of the two nations, the camaraderie of the World War Two veterans, fighting

together against the ultimate evil. It, however, also contains the memory of February 1921, when the Russian Bolsheviks ruthlessly crushed Georgia's dreams of independence, having first concluded a non-aggression pact signed, of all people, by Vladimir Ilych Lenin himself and the very recent memory of April 9, 1989 when 19 demonstrators, most of them young women were shoved to death by Soviet troops in Tbilisi. Little wonder then, the Georgian media invariably accused Russia of neo-imperial designs, while their Russian counterparts begrudged Georgia the assistance their country had provided in the past and vilified Georgia for selling out to the West. It was also common to see Russian analysts suggest various recipes for destabilizing Georgia and, thus, keeping it in the Russian orbit.

But apart from rhetoric there were things happening in the real life. So, in 1992-93 the Russian military gave every kind of assistance to the Abkhaz separatists, including military planning and, as it is widely believed, even took part in the actual combat. As a result Abkhazia was cleansed of its ethnic Georgian population, which had comprised 48% of the antebellum total whereas then the Abkhaz had made up only 17. In the wake of the Abkhaz disaster, Georgia, brought to its knees, had no choice but to join the CIS, which many Georgian politicians regarded at the time as Russians tool designed to help recentralize her former territory. Yet, after that bilateral relations began improving and, before long, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin arrived in Tbilisi on an official visit.

The highlight of that trip was signing a framework agreement that was to regulate relations between the two friendly nations for many years ahead. There was also an important nuance indicative of Russia's, or at least Yeltsin's, intention to forget the immediate past. In his speech at the Georgian Academy of Sciences the Russian President sort of apologized for his country's unseemly role in the Abkhaz conflict. In the same year Russian peacekeepers were deployed in the conflict zone and a basing agreement was signed contained wherein were Russia's promises to help upgrade the Georgian army and settle the conflict in Abkhazia. All that seemed to bode well for Georgian-Russian relations. However, things didn't work that way. Suffice it to say that the Framework Agreement signed by Yeltsin and Shevardnadze never even came close to being ratified by successive Russian Parliaments. This was an alarming signal. Something had gone fundamentally wrong between the two societies.

Meanwhile Georgia, in the face of overwhelming odds began picking up pieces. Economy was a shambles, so was law and order. International community showed little interest. One resource that Georgia could effectively use was its location between the oil-rich Caspian and Europe. Therefore, it was imperative that Georgia get the world interested in infrastructure projects that would not only promise material benefits, but eventually help the country find its niche within the globalizing world. Equally important were the opportunities the East-West corridor opened for Georgia's energy independence, no longer having to rely on one and only source of supply.

Therefore, it is all too natural that the role of the most ardent champion of the New Silk Road was assumed by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who even wrote a book on the subject. Although the response to his initial efforts was tepid, his perseverance along with the support he received from his friends finally succeeded in getting major global power centers to take heed. The European Union came up with its TRACECA and Inogate projects. US Congress enacted a piece of legislation known as the Silk Road Strategy Bill, initiated by Senator Brownback. US Administration created a position of the special adviser to the State Department and the President on oil and pipeline diplomacy. Japanese Government elaborated its policy with regard to the Silk Road. Nor was China indifferent to the project.

With some variations, stated Western policy objectives with regard to the Silk Road region, of which Georgia with its access to the Black Sea is a pivotal country, boiled down to the following three points.

- To help the countries utilize their natural resources and develop their economies, so that their independence becomes irreversible.
- To create favorable conditions for secure and unhampered transportation of the natural resources to the world markets, enhancing thus business opportunities for the Western companies.
- To encourage regional cooperation by means of developing a system of multiple pipelines.

Of the five originally planned pipelines two were intended to carry Caspian hydrocarbons across the Russian territory, while the three would do so, through the south Caucasus.

Although the pipeline theme may have encouraged some exaggerated expectations of easy money or "pipe-dreams" as some journalists were quick to dub them, general optimism over the Silk Road's potential was not at all groundless. Hopes pinned on it for more jobs, better living standards, and increased security through the intensified regional co-operation were realistic. For this reason it was all the more painful for the Georgian public to learn of Russia's outright negative stance on the multiple pipelines and the Silk Road as such. Russia's zero-sum approach to this matter at times seemed to border on the irrational "No pipeline will ever be laid across the South Caucasus." "We must drag all pipelines onto the Russian territory." These and many similar statements belong to Russian high officials. A question implying the existence of a conspiracy - "why are they trying to bypass Russia?" was asked incessantly in the media and a simple conclusion was offered: "They intend to sneak away. We are being ousted from the Caucasus by the West."

This rhetoric did not change things in the real life-pipelines continued to be built much in accordance with the original plan. It did, however, escalate the paranoia.

Opposition political parties in the Georgian Parliament renewed their demands that Georgia withdraw from the CIS and reduce contacts with Russia to an officially required minimum. They were joined by some mainstream politicians who argued that Russia's stand on pipeline routes clearly demonstrated her total disregard for Georgia's interests and one way to protest her selfishness was to give up membership in the organization that Russia had allegedly conceived as her modernized empire. Yet, whatever Russia's original intentions, CIS never came to be more than a talk-shop essentially innocuous and dismally ineffective.

As we can see today Russia eventually became disillusioned with the CIS. In recent months some top Russian officials have indicated that the country's leadership no longer regarded the CIS as their priority and the focus would shift to bilateral relations with the former republics. A few months before those views regarding the diminished importance of the CIS were voiced, Russia withdrew from the Bishkeck Treaty on visa-free travel - possibly the only CIS agreement that had worked smoothly. To everyone's surprise it soon became clear that Russia had done it with the sole purpose of imposing a visa regime on Georgia. Notwithstanding the rationale Russia's leadership provided, the majority of the Georgian population responded very negatively to Russia's maneuvering which as it turned out was aimed at punishing Georgia alone.

Even those who traditionally viewed Russia as a friend now felt betrayed. As for the political opposition, ironically, its demands to pull out of the CIS became even louder.

Let me also remind you that as early as several years prior to the events cited above, political analyst Sergey Karaganov, as he spoke of the prospects of CIS, described Russia as an old and sick lion, surrounded by a pack of jackals, that is, CIS member states. He concluded that the lion

would do a lot better if he switched to dealing with the jackals on an individual basis, rather than facing them as a pack at various CIS forums. Incidentally, Karaganov singled out a particularly pugnacious sub-pack of states called GUUAM.

What makes GUUAM special and consequently somewhat suspicious is its uniqueness. Unlike other groups of nations that have emerged on the former Soviet territory, the Baltics excepted, GUUAM does not have Russia as a member. In character, Russia's response to GUUAM was on the whole similar to that displayed with regard to the pipelines. However, judging by some comments in the media, it was viewed as even more of a threat.

True, because of the commonality of interests of the GUUAM nations each of them hoped to enhance its independence by cooperating within this new framework, but can a higher degree of independence of, say, Georgia, pose any threat to Russia? Naturally, the answer is no, unless the lessening of Russia's ability to bully Georgia, or in more technical terms, to influence its external behavior, is perceived as a threat.

It was against this un auspicious background that Russia began its second military operation in Chechnya, whose only external border is the one it shares with Georgia. As the Russian forces pressed hard south, over six thousand Chechen civilians, most of them, women, children and old people streamed towards that very border. Although This crowd of malnourished, sick people, long exposed to cold weather, did include a few wounded soldiers, the Georgian government decided to let them in and give them shelter in the narrow Pankisi Gorge inhabited by Georgian citizens of Chechen extraction. This decision was taken on strictly humanitarian grounds. It should also be noted that even though over six thousand Chechen boeviks had sided with the Abkhaz separatists and had committed gruesome atrocities against ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia, the Georgian leadership chose to respond within a paradigm befitting the dawn of the new millennium. By refusing to retaliate it severed the possible chain of' endless violence that had bedeviled the Caucasian peoples for centuries and would undoubtedly do so again had the decision been different.

Accusations of complicity with the terrorists came immediately. "Georgians harbor thousands of Chechen terrorists on their territory, provide them with medical assistance, help them to receive funds, arms and ammunition from abroad, and are planning to lead them back into Chechnya to fight the Russian forces." Incidentally, speaking of harboring terrorists, one would be remiss not to mention the fact that for six years now Russia has refused to extradite Georgia's former security minister charged with assassination attempt on President Shevardnadze. Accusations grew even louder after Georgian President rejected Mr. Yeltsin's request to use Georgian territory to launch military strikes against the Chechens. Had he not done so, however, Georgia would have long been a scene of fierce battles and terrorist activities. So this time the decision was a pragmatic one - the result of simple calculations prompted by national interest.

Even though there were obviously no reasonable alternatives to what Sheverdnadze did, this episode is widely believed to have served as the most powerful irritant in Georgian-Russian relations ever since. Peter Baker in the same Washington Post article quotes Georgian President as saying: "Regrettably, the idea is still alive in Russia that the former Soviet republics should for some reason give advantage to Russia's interests and sometimes even put them ahead of their own." References to Russia's national interests in the Caucasus are constantly made by Russian politicians and political commentators. Interestingly enough, however, these interests are never explicitly stated. One wonders if it is because what is often perceived as a matter of national interest - be it military presence in Georgia or monopoly on the transit of the Caspian hydrocarbons - transcends the ethical boundaries of the modern concept of national interest. If so, some of these interests wilt inevitably clash with those of what one might describe as the host countries, and, as we see, they often do.

To be sure, there is nothing very unusual about the way things unfolded in the decade that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union; an event which is unquestionably regarded as central to their recent histories by the Russians and the Georgians alike. However, there the similarities end. Georgian and Russian perceptions of the disintegration of the USSR are considerably different, if not diametrically opposite. In Russia the overwhelming majority view this event with regret, while many even regard it as a tragedy of epic proportions. The majority of the Georgians welcomed the demise of the Soviet Union, for that meant the long-awaited freedom for their nation. Contrary to the predictions of some wise men, this attitude has not changed substantially despite the economic hardship and uncertainty that the new lift has produced.

This difference in attitudes can explain policies the two sides have pursued. Understandably, Russia has tended to encourage centripetal behavior in the former Soviet space, while discouraging, or at times, even punishing those who chose to move in the opposite direction. Given the current paucity of her resources, it is all too natural that Russia has selected negative conditioning as a tool to curb centrifugal aspirations. For its part Georgia has made every effort to consolidate the newly gained independence, which has often meant doing the very things Russia regarded as wrong or even inimical to its national interests.

Also an important point to be kept in mind is that unlike the 18th century when Georgian kings regarded physical survival of the nation as the major problem and were ready to trust their co-religionist neighbor with the security of their people at nearly any cost, today the central security concern for the Georgians is a possible loss of independence, even if only partially. Modern Georgians value freedom as high as life and as recent history has demonstrated, sometimes even higher. It is precisely for this reason that they may at times overreact and respond disproportionately to careless statements in the Russian media that could after all, be simply disregarded.

With all the ups and downs, recent increased Russian pressure, whims and counter whims, there still seems to be emerging a faintly discernible tendency toward somewhat improved relations. This is mainly due to a higher awareness in both societies of a need to do something to turn the tide. Lately, the two Presidents have instructed their respective foreign policy teams to begin working on a new framework agreement to replace the ill-fated document that repeatedly failed to pass ratification procedures in the Duma. Also, a recent statement by Mr. Putin to the effect that the visa regime was only a temporary measure has been assessed by Georgian leadership as reassuring. Hopefully these first cautious steps will be followed by new initiatives and reasonable compromises. More so, as the recent history of Georgian-Russian relations has seen some genuinely positive developments, that could serve as object lessons in the application of a win-win paradigm. One such event was the replacement of the Russian border guards with their Georgian counterparts along the Georgian-Turkish border and the Black Sea coast. The process was carried out in a most civilized manner and currently the two agencies continue to co-operate fruitfully. It is essential, however, that Russia should begin taking pride in helping the New States to stand on their feet rather than feel insulted at having to leave.

Yet, it may be a long time, before the Georgians relinquish their fears of Russia's intentions and the Russians begin regarding Georgia as a genuinely independent state, no longer what they euphemistically call the "Near Abroad."