

## **ESCALATION OF THE TENSIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA: A DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF?**

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This paper seeks to discuss the recent escalation of the tensions between Russia and Georgia, especially since Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000. These developments have been conceived completely differently on the two sides of the Russian–Georgian border. The Russian side accuses Tbilisi for failing to take the necessary security measures against the terrorists who use the Georgian territory to attack Russia. In response, the Georgian side accuses Moscow for manipulating its own security problems to destabilize Georgia with a view of restoring its imperial dominance in the Caucasus. Consequently, the alternative narratives of both sides on the escalation of the tensions in their relations looks like a dialogue of the deaf.

In this paper, I will try to demonstrate that although Moscow has systematically manipulated Georgia's post–Soviet domestic problems in order to keep the country within the Russian sphere of influence, it is basically Georgia's weakness in dealing with its own security problems that enables Moscow to claim a 'constructive role' in Georgia's security. Besides, Moscow is not likely to gain from having antagonistic relations with Georgia since this is likely to result in promoting the pro–Western rather than the pro–Russian orientation of Georgia.

Initially, I will explore the nature of Russia's relations with Georgia in the post–Soviet era. This will be followed by an analysis of the tensions that shape the relations between Russia and Georgia. These contentious issues include the politics of energy, Russian military bases, visa regime and international terrorism. The penultimate section will discuss the Georgian response to the Russian pressures. The concluding part will evaluate the outcomes of the escalation of the tensions by taking the concerns of both sides into account.

### **Russia's Relations with Georgia in the Post–Soviet Era**

The post–Soviet tensions between Tbilisi and Moscow have their roots in the developments that took place in the early 1990s, when the majority of the Georgians got organized for achieving immediate independence from Moscow. During the final years of the Soviet Union, the anti–Communist Georgian nationalist opposition used strikes and other forms of civil disobedience in order to undermine the institutional bases of the communist power in Georgia. This set the stage for the independence of the republic from the Soviet Union. (1)

It was, however, the differences over the strategy of achieving independence that divided the Georgian people in post–Soviet Georgia. The radical Georgians rejected any compromise with the Soviet–era Georgian ruling elites domestically and with Moscow internationally. The moderate Georgians, on the contrary, favored a cautious and gradualist approach towards these former centers of power. The radicals gained the upper hand in May 1991 when Gamsakhurdia was elected president of Georgia (receiving over 86 percent of the vote) in the first popular presidential election in the USSR. After becoming Georgia's President, Gamsakhurdia alienated not only the moderates but also

his former allies due to his erratic policy decisions. (2)

In response to Gamsakhurdia's self-styled leadership, the opposition leaders got organized through a Military Council that forced Gamsakhurdia to leave Georgia. Shortly thereafter, a Political Consultative Council and a larger State Council were formed to provide more decisive leadership. In March 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze returned to Georgia at the invitation of the Military Council to provide international legitimacy for post-Soviet Georgia. Shevardnadze brought reformers into government, while keeping some of the local leaders in power in order to prevent the formation of a unified opposition to his rule. Shevardnadze succeeded in consolidating his rule despite his policy failures and several assassination attempts. (3)

Taking the advantage of Georgia's post-Soviet weakness, the separatist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia have also attempted to gain the independence from Tbilisi. The first major challenge for Tbilisi came from South Ossetia. When Tbilisi abolished the region's autonomous status within Georgia in December 1990, the South Ossetian parliament took a secessionist position by calling for a union with North Ossetia, which was an Autonomous Republic in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR). This provoked the invasion of the region by the Georgian nationalist forces. By the end of 1991, the invasion resulted in the deaths of more than a thousand people as well as tens of thousands of refugees. The conflict came to an end when Russian President Boris Yeltsin mediated a cease-fire in July 1992. (4) This cease-fire, which is enforced by the Russian, Ossetian and Georgian troops, is still in force.

Another challenge for Tbilisi was Abkhazia, which was Georgia's Autonomous Republic in the USSR. Abkhazia's demands for independence led to a violent conflict between the ethnic Georgians and the Abkhazians in the region. In July 1992, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet declared the independence of Abkhazia from Georgia. In response, the Georgian National Guard captured the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi in August 1992. This forced the Abkhazian government to flee Sukhumi. However, Tbilisi was unable to establish its authority in this republic as the Abkhazian forces captured Sukhumi and drove the remaining Georgian forces out of Abkhazia in September 1993. (5) There is now a cease-fire between Abkhazia and Georgia, with the Inguri River serving as the dividing line.

Although Moscow has been seen as an ally of both secessionist movements in Georgia, Russia's post-Soviet policy towards Georgia has been explained as if a stable, independent Georgia was necessary for security along Russia's southern border. The Russian foreign policy establishment has attempted to justify the Russian position in terms of 'Near Abroad' doctrine. According to this doctrine, Georgia, which is a very strategic country in the Caucasus, belongs to the Russian sphere of influence. Accordingly, Moscow has claimed that no state other than the Russian Federation could solve regional problems in the Caucasus, including Georgia. (6)

In line with this 'official rhetoric' of the Russian Federation, Moscow offered mediation of Georgia's conflicts with the Abkhazian, Ajarian and Ossetian minorities. Moscow claimed that increasing the autonomy of these groups could contribute to the stability of Georgia. However, it is widely believed in Tbilisi that some Russian military personnel continue to give military assistance to the Abkhazian forces. In order to limit Moscow's support to Sukhumi, Georgia joined the CIS on terms dictated by Russia in 1993. Shevardnadze defended CIS membership of Georgia as a necessity for Georgia's survival as an independent state. (7)

The gap between Moscow's 'pacifist and defensive rhetoric' and its more assertive foreign policy line in the region became wider since Vladimir Putin's rise to the Russian Presidency in 2000. Moscow has escalated its tensions with Georgia by increasing its pressure over the republic through its politics of energy, Russian military bases in Georgia, visa regime and international terrorism. It could be useful to analyze these issues that served to escalate the tensions between Russia and Georgia in detail.

### **The Politics of Energy**

It is widely shared that Russia's interest in keeping Georgia in its sphere of influence cannot be understood in isolation from its intention to control the export of the Caspian oil and gas to the international markets. Moscow has always opposed to the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, which will bypass the Russian territory. The Russian objection to the construction of this pipeline stems mainly from the fact that it could weaken the Russian monopoly over transit routes of the Caspian oil and natural gas. Moscow also fears that this could help the countries of the Caspian region to develop their economies independent of Russia. (8)

In this context, Georgia's strategic importance comes from the fact that Georgia is a key strategic actor in the East–West energy corridor that could weaken the Russian monopoly over the transport of the Caspian oil and natural gas resources. However, Georgia's economic and political problems as well as its reliance on Russian gas supplies make it very susceptible to Russia's pressures. In order to weaken Georgia's support for the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, Moscow intensified its efforts on showing that the Georgia's long–term interest lies in securing Russia's uninterrupted provision of energy to the republic rather than the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline.

Relying on this strategy, Moscow has intensified its manipulation of Georgia's dependence on Russian gas supplies by cutting the natural gas to the republic periodically since December 2000. The cuts in the delivery of natural gas to Tbilisi's the main electricity supplier resulted in a major energy crisis in the capital of Georgia. (9) Although Moscow uses Georgia's unpaid bills as the reason for the periodic cuts, it is likely that there is a political motivation for Russia's control of Georgia's gas supplies. As in its relations with other post–Soviet republics, Moscow hints that if Georgia were to accede to Russian demands, there would be no natural gas and electricity cuts. I think, this politics of energy is likely to become very counter–productive in the eyes of the Georgian population, who suffer from the cold in the winter. It is likely to result in more anti–Russian feelings among the masses.

### **The Politics of Russian Military Bases in Georgia**

Another instrument that Moscow has been using against Tbilisi is the delay in closing the Russian military bases in Georgia. According to an agreement between Moscow and Tbilisi in 1995, Russia gained the legal right to have four military bases in Georgia that it inherited from the USSR until 2020. Gradually, Tbilisi has demanded revisions in this agreement, and called for the closure of these Russian military bases. In the face of amounting international pressure on Russia at the 1999 Istanbul Summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Moscow agreed finally to close its military bases in Vaziani (near Tbilisi) and Gudauta (in Abkhazia) by 1 July 2001. According to the Istanbul Agreement, talks were also planned on the closing of the other two bases in Batumi (in Adjara) and Akhalkalaki (in Southern Georgia) by 2003–2004. Washington promised to give \$10 million aid to Moscow for

financing the closure of these military bases. (10)

Although Russia withdrew its military equipment from the Vaziani and Gudauta military bases in accordance to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) limits by the end of 2000, Moscow has started to propose that it is interested in continuing to use these two military bases. What is more, contrary to its earlier promises, Moscow has blocked the talks on the closure of its military bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki. Moscow tried to justify its position by picturing its military bases in Georgia as a factor of stability in the highly unstable political and security environment of the Republic. (11) I think, one could also argue that the delay in the closure of the Russian military bases could be seen as Russia's measure to prevent NATO from gaining the control of these bases. In fact, Turkey and the United States, two NATO allies have already started to modernize the former Russian military base in Vaziani.

The reluctance of Moscow in closing the Russian military bases has been supported by the Abkhazian authorities who claim that the withdrawal of Russian military forces could lead to a new armed conflict with Georgia. The Abkhaz authorities have also claimed that equipment located in Gudauta military base should be transferred to Abkhazia. Likewise, Adjara, where the Batumi military base is located, has also demanded that its representatives should also be allowed to take part in the Russian–Georgian talks on the closure of the Russian military base in Batumi.

In this way, Moscow succeeded in portraying its delay in closing the Russian military bases in Georgia not as its own selfish behavior, but as its concern for the peace and stability among Georgia's main ethnic groups. Consequently, the Russian discourse on the delay in the closure of its military bases has been framed in terms of Georgia's image as a 'weak state', which is unable to provide security in its own territory. I think, the most dangerous trend here is the inclination of Moscow to justify its bases through a politics of minority nationalism in Georgia. Moscow's interest in playing with minority nationalisms in Georgia could also be seen in its attempt at pressuring Tbilisi into submission through its politics of visa regime.

### **The Politics of Visa Regime**

In order to keep Georgia in its own sphere of influence, Moscow has also escalated its conflict with Georgia over Russia's visa regime. To this purpose, Moscow revised its visa regime for the Georgian citizens on 5 December 2000. (12) The striking point in this new visa regime was that Moscow envisaged the continuity of a visa–free travel regime for the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The preferential treatment of these Republics against the people living in other parts of Georgia (Moscow's visa regime also involved the distribution of Russian passports to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) looks like a defiance of Georgia's national sovereignty and a challenge to its territorial integrity. In response to these developments, the Georgian Parliament has claimed that this new visa regime makes it very clear that Moscow has been pursuing expansionist and imperial policies towards Georgia, which might lead to the eventual annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (13)

Concerning the areas where Tbilisi is able to exert its sovereignty (the Georgian territories except Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Russia's new visa regime seems to be intended to pressurize the approximately 500,000 Georgians who work in Russia. The new visa regime could weaken Georgia's economy by creating extra poverty and unemployment in Georgia. (14) I think, Moscow expects that increasing social unrest in Georgia would pressurize Shevardnadze into

agreeing to Russia's demands. Nevertheless, just like Moscow's politics of energy supplies, the Russian policy on the new visa regime is likely to result in more anti-Russian feelings among the masses, who would suffer from Russia's visa requirements.

### **The Politics of International Terrorism**

The already tense relations between Russia and Georgia escalated dramatically when Moscow has started to accuse the Georgian leadership of permitting the international terrorists to use its territory in order to fight in Chechnya. Moscow has also claimed that Georgia provides a safe heaven to the Chechens for establishing bases in the Pankisi Gorge along the Russian-Georgian border. Moscow bases its claims on the fact that there are approximately 5,000 Chechen refugees from Chechnya as well as 7,000 local ethnic Chechens in the Northeastern part of Georgia. In response, Georgia, which has consistently refused the Russian requests to deploy Russian forces in the Pankisi Gorge, declared that it will bolster the security along its border with Russia. However, Moscow criticized these Georgian moves as cosmetic attempts to delay the massive Russian operation to root out the terrorist bases in the Georgian territory. This showed that Russia was very keen on carrying out a military operation in attacking the Pankisi Gorge. (15)

The Russian pressure on Tbilisi increased on 11 September 2002 when President Vladimir Putin sent a letter to world leaders outlining Russia's complaints about Georgia's inaction and asserting Russia's right to launch attacks in line with the United Nations Charter enshrining countries' right to self-defense. In this letter, Putin stated that

The successful progress of the counter-terror operation has forced the remaining bandits to flee to Georgia, where the Georgian authorities turn a blind eye to the fact that they are living a free and comfortable life there, and continue to receive military, financial and other assistance from abroad. [...] Proceeding from the above, we are talking about glaring violation by Tbilisi of counter-terrorist Resolution 1373 of the UN Security Council, which is obligatory for all states. In this situation we must ensure that Georgia fully complies with its obligations to the international community in this sphere. [...] In this connection Russia may be forced to use the inalienable right to individual or collective defense in accordance with the UN Charter, stipulated in Resolution 1368 of the UN Security Council adopted in the aftermath of the barbarous terrorist acts in the USA in September last year. I want to stress that we are not considering actions that would undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country in question or a change of its political regime. (16)

Since the Russian public opinion has generally supported all the hawkish policies of Putin during the Second Chechen War, this ultimatum contributed to Putin's popularity. Putin needed to shore up his public image as a determined leader when his accommodative policies towards the NATO and the United States undermined his credibility in the eyes of the public. Putin might have also expected that the United States could give a carte blanche to Moscow in Georgia in return for the Russian support for the United States during the approaching War in Iraq. (17)

Nevertheless, as the growing relations between Tbilisi and Washington show Putin's policies proved to be self-defeating.

### **The Georgian Response to the Russian Pressures**

In order to counterbalance the increasing Russian influence over Georgia, Tbilisi opted for strengthening its relations with the United States. Thus, Tbilisi intensified its cooperation with the U.S. within the framework of the US 'Train and Equip' program, which is a \$64 million project designed to bolster Georgian border security and modernize its armed forces in April 2002. However, it should be noted here that this 'Train and Equip' program cannot be seen as a means of reasserting Georgia's control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia since this is a rather small military assistance program. In line with the objectives of this program, only 1,600 Georgian soldiers will be trained, which is not adequate for putting the secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the Georgian control. (18)

Although the new situation in Georgia might have created problems in Washington's relations with Moscow, whose support was essential for the looming crisis over Iraq, the United States opposed to Putin's threats categorically by condemning him for suggesting that he might attack the Chechen rebel bases in Georgia militarily. (19) To appreciate the US support for Tbilisi during this crisis, the Georgian Parliament granted the U.S. armed forces conditional access to all Georgian military facilities during the latest War in Iraq. The Georgian Parliament also decided to extend diplomatic immunity to all U.S. personnel posted in Georgia on 21 March 2003. The State Duma reacted harshly to these resolutions of the Georgian Parliament by characterizing it as detrimental to Moscow's relations with Tbilisi.

Georgia's increasing cooperation with the United States has also motivated Tbilisi to apply officially for NATO membership in Autumn 2002. Already annoyed by the US support for Georgia, Moscow has been increasingly worried about the growing relations between Tbilisi and NATO. Specifically speaking, Russia does not want Georgia to open its airspace to NATO spy planes that might carry out surveillance operations over the Russian territory. Therefore, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksander Yakovenko stated that 'the possible deployment of NATO radar monitoring and surveillance aircraft (AWACS) in Georgia would run counter to Russia's national security interests and compel Moscow to take protective countermeasures'. (20)

Although this pro-Western orientation of Georgia might be seen by Moscow as a 'surprising development', Moscow should not have expected anything better than this from Tbilisi, because the escalation of the tensions with the Georgian leadership especially over the delay in closing the military bases as well as the fight against international terrorism and the intimidation of the Georgians through cutting energy supplies as well as establishing a highly discriminatory visa regime could only alienate Georgia from Moscow. This picture after three years of escalation of the tensions between Russia and Georgia shows that both sides could have solved their problems cooperatively better as the existing dialogue of the deaf resulted in mutually disappointing results.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it could be stated that the escalation of tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi especially since Vladimir Putin's rise to Russian presidency produced mixed results for both Russia and Georgia. Both sides have continued to

view their problems from radically different points of view. Moscow's politics of energy, military bases, visa regime and international terrorism clearly intended to subordinate Georgia to Moscow's dictate. Nevertheless, these policies resulted in a pro-Western rather than a pro-Russian foreign policy orientation in Tbilisi. Therefore, Moscow should take the concerns of the Georgians and their neighbors in designing its policies for stabilizing the region. This culture of mutual understanding, rather than the existing dialogue of the deaf, seems to be the way forward for Moscow to cement working relations with Tbilisi in the near future.

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