

# Georgia's Foreign Policy Impasse

## IS CONSENSUS CRUMBLING?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 187  
September 2011

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### **Introduction**

A broad, pro-Western consensus over foreign policy goals has existed in Georgia since the late 1990s, but it is not certain whether this will be sustained in the future. The consensus was based on a few widely shared assumptions, including Georgia's geostrategic importance in the post-Soviet region, the indispensability of the so-called pro-Western course, and an irreconcilably dualistic nature of world politics played out as a geopolitical great game between Russia and the West.

The aftermath of the war of August 2008 put these assumptions under serious question. Georgia, a self-perceived regional pivot, came under direct Russian military attack, but neither the United States nor Western European states bothered to strain their relations with Russia, let alone come to Georgia's military aid. Western states have not been effective in ensuring the "de-occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Georgia still deems to be inalienable part of its territory. Quite the opposite, the United States engaged Russia in an apparently positive-sum game of "reset." All Georgia received from this post-war international situation was U.S. and European financial aid, which felt more like "guilt money" than a serious postwar reconstruction aid package. Georgia did not receive strategic backing from the West except for qualified sympathy and occasional rhetorical support.

The Georgian government, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, managed to retain its authority within the country while the opposition remained fractured and weaker than ever before. One of the major political tools in the hands of Saakashvili, which helped him to remain in power, was popular mobilization in the face of the Russian threat. The Georgian population's perception of Russia has remained negative ever since August 2008, and this perception continues despite the attempts of particular political forces to question the rationale of Saakashvili's ardently pro-American and anti-Russian rhetoric.

This paper is an attempt to analyze what has underpinned Georgia's foreign policy consensus and how likely it is to persist in the face of mounting difficulties concerning Georgia's international standing. The explanation for foreign policy persistence includes the Georgian president's grip on power, the intransigence of the Russian leadership toward improving relations with Tbilisi, a lack of practical cooperative areas in Russian-Georgian relations, and the government's motivation to stay its course under conditions of international uncertainty. However, the broad ideological consensus regarding Georgia's foreign policy stance may be weakening.

### **A Foreign Policy Impasse**

Georgia finds itself at an impasse over foreign policy. This impasse can be defined as a political situation that precludes meaningful progress toward enhancing national independence and security. It is both conceptual as well as practical. The Georgian leadership clings to foreign policy priorities that are either unrealistic or too distant to achieve. Meanwhile, important foreign relationships are either already strained or deteriorating.

On the conceptual level, there are currently no visible – to say nothing of credible – guarantees for ensuring Georgia's independence and territorial integrity. Georgia does not have enough power on its own to stand up to the aggression of almost any of its neighbors. Georgia also has no formal military alliance with anyone. The closest such alliance is the U.S.-Georgian Charter on Strategic Partnership, which does not go beyond a rhetorical endorsement of Georgian democracy and territorial integrity. Membership in either NATO or the European Union has been Georgia's top foreign policy priority for the last ten to fifteen years but now these priorities seem more distant than ever before. Therefore, the current leadership does not have any answers for the acute questions of national security and independence.

The EU has turned more and more critical of the Georgian government over human rights, democracy, and rule of law. Georgia's long awaited treaty with the EU has been delayed because of Tbilisi's intransigence over regulation mechanisms and other such technical issues. The EU's so called "neighborhood policy" showed little promise of serious progress. Georgia did not receive any significant investments from the EU after the August 2008 war, except for the above-mentioned financial aid.

Georgia's relations with its neighbors as well as traditional partners have not improved since the August war. Relations with Russia, Georgia's most important neighbor, are extremely strained. Apart from the absence of diplomatic ties, the two countries have failed to make any progress on concerns regarding the cause of the 2008 military conflagration. Georgia refuses to accept the legitimacy of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and still demands the withdrawal of Russian forces from the two regions. The Russian leadership flatly refuses to have anything to do with Saakashvili. Meanwhile, there are no international guarantees for a non-resumption of conflict between Georgia and Russia, or between Georgia and its breakaway regions.

The United States has a reset policy with Russia, which endures despite many initial predictions about its quick termination. U.S. President Barack Obama's policy did

not deprive Tbilisi of Washington's rhetorical support, but Saakashvili's government found itself increasingly marginalized and deprived of its hopes for a more energetic and sympathetic U.S. policy toward Georgia. Saakashvili would be happy to undermine the reset, hoping, implicitly, that renewed U.S.-Russian scuffles would give Georgia a more important place in U.S. foreign policy. In fact, the reset may be the only international premise on which the stability of a Georgian-Russian "cold peace" is predicated. Its termination could lead to unpalatable consequences for Tbilisi.

Georgia's relations with its traditional partners, Turkey and Azerbaijan, continue seemingly undisturbed, but these relations have cooled down a great deal since the times when Eduard Shevardnadze, Heydar Aliev, and Suleiman Demirel enjoyed especially cordial, and fruitful, relations. Turkey and Azerbaijan look for better relations with Russia because of the business opportunities the latter gives them. The "revolutionary" rhetoric of the Georgian leadership, and a certain personal alienation between Saakashvili and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliev, have not helped improve relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia.

In short, Georgia has no prospect of relying on any foreign power or alliance in its showdown with Russia. And a change of policy toward Russia is also not in sight.

### **Domestic Disagreement over Foreign Policy**

Saakashvili has relied on popular support for his foreign policies ever since he assumed power in 2004. Paradoxically, the war of August 2008, despite Georgia's spectacular military defeat, increased the popular basis of his pro-Western and anti-Russian political rhetoric. However, this popular support has never been unconditional. It started to crumble recently because of two fundamental reasons: disillusionment with the United States by the Georgian opposition and domestic social and economic grievances.

Domestic opposition to Saakashvili, even if disparate and powerless, is increasingly restless and there is little promise of significant progress in terms of societal consensus over basic issues of legitimacy and power distribution. As early as December 2009 and March 2010, erstwhile supporters of Saakashvili, former Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli and former Parliamentary Chairwoman Nino Burjanadze, visited Moscow and held meetings with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. This was the first major public political act challenging the foreign policy consensus. Saakashvili and his party, as well as the state-controlled media, labeled Noghaideli and Burjanadze as traitors. By the summer of 2011, almost the entire Georgian political spectrum, except for former Georgian ambassador to the United Nations, Irakli Alasania, and the New Rights Party, was either engaged in public negotiations with various Russian politicians or holding talks with Russian businessmen of Georgian descent about funding their political activities.

The Georgian opposition acted not because of their sympathy toward Russia and Putin. While in government, both Noghaideli and Burjanadze had impeccable reputations as ardent nationalists and their anti-Russian speeches often outshined Saakashvili's rhetoric. Their speeches were not far from what they actually believed

(most probably). These two politicians declared that their trips to the Kremlin served Georgia's national interests because at least, they said, somebody should be talking to Russia in the absence of any meaningful official contact between the two capitals. In terms of political expediency, however, they were clearly out for political support from the Russian leadership as well as financial resources that would enable them to fund their respective political campaigns. Other Georgian politicians, most notably former minister of defense Irakli Okruashvili (another ardent former Russophobe) and former presidential contender Levan Gachechiladze also looked to Moscow for funding.

However, is there something more to these politicians' moves than a mere search for Russian political support (and funding)? One can add three additional reasons for their "pro-Russian" behavior. First, there is a realization that Russia and the West are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Second, because of cultural affinity, Russia never entirely lost its cultural and even political appeal among the Georgian public. It makes sense for politicians to cater to this part of the population, which is both skeptical of Georgia's exclusively pro-American political course and marginalized by the government's economic and social policies. Third, the Georgian opposition became disillusioned about U.S. democratic assistance as a political tool for overthrowing the current Georgian regime.

On this third point, most Georgian political campaigns since late 2007 against Saakashvili have been modeled on the Rose Revolution of 2003. It was widely believed that it was U.S. democracy assistance that enabled Saakashvili to overthrow Shevardnadze back then. Now, citing Saakashvili's undemocratic practices, Georgian opposition leaders expected that the United States would pour financial resources onto them to undermine Saakashvili's increasingly autocratic rule. Ultimately, they have become disillusioned with the United States that this did not happen.

Therefore, compared with the mid-2000s, there is a greater plurality of views with respect to Georgia's foreign orientation, which is motivated by difficulties in domestic affairs, disillusionment with the West, and a growing sense of Russia's comeback in the post-Soviet space. The next section addresses the basis for Georgia's foreign policy consensus.

### **What is the Basis for Georgia's Foreign Policy Consensus?**

The decisive factor that binds Georgia's foreign policy together is the government's iron grip on power, media, and, hence, public opinion. The official propaganda machine creates an image of a crumbling Russia and a foreseeable de-occupation of Georgia. Dissenting views are not widely available and treated by both the government and its loyal media as unacceptable for Georgian national interests. The government's perception of its international stance may be more sober than its propaganda but, given Georgian realities, there is practically no available alternative to the course that Saakashvili has chosen.

On the surface, Saakashvili is intransigent toward Russia. However, there are signs of a readiness for collaboration. The most important of these signs is the increasing volume of Russian-generated investments into the Georgian economy. Most

of this money comes from offshore sources. However, these investments are not enough to melt the political ice. Georgia cannot offer Russia anything that Moscow would seriously be interested in. Neither in economic, strategic, or political terms is Tbilisi able to acquire a strong bargaining position with regard to Russia. Probably the most obvious strategic issue on which the two states could cooperate is the stability of the North Caucasus. In a way, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are extensions of the North Caucasus problem. However, Moscow treats these issues as isolated problems that Russia can take care of on its own. In a way, Georgian policy displays a mirror image. Tbilisi looks elsewhere for foreign assistance for the security of its borders and ignores the potentially shared interests with Russia over the security questions of the North Caucasus.

All this considered, Georgia's foreign policy consensus rests on the apparent effectiveness of government policies, and primarily its economic performance. Meanwhile, the Georgian economy shows no signs of improvement and the country's economic infrastructure is crumbling. Inequality is steadily rising, breeding more and more discontent. Problems are particularly evident in the agricultural sector, which used to provide some basic social support for the economically impoverished population. This support is weaker now. The share of imports is steadily rising, as is inflation, and Georgia's exports show no sign of growth. Foreign investments are steadily diminishing, and Georgia's foreign debt has grown exponentially in the last few years. Post-war foreign assistance was just enough to sustain stability in Georgia but by no means enough to revitalize it. Hence, economic growth may no longer be enough to serve as a base for the government's maintenance of power.

Therefore, the only credible functioning base on which the government can rely on is the police, security forces, and loyal bureaucracy. All these are sustained with high salaries and privileges. There are little other power resources keeping the regime together. How long Saakashvili can sustain this is an essential question. And the foreign policy consensus may be disappearing along with the stability of the regime.

## **Conclusion**

There is an opportunity cost in maintaining a foreign policy line that opposes Russia. This opportunity cost includes diminished foreign economic revenues, growing domestic instability, and strained relations with many countries that find it more and more profitable to have good relations with Russia. There are signs that the foreign policy consensus is crumbling, given opposition figures' recent harsh statements against the United States and their increased contacts with Russian politicians and businessmen.

There was a period in Georgia's recent history when Shevardnadze chose to bandwagon with Russia (1993-1995), despite Russia's indirect and unwelcome interference in the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is not likely to happen while Saakashvili is in power. The major reasons for this are Saakashvili's ideological preferences and the Kremlin's intransigence toward him. Whether Saakashvili can

remain at the helm long enough to outlive his opponents in the Kremlin is a different – and open – question.