

FOREIGN POLICY & SECURITY PROGRAMME

*Georgia, Russia and the North Caucasus:
Is Enmity What States Make of It?*

(Working Paper)¹

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Grant Code: E0476

¹ *Draft: not for citation*

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Introduction

The policy toward the North Caucasus proved to be the most pronounced national security problem for two neighbouring countries – Georgia and Russia – since the early 1990s. Both countries failed to address the problem adequately: Georgia lost control over two provinces adjacent to the North Caucasus, and Russia did not manage to quell separatist and religious fundamentalist challenges in the region in a sustainable way. Given the seriousness of the challenge of the North Caucasus, both realist as well as liberal school of thought in International Relations would expect mutually beneficial collaboration between Georgia and Russia in addressing the security problem. And yet, consecutive regimes both in Georgia as well as Russia failed to achieve collaboration, and foster the destructive process in the North Caucasus and adjacent areas, especially Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Pankisi Gorge.

This paper is an attempt to analyse the root causes of discord between Georgia and Russia that pertain to the politics of the North Caucasus. In the first section, an overview of the North Caucasus problem as existing since the late 1980s is given. In the following section, the international political dimension of the Georgian-Russian squabble over the North Caucasus is analysed, followed by the domestic political and ideational factors that influence Georgian policy toward the North Caucasus. Finally, a plausible basis for the solution of the North Caucasian problem is discussed, in the context of intensity of Georgian-Russian political disagreement.

The Context: The North Caucasus and Its Discontents

The North Caucasus loomed large in the modern history of both Georgia and Russia. Historical evidence abounds. In the 19th century, Russia was involved in protracted bloody conflict against the mountainous peoples of the North Caucasus for decades. The North Caucasus was a hotbed of the Russian civil war after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917. During the WWII, the region saw deportations en masse of the local population to the steppes of Kazakhstan. The North Caucasus became the soft underbelly of the independent Russian state in the wake of the break-up of the Soviet Union.

For a smaller Georgia, the North Caucasus was even more significant politically. In the second half of the 18th century, the independent kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, led by King Irakli II suffered most from the incessant marauding incursions of the warlords of the North Caucasus. Georgian nobility fought alongside Russians against the North Caucasians in the 19th century, and Georgian communist emissaries participated in the repressions of the North Caucasians in the 1940s. Georgia's relations with the North Caucasians became complicated again after Georgia gained independence in 1991.

The North Caucasians themselves never represented a unified force since the mid-19th century when most of the North Caucasus seized to be under the Ottoman political control. Most of the peoples of the North-West Caucasus, commonly known as Circassians were deported to the Ottoman Empire, and the remaining ethnic groups were incorporated in the Russian Empire, and, later, the Soviet Union. The North Caucasians failed to unify politically in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and developed rivalries and enmities along power political, ethnic, and religious lines.

The post-Soviet political relationship among the three protagonists of the Georgian-Russian-North Caucasian triangle was ambiguous but, nevertheless, represented a discerning pattern. The North Caucasians' relationship with federal Russian authorities was a mixture of obedience, fear and resistance. These mixed attitudes resulted from not only ethnic and religious divisions among the North Caucasian peoples, but also generational and ideological divisions within particular nationalities and communities. Because of these divisions, many North Caucasian communities viewed Russia and Georgia as threat and opportunity at the same time. Sometimes these views were held simultaneously.

The Russian authorities viewed the North Caucasus in a wider context of their Caucasian policy. The Caucasus was not a national security or foreign policy priority for Russia, yet proved to be rather significant for the Russian national statehood. After the military debacle, following the initial neglect of Chechen nationalism and North Caucasian Islam, Russian authorities relied on sheer force and quelled most of North Caucasian resistance. Chechnya and Dagestan were pacified at an enormous human cost but one would argue that the problem of the stability in the North Caucasus is far from settled. Georgia was perceived by successive Russian regimes as part of the international plot to weaken Russia through instability in the North Caucasus. This view denied any legitimacy to Georgian claims to its own territorial integrity.

Of the three actors, the Georgian attitudes toward the North Caucasus were probably most ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, the instability in the North Caucasus was thought to be part of anti-colonial rebellion for the freedom of the peoples of the Caucasus. On the other hand, the spillover effects of the instability in the North Caucasus in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Pankisi proved almost fatal for nascent Georgian statehood in the early 1990s and then in 2008. In a way, successive Georgian regimes thought of the problematique of the North Caucasus as distinct from that of the South. Therefore, sympathy toward the North Caucasian ethnic separatism and religious awakening was not perceived as contradictory to Georgia's national interests. Georgia's problems with Abkhazia and South Ossetia were blamed on Russia alone, and the North Caucasian aspect of these conflicts was glossed over.

Analytically, the Northern and Southern parts of the Caucasus were also seen as separate by both regional as well as foreign observers. Problems with Abkhazia and South Ossetia were seen in Tbilisi as rebellions fomented by the Soviet and Russian secret agencies. Alternatively, some Russian analysts believed that it was Georgian nationalism that caused the conflicts in the two provinces. Scholars and analysts outside the region mostly supported

either of these two views. And there are very few accounts of the situation that take the North Caucasus as the causal root for the security problems of Georgia.

The rest of this paper is about explaining why the North Caucasus is a common security challenge for both Georgia and Russia and why the two states failed to recognize and tackle the problem as such.

Is the North Caucasus a Global Problem?

One explanation for the diverging and, to an extent, myopic perception of the North Caucasus is describing it as an international, even global issue. Many observers either in the West, Russia or Georgia, as well as in the North Caucasus, see the region in a larger context of global political rivalries. For Russians, as mentioned above, the North Caucasus is about resistance to the global forces led by the United States that aim at weakening and, ultimately, dismembering Russia. This attitude is substantiated by the rhetoric from the Kremlin and corroborated by the rhetoric of Georgia's pro-Western leadership and various opponents in Europe and the United States that supported or, at least, remained loyal to the separatist causes of the North Caucasians.

For Georgians, Russia was a revisionist imperial power, bent on controlling the South Caucasus and re-invading Georgia. Therefore, the North Caucasus represented a platform for weakening Russia's influence not only in the South Caucasus but also globally. Weakening and, potentially, destroying Russia was thought to be key to Georgia's survival as an independent state. The fact that the period of Georgia's loss of territorial integrity coincided with the Russian weakness in the North Caucasus in the early 1990s was continuously neglected.

For many Western analysts, the North Caucasus was also part of the global struggle for geopolitical dominance in Eurasia. Russia's resurgence in the 2000s seemed to prove their point about necessity of keeping Russia at bay. The North Caucasus, therefore, was seen as part of the 'faultlines' where Russia and the rest of the world conducted their campaigns for domination and control. And for the religious fundamentalists in the North Caucasus too, the processes taking place in the region were part of a larger, universal struggle between the global forces.

These conflicting visions of the North Caucasus have a paradoxical, and ironic, common ground – they all neglect the possibility of change, putting the North Caucasus into a much larger context on the world map than more scrupulous examination of the matter would imply. Hence, seeing the North Caucasus as a regional problem that is a matter of security and economic collaboration of the nations involved in regional politics is an alternative way of looking at the problem. Yet, portraying the North Caucasus in this particular fashion does not imply that the prospects of solving of regional security problems are any easier. All that

may be suggested is that key to alleviating the security predicament is in bilateral Georgian-Russian relations rather than in global politics.

Why Is There No Georgian Policy toward the North Caucasus?

Georgian policy toward the North Caucasus is non-existent for a few reasons: First, it is difficult to talk about the North Caucasus as a monolithic actor. The region is divided into various ethnic groups. Yet, the extraordinary thing is that successive Georgian Governments failed to form positive and predictable relationship with any of the significant North Caucasian ethnic or religious communities. Diversity and instability of the North Caucasus is an objective predicament to the formulation of Georgia's stance toward the region.

Second, Georgia failed to come to terms with its attitude toward Russia, let alone the North Caucasus. The relations between the two countries remained tense and unfriendly since independence, to say the least. Even if Georgian rhetoric toward Russia remained critical throughout the two decades of independence, culturally and economically Russia always represented a powerful presence in Georgia, preventing complete mutual alienation of the two peoples. Therefore, full-blown policy of undermining Russian influence in the North Caucasus remained off the agenda for Tbilisi, even when relations between the two states seemed to reach the nadir a few times since 1991.

Third, Georgian governments never really considered the North Caucasus as a serious policy priority. Both rhetorically as well as practically, Georgia's foreign policy and national security establishment looked to NATO and the European Union as major priorities, and fostering of relations with the United States and integration into the world economy remained the major policy line. Russia was seen as the major threat, and the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were linked to Moscow's evil interference. Therefore, the North Caucasus could not be seen as a force in itself but either an instrument in Russia's hands or a policy tool in Georgia's possession to thwart Russia's influence in the Caucasus.

Fourth, Georgia had limited resources to reach out to the North Caucasians. Unlike the Soviet times, in post-Soviet period Georgia had little to offer to the peoples of the region either intellectually, or culturally or economically. And the fond memories of Georgian scholars that studied the North Caucasian culture and history and thus contributed to the local development faded quickly among the North Caucasians, following the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s.

Fifth, given that the North Caucasus was thought to be an instrument in the global struggle between Western liberal democracy and Russian totalitarianism, then there was little need for a coherent policy toward the region. Engagement of the North Caucasians was seen not in terms of fostering mutual relationship per se but in terms of creating obstacles for Russian domination. Therefore, propaganda was more preferable than diplomacy in the North

Caucasus, including by means of electronic media and accentuation of the historical maltreatment of the Circassians by the Russian empire.

And, finally, given the 'Western' dimension of Georgian identity since independence, the North Caucasus did not register on Georgians' mental map as plausible place to search for friends and allies. A self-reconstructed sense of belonging to the Western Christendom, Europe, and the integrated global liberal economy did not bode well with the perception of the North Caucasus as backward, terrorism-ridden territory. This attempt of detaching Georgia virtually from its geographical position on the map of the world has become particularly pronounced in the rhetoric of Georgian authorities following the Rose Revolution. This particular perception of self-identity left little room for the formulation of coherent policy toward the region (i.e. the North Caucasus) that had nothing to do with virtual 'European Georgia'.

All these factors complicated formulation of Georgia's policy toward the North Caucasus in the last twenty years. The result has been sub-optimal for both Georgians and the North Caucasians, and the Russians too. Georgia failed to build alliances or at least achieve rapprochement with anyone in the North Caucasus. This happened against the background of ever deteriorating relations with Russia. Understandably, rhetorical embrace of Georgia by the United States and some European powers as a regional champion of democracy and liberal economy could not compensate for the double political loss with respect to the North Caucasus and Russia. The next section of this paper deal with the question whether a rational Georgian policy toward the North Caucasus is plausible, or whether systemic factors are likely to frustrate any efforts of improving Georgia's regional security predicament.

Why Cannot Georgia and Russia Find a Common Ground?

Indecision toward the North Caucasus did not bring Georgia any benefits. The question is whether this indecision may continue without imperiling Georgia's national security. The answer depends on the time perspective. In the short run, Georgia can continue its muddling through, trying to react to the developments in the North Caucasus and hoping that Russia's potential bogging down in the region will take some pressure off Georgia. In a longer run, however, there is no evidence to suggest that the trends in the North Caucasus are likely to become beneficial for Georgia. Therefore, a slow yet sure movement toward consistent policy toward the North Caucasus is needed.

In an ideal world, Georgia and Russia would collaborate to help each other out of their respective conflicts and engage in cooperation for enhancing regional security and prosperity in the Caucasus. Security cooperation, in particular, would eliminate causes of terrorism, fundamentalism and ethno-political extremism that harmed the prospects of regional peace in the North Caucasus and Georgia.

There are historical precedents of such collaboration, starting from the late 18th century, when joint military campaigns were conducted against the Ottomans and the North Caucasian warlords. Later, in the 19th century, Georgians and Russians collaborated in defeating Shamil and gaining territories both from the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Some of these territories are now parts of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. What are the obstacles that stop Georgia and Russia from engaging in collaborative behaviour?

To put this question in a different way, is the essence of Georgian-Russian disagreement systemic, 'geopolitical', ideological, domestic political, or emanating from divergent perceptions of the self and each other? And, above all, is the disagreement endemic and insurmountable? This section argues that the problem is not systemic and it lies within the Georgian and Russian leaderships. But the disagreement is not purely ideological or domestic political and a mere change of the leadership in either of these two countries would not lead toward collaboration. The problem lies with collectively held beliefs in Georgian and Russian leaderships that have influenced decision making toward each other ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

As mentioned above, Georgian-Russian relationship cannot be exclusively seen in the context of global struggle for power. Under the George W Bush administration, the American and Russian governments considered the post-Soviet space in ideological terms, pushing for their own versions of regional arrangements. This allowed for the stand-off that spilled into the local Georgian-Russian war of August 2008. However, such understanding of post-Soviet regional politics was a characteristic of that particular period. Clearly, if American-Russian showdown still maintains the global and insurmountable nature then the further conflicts in every part of the former Soviet space should be unavoidable. Nevertheless, the 'reset' worked as soon as the sides agreed to take a more loyal stance toward each other. This would suggest that there is little 'global' and 'principled' in American-Russian disagreement over the post-Soviet space. Georgian-Russian relations remained remarkably peaceful ever since the 'reset' started.

And the 'geopolitical' explanation of Georgian-Russian conflict is also rather tedious. In both of its incarnations, geopolitics cannot explain the absence of Georgian-Russian collaboration in the North Caucasus or elsewhere. Russians managed to regain their influence over the delivery routes of energy in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine mostly by peaceful means. And the disagreements with European countries over stable natural gas supply seem to be tactical rather than fundamental. And the American involvement in the post-Soviet energy politics has virtually disappeared since the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, leaving the argument of geopolitical rivalry between Moscow and Washington rather groundless.

Apart from these 'systemic' and 'global' explanations of Georgian-Russian showdown, there is a significant domestic political aspect of the problem that pertains to both countries. It is remarkable that change in leadership both in Moscow and Tbilisi since the early 1990s did not yield any semblance of relatively sustainable and productive political rapprochement. Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin were not less different from each other in their style and

content of leadership than were Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili. Yet, several dyads of the leaders failed to achieve any meaningful collaboration and improvement of relations. Therefore, it would be misleading to quote ideological differences of particular regimes as crucial causal variables determining the outcomes of Georgian-Russian relations. Particular leaders displayed readiness to improve relations and made gestures toward the counterparts. Gamsakhurdia and Yeltsin pledged friendship in early 1991; Shevardnadze brought Georgia to CIS in late 1993 and appointed Russia's favourite candidates as his key ministers; Yeltsin imposed embargo on Abkhazia in the 1990s after Shevardnadze insisted on such measures; Putin's foreign minister was instrumental in ending crisis in Tbilisi in November 2003 and in Adjara in May 2004; Saakashvili and Putin reached personal rapport in the first half of 2004. All these overtures proved short-lived and unproductive, however.

In explaining Georgian-Russian showdown, it would be equally misleading to point to broad cultural and identity differences between the two nations. Quite the opposite. Georgians and Russians share the same denomination of the Orthodox Christian faith and most Georgians still speak fluent Russian and are fond of Russian culture. Many Russians reciprocate this cultural affinity. And in literature and fine arts, there is more evidence of mutually shared values than of adverse memories antagonizing the two communities.

Therefore, one should look to the ideas shared by the elites of both countries that originated in the adversarial rhetoric of the late 1980s in Georgia and Russia. This rhetoric was political in essence, centred on the question of whether to retain the Soviet Union or not. The Georgian elite was radically pro-independence and anti-Communist, and the Soviet elite favoured maintaining of the Soviet Union. In Georgia in particular, the political rhetoric quickly gained ethnic hues, and the image of Communist oppressors got quickly intertwined with historical woes related to Russian dominance and colonialism. This rhetoric outlasted the Soviet collapse.

On the other side of the divide, the pro-Soviet camp portrayed Georgians as traitors that betrayed the common Soviet values and homeland for the favours of the enemy's camp, particularly of the United States. This image, here too, outlived the demise of the Soviet Union, and Georgia became a symbol of the forces that led the USSR to its inglorious end. Georgian leaders' personae did not help to alleviate this image of Georgia – Gamsakhurdia was a Soviet-time dissident, Shevardnadze was one of the architects of the *Perestroika*, and Saakashvili is an American-trained lawyer with a decisive and virulent pro-Western and pro-independence rhetoric.

These two antagonistic images became shared among the two elites, and virtually impossible to overcome even in cases of mutually exclusive collaborative opportunities, such is the North Caucasus. The problem became particularly pronounced with the two presidents, Putin and Saakashvili, respectively in Russia and Georgia. They brought the rhetoric of 'revival' of the USSR on the one hand and ever-closer alliance with the United States on the other hand. These mutually exclusive narratives made any collaboration between the two regimes much less possible than ever before and culminated in the war of August 2008.

What Policy for Georgia toward the North Caucasus?

The Georgian government came to believe that rhetorical embrace of the West and, again, rhetorical rapprochement with the United States can override the structural security predicament of Georgia. Unfortunately, as events of the last few years demonstrated, Georgia proved unable to overcome its geography and relative power asymmetry and improve its security situation. Harsh realities of power politics showed how sub-optimal Georgia's policy of alienating Russia proved to be. Even more unfortunate is the fact that alienation of Russia did not help to improve ties either with the United States or the European Union, or the peoples of the North Caucasus.

The unfortunate outcome of the policy is that Georgia now is trapped by its own rhetoric, both internationally as well as domestically. The Government cannot possibly change its policy toward Russia without losing face internationally and possibly even causing major upheaval domestically. But Georgia has little choice as the power asymmetry with Russia is looming menacingly, threatening to crush Georgia's independence.

One way out of this debacle may be slowly restoring trust between Georgian and Russian governments. And the obvious point of departure for such improvement is the collaboration over the North Caucasus, the region which still represents existential threat for Russia. How can this be achieved by the Georgian Government is an open question but it is also obvious that this government or the next should take up this ungrateful task in the name of Georgia's independence and national interest.